



**UNITED NATION HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES  
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING  
GENERAL DEBATE**

**WEDNESDAY 4 OCTOBER 2017**

**REPUBLIC OF FIJI – HER EXCELLENCY AMBASSADOR NAZHAT SHAMEEM KHAN**

The High Commissioner for Refugees

Madam Chairperson and Distinguished Delegates

I would like to start with a quote from the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres when he was the High Commissioner for Refugees –

*“While every refugee’s story is different and their anguish personal, they all share a common thread of uncommon courage – the courage not only to survive, but to preserve and rebuild their shattered lives”.*

The Republic of Fiji is pleased to be a member of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR and looks forward to constructively engaging with the Executive Committee on issues in relation to Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons.

The Fijian Government in 1971 succeeded to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol both of which are reflected in Fiji’s Immigration Act 2003. The Fijian Government has since 2006 received and processed a number of applications from nationals of various countries who seek protection or recognition as refugees under our Immigration Act. We are pleased to advise that Fiji has added relevant provisions on Refugee Status Determination to the Immigration Act thereby enacting a clear legal framework to assess claims for asylum. The Fijian Government continues to respect the principle of *non – refoulement* and works closely with the UNHCR to fulfill its obligations under the Refugee Convention.



The UNHCR Canberra office in Australia continues to work constructively with the Fijian Government to provide technical assistance and capacity building for Immigration Officers in relation to RSD applications and also to collaborate on training opportunities for various stakeholders in relation to better understanding the rights and responsibilities of States Parties under the 1951 Convention and Protocol.

The UNHCR and the Fijian Government in efforts to strengthen regional cooperation to address the growing challenge of refugee populations in the Pacific, hosted an inaugural Pacific Regional Meeting on Protection late last year. The two-day conference brought together representatives from 13 Pacific Island countries to discuss issues relating to refugee protections, including mixed migration, statelessness and climate-induced displacement. The meeting also sought to boost regional and sub-regional innovation to develop solutions to challenges stemming from refugees and displaced peoples in the Pacific.

Opening the forum, UNHCR's Regional Representative, said that the UN Refugee Agency is "encouraged in the Pacific by the efforts made by states to formalise legal commitments to displaced people, to regularise arrangements for their care and processing, and to show regional leadership on emerging issues." He also noted the Pacific's "proud tradition of welcome and care."

The Fijian Government recognizes the importance of regional and international collaboration in confronting the practical challenges presented by refugee movements around the world. Issues relating to refugee status rarely have easy answers, however, this workshop presented an important opportunity for Pacific delegations to engage in open and free discussions around emerging issues providing a platform for Fiji and the Pacific to learn from each other's experiences.

Fiji notes that while refugee movements represent serious challenges to countries all across the world, we must always recognize the dignity and individual rights of the human being and all States need to continue to review their relevant laws to ensure that processes are transparent and accountable in confronting the practical challenges of refugee status.



Fiji and the Pacific region as a whole is currently dealing with an emerging issue in relation to the projected increase of climate-displaced people in the Pacific, and the urgent need for not just the Pacific community, but the global community to offer adequate accommodation and assistance to those seeking refuge from rising sea levels. National boundaries have become less significant and displacement is now a regional and global responsibility. Displacement makes the vulnerable, more vulnerable and creates new categories of vulnerability.

Ten years ago the notion of displacement caused by rising sea levels and extreme weather events was a vague possibility. Something that was to play out in the distant future. However, climate displacement is now a reality for many Pacific States.

In the last few months, hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria. As we have seen with these events, displacement of people due to climate change is no longer just a Pacific problem.

The work of the UNHCR has been critical in developing our understanding of disaster response and preparedness. The issue of forced migration and displacement is complex. It is caused or exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, but also linked to other factors related to human rights, gender, indigenous peoples and communities, conflict and security. Systemic and structural changes are needed. Adequate policy responses should protect the most vulnerable and build support for communities to enhance their capacities to adapt.

As a consequence of the rise in sea levels, Fiji has offered to give a permanent home to the populations of two of our closest neighbours - Kiribati and Tuvalu - in the event that current scientific projections are realised and the rising seas envelop them altogether. We will naturally work with the region and stakeholders to ensure human dignity in that mass movement of people when the time comes.

As things stand, we have yet to establish an international legal framework for this to occur. But we hope that through this initiative, we are at least building the consensus that we need to adequately respond to a situation that is unique in human history. Entire sovereign nations - members of the



United Nations –may be disappearing beneath the waves and their people having to be accommodated elsewhere. In the meantime, we have facilitated the purchase by the State of Kiribati of a large area of land on our second biggest island, Vanua Levu, to ensure its food security and at the same time, we have begun the process of moving our own people out of the way of the rising seas.

Some Fijian communities have relocated or are in the process of relocating due to the slow-onset impacts of climate change. With forced relocations there is a danger of communities being broken apart, for people who have grown together through generations losing their collective identity, ownership of land including their spiritual link to indigenous land.

One of the challenges faced by Fiji during the early days of relocation process was to ensure that we had a legal framework in place to address such relocation. As such Fiji has started with the development of our own Relocation Guidelines. At the time of development, there was no international experience to build upon and so as a Small Island Developing State we needed to be creative in building our own capacity. This was achieved through the assistance of multi-lateral cooperation.

In 2016 it was decided that the initial guidelines on relocation would focus on indigenous communities first with an emphasis on a people centred approach whereby the community must approach the Government to request relocation. This approach can make something as stressful as relocating due to climate change a transformative experience as everyone in the community needs to agree to the move. Women and children who are typically excluded from such decisions are also given a voice in this process.

The UNHCR, Brookings and Georgetown Guidance on planned relocation is important tool for the development of national guidelines as it provides overarching principles for States and other actors to plan and implement planned relocations.

This toolkit provides concrete suggestions through case studies on relocating people in order to protect them from disasters and environmental change. These are invaluable inputs for States and



other actors who are navigating a new domain of human movement. The case studies in the toolkit highlighted the challenges faced by communities and how such challenges may be avoided or addressed.

The toolkit also makes reference to Fiji's draft Relocation Guideline that defines relocation as the voluntary, planned and coordinated movement of climate displaced persons within States to suitable locations, away from risk-prone areas, where they can enjoy the full spectrum of rights including housing, land and property rights and all other livelihood and related rights.

The Fijian government, therefore, has taken the initiative of developing its own people centred relocation guideline that advocates for and plans and pre-empts individual and community needs. This proactive work is to ensure that when communities relocate within Fiji, because of climate change, they do so in a way that protects and upholds the rights and dignities of the people involved.

The realities of mass movement of populations either fleeing from war, persecution or the effects of climate change can no longer be ignored. Fiji looks forward to constructive engagement with all States in addressing these issues in order to create the necessary safeguards that guarantee global stability and prosperity whilst protecting and preserving the human rights and dignity of all persons.

I thank you Madam Chairperson.