

## Editorial

# Island Land Is Vital.....

It's been obvious for a long time, but now it is quickly becoming more official—the key to the settlement of the political future of the Pacific Islands lies in the vital question of land.

Right now the status talks on the future of the islands is hung up, all because the people of Palau want the question of public land resolved before they will continue any kind of talks with the United States.

Earlier it was assumed by the United States that the land question would take care of itself—after the political issue was resolved. James Wilson, deputy to Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams, chief U.S. Status Negotiator, said here Thursday that a declaration by the traditional Palau chiefs has changed that picture.

The declaration was followed by Lazarus Salii (then chairman of the Congress of Micronesia's Joint Committee on Future Status) who came up with a letter saying that the Palau lands have to be returned or there will be no further status talks.

In March, at a meeting in Honolulu, the U.S. said that it was not the owner of the public lands, but was holding it in trust for whomever owned it; that it would take time to study the return and would talk to people in the districts. The U.S. felt at the time that it couldn't act on land return for one district only.

Still, Palau was the only district where the problem existed, and so a team headed by Wilson visited Palau and other districts, trying to get some answers on the land problem.

The people of the islands, always land short, are more concerned about this aspect of the political talks than any other single issue. There are many real problems in connection with land, however, and certainly it is going to take a good deal of time, and lengthy discussions between reasonable men to decide these questions.

Island land problems stem from many of the original islanders who didn't believe in private land ownership at all. This view was disrupted by a chain of colonialists, from Spanish, through German, through Japanese, and at last the Americans. It was complicated by a bitter war that saw much of the land blown up, or paved over by airstrips. In that war most of the land records, such as they were, were lost forever.

Other complications include military retention land, land that the military still might need in the future, the question of eminent domain, homesteads with adverse claims, and the fact that some traditional leaders are not recognized now as having power over land.

The U.S. negotiating team, Wilson said, while recognizing the problems, is prepared to go along with the desires of the people "in principle."

To give you an example of the problems to be faced on land discussion, Wilson said that there are some 600 to 700 Palauan families now living on land that the traditional chiefs claim. Wilson reported that the chiefs made it clear that the people living there will have to renegotiate with them for the land. He said that as much as 68 per cent of the land in Palau is public land—most of it in Koror and Babelthuap. That percentage is even higher in the Marianas, where more than 90 per cent of the land is public in nature. On Rota that figure could go as high as 95 per cent.

In the case of Palau, where these families are living on public lands, they were first put there by the U.S. military during occupation, and then later by the Trust Territory government, "rightly or wrongly."

It would be so much simpler for the United States if the question of public land was not raised at this time, but rather returned to the islands as part of the end of the trusteeship. But apparently the Palauans, worried about the military land needs, have decided that they want the question of the land solved before they continue talks on any of the other issues.

Wilson again talked about the military land needs in Palau, most of it needed for "contingencies" that have never been spelled out before. He told reporters on Guam that the U. S. still wants joint use of the Palau airport, along with 40 acres now submerged near the Koror harbor, and 2,000 acres on Babelthuap near the airport for a supply depot. The military also wants to work out an agreement for potential use of 30,000 acres on the large, mostly unused island of Babelthuap for possible maneuvers. This land, Wilson stressed, would be kept in the hands of the farmers and villagers, and if used, these people would receive compensation for any damages.

When Wilson was asked what contingencies would cause the use of Palau, he said that the only circumstances that would dictate the use of this land would be the closure of U.S. bases like that at U Tapao in Thailand, or the Philippines, or installations in Okinawa.

For the first time publicly, at least, a serious spokesman of the United States has come right out and said: If the United States, for one reason or another, is booted out of Okinawa, Thailand, or the Philippines, we will fall back to the Micronesian islands. We are definitely not leaving the Western Pacific as a base of operations.

The next step for the U.S. negotiators is to study the land and the problems in other island districts, the Marshalls, and Ponape, and Truk, and to talk to the leaders there. Following this, the U.S. team can sit down with the Micronesian leaders and make some "agreement in principle" on the land issue.

Then, and only then can the Status Talks on political future go forward.

All these issues, all of these problems take time to resolve. Is there a time sequence, like the Australians have set up for the other last remaining Trusteeship, in Papua-New Guinea? Not really, at this stage, we would guess, although it might be possible within four years to spin the Marianas off from the rest of the Trusteeship.

Frankly, in view of the problems, we don't foresee setting the Micronesians free much before 1978-1980. This time frame isn't entirely the fault of the U.S. either, but partially because the Micronesians themselves don't know what they want. JCM.