



Press Statement

Trafficking in Pacific will end only if Govts and CSOs work together: CHRI

Geneva, Sept 12-- With moving testimony about the challenges of rising human trafficking and contemporary forms of slavery, civil society leaders from Fiji and Vanuatu called on governments and international stakeholders here to work with civil society in the Pacific to address the issue and end exploitation.

Their call was backed by Urmila Bhoola, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, who stressed the need for all stakeholders to work on these issues with “smart use of digital technology, strategic and sustainable approaches” which involves survivors of human trafficking in decision-making. She was speaking at a panel discussion on Human Trafficking in the Pacific organised by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) at the 42nd session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC).

Two days earlier, Ms. Bhoola had presented a hard-hitting report to the HRC as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, listened intently, as did diplomats and CSOs from dozens of countries.

Highlighting that Fiji was one of Alliance 8.7's 15 Pathfinder Countries committed to fulfilling SDG Target 8.7 on issues of contemporary forms of slavery, Linnie Roche of Homes of Hope spoke of the “culture of silence and shame” as a critical challenge. Homes of Hope has rescued, supported and rehabilitated over 2,000 girls and women in 22 years, including an 11-year-old single mother who was, like many others, a victim of forced sex. Roche said that coordinated efforts across the Pacific “to train and sensitise State actors and service providers to be trauma-informed” were critical in the campaign, especially to prevent re-victimisation.

Elise Gordon of the Minderoo Foundation, who joined through Skype, spoke about their ‘Walk Free’ initiative and upcoming research report on slavery focusing on six Pacific States. She suggested that more robust research and data on the various forms of slavery will be expedient in controlling, and gradually, eradicating slavery by 2030.

Sanjoy Hazarika, CHRI's International Director who moderated the session, spoke of the “unhappy convergence of climate change, displacement, heightened vulnerabilities of women and children, increasing violence and trafficking” across the Pacific.

Addressing diplomats, UN and Commonwealth officials, as well as CSO representatives, Hazarika added: “We need to build a tapestry of solidarity that supports these voices of workers on the ground by developing partnerships between stakeholders, governments and civil society.”

Wednesday's panel was CHRI's third side event this year along the sidelines of the UNHRC, focusing on a range of issues in the Pacific and giving voice to civil society groups from Fiji, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. Those who have attended the Human Rights Council earlier under this programme include members of PNG Tribal Foundation, Transparency International PNG, Citizens' Constitutional Forum of Fiji, Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Transparency International Vanuatu and Women Against Crime and Corruption.

Issues covered by the groups have included freedom of information, freedom of assembly, corruption and attacks on women accused of witchcraft. For rights groups as well as UN officials and State representatives, this represented a rare dive into the complex social issues of the Pacific. The engagement is also aimed at understanding how



Governments represent domestic and international issues relating to human rights at the Council, bringing that understanding back home where fora like the UN remain distant and disconnected from daily realities.

“People have a right to know what their governments, which claim to represent them, are saying on their behalf at such fora and whether it matches or contradicts domestic law and practices,” said Hazarika. It is an effort at demystifying the Council, but also “giving people a voice in shaping foreign policy”.

Members of eight Pacific NGOs have made as many as nine oral and written statements during the past three sessions of the Human Rights Council. The oral statements were read out in the sprawling council hall by CSO members themselves, challenging government positions and also reflecting on difficult situations back home.

Anne Pakoa, CEO of the Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition, shared her country’s experience of handling a group of 101 Bangladeshis who had been trafficked for labour. Although a majority had been repatriated, major legal and rights hurdles faced those left behind. “Governments cannot handle the issues on their own and need us, civil society.”

Supporting Pakoa and others, Hannah Bondi of CHRI announced that a new Commonwealth 8.7 Network, launched recently, seeks to bring together civil society groups across different geographies to share, mobilise, advocate, and demand changes in policy as well as implementation of anti-slavery and trafficking laws. As much as 55% of those trapped in contemporary forms of slavery – over 40 million worldwide – reside in Commonwealth countries.

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About the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)

Headquartered in New Delhi, with offices in London and Accra, The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-government, international, non-profit organisation committed to protecting and promoting human rights in Commonwealth nations. CHRI works towards strengthening access to justice (through prison and police reforms) and building a culture of transparent governance (through the Right to Information). CHRI also monitors human rights-related trends and developments across the Commonwealth and makes formal submissions to treaty bodies and inter-governmental agencies, including the United Nations Human Rights Council.