

January 28, 110 Thursday 21 Shevat 3870 10:29 IST

THE JERUSALEM POST

JPOST.com
Israel's best-selling english daily and most-read English website

Print Edition
Photo by: Ginie

Best friends from the Pacific islands with a very different

By GREER FAY CASHMAN
21/01/2010

Presidents of Micronesia and Nauru come to Beit Hanassi.

The adage that good things come in small packages most definitely applies to the Pacific island states as far as Israel is concerned - particularly Micronesia, Nauru, the Marshall Islands and Palau, which with the United States are Israel's strongest supporters at the UN.

As small island states go, they don't come any smaller than Nauru, which has a total area of 21 square kilometers and a population of 10,000. But to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a vote is a vote is a vote, and at the UN every country's vote is equal regardless of its demography or size.

It stands to reason that when the presidents of such supportive allies make state visits, as President Emanuel Mori of the Federated States of Micronesia and President Marcus Stephen of the Republic of Nauru are currently doing, they get a full red-carpet welcome; indeed, the military band at Beit Hanassi almost froze in their honor on Thursday. The soldier/musicians wore shirts without jackets and shivered in the chill Jerusalem air.

The two presidents are here at the invitation of President Shimon Peres, who greeted them in separate ceremonies on Thursday morning and hosted a state dinner in their honor on Thursday night. Peres also invited President Johnson Toribiong of Palau and President Jurelang Zedkaia of the Marshall Islands, but they were unable to fit a visit to Israel into their schedules.

The visits of Mori and Stephen were facilitated by Project Interchange, a non-profit institute of the American Jewish Committee that develops and implements wide ranging educational seminars in Israel for current and emerging leaders from nations around the globe. Since 1982, Project Interchange, in coordination with the Foreign Ministry, has brought about 5,000 seminar participants from more than 60 countries to Israel. Both presidents are travelling with an entourage that includes their foreign ministers and diplomatic representatives.

Yosiwo George, Micronesia's non-resident ambassador to Israel, presented his credentials to Peres on January 11, and was in the reception line at Beit Hanassi to greet his own president.

Micronesia is a former United Nations trust territory administered by the United States. It became independent in 1986, and established diplomatic ties with Israel in November 1988. In 1991, Micronesia joined the UN, where it has consistently voted with Israel. It has an estimated 111,000 people and its 607 islands add up to 702 square miles.

In welcoming Mori to Israel, Peres told him, "We consider your country to be one of our greatest friends. You have demonstrated again and again the courage of your convictions and have stood up for the voice of reason."

Mori recalled that Israel was among the first countries to enter into diplomatic relations with Micronesia. "We express our appreciation by voting 100 percent with Israel at the United Nations and are proud to do so," he said.

Peres asked how Micronesia was affected by the global economic crisis, and learned that \$30 million of national investment had been wiped out. But "the US and our development partners have come to our rescue," said Mori.

Micronesia has a lot of fish, he said, but lacks the finance and technology to take advantage of this resource. Boats from other countries come to Micronesia's waters and pay a fishing fee. "We don't have a normal economy," he said.

Mori noted that like Israel, Micronesia is dependent on foreign oil and is looking for alternative energies. "We cannot continue to depend on fossil fuel, and we understand that Israel has great expertise in solar and wind energy," he said.

Naurun Foreign Minister Dr. Kieren Keke, who arrived at Beit Hanassi while his president was still touring the Old City and the Armon Hanatziv neighborhood, said that seeing Israel close-up put it in a completely different perspective. Both he and Stephen are in Israel for the first time. In fact, Stephen told Peres, this was the first state visit by Nauru to Israel.

Nauru, which will celebrate 42 years of independence on January 31, has maintained diplomatic ties with Israel since 1994.

"This trip is an eye-opener for us," Stephen said. "One could not imagine the difference between what is published in the newspapers and seeing Israel close at hand."

On Wednesday evening, Stephen met Minorities Affairs Minister Avishay Braverman, who told him about the declining water level in the Dead Sea. "I wish we had that problem," said Stephen. "We have an increase of water in the Pacific. We have too much water."

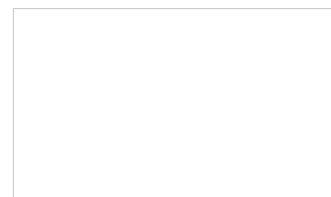
"Do you want to make up our deficit?" quipped Peres.

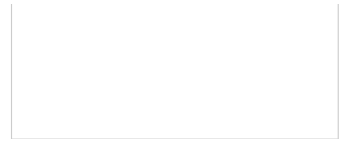
"It's difficult for some countries to know that in 30-40 years' time they'll be under water," said Stephen. "Ninety percent of our infrastructure is along the coast and we'll have to relocate." Nauru's highest point is 60 meters above sea level.

Uncertain of some of the geography of the Pacific, Peres sought enlightenment. "Some people think we're part of Australia, but we're a long way from Australia - six hours by plane," replied Stephen.

Were there advantages to being such a small country, Peres asked. Indeed, said Stephen. "You know everyone, and if you have a flat tire someone will help you change it. If you've had too much to drink, the police will take you home."

The downside is that everyone knows where everyone else lives and when anyone has a gripe about something for which the government is responsible, they know exactly where each politician lives and bring their complaints to his front door, he added.





All rights reserved © 1995 - 2009 The Jerusalem Post.

כל הזכויות שמורות © 2009- נט אפיקי תקשורת אינטר מדיה בע"מ