

Micronesia's status

It's too soon to say we are at the beginning of the end in the effort to find a mutually-satisfactory future political status for the Trust Territory.

But Washington hopes and goals in that regard are a bit clearer after the U.S. letter requesting Micronesian negotiators to delay further formal talks from late December until about March.

The American idea is to wait until after the Congress of Micronesia session opening next month, but also to use the time before March for exchanges of notes and some informal meetings between top negotiators.

It makes sense, and it seems to fit everyone's strategy for the moment—not just the U.S. and Micronesian negotiators, who have agreed, but even advocates of independence for the Trust Territory who feel delay and debate are to their advantage.

THE THIRD ROUND of status negotiations, held in September in Hana, Maui, indicated general agreement on the Micronesian concept of "free association." That foresees a future where the U.S. will handle foreign affairs and defense but Micronesia will have complete internal self-government.

But the Hana talks also exposed some nagging and touchy questions and a major issue.

Some of the questions relate to such things as customs, citizenship, and currency. They can be settled, but behind them is a basic question of how much sovereignty the Micronesians will have. They want to be a free nation that enters a working arrangement with the U.S.

Presumably some of these questions and details can be explored and almost worked out in exchanges of notes and informal talks between now and March.

THAT COULD HELP clear the air

and leave the way open to settle what the U.S. and some others see as the big remaining issue—how any free association agreement might be terminated.

The Micronesians want a stipulation that either side—as a free and independent people—can terminate the agreement unilaterally.

The U.S.—stressing what it feels are legitimate Pacific-wide security and other interests—wants any termination to be by mutual consent.

The hope is a compromise can be reached, and the American letter indicates there will be concessions and material benefits if Micronesians are more flexible on this point.

In this regard, it's noted that a Micronesian leader on the status group recently suggested that it might be possible to have no unilateral termination for an initial five-year period and then renegotiate the matter after that.

THAT, OF COURSE, is just an American view of how things might go by way of finding an agreement that offers what both sides want.

There are many steps to go, including approval of any agreement by the Micronesian people and the U.S. Congress, a body with some mosquitoes in positions to seriously damage any accord.

Since Micronesia is a United Nations trust territory, at some point the U.N. will have to be consulted or at least informed. If Americans and Micronesians are agreed, that should not be a serious problem. If not, the U.N. will be a source of embarrassment on this issue.

At any rate, the never-too-visible Micronesia status question is likely to go underground for a few more months. Hopefully, when it surfaces in March or so we will truly see the beginning of a new kind of American role based on the idea of cooperation and equality.

