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HEADLINE: KIRIBATI: COUNTRY PROFILE

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Historical profile

Micronesians from the South Pacific settled Kiribati between 200 and 500 AD. Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas) is made up of 33 low-lying coral atolls and is sub-divided into three main groups known as the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix and the Line Islands.

1892 Kiribati became part of the British colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands and was administered by the West Pacific High Commission in Fiji.

1942 The islands were occupied by the Japanese during World War II.

1963 Transition to independence began, with the formation of legislative and executive councils under the supervision of a British governor general.

1975 Ellice Islands seceded and formed the separate entity of Tuvalu.

1979 Became the fully independent Republic of Kiribati.

198-91 Iremia Tabai won the first three post-independence presidential elections in 1982, 1983 and 1987.

Constitutional restrictions prevented Tabai contesting the 1991 elections which were won by Teatao Teannaki.

1994 Teburoro Tito of the Mwaneaaban te Mauri Party (MMP) was elected president.

1998 Teburoro Tito was elected to his second term.

2001 The Pacific Islands Forum, of which Kiribati is a member, completed its negotiations to bring 14 Pacific island countries into a free trade agreement (FTA), known as the Pacific Islands Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA). The government of President Teburoro Tito suffered heavy losses in the second round of parliamentary elections.

2002 Parliament passed newspaper registration laws, giving powers to a registrar to deregister and stop the publication of newspapers that face complaints.

2003 Results of 25 February presidential elections: Teburoro Tito won 50.4 per cent of the vote against 48.4 per cent for Taberannang Timeon and 1.2 per cent for Bakeua Bakeua Tekita. On 28 March, President Teburoro Tito lost a no-confidence motion in which the opposition won 21 out of 40 votes. The administration was taken over by the Council of State, chaired by the chairman of the Public Service Commission, Tion Otang.

Results of general elections in May for all the seats in the House of Assembly, following its premature dissolution in March: ruling party 24 seats; opposition, Boutokaan te Koaua Party (BKP), 16 seats.

On 4 July, Anote Tong (BKP) was elected president with 47.4 per cent

of the vote, followed by his brother Harry Tong (MMP) with 43.5 per cent and Banuera Berina (Maurin Kiribati Pati (MKP)) with 9.1 per cent.

Political structure

Formerly the UK Dependent Territory of the Gilbert Islands, Kiribati gained independence in 1979.

Constitution

The 1979 constitution provides for free and open elections. Kiribati elections run in two phases with a general election for MPs in the first round and then the elected members are required to put forward three candidates for a presidential election.

Form of state: Kiribati is an independent democratic republic within the Commonwealth.

The executive

Executive power is exercised by a twelve-member cabinet chosen by the beretitenti (president) from the Maneaba. The cabinet is composed of a president, vice president and ten ministers.

The beretitenti is head of state and head of government and is elected by the people from among three or four candidates nominated by the Maneaba from its ranks. The president does not act on behalf of a political group and serves a four-year term; the limit is three terms.

National legislature

The Maneaba consists of 42 representatives elected by universal adult suffrage to a four-year term and one nominee representing Banaba (most of whose inhabitants now live on the island of Rabi in Fiji). The attorney general is an ex officio member (if not already an elected member).

Last elections: 4 July 2003 (presidential); May 2003 (general)

Next elections: 2007 (presidential and general)

Political parties

Ruling party: Mwaneaban te Mauri Party (MMP)

Main opposition party: Boutokaan te Koaua Party (BKP)

Population: 94,149 (2001)

Religions

Approximately 85 per cent of the population is Christian (mainly Kiribati Protestant Church and the Roman Catholic Church); other religions are the Baha'i Faith and Islam.

Education

The adult literacy is estimated at 92.2 per cent with a gross school enrolment of 67.8 per cent. The Junior Secondary School (JSS) programme aims to provide universal access to basic secondary education.

Higher education, is provided by the government and the University of the South Pacific (USP).

Health

The government has collaborated with the World Health Organisation (WHO) to strengthen its primary healthcare services. Such support has lowered the infant mortality rate to 54 per 10,000 live births; the fertility rate is 4.5 per woman, while maternal mortality is 67 per 100,000 live births. Life expectancy is 57 and 62 years for men and women, respectively. Estimates in 2001 showed that 47 per cent of the population had access to improved water sources. There is one physician per 4,000 people.

Welfare

The government has instituted a bonding system requiring all trained personnel to serve the country for at least the same number of years that it has funded their training. The retiring age, which was previously 50 years for all government employees, has been increased to 60 years for doctors and 55 for other categories.

Main cities

Bairiki, (capital, on Tarawa, estimated population 26,600 in 2003), Bikenibeu (on Tarawa, 7,400).

Languages spoken

English is used for official communications and in the capital Tarawa is widely understood. It is used less on the outer islands where i-Kiribati is the norm. In the i-Kiribati language the letters 'ti' are pronounced 's' (Kiribati is pronounced Kiribas).

Official language/s: I-Kiribati, English

Media

Press

In October 2002, the Newspaper Registration Amendment Bill was passed, giving powers to a registrar to deregister and stop the publication of newspapers that face complaints.

Weeklies: Te Uekera is a weekly newspaper published by the Kiribati Broadcasting and Publications Authority (KBPA). The present KBPA is controlled by an independent board and is not a printing and broadcasting arm of government. The weekly publication is 90 per cent in the vernacular and is sold on the street. This newspaper is the successor to Atoll Pioneer, which was published by the government. An independent weekly, Kiribati New Star is published every Friday and distributed throughout the country to the many different islands.

Business: Kiribati Business Link is published locally. Some regional business news is available from Business Pacific and Islands Business.

Periodicals: There are no newsagents and only limited copies of overseas papers and magazines are sold in shops. These include Marshall Island Journal and Pacific Islands Monthly. The Catholic Mission of Kiribati publishes regular magazines including Te Itoi ni Kiribati. The Kiribati Protestant Church publishes Kaotan te Ota which is generally irregular.

Broadcasting

Radio: The government-operated Radio Kiribati is a division of the Broadcasting and Publications Authority. It broadcasts daily for one-and-a-half hours in the morning and at lunchtime and three-and-a-half hours in the evening in the local languages.

Economy

Kiribati lacks natural resources and is one of the poorest countries in the Pacific. The economy is based on export of copra and fish, fishing vessel licensing, and remittances from overseas workers, as well as international loans for modest development programmes which account for 40 per cent of GDP.

There has been little development of tourism owing to the islands' isolation, high air fares and lack of facilities.

Kirimati (Christmas) island is used for landings of unmanned space shuttles operated by Japan's National Space Development Agency (NASDA). This attracts tourists, as does fishing and birdwatching.

Income is received from remittances from migrant workers (seamen and

miners working in Nauru), and the licensing of foreign fishing vessels in the Kiribati Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (the second-largest in the Pacific, behind French Polynesia) which contributes more than A \$ 43 million (US \$ 22.6 million) per annum.

Government revenues amounted to 120 per cent of GDP in 2002, compared to 150 per cent in 2001. Fishing licence revenues account for half of government revenue. The other half comes from income from the US \$ 325 million Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund (RERF), which invests overseas, taxes and duties. Expenditure amounted to 125 per cent of GDP in 2002, compared with 133 per cent in 2001. Exports were US \$ 4.2 million in 2002, up 10.5 per cent over the previous year, whereas imports rose 14.3 per cent to US \$ 35.9 million. The deficit on the trade account coupled with a decline in remittances caused the first current account deficit in eight years, reaching 6.5 per cent of GDP.

External trade

Trade deficits have occurred every year since the cessation of phosphate mining in 1979.

Exports

Principal exports are copra, fish, lobster, dried shark fins and seaweed.

Main destinations: Japan (45.8 per cent of 2001 total), Thailand (24.8 per cent), Republic of Korea (10.7 per cent), Bangladesh (5.5 per cent), Brazil (3 per cent).

Imports

Principal imports are machinery and transport equipment, food, mineral fuels, manufactured goods, miscellaneous manufactures, chemicals, beverages and tobacco.

Main sources: Australia (26.5 per cent of 2001 total), Poland (15.7 per cent), Fiji (14.8 per cent), US (9.5 per cent), Japan (8 per cent).

Agriculture

The agricultural sector accounts for about 40 per cent of GDP (fishing 21 per cent and copra 10 per cent).

Farming

Agricultural development is limited by poor soil quality. There are commercial and government-owned copra plantations on Teraina (Washington) and Tabuaeran (Fanning) islands, but peasant smallholdings are more usual. Most copra is exported to Europe by the Copra Co-operative Society (CCS).

Other crops include breadfruit, pandanus, bananas, pawpaw and a few root crops. Islanders raise pigs and poultry and fish is an important food resource. Flour, sugar and rice are replacing the traditional breadfruit and taro in the national diet, increasing reliance on imports.

Fishing

There are programmes to upgrade subsistence fisheries to small commercial enterprises.

Deep-sea fishing is carried out by Japanese, Russian and Korean Republic fleets, under licence. The main source of revenue is the sale of fishing licences. Skipjack and yellowfin tuna is fished in the immense Kiribati Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

In May 2003, Kiribati and the EU completed a deal under which Spanish, French and Portuguese purse seine and long-line fishing boats are to be allowed to catch tuna in Kiribati's 3.5 million square km fishing zone.

Industry and manufacturing

Small-scale manufacturing industries include clothing, furniture and handicrafts.

Tourism

Tourism plays a minor role in the Gilbert Islands but in the northern Line Islands tourism has a high priority. A growing number of tourists visit the rare seabird colonies situated on Kirimati (Christmas Island).

Approximately 5,000 people visit Kiribati each year, bringing US \$ 1million in receipts.

The Japanese corporation, Mitsubishi is developing a 200-room hotel on Kirimati (Christmas) Island, which will become a base for unmanned space shuttles and will attract tourists.

Access to Kiritimati has been aided by a weekly charter flight from Honolulu.

Environment

The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) reported in 1999 that, due to global warming, two uninhabited islands in the Kiribati group, Tebua Tarawa and Abanuea, had disappeared beneath the waves, others have almost gone, and the main islands suffered severe floods from high tides.

Lagoon pollution has occurred on the main island of Tarawa.

Energy

Annual electricity production and consumption is about 6.5 million kW.

Banking and insurance

There is no central bank in Kiribati and the sole commercial bank is the Bank of Kiribati. The government does not buy and sell foreign exchange.

Time: GMT plus twelve hours

Geography

Kiribati comprises 33 atolls in three principal groups, within an area of about 3.6 million square km (two million square miles) in the mid-Pacific Ocean. The country extends about 3,870km (2,400 miles) from east to west and about 2,050km (1,275 miles) from north to south. Nauru lies to the west and Tuvalu and Tokelau to the south.

Climate

Temperatures range from 25-33 Celsius. The wet season extends from December to May and rainfall variation is high in most of the islands. A gentle breeze from the easterly quarter is predominant. The westerly gale (October-March) can be unpleasant.

Entry requirements

Passports

Required by all; also onward air ticket and proof of sufficient funds while staying in the country.

Visa

Nationals of Australia, New Zealand, France, Japan, Germany and US must obtain a visa prior to arrival in Kiribati. Nationals of American Samoa, Canada, Fiji, Denmark, Hong Kong, India, **Malaysia**, Norway, Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and UK (except

Northern Ireland), do not require visas. Holders of passports issued in Guam or the Federated States of Micronesia may enter Kiribati visa free for a period of up to 20 days. Those on pre-paid package tours may be able to obtain their visas from Immigration Authorities on arrival.

Currency advice/regulations

There is no restriction on the importation of currency into Kiribati via traveller's cheques expressed in Australian currency; Australian currency in notes may also be imported without restriction.

Customs

Personal effects are allowed duty-free. Firearms, ammunition, explosives and indecent publications are prohibited imports. Strict quarantine laws govern the import of plants, or parts of plants, vegetable matter or soil, clay or earth, animals and/or animal products. Visitors are not allowed to take out of the country human remains, artefacts over 30 years old, traditional fighting swords, traditional tools, dancing ornaments or suits of armour.

Health (for visitors)

Mandatory precautions

Vaccination certificate for yellow fever is required if travelling from an infected zone.

Advisable precautions

Vaccination for diphtheria, tuberculosis, hepatitis A and B, polio, tetanus, typhoid are recommended. There is also a rabies risk. It is advisable to boil water before drinking.

Hotels

In addition to the islands' four hotels, there are rudimentary rest-houses. All hotels provide laundry services. Traveller's cheques are not accepted. A 10 per cent services charge is added to all hotel bills. Tipping is not customary.

Credit cards: Mastercard and Visa are accepted.

Public holidays

Fixed dates: 1 Jan (New Year's Day) 3 Jan (In Honour of New Year's Day), 9 May (Health Day), 11 Jul (In Honour of Independence Day), 12 Jul (Independence Day), 1 Aug (Youth Day), 12 Dec (Human Rights/Peace Day), 25 Dec (Christmas Day), 26 Dec (Boxing Day), 27 Dec (In Honour of Christmas Day).

Variable dates: Good Friday, Easter Saturday, Easter Monday.

Working hours

Banking: Mon-Fri: 0930-1500 for all branches of Bank of Kiribati except Bikenibeu which opens from 0900-1400 and Kiritimati Island branch which opens between 1230 and 1330.

Business: Mon-Fri: 0800-1230, 1330-1615.

Government: Mon-Fri: 0800-1230, 1330-1615.

Shops: Shopping on Tarawa is very limited. Mon-Sat: 0700-1900 (some shops open until 2030).

Telecommunications

Telephone/fax

A telephone service is available throughout urban Tarawa. Radio telephone links available to most outer islands. Only South Tarawa and Kiritimati have their own telephone networks. International and some intra-national calls are carried by satellite. Telecom Services Kiribati

Ltd (TSKL) hopes to modernise all telecommunications services by end-2003.

Mobile phones: TKSL and an Australian partner launched a mobile phone service in Tarawa in 1999.

Electricity supply: 240V AC, 50 cycles. Appliances with the standard Australian type three-pin plug will operate within South Tarawa.

Weights and measures: Metric system (Imperial units also used).

Social customs/useful tips

In official correspondence i-Kiribati adopt the western convention of signing their names with initials and surname, but it is customary (and more polite) to address people by their first name.

Women should not go out in shorts or short dresses especially on the outer islands. No bikinis should be worn.

Getting there

Air

National airline: Air Kiribati.

International airport/s: Bonriki International (TRW) on Tarawa.

Airport tax: There is a passenger departure tax A \$ 10; not applicable to infants under two years and transit passengers not leaving the airport and continuing their journey by the same aircraft.

Surface

Cargo services operate from Australia, New Zealand, Japan and US. Large ships anchor offshore and are offloaded by barge. Government ships operate between Fiji and Kiribati. The remoteness of the islands restricts the number of large vessels which call. The international ports are Betio (on Tarawa), Banaba and Kiritimati.

Getting about

National transport

Air: Air Kiribati provides Trislander and Casa inter-island plane connections several times a week to most of the islands. Charter flights can be arranged.

Road: There are 30km of asphalt road on Tarawa. The majority of vehicles are motorcycles able to travel beyond the confines of the limited road network.

Buses: A large fleet of privately owned buses operates an efficient and inexpensive mode of public transport from the airport to the main centres on South Tarawa. They may be flagged down anywhere on the main road; users may get off anywhere they wish. Buses operate daily from Betio to Buota 0600-2100.

Water: Ships operate from Betio to all the outer islands transporting cargo and vehicles as well as passengers.

City transport

Taxis: Taxis are available on Tarawa but cannot be booked, nor do they have meters. Charges are high.

Car hire

Overseas driving licences and international driving permits are recognised in Kiribati for a maximum period of two weeks after arrival. Persons hiring a rental car should be at least 17-years-old. Driving is on the left side of the road and the speed limit is 45kph in towns/villages, 65kph on the open highway. In general, car hire is available on urban Tarawa and Kiritimati only.

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