

**ADDRESS BY THE HON. SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE
OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC,
Mr JEAN-PIERRE MASSERET**

I would like to begin by thanking our host country, French Polynesia, for the perfect arrangements made for this Conference and the both traditional and warm welcome extended to us. Our acknowledgement goes to the authorities of French Polynesia through the President of the Government.

The offer made by French Polynesia in 1997 at the Canberra Conference to host here in Papeete this meeting, which will close the century and open the new millennium was received with great enthusiasm. This Polynesian land of which so many men and women around the world dream, still testifies to their peoples' qualities.

As privileged as we may be, however, to be working together in this setting, we must bear in mind the reason why we are here: I am referring to the First Conference of the Pacific Community. This new name, "Pacific Community", which supersedes the "South Pacific Commission", was decided by consensus by ministers at the Fiftieth Anniversary Conference in Canberra in October 1997.

It is, then, the first meeting of this Pacific Community which we are holding this year, a historical event, given added significance because we are called upon to appoint the new Director-General on this occasion.

This organisation, Mr Chairman, owes a great deal to the outgoing Director-General, Dr Bob Dun. It will be difficult to dissociate the Pacific Community from the person who has guided its work and introduced reforms over the past few years. Dr Bob Dun ended up identifying with what we continue to call the SPC to such an extent that he carried on a regular and strong relationship with member countries, expressed every six months in reports, in the form of personal letters. This reveals how strong are the bonds which have linked him, the organisation and the member countries over the years. On behalf of France I would like to convey to Bob Dun our respect, recognition and friendship. He has performed his mission in the most distinguished sense of the term, by making this organisation a productive tool for Pacific Island countries and territories. He has also been able to modernise the organisation's services as it turns today towards new information technologies with determination and confidence. These are at the heart of the Conference this year and rightly so, because, for the Island Pacific, they represent both an opportunity and a requirement. An opportunity, because distance is no longer the obstacle and hindrance that it for so long represented to Island States and Territories; a requirement, because it is necessary, while relying on existing regional bodies, to prepare our human resources and adapt our structures to meet these new developments. The Pacific Community is gearing up to do so.

Last year, France had already taken the initiative of supporting and co-funding with Australia the COMET satellite link project between the Noumea headquarters and the Suva offices, giving Internet access. We welcome the fact that this project has commenced and form the wish that its implementation occur rapidly in the interests of our organisation's effectiveness. I believe that positive developments have occurred recently in this area.

Further, one of the primary positive results of the use of new technologies, with the inception within the Community of the PACNET public health surveillance network is an early warning and reciprocal information system for epidemiological outbreaks or threats. In the long term, these instruments will, together with telemedicine, help us to save human lives. I note that the outstanding work already done by our organisation's Health Programme has been recognised in its short-listing for the Erica Prize.

Mr Chairman, I will be speaking to agenda items, as appropriate, throughout our proceedings, but please allow me during my opening remarks to restate the reasons which have led France and her government to provide its full support to the Pacific Community. The principles underlying the origins of this body have not only stood up to the test of time but remain just as valid today. France and her government, which supported them when the Canberra Agreement was signed in 1947, continue to subscribe fully to them today.

The first of these principles is the universality of this organisation which includes almost all Pacific States and Territories, whatever the subtleties of their constitutional status, and we know how much these statuses have evolved over the years.

The changes which have occurred in New Caledonia and which will be occurring in French Polynesia provide some recent examples. This principle of universality, already considered by President Ratu Mara, at the Fiftieth Anniversary Conference in Canberra, as one of the main reasons for this organisation's success, means the whole Pacific family can be brought together around the table without exception, together with the Metropolitan partners interested in the region, but particularly in its development. This is the case for France and I am anxious on behalf of our government, to restate our commitment to continue assisting in Pacific island development, in a region to which we are bound by so many historical and cultural ties.

The second principle to which we are of course also very attached is the organisation's bilingualism. As globalisation reaches our shores, we are anxious to preserve languages and cultures and what is normally referred to as "cultural diversity". The Pacific Community's bilingualism helps preserve these differences which are advantageous for a region which itself possesses many languages of great richness.

The third principle relates to the choice of regionalism to face up to the challenges awaiting countries and territories today. As the economy becomes globalised, each island country and territory feels increasingly vulnerable. Reflection is under way within the United Nations' development policy committee to define this notion of vulnerability and the relevant criteria. How can countries face up to this vulnerability, which is due to distance and a fragile ecological system, without joining forces and using the services of a body such as the Pacific Community with its technical vocation and ability to rapidly respond to member country needs?

The consolidation of regional institutions is therefore a necessity to address these new commercial, economic and technical issues, arising from these global disturbances. The Pacific Community plays a role in bringing all the technical agencies together to become more effective and have common rules of procedure and common services (such as information, dissemination, library and computer services and communications), which should gradually be introduced. The proliferation of organisations is not the best response to expressed needs in the region because it inevitably leads to the shrinkage of the shared resource base. Why not gather to strengthen a technical organisation with an universal vocation which acts as a credible interface with aid donors.

These three principles which have contributed to our organisation's success in the past will guarantee its future progress in the interests of Pacific Islands Countries and Territories.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, friends, as I come to the end of my address, I simply form two wishes:

- a very productive conference, and a
 - long life to the Pacific Community in serving all our communities.
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