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PRESS STATEMENT

Disaster Response Must Protect Lives, Livelihoods and Human Dignity

The Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission (Commission) recognises the Government's humanitarian response to declare a State of Natural Disaster in Fiji over El Nino and the efforts being undertaken to protect lives, provide emergency assistance and support affected communities.

The Commission stresses that protecting human rights must remain at the heart of every humanitarian response. A disaster does not diminish people's rights. Rather, it reinforces the responsibility of the State to protect human dignity, prevent discrimination and ensure that assistance reaches those most in need.

The Commission cautions that when human rights concerns are overlooked during emergencies, existing vulnerabilities can intensify, discrimination may deepen and grievances can grow.

As communities confront the impacts of prolonged drought and severe water shortages, access to safe drinking water, adequate food, sanitation, healthcare and menstrual hygiene must remain a priority. These are not merely humanitarian needs but fundamental human rights essential to human dignity and wellbeing.

The Commission emphasises that humanitarian assistance must be timely, equitable, transparent and accessible, particularly for those facing heightened risks during natural disasters. Affected communities must have meaningful opportunities to raise concerns, identify unmet needs and participate in decisions that directly affect their lives. Accessible feedback and complaints mechanisms must also be available to ensure accountability throughout the humanitarian response.

Children, older persons, people with disabilities, pregnant women, people living with chronic illnesses, low-income families and communities in rural, remote and maritime areas must not be left behind. Particular attention must also be given to women and girls, women-headed households, people experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and those who face additional barriers accessing essential services. Their specific needs must be considered in emergency planning, relief distribution and recovery efforts. For women and girls, this includes ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, menstrual hygiene products and protection from gender-based violence. Emergency responses must also recognise the increased unpaid care responsibilities that often fall on women during periods of crisis.

For people with disabilities, emergency information, evacuation arrangements, water distribution and essential services must be accessible and inclusive. People with disabilities and their representative organisations must be meaningfully involved in planning, decision-making and monitoring the humanitarian response. Water-supply at hospitals and rural health centres must not remain compromised.

For families already struggling with poverty and limited access to essential services, a disaster can deepen hardship and increase their vulnerability to further human rights violations. Water shortages threaten agricultural production, livestock's, household food supplies, incomes and livelihoods, placing additional pressure on families dependent on subsistence farming. For many rural families, the loss of livestock can mean the loss of their primary source of income and economic security.

The Constitution of the Republic of Fiji provides an important framework for safeguarding fundamental rights. Section 36 recognises the right to adequate food and water, Section 35 addresses housing and sanitation, Section 38 provides for the right to health, while Section 26 guarantees equality and freedom from discrimination. Section 42 further recognises the rights of persons with disabilities.

Access to accurate and timely information is equally critical. Communities must receive clear guidance on water distribution, health risks, emergency services and available assistance in languages and formats they understand, including accessible information for people with disabilities.

As world leaders negotiate climate commitments at COP31, Fiji's unfolding El Niño crisis is a stark reminder that promises must translate into meaningful action; action that protects lives, safeguards livelihoods, strengthens resilience and upholds human dignity, particularly for those who face the greatest barriers and inequalities.
Climate-related disasters also raise important questions of climate justice. Those with the fewest resources and least capacity to recover often experience the greatest impacts, reinforcing the need for equitable, inclusive and rights-based climate action.

The Commission will continue to monitor the humanitarian response and the State's compliance with its human rights obligations.

Ms. Veena Singh
Commissioner
Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission

Statement attributed to Commissioner Veena Singh, Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission.