

PACNEWS

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NAURU - ASYLUM SEEKERS: SMH

PACNEWS 2: Thu 08 Oct 2015

A quarter of 600 remaining asylum seekers on Nauru likely to face order to go home

NAURU, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (SMH) ----About 150 asylum seekers on Nauru face being sent home as the island's government works through about 600 remaining refugee claims.

However the government concedes its promise to process all refugee claims this week will not be met.

Refugee lawyers and others have been recruited to speed up refugee determinations, which the government says will be more than 26 times faster than the processing rate to date.

A Nauruan government official confirmed to Fairfax Media that about 75 per cent of refugee claims processed on the Pacific island are accepted, potentially leaving 25 per cent of the 600 remaining asylum seekers being told to return to their countries of origin or lodge an appeal.

In a surprise move on Monday, Nauru Justice Minister David Adeang said the government intended to determine about 600 remaining refugee claims "within the next week", and confirmed asylum seekers were now free to come and go from the detention centre as they pleased.

But Nauru Department of Justice and Border Control deputy director Shyla Vohra has since told Fairfax Media the government now expects to finalise 400 refugee claims by Sunday.

It will not give determinations to people who have been transported out of the country for medical reasons, nor will it do so for their family members because "family claims should be determined and handed down together", she said.

Determinations will also be withheld in cases where assessments are not yet complete, if asylum seekers have raised additional claims since their interview or further research is required. These remaining cases "will be done as soon as possible", she said.

The determination of 400 refugee claims in one week still leaves questions over how this will be achieved, given Nauru had been working through about 15 each week until now.

Vohra said almost all asylum seekers had already been interviewed, detailed assessments had been drawn up and recommendations made.

Senior legal staff then conduct a "quality control process" over each assessment to ensure consistency, accuracy and quality, before they are reviewed by the Secretary for Justice.

The Nauruan government was keen to "end the limbo for asylum seekers" and would accelerate the process by seconding experienced refugee lawyers and protection officers to assist with quality control, Vohra said, adding this would occur "without compromising on the quality of determinations".

Those found not to be refugees would be asked to "voluntarily" return to their home countries or lodge an appeal with the Nauru Refugee Review Tribunal.

The tribunal is composed of Australians who are either current or former members of the Australian Refugee Review Tribunal. Asylum seekers are helped in the tribunal process by migration lawyers and agents.

If the tribunal upholds the negative refugee determination, asylum seekers can appeal to the Supreme Court of Nauru. The first of such hearings is expected later this year.

"After their final appeal is heard, a person who is not found to be a refugee is expected to return or may be removed," Vohra said.

Despite the new open centre arrangement on Nauru, it is expected some asylum seekers and refugees will return to the detention centre each night to sleep.

Hard-walled, air conditioned units on land inside the detention centre are being constructed as settlement accommodation.

For those who opt to live outside the centre, Vohra said a number of recently built apartments may be used and more units are being built.

About 569 refugees presently reside at Nauru comprising 208 adult men, 46 adult females, 289 in family groups and 26 who were classed as unaccompanied refugee minors, but are mostly now aged over 18.

Many live in accommodation outside the centre. They do not pay rent but receive a living allowance, Vohra said.

There are concerns for the safety of refugees at Nauru after numerous reports of attacks and sexual assaults.

They include a 23-year-old "vulnerable and traumatised" Somali woman who was raped on Nauru and has pleaded with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to allow her to come to Australia for an abortion.

However Adeang this week claimed that in some ways, "Nauru is safer than Australia".....PACNEWS

PNG - DROUGHTS: ABC

PACNEWS 2: Thu 08 Oct 2015

Children dying of hunger as frost, drought worsens in PNG, villagers say

HELA, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (ABC) ----Children in remote areas of Papua New Guinea are dying as a result of food shortages caused by frost and worsening drought, villagers say.

Severe dry weather has evaporated water sources in Panduaga as the El Nino weather event continues to ravage PNG's highlands.

Meanwhile, frequent overnight frosts have devastated food gardens, forcing villagers to rely on bush foods.

Rocky Herpet, a ward councillor in Hela province, said two children died after eating the unfamiliar food.

"Two kids have died because of the drought now. They were vomiting when [they] died," he told the ABC.

"Everything here is affected by the frost and we can't live for a long time now."

Hela, which had previously been part of the Southern Highlands, only became an official province in May 2012.

Herpert said people in Panduaga are yet to receive any food relief because provincial governors have been arguing over which province is responsible for the village.

"We have no member, no governor to help us. We live this corner, no one can help us," he said.

James Komengi, the administrator for the Hela Community Good Action forum said despite the political wrangling, Panduaga is definitely part of Hela province.

In a gathering of elders in Panduaga this week, they pressed the councillor to seek immediate help in responding to the ongoing drought crisis.

"The situation there is really critical," Komengi said.

"People there were saying that because they didn't support the current representative in parliament they are unlikely to receive something."

A state of emergency has already been declared in the Southern Highlands and Enga province, where church leaders claimed at least 10 people died from starvation last month.

The PNG government has pledged to provide emergency relief funds to affected areas, but was warned the situation on the ground could get worse.

According to PNG's National Weather Service (NWS), the El Nino phenomenon will continue to strengthen and is expected to last until March 2016.

The effects are expected to surpass the 1997 event that adversely impacted around 3 million people, the NWS said....PACNEWS

PNG - PACIFIC WORKERS: BUSINESS ADVANTAGE PNG

PACNEWS 2: Thu 08 Oct 2015

More Pacific Island workers coming to Papua New Guinea, but numbers remain low

PORT MORESBY, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (BUSINESS ADVANTAGE PNG) -----While the number of work permits Papua New Guinea has issued to Pacific Islanders has quadrupled in the last ten years, they still make up just 1.2 per cent of the total foreign work force in the Pacific's largest economy. But that may be about to change.

PNG's Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has flagged that his government will relax its travel visas and work permits for Pacific Islanders coming to visit and work in Papua New Guinea.

He says people from Micronesia will be granted visas on arrival, while 'work permits will not be required for other Pacific Islanders wanting to come and work in PNG'.

O'Neill's announcement coincides with an analysis of labour mobility in the Pacific, which shows while the number of work permits issued to Pacific Islanders has increased rapidly in the last ten years, from a low of 43 in 2005 to 266 in 2014, the numbers remain small, overall.

By May this year, 511 Pacific Islanders were working in PNG, with 413 from Fiji, according to Australian National University demographer, Carmen Voigt-Graf.

Compared to a total of 41,096 active work permits held by foreign nationals, Pacific Islanders make up only 1.2% of the workforce.

The largest number of Pacific Islanders were working in 'Transport, Postal and Warehousing (54), followed by 'Construction and Infrastructure' (30), 'Information media and telecommunications (23), 'Accommodation and Food Services' (22) and 'Health Care and Social Assistance (22).

But they work in more than 100 different occupations, and by far the majority (85%) are either managers or professionals.

The movement of Pacific workers into PNG has occurred on an individual basis and not under any bilateral or regional scheme, Voigt-Graf says.

Three years ago, the Melanesian Spearhead Group's set up a Skills Movement Scheme to promote labour movement between PNG, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji. But not a single worker has moved under that scheme.

Pacific Islanders face several challenges in accessing the PNG labour market, says Voigt-Graf.

"Many big companies are foreign-owned and employ workers from the countries where their headquarters are located, or they have established networks with recruitment agents in their own countries.

"And because Pacific islanders are not represented in the PNG labour market to the extent that Australian and many Asian workers are, they have not had an opportunity to develop networks and gain a reputation as competent workers."

Thirdly, many Technical and Vocational Education and Training systems in the Pacific region are not regarded as being of high quality.

"So PNG employers do not regard the workplace skills and competencies of Pacific Islanders as of the same high quality as those of workers from some other countries.

"The lack of a Pacific Qualifications Framework also means that qualifications are not directly comparable, and not necessarily compatible between Pacific island countries.

"There is also a sense of unease among officials in PNG about labour mobility within the region.

"Until a working regional mobility scheme is up and running, the number of Pacific Island workers being employed elsewhere in the Pacific will continue to remain low," she said....PACNEWS

COOKS - COURTS: COOK ISLANDS NEWS

PACNEWS 2: Thu 08 Oct 2015

Top Cook Islands lawyer is barred from land court

RAROTONGA, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (COOK ISLANDS NEWS) -----Cook Islands lawyer Norman George has been forbidden from ever again appearing in the country's Land Court division after failing to obey a three-year suspension imposed by Chief Justice Tom Weston in September 2013.

In handing down his decision on Wednesday last week forbidding George to practice in the Cook Islands land Court, Chief Justice Weston made the exception that George could appear on his own behalf or that of his wife.

George was given a three-year suspension from the land division after CJ Weston found in favour of five complaints made against the local law practitioner in 2013. An additional 18-month suspension from the Court of Appeal was also imposed on George at the time.

The 2013 complaints were in respect of George's conduct as a lawyer. CJ Weston commented then that the complaints showed a pattern of conduct by George. Had George observed the conditions set in 2013, the land division suspension would have expired in September 2016.

In February this year a land agent laid a complaint with CJ Weston alleging George had breached the 2013 disciplinary decision when he appeared before JP John Kenning in the land division of the High Court.

George responded to the allegation in an affidavit that an emergency had developed and he had been asked to take steps for a client on a pro bono basis. He also claimed to have sought leave to appear at the start of the hearing before JP Kenning.

Neither JP Kenning, the deputy Registrar nor the complainant believed George had sought leave. These accounts were accepted by George's lawyer Brian Mason. Mason also submitted in a hearing before CJ Weston that the JP did not have jurisdiction to authorise George to appear contrary to directions given by the Chief Justice.

Mason suggested that for George to be struck off the roll would be too severe a penalty. CJ Weston stated in his formal advice to George of his decision: 'I believe the appropriate penalty for an instance such as that occurring here would be suspension but there is doubt as to whether under the current Act, such a right of suspension exists. Therefore, I need to select from a lesser penalty than might otherwise be appropriate'.

CJ Weston informed George: "I now limit your practice. You may never appear in the Land Division again. The one exception to this is if you are to appear either personally or on behalf of your wife in any matter. Other than that, though, you may not appear in the Land Division again".

The Chief Justice added it was appropriate that he formally censure George. He reminded George of having stressed the importance of observing the appropriate professional boundaries. CJ Weston advised George that he is now on notice 'that any further infractions may result in your being struck off the register even if the individual breach is not, by itself, otherwise deserving of that outcome'PACNEWS

CNMI - IMMIGRATION: MARIANAS VARIETY

PACNEWS 2: Thu 08 Oct 2015

Interior official: CNMI lawmakers should discuss immigration issues with US Congress

SAIPAN, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (MARIANAS VARIETY) ----Assistant Interior Secretary for Insular Affairs Esther Kia'aina has advised CNMI lawmakers to discuss local labor and immigration issues with members of the U.S. Congress, according to Speaker Joseph Deleon Guerrero.

Kia'aina had a closed-door meeting in the Senate chamber with lawmakers on Wednesday to discuss infrastructure, wildlife and immigration issues, including the end of the CW program in December 2019.

"The assistant secretary informed us that we should do our part to make more accurate projections and be more specific like what job positions are needed by the private sector, and that we should bring this to the U.S. Congress," the speaker said.

"She actually advocated that we meet with members of the U.S. Congress in D.C. to discuss these things. We are just hoping that the law be flexible enough to...change the deadline if it needs to be extended or maybe change the law and give us some kind of exemption.

"Immigration is really important because we do have a deadline and based on our projections, we have close to 4,000 [hotel] rooms in the near future and that does not include the 2,000 rooms of Best Sunshine plus the projection of 11,000 jobs that have to be filled and if Congress plans to zero out the CW workers [after 2019], how are we going to meet those projections?" Guerrero said.

He added, "Our government is trying to do our part to build capacity and develop our workforce to meet the demands but the challenge is it may not be enough. The federal government needs to realize that tourism is our bread and butter and that with these new developments, even if all U.S. citizens here get employed, we still need more workers and that's the challenge right now."

Senate Floor Leader Arnold I. Palacios, in a separate interview, said they need to come up with a unified plan before they discuss the issue with the U.S. Congress.

"We really need to come up with a game plan and options that we need to put in place in a short period of time. We need to look at it and go from there. We can't just go there and talk. We need to sit down first and talk it among ourselves, agree among ourselves before we can go any further."

Kia'aina, in an interview, said: "We are committed to work collaboratively with the CNMI leadership in concert with the private sector and the U.S. Department of Labor in ensuring that we have a good discussion on the progress we have made on workforce capacity as we try to recruit and increase [the number of U.S. workers.]"

She said her job is "to work with other relevant agencies such as Homeland Security and the White House to gauge whether it is possible to have zero CWs, but what I've been hearing from CNMI leaders and the local private sector is, that is not possible. In fact, the need to further develop the tourism industry will require a continuation of the program What we decided this morning is to ensure that we work collectively with...the U.S. government to determine how we can move forward in discussing these labor and immigration issues."

Kia'aina said she has "great concerns about the implication [of phasing out the CW program] for the CNMI economy. It's not known by many people that the law did not just say that it will end in 2019; it also took away the discretionary authority of the U.S. Labor secretary to determine whether or not the CNMI can have another extension and that, to me, is a great concern.".....PACNEWS

PACNEWS BIZ

PNG - FOREIGN CURRENCY: BUSINESS ADVANTAGE PNG

PACNEWS BIZ: Thu 08 Oct 2015

Foreign exchange controls affect PNG business as ANZ calls for changes to kina trading range

PORT MORESBY, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (BUSINESS ADVANTAGE PNG) ----ANZ Bank has called for a relaxation of the enforced trading band for the kina. Meanwhile, analysts say the kina is facing further downward pressure from the US dollar.

Since the Bank of Papua New Guinea, the country's central bank, restricted the trading range for the PNG kina and the US dollar in June 2014, ANZ analysts Glenn Maguire and Dan Wilson say the kina has depreciated by 13 per cent.

As a result, they argue in ANZ Research's September Papua New Guinea Fiscal Update, the kina's prescribed trading band is constraining the ability of the currency to decline and insulate the economy from falling commodity prices.

The call comes as business leaders estimate that at least K1.5 billion (US\$520,000) is waiting to be converted into US dollars, causing frustration and resulting in a 'rationing' of foreign currency.

The impact has affected PNG financial institutions and exporters, 'as banks continue to see a build-up of FX orders with very little levels of activity and continued shortages of FX supply which in turn affect importers', agrees the latest analysis from Kina Funds Management Research.

In recent weeks, both the President of the PNG branch of the Australia–Papua New Guinea Business Council, Phil Franklin, and the President of the Lae Chamber of Commerce, Alan Macleay have observed that PNG's foreign currency situation is affecting the ability of businesses to purchase goods and services from Australia, compelling some companies to extend credit to their subsidiaries or delay purchases.

Long and increasing delays in accessing foreign exchange by importers are causing costly disruptions to business activities, which highlights the need to improve the foreign exchange allocation mechanism to 'rectify' the foreign exchange market imbalance, according to the World Bank's latest East Asia and Pacific

Franklin estimates about K1.5 billion in foreign currency orders with PNG-based commercial banks was awaiting processing.

While dealers are unwilling to confirm just how many orders they are, one of the five licensed dealers in PNG told Business Advantage PNG that the estimate of K1.5 billion is 'conservative'.

David Kelso, Managing Director of Moni Plus, one of the smaller foreign currency dealers, estimates there could be a total of K3 billion of orders for bank clients waiting to be processed.

"The commercial banks only report to the central bank the orders they have under their prudential limits. The established limits applied by our central bank are very conservative compared to other countries," he told Business Advantage PNG.

One of PNG's largest forex dealers, Bank of South Pacific, is coping with this situation by maintaining a 'dialogue with our customers to ensure that critical payments are prioritised where possible, Group CEO, Robin Fleming told Business Advantage PNG.

But while the Kina has depreciated against the US dollar, it has appreciated significantly against other currencies, most notably by 34% against the Australian dollar and 34% against the Malaysian ringgit, points out economist at the Australian National University, Canberra, Paul Flanagan.

Combined with the fall in oil prices, Flanagan argues the appreciations 'are a major factor for why imported inflation is so low and why inflation in PNG is so reasonable.

'However, this also means the PNG economy is now much less competitive relative to its neighbours. Without returning to a more competitive position, there will be continuing pressures on PNG's balance of payments and foreign exchange reserves.

He says a primary focus on the US dollar exchange rate can be misleading and too much emphasis has been given to maintain PNG foreign exchange reserve levels around the US\$2 billion mark.

"When small PNG businesses can no longer open foreign exchange accounts (due to the Vostro account review which is now being audited but has not yet been completed), this ultimately also hurts sustainable growth."

Bankers and analysts say if the trading band were to be totally removed, there would be 'a significant fall' in the currency.

"There is a need for a faster rate of depreciation of the Kina—related to actual market-based exchange rates—and based on a broader set of currencies than just the US dollar," says Flanagan.

'A downward adjustment to the PGK exchange rate on a trade-weighted basis would help the country remain competitive on the export front and attractive to foreign investment, notes ANZ's most recent PNG Fiscal Update.

Flanagan says the current low levels of inflation are actually an opportunity to accelerate a move down in the Kina.

Until then, the expectation is that then Kina will continue to depreciate.

"We maintain our view that the PNG Kina will continue its downward momentum in relation to the US\$ and will fluctuate in relation to other foreign currencies over the next six months," notes Kina Funds Management Research's most recently monthly report.

Kelso agrees.

"What we see in the immediate future is a gradual decline of the Kina over the next few months. Whether this resolves the situation is, in my view, unlikely.

"The supply and availability of hard currency still remains the major issue in our market," he said'

FIJI - UNION ELECTION: FBC NEWS/FIJI TV

PACNEWS BIZ: Thu 08 Oct 2015

Daniel Urai retains union post

SUVA, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (FBC NEWS/ FIJI TV) ---Daniel Urai has retained his position as the General Secretary of the Fiji National Union of Hospitality, Catering and Tourism Industries and Employees.

Urai won the union election winning 775 votes out of 1070.

10 votes were invalid, while 285 votes went to Mereani Qoro who was also contesting for the position.

Counting was held at the Hexagon hotel in Nadi and was completed at 10:30pm last night in the presence of Supervisor of Elections Mohammed Saneem.

Saneem is expected to make an official announcement later today.

This is the second election in two months after the first was declared null and void because of complaints about voter registration.

Meanwhile, Fiji's Director of Public Prosecutions, Christopher Pryde has decided to withdraw charges against Daniel Urai and Jagath Karunaratne who were earlier charged with Urging Political Violence.

The State today filed a Nolle Prosequi in Court.

The DPP's office has not revealed the reason for the withdrawal of charges.

Urai said he was elated with the decision.

Following a trial that lasted four years and a travel ban Urai said he is looking forward to continuing trade union work.

"There are other meetings I will be attending before the end of the year.I'm grateful that this issue has been resolved and I'm free to travel as and when I'm invited to travel. Unfortunately no they've not given any reason, they may be later in the week, the DPP can only answer to that," said Urai...PACNEWS

PACNEWS *In Focus*

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Pacific leadership pivotal in global health initiative - Every Women, Every Child, Every Adolescent, Everywhere

SUVA, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (UNFPA PACIFIC) ---- As nations that greet the new day before any other region in the world, the Pacific collection are well-positioned to claim a lead role in the realization of global strategy for women's, children's and adolescents' health.

The Millennium Development Goals has affirmed how time-bound and monitored albeit non-legally-binding objectives can accelerate regional and national progress in the realization of human rights for all, the alleviation of poverty, the improvement of gender equality dynamics and so forth.

No one can claim perfection in the realization of development goals and plans, as each country has unique realities to work with, different priorities and approaches, but as nations still in their socio-political infancy, the Pacific nations have remarkably made their presence known and issues felt at international fora.

As we embark on the journey that is the Sustainable Development Goals with its specificity of reference to climate change and oceans, Pacific nation leaders have been loud and proud, affirming their support for each other particularly in relation to climate change talks.

The Pacific leadership can also play a pivotal role in, and create, waves of change from the southern hemisphere in a completely different sector though one that is fundamental for a resilient population in climate change adaptation talk, and that is: good health of every woman, every child and every adolescent, everywhere.

Regionally-speaking, there is political will for decisive action in regional development frameworks supportive of international commitments while providing perimeters of the creation of an enabling environment for addressing the interplay between climate change and reproductive, maternal, newborn, children's and adolescents' health (RMNCAH).

* The 2015 46th Pacific Islands Forum communique recognized climate change as the "single greatest threat" to the existence of Oceania peoples and the "disproportionate impact of climate change on women"; there is a separate climate change declaration from the meeting.

* The 2015 Suva Declaration on Climate Change affirms in (16) i.e "addressing gender-based inequality and discrimination is essential for effective action on climate change".

* The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) urges "urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts" (SDG 13).

* The 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction frames such development and humanitarian integration as both important and urgent stating that countries should: "Strengthen the design and implementation of inclusive policies and social safety-net mechanisms, including through community involvement, integrated with livelihood enhancement programs, and access to basic health care services including maternal, newborn and child health, sexual and reproductive health, food security"

Consider a legacy of this time and age, with all the advanced medical knowledge and services humanity claims to have, that 800 women continue to die daily from preventable pregnancy and childbirth complications. The majority of these maternal deaths are attributed to hemorrhage (27 per cent), hypertensive disorder (14 per cent), sepsis (11 per cent) and complications of abortion (8 per cent).

Newborn deaths have actually declined by 40 per cent since 1990, though about 2.8 million newborns died in 2013 - newborn deaths account for 44 per cent of all deaths of children under 5, globally-speaking.

The three main causes of newborn births remain pre-term birth complications (35 per cent), intrapartum conditions (24 per cent) and infections (20 per cent).

Stillbirths have declined albeit a mere 15 per cent since 1995, an estimated 2.6 million stillbirths occurred globally in 2009.

The largely nonchalance attitude towards care before and around birth, and related health systems will be detrimental to any efforts to strengthen resilience in national populations.

Last week (September 28, 2015) the Global Strategy for Women's Children's and Adolescents' Health was launched by the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General.

The initiative, representative of commitment of more than US\$25 billion in the next five years, includes new policies and groundbreaking partnerships from 40 countries and over 100 international organisations, philanthropic foundations, UN agencies, civil society and the private sector.

The specificity of everywhere in the global movement borne out of RMNCAH (Every Women, Every Child, Every Adolescent, Everywhere) seeks to emphasise that this state of good health must include humanitarian or fragile situations.

RMNCAH in the context of climate change therefore is crucial for resilience - whether one is speaking of human population or ensuring an enabling environment for RMNCAH to thrive.

RMNCAH is crucial for strengthening of individual agency that collectively would give you your resilient population.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services recognising the critical importance of filling the gap in climate change adaptation discourse has invited its regional counterparts to discuss this very basic of health considerations between October 26 and 28.

The interplay between the impact of climate change and Pacific nations' status of RMNCAH exists; the shifting realities of humanitarian and fragile settings needs to be better anticipated, planned for and resourced.

Oceania nations and peoples face unique challenges being at the forefront of impacts of climate change: investments in health, wellbeing and dignity of women, young people and children have a powerful role in shoring up the resilience of island communities.

Discussing it at this level will also ensure that the Pacific voice will be loud and potentially cause ripples of change across global conversations come COP21 (21st session of the Conference of Parties to the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, France, December 2015), the first World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2016 and/or the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito, Ecuador, October 2016.

No one can be left behind in development initiatives and global progress particularly in the context of humanitarian or fragile settings, expected to increase in the Pacific region because of global warming - no women, no child, no adolescent, because everyone counts....PACNEWS

For more information, please visit our website or you can follow us on Twitter and/or LIKE our page on Facebook. You can also write to zibiah@unfpa.org

PACNEWS DIGEST

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Genetic makeup of thousands of rice varieties placed in global seed data pool

Information provided to international treaty to help develop more sustainable crops

ROME, 08 OCTOBER 2015 (FAO) --- Genome sequences of more than 3,000 rice varieties have been placed with the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) by the world's leading rice research institute in a move boosting plans to set up a global data exchange system for crop genetic resources.

The Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the Treaty (ITPGRFA) made the announcement at the 6th session of the Governing Body of the FAO-based 136-member nation plant treaty that is being held in Rome this week.

Around the world governments and organisations are storing genetic material in seed banks, but without one single gateway to genetic resource data, it is very difficult for researchers and plant breeders to know what is held where and what genetic resources are contained in the seeds.

"The genetic information that IRRI is making available to us, and the public at large, is a hugely generous and significant show of support to our endeavours to make all relevant information on genetic resources on plant crops available for future food security" said Shakeel Bhatti, Secretary of the International Treaty.

"To have so much information on rice, which after all is the basic food for half the world's population, placed at the fingertips of everyone is a major step in securing food security for future generations," he added.

A genome sequence is like an inbuilt instruction book that tells living organisms how to grow and react to the environment. Each rice plant has about 400,000,000 "letters" in its genome sequence.

With a burgeoning global population, and climate change causing more shocks to agricultural production such as drought, floods and pests, the need to develop crop varieties that are both more productive, less environmentally damaging and also shock tolerant is crucial.

The Rome meeting will discuss how to enhance the current multi-lateral system through the creation of one Global Information System on Plant Genetic Resources. This system containing information including on how to access genetic material and seed samples from existing gene banks would be developed and overseen by the Treaty's host, FAO.

"We can't expect every programme, every gene bank in the world to re-design their databases to match some international standard; what we need is inter-operability, to create portals where everyone's databases can talk to another. This is what the Global Information System on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture will be," said Robert Zeigler, Director General of IRRI.....PACNEWS

For photos, audio clips, video material & b-roll, contact: (+39) 06 570 53625 or FAO-newsroom@fao.org