



**Event** : Launch of the Institute of Human Rights Research (IHRR) and Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), The University Of Fiji (UoF) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner For Human Rights (OHCHR),  
**3– 5pm, Thursday 18th July, 2019. M.A.S.T Centre, 7 Desvouex Rd, Suva**

**Welcome Address** By Mr. François Martel, Secretary General, Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF)

**Afio mai, Afio mai,**

**Your Excellency Sir Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, Speaker of the House and former President of Fiji,  
Dr. Chitralekha Massey the Regional Representative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Regional office for the Pacific.**

**Professor Shaista Shameem, Dean and Coordinator for Postgraduate International and Diplimacy Programme at the University of Fiji,**

**His Excellency Bingo Thamaga – Charge d’affaires of the South African Commission  
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Welcome to the Launch of the Institute of Human Rights Research on this auspicious Nelson Mandala Day.**

The greatest threat to human rights for our generation is without a doubt Climate change. It is threatening the very existence of the people of the Pacific. No country alone can protect their citizens from the impacts of this climate emergency, the effects of which are further exacerbated, if climate action is not informed by human rights norms. Left unchecked, climate change has also the potential to wipe out the development gains of recent decades.

PIDF recognizes that, for the people of the Pacific, climate change and human rights are very closely intertwined. As a global environmental hazard, climate change affects the enjoyment of human rights as a whole and therefore, it is at the core of the indivisible, interdependent and interrelated nature of each and all human rights as initially emphasized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Climate change is a human rights issue precisely because these impacts, while felt globally, are disproportionately distributed. The Pacific region is particularly vulnerable with Pacific Islands like Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu and all low lying atolls, facing uncertain futures because of the very real threat of sea level rise submerging their land territory. As well as the threatened loss of their homes, extinction of their cultures and the unwelcome prospect of displacement, they also face the consequence of losing their rights of sovereignty in International law, with the most vulnerable in our society – like children, the elderly, and marginalised communities – often being the most at risk.

The primary obligation to protect people from human rights harm lies with states. A state that fails to take any feasible steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or rely on fossil fuel extraction, is failing their human rights obligations.

As the window of time available to us to make a difference narrows we must find ways to make lasting global change. We therefore call for Climate Justice now.

Under international human rights law, all States have an obligation to cooperate with one another and take measures to ensure the rights of all people are protected. These obligations of international cooperation and assistance are particularly important in the context of climate change. International human rights law, are deemed to be key to solving the existential challenges of this region, as Pacific Island States have clearly recognized, in advocating for high ambition, urgency and inclusion of human rights in the UN Convention on Climate Change negotiations.

Indeed, the Pacific Islands stand out as a region where the authorities' overall approach to human rights laws and principles is markedly positive. Though for the Pacific there may be many outstanding human rights challenges, it has also witnessed some recent wins. Many states have now ratified core international human rights treaties, particularly the Conventions on the rights of the child and the rights of persons with disabilities. And Fiji recently abolished the death penalty. In many Pacific Island Countries there have been significant legal reforms, including to improve respect for the rights of persons with disabilities, and to end torture and ill-treatment of people in detention.

The Human Rights Council has affirmed that human rights obligations have the ability to strengthen both international and national policy-making in the area of climate change. The 1972 Stockholm Declaration provided the basis for further elaboration of a human right to environmental quality.

The Preamble of the Paris Agreement makes it clear that all ***States “should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights”.***

The MoU signing of today, solidifies a formal agreement reached between the PIDF, the University of Fiji and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and is a “milestone achievement”.

I congratulate the University of Fiji for proactively pioneering a collaboration that will align the skills of its students to the demands of an evolving world where human rights are an integral and inseparable component of the sustainable development goals, good governance and the law.

I also congratulate the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, for this partnership which will not only promote human rights at academic level but through research and skills based activities

Our hope as partners, is that the Institute of Human Rights Research with Human rights education, at its core, will progress further than the simple introduction to human rights content in an already over-burdened curriculum. Instead, the Institute is envisioned as a re-think of educational methodology including postgraduate research through an academic think-tank in areas related to human rights and freedoms in a Pacific context. This would include human rights research related to climate change displacement, disabilities and mental health, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), democracy and governance, business and the environment.

PIDF as partners will ensure to promote collaboration and advocating of human rights through capacity building programmes, public seminars and publications, with its partners through the Institute.

It is only when human rights values are embedded in content and in pedagogy will this translate into our attitudes, behavior change and finally action.

***I Thank you – Vinaka vaka levu, Fa’afetai tele lava***