Agenda item 5(d):   Secretariat Report – Impacts of COVID-19

Proposed Recommendations

PIDC Members are invited to:

1. **welcome** the update provided by the Secretariat regarding the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway for COVID-19 (PHP-C) and the development of the Immigration Protocols that have been endorsed by the PHP–C Regional Taskforce and Ministerial Action Group;

2. **welcome** the work undertaken by the Secretariat and Members to finalise the high-level Immigration Protocols for the PHP-C;

3. **endorse** the current activities of Operation Akamau noting it is currently available to support Members and can be activated upon request;

4. **welcome** the support provided by Australia of $500,000 AUD to support PIDC activities to combat and adapt to COVID-19; and

5. **review** the proposed activities for the PIDC COVID-19 Support Programme and **advise** the Secretariat as a matter of priority key national Policy and operational needs for priority support.

Purpose

This paper seeks to brief the PIDC Membership on work undertaken to support Members combat COVID-19 through (a) the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway to Combat COVID-19 (PHP-C) established by the Pacific Islands Forum under the Biketawa Declaration; and (b) Operation Akamau endorsed in principle by the PIDC Board in April 2020.

Background

2.   In response to the significant challenges caused by the global pandemic COVID-19, the Pacific Islands Forum established the PHP-C under the Biketawa Declaration[1] on 7 April 2020 during a 2020 Special Session of the Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting which was attended by PIDC (Attachment One). The PHP- C was designed to establish an enabling political environment to ensure that Forum Members' requests for medical and humanitarian assistance for their preparedness and response to COVID-19 are addressed in a timely, safe, and effective manner that does not undermine national efforts already in place.

3.   The PIDC was invited to form part of a Regional Taskforce (RTF) to operationalise the PHP-C reporting to a Ministerial Action Group (MAG) formed from Members of the Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting. The Secretariat with engagement of the Board subsequently

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[1] The Biketawa Declaration Is a regional response mechanism to support Pacific Islands Forum Members during times of crisis and has been activated previously under RAMSI and PRAN to support Solomon Islands and Nauru respectively.

supported RTF and MAG discussions for the development of *the PHP-C Governance and Operational Arrangements* to guide the implementation of the Pathway.

4.   One of the key activities that resulted from the governance arrangements requiring Secretariat support was the development of high-level immigration protocols to operationalise and standardise common approaches to the clearance of relief disaster personnel and supplies.

5.   The Secretariat developed draft protocols which were presented to Members for comments and through a series of iterations over several meetings of the RTF were finalised and endorsed by the RTF and subsequently by the MAG on 17 June 2020 (Attachment Two). The PIDC Secretariat was represented in all RTF meetings and presented the immigration protocols to both the RTF and MAG for discussion and endorsement. The MAG on 17 June amongst other things considered and endorsed:
   a) Common Protocols for the Deployment of Technical Personnel;
   b) Common Protocols on Customs and Biosecurity;
   c) Common Protocols on Immigration (Attachment Three);
   d) Common Protocols on Repatriation of Forum Nationals, and **tasked** the RTF to further explore the application of the protocols to the transit of Forum nationals from countries outside the region through Forum countries; and
   e) Common Protocols on Clearances for Aircraft and Ships Transporting Medical and Humanitarian Assistance, Technical Personnel, and Repatriating Nationals.

6.   The MAG further directed the RTF in its future meetings to coordinate the implementation of the regional common protocols and the operationalisation of the PHP-C, including information sharing of national protocols and identification of national focal points, and to report regularly to the MAG.

7.   The PHP-C Immigration Protocols are attached for Members to review.   The Secretariat notes that while they provide useful guidance for Members, the key issues to note are that: (a) they were developed to provide best practices and are based on a number of regional and international standards and best practices including as listed in the protocol itself the PIDC Model SoPs on Management of Disaster Relief Personnel; (b) various iterations were circulated to the Board and Members for review along with advice on implementation and model policy issues for consideration at the national level; and most importantly; and (c) the protocols are subject to and do not supersede national legal and operational immigration frameworks.

Operation Akamau

8.   In its meeting of April 2020, the Board endorsed in principle the establishment of Operation Akamau that had been proposed by Australia to coordinate activities to support Members combat COVID-19 and operationalise the Pacific Islands Forum PHP-C. The Board:

   a) **noted** the proposal provided by Australia for the establishment of Operation Akamau as an OCO/PIDC led activity to coordinate regional immigration and customs efforts to support the establishment of the PHP-C and provide leadership in the area of humanitarian assistance in the Pacific;

b) **agreed** to endorse the establishment of Operation Akamau in principle and **tasked** the Secretariat to support Australia to finalise Operation Akamau for the Board to consider and endorse inter-sessionally as a matter of priority given the pressing timelines; and

c) **welcomed** the inclusion of PIDC Board representatives and Secretariat in the joint steering committee and **noted** that this oversight committee allowed PIDC to monitor coverage of operational efforts in achieving priorities identified by Members.

9.   On 07 May 2020, Australia provided the final draft plan for Operation Akamau (Attachment Four) to the PIDC Chair and Secretariat. The Secretariat, in noting that the Operation is meant to complement the activities of the PHP-C RTF and also support Members to operationalise their responses to COVID-19, is happy to advise that operational structure is ready to be activated as and when required by Members.

10.   Linked to this regional support to assist Members combat and adapt to COVID-19, Australia has provided AUD500,000 to the Secretariat to be utilised to support relevant activities over the next 24 months. The Secretariat has prepared a number of activities to advance this work under a proposed PIDC COVID-19 Support Programme looking to strengthen Members' operational capacity as well as ability to effectively communicate remotely given the new reality of border restrictions (Attachment Five). To ensure these funds are best utilised, Members are again requested to identify key priority policy and operational needs linked to COVID-19.

11.   In its proposed draft Annual Work Plan for 2020/ 2021, the Secretariat notes that a lot of research and technical assistance requiring engagement with Members will have to be undertaken remotely and therefore Members will need to strengthen their capacity to effectively engage with multiple parties on appropriate remote platforms with minimum disruption, confusion and frustration.