

# Pacific refugee stories waiting to be told

Nic Maclellan at the recent WACC workshop in Fiji on the information and communication rights of refugees and displaced people.

The information and communication rights of refugees and displaced people in the Pacific region was the theme of a workshop held in Nadi, Fiji, from May 7-9, 2002. The workshop brought together communicators representing the media and the ecumenical community from Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand and Australia.

Among the issues discussed were media representations of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people (IDPs), the politics, impact, coverage and regional consequences of the 'Pacific Solution' and the quality of reporting of issues related to refugees and displaced people.

The impact of Australia's refugee policy on Pacific nations – the so-called "Pacific Solution" – was discussed at length. While Australia's traditional generosity to refugees and immigrants was acknowledged, its Pacific Solution was condemned as an affront to the human rights and human dignity of people who have already experienced their fair share of suffering under regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

WACC members Larry Hanna and Viliame Falekaono in the Fiji press launching a regional media education video

It was pointed out that the media in their privileged position as the makers and shapers of public opinion have a responsibility to ensure fair and balanced coverage in the context of crisis situations in the Pacific – for refugees in Nauru and Manus Island, those on the borders of PNG and West Papua, IDPs in Fiji and the Solomon Islands.

Workshop participants heard of the plight of IDPs in Fiji and Solomon Islands and of the potential for the displacement of people living on low lying coral atolls of the Pacific such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, whose shorelines are being eroded by rising sea levels.

The workshop heard of the limited channels of communication in Solomon Islands and a culture

of silence and fear that prevents sufficient analysis of issues which should help people discuss community problems openly and honestly.

Recently released by Signis Pacific: 'Media the Pacific way' aims to educate a variety of audiences in the Pacific on the shape, role and power of media.

The University of the South Pacific Journalism Program was represented by student journalists, whose presentations demonstrated an awakening interest among young journalists of the plight of refugees and their rights.

Representatives of Fiji media spoke of the dilemma faced in defining "refugees" and "displaced persons" in relation to definitions used in international laws and conventions, especially following the events of May 2000.

The workshop agreed that Refugees and displaced people have their own stories to share. It is vital that the media in the Pacific extend the space for such stories, to enable debate on related issues, support for reconciliation processes and facilitating the information / communication rights of refugees and displaced people. The need for a broad-based educational strategy on issues such as identity and belonging was identified as a means to contribute to the making of a caring society.

Fiji Media Watch video

Launch of Media Awareness Video "Media, the Pacific Way" ECREA Centre, Suva, 10 April 2002

A video on media awareness entitled 'Media, The Pacific Way' was launched on 10 April 2002. The 35 minutes video aims at raising awareness of the nature, role and influence of the media in the Pacific and to 'empower Pacific people to take action to shape the form of the media they want for their culture.'

The video was produced by SIGNIS Pacific, the Pacific Chapter of the Catholic World Association for Communication, as a video resource for media education.

Every video is accompanied by an attractively designed teacher's and discussion group leader's guide, The video explores major media issues in Pacific societies.

The video is produced in response to an ever increasing demand for educational media resources to help people understand the workings of the mass media, which is fast becoming the dominant culture in Pacific societies.

The participants have sent a letter to Pacific leaders and to the Secretary General of the Forum Secretariat outlining their concern for the information rights of refugees and IDPs.\*

Key note speaker Nic Maclellan concluded “There are over 1,500 refugees in detention in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. That’s 1,500 stories waiting to be told”.

The workshop endorsed the comments by the journalist Peter Mares: “Media reporting can shape public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers. Compassionate and sympathetic coverage can help to promote public understanding and encourage generous assistance to refugees and others in need. Negative reporting can generate and intensify feelings of fear”.

\* See Letter to Pacific Islands Forum and Governments