**MEDIA RELEASE**

**31ST October 2014.**

**Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson)**

**Indentured labour akin to slavery?**

**‘The legal framework for criminal activity’**

Ms Emelda Davis the president of the NSW based organisation Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson) (ASSI.PJ) has been invited as a guest speaker to Port Louis, Mauritius international conference “Towards the establishment of the Indentured Labour Route” in acknowledgement of the 180th Anniversary of the first arrival of Indian indentured labour at Aapravasi Ghat on 2nd November 180 years ago.

Ms Davis says … ‘I am honoured for the opportunity to participate on this important platform in representing the perspective of our Australian South Sea Islander community. As I travel to Mauritius tomorrow I travel with the spirit of my grandfather who was taken off the beach at the age of 12 from Tanna Island Vanuatu. Our oral family history of his experiences is one of a human being, being denied his birth right to grow up with out his family never to return home.’

The term “Australian South Sea Islander” refers to the Australian descendants of people from more than 80 islands in the Western Pacific including the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides) in Melanesia, and the Loyalty Islands, Samoa, Kiribati, Rotuma (Fiji), Tuvalu in Polynesia and Micronesia who were recruited to the indentured labour trade akin to slavery which started in NSW in 1847, with an influx to QLD between 1863-1908, to work and establish Australia’s economical base in sugar cane, maritime and pastoral industries.

They are the largest Melanesian community living outside of the Pacific Islands, and they have survived considerable adversity. Australia’s Pacific Islands indentured labour trade akin to slavery was initiated illegally in 1847, 167 years ago, by Benjamin Boyd an entrepreneur-adventurer who over two voyagers coerced 122 Melanesian labourers, including three women, to the Australian township of Eden on the south coast of NSW. Boyd’s attempts were seen as a human disaster. Other Pacific Islander indentured labourers were brought to Torres Strait onwards from 1860. Then on 14 August 1863, 151 years ago, 67 men from Maré and Lifu in the Loyalty Islands (now part of New Caledonia), and Tanna and Sandwich (Efate) Islands in the New Hebrides (now part of Vanuatu) were landed in Brisbane and began walking from upstream in the Brisbane River, near present-day Goodna, to Robert Towns’ Townsvale cotton plantation on the Logan River, 57 km away. Don Juan, the ship that brought them to Queensland, arrived in Moreton Bay on 14 August. They worked on the first of 62,475 indenture contracts issued for Pacific Islanders as labourers in Queensland between 1863 and 1904. Ninety-five per cent of these were males, some no more than teenage boys.

Below is an extract of the paper that will be presented at the conference by Ms Davis.

“Legally, slavery was abolished in the British Empire between the 1800s and the 1840s, but continued to exist in the West Indies, South Africa and Mauritius until 1835 and in fifteen southern states of the United States of America until the Civil War of 1861–1865. However, slavery continued to be legal in other European jurisdictions well into the 1890s. It was a legal status that lasted for life and was inherited by slaves’ children.

Slaves were the property of their owners, and could be sold, bequeathed, gifted, mortgaged or hired out like any other uses. Slaves prior to the 1840’s could not enter into any contract, own property or give evidence in court. In contrast, indenture contracts were legally enforceable and legally void if the law was satisfied that they were not voluntarily entered into. Indenture is not the same as slavery, but Hugh Tinker also called Indian indenture a ‘new system of slavery’, used to keep non-European labourers in servitude.

Shireen Malamoo ASSI.PJ board member is of Aboriginal, Kanak descent says… “Australia needs to grow up and tell the truth. It was a slave trade and lets face it, it affected people of colour all over the world. Fourteen Caribbean nations are taking Britain to court today for slavery. Their communities remain in third world conditions after stoic people established economic stability for nations around the world. The same goes for our South Sea mob.”

The ASSI perspective is, call it what you will, that a severe denial of human rights, exploitation, and unthinkable atrocities occurred and over 15,000 lost their lives and lie in unmarked graves today across our nation, unmourned. The racism, exploitation and contempt from which ASSI suffered was experienced in the same way that Australians treated the First Nations People and Torres Strait Islanders, which also is stated as slavery. They were being herded like cattle with an overseer and some were dumped on the same missions with first nation people communities.

The extreme methods by which Pacific Islanders were brought to Australia, their treatment in Australia, the high mortality, the 1900s attempt at total deportation (7,000+ on mass) and neglect during much of the twentieth century has now been recognised by the Commonwealth (1994), Queensland State Government (2001) and New South Wales State Government (2013). Most recently recognition occurred in Federal Parliament on 1st September 2014 with a motion of regret and a debate that included the acknowledgement of a slave trade.

Federal Member for Hinkler, Keith Pitt said: … **“**The practice of blackbirding was at one point rebranded indentured labour, to circumvent the slavery laws of Britain. The former member for Hinkler, Brian Courtice, fought to have 29 graves on Sunnyside farm heritage listed for protection. His family purchased the farm in the 1920s from local businessman Edward Turner. Turner financed the slave ship *Ariel* to bring South Sea islanders back to work on the local plantations.”

Federal Member for Shortland, NSW Ms Hall says … ‘”actually think that those South Sea Islanders working there were, in effect, slaves. They had no rights and they did not receive the same wages as other workers. It is a blight on the history of our country. The White Australia policy contributed to this also. The simple fact that South Sea Islanders were deported, were treated even more appallingly after 1901, is another blight on our country.”

Australians cannot deny the belief in slavery by this entire ethnic group and retreat to legal definitions. It is the lived experience of the ASSI community and needs to be formally addressed.

In the Islanders’ eyes Indentured labour contracts were the legal framework for criminal activity that imposed evident denial of the most basic human rights on people of colour.

At the same time as Islander indentured labourers were imported Australian governments treated the first nations people as little better than slaves, working them without wages and treating them cruelly.

We know that a substantial proportion of the original Islanders were 'kidnapped', by any definition of the word. Historians suggest that around 5 per cent were illegally recruited, with a higher figure — 10 to 15 per cent of indenture contracts — in varying degrees illegal under the terms of the Acts of Parliament.  Islanders suggest a higher proportion, based on oral testimony from the community.

Regardless of definitions of illegality, all of the Islanders were 'culturally kidnapped', meaning that Europeans took cultural advantage of their small-scale societies and enticed Islanders to come to Australia under circumstances they did not understand.

Once indentured in Queensland, they were servile bonded labour, paid poorly (by comparison with European labourers), and often transported by foot with overseers on horseback and held in circumstances that have often been described Europeans as slave-like. The conditions on the ships which transported them were primitive and like slaving ships. There are many substantiated examples of cruelty and mistreatment during their contracts in Australia.

The indenture agreements did not allow labour strikes and although they were able to challenge employers in the courts, and sometimes did, by-in-large they did not understand the legal system and were unable to use this avenue of redress.

Should a plantation owner go broke transfers of contracts occurred, which included a transfer of the human labourers in ownership as slavery did.

They faced a mortality rate of around thirty percent, higher than any other Australian immigrant group and comparable only with the first nations people.

In 1901 the government of the Commonwealth of Australia passed an Act of Parliament aimed at the total deportation of all Islanders on mass with no consideration of life circumstances after a forty-year period. They were basically ordered out of the country and in some cases displaced in the Pacific. They were the only people in Australia who had an Act legislated (the *Pacific Islanders Act* 1901) for their deportation.

During the first half of the twentieth century other pieces of legislation at Commonwealth and State level precluded them from participation in the sugar industry, their only primary area of occupation.

Ready to leave for the conference in Mauritius , Emelda Davis says … “The ASSI.PJ have worked extremely hard over the past four years in delivering a strong media campaign in furthering recognition for our community group through capacity building workshops.

The beginnings of this country, the economic base of the nation, was established by our ancestors bought here on mass. Their 40,000 surviving descendants today are struggling for rightful recognition and inclusion in programs and services that will instil social and economical stability in our communities. Our call needs help from an international platform because we are falling on deaf ears within Australia.

Recognition in Parliament needs a follow through on the ASSI recommendations and the action plan that came out of the 1992 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Report (HREOC Report) ‘The Call for Recognition.”

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