

Letter to Pacific Islands Forum & Governments

Dear Sir,

We write to ask your government to consider the issue of the right to information and communication for refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people.

We believe that refugees and asylum seekers in our Pacific region must be treated with dignity and human respect. Restrictions on the right to information and communication can only restrict debate within our countries over this important regional and international issue.

As journalists from around the region, we are concerned that there have been some restrictions on the media from fully and accurately reporting on refugee issues, especially relating to the detention camps on Manus Island and Nauru under Australia's so-called "Pacific solution." We would encourage Pacific governments to provide appropriate access for journalists to refugee camps, including provision of visas for overseas journalists.

We also request that you bring this issue to the next Pacific Islands Forum, to be held in Fiji in August 2002.

We are writing to you as participants of the seminar on "Refugees' Rights to Information and Communication" organised in Nadi, Fiji by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) Pacific region. The regional consultation, held on 7-9 May 2002, involved participants from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati, Australia and Aotearoa / New Zealand.

Our consultation brought together journalists from TV, radio and newspapers, media students and church representatives from the region, to discuss refugee rights. The seminar was held in response to increased awareness on the plight of refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people in the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Nauru, West Papua and other parts of the region. There is also growing community concern over the social and humanitarian impact of Australia's policy of establishing detention camps in neighbouring Pacific countries.

We believe that Pacific governments should support the right to information and communication for refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people. This would include:

‘The right of refugees to have information on their status under national and international law’.
‘The right of refugees to petition the government, in the country that they have sought refuge, for human rights in line with international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees’. ‘The right of refugee groups to hold, impart and receive opinion through all media, and to have access to their own media’. ‘The right of refugee groups to counter the willful misrepresentation of refugees through the national and overseas media’.

Beyond the media’s role in reporting on this issue, we believe that governments can play a greater role in community education on the rights of refugees, displaced people and other marginalised groups. We encourage your government to increase human rights education in the school and university curriculum, to shape more compassionate and peaceful societies in our region.

We thank you for your action on this issue, and would be happy to provide further information as required.