

# Forum offers olive branch to Fiji

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Running on "island time", Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders returned from their day retreat to Vanuatu capital Port Vila about three hours behind schedule today, offering a olive branch to suspended Fiji.

Prime Minister John Key said there was little discussion about Fiji, which was last year suspended from the 16-member forum due to the interim military government's reluctance to restore it to democracy, despite pressure from neighbouring states to do so.

Leaders were content to stick with their decision to keep Fiji out of the forum, but there were discussions, initiated by New Zealand, about letting Fiji officially take part in Pacer Plus regional free trade talks, he said.

Fiji is excluded from taking part in meetings of officials but gets briefed on progress.

"We've asked the Ministerial Contact Group to ask whether Fiji shouldn't be admitted to the officials group, and the reason for that is that none of the countries have trade or economic sanctions with Fiji.

"So in the course of the next six months or so the Ministerial Contact Group will reconvene, they will take a look at that issue, they will also discuss that with Fiji and see whether that is something they are interested in participating in, and then ultimately come back and report to leaders..."

A decision would be made before the next PIF, in New Zealand next year.

Mr Key said as a larger player and significant economy in the Pacific it "may well make sense for them to be engaged at the officials level if we are going to make progress on Pacer Plus".

Despite Australia being in "caretaker" mode leading into the coming election and not able to change its position on issues, it was supportive of the recommendation.

Mr Key said other discussions today included an affirming of a commitment to tackle the issue of climate change.

The topic was discussed repeatedly at the PIF, with concern expressed from some of the smaller island states that rising sea levels, drought and famine presented huge dangers, but not enough was being done at international level to address their plights.

Mr Key said leaders welcomed a commitment announced yesterday by New Zealand to put an extra \$4.8 million to support the management and policing of the Pacific's fisheries, including putting trained observers on fishing boats.

"But generally there was a belief that fisheries is a resource that is under utilised in terms of value, and we've agreed to go away and explore how we might maximise that opportunity."

Post forum dialogue takes place tomorrow and the New Zealand delegation returns home in the afternoon.