

Pacific Islands Human Rights Consultation

Suva, Fiji Islands, 1-3 June 2004

Media Release

Pacific Islands endorse mechanisms to focus on regional human rights issues

Joint Media Release issued by the APF for the Consultation
3 June 2004

Over 60 participants from 15 Pacific Island countries, representing civil society, non-government organizations (NGOs), governments and national HR institutions met to discuss human rights issues and endorsed the development of further mechanisms to realise human rights in the region.

Participants at the Pacific Human Rights Consultation, held 1-3 June at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in Suva, Fiji Islands, highlighted that greater attention needed to be given to human rights issues in the Pacific region through the establishment and development of national human rights institutions and regional initiatives.

Participants agreed that addressing the impact of human rights on the lives of Pacific peoples throughout the region is best achieved by collaborative and supportive efforts of CSOs, national human rights commissions, international agencies, private sector and governments.

Over three days, participants reaffirmed the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights – civil, cultural, economic, political and social.

The consultation participants:

- Acknowledged that it is more constructive to assist nations in preventing human rights abuses than awaiting tragic consequences, which require significant intervention, and called on the international community to take proactive measures to assist Pacific Island Nations in promoting and protecting human rights.
- Emphasised the need to develop a culture of human rights both among the general public and in the official sector (including the executive arm of government, the legislature and the judiciary) through wide dissemination of information about human rights (including through grass-roots work), highlighting the role of national human rights institutions.
- Highlighted the financial and human constraints faced by the Pacific Island States in their efforts to promote and protect human rights and called upon international and regional agencies to provide technical assistance, capacity building and training.

Participants made a range of recommendations to governments, regional and international organizations and civil society organizations including:

- Urging Pacific Island Governments to ratify international human rights treaties without reservation, and where they have not ratified these treaties, to strive to protect basic human rights through entrenchment in constitutions or through appropriate legislation, implementing relevant programmes and policies and through education.
- Encouraged and offering assistance to Pacific Island Governments to establish independent national human rights institutions.
- Also encouraged Pacific Island Governments to support and contribute to the work of the UN Ad Hoc Committee considering proposals to adopt laws and policies, and review existing laws and policies, to protect the rights of people with disabilities.

Recognising the importance of implementing basic minimum human rights norms and standards, participants called on donors and regional and international agencies to assist Pacific Island Nations in applying such standards through a range of initiatives such as:

- Establishing a Pacific Peoples NGO / Civil Society Human Rights Network;
- Establishing a regional secretariat for all Pacific Peoples human rights organizations.
- Establishment of an Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) human rights advisor in the UN country team in Fiji to identify technical cooperation needs in the Pacific and work with all relevant human rights partners.

NGOs from the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste and New Zealand attended the consultations.

Governments represented at the Consultations included Australia, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Also participating were representatives from OHCHR, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNICEF, the UNESCO office for the Pacific States, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF), the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the national human rights institutions of Australia, Fiji and New Zealand.

The consultation was organised by APF, OHCHR, UNDP and the Commonwealth Secretariat, and hosted by the Fiji Human Rights Commission with support from the New Zealand Human Rights Commission.

Participants suggested that a roundtable meeting be convened to follow up on the recommendations from this consultation and a further roundtable specifically on the establishment of national institutions within 12 months.