

PNG to approve fruit picking scheme

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PORT MORESBY, PNG (TVNZ) --- Papua New Guinea (PNG) is this week expected to endorse an agreement for its people to work in a fruit-picking pilot scheme launched in Australia two years ago. Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith is due to arrive at Alotau, Milne Bay Province, in PNG's eastern tip, on Wednesday for the annual Australia and PNG ministers' forum. A Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade spokeswoman said the meeting "to discuss and advance key issues of bilateral concern", would be attended by fewer ministers this year because of a problem of "finding suitable dates". The forum will focus on the beleaguered aid program under which Australia has spent about \$A400 million a year over the past decade with few "wins" in AusAID's goal of providing good governance and social development improvements. As outlined in the recent PNG-Australia Development Cooperation Treaty review, PNG has called for an overhaul of Australian-supplied aid, especially the role of ineffective and highly paid consultants. PNG is also expected to announce it will soon start vetting locals for Australia's seasonal workers scheme which so far has only employed 56 Pacific islanders. When Agriculture Minister Tony Burke launched the pilot in August 2008, he said the 2,500 visas available for the three-year scheme would be mutually beneficial by creating revenue streams for the Pacific while helping Australian farmers get fruit to market. But the scheme has been plagued by setbacks blamed on the global financial crisis. Meanwhile, the New Zealand seasonal workers scheme, on which Australia has modelled its pilot, is reporting numerous successes. Australia's handling of PNG, a former territory that gained independence in 1975, has always been difficult for Canberra which has tried numerous approaches to help get the resource-rich country on track. The Sydney-based Lowy Institute think tank has repeatedly called for more beneficial trade, not aid, in regard to PNG. The Vanuatu-based think tank Pacific Institute of Public Policy recently recommended Australia endorse "an orderly, mutually beneficial Pacific Island migration policy". "There seems to be no political will for a 'grand gesture' to embrace Pacific islanders as part of the broader Australia community," the paper states. It's not just about supplying millions in aid but embracing Pacific culture, the report suggests. "Otherwise it (Australia) will be forever perceived as only seeing the islands through the prism of governance and economic issues, which means nothing for the 80 per cent of islanders living outside towns."

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