

Marshalls To Split?

Possibly the biggest story to come out of the Trust Territory in the last year concerns legislation introduced in the Marshall Islands District Legislature, which would ask the United States for separate talks with the Marshall Islands concerning future political status.

Coming on the heels of an earlier decision by the Marianas to seek separate status talks with the U.S. the resolution, if passed, could be a death blow to the demands of some Micronesians for independence, and certainly dispells any talk of "unity" among the Micronesians.

The bill was introduced at the 20th regular session of the Marshall Islands Nitijela (legislature), and would insist on separate status negotiations if the Congress of Micronesia fails to pass legislation during their next session that would return 50 per cent of all revenue collected under the TT income tax law to the districts.

There was not word from the Nitijela on what kind of status is desired by the Marshalls—only that separate talks would be requested if the territory-wide congress does not enact revenue sharing legislation. This, of course, has long been a source of irritation among the Marshallese, since the income tax law was instituted a couple of years ago. The Marshalls, site of the Kwajalein Missile Range, and the high price civilian and military employees there, feel that they should be receiving more of the revenue from the taxes. It was estimated that the Missile Range tax revenues amount to \$1.7 million annually. Currently, all such revenues are appropriated by the Congress of Micronesia, without regard to where the monies come from.

Marshallese members of the Congress of Micronesia have repeatedly introduced legislation asking for a revenue split on the basis of income, but they have been stymied. Marshalls Representative Ekpap Silk, co-chairman of the Micronesian status committee shed some light on the background behind the controversial measure in an interview with a Daily News reporter. He said: "It's no secret that our delegation at the Congress is split. We are not together. Several of our members are bitter because the Congress as a whole does not see things their way."

Silk singled out former president of the Senate, Amata Kabua, who is also a member of the Micronesian status committee, as the major proponent behind the Marshalls' move towards separation. "The Nitijela is a 'rubber stamp' for Senator Kabua's wishes," he said, "his influence as a business, political and traditional leader runs high." Silk said that Senator Kabua delivered a strongly-worded speech at the opening of the Nitijela March 12, and urged legislators to give serious thought to the possibility of the Marshalls separating from the rest of the Trust Territory.

Silk, sees himself as a moderate, and he favors continued affiliation with the rest of the Trust Territory in a "free association" status with the United States, and he believes most of the Marshalls' people see things the same way. He says: "A Marshall Islands separate from the rest of Micronesia means dependence on revenues from Kwajalein Missile Range for support. What will happen when the test site becomes obsolete? Gambling casinos? I don't think the Marshallese people want that."

Still, the income derived from the Kwajalein Missile Range, the jobs provided there, is more than they have in Truk, Palau, Yap, Ponape, or even the Marianas.

Passage of the revenue sharing legislation would mean that approximately \$1 million would be returned to the Marshalls District for local projects, instead of going into the congress general fund.

A State Department representative at the Trust Territory headquarters said that it was not possible to predict at this time how Washington would respond to such a request for separate talks, although the U.S. government did decide that they would hold separate talks with the Marianas--over the bitter opposition of some of the members of the Congress of Micronesia, who felt that such permission should have come from them.

During the past two regular session of the Congress of Micronesia the TT income tax revenue sharing issue has threatened to cause a bitter split within the Congress. The Marshalls and Marianas Districts, which together provide over three-fourths the total tax revenue, have strongly backed the proposal, while Micronesia's poorer districts have consistently voted against it.

It has long been apparent to observers of the Micronesian scene that "unity" has been more talk than reality. The very name, Micronesia, which means "small islands", was devised only fairly recently to differentiate between the islands of the South Pacific and the North Pacific. While the islanders do share many similar interests, and cultures, they are in reality, quite diverse, especially in language. Up until the Japanese times they never even shared the same government. It wasn't until just a few years ago they even had a Congress, and a local voice in government.

We are not saying that the islands should split up. No, we favor island unity, because we believe that in unity there is strength, just as the diverse American colonies proved in 1776. What's more, we hope that the U.S. government is not even remotely involved in any master plot to split up the islands, as some have darkly suggested.

What would happen to the Marshalls? Or for that matter, the Marianas? Will the U.S. accept two new territories? Would the Marshalls consider annexation to Hawaii--as has been suggested in the past? Or, is there a way that all of the islands of the Northern Pacific--including Guam--can somehow be worked into a loose knit government that would be viable? We don't know that this would be possible, but we can't think of a better time to explore the idea. There is no real reason why Guam has to be continually excluded from any talks concerning the political future status of the islands that lie out in the Northern Pacific. JCM.

Pacific Daily News

ROBERT E. UDICK Publisher

JOSEPH C. MURPHY Editor

PUBLISHED ON GUAM, WHERE AMERICA'S DAY BEGINS

Daily except Sunday at Agana, Territory of Guam, U.S.A.

P.O. Box DN Agana, Guam 96910

PHONE: 777-9711

Entered as Second Class Matter at the Post Office, Guam
Under Act of Congress March 3, 1879