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TT Status In A Bind

Talks on Trust Territory future status between U.S. Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams and the Congress of Micronesia have hit a snag over Palauan land rights, forcing the Congress' Joint Committee on Future Status to embark on a series of hearings throughout the territory this month.

The committee met in closed session on Guam yesterday to plan a trip schedule and issues to bring up in the public hearings, according to committee chairman Sen. Lazarus Sali.

Sali said the joint committee has demanded Williams agree that "public land must be returned to the people of Palau." The committee refused to hold any more talks until Williams responded to the demand, Sali said.

Williams then asked the committee to formulate its position on land rights for all districts, said Sali.

"Before we can answer him, we will go and consult the people," Sali said.

The joint committee will split into two subcommittees and hold about one hearing a day from Monday to July 27, he said.

He said the status talks would reconvene in late September or early October. Williams is "actively studying" the committee's demands, Sali said.

He said the land question is the major subject of hearings but committee members would also "report on what has happened in the negotiations to date and get instructions from the Micronesian people."

Yesterday's meeting at the Okura Hotel was held to "work out the kind of questions we want to raise in the hearings," Sali said.

The status of all districts must be settled before dissolution of the trust mandate, Williams said, following the most recent round of talks that included only the Marianas. Status talks on the rest of the TT are scheduled later this year.