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Micronesia: maybe

After a year of delays and disagreement, maybe the Trust Territory in Micronesia is about to resume its slow progress toward a new political status.

The key words are "maybe" and "slow."

THE MEETING of top negotiators from the Congress of Micronesia and the special U.S. bargaining team in Honolulu recently appears to have cleared at least part of the way.

There was agreement for the Trust Territory administration to launch a "comprehensive new program of education for self-government" among Micronesia's 115,000 people — something all sides agree has been badly needed. It is a program that should last several years.

The actual negotiations on a future status between the two large delegations will resume in Washington, D.C., next month, over a year after the sixth and last round of talks.

If the two sides can reach agreement on the hangup question of how (not whether, for it is guaranteed) the U.S. will return the public land to Micronesian control, the talks could move quite swiftly.

THERE ARE EVEN some hopes the two sides can complete work on a draft agreement or "compact" of free association.

That is the system under which the U.S. would continue to control foreign affairs and defense (including having rights to lease some military base

areas).

Micronesians would have complete internal self-government and the ultimate sovereign right to choose independence or some other status later.

The goal is to get the agreement in shape to present in January to the Congress of Micronesia, which has been badly divided among future alternatives ranging from independence to permanent ties with the U.S. to the status quo of staying under the United Nations umbrella.

The Congress has been delaying and undecided, but there seems to be some hope it will now move on some of the needed steps for transition from American to Micronesian administration.

Meanwhile, separate talks between the American team and the Marianas District (one of six in Micronesia) for a separate status closer to the U.S. will be following later.

THE OPTIMISTIC view of what's in sight in the next few years, then, is for transition to two Micronesian administrations still nominally under American rule but moving toward their ultimate status and the day when the U.N. trusteeship will be abandoned.

Timetables range up to 10 years, and 1980 is pictured by some on both sides as a target date, although with luck it might be sooner.

So after four years of talks on a new status the operative word at best is still "slow." It's also prudent to add the "maybe."