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Rarotonga, COOK ISLANDS, 28 August 2012/ PIFS/ PACP Press Release – The Pacific ACP States are encouraged to conclude their negotiations on the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union (EU) this year.

In his opening remarks at the PACP Leaders Meeting in Rarotonga, the Cook Islands, today, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Tuiloma Neroni Slade said that the Pacific region's engagement with the EU, in the context of the EPA, needs to be concluded this year in accordance with Leaders' directives.

"It is already a longstanding series of negotiations. Noting the time taken since negotiations first commenced in 2004, as well as the significant regional effort and demands on its resources, it is important that Honourable Leaders now, at this meeting, work towards the conclusion of the EPA," Mr Slade urged PACP Leaders.

Mr Slade noted that "Making tangible progress and finalising the EPA will require commitment and flexibility from both the EU and PACP countries. A re-emphasis on the original intent for a development-friendly EPA and improved arrangements to channel aid for the development of trade is of high importance."

The Secretary General highlighted the importance of trade and cooperation agreements to the broader economic agenda for the Pacific Region. "Agreed arrangements such as the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA) need to be pursued vigorously and more seriously so that countries are able to undertake necessary reforms and adjustments and be better prepared to contend with the pressures of a globalised economy, as well as seizing the opportunities provided within the region," Mr Slade said.

"With a sense of achievement, I can report that, further to your directions, and after much hard work and seven rounds of negotiations, the PICTA Trade in Services Protocol was initialed at the recent Pacific ACP Trade Ministers Meeting in Tonga some 10 days ago. PACP Ministers have commended the PICTA Trade in Services Protocol for your Leaders' signature today," Mr Slade added.

Such engagements are a significant step towards facilitating deeper regional integration, and unlocking the potential benefits of regional trade in services. These regional agreements among Forum island countries will also better prepare Pacific economies for engagement under the EPA with the EU, and also with respect to undertaking negotiations with Australia, New Zealand and other developed countries.

During the one-day meeting which involves Leaders from Pacific Island Countries and Timor Leste, Leaders will have the opportunity to hear from the Secretary General of the ACP Group, and the Chief Operating Officer from the EU's External Action Services.

The PACP Leaders' meeting is the second in the series of meetings leading to the 43rd Pacific Islands Forum which officially opens later today.

The Forum Leaders will meet in plenary on 29 August before they travel to the northern Cook Islands of Aitutaki for their annual Retreat. The week-long series of meetings will conclude with the Post-Forum Dialogue Partners' meeting on 31 August.

ENDS.

Press Release from the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat. For media enquiries, contact Mr Johnson Honimae, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat's Media Officer on phone: 682 75865 or email: johnsonh@forumsec.org.fj ^[1]

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