

Palau Clans May Face Boot

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By Robert B. Thompsc
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Some 600 to 700 Koror, Palau families face possible displacement under conditions of the return of public lands entered into Trust Territory future status talks by the district's chiefs.

James Wilson, deputy to Ambassador Franklin Haydn Williams, chief U.S. status negotiator, said yesterday on Guam that the chiefs claim the land and have made it very clear in his talks with them that the people living there will have to renegotiate with the chiefs for their homes.

Wilson noted that about 68 per cent of the total land area of Palau is public lands—most of it in Koror and Babelthau.

In many instances, Wilson continued, there are conflicting claims on who is the rightful possessor of the land.



JAMES WILSON

"The Trust Territory administration, first the Navy then the present civilian administration, has rightly or wrongly put people on public land," he said.

In some instances there is no lease, in some instances: a short lease that has expired and never been renewed and in other instances long-term leases that still have years to go.

In all instances though, the land is occupied whether the lease is in existence and this is a complicating factor in working out the land return, he added.

He also said that the U.S. is willing to return the land to whomever before Micronesia ends its trusteeship role.

The return, though, he said, is a fairly recent development in the future status talks.

The land issue was first raised in talks on Saipan in December. Until then, Wilson said, both sides seemed to "point that return of lands would be something Micronesia would take care of itself"—after independence.

In the meantime, he said, the U.S. would continue "fumbling" along trying to get the "mess" of land ownership straightened out.

"In December, we had the declaration by Palau chiefs that the U.S. military should go home. What they really wanted was for the military go home

unless they got lands back.

"Lazarus Salii (then chairman of the Congress of Micronesia's Joint Committee on Future Status) came up with a letter saying Palau lands have to be returned or we can't proceed," Wilson added.

He and aides have just completed a trip through the western districts studying the land problems.

In March, at a meeting in Honolulu, the U.S. said it was not the owner of the lands, but 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, Wilson continued. The U.S. added that it couldn't act on land return for one district only.

Salii, according to Wilson, said Palau was the only place the problem existed and the U.S. countered there were questions of what to do with the land until trusteeship ends. There were also questions of eminent

domain, homesteads with adverse claims and the fact that some traditional leaders are not recognized now as having power over land.

However, he said, the U.S. negotiating team is prepared to go along with the desires of the people "in principle."

He also noted that the U.S. still wants joint use of the Palau airport, 40 acres of now submerged adjacent land, 2,000 acres on Babelthau for a Navy supply depot and 30,000 acres

for maneuvers to be used "very occasionally."

He said the military land was needed for contingencies and might never be used. Asked what contingencies would dictate its use he said a possibility would be the closing of U.S. bases like that at UTapao in Thailand or like the installations in Okinawa.

Wilson on Tuesday also publicly apologized for the official secrecy that has cloaked his government's initiation of an economic development moratorium on Tinian.

"The pity is—and here I apologize—that a full explanation was not given earlier," Wilson told members of the Marianas District legislature on Tuesday on Saipan.

"Nobody has suggested a moratorium for anything like five years," he said.

"There has been considerable misunderstanding on this. But there is no thought of stunting Tinian's economic growth. It should flourish in this period" (while the military's land desires are negotiated).

Wilson said there is a need for

caution in the disposition of Tinian's land now. He urged against going "blindly down the same old road" and alienating public land on Tinian through transfers to non-citizens.

"The opportunities for speculation are too obvious to mention," said Wilson.