

Item 6.

Mr. Chairman

1. Let me first of all, on behalf on my delegation, congratulate you on your appointment as Chair of the Ministerial segment. I am confident that through your experience and wisdom, you will be able to steer this meeting to achieve its desired outcomes.

2. I would also like to congratulate the ESCAP Secretariat for convening the very first Ministerial meeting on CRVS. This is indeed a major milestone and the Secretariat's dedication and commitment, with the support of other partner agencies, has enabled us to gather here this week to discuss this pressing issue. We owe it to ESCAP and these agencies for according priority to CRVS and its ambition of *"getting everyone in the picture"*.

3. The Fijian Government recognizes the great importance of CRVS. In this regard, it endorsed the participation of our former Minister of Health, Dr. Neil Sharma, at the First Meeting of the Regional Steering Group for CRVS in December last year. At that meeting, he was elected as the Chair of the Steering Group, and I am pleased to be here today to reinforce Fiji's commitment to this wonderful and rewarding journey. We will stay the course simply because we believe that no one should be left behind.

4. Mr. Chairman, in September 2013 Fiji witnessed a historic event in that our new Constitution was promulgated. It enshrines a number of important rights under the Bill of Rights provision and these include the rights of a child, the right to health, to name a few, which support CRVS.

5. Driven by its general intent at a universal level – get everyone in the picture – the Fijian Government has been a part of the Regional Steering Group here with ESCAP and Pacific sub-regional initiative through the Brisbane Accord Group, which oversees the implementation of the Pacific CRVS Action Plan. At the national level, the Fijian Government has a CRVS Steering Group, set up in 2012, led by our Ministry of Health and includes the

key relevant agencies including the Ministry of Justice and the Bureau of Statistics Office.

6. Our Steering Group has overseen the formulation of Fiji's CRVS Improvement Plan. The Plan contains 19 recommendations which are clustered under 5 categories: i) Legal; ii) Registration Practice; iii) ICD Compliant Practices; iv) Data quality, dissemination and access; and v) Coordination.

7. These recommendations are now being progressively implemented based on the resources that we have. For example, under the Legal category, we are intending to continue the review of our principal laws covering CRVS, the main one being the Births, Deaths and Marriages Act. An amendment was done recently to empower our Minister of Justice to waive the penalty for late registration. To this end, the Minister granted an amnesty period this year, waiving this penalty, which automatically resulted in an increase birth registration. We are considering other provisions and this will depend on the commitment of our Government and the support of our development partners.

8. We have also improved access to rural and remote areas, in terms of registering births, by opening up centers in those areas. An obvious target in taking this service closer to them is our vulnerable groups. In the recent past, we have opened more schools at primary and secondary levels in these areas. An important step that we have also taken is the sharing of data amongst our key agencies. Our Ministry of Health now shares its data with these agencies for registration and census purposes, covering all aspects of it.

9. further there have been significant improvements in the Health Sector particularly in death certification and coding processes. A number of our doctors have been trained to adequately fill the Death Certificates and Medical Recorders have been trained in ICD 10 to appropriately code causes of death.

10. Mr. Chairman, let me highlight a few challenges we are facing with CRVS. Much as we want to accelerate our efforts, we are faced with limited resources. Towards this end, we are continuously encouraging our Government to consider increasing funding for this important work. Our development partners, through the Brisbane Accord Group, have been generous enough to lend us support and for that we are grateful. But considering the potential impact of a well-functioning CRVS system, especially on reducing costs, we are pushing for recognition first through short term gains so that this can be supported by appropriate resource allocation.

11. The other major challenge that we face is with birth registration. Our Register General's Office registers approximately 40 per cent of births each year despite 100 per cent birth notification coverage by the Ministry of Health. The completeness of birth registration therefore remains a challenge, particularly when compared to deaths. Some of the reasons for this challenge include:-

- The public generally lack awareness of the importance of birth registration and knowledge of the procedures.
- There are no tangible benefits or incentives for early registration. Consequently, parents will not register the birth until there is a benefit in doing so. For example, when formal identification through birth registration is required for the child to go to school, open a bank account or get a tax identification number.
- In Fiji, naming a child usually occurs two to three months after birth. This delays registration.
- A lack of coordination between the core agencies and registration procedural issues delay or limit registration. For example, the MoH issues a notification of birth to parents and the Registrar General. However, there are numerous requirements to be met before the RGO can register a birth (e.g. child's name, parents' details etc.) and this hinders early registration.

- Access to registration services can be limited in rural areas, especially on remote islands. The registration offices are mainly located in urban areas, so parents from rural areas are restricted or prevented from registering a birth due to the expense of travelling to a registry office.

Since our CRVS Steering Committee started its work, I am pleased to say that some of these challenges have been addressed. The more challenging ones will be handled with appropriate resource allocation and commitment.

12. Mr. Chairman, like all delegates, I have listened with great enthusiasm; I have seen the highs and lows pointed out by some countries; I have learned valuable lessons; and I am more than ever convinced that we must put a strong case for CRVS to our national, regional and international governance actors. Essentially, I have been compelled to act and that I will do to ensure that Fiji achieves the target of getting everyone in the picture. For this reason, Fiji will continue to vigorously support ESCAP's work in this area, as a tribute to the work Dr. Neil Sharma started for Fiji as the first chair of the Regional Steering Committee.

I thank you.