FSM Information Services
Press Release

FSM National Government Indefinitely Postpones December 5th Repatriation Flight & Cancels Operation Christmas Drop

PALIKIR, Pohnpei—On December 1st, 2020, the Government of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) indefinitely postponed a planned December 5th, 2020, execution of the Nation’s first repatriation flight since the border closed in March; the FSM National Government later requested the Government of the United States of America to forego any Operation Christmas Drop activities in the FSM this year. The indefinite postponement of the repatriation exercise, and the cancellation of Operation Christmas Drop, are both due to ongoing concerns regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Regarding the indefinite postponement of the December 5th repatriation effort, His Excellency David W. Panuelo, President of the FSM, upon receiving a briefing on the mechanics and technical components of the repatriation, learned that there are potential gaps in the effort to make an airtight process.

“I have every confidence,” President Panuelo said in a statement, “With our National Government’s preparedness to repatriate our citizens stranded abroad. But, upon multiple meetings with the Pohnpei State Executive and Legislative leadership and staff, and technical follow-ups with our health staff, it is clear that certain scenarios, however unlikely they are to occur, could threaten the safety of our citizens. My decision to indefinitely postpone this first repatriation flight stems entirely from safety concerns, some of which are due to an emerging capacity shortfall issue with our healthcare responders at the Pohnpei State Hospital. I have demanded an airtight repatriation regime, and I have been briefed on possible, if unlikely, scenarios that could result in COVID-19 spreading into the community. I cannot and will not allow that to happen.”

All FSM repatriation efforts are postponed indefinitely until further notice.

Regarding the cancellation of Operation Christmas Drop, the FSM National Government, upon receipt of a letter from the Honorable Henry S. Falan, Governor of the State of Yap, requesting to forego any airdrop activities this year per the decision of Yap’s COVID-19 Task Force, contacted the States of Chuuk and Pohnpei to determine if their Governments were willing to participate in the annual humanitarian operation. Both the Government of Pohnpei State and the Government of Chuuk State noted their strong preference to cancel all Operation Christmas Drop activities this year. Thus, the FSM National Government, on behalf of the States of Yap, Chuuk, and Pohnpei, has
asked the Government of the United States of America to forego any Operation Christmas Drop activities in the FSM until December 2021.

The citizens of the FSM recognize the value of Operation Christmas Drop, which is the longest running U.S. humanitarian assistance program entering its 69th consecutive year, and choosing to cancel was not an easy decision to make. The FSM National Government is regretful for this difficult decision made in extraordinary times, and remains grateful to the U.S. Armed Forces for their enduring commitment to this profound symbol of the sincere friendship between the FSM and the United States.

“In my capacity as President of the FSM, and in my personal capacity as a citizen, I have full trust and confidence in the United States Armed Forces to carry out Operation Christmas Drop in a safe manner,” President Panuelo said. “We are cancelling Operation Christmas Drop this year not due to a lack of trust and confidence, but due to ongoing concerns from our citizens in our most remote and vulnerable communities about the COVID-19 Pandemic. I may have the authority to override the decisions of the State Governments, but it is clear to me that when they are all in agreement on an issue such as this that the only appropriate course of action is to support them in full. Because the FSM’s States wish to cancel Operation Christmas Drop, then so too does the FSM National Government.”