

Media Release

24 MAY 2024

JOINT STATEMENT ON THE NEW ZEALAND – COOK ISLANDS JOINT MINISTERIAL FORUM 2024

1. New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rt Hon Winston Peters; Minister of Health and Minister for Pacific Peoples Hon Dr Shane Reti; and Minister for Climate Change Hon Simon Watts hosted Cook Islands Minister of Foreign Affairs and Immigration Hon Tingika Elikana MP and Minister of Health Hon Vainetutai Rose Toki-Brown MP on 24 May in the Bay of Islands for the 8th annual New Zealand-Cook Islands Joint Ministerial Forum.

2. The Joint Ministerial Forum was established in 2011 to reflect the strength of the bilateral relationship and provide for an annual high-level meeting to discuss issues of mutual interest and importance. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the last Joint Ministerial Forum took place in Aitutaki in May 2019.

3. Ministers acknowledged the pre-eminence of the Joint Ministerial Forum and the importance of meeting in-person to maintain the strong and special relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand; a relationship based on historical, familial, cultural, economic and social ties that have existed between the two countries and their people for generations. These foundations are enhanced by our linkages today of shared values, history, citizenship, and partnership. The regularisation of the Forum is critical to ensure the articulation of joint priorities and timely implementation of key tasks and deliverables. The Ministers confirmed their intention to hold the Forum early each year.

4. Ministers acknowledged the need to formalise annual Prime Minister to Prime Minister meetings as a testament to our constitutional ties and to acknowledge the closeness and breadth of the relationship. The Leaders meeting would be sequenced with the Joint Ministerial Forum and the Joint Ministerial Forum Working group.

5. Ministers emphasised the special nature of the constitutional relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand, and the mutual responsibilities of partnership and cooperation that underpins it, as encapsulated in the Joint Centenary Declaration of the Principles of the Relationship between the Cook Islands and New Zealand 2001. Ministers reconfirmed their mutual commitment to consult each other on issues of importance.

6. 2025 will mark sixty years since the Cook Islands became self-governing in free association with New Zealand. Looking ahead to this historic and important commemoration, Ministers signalled their intention to issue a joint declaration to elevate the relationship and celebrate the many strands which make it unique and enduring. Ministers tasked officials to convene a Joint Ministerial Forum Working Group by the end of this year to develop a draft joint declaration for Ministers and Leaders' consideration by first quarter 2025.

7. Discussions at the Forum focused on priority areas of cooperation in the relationship as set out in the Cook Islands – New Zealand Statement of Partnership (Waka Hourua/Vaka Purua) 2022-2025, including economic development, public sector strengthening and cooperation in education, health, tourism, security, infrastructure, and natural resources.

8. Ministers of Health agreed to deepen cooperation on health, including progressing as soon as possible a new Memorandum of Understanding that formalises our health partnership and gives due recognition to health cooperation as members of the Realm of New Zealand. Ministers of Health further acknowledged the value of cooperation through the Polynesian Health Corridors (PHC) programme and the Cook Islands welcomed New Zealand's pledge of NZ\$30 million over five years for phase 2 of the PHC. Health Ministers Reti and Brown tasked New Zealand and Cook Islands health officials to explore collaboration on strengthening the Cook Islands health system.

9. Ministers recognised the effectiveness of the Infrastructure Trust Fund (ITF) as a mechanism through which to deliver climate-resilient infrastructure and noted support so far for the Airport Slab Replacement Project, Manihiki Airport Improvement Project, and Te Tau Papa o Avarua (Avarua Town Plan Project).

10. Ministers welcomed the earlier confirmation for the 2022-25 funding period of NZ\$24 million through the Kerekere Moana climate finance partnership arrangement, which will support through the ITF the Cook Islands' Northern Group Renewable Energy Battery Upgrade Project program and other projects. Ministers acknowledged the importance of energy security and the need for continued pragmatic, just and equitable transition to renewable energy.

11. Ministers shared reflections on post COVID economic recovery challenges, including flight connectivity and workforce retention and recruitment challenges. Minister Elikana noted the debt servicing challenges the Cook Islands would be confronted with in the outer years and sought continued dialogue on this issue.

12. Minister Peters reiterated New Zealand's steadfast commitment to supporting education, health, and tourism outcomes in the Cook Islands by providing NZ\$20 million in Core Sector Budget Support over the next two years, targeted at these sectors. Ministers acknowledged the governance and development outcomes that had been derived from prior and current strong inter-agency collaboration between New Zealand and the Cook Islands in areas such as border security (customs, immigration) and New Zealand agencies such as the Office of the Auditor General, Audit New Zealand, Ministry of Justice, through parliamentary exchanges and Public Service Fale and their counterpart Cook Islands agencies. Minister Peters further confirmed an additional NZ\$3.5 million per year for the next three years in support of continued public sector strengthening and enhancing Cook Islands-New Zealand cross-agency cooperation.

13. Minister Elikana sought New Zealand inter-agency collaboration with the Cook Islands Seabed Minerals Authority in scientific research, technical and environmental support, policy and legislative support, institutional strengthening and capacity building.

14. Ministers had a frank discussion on strategic issues including the increasingly complex and insecure global context, and the challenges facing the Pacific. The Ministers reiterated their commitment to Pacific-led solutions to challenges in our region and the critical role of the Pacific Islands Forum as the pre-eminent regional organisation. Ministers expressed their shared concerns with the political unrest in New Caledonia and offered their condolences to all affected, and in particular, those who have lost loved ones. They called for peace and order to prevail to enable respectful dialogue between the parties and affirmed their support for the Pacific Islands Forum playing a constructive role.

15. Ministers acknowledged the foundational constitutional obligations that underpin our closest of partnerships on matters of defence and security, and affirmed their desire to deepen this partnership in the midst of the complex and varied security challenges of our time. Ministers welcomed the breadth of defence and security cooperation including on policing, maritime security, customs, immigration, cyber-security and noted that this was important for our shared security and prosperity. Ministers reiterated their commitments to consult regularly and candidly on defence and security issues, including non-traditional security elements such as human security, environmental and resource security and economic security that all play a critical role in exacerbating the Cook Islands' vulnerabilities as a small island state. The Ministers also agreed to establish an officials' level annual defence and security dialogue under the Joint Ministerial Forum Working Group.

16. Minister Elikana provided an update on the Cook Islands' progress in pursuit of membership of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Commonwealth emphasising membership of the IMF would unlock various types of support. Ministers reconfirmed their support for the Cook Islands' deeper engagement in international affairs and within the international community.