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“Transitioning away from an extractive economy provides us with the opportunity to build one that is instead visionary, regenerative and fruitful.”

~ Vanuatu’s Prime Minister, Alatoi Ishamael Kalsakau



Photo by Tobias Tullius on Unsplash

A FOSSIL FUEL FREE PACIFIC

On 17 March 2023, after a three-day meeting ministers and officials from six Pacific Island countries – Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Tonga, Fiji, Niue and the Solomon Islands – committed to the *Port Vila Call for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific*. Its call to Pacific and global leaders includes to:

- 1) Adopt a Pacific Island Leaders Declaration for a just transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific as soon as possible;
- 2) Spearhead the global phase out of coal, oil and gas production in line with global temperature goal of below 1.5C;

- 3) Join the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance and urge major oil and gas producers to join;
- 4) Call for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty
- 5) Support the adoption of the Pacific's UN General Assembly Resolution seeking an advisory opinion on climate change from the International Court of Justice.

Pacific Island nations bear little responsibility for the climate crisis but are acutely vulnerable to rising sea levels and extreme weather. The call for an equitable global phase-out of fossil fuels and just transition strengthens the Pacific governments' ongoing leadership for limiting global warming to 1.5C. So far international climate change frameworks have not constrained fossil fuel extraction at a rate consistent with the global temperature goal. The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative is spurring international cooperation to end new development of fossil fuels, phase out existing production within the agreed climate limit of 1.5°C and develop plans to support workers, communities and countries dependent on fossil fuels to create secure and healthy livelihoods.

Vanuatu's Prime Minister, Alatoi Ishamael Kalsakau, said that record profits from fossil fuel companies demonstrated that polluting industries would continue with "business as usual" unless forced to change. Kalsakau said:

"We need both domestic action and international cooperation to explicitly stop the expansion of fossil fuel emissions and production in order to fulfil the aims of the Paris Agreement. Transitioning away from an extractive economy provides us with the opportunity to build one that is instead visionary, regenerative and fruitful."

At the Pacific Islands Forum Economic Ministers Meeting in Suva, Fiji in mid-August supported the Port Vila Call. Auimatagi Joe Moeono-Kolio, Pacific Director of the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, said:

"It is encouraging to see the Port Vila Call being welcomed by the region's Finance and Economic Ministers. Our region is facing the devastating consequences of the climate crisis and we need to accelerate climate action, including a just and equitable transition out of fossil fuels. For this to be feasible we need greater global governance to manage the fossil fuel phase out. We need an international mechanism to finance the just transition in the Pacific to end the proliferation of fossil fuels, we need a people-centered approach to ensure no one is left behind in this transition and most importantly, we need Australia and New Zealand to stop hampering the region's efforts to address the greatest threat to our security and prosperity and make good on their platitudes of solidarity with the Pacific."

Sources: 'Pacific Nations push for global backing of fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty' by Adam Morton, 17 March 2023, The Guardian; www.fossilfueltreaty.org; 'What is the fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty?' by Damian Carrington, 12 November 2022, The Guardian.

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A NEW REPORT OFFERS A WAY FORWARD FOR SOLOMON ISLANDS COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY LOGGING

The negative impact of logging on human rights in Solomon Islands remains largely unaddressed, despite promises made by the government at the United Nations. In 2018, a Global Witness investigation found that the exports of Solomon Islands tropical timber were 19 times more than the estimate sustainable annual harvest. Logging dominates the Solomon Islands economy, and while some forestry operations are sustainable, the majority are not. According to a recent DevPolicy Blog, *The cost of logging in Solomon Islands* by Boddy Anderson, even though land is communally owned by traditional owners, often actually ownership is poorly defined, or complicated by competing claims, so logging companies are able to find people claiming to be traditional owners, or to represent them, and pay those people off.

In a new report based on focus-groups discussions with over 300 people, Franciscans International (FI) gives an overview of the most pressing issues for communities impacted by logging and offers concrete steps forward. Communities reported pollution of streams and rivers affecting water for drinking and washing and causing the diminishment of fish and seafood, also the scarcity of food and medicines traditionally harvested from the forests.

The report has been developed in close collaboration with Dominicans for Justice and Peace, the Society of Saint Francis, the Dominican Network in the Solomon Islands, and the Community of the Sisters of the Church (Solomon Islands – Pacific Province).

Following reports collected by Franciscans and Dominicans in communities living near logging sites, these organisations submitted a report in October 2020, which documented the wide-ranging human rights implications of logging practices, ahead of the country’s examination under the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May 2021. As a result the Government of Solomon Islands made several commitments to improve practices for logging projects.

In October 2022 follow-up visits were made to six communities on Guadalcanal Island to ascertain whether UPR recommendations were successfully being implemented.

“We found that logging continues to disrupt almost all aspects of life for people who traditionally have a close relationship with the environment and rely on it for water, food and medicine,” says Budi Tjahjono, FI’s Asia-Pacific Coordinator. “Other issues caused with logging, including the introduction of invasive species, conflict with communities, and domestic trafficking of young women and girls, threaten to cause generational harm.”

The Franciscans and the Dominicans found that the concerns of the affected communities had been largely unaddressed, and that the impact of logging threatens to cause irreparable harm to people and the environment they inhabit and rely on. Their report, *The impacts of logging on human rights in Solomon Islands* provides practical and concrete steps the government can take to implement the commitment it made during its 2021 UPR. It calls on the government to root out corruption and ensure that any contracts affecting customary land are signed with the consent of the entire community. It calls for the implementation of environmental protection measures and policies to ensure the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, as well as safeguards to protect young women against sexual exploitation.

“It is our hope that this publication will make a positive contribution by proactively offering the government avenues that reflect the reality on the ground to start implementing the commitment it has made,” says Budi Tjahjono. “It is not too late to meet these challenges, but it is imperative that meaningful action is taken now.”

Sources: ‘The impacts of logging on human rights in Solomon Islands: Key findings of October 2022 community visits’ by Franciscans International, 22 June 2023; ‘The costs of logging in Solomon Islands’ by Bobby Anderson, 3 August 2023, [DevPolicy](#), the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University; ‘Paradise Lost’ by Global Witness, 18 October 2018.

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MERAIA TAUFA VAKATALE: ANTI-NUCLEAR ACTIVIST AND FEMINIST TRAILBLAZER

Fiji recently lost Dr Meraia Taufua Vakatale, a monumental woman leader who broke many glass ceilings with her numerous firsts. As an educationalist, diplomat and politician, she profoundly impacted the lives of tens of thousands in Fiji and the region, particularly young women in politics and anti-nuclear activists.

Dr Vakatale was Fiji’s first woman deputy prime minister, the first woman to be elected as a cabinet minister, the first female to be appointed as a deputy high commissioner, and the first Fijian woman principal of a secondary school in Fiji.

Dr Vakatale was also a fervent anti-nuclear activist. In 1995 she took a costly stand against her party and the then Sitiveni Rabuka government on renewed French nuclear testing on Mururoa Atoll in French Polynesia. Joining a protest march against French testing led to her losing her cabinet position in the Rabuka-led government, in which she served as a member of the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party.

She held the portfolio of Education, Science and Technology in two stints: from 1993 to 1995 and then, after being reinstated, from 1997 to 1999. In 1997 she was appointed Deputy Prime Minister. In 2000 she resigned as President of the SVT party over the 2000 coup fallout.

Dr Vakatale was a woman ahead of her time. Dedicated to her principles, she “paid it forward” to Pasifika generations by her fight to keep the Pacific a nuclear-free zone. Dr Taufu Vakatale’s spirited and unwavering determination, her activism, idealism and her principles inspired thousands of women and youth to fearlessly pursue their dreams.

The name Taufu Vakatale was first linked to the prestigious all-girls Adi Cakobau School when she became a pioneer student there in 1948, aged 10 years. She was also the first female student at the all-male Queen Victoria School. She completed her 6th form year at Suva Grammar School, where she became the first Fijian female to pass the NZ University Entrance. She entered the University of Auckland and in 1963 was the first Fijian woman to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree, privately funding her studies from her wages as a teacher in Fiji.

Taufu Vakatale went on to further studies in the UK from 1963 to 1971. On return to Fiji, she became the first Fijian woman president of the Fiji YWCA and principal of her old school, the Adi Cakobau School. The YWCA in Fiji was the driving force of the anti-nuclear protest movement in the early 1970s, while she was president.

In her time as an educationalist, Dr Vakatale disciplined fairly, understood her students, and entrusted them with positive goals for their future, instructing them to “leave the world better than we found it”. She was respected and honoured. Her feats helped ease the students’ own steps, to bring to life the Adi Cakobau School motto.

Of petite and elegant frame, in moral stature Dr Vakatale towered above many. In diplomacy she served as Fiji’s Deputy High Commissioner to the UK in 1980, whilst single-handedly raising her daughter to become a lawyer. The University of St Andrews in Scotland awarded her an Honorary Doctorate of Letters for her contribution to the cause of Pacific women, while Fiji bestowed her with the Order of Fiji in 1996.

The extraordinary Dr Meraia Taufu Vakatale died on 24 June 2023 aged 84. She leaves behind her only daughter Alanieta Vakatale, three granddaughters, and many more following in her footsteps to leave this world a better place. 38 years on from the [sinking of the Rainbow Warrior](#) and the adoption of the Pacific nuclear-free zone treaty, the [Rarotonga Treaty](#), and with the imminent [release of Japan’s Fukushima nuclear plant radioactive waste](#) into the Pacific ocean, the leadership and sacrifices of Dr Vakatale must be hailed, and her life celebrated.

Source: ‘Meraia Taufu Vakatale: anti-nuclear activist and feminist trailblazer’ by Asenaca Uluiviti and Sadhana Sen, 22 August 2023, which first appeared on [Devpolicy](#), published by the Development Policy Centre at the Australian National University.

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Network Coordinators: Alison Healey (info@grailaustralia.org.au) and Mary Boyd (maryboyd@live.ca)

Editor: Rosamund Burton (admin@grailaustralia.org.au)

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