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Pacific view

By JOHN GRIFFIN
Editorial Page Editor

Micronesia in Washington

What with Watergate, the Mideast and the energy crisis, we won't be reading much about the seventh round of status talks on Micronesia's political future due to open in Washington Tuesday.

But the new round does begin after a couple of good preliminary steps by the U.S.

One of them is agreement by Washington to turn over public lands to the six districts if the people in the districts vote for it.

This has been a point that helped stall negotiations for the past year. Leaders in the Palau District (where 68 per cent of the land is public) demanded talks not go forward until such land was returned to their control.

The U.S. Administration, which now controls public lands under the United Nations Trusteeship agreement, has long taken the position the land would revert to Micronesian control. The debate was whether the transfer would come at the end of the trusteeship (not yet in sight) or earlier. Also in question was who it should go to.

Since public lands make up some 60 per cent of the Trust Territory, the decision to turn such land back to the districts, as opposed to some future central Micronesian government, should be an influence toward a much more decentralized Micronesia in the future.

The second step was a restatement of the Nixon Administration's willingness to ask the U.S. Congress for funds to finance a Micronesia constitutional convention.

Such a convention has been long encouraged by the U.S., which has been pushing to get agreement on a future status of "free association" under which the U.S. would control foreign affairs and defense and Micronesians would have complete internal self-government and an option for independence later. Now, after much indecision and delay, Congress of Micronesia leaders have indicated they hope to move ahead with plans for a convention.

While these moves should contribute to the atmosphere when talks begin, the outlook at best is for a slow, often difficult process of transition in moving Micronesia to the point of control over its own affairs.

A Johnston veto

It doesn't quite rank with the firing of Archibald Cox, but Trust Territory High Commissioner Edward Johnston has taken a highly controversial step in vetoing funds for the Micronesian Legal Services Corporation's program.

In effect, Johnston's action cuts off some \$600,000 for running a program that has been controversial with the Administration but also of great benefit to Micronesians.

Johnston offers several reasons for his veto. He proposes the staff of the Trust Territory Public Defender be increased to fill the gap.

There are doubts about the effectiveness of that alternative as a means of handling the kind of civil suits undertaken by the legal services program.

And, equally important, there is a psychological aspect. The legal services program has been a thorn in the side of the Administration, and the U.S. military. Many Micronesians came to admire its work; so, sometimes grudgingly, did some Americans.

As with the reduction of Peace Corps lawyers in Micronesia a few years ago due to Washington pressure, it's hard to believe this action was simply taken for the good of the Micronesians.

Johnston's action can be overridden by the director of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, Alvin Arnett. Given the climate needed for successful Washington status talks, it would seem well for him to do so.