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JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

Workshop for Judges and Magistrates to upgrade skills and knowledge on Criminal Law

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Sigatoka, Fiji - Strengthening of the rule of law in Fiji and improving the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the justice sector by enhancing the capacity of Fiji's Judges and Magistrates to deliver access to justice for all Fijians, is a key objective of a two and a half-day workshop which got underway yesterday on the Coral Coast in Sigatoka, Fiji.

Thirty nine Judges and Magistrates (ten women and twenty nine men) are attending their annual workshop to upgrade skills and knowledge in the area of criminal law. This year's workshop is supported by the Fiji Access to Justice Project, funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Pacific Office in Fiji.

Hon. Chief Justice, Mr Justice Anthony Gates opened the Workshop noting the importance of continuous improvement to skills and knowledge which is essential for all reforms and improvements and that there was a comprehensive programme in place for the next three days. The Hon. Chief Justice raised a crucial component of access to justice stressing to the Judges and Magistrates, "Remembering the rights of victims, women, children, the disabled, the inarticulate, leads us on to realize that we have to lean forward in order to hear the accounts of those who find it difficult to be heard".

Speaking at the workshop yesterday, the European Union (EU) Ambassador to Fiji and the Pacific, His Excellency Andrew Jacobs said that since the launch of the Access to Justice Programme, back in August 2016, the European Union had provided significant support to the Judicial Department, the Legal Aid Commission and the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission in order to enhance their institutional capacities to deliver access to justice to impoverished and vulnerable groups.

"The Criminal Law Workshop represents another milestone and the EU is delighted to be in a position to support such an important initiative ... (which) allows for important discussion on current practices, skills and knowledge ... ultimately contributing to a greater effectiveness of the criminal justice system, more importantly, this will reinforce citizens' confidence in the fairness of proceedings as well as awareness and protection of their rights enshrined in the Fijian Constitution," said Ambassador Jacobs.

Bakhodir Burkhanov, Country Director and Head of Regional Policy and Programme for the UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji also speaking at the opening of the workshop said, "An independent, impartial and efficient judiciary is a cornerstone of the rule of law in a democratic state. It serves to protect human rights and helps secure social progress and human development. Workshops such as this go a long way not only in strengthening the capacity of the judiciary, but benefiting all citizens who are in need of fair and effective access to justice".

"For us at UNDP, this partnership with the Judicial Department and the European Union has been truly rewarding by putting people at the centre of development," he added.

Her Excellency Madam Nazhat Shameem stated that, "The rule of law and upholding human rights are intricately linked and are underlying themes of this workshop. Importantly this workshop supports ongoing initiatives, such as evidence from video recorded interviews, being undertaken following Fiji's ratification of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment on 16 March 2016. We are most pleased that the EU funded Fiji Access to Justice Project has provided support to have the Vice-President of the Association for the Prevention of Torture, Mr Mike Kellett, as a key presenter on these topics."

"The Convention against Torture can only be effectively implemented in Fiji in partnership with the national police force. Both projects, the First Hour Procedure and the video recording of confessions are intended to create a police ethos and procedural climate which prompts fairness and adherence to the rights of suspects whilst ensuring effective police investigations. These principles are consistent with and fundamental to the public interest", she added.

The Fiji Access to Justice Project supports access to justice for impoverished and vulnerable groups through empowering people to access legal rights and services through the relevant key justice institutions, in conjunction with strengthening those key justice institutions to undertake improved service delivery. The Fiji Access to Justice Project is funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Pacific Office in Fiji.

The Fiji Government has endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals which highlights the importance of access to justice as an enabler for development and an outcome of development in its own right. At Goal 16, there is commitment to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. At Goal 5, there is commitment to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. The Fiji Access to Justice Project supports the achievement of these goals.

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Photographs



From left to right: Mr Michael Kellett, Association for the Prevention of Torture Geneva; Ambassador Mr. Andrew Jacobs, Head of Delegation for the European Union for the Pacific; Hon. Chief Justice, Mr. Anthony Gates; Mr. Bakhodir Burkhanov, Country Director, UNDP Pacific Office in Fiji; Ambassador Ms. Nazhat Shameem Khan, Permanent Representative of Fiji to the United Nations in Geneva.



Group photo of participants at the Judicial Department Criminal Law Workshop being conducted from 2 to 4 August 2017 in Sigatoka, Fiji.