

## Leaders give Pacific forum a wide berth

Author: ROWAN CALLICK

Publication: The Australian (2,Wed 04 Aug 2010)

FOREIGN Minister Stephen Smith will lead Australia's delegation at the Pacific Islands Forum annual leaders' summit in Vanuatu today, but will not be the only second-tier representative there.

Forum protocol requires the meeting to take place among government heads, but from the region's five biggest countries, only one will be present -- New Zealand Prime Minister John Key.

Despite the validity of the reasons for the leaders' non-attendance, this raises questions about the danger of the downgrading of the Pacific's premier organisation.

Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister, Michael Somare, has decided not to attend. His spokesman told AAP: ``It has nothing to do with politics. He needs to be in PNG."''

He is facing immense challenges from a rejuvenated opposition and from within his own National Alliance ranks.

But he still found time 12 days ago to attend the Engaging Fiji meeting organised by Fiji's military ruler, Frank Bainimarama, to rival the forum.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Derek Sikua, who also attended Engaging Fiji, is another absentee from Port Vila today -- because the Solomons' national election starts today, and his hold on office, as the single representative of his Liberal Party, is tenuous.

Fiji's Commodore Bainimarama will not be in Port Vila because his country was suspended a year ago from the forum, over his regime's decision to rule out elections until September 2014 or after.

And Prime Minister Julia Gillard said she could not attend because she is campaigning.

Mr Key is expected to take a leading role in formal discussions today and at the leaders' retreat tomorrow.

He said he expected to have talks with Mr Smith.

But he was aware the election campaign had put other issues on hold, and it was not clear whether there would be scope to progress talks on issues such as asylum-seekers.

Mr Key said the leaders remained united in wishing to see democracy restored in Fiji.

The summit will discuss the Pacific Plan, which sets overall regional priorities. The Cairns Compact instigated at last year's summit by Kevin Rudd, aiming to co-ordinate regional aid, will also be discussed, as will progress towards a regional **free trade** deal.

Climate change will also be on the agenda.

The forum's Secretary-General, Neroni Slade, said the fund being established under the Copenhagen Accord to help developing countries adapt to climate change would bring ``a significant flow of funds'' into the Pacific.