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## Goal 16

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Dr Rebecca Miller of UNODC addressing the Trafficking in Persons regional Forum in Suva. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne, IDN-INPS.

## Pacific Island Nations Embark on Addressing Human Trafficking

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By Kalinga Seneviratne

SUVA, Fiji, 22 April 2023 (IDN) — Since opening borders after the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia and New Zealand have been aggressively sourcing for Pacific Islander workers to help fill a severe labour shortage in their countries. In the meantime, with investments from Asia, especially China and Korea, increasing in the region, Asian workers have been slowly filtering into the island nations, especially Fiji.

This month (18-20 April), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (**UNODC**) held a forum attended by government immigration and law enforcement officials and civil society organizations from the South Pacific region to discuss measures to enhance data and information on trafficking of persons and smuggling of migrants in the area for work. Why did UNODC organize the Forum, not the International Labour Organisation (**ILO**), the agency entrusted with addressing workers' rights?

“We know human trafficking and smuggling of people cannot happen on a large scale it is happening in the Asia-Pacific region without the collusion of corrupt officials and smugglers. They are essentially criminal networks,” Dr Rebecca Miller, UNODC Regional Coordinator, Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, told IDN. She added that corruption within relevant government agencies has to be addressed because that has been the driving force in Southeast Asia. “We need to start somewhere (and) we have found that governments in this region want to proactively address this.”

UNODC plans to develop a concept note after this dialogue on trafficking in persons (TIP) data in the region. The UN agency entrusted with addressing drug and corruption issues around the globe believes that the role of corruption in TIP and smuggling of migrants (SOM) has been particularly overlooked and undocumented in the region.

In 2021, UNODC conducted a training course for national officers in the Pacific on TIP and SOM, and its regional office has done a report on Fiji and Palau with the assistance of national bodies such as the Fiji Bureau of Statistics

(FBS). Preliminary results and findings were presented at the Forum—the report shed light on how corruption facilitates such crimes, the actors involved, and the context in which such bribery occurs.

A closed-door session was held on the final day with government officials from the immigration department and the police to discuss the issues. An Australian immigration intelligence officer also attended it. This process of sharing current knowledge on TIP and SOM and applying lessons learned to encourage regional action, UNODC argues, addresses Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which is Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

FBS chief executive Maria Musudroka speaking on the Forum's opening day, said that despite the extent of these crimes, both TIP and SOM remain under-researched in the region. Referring to the problem of domestic trafficking in Fiji, she explained that researchers had to be trained to do it in a conversational manner to let the victims tell their stories.

Maria Fatiaki, Research Officer with UNODC's Crime Research Section, who coordinated the five-year research project between 2017-2021 in Fiji, told IDN that during this period, through community-based research, they detected about 5200 hidden victims of trafficking. She said most were domestic trafficking into forced labour, agriculture, forestry, construction industry, service and retail industries.

"We also found foreign workers from Bangladesh, Philippines and China who have come here with contracts", Fatiaki explained. "But, once they came here, they found that the work was not what they expected." She added that in recent years Fijian workers have travelled across borders, and the incidents of them "being in exploitative situations" has increased.

"That is why now we are talking about (trafficking of) migrant workers," she noted. "What is needed in Fiji is a training of border officials, and there is also a need for a questionnaire (to be prepared), which people leaving and coming in have to fill so that we can detect potential cases of trafficking."

The Pacific Island of Palau has had Filipino workers flying in to work there for some years. According to one of the delegates, 5000 Filipinos worked there before the onslaught of the pandemic. The numbers have come down to 2500 now. "Palau is only a two-hours flight from Manila," he said. Fiji also had Filipino and Chinese migrants working in the sex industry before the pandemic.

UNODC chose Palau and Fiji to study in TIP because both countries faced these issues earlier.

"Human trafficking is not reported as much as domestic violence (in the media)", said Ronald Ledgerwood of the Micronesian Legal Service Corporation in Palau. "This has got much to do with losing their jobs", he added, explaining that exploitation of migrant workers in Palau occurs not in the sex industry. He pointed out that a complicated issue to tackle is coercion that has happened before their arrival, including hefty agent fees, false job promises and family connections (to trafficker).

"(When they arrive) domestic workers are exploited such as multiple jobs among families and violation of other labour laws," Ledgerwood told the Forum. "Now the government is raising awareness in the community about the exploitation of foreign workers. There are now laws against human trafficking with mandatory jail terms, which could deter people from trafficking and exploiting foreign workers". As a lawyer, he also agrees that you need to build relations with people to speak up.

During discussions at the Forum, participants from Fiji, Tonga and other Pacific Island countries pointed out that most of them have no laws against trafficking, and any cases detected have to be charged as assault cases under local laws.

Many foreign workers in the Pacific islands tend to come from China, the Philippines and Bangladesh. At the same time, in Fiji, people from other Pacific islands, such as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, have been exploited at workplaces. But they are on student visas, usually studying here. With Australia and New Zealand opening up their borders for workers from the Pacific, there are many agents here who are demanding hefty fees to get visas for locals to go there to work.

Recently the Fiji government has begun investigating the migration of some 400 members of a Christian cult from South Korea who have come on investment visas. The church in question has set up farms, restaurants, spas, salons and manufacturing plants employing hundreds of locals, but some of the Koreans working in these businesses are suspected to be cases of TIP. It is under investigation as a corruption case where the church may have bribed certain members of the previous government to get visas.

The US government has just announced a \$10 million grant through USAID over five years for a project called 'Pacific Rise' to counter TIP in the region. US Ambassador to Fiji, Marie Damour, addressing the opening session, said what we see around the world is "modern-day slavery". She said the US government is committed to fighting this menace "because it is wrong, and it has to stop".

"We now need to go into tangible action like improve prosecution, intelligence and coordination. We need to build on that," Fatiaki told IDN when asked what the follow-up action would be. "Now we have research (data) and established a baseline that shows the type of action we have to take". [IDN-InDepthNews]

Photo: Dr Rebbeca Miller of UNODC addressing the Trafficking in Persons regional Forum in Suva. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne, IDN-INPS.

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