



FIJI HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

GPO Private Mail Bag
SUVA, FIJI ISLANDS

10th December 2007

Statement on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Dedicated to Eleanor Roosevelt.

**Dr Shaista Shameem
Ombudsman and Chairperson of the Fiji Human Rights Commission.**

Staff of the Ombudsman's Office and the Human Rights Commission,

Today, 10th December, we commemorate the **60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** by enjoying brunch with our colleagues and friends.

We wanted to use this opportunity to remind ourselves of the importance of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1948, after 6 years of devastating war and the worst human rights violation in history, called the holocaust, the sovereign nation states of the world came together and hammered out a set of principles which bound them all. In this declaration, what was stressed was self-determination and sovereignty of states on the one hand and rights of people living in those states on the other. Both State and Citizen came together under the Declaration in the spirit of partnership and equality. The right of one was the duty of the other.

The core right that was stressed way back then, in the UN Charter as well as the Universal Declaration, was the right of all peoples to equality. That core right, the right to equality, remains the linch-pin of the United Nations system. The right to equality, expressed as the right to be free from unfair discrimination, is also provided in our 1997 Constitution, though not as explicitly and unequivocally as international law demands. This is one provision of our Constitution that might need strengthening. The provisions on the right to equality, that is section 38, could be made more consistent with our commitments and obligations in international law. The reservations that Fiji entered during colonial times to international instruments protecting the right of everyone to full equality should be removed.

I am very pleased that the UN has chosen the theme of ‘**dignity and justice for all of us**’ to launch a year-long celebration of the 60th anniversary of the UDHR. Despite conflict, and enormous differences in wealth and privilege between peoples and nation states, the values inherent in the concept of justice has survived the test of time and significant political transformations since 1948. This needs to be celebrated in Fiji and elsewhere.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights Office has asked all states to intensify their efforts to combat discrimination and exclusion because they infect societies all over the world and are a root cause of many human rights violations. We support this call.

We know from our own experience that individuals and communities who are discriminated against and excluded are denied a voice in representation or a political voice which, in turn, affects their ability to take part in making decisions that affect them.

Left unchallenged discrimination causes conflict, poverty and insecurity. The effects of discrimination are cumulative, and make life very difficult for people who are already vulnerable like those living on the margins of society, for example the homeless, landless and unemployed.

On this very important occasion, I would like to remind you all that Articles 1 and 2 of the UDHR state that everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms because all human being are born free and equal. Over the next year and even further we should look closely at ourselves and our society, Fiji, to see how we can incorporate this core value in our own lives and our institutions.

To start the UDHR 60th year off, the FHRC has decided to release our comic book, ‘**Human Rights....What’s That?**’ which was produced last year but could not be released until now. Funded by the Australian Government under its Development Corporation Section, the book will now be released to schools, libraries and the public and will also be translated into Fijian and Hindi, ready for teachers to use when they start the multi-lingual programme in primary schools next year.

The comic book is easy to read and we will continue using the same characters in forthcoming books on particular rights.

The Ombudsman's Office and FHRC will both be engaged in ensuring that the people of Fiji are aware of the theme of the 60th anniversary year- dignity and justice for all of us, no matter who we are or where we come from. We must never forget Eleanor Roosevelt, the creator of human rights as we know them- indeed, she is the mother of human rights. Without her persistence, the United Nations would just be like the failed League of Nations- full of talk among men and no action. Only a woman could have done it!

Over the next 12 months FHRC will actively promote the theme through our own education and training programmes, as well as through partnerships including with key state institutions and ministries.

As we come to the end of yet another year in the minefield of human rights, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the FHRC as well as the Ombudsman's Office for a job well done this year. The two institutions did their best to protect both individual human rights as well as public interest and this year took the human rights debate to a whole new level. It has not been easy but challenges are good for us all.

Certainly the word on the **street**, about the Fiji Human Rights Commission, is good. But judging from today's Fiji Times editorial, whether the media conglomerate of Fiji has a pulse on what the ordinary people of Fiji think is anyone's guess. Often the commercial media, or at least some elements of it, try to ram a particular way of looking at things down their readers' throats- but thankfully the people of Fiji are smart enough to decide for themselves how much of media reports is information, and how much of it is propaganda. We will try to provide as many alternative views to the mainstream media in the coming year as we can by establishing our own avenues of information which will go out to the public in various forms, including by way of educational material, documentaries, our website and other alternative media.

It would be appropriate for all of us to spend some time today reflecting on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the universal values it enshrines, without losing sight of the fact that we also need to domestically translate the values inherent in it according to our own local ideas of freedom, liberation, justice and equality.

I dedicate our celebrations today to Eleanor Roosevelt! Let's be sure to drink a toast to Elenore Roosevelt today!

Thank you all and happy World Human Rights Day!