

## **Peacebuilding Commission**

### **Ambassadorial-Level meeting on the impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding and sustaining peace in the Pacific Islands**

**28 July 2020**

#### **Chair's Summary**

1. On 28 July 2020, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) Vice-Chair, H.E. Mr. Kimihiro Ishikane, convened a PBC Ambassadorial-level meeting on the Pacific Islands to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding and sustaining peace in the region.
2. In his introductory remarks, the Vice-Chair noted how COVID-19 is causing a serious human security crisis worldwide by posing a multifaceted threat, in particular to the most vulnerable. He stressed the need to ensure that the hard-won stability in some counties would not be jeopardized and called for close attention to be paid to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on Pacific Islands, which, as small island developing states (SIDS), already have inherent vulnerabilities. He noted that climate change weighs heavily on SIDS and represents one of the most pressing security challenges in the region. He recalled the message conveyed during the Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8) in Japan in 2018 on the need to integrate climate change and disaster risk considerations into resilience development, and encouraged the continuation of this important discussion, including at the ninth PALM meeting (PALM9) next year.
3. The UN High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, Ms. Fekitamoeloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu, highlighted the need to be vigilant about human security and the links between peace and development, particularly in connection with Pacific Islands that have been facing several multifaceted challenges. She noted that COVID-19 has brought additional challenges and aggravated existing ones. Going beyond the health sector, the pandemic has caused a significant loss of jobs and income, primarily in the tourism and hospitality industries, which has exacerbated inequalities, increased extreme poverty, and raised social tensions. In this regard, she called for measures to be taken to guarantee fundamental human rights, including gender equality, political participation of women, and access to justice. The High Representative added that the Pacific was home to one of the highest rates of domestic violence and intimate partner violence in the world and referred to the allocation of EUR 50 million from the European Union through the UN-EU Spotlight Initiative aimed at addressing this issue. She underscored that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific, and welcomed the PBF project on climate security in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati. The High Representative called for a coherent, multidimensional and cross-pillar response to COVID-19 by the UN, integrated into the logic of the SDGs.

4. The Assistant-Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the region's vulnerability to natural disasters, including by negatively affecting food security. He called for donors to continue supporting conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19 and to strengthen investments in support of longer-term peacebuilding and development. In this connection, the ASG briefed on the activities of the PBF in the Pacific, for example in Papua New Guinea where, since 2014, the Fund has invested \$6.5 million, mostly for the peace process in Bougainville, but also towards initial peacebuilding priorities in the Highlands region, and empowering women and youth in Hela and Southern Highlands provinces to play a stronger role in conflict resolution. In Solomon Islands, since 2016 the Fund has invested \$9.4 million in support of peacebuilding priorities and in preparation for the withdrawal of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which closed in 2017. He also informed that, to ensure that the UN's COVID-19 responses are conflict-sensitive, PBSO is working with the development system to support the Resident Coordinators response to the peacebuilding and prevention dimensions of the pandemic, equipping them with tools, resources and guidance. The ASG recalled that for over a decade, Pacific Island leaders have identified climate change as one of the greatest threats to their region. Therefore, the PBF approved a \$3.2 million project to strengthen the capacities of national and regional authorities in the Pacific for climate risk assessment and responsiveness. He explained that, by supporting local solutions in Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu, the project places people at the center so as to learn from those practitioners and grass-root organizations who are directly affected by climate change.
5. The Assistant Administrator and Director of the Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, UNDP, Ms. Kanni Wignaraja, welcomed the timely engagement of the PBC in support of the Pacific Islands region, which currently faces a three-pronged challenge—COVID-19, climate change and threats to human security, resulting in the resurfacing of unaddressed conflicts. She called for investments and action before small islands of the Pacific are rendered uninhabitable. She mentioned three areas that deserve special attention. First, breaks in the regional and global supply chain, worsened by the pandemic, may lead Pacific Islands to face food shortages and increased poverty. Second, forced migration in a stretched labour market is negatively affecting social cohesion. And third, the loss of income can lead to an increase in illegal activities. Ms. Wignaraja identified a number of measures that governments could take, with the support of the UN, to address those challenges, including to increase investments in the health sector, provide a fiscal stimulus to support medium and small businesses, promote a sustainable green economy, and scale up social protection. She informed that UNDP has been working with other parts of the UN, including the PBF, to support national governments implementing those priorities towards a more economically and socially just and inclusive development.
6. The Chair of the Board and Regional Representative for the Pacific, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), Ms. Sharon Bhagwan Rolls, said that COVID-19 has led to an increase in economic insecurity, domestic violence, and community violence in several Pacific Island countries. She noted that the challenges posed by the pandemic require the integration of gender, age and disability analysis across peace-development-humanitarian work and an amplification of the language of human security. She said that a key priority for women first responders, faith communities and peacebuilders is to connect all parts of the triple

nexus with the women, peace and security agenda as a strong anchor. She said an inclusive triple nexus response to the pandemic needs to strengthen regional peacebuilding capacities and coordination of a joint response, to better align local and government efforts, and to strengthen gender-sensitive analysis in all stages of response, and more specifically, a joint comprehensive triple nexus response should include the convening of regular multi-stakeholder processes, a strengthening of the application of the human security approach in line with the Boe Declaration, and the ensuring of flexible peacebuilding funding to reflect the changing nature of threats. In connection with the role of the UN, she said that the Organization should support existing knowledge and expertise in the Pacific in the operationalization of the triple nexus.

7. The Permanent Representative of Tuvalu, H.E. Mr. Samuelu Laloni, speaking on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum, said that the countries of the region, whose communities are already affected by climate change, are even more vulnerable because of COVID-19, which is continuing to pose real and imminent threats to security and peace in the region. He noted that the swift lockdown in countries of the region, while giving time to prepare on the health response, crippled the economy and hindered the humanitarian response. He explained that vital economic links have weakened in recent months with the evaporation of tourism, severe disruptions to international trade, and a reduction in remittances. Ambassador Laloni expressed concern about the immense impact of the pandemic on food security and nutrition due to the disruption in global and local supply chains, including in production, processing, exports, transportation and imports. He recalled that countries from the region invoked the Biketawa Declaration to collectively respond to COVID-19 and expedite assistance and cooperation between member countries in preparing for and responding to the pandemic. In this regard, he welcomed the work of the PBF in the region, and in particular the Fund's project on climate security. He noted that the PBF is an important tool to fill critical funding gaps. Addressing the economic situation, he noted that the impact of the pandemic reduces opportunities for private sector development, which is essential for stimulating domestic food production. He called for a proper assessment and analysis of the impacts of the pandemic in order to have up-to-date information that the region can use to advocate for continued international support. He noted that responses must be tailored according to the unique circumstances of the region and must work with and through national systems. He stressed the need for support to urgently and effectively respond to COVID-19, seeking to advance and safeguard development progress and deliver on the pledge to leave no one behind, in full support of coherence across the health, humanitarian and socioeconomic responses and with a focus on building back better
8. Member States welcomed the briefings and made the following observations:
  - They welcomed the Commission's engagement in support of the Pacific Islands region, which follows the recent deliberations of the PBC on Papua New Guinea and is in line with the commitment of the PBC to support conflict-affected countries in their efforts to respond to COVID-19. Some noted a number of common challenges that several countries affected by COVID-19 are facing, including health and socioeconomic issues. While acknowledging that responses should be nationally owned and driven based on the specific challenges that each country is facing, Member States stressed

the important role of the PBC in supporting the efforts of the PIF and other regional fora for peacebuilding, development and conflict-sensitive COVID-19 response and recovery in the Pacific.

- They recognized that, in recent years, several countries in the region have successfully navigated political challenges and consolidated peacebuilding gains, making reference to the closure of RAMSI in 2017, the 2018 elections in Fiji, and the successful, peaceful and credible holding of the December 2019 referendum on the political future of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. They expressed concern about the impacts of COVID-19 on these and other recently achieved peacebuilding gains, and on existing socioeconomic and environmental vulnerabilities in the region.
- They noted that COVID-19 poses challenges to peace and security in the Pacific region, particularly for small islands. They called for the international community and donors to support the Pacific Island countries as they face multifaceted challenges posed by the pandemic, including socioeconomic impacts such as damage to tourism, international trade disruptions, reductions in remittances and increased food insecurity, which exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, increase inequality and have an adverse impact on social cohesion. They stressed the need to support longer-term peacebuilding and sustainable development in the Pacific Islands. Some Member States also called for support to make Pacific health systems more resilient.
- They welcomed national and regional efforts aimed at addressing critical capacity gaps that have emerged due to the pandemic, including the PIF leaders' initiative to invoke the Biketawa Declaration. In this connection, Member States expressed their support for the work of the PIF.
- Several Member States echoed the concern raised by Pacific Island leaders that climate change presents the single greatest threat to the livelihoods and security of the region.
- They praised the work of the PBF in bringing peace and security and development issues together. They also praised the recent PBF project on climate security in the Pacific Islands.