



NEW ZEALAND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE
Manatū Aorere



New Zealand Ministry of
Foreign Affairs and Trade
Manatū Aorere

9 March 2026

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Wellington 6160
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OIA 30675

Personal details removed for
proactive release

Tēnā koe ^{Personal details removed for proactive release}

Thank you for your email of 28 January 2026, in which you request the following under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA):

"The information I request is regarding the landing request rejections by Tongan officials of a New Zealand air ambulances (NZAAS) which occurred on 2 March 2025 for "suspicion" of drug trafficking.

- 1. Is there Ministry of Foreign Affairs communications with Tongan officials regarding the rejected air ambulance landing requests.*
- 2. Is there Ministry of Foreign Affairs communication with Foreign Affairs ministers or other NZ ministers regarding air ambulance landing requests being rejected."*

On 25 February 2026, the timeframes for responding to your request were extended by an additional 7 working days due to the consultations necessary to make a decision on your request (section 15A(1)(b) of the OIA refers).

Response to your request

Attached are the following documents in scope of your request:

1. Formal Message Tonga Police Minister Rejects Air Ambulance Landing Request [withheld under section 6(a)], dated 14 March 2025
2. RE: Attached: Inquiry Regarding Tonga Medevac Allegations – Request for Clarification, dated 17 November 2025

Some information is withheld under the following sections of the OIA:

- 6(a): to avoid prejudicing the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the New Zealand Government;
- 6(b)(i): to protect the passing of information from another government on a confidential basis;
- 9(2)(a): to protect individuals' privacy;
- 9(2)(g)(i): to protect the free and frank expression of opinions by departments; and

- 9(2)(g)(ii): to protect officers and employees from improper pressure or harassment.

Where the information has been withheld under section 9 of the OIA, no public interest in releasing the information has been identified that would override the reasons for withholding it.

Please note that it is our policy to proactively release our responses to official information requests where possible. Therefore, our response to your request (with your personal information removed) may be published on the Ministry website:

www.mfat.govt.nz/en/about-us/contact-us/official-information-act-responses/

If you have any questions about this decision, you can contact us by email at: DM-ESD@mfat.govt.nz. You have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman of this decision by contacting www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or freephone 0800 802 602.

Nāku noa, nā

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SC', written in a cursive style.

Sarah Corbett
for Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

From: [NUKU'ALOFA](#)
To: [PACPF; MEDIA](#)
Cc: [...PACIFIC POSTS; ...POLICY DIVISIONS; DS PDG; OCE; DCE; CEO; FM.Defence \(Seemail\); s6\(a\)](#)
[FM.DPMC \(FPA\) \(Seemail\); FM.P/S MFA \(Seemail\);](#)
[FM.Police \(Seemail\); FM.Immigration NZ \(Seemail\); FM.Customs Service \(Seemail\); FM.Civil Aviation](#)
[Authority \(Seemail\); s6\(a\)](#) [FM.MBIE Formal Messages \(Seemail\);](#)
[Cable Exchange FCDO-UK; Cable Exchange DFAI-AUS](#)
Subject: FORMAL MESSAGE: TONGA: POLICE MINISTER REJECTS AIR AMBULANCE LANDING REQUEST ^{s6(a)}
[SEC=RESTRICTED]
Date: Friday, 14 March 2025 4:41:00 pm

[RESTRICTED]

RESTRICTED

RĀPOPOTO – SUMMARY

Tonga's Minister of Police recently declined an air ambulance request to transport two passengers from Tonga to New Zealand. In a press conference the Minister claimed that the medical evacuation was a façade for trafficking illicit drugs. s6(a)
New Zealand has an interest in air ambulance services continuing unimpeded.

HOHENGĀ – ACTION

Hei titiro māu – for information.

PŪRONGO – REPORT

Aircraft are only allowed to land or take-off in Tonga on Sundays if they have express permission from the Minister of Police. Police Minister, Piveni Piukala, declined a request for a New Zealand Air Ambulance Service (NZAAS) flight on Sunday 3 April to return to two patients to New Zealand.

2 s6(a), s6(b)(i)

3 Piukala has subsequently outlined his concerns in a press conference. It has been picked up by New Zealand based Tongan media ([Kaniva Tonga News](#)). We have received a request to provide comments from Fetu'u 'Esiafi News.

4 s6(a), s6(b)(i)

5 Aside from the New Zealand company (NZAAS) and New Zealand nationals involved in this case, we have a wider interest. Air ambulances provide a crucial link back to New Zealand medical treatment. s6(a), s6(b)(i)

TĀKUPU – COMMENT

6 s6(a), s6(b)(i)

MUTU - ENDS

RESTRICTED

Released under the Official Information Act 1982

From: s9(2)(g)(ii)
To: [JOE, Kerrianne \(PACPF\)](#)
Cc: s9(2)(g)(ii); [COULSON-SINCLAIR, Zoe \(PACPF\)](#); [DONOHUE, Anya \(DS PDG\)](#); [LESTER, James \(OCE\)](#); [KIM, Minuk \(OCE\)](#); [MCLEAN, Rachel \(PACPF\)](#)
Subject: RE: Attached: Inquiry Regarding Tonga Medevac Allegations – Request for Clarification [SEC=IN CONFIDENCE]
Date: Monday, 17 November 2025 9:55:37 am
Attachments: [image002.jpg](#)
[image003.jpg](#)
[image004.jpg](#)
[PIVENI MEDEVAC ALLEGATION .pdf](#)
[Informal Note - Drug Allegations by Tongan Police Minister.docx](#)

Mōrena Kerrianne

Many thanks for the attached informal note/briefing which we will put to the Minister.

Thanks also for approaching NZP - which is noted.

We will come back to you if further information is needed.

Thanks again

s9(2)(g)(ii)



s9(2)(g)(ii) **Private Secretary (Foreign Affairs Administration)**
Office of Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs | Minister for Racing | Minister for Rail
Private Bag 18041, Parliament Buildings, Wellington 6160, New Zealand
Mobile: s9(2)(a) | Email: s9(2)(g)(ii)
Website: www.Beehive.govt.nz

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From: JOE, Kerrianne (PACPF) <Kerrianne.Joe@mfat.govt.nz>

Sent: Monday, 17 November 2025 9:30 am

To: s9(2)(g)(ii)

Cc: s9(2)(g)(ii)

COULSON-SINCLAIR, Zoe (PACPF) <Zoe.Coulson-Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz>; DONOHUE, Anya (DS PDG) <Anya.Donohue@mfat.govt.nz>; LESTER, James (OCE) <James.Lester@mfat.govt.nz>; KIM, Minuk (OCE) <Minuk.Kim@mfat.govt.nz>; MCLEAN, Rachel (PACPF) <Rachel.McLean@mfat.govt.nz>

Subject: RE: Attached: Inquiry Regarding Tonga Medevac Allegations – Request for Clarification [SEC=IN CONFIDENCE]

[IN CONFIDENCE]

IN-CONFIDENCE

Mōrena^{s9(2)(g)(ii)},

Please find attached an informal note/briefing on the allegations made by Tongan Police Minister Piukala back in March 2025. We have also recommended a response to the Fetu'u 'Esiafi News Editor with a draft statement.

I did try to get in touch with the below NZP contact but did not hear back from Liam.

Please let me know if you need anything further,

Thanks,
Kerrianne

Kerrianne Joe (she/her)

Senior Policy Officer – Tonga

Te Rāwhiti o Te Moana | Pacific Polynesia and French Pacific Division

□

M ^{s9(2)(a)} **E** Kerrianne.Joe@mfat.govt.nz

IN-CONFIDENCE

From: ^{s9(2)(g)(ii)}

Sent: Thursday, 13 November 2025 12:05 pm

To: JOE, Kerrianne (PACPF) <Kerrianne.Joe@mfat.govt.nz>

Cc: ...^{s9(2)(g)(ii)}

COULSON-SINCLAIR, Zoe (PACPF) <[Zoe.Coulson-](mailto:Zoe.Coulson-Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz)

Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz>

Subject: RE: Attached: Inquiry Regarding Tonga Medevac Allegations – Request for Clarification
[SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

Kia ora Kerrianne

The point of contact at NZP is Inspector Liam Clinton - Liam.Clinton@police.govt.nz

Ngā mihi,

^{s9(2)(g)(ii)}

Office of Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs
PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

From: JOE, Kerriane (PACPF) <Kerriane.Joe@mfat.govt.nz>

Sent: Wednesday, 12 November 2025 2:15 pm

To: s9(2)(g)(ii)

Cc: s9(2)(g)(ii)

COULSON-SINCLAIR, Zoe (PACPF) <Zoe.Coulson-Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz>

[Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz](mailto:Zoe.Coulson-Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz)

Subject: RE: Attached: Inquiry Regarding Tonga Medevac Allegations – Request for Clarification [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

[UNCLASSIFIED]

UNCLASSIFIED

Kia ora ^{s9(2)(g)(ii)}, confirming receipt and we will have the briefing by the required due date.

Malo,
Kerriane

UNCLASSIFIED

From: s9(2)(g)(ii)

Sent: Wednesday, 12 November 2025 1:28 pm

To: JOE, Kerriane (PACPF) <Kerriane.Joe@mfat.govt.nz>

Cc: ...s9(2)(g)(ii)

COULSON-SINCLAIR, Zoe (PACPF) <Zoe.Coulson-Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz>

[Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz](mailto:Zoe.Coulson-Sinclair@mfat.govt.nz)

Subject: FW: Attached: Inquiry Regarding Tonga Medevac Allegations – Request for Clarification

Some people who received this message don't often get email from ^{s9(2)(g)(ii)} [Learn why this is important](#)

Kia ora Kerriane

Grateful your assistance please.

We received the attached letter from 'Ofa Ki Moana Vatikani of Fetu'u 'Esiafi News (Tongan News in Auckland) regarding allegations made by the Tongan Minister of Police concerning medevac operations from New Zealand and their alleged links to drug trafficking.

As letter is addressed to both Minister Peters and Minister Mitchell, we would appreciate receiving a briefing **by midday Monday 17 November** please.

We are in contact with Minister Mitchell's Office and have advised that a briefing will be provided. We also requested details of NZP contact point (should you need to make contact) and will forward this once received.

Please advise should you have any queries.

Ngā mihi

s9(2)(g)(ii)



s9(2)(g)(ii) Private Secretary (Foreign Affairs Administration)
Office of Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs | Minister for Racing | Minister for Rail
Private Bag 18041, Parliament Buildings, Wellington 6160, New Zealand
Mobile: s9(2)(a) | Email: s9(2)(g)(ii)
Website: www.Beehive.govt.nz

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Out of Scope

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Informal Note — Drug Allegations by Tongan Police Minister

Summary/Context

Background

- The Founder and Editor of Fetu'u 'Esiafi News, 'Ofa Vatikani is seeking clarification regarding public allegations made by Tongan Police Minister Piukala, that air ambulance flights from New Zealand are being used for drug trafficking into Tonga.
- Piukala's comments followed an incident on Sunday 2 March 2025 when an air ambulance flight operated by New Zealand Air Ambulance Service (NZAAS) was scheduled to retrieve two patients from Tonga and return to New Zealand. As the request fell on a Sunday, permission was sought from the Tongan Police Minister to allow the flight to operate. Piukala denied landing approval, concerned the medical evacuation was suspicious, and may have been façade for trafficking illicit drugs.
- s6(a), s6(b)(i)
- s6(a), s6(b)(i)

MFAT advice

- s6(a), s6(b)(i)
- s6(a), s6(b)(i)
- s6(a), s6(b)(i)

Response

- s9(2)(g)(i)

- Sunday Flights

Minister Piukala's concerns about the process for approving Sunday flights are well documented publicly. Concerns have not been raised with us over the New Zealand Air Ambulance Service (NZAAS) and we have not had reason to investigate any medevac operations.

- Ground Handling Services:

The aviation link between New Zealand and Tonga is important, it connects people, trade, and tourism. The New Zealand Government regularly engages with Tongan officials, aviation regulators and operators, as well as Air New Zealand and other airlines through the International Air Transport Association (IATA). All parties are interested in ensuring continued connectivity. Ground handling services are an important part of connectivity, and all parties are working to ensure ground handling services continue to operate smoothly.

Pacific Polynesia and French Pacific Division
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
17 November 2025