

Statement of the Permanent Representative of Fiji to the UN and other organisations in Geneva H.E. Nazhat Shameem Khan at the 105th Session of the International Organisation for Migration 25th to 28th November 2014

Firstly, let me congratulate you on your election as the Chair of the Chairperson of the Council, and to thank and acknowledge the excellent work of your predecessor, His Excellency Ambassador Luis Chavez.

Fiji has two main concerns in relation to issues of migration. The first is the effect of climate change and environmental degradation on the ability of Fijians to keep their homes and their livelihoods. The other is the severe brain drain, Fiji has experienced in the last 30 years, as result of the lack of opportunities in employment and a lack of faith in the standard of living provided to all Fijians.

Fiji has also experienced the first human trafficking prosecutions in the last 5 years. These prosecutions were possible after the introduction of new criminal laws on trafficking, and the training of law enforcement agencies on best practices in trafficking cases. Of the four cases of trafficking discovered in Fiji, all led to convictions and prison terms of up to 18 years imprisonment.

In relation to climate change, the Fijian Government has had to relocate the people of coastal villages to higher ground, to escape the consequences of rising sea levels. The relocation has more than financial consequences for our people. Climate change and the loss of villages have also resulted in an emotional dislocation of our people from the land of their ancestors. In Fiji, the connection between land and people is a spiritual and emotional one, which cannot be measured by money alone. Land ownership by the iTaukei, or indigenous people, is considered to be a sacred trust. Land cannot be alienated by sale or transfer according to law. Yet climate change has had the effect of alienating the people of some of our coastal settlements from their land. Other countries in the region are similarly affected. In Fiji, we have assisted one such island nation to purchase a large area of land in Vanua Levu to prepare for the sad exodus of its people from the land of their birth. While we Small Island Developing States deal with such multi-faceted challenges when designing adaptation policies, we look to developed states in the region to consider the impact of such alienation when devising their own domestic policies, particularly those policies which could either exacerbate or mitigate the effects of climate change.

We also look forward to working closely with the IOM and its regional offices, in implementing effective adaptation policies in Fiji. Such policies are integrated with policies on disaster risk reduction.

In relation to the brain drain which we have experienced since independence, and which intensified after the military and civilian coups of 1987 and 2000, Fiji recognises that our skilled young workers, most of whom hold internationally recognised qualifications, will leave Fiji to work in Australia, New Zealand and the United States, if we do not create the conditions which will guarantee educational opportunities, free education, adequate and available housing, a clean environment, water, good health care, and access to transportation. The only real way to halt the loss of skilled labour is the development of social and economic rights, and the guarantee of reward on merit and merit alone.

In this, the passing of our 2013 Constitution, which guarantees equality, which provides that every person in Fiji has the same value, which guarantees the right to housing, education, health, water, a clean environment, gender equality and the rights of children and persons living with disabilities, and reasonable access to transportation, is central to national development. These are bread and butter rights, which when implemented by Government policy or enforced through the courts, will create an environment in Fiji which will persuade the young and skilled to stay to help to build our nation. Just as important is the guarantee of equality, so crucial to the student who merely wants his or her hard work recognised and rewarded, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, culture, gender or sexual orientation. The removal of institutionalised racism is a policy which is not only based on the belief in the dignity of all persons, it is also a policy which must give all Fijians a sense of national unity and a commitment to staying, and working together as Fijians.

Lastly, I would like to welcome the International Organisation for Migration to Fiji. It is hoped that the IOM Office will open in Fiji this year or at least by early next year. The opening of the office will result in an even closer partnership between the IOM and the Pacific region. Fiji looks forward to such partnership.