

Dialogue

The Centre for International and Regional Affairs (CIRA)

Robin R. Nair

CIRA was launched at the University of Fiji, Saweni, on 22 June 2006 by the Hon Senator Kaliopate Tavola, Fiji's Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade before an audience of 150 people comprising parliamentarians, diplomats, academics, Council Members of the University of Fiji, staff from the University of Fiji, officials, business people, representative of the University of the South Pacific, members of civil society, representatives from Trade Unions, members of the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies, students and well-wishers. It was an extremely successful high profile launch.

In his welcoming address, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Fiji noted:

The University of Fiji Council decided to establish the Centre for International and Regional Affairs to enhance Fiji's capacity to deal with the many opportunities and challenges of globalization—and to strengthen Fiji's efforts to systematically integrate its economy and society with its immediate region first, including that of Australia and New Zealand and then with other regions.

It will act as a think-tank on regional and international affairs; it will promote research, writing and dialogue on innovative responses to our regional and international developments and opportunities; it will provide consultancy and other support for government, donor and NGO activities in these areas; and it

will promote the professionalization of our foreign service.

The Centre will work with the other Centres and sections of the University to achieve its objectives. It will be governed by an Advisory Board that will include representatives of the Government, business, NGOs, and the University with the authority to co-opt people with outstanding contributions in this area both nationally and internationally.

In launching the Centre, Minister Tavola noted:

I was actually keen as mustard to participate in these events. You may wonder why! Well, if you were Minister of Foreign Affairs & External Trade, like myself, wouldn't you be impressed with the terms of reference of CIRA, which plans to address precisely all the complex and technical regional, diplomatic and global issues that we, in the Ministry, are trying to grapple with on a daily basis?

These are regional and global issues in which we have lacked competence, experience and institutional memory for decades. Issues, for instance, for which organizations and even governments pay big bucks for greater comprehension and clarity, for the purpose of achieving regional and international credibility and kudos. Issues that are related to, inter alia, trade negotiations, be they bilateral, sub-regional, regional or multilateral.

I am very happy indeed to be here! When you relate CIRA's core function to the multiplicity of my Ministry's role in the Pacific regional context, for instance, you can begin to appreciate the degree of my happiness in being here.

A two-day Workshop on *Globalisation: Challenges to Fiji's Diplomacy* followed the Launch of the Centre. The attendance, participation, enthusiasm and outcomes far exceeded the Director's expectations.

The subject matters of the Sessions and the Papers were chosen to focus on some of the key issues facing Fiji's foreign and trade policy interests. Speakers and commentators were chosen for their scholarship, expertise in these areas and for their ability to stimulate discussion and debate from the floor. Presenters and commentators were sourced from Australia, New Zealand, India, China, Fiji and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. The Chairs for each session of the Workshop were chosen for

their standing in their occupational fields. The attendance at the Workshop was very impressive with an attendance figure of around 70 participants from Government (including Ministers, CEOs and senior officials), from local Governments, from Trade Unions, from academia, from business, the University Council, the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies and from the civil society. The first Workshop was never intended to find any prescriptions for the direction of policy but only as a source for information, education, discussion and debate.

The moral support, the support in kind and valuable advice throughout the preparatory stages of the Launch and the Workshop from the Executive Director and members of the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies (FIAS) is gratefully acknowledged. In response to this support and to acknowledge the academic standing of FIAS, CIRA responded in inviting FIAS to jointly sponsor this Workshop. The joint sponsorship of the Workshop also enabled us to publish selected papers from the Workshop in the FIAS' journal, *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji*.

Tribute is paid to the then Chief Executive Officer of the University of Fiji, Dr Ganesh Chand and the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Prof Rajesh Chandra on taking up Office for encouraging, supporting and helping with the establishment of the Centre from the earliest days of the University. The Centre could not have been realised without their close personal involvement. Lastly but not the least, the Hon Director acknowledges the encouragement, advice and support that Prof Satendra Nandan provided to the Director right through from the inception days of the idea of a Centre devoted to studying international and regional affairs, to the launch of the centre and the Workshop.

Robin Nair is the Director (Honorary) of the Centre for International and Regional Affairs, The University of Fiji, Lautoka.