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Honolulu Advertiser

Micronesia progress . . .

Change often comes with frustrating slowness in the islands spread across the vast Pacific area west and south of Hawaii.

But it does come, and you could see it in recent days in events relating to Micronesia, American Samoa, and general Pacific Island cooperation.

MICRONESIA took a couple of steps closer to its new political status in talks held in Honolulu this week between U.S. negotiators and island leaders.

Two sets of negotiations are still involved — one for the northern Marianas district (above the U.S. territory of Guam), the other for the rest of Micronesia, five other districts spread across 3,000 miles of the north-central Pacific.

There was already basic agreement earlier this year on the plan for the northern Marianas chain to become a U.S. commonwealth, a form of high-class territorial status with strong self-government, much help from Washington and provisions for U.S. military bases, notably on Tinian.

Now there is a timetable:

The final draft will be signed in December. Then there must be a plebiscite with United Nations observers, a constitutional convention and referendum among the people of the Marianas — as well as approval by the U.S. Congress.

The aim is to have everything completed by July of 1976. But the new Northern Marianas Commonwealth will run under the basic umbrella of the United Nations trusteeship covering all Micronesia until the rest of the area is ready for its new status.

THAT OLDER SET of talks for the bigger area has been marked by slow progress and stalemates, amid spurts forward.

By now negotiators have completed most of the work on the new status of "free association." It will give this part of Micronesia self-government and basic sovereignty, and the U.S. responsibility for most foreign affairs and all defense, along with some military base rights.

With much luck, the draft compact or agreement could also be signed in December for referral to the congresses of both Micronesia and the U.S.

But any timetable is far less clear than the one for the Marianas. Envisioned is a long process of congressional debate, constitutional conventions for the districts and area as a whole, a major referendum under the U.N. with various options, and a transition period that could stretch into the 1980s.

In both sets of negotiations the major sticky issues remain control of land and how much the U.S. will be paying for any military use.

And that underscores some basic points:

Land is an emotional as well as practical issue, and islanders don't want to lose out, as happened in Hawaii and elsewhere.

In addition, land and strategic location are often the chief economic assets they have. Wisely, island leaders are seeking the best bargain they can get from the world's wealthiest nation. And they don't want to make mistakes that will later burden their children.

Nobody can blame them for that.