



MELANESIAN *Tak*

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A quarterly newsletter to inform our readers about key work activities undertaken at the MSG Secretariat

Political Stability, Economic Prosperity, Social Equality and Inclusivity and Sustainable Development are the MSG's core objectives as endorsed by Leaders in the "MSG 2038 - Prosperity for All Plan"

FATHER WALTER LINI SCHOLARSHIP LAUNCHED ON MSG DAY



From L-R: Vice-Chancellor of NUV, Jean-Pierre NIRUA; Kariso Korisa, 1st male recipient; Carole Raupepe, 1st female recipient; Lady Mary Lini, the surviving wife of the Late Father Walter Lini; Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma; and Political Counsellor at the Australian High Commission in Vanuatu, Laura Frech.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat and the Australian Government will sponsor two high-achieving students of the National University of Vanuatu (NUV) for the 2024 Academic year following the launch of the inaugural Father Walter Lini Scholarship last month.

Coinciding with MSG's 36th anniversary marked every year on March 14, the launch took place at the National Convention Centre in the presence of the MSG Chair and Vanuatu Prime Minister, Hon. Charlot Salwai, Senior MSG Officials, Cabinet Ministers, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, invited guests and friends of the MSG.

The Walter Lini Scholarship was a decision of the MSG Leaders in 2013, and while a formal announcement of the scholarship program was made in 2014, concrete implementation

could not be undertaken due to financial constraints. Both scholarships are worth a total value of 600,000VT.

In commending Australia's support, Director General, Leonard Louma, said, "implementing this particular Leader's decision is a milestone achievement and Australia's contribution will go a long way in ensuring that students will realise their dreams, hence contributing to a region of Economic Prosperity and Social Equality and Inclusivity – two of our core objectives endorsed by Leaders in the MSG 2038 Prosperity for All Plan".

Vice-Chancellor & President of the NUV, Jean-Pierre NIRUA, acknowledged the MSG Secretariat and the Australian Government for the worthy initiative.

MSG Chair, Hon Charlot Salwai was proud to announce the fulfilment of this Leader's mandate.

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**FROM THE
DIRECTOR
GENERAL'S DESK**

Leonard Louma, OBE



Welcome to the first edition of our Melanesian Tok 2024.

Time has caught up with us in the midst of our engagements in the 1st quarter culminating in the successful conclusion of the Budget sessions of both the Senior Officials Meeting and the MSG Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM) – our Governing Bodies.

Let me, at the outset, mention how pleased I am to welcome several staff who have come on board including our new Deputy Director General (DDG), Dr Gregoire Nimbtik, who brings with him a wealth of experience working for the Government of Vanuatu including most recently as Director General at the Office of the Prime Minister. Our other new comers include the Manager, Environment, Climate Change & Natural Resource Management (ECCNRM), Diane Hinge -Salili; Legal Officer (LO), Brittien Yosef; and Executive Personal Assistant (EPA) Gosiana Malili.

We began the year by convening a staff retreat to discuss our Corporate Plan 2022-2025 in detail, a document outlining our strategic road map for regional cooperation, development and growth and from which our annual work plans and budget will be developed.

Recently our team completed filing our written submissions to the ICJ Climate Change Advisory Opinion proceedings, a historic first for the MSG.

This following a Leader's decision in August last year for Members and the Secretariat to make submissions. Vanuatu's role in the ICJ initiative is greatly commended as it reaffirms that 36 years on, the MSG remains relevant and influential.

Last month we marked 36 years of MSG's existence, a story of innate resilience in the

face of adversity, shared Melanesian values and cultures and the resolve of our political leaders to pursue their goals.

We were honoured to have the MSG Chair, Hon. Charlot Salwai officiate at this auspicious occasion.

A special feature of the celebration was the launch of the Father Walter Lini scholarship for two high-achieving students of the National University of Vanuatu sponsored by the MSG Secretariat and the Australian Government.

Also in attendance were members of the Committee for Reinforcing Commitment and Obligations (CROC) to the MSG which convened its first meeting following the 36th anniversary celebration.

The Committee has been set up to examine the institutional, regulatory, and operational mechanisms in Member's bureaucracy that might be affecting commitment to, and cohesion of the MSG and the effective implementation of MSG Leaders' decisions.

Additionally, a week-long consultation was held in Port Moresby where the Secretariat discussed trade and investment opportunities with stakeholders, progress on the MSG Sports Charter, and several proposals including for an inaugural Heads of MSG National Universities Meeting, Heads of MSG National Broadcasting Corporations Meeting and the introduction of a MSG Business Travel Card to encourage cross border investment and commercial activities, among others.

Early last month we paid a courtesy call to the MSG Chair briefing him on crucial dates in our events calendar in particular the imminent Handover of the Chairmanship to Fiji during the next MSG Special Leaders' Summit in Nadi, now scheduled for August.

Finally, the 1st MSG Heads of Immigration Meeting kicked off in Apia, Samoa within the margins of the Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC). The meeting was convened to discuss the MSG Business Travel Card proposition and how it will be developed and implemented.

I hope that you will enjoy these updates and many more in this issue.

Oleti, Vinaka Vakalevu, Tenkiu Tru, Tangio Tumas, Tankyu Tumas.

MSG GOVERNING BODIES APPROVE WORK PROGRAM & BUDGET



From L-R: Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma; Hon. Justin Tkatchenko MP, Papua New Guinea Minister for Foreign Affairs; Hon. Johnny Rasou MP, Vanuatu Acting Deputy PM & Minister for Foreign Affairs; Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua MP, Fiji Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs; Hon. Pahala Nugraha, Indonesia Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs; Mr Patrick Jommesy – Representative of the FLNKS & Mr Collin Beck, Solomon Islands Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat's 2024 Work Program and Budget was endorsed by the MSG Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM) following the conclusion of the Governing Body meetings in Port Vila, Vanuatu last month. The 2024 Budget represented a surplus budget.

The FMM sat to deliberate on recommendations put forward to it by the preceding Budget Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) which was convened at the MSG Secretariat.

In his opening remarks, the Chair of FMM, Hon. Johnny Koanapo Rasou MP, Acting Deputy Prime Minister & Minister for Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and External Trade of Vanuatu expressed his appreciation to Members for their commitment towards the convening of the meeting, saying it demonstrated the shared visions and values for Melanesian solidarity and the recognition of the MSG's collective efforts to strengthen the fabric that binds the Group together.

He reminded the meeting that the MSG was established to encourage subregional diplomacy and friendly relations, maintain peace and harmony, encourage free trade, economic and technical cooperation, promote social cohesion through sports cooperation and to promote and

protect our Melanesian traditions, cultures and identity.

Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, thanked the FMM Chair and the MSG Ministers for their ongoing support to the work of the Secretariat.

Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs of Fiji, said the presence of the FMM demonstrated its commitment to uphold Melanesian solidarity and unity.

Mr Patrick Jomessy, Representative of the FLNKS Political Bureau, said that MSG continues to give FLNKS hope and courage to pursue the process of decolonisation to eventually build an independent nation in Melanesia and the Pacific.

Hon. Justin Tkatchenko MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Papua New Guinea reiterated that the MSG, being a sub-set of Pacific Regionalism makes it an important player in Pacific regionalism.

Mr Collin Beck, Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs and External Trade of Solomon Islands acknowledged the leadership of Director General Louma in ensuring that the MSG Secretariat is currently in good financial health with greater visibility. Similar sentiments were shared by Mr. Richard Balkonan, Head of the Asia Pacific Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vanuatu.

COMMITTEE FOR REINFORCING COMMITMENT TO MSG MEETS



The 1st meeting of the Committee for Reinforcing Commitment to MSG got underway at the MSG Secretariat last month.

The Inaugural Committee for Reinforcing Commitment and Obligation towards the MSG (CRCO) was successfully convened at the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat last month.

Chaired by Mr Kalfau Kaloris, Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and External Trade of Vanuatu, the CRCO was convened to examine the institutional, regulatory and operational mechanisms in Members' bureaucracy that might be affecting commitment to, and cohesion of the MSG and the effective implementation of MSG Leaders' decisions.

The same issues were examined of the Secretariat and suggestions to strengthen its operations, commitment to the MSG and the effective implementation of Leaders mandates were put forward.

During opening statements, Members reaffirmed their commitment towards the MSG and its objectives. They also noted the Secretariat's efforts to strengthen its operations and capacity needs and undertook to improve their support to the Secretariat with its work.

Additionally, they reiterated their commitment towards ensuring that the MSG continues to be

relevant, and that the cohesion of the Group is further strengthened to ensure it plays an effective leadership role in the region on matters of particular interest to the MSG Members.

Members agreed to the need for adjustments and strengthened cooperation within the MSG Membership in the changing regional and global political and economic landscape.

In terms of Legislative measures, Members called for the need to review the Agreement Establishing the MSG, among other things, to make it consistent with International Law and practice. The review would ensure a stronger and versatile subregional Organisation, that MSG will remain faithful to its original objectives and truthful in the service of its Members interests, and the Organisation will remain relevant amidst changing times. With regards to operational matters, Members urged for concerted efforts to be made to increase the visibility of the MSG as a Group and the Secretariat, and aggressively promote what the MSG does. Among other things, Members acknowledged the importance of the Committee's work and agreed for the CRCO to become a Standing Committee of the MSG that would report to the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) directly and endorsed that the outcomes be presented to and considered by the MSG Governing Bodies.

MSG MARKS 36 YEARS OF EXISTENCE



Chairman of the MSG and Vanuatu Prime Minister, Hon. Charlot Salwai (L) delivering his MSG Day keynote address. On the right is the Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) constitutes almost 98 percent of the land area, 86 percent of the population, 91 percent of the GDP, almost half of the EEZ, and close to 90 percent of the natural resources in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) area and these characteristics rightfully imposes on us a responsibility to be at the forefront of regional actions as we prosecute Pacific regionalism within the Blue Pacific Ocean Continent.

These were the words of the Chairman of the MSG and Vanuatu Prime Minister, Hon. Charlot Salwai, while delivering his keynote address at the celebration of the Group's 36th anniversary in Port Vila, Vanuatu on 14 March 2024.

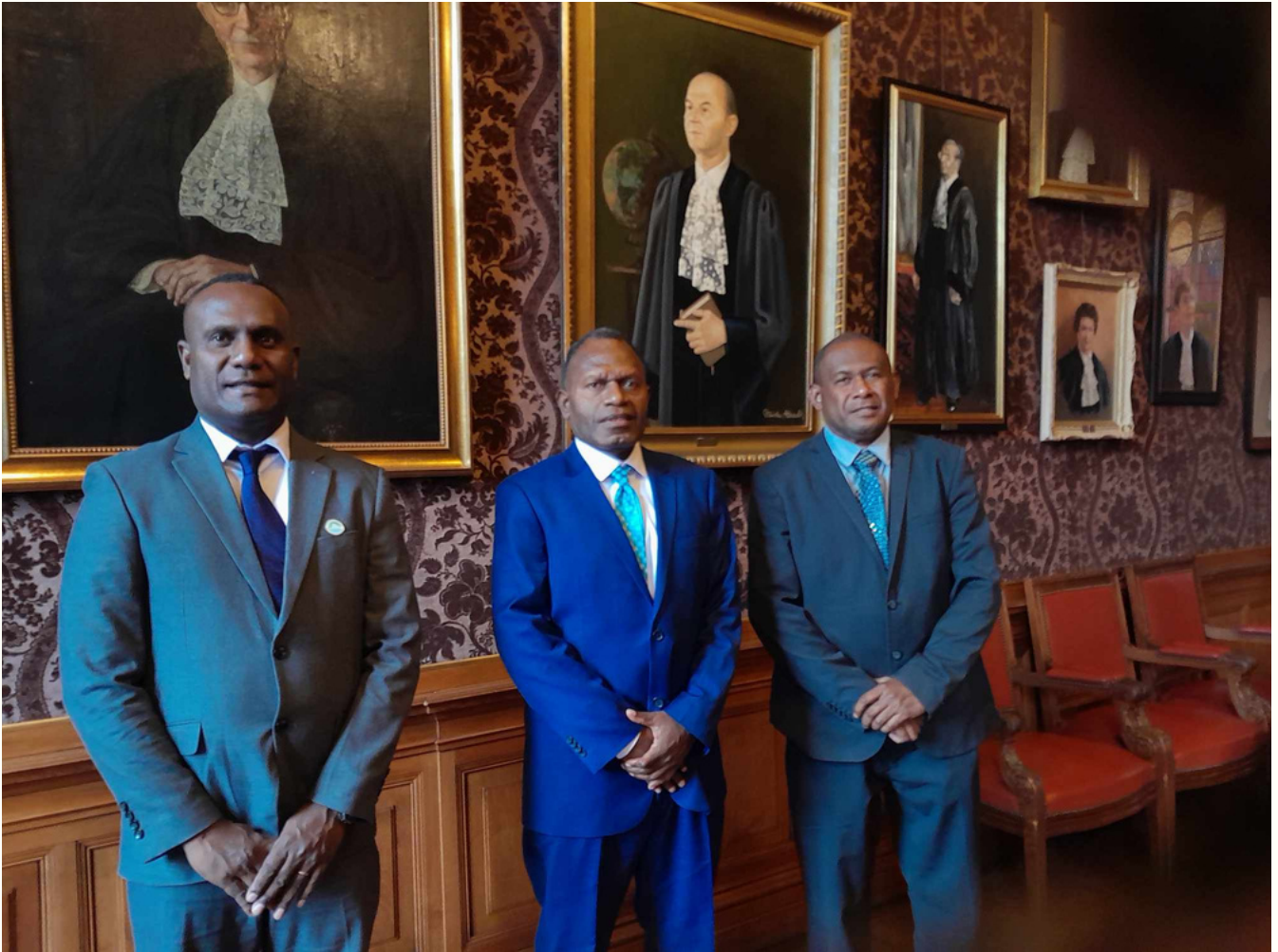
Hon. Salwai said this year marks yet another occasion where "we gather to celebrate the successes, remind ourselves of the ongoing challenges and accept responsibilities for the things we could have done better in pursuit of our goals and vision as contained in the Principles of Cooperation amongst Independent Melanesian States and the Agreement Establishing the MSG".

DG Louma said there is much that we have achieved as MSG from our humble beginnings in Goroka, PNG, in July 1986 and since MSGs' founders subsequently formalised the Group with the signing of the Agreed Principles of Cooperation Among the Independent States of Melanesia in Port Vila on 14 March 1988, it has been a rollercoaster 36-year journey for the MSG. "From its very inception, MSG faced headwinds in its pursuit of better coordination of efforts in prosecuting political issues of interest to its Members, greater cooperation in trade and economic matters, enhanced promotion of Melanesian cultures, traditions and values, and realising ambitious aspirations to share resources and services.

All of those he said, were with a view to achieving the goals of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security.

DG Louma reaffirmed that the MSG Secretariat cannot rest on its laurels and is now seeking out and engaging in activities that will bolster the Group's relevance in today's changing world.

MSG CREATES ANOTHER HISTORY FOR THE SUB-REGION AT INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE



The team at the ICJ from L-R: MSG Secretariat's Political & Security Affairs Manager, Ilan Kiloe; Deputy Director General, Dr Gregoire Nimbtik, and Legal Officer, Brittien Yosef.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat completed filing MSG's joint written submission to the ICJ Climate Change Advisory Opinion proceedings at the Hague last month.

This following a Leader's decision during the Leaders' Summit in August last year for submissions to be made by Members and the Secretariat.

The MSG ICJ submission is being advanced through the MSG Secretariat's Political & Security Affairs programme headed by Ilan Kiloe.

The team at the ICJ included MSG Secretariat's Deputy Director General, Dr Gregoire Nimbtik, Political & Security Affairs Manager, Ilan Kiloe and the Legal Officer, Brittien Yosef.

Prior to their submissions, a Melanesia Alignment

Meeting for MSG Members to consider ways to maximize the impact of submissions while accurately representing the collective interests of the Melanesian sub-region, was convened at the MSG Secretariat.

The meeting was held face-to-face and virtually to ensure harmonization of perspectives among participating Melanesian states, allowing them to collaborate effectively despite geographical distances, to ensure a unified approach towards the ICJ AO within a very tight deadline.

Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, firstly commended the role played by Vanuatu in the ICJ initiative, saying it reaffirmed that the MSG and its Members continue to be relevant and influential.

MSG SECRETARIAT TEAM PAYS COURTESY CALL ON MSG CHAIR



Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, and his senior staff with the Chairman of the MSG and Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Hon. Charlot Salwai along with his management team.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat comprising senior staff recently paid a courtesy call to the Chairman of the MSG and Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Hon. Charlot Salwai.

DG Louma took the opportunity to say he was proud of the calibre of people that were joining the MSG Secretariat.

Hon. Salwai was briefed on upcoming meetings in particular the dates for the MSG Special Leaders' Summit for the handover of the Chairmanship to Fiji, and the preceding Senior Officials and Foreign Ministers Meetings in Port Vila.

He was also informed of the efforts by the Secretariat and the status of the implementation of Leader's decisions, including the completion of the Review of Communiqués and the Establishment of Supporting Officers, among others.

Other briefings included that of Strategic Partnerships pursued by the Secretariat; the ongoing pursuit of the Membership of the CROP;

Visibility of the MSG; and the Secretariat's drive towards bolstering capacity in terms of staff numbers.

DG Louma advised the Chairman of the establishment of the Project Management Coordination Unit, whose activities will be geared towards bringing in extra-budgetary resources and developing projects for funding that will focus on Youth, Women and Community-Level empowerment. With regards to organisation restructure, DG Louma informed the Chairman of his intention to include a French Translator, FLNKS Desk Officer and a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Officer.

Hon. Salwai was also briefed on latest developments like the proposed establishment of the MSG Business visa travel cards and the Father Walter Lini Scholarship to be administered by the National University of Vanuatu (NUV).

The Chairman thanked DG Louma for the updates and acknowledged his team for their work and contribution to the region.

MSG BUSINESS TRAVEL CARD TO ENCOURAGE CROSS BORDER INVESTMENT & COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES



Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, with a team from Papua New Guinea Immigration led by its Head, Mr Wellington Navasivu (right). To the far left is MSG Secretariat's Senior Executive Advisor (SEA), Chris Waiwori.

The notion of a Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Business Travel Card (MBTC) to encourage cross border investment and commercial activities topped the agenda during a recent meeting between the MSG Secretariat's Director General, Leonard Louma, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) Immigration Officials in Port Moresby.

Based on PNG's experience on the establishment of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Business Travel Card (ABTC), DG Louma explored the potential of a similar concept for the development of an easy access visa product, to cater for the needs of genuine business investors in MSG and bona-fide business entities that have a substantive commercial footprint in the MSG membership. As well, the MSG Business Travel Card idea envisages the inclusion of Government officials and Heads of Regional and International Organisations, whose work requires them to travel regularly around the MSG membership.

DG Louma said, that while the proposed Melanesian Travel Card to encourage free movement of personnel across MSG borders is

under consideration by MSG Trade officials, he desires to establish a mechanism to kickstart the easy access visa as a priority. The Melanesian Travel Card is a component of the new Melanesian Free Trade Agreement (MFTA).

This he said, will complement the existing easy MSG short term visa that facilitates the free movement of MSG personnel across the MSG Borders.

Discussions in Port Moresby point to the possible creation of an online application system where responsible Immigration Officials can access and perform due diligence checks on those applying for the MSG Business Travel Card.

The MSG Business Travel Card is part and parcel of the efforts to encourage cross border investment within the MSG membership, and facilitate better administration of the operations of MSG business entities in MSG countries.

Discussions to date indicate genuine support for both the idea of an MSG Business Travel Card and greater cooperation amongst MSG countries in consular matters from both Government Officials and private sector representatives.

PROPOSED MEET FOR HEADS OF MSG UNIVERSITIES



Vice Chancellor of the University of Papua New Guinea, Professor Frank Griffin and Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat is proposing to convene a meeting of the Vice Chancellors of the MSG National Universities in Port Vila in early May 2024.

This Meeting of the Heads of the National University of Vanuatu (NUV), Solomon Islands National University (SINU), Fiji National University (FNU) and the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) will discuss joint activities to promote MSG cooperation in the higher education space.

This was discussed in Port Moresby when the Director General, Leonard Louma, met with the Vice Chancellor of UPNG, Professor Frank Griffin. DG Louma stated the possibility of the Heads of the MSG National Universities discussing issues such as an MSG Student Exchange Program, consideration and implementation of the Walter Lini Scholarship Program (a standing mandate of the MSG Leaders), preferential fees for MSG citizens, mutual recognition agreements on qualifications, develop curriculum in relation to Melanesian studies/research, and the proposal for a Visiting Lectureship arrangement. DG Louma said that the NUV VC has also expressed his support, and he will also bring the proposal to the attention of the VCs of SINU and FNU to solicit their views before their inaugural meeting.

MSG FINALISES DEAL WITH PNG NATIONAL FOREST AUTHORITY



Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, and the Managing Director for the PNG NFA, John Mosoro.

The funding arrangement with the National Forest Authority (NFA) of Papua New Guinea (PNG) for the position of a Forestry Officer within the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat has been secured.

This was confirmed following a meeting between the Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, and the Managing Director for the PNG NFA, John Mosoro, following the Board's approval of this assistance.

The arrangement is for the PNG Government, through the PNG NFA, to provide a 3-year funding for the position, which will also involve the secondment of an officer from the PNG NFA.

The intention to fund the Forestry Officer position was first announced by the Vice Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Constitutional Matters, Hon. Muguwa Dilu, to the MSG Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM) on 21 August 2023. It was then formally confirmed by the Prime Minister, Hon. James Marape, on 23rd August 2023 at the 22nd MSG Leaders' Summit in Port Vila.

DG Louma welcomed the signing of the funding arrangement as this gave certainty to the preparations for the 2024 Budget, which was considered and endorsed by the Senior Officials and the Foreign Ministers in March.

NEW ERA OF PARTNERSHIP FOR THE MSG & AUSTRALIA



The teams from the MSG Secretariat and the Australian High Commission in Vanuatu with their respective Heads, Director General Leonard Louma, and the Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu, H.E Heidi Bootle.

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat Director General, Leonard Louma, and Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu, Heidi Bootle, have committed to strengthening the Australia-MSG partnership in 2024.

MSG Members and Australia share longstanding bonds, including through deep cultural and historical ties, significant development, education and trade linkages, shared values including multiculturalism, democracy, equality and human rights. We also share a commitment to taking strong climate action.

In 2024, the MSG Secretariat will partner with Australia to launch two new projects aligned with its economic, social and cultural agenda for the region:

- i. A Project Coordination Unit within the MSG Secretariat will boost its administrative and project management capacity and resource MSG to have a stronger impact for its members.
- ii. The Yut4Melanesia initiative will support youth in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to respond to climate change and find solutions to the region's pressing environmental challenges, such as plastic pollution.

Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, welcomed Australia's partnership and is equally excited to soon launch the new projects.

"I note that the Australian Cooperation programs with our MSG Members continues to expand in many areas and I appreciate these efforts very much," DG Louma stated.

Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu, H.E Heidi Bootle said Australia highly values its partnerships across the Melanesian region, through close relationships with MSG member countries and strong historical and cultural ties, including through our Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander communities."

These new, Melanesian-led initiatives she said, elevates Australia's partnership with the MSG Secretariat to another level, enabling the MSG Secretariat to deliver more for its Members.

In December 2022, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Penny Wong, and the then Deputy Director General of the MSG Secretariat, George Hoa'au, signed the Australia-MSG Memorandum of Understanding on Development Cooperation, a long-term partnership towards achieving the MSG 2038 Prosperity Plan.

Australia also partnered with the MSG to host the inaugural and second MSG Prime Minister's Cup in Vanuatu and New Caledonia respectively, and supported the 2023 MACFEST hosted by the Vanuatu Government and the MSG.

MSG EYES POTENTIAL COLLABORATION WITH MELANESIAN BROADCASTING HOUSES



DG Louma discusses potential collaboration with the PNG NBC team led by Managing Director & PINA President, Kora Nou (2nd from left).

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat is currently putting together a concept to have all MSG National Broadcasting Corporations (NBCs) collaborate in providing positive news about Melanesia. The Secretariat's efforts are in line with the MSG 2038 Prosperity for All Plan to promote the MSG regionally and globally as one of its broad objectives. Plans are underway to convene a meeting of the Heads of the MSG NBCs, which include the National Broadcasting Corporation TV-PNG, Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, Fiji Broadcasting Corporation and Vanuatu Broadcasting Television Corporation. The idea is to see greater cooperation between MSG NBCs in areas like training attachments, news content, mainstreaming of positive news about Melanesia, rebroadcasting of each other's daily news, and simultaneous broadcasts of major events or happenings in each other's countries, including simultaneous broadcasts of MSG Leaders statements at the UN, among many others. The issue was discussed at length during a meeting in Port Moresby between the Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, and the Managing Director of the National Broadcasting Corporation of PNG, Mr Kora Nou, who is also the President of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA).

DG Louma emphasised that the perception of MSG countries as representing an "Arc of Instability" and the focus on negative stories on and about MSG countries by the international media was unhelpful to building the self-esteem of our people.

This negative narrative he said, needs to be addressed by giving greater coverage to positive stories in the region, including specific programs on Melanesian diverse and unique culture, sports, business investments, climate change actions and youth entrepreneurship and innovations, and ensure that these are promoted in a regular and sustained way by our own NBCs. Both DG Louma and Mr Nou agreed that there was value in exploring the development of a program called "Melanesian Way or Melanesian Story", similar to that of the "Pacific Way" and the "Australian Story". Managing Director Nou said that discussions on enhanced cooperation has been ongoing among MSG Broadcasting Officials and the idea by the MSG Secretariat is most welcome and will provide added impetus to the conversations on improved cooperation between the MSG countries in the media space. The discussion concluded with the understanding that the development of a multilateral agreement between all the MSG National Broadcasting Agencies will allow news content to be shared among them for transmission.

1ST MSG HEADS OF IMMIGRATION MEETING, A SUCCESS



The Heads of Immigration in MSG Member countries at their first meeting in Samoa.

The first Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Heads of Immigration Meeting (HOIM) was successfully convened in Apia, Samoa, last month, to discuss the MSG Business Travel Card (BTC) proposition and how it will be developed and implemented.

Hosted within the margins of the Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC) meetings, the aim of the talks was to introduce an easy entry business visa product to facilitate travels of bona-fide MSG entrepreneurs engaged in business activities within the MSG countries.

The MSG BTC will also cater for the needs of Government Officials whose work requires them to travel frequently within the MSG sub-region, including Executives of International Organisations that have projects in MSG countries.

While officially opening the meeting via zoom, Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, acknowledged the Head of the PIC Secretariat, Akuila Ratu, for agreeing to allow for the convening of this MSG inaugural meeting.

"MSG Leaders have made it very clear that in their desire to see greater economic and trade integration amongst the MSG countries, they would want us to facilitate easier travel for our business people, our officials whose work requires them to travel regularly

around our countries, as well as those International Organisations whose officials and staff need to visit our countries on a regular basis because of projects that they fund and run in our countries," he stated.

DG Louma welcomed any specific views on the role that the Secretariat can play, not only in the development of the concept, but in the operation and management of the MSG BTC, once it comes to fruition.

He also expressed appreciation to the Papua New Guinea Immigration & Citizenship Authority for preparing a paper on the various policy settings that would need to be considered for the MSG BTC. DG Louma stated that while there are ongoing conversations at the Trade and Economic Officials Meeting (TEOM) for a broader Melanesian Travel Card to cater for the MSG Labour Mobility and MSG SMS needs under the Melanesian Free Trade Agreement, those discussions will continue.

Furthermore, he will propose to the MSG Governing Bodies the endorsement of a meeting of the MSG Heads of Immigration, to be a standing constituent body meeting, to be reflected in the MSG Annual Calendar of Events.

OCEAN POLICY, MARINE SPATIAL PLAN TO ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY



Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, delivering his address at the Vanuatu National Ocean Policy and Marine Spatial Plan Workshop.

The National Ocean Policy and Marine Spatial Plan is an important instrument in ensuring that the Ocean and its eco-system are developed and managed in a sustainable way to ensure our people can benefit from its eco-services.

These were the words of the Director General of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat, Leonard Louma, while delivering his keynote address during the Vanuatu National Ocean Policy and Marine Spatial Plan Workshop at the Ramada Hotel.

He stated that together MSG countries constitute some 8.5 million square kilometers of the total EEZ in what is now fondly referred to as the Blue Pacific Continent. And, while this is a very significant swath of blue ocean real estate, consequently, ocean governance must feature prominently in the MSG echelons of our policy concerns and priorities.

MSG Members he said, share with each other extensive coastlines and huge coastal communities that straddle our borders, communities whose food bowl is the ocean and the attendant marine ecosystems, and if managed responsibly, we will ensure their economic prosperity.

He noted that according to an SPC report, subsistence inshore fisheries contribute between 28 - 96% to the overall value of fisheries to the GDP of Melanesian countries - Fiji 82%, Vanuatu 96%,

Solomon Islands 38%, PNG 28%, and New Caledonia 70%, and that even with the high value tuna fisheries, MSG countries continue to be significant players in that fishery. He re-emphasised the importance of the ocean and the coastal fisheries to our people with the provision of food security, employment, recreational value and a lot of our culture is closely linked to activities pertaining to the marine life.

DG Louma said, "we owe it to our people living along the maritime borders, to devise a corridor for them to engage in cross border commercial activities".

Traditional communities divided by colonial drawn borders he said, must be allowed to visit their relatives easily and while we are already doing that in the MSG, more can be done by developing mechanisms to assist traditional coastal communities along the border to jointly manage their shared traditional fishing grounds, whether it be in relation to sedentary marine resources or pelagic fishery. DG Louma said he is confident that the MSG can lead the way in this regard.

"We, at the Secretariat, are gradually unpacking the MSG Roadmap for Inshore Fisheries Management and Sustainable Development 2015- 2024 with shared responsibilities of our ocean and marine resources very much in our minds," he added.

MSG CALLS FOR CONCERTED EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CYBER-CRIME



The MSG has called for concerted efforts to address cyber-crime. Photo: UNODC

The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat has called for strengthened collective efforts to address cyber-crimes by proactively investing in digital evidence awareness and capability in the region's law enforcement agencies.

Director General of the MSG Secretariat, Leonard Louma, made the call while speaking at the United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime (UNODC) Digital Evidence Workshop in Port Vila last month.

He stated that IT developments and advances have ushered in many advantages to the way we live our lives, the way we communicate, the way we do business and the way we collect and store information.

DG Louma said while advances in IT have made life easier and more pleasant, they have created platforms for criminal activities.

In recent years, he said, the region has experienced increase insidious cyberattacks on government systems and the MSG Sub-region has had its share of these.

In 2022, the government systems of Vanuatu were taken down, including servers, websites, and the police management system for a significant period due to a series of cyberattacks which the country is still recovering from today.

In 2019, the IT systems of Papua New Guinea's Supreme and National Courts were subjected to cyberattacks by perpetrators seeking financial gain, while the government payment system was targeted with a ransomware attack. In the same year, a cyberattack was launched against Fiji's GovNet causing temporary disruption in the government network.

These examples he said, demonstrate that there is an intricate relationship between IT and crime that can be taken advantage of by criminals who are increasingly exploiting the advances made in IT platform to the detriment of society and common good. DG Louma said that as the internet reach becomes more extensive - extending to rural areas, and computers and smartphones become more accessible and affordable to all including children, the region will become more susceptible to the exploits of criminals and we will all be feeling the impact, both good and bad, of global connection. While DG Louma acknowledged the UNODC for commencing this work on digital evidence & forensics training course in Vanuatu, he is hopeful that similar training can be conducted in other MSG Countries.

MSG SECRETARIAT STAFF EMBARK ON 'WELLNESS WEDNESDAY'



Staff of the MSG Secretariat during a visit to the Teouma valley farms.

Staff of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat and their families have started the year with taking time off work every Wednesday afternoon to take part in physical exercise and activities.

The first one held in February was a visit to Teouma Valley farms to observe the horticultural farming

operation. Following the visit, the team took a ten minute walk along Tamanu Road.

The team has also walked along Mele Beach.

These activities for the staff are aimed not only at team bonding but prioritizing health which will eventually contribute to a more healthier and productive work environment.

MSG SECRETARIAT CONTRIBUTES TO REBUILDING OF CHIEFS' NAKAMAL



The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) Secretariat made an additional contribution of 100,000VT to the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs.

Deputy Director General (DDG) of the MSG Secretariat, Dr Gregoire Nimbtik, made the presentation on behalf of the Secretariat on the eve of Custom Chiefs Day.

The contribution, which will go towards the rebuilding of the Chief's Nakamal, is an affirmation of the Secretariat's belief in the importance of the role of the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs in the governance of Vanuatu.

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