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Minister for Foreign Affairs

M E D I A R E L E A S E

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Travel to Fiji and Solomon Islands

I will be visiting Fiji and the Solomon Islands from 14 to 17 July.

Fiji

In Fiji on 14 to 16 July, I will join the Pacific Island Forum Foreign Ministers' Ministerial Contact Group in talks aimed at helping Fiji return to democracy and the rule of law.

The Ministerial Contact Group was established by Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers in March 2008 and comprises the Foreign Ministers of Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tuvalu, New Zealand and Australia.

The Ministerial Contact Group is tasked with monitoring the progress of Fiji's preparations for holding an election in the first quarter of 2009, and to report to the meeting of Pacific Island Forum leaders, which will be held in Niue in August.

The visit reaffirms the Pacific Island Foreign Minister Forum's commitment to assisting Fiji in its preparations for a democratic election early next year.

The Contact Group will meet senior members of the Interim Government which will provide an important opportunity to assess progress toward the holding of an election and to engage in constructive dialogue.

The Interim Government's recent appointment of a Supervisor of Elections is a small but definite step in the right direction.

Despite this positive development, the Australian Government remains very concerned about the situation in Fiji and again calls on the interim Government to honour its faithful and unconditional commitment to hold a democratic election in the first quarter of 2009.

During a recent visit by Sir Paul Reeves, Special Representative of the Commonwealth, the key political leaders in Fiji agreed to take part in a dialogue on electoral and political reform, to begin in late August. Australia welcomes this development.

My visit to Fiji will be the first by an Australian minister since the December 2006 Coup. The most recent visit by an Australian Foreign Minister to Fiji was that of Mr Downer in September 2005. Then Prime Minister Mr Howard visited Suva for the Pacific Island Forum Leaders' meeting in October 2006.

Following my announcement on 30 June about Fiji's diplomatic representation in Australia, I have accepted the interim Fiji Government's nominations for Acting High Commissioner in Canberra and Consul General in Sydney. The interim Fiji Government will announce details of these appointments in due course.

These appointments will strengthen channels of communication with the Interim Government with the nominated officers taking up their posts in the near future.

I note the New Zealand Government has also agreed to similar diplomatic arrangements with the interim Fiji Government.

Solomon Islands

I will also visit the Solomon Islands on 16 and 17 July to attend the second meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

The Forum Ministerial Standing Committee (FMSC) comprises the Foreign Ministers of the Pacific Islands Forum troika of past, present and future chairs of the Forum – Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Niue – as well as the Foreign Ministers of Solomon Islands and Australia.

The FMSC was established to help ensure a greater degree of regional coordination and oversight of RAMSI's operations. I attended the inaugural meeting of the FMSC in Honiara on 22 February.

This meeting marked the beginning of a new, forward-looking partnership between RAMSI and the Solomon Islands.

At the meeting, the Committee underlined the importance of consultation between the Solomon Islands Government and RAMSI in formulating jointly agreed development strategies, and endorsed the proposal to jointly develop a Solomon Islands Government – RAMSI Partnership Framework.

The Framework will develop agreed timelines to reduce RAMSI's engagement in critical areas of government as the capacity of the Solomon Islands Government continues to grow.

At the forthcoming meeting of the FMSC on 17 July, the Committee will discuss progress on the Partnership Framework proposal and other elements of the cooperative relationship between RAMSI, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Solomon Islands Government.

I look forward to my second visit to Solomon Islands as Foreign Minister and to continuing a productive, practical and positive regional dialogue on RAMSI.