



FIJI HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

GPO Private Mail Bag
SUVA, FIJI ISLANDS

PRESS STATEMENT

31st March, 2007.

The Fiji Human Rights Commission today released an Evaluation Report of the Commission which stated that previous Governments had not lived up to their commitment or obligation with regard to funding of the Commission which had limited both its effectiveness and its ability to undertake all the responsibilities assigned to it in law. The Report further revealed that Commission staff were underpaid, and worked in space that was so grossly inadequate, to the extent that the Commission had become non-OHS compliant. The Report stated that ‘it was well past time for the Government to act on its responsibilities’ by providing adequate space and facilities to the Commission and that ‘continued inaction could only be seen as deliberate neglect, calculated indifference, or worse’.

The report was submitted to the Commission last week by independent Canadian consultant John Dwyer who was asked to review the Commission’s achievements and performance. The report stated that the Commission was referred to by its stakeholders as the ‘jewel’ of all constitutional bodies, especially as it had ‘saved’ the 1997 Constitution, had raised awareness of human rights throughout the country, taken on important issues without fear of government reaction, dealt with matters that no one else in the country would touch, and had given ‘voice to the voiceless’.

A number of shortcomings were also mentioned by the evaluator. These had mainly resulted from lack of adequate funding and space to operate fully. The report stated that the Commission had however achieved virtually all its defined activities as set out in the Strategic and Corporate Plans and, where they were not, this was nearly always due to insufficient funds being made available to carry out the activities in question.

Commission Director, Dr Shaista Shameem said that one of the Commission's Goals was to be a good employer but in this respect the Commission had failed its staff. The salaries of staff were well below that paid to personnel in similar areas of employment. An independent salary and job evaluation exercise conducted by Price Waterhouse Cooper in 2005 showed that salaries paid to Commission staff were significantly undervalued relative to those paid under the "All Organization Market". Price Waterhouse had reported that the Commission was a highly performance oriented organization with renewal of the 3-year contracts tied to performance and achievement. Yet there was low level of job security and career path opportunities, as well as poaching of staff by international and regional organizations which benefited from the training provided by the Commission. Dr Shameem said that had there been an improvement in the conditions of employment, Commission staff would be less inclined to take up offers elsewhere. Staff turnover was 22% during this period under review.

Moreover, the space occupied by the Commission was so grossly inadequate that, as the Report of the Evaluator had stated, it was an absolute bar to staff expansion. Despite staff continuing to raise this with the Commissioners year after year, nothing was done to alleviate the conditions of work, Dr Shameem said. It was the responsibility of the Commissioners to take this matter up with Government more forcefully than they had done and despite a number of meetings with officials in the last Government, there had been no improvement and nothing further had been done.

Dr Shameem said that with the appointment of the new Chairperson, Mr Rodney Acraman, the staff hoped that their conditions of work would improve in light of the Report of the Independent Evaluator. The Commission staff will next week also seek a meeting with the Minister of Labour, Ms Bernadette Rounds Ganilau, to provide her with a copy of the Evaluator's report and to explore their options under the Employment Relations Act since most were not members of the Fiji Public Service Association and could not take their grievances to the FPSA. The non-unionised staff had only the law to protect their rights as workers and this would be the subject of their meeting with the Minister.

The full report of the evaluator can be found on www.humanrights.org.fj



Dr Shaista Shameem
Director