

Micronesia's Future

Negotiations over the future status of Micronesia, the United Nations trust islands in the Pacific, have taken a new turn.

It used to be that Micronesian leaders were pressing for an early settlement while the U.S. was holding back. Now it is the other way around.

The U.S. in the past year has shown itself ready to strike a deal, but the Micronesians now are maneuvering for more time.

SENATOR Lazarus Salii, chief negotiator, seemed to have made a deal more than a year ago, but was asked by the Congress of Micronesia to go seek another. He was close to another agreement late last year when the Micronesians broke off the talks, claiming the U.S. was offering an inadequate future subsidy.

This month, Salii suggested to the Congress of Micronesia what the real trouble may be. He said a general lack of political awareness still hampers the people of Micronesia from making a meaningful choice of a future political status.

America has indicated it is willing to help in that area, too.

Interior Secretary Rogers Morton in his Jan. 22 Message to Micronesia promised the U.S. will support both a Constitutional Convention and a greatly expanded program of education for self-government.

He spoke of the next three years as a decisive turning point in Micronesia's history, and implied a U.S. desire to see matters settled no later than that — meaning by the end of the Nixon administration.

Morton also offered to return public lands to control of the six local districts — the Marianas, Yap, Palau, Truk, Ponape and the Marshalls. And he said Micronesia can be opened to foreign business investment starting April 1, though the U.S. will still retain a case-by-case veto over the issuance of business permits.

"The right to self-determination is yours," Morton said in his message. At the moment America seems more active than Micronesia in pressing for the decision.

Sen. Salii has responded by suggesting 1981 should be the target date for complete self-government in Micronesia in a phased movement from a constitution to be effective in 1976.