

In Confidence

Office of the Associate Minister of Health

Chair, Cabinet

Report on Overseas Travel: Hon Aupito William Sio

Proposal

- 1 I recommend Cabinet note this report on my travel to Manila, Philippines from 22 October – 29 October 2022 where I attended World Health Organisation (WHO) 73rd Annual Western Pacific Regional Committee Meeting (RCM), and undertook bilateral engagements focused on New Zealand's development activity.

Executive Summary

- 2 My visit to Manila achieved its objectives of:
 - 2.1 Reconnecting with Western Pacific Health Ministers.
 - 2.2 Strengthening and reaffirming New Zealand's relationship with the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office.
 - 2.3 Promotion of New Zealand and wider Pacific health regional priorities.
- 3 My attendance at the RCM gave me a much greater appreciation for the important role played by the WHO Western Pacific Office. It also highlighted the need for ongoing Ministerial engagement to ensure continued advocacy and profile for New Zealand and Pacific priorities. My engagement with Pacific Ministers and Senior Officials in the margins of the RCM was important to encourage Pacific regional collaboration and solidarity.
- 4 I attended a half day Special Session dedicated to discussing the next steps with regard to the Western Pacific Regional Director who is currently on administrative leave following allegations of bullying and racism.
- 5 I also undertook a small bilateral programme featuring engagements around indigenous peoples, combatting violent extremism, youth and women's rights, and economic empowerment organised by the New Zealand Ambassador's Office.

WHO Western Pacific Regional Committee Meeting

- 6 The WHO Western Pacific RCM was the first meeting New Zealand has attended in-person since 2019. The Annual Meeting provided me with an opportunity to emphasise Aotearoa New Zealand's priorities at the WHO. These included advocating for effective governance, resources to the Pacific,

Pacific regional priorities, mental health, climate change health-related impacts and profiling our Health reform and its approach to indigenous health (the establishment of the Māori Health Authority and the All-of-Government Pacific Wellbeing Approach).

- 7 Member State interventions reflected heavily on their COVID-19 responses. Most Member States are grappling with the impact of COVID-19 on their health systems and recognise the need to continue strengthening their pandemic efforts while also turning back to addressing pervasive issues such as non-communicable diseases. Several Member States expressed interest in New Zealand's approach to equity, community engagement and indigenous health.
- 8 I was able to signal New Zealand's interest in an WHO Executive Board seat for the 2024 term, which was received positively.
- 9 At the Special Session regarding the Western Pacific Regional Director, I was able to state New Zealand's interest in a transparent and robust investigation process, which I believe WHO is also focused on. A further Special Session is likely to be held in early 2023 and this will continue to be a priority for New Zealand given the critical role of WHO's Western Pacific Regional Office and the potential for a Pacific candidate if/when the Regional Director vacancy arises. It is worth noting that previous campaigns for a New Zealand or Pacific candidate have not been successful.
- 10 The RCM demonstrated the advantages of in-person engagement with opportunities to engage directly with key partners on health priorities. I held bilateral engagements with the Minister of Health from Malaysia during which he informed me that Malaysia's new Smokefree legislation was inspired by New Zealand's report of our own process at the RCM in 2021. I also met with other Pacific Ministers, including the Cook Islands and the Secretary for Health, Federated States of Micronesia. I co-hosted a Pacific Heads of Delegation dinner with the Minister of Health from Tonga whom is the current Pacific Ministerial caucus Chair.

Engagement with Pacific Ministers and Senior Officials

- 11 At the New Zealand-hosted Pacific Heads of Delegation dinner, we discussed the importance of Pacific regionalism and solidarity both in addressing similar health challenges and approaching multilateral fora including the WHO. I reflected on discussions from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) held earlier in the year s 6(b)(ii)

Development Programme Engagements

- 12 I attended an event celebrating the Aspiring Women Entrepreneurs Bootcamp, a Spark! Philippines initiative supported by New Zealand which provided seed capital, skills and needs-based training to marginalised women entrepreneurs, enabling them to adapt their businesses for pandemic-

imposed constraints. The dialogue provided a chance for 9 of the programme beneficiaries to share how their participation had impacted their livelihood. Also in attendance was the Deputy Mayor of Quezon City, Gian Sotto, Councillor Joseph Juico, former Councillor Mayen Juico, and Spark! Executive Director, Maica Teves. As well as building capital with these stakeholders, the event provided a platform to reiterate New Zealand's support for economic and social justice, gender equality and the empowerment of women, a message that resonated strongly with those gathered.

- 13 I spoke at the Plenary of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund's (GCERF) annual conference. GCERF works to strengthen community resilience to violent extremism, particularly in the conflict stricken areas of Muslim Mindanao in the country's south. New Zealand contributed to GCERF's pooled funding for the Philippines in 2020-2022. The event was also attended by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), Secretary, Benjamin "Benhur" de Castro Abalos Jr who I engaged with briefly before the plenary.
- 14 My final engagement outside of the WHO programme was a visit to the ACAY Missions Philippines in Quezon City. ACAY works to support at-risk youth through innovative pedagogical methods and has recently been a recipient of New Zealand Development Funds. The organisation works alongside local courts and judges from who their beneficiaries are referred. I shared New Zealand's experience with similar initiatives under my Courts portfolio of Te Ao Mārama.

Proactive Release

- 15 I propose to proactively release this paper within 30 business days of its consideration by Cabinet.

Recommendation

The Associate Minister of Health recommends that Cabinet:

- 1 Note the value of Ministerial attendance at the annual WHO Western Pacific Regional Committee meetings and give consideration to ensuring that this continues.
- 2 Note the importance of strategic discussions with Pacific counterparts on key positions at multilateral organisations.
- 3 Note the importance of strategic Pacific regional collaboration to advance health priorities.
- 4 Note this report.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Aupito William Sio
Associate Minister of Health