



STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE

Review Report on the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 (SAR Convention)



PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI
Parliamentary Paper No. 12 of 2026

March 2026

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ACRONYMS

AFL	Airports Fiji Limited
CAAF	Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji
FPF	Fiji Police Force
FMSRCC	Fiji Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Coordination Centre
IMO	International Maritime Organisation
MSAF	Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NDRMO	National Disaster Risk Management Office
RFN	Republic of the Fiji Navy
RCC	Rescue Coordination Centre
SAR	Search and rescue
SGO	Solicitor-General's Office
SRR	Search and Rescue Region

CHAIRPERSON'S FOREWORD

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I am pleased to present the Committee's Report on the review of the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 (SAR Convention).

The Convention, adopted under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation, establishes a coordinated international system for responding to maritime distress incidents and ensuring that persons in danger at sea receive assistance without discrimination. For a maritime nation such as Fiji, with a vast ocean area and increasing maritime activity, the strengthening of search and rescue capabilities remains critical to safeguarding human life and maintaining maritime safety.

During consultations, the Committee engaged with a broad range of stakeholders including government ministries, operational agencies, and aviation and maritime authorities involved in SAR operations. The Committee also undertook site visits to key operational centres to better understand the coordination and response mechanisms currently in place. These engagements provided valuable insights into the existing institutional arrangements, operational strengths, and areas requiring further development.

Information presented to the Committee indicates that Fiji already conducts search and rescue operations through a multi-agency framework involving the Republic of Fiji Navy, the Fiji Police Force, the National Fire Authority, and aviation authorities. However, accession to the Convention will provide a clear and internationally recognised legal framework to strengthen coordination, enhance regional cooperation, and support the continued development of Fiji's national SAR system, including the enactment of dedicated search and rescue legislation.

The Committee also identified several areas that require further strengthening, including sustained investment in training, improved communication infrastructure, and enhanced inter-agency coordination. The recommendations contained in this report seek to support the effective implementation of the Convention and strengthen Fiji's overall search and rescue capability.

Considering the evidence received and the analysis undertaken, the Committee strongly supports Fiji's accession to the Convention.

On behalf of the Committee, I wish to acknowledge the valuable contributions of all stakeholders who participated in the consultations and provided submissions during the review process. Their expertise and cooperation assisted the Committee in undertaking this important work. I also extend my appreciation to the Members of the Committee for compiling this bipartisan report and I submit this report to Parliament for urgent consideration.



.....
Hon. Lenora QEREQERETABUA
Chairperson

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee recommends that, pursuant to Section 51 of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji and Standing Order 130 of the Standing Orders of the Parliament of Fiji, Parliament approve that Fiji accede to the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 (SAR Convention) of the International Maritime Organisation, as amended from time to time, unless Fiji objects to an amendment within the prescribed timeframe for objection. Where the Government deems it necessary, any amendment to the Convention may also be brought before Parliament for deliberation and approval.

1.0 Committee Remit and Composition

Under Standing Order 109(2)(e) the Committee is mandated to investigate matters related to Fiji's relations with other countries, development aid, foreign direct investment, oversight of the military, and relations with multi-lateral organisations. The members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence are as follows:



Hon. Lenora Qereqeretabua
Chairperson
*Deputy Speaker of Parliament Assistant
Minister for Foreign Affairs*



Hon. Rinesh Sharma
Deputy Chairperson



Hon. Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu
Member
Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Heritage and Arts



Hon. Penioni Ravunawa
Member
Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services



Hon. Virendra Lal
Member



Hon. Taito Rokomatu
Member

1.1 Committee Secretariat Team

The Committee is supported by Parliament officers serving as the Committee Secretariat. These officers are appointed and delegated by the Secretary-General to Parliament by Standing Order 15(3)(i). The Secretariat officers are as follows:

- Ms. Tirisiane Logavatu – Senior Committee Clerk
- Mrs. Katie Batikawai – Acting Deputy Committee Clerk

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2.0 Background and Terms of Reference

2.1 Review of the Convention

- 2.1.1 On 24 November 2025, the Acting Attorney-General moved a motion to refer the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 (“Convention”) to the Committee for review. In compliance with Standing Order 130(2), the Speaker of Parliament (“Speaker”) received copies of the convention and written analysis. Subsequently, pursuant to Standing Order 130(3), the Speaker referred the Convention to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for consideration and review, and to report to Parliament no later than 30 days from the date of referral.
- 2.1.2 The Committee is responsible for reviewing matters concerning Fiji’s international relations, development assistance, foreign direct investment, national security oversight, and engagement with multilateral organisations.

2.2 Procedure and Program

- 2.2.1 Following the referral, the Committee invited submissions from relevant government ministries, statutory bodies, and stakeholders with responsibilities relating to maritime, land and air search and rescue operations.
- 2.2.2 The Committee commenced its review on 22 January 2026 by considering the written analysis. During its deliberations, the Committee identified the relevant stakeholders to be consulted regarding the implications of Fiji’s potential accession of the Convention, including anticipated benefits, obligations, and impacts on Fiji’s search and rescue operations.
- 2.2.3 The Committee consulted the following stakeholders:
- a) The Search and Rescue (SAR) Working Committee, comprising representatives from the Ministry of Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport, the Ministry of Defence, and the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF).
 - b) The Republic of Fiji Navy (RFN).
 - c) The Fiji Police Force (FPF) and the Ministry of Policing.
 - d) The National Fire Authority (NFA) and the Ministry of Local Government.
 - e) The Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji (CAAF), Airports Fiji Limited (AFL) and Fiji Airways.
 - f) The Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation.
 - g) The Solicitor-General’s Office (SGO).
- 2.2.4 The Committee held consultations from 29 January to 24 February 2026. As part of its inquiry, the Committee undertook site visits to key search and rescue operational centres to better understand the existing coordination and response mechanisms. The Committee visited the following facilities:
- a) The Maritime Essential Services Centre in Lami on 10 February 2026;

- b) The Aeronautical Rescue Sub Centre in Nadi on 24 February 2026; and
- c) The Fiji Airways Operations Coordination Centre in Nadi on 24 February 2026.

2.2.5 A summary of the submission is provided in a later part of this report, under the heading 'Committee's Deliberation and Analysis'.

3.0 Review of the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 (SAR Convention)

3.1 Overview of the SAR Convention

The International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue was adopted in Hamburg in 1979 and entered into force in 1985 to establish a coordinated international framework for maritime search and rescue (SAR) operations. The Convention aims to ensure that persons in distress at sea are provided assistance without discrimination and promotes cooperation among States in responding to maritime emergencies.

The SAR framework builds on obligations contained in earlier maritime instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which establishes the duty to render assistance to persons in danger at sea, and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, which requires States to maintain arrangements for coast watching and the rescue of persons in distress. The Convention further establishes a global system for SAR operations by requiring States to designate Search and Rescue Regions, maintain adequate SAR services, and coordinate responses through Rescue Coordination Centres.

The Convention consists of eight Articles outlining general obligations and administrative provisions, together with an Annex that provides operational standards for SAR services, including the organisation of SAR operations, international cooperation, and procedures during emergencies.

3.2 Amendments and Reservations

The Convention has been amended in 1998 and 2004 to strengthen operational procedures for maritime search and rescue. The 1998 amendments introduced provisions on ship reporting systems and the provision of urgent medical assistance during maritime emergencies, while the 2004 amendments clarified the responsibility to ensure the prompt disembarkation of rescued persons at a place of safety.

Amendments to the Convention's Annex are adopted through a tacit acceptance procedure, whereby proposed amendments circulated to States Parties enter into force within a specified period unless a Party formally objects. This mechanism allows technical and operational provisions to be updated efficiently while providing States the opportunity to raise objections.

The Convention does not permit reservations, requiring States acceding to the Convention to accept its provisions in full, thereby promoting consistent implementation and strengthening international cooperation in safeguarding human life at sea.

3.3 Features of the SAR Convention

Key elements of the SAR Convention are as follows:

- (a) Establishment of Search and Rescue Regions (SRRs) globally.

- (b) Obligation for contracting States to provide adequate SAR services within assigned regions.
- (c) Creation of Rescue Coordination Centres (RCCs) and Sub-centres.
- (d) Duty to assist persons in distress regardless of nationality or circumstances.
- (e) Incorporation of later amendments introducing the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) and rules on disembarkation of rescued persons.

3.4 Requirements for Implementation within a Signatory State

The Committee notes that implementation of the SAR Convention requires States to undertake specific legislative, administrative, and operational measures to ensure compliance.

General Obligations

Parties must adopt all necessary measures to give full effect to the SAR Convention and its Annex, which sets out detailed technical requirements for SAR services. Compliance requires incorporation into domestic law and adequate institutional capacity.

Organisation and Coordination of SAR Services

States are required to:

- Establish adequate SAR services within their territorial waters and designated areas of responsibility;
- Develop national SAR infrastructure, including trained personnel, equipment, and operational readiness;
- Create Rescue Coordination Centres (RCCs) and sub-centres to manage operations;
- Coordinate maritime, land and aeronautical SAR services; and
- Equip SAR facilities with appropriate tools and technology.

The table below outlines the current operational capacity and identified gaps in Fiji's SAR operations.

SAR Convention Obligation	Current Implementation in Fiji	Identified Gaps
Establish adequate SAR services within territorial waters and areas of responsibility	SAR operations are primarily coordinated by the Fiji Navy, which manages maritime search and rescue within Fiji's designated SRR. Other agencies assist depending on the nature of the emergency.	Capacity may be constrained by available vessels, personnel, and operational resources during large-scale incidents.
Develop national SAR infrastructure including trained personnel, equipment, and operational readiness	Multiple agencies contribute to SAR responses including the Fiji Navy, Fiji Police Force, National Fire Authority, Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji, and Airports Fiji Limited. Training and operational systems exist within respective agencies.	Coordination of specialised training and resource allocation across agencies require further strengthening.

SAR Convention Obligation	Current Implementation in Fiji	Identified Gaps
Establish Rescue Coordination Centres (RCCs) and sub-centres	Fiji's Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) is located at the Maritime Essential Services Centre in Lami and is operated by the Fiji Navy. Aeronautical SAR functions are supported by CAAF and AFL. Land SAR functions are supported by the Fiji Police, including the National Fire Authority.	The level of integration between maritime, aeronautical, and land SAR coordination mechanisms require legislative formalisation.
Ensure coordination between maritime, aeronautical and land SAR services	SAR responses involve collaboration between the Fiji Navy, Fiji Police Force, National Fire Authority, CAAF, and other stakeholders.	Multi-agency responses require clearer operational protocols and coordinated response frameworks for complex emergencies.
Ensure SAR facilities are equipped with appropriate tools, communication systems and technology	SAR operations utilise communication systems, rescue vessels, aircraft support, and emergency response equipment from participating agencies.	Some SAR capabilities are affected by limited specialised equipment and technological upgrades.
Maintain operational readiness for emergency response	Existing agencies maintain readiness through their operational mandates and emergency response roles.	Sustained funding, training, and maintenance of equipment are necessary to ensure readiness across agencies.

Fiji's Current and Proposed Implementation Measures

The Committee notes that Fiji has taken steps toward compliance, including:

- **National Authority** – Proposed role for the Department of Transport as policy focal point and the Republic of Fiji Navy as the implementing authority;
- **Rescue Coordination Centre** – The Fiji Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Coordination Centre (FMSRCC) is operational under the Republic of Fiji Navy;
- **National Legislation** – A draft law is under consultation with stakeholders, currently in version 6 of the draft;
- **Resources** – propose the provision of vessels, aircraft, trained personnel, communications equipment, and joint training with civil aviation;
- **Regional Cooperation** – Fiji is part of the Pacific Search and Rescue Steering Committee (PACSAR), which includes Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States, responsible for major SAR areas in the Pacific;
- **Reporting** – Fiji regularly provides updates to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

These measures demonstrate Fiji's commitment to fulfilling its obligations under the SAR Convention while strengthening national and regional maritime safety.

3.5 Entry into force

The Convention entered into force on 22 June 1985, establishing the international framework and standard operating procedures for responding to maritime emergencies and coordinating search and rescue operations. As of 3 November 2025, the Convention has 115 States Parties, including ten countries from the Pacific region. These countries are Australia, Cook Islands, Kiribati, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.

3.6 Benefits of the SAR Convention

Strengthened International Coordination

The Convention establishes a coordinated global framework that enables States to respond efficiently to maritime distress incidents. Through the designation of Search and Rescue Regions and the establishment of the Fiji Rescue Coordination Centre, the Convention ensures that responsibilities for SAR operations are clearly defined and that assistance can be mobilised promptly during emergencies.

Enhanced Regional Cooperation

The Convention promotes cooperation among neighbouring States in responding to maritime emergencies, particularly for incidents occurring in international waters. Such cooperation allows countries to coordinate resources and responses more effectively, thereby improving the chances of rescuing persons in distress at sea.

Improved Maritime Safety Standards

The Convention enhances maritime safety by setting operational standards for SAR services, including preparedness measures, communication systems, and emergency response procedures. These standards support the effective conduct of rescue operations in accordance with internationally recognised practices.

Reinforcement of International Maritime Obligations

The Convention complements and reinforces obligations under related international instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, which emphasise the duty to render assistance to persons in danger at sea. Together, these instruments strengthen the international framework for safeguarding human life at sea.

3.7 Implications of Fiji's non-accession to the Convention

If Fiji does not accede to the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, several legal, operational, and strategic drawbacks may arise.

Limited Alignment with International Maritime Standards

Without accession, Fiji may not be fully aligned with internationally recognised SAR coordination standards developed under the IMO. This could create gaps between Fiji's national SAR framework and global maritime safety practices.

Weaker Legal Framework for SAR Coordination

The SAR Convention provides a clear legal framework for establishing national SAR systems, defining responsibilities, and coordinating operations. Without accession, Fiji may face limitations in formalising responsibilities and strengthening its current domestic SAR governance structure.

Reduced International Cooperation Mechanisms

The Convention facilitates cooperation between neighbouring states in responding to maritime distress incidents across search and rescue regions. Non-accession may limit Fiji's ability to fully participate in established international SAR coordination mechanisms and operational arrangements.

Operational Coordination Challenges

Fiji's maritime area of responsibility overlaps with neighbouring search and rescue regions in the Pacific. Without being a party to the Convention, coordination with regional partners during large-scale maritime emergencies may be more complex.

Potential Impact on Maritime Safety and Confidence

Accession demonstrates a state's commitment to international maritime safety standards. Not acceding could affect international confidence in Fiji's SAR framework, particularly among international shipping operators and maritime stakeholders operating within Fiji's maritime region.

Missed Opportunities for Capacity Building

States that are parties to the SAR Convention benefit from technical guidance, training opportunities, and capacity-building initiatives coordinated through the IMO and regional partners. Fiji may have reduced access to these forms of support if it remains outside the Convention framework.

Delayed Strengthening of National SAR Systems

Accession often drives improvements in national SAR legislation, coordination mechanisms, and operational readiness. Without accession, progress in strengthening Fiji's SAR system may occur more slowly.

4.0 Committee Deliberation and Analysis

4.1 Submissions

The Committee received written and in-person submissions from stakeholders as listed in 2.2.3.

4.2 Summary of Evidence received

4.2.1 SAR Working Committee

The Committee noted that the SAR Working Committee supports Fiji's accession to the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, recognising that accession would strengthen Fiji's legal and institutional framework for maritime search and rescue operations and enhance coordination with regional and international partners. The Convention establishes a coordinated global framework for maritime search and rescue through the designation of SRRs and the establishment of RCCs. This system enables States to coordinate responses to maritime distress incidents efficiently, particularly where emergencies involve multiple jurisdictions.

The Committee notes that Cabinet has endorsed Fiji's accession to the SAR Convention, subject to parliamentary ratification. Accession will formalise Fiji's participation in the international SAR framework and strengthen existing national and regional arrangements for SAR operations. The SAR Working Committee highlighted that Fiji currently undertakes search and rescue operations through a multi-agency framework involving the Republic of Fiji Navy, the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji, the Fiji Police Force, and other relevant agencies. However, these arrangements operate without a comprehensive legislative framework fully domesticating the SAR Convention. In 2025, Fiji managed 161 SAR incidents within its SAR region, resulting in 566 persons being rescued or self-rescued.

Officials highlighted that the benefits of accession to the Convention would provide Fiji with a clear and internationally recognised legal framework for SAR operations, strengthen coordination between maritime, aviation and land SAR agencies, and provide assurance to mariners, fishers, tourism operators and international shipping that Fiji's SAR system meets international standards. Accession would also enhance Fiji's credibility and leadership role within the Pacific region, enhancing regional cooperation with neighbouring States, and improve the management of cross-border maritime distress incidents.

The Committee was further informed that the Convention will be domesticated through a proposed Search and Rescue Bill to integrate maritime, aviation and land rescue arrangements into a unified national SAR framework. The proposed legislation is expected to establish the legal framework for SAR coordination, designate responsible authorities, and support the operational role of the Republic of Fiji Navy and other relevant agencies. The Committee notes that relevant agencies have indicated that Fiji possesses the institutional structures and

operational capacity necessary to accede to and implement the Convention, while recognising the need for continued strengthening of coordination mechanisms, training, and operational resources to support SAR operations.

4.2.2 The Republic of Fiji Navy

The Committee noted that the Republic of Fiji Navy (RFN) fully support Fiji's accession to the Convention. The Fiji Navy emphasised the importance of formalising Fiji's existing SAR arrangements to enhance life-saving capabilities across the nation's extensive maritime domain. Currently, the legal and operational framework in Fiji that fulfils SAR obligations include the duty to render assistance through the UNCLOS (Article 98), the safety of Life at Sea through the SOLAS (Regulations 15–16) and through the SAR coordination in Fiji's flight information region under the Chicago Convention (Article 12). The interim measures in place in the absence of the SAR Convention include the National Search and Rescue Manual (2019), interagency agreements, bilateral MOUs with regional states, and adherence to the IAMSAR Manual.

Fiji's SAR region covers approximately 6.5 million sq. km, and includes neighbouring territories of Tuvalu, Kiribati, parts of Tokelau, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna. The operational structures and capabilities of SAR in Fiji includes:

- The Fiji Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Coordination Centre (FMSRCC), established in 2017, and modernised in 2025 at the Vuvale Maritime Essential Services Centre (MESCC) in Lami.
- Draft Search and Rescue Bill (Draft 6) which proposes the establishment of a Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC-Fiji) under RFN, supported by sub-centres for land and aeronautical SAR.
- RFN assets include patrol vessels (e.g., RFNS Savenaca, RFNS Timo), Rigid Hull Inflated Boats (RHIBs), navy divers, and SAR Air Riders. Personnel include 3 internationally qualified SAR Mission Coordinators and 15 operators, providing 24/7 coverage.

Some of the achievements of the SAR operations between 2020 and 2025 include the JRCC-Fiji coordinated 589 SAR incidents, averaging 98 per year, saving over 2,900 lives. Notable operations include aviation crashes (2018 airplane crash in Deilaikoro, Vanualevu, resulting in two fatalities, the 2019 helicopter crash in Natewa Bay) and the 2019 sinking of MV Butiraoui in Kiribati. Subsequently, operational hours dedicated to SAR exceeded 17,650 hours over six years, highlighting the increasing demand for services. However, these operations identified certain challenges such as the rising SAR demand requiring ongoing investment in personnel training, welfare, retention, and operational support. Gaps exist in VHF marine radio coverage and statutory clarity for coastal radio operations. Additionally, loss of trained personnel to Australia and New Zealand has impacted operational continuity.

The Committee acknowledges the critical role of the RFN and interagency partners in safeguarding lives across Fiji's maritime domain. Accession to the SAR Convention, combined with dedicated domestic legislation and resources, will enhance Fiji's compliance with international standards, strengthen regional leadership, and improve life-saving capabilities.

4.2.3 Joint submission from the Fiji Police Force and the Ministry of Policing

The Fiji Police Force (FPF) together with the Ministry of Policing affirmed their full support for Fiji to accede to the SAR Convention. The FPF plays a key role in SAR operations under the Police Force Act 1965, with responsibility for responding to incidents within Fiji's territorial waters. Coordination of operations is undertaken through the Police Coordination and Command Centre, which serves as the central command hub for search and rescue activations. The FPF is responsible for SAR operations within Fiji's territorial waters of up to 12 nautical miles from the coast, while the Republic of the Fiji Navy assists with incidents beyond this jurisdiction through the RCC.

The Ministry of Policing emphasised that an initial assessment is critical when a distress call is received, as it determines the appropriate response and which agency is best positioned to respond. Community members may also assist in nearby incidents, while coordination with the Navy and multi-agency approach involving the National Disaster Risk Management Office, the National Fire Authority, the Ministry of Health, local authorities, and community stakeholders is undertaken where necessary depending on location, distance, and sea conditions. The Committee further noted that the FPF maintains maritime operational capability and deploys specialised units such as the Police Mobile Force for land-based search and rescue operations. However, operational challenges remain, including difficult terrain, adverse weather conditions, limited information, and resource constraints.

The Committee also noted concerns regarding the infrastructure and operational effectiveness of the 3DP Suva Radio coastal communication station, which has raised compliance issues with international maritime safety obligations. Overall, the Committee recognised the need to strengthen inter-agency coordination, enhance communication infrastructure, improve training, and ensure sustained investment in equipment and operational capabilities to support effective SAR operations in Fiji.

4.2.4 Joint submission from the National Fire Authority and the Ministry of Local Government

The National Fire Authority (NFA) and the Ministry of Local Government underscored the critical need for enhanced national preparedness and stronger inter agency coordination to improve Fiji's overall emergency response capability. Under existing legislation, the NFA serves as the primary operational agency responsible for land-based search and rescue, technical rescue operations, and fire suppression across urban, peri urban, and disaster affected areas. The Fiji Police Force maintains the lead role in land SAR, with NFA providing technical capability and reinforcement when required. The Ministry of Local Government supports these

functions through policy guidance, legislative and regulatory oversight, and resource facilitation.

Fiji continues to experience a notable number of maritime incidents, with data from 2021 to 2024 indicating recurring challenges linked to human error, adverse weather, and vessel maintenance gaps. Broader water safety concerns persist, with drowning remaining a significant cause of fatalities. These trends highlight the importance of strengthening both maritime and land-based emergency response mechanisms.

The NFA has invested substantially in capability development, including advanced training in urban search and rescue, swift water rescue, hazardous materials handling, and various international programs. While these initiatives have strengthened national competencies, gaps remain in specialised equipment availability, communication reliability, and maritime response capacity.

Inter agency coordination—particularly among the NFA, Fiji Police Force, Fiji Navy, and the National Disaster Management Office—is well established during active disasters, but both agencies emphasised the need for routine, large scale multi agency drills to ensure readiness before emergencies occur. Operational challenges such as difficult terrain, limited equipment, communication blackouts, and the absence of fireboats continue to constrain response capacity.

To address these gaps and strengthen national resilience, the NFA proposed two key strategic actions:

- The establishment of an annual national disaster response drill, involving domestic agencies and regional partners, to enhance interoperability and operational preparedness.
- The creation of a comprehensive legal and structural framework to fully localise and implement the 1979 SAR Convention, clarify maritime SAR leadership, improve resource coordination, and centralise national SAR governance.

Both the Ministry of Local Government and the NFA expressed strong support for Fiji's accession of the SAR Convention. They affirmed their collective commitment to advancing policy reforms, enhancing inter agency collaboration, and investing in modern equipment and training to strengthen Fiji's land and maritime search and rescue capability.

4.2.5 Joint submission from the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji and Airports Fiji Limited

The CAAF and AFL strongly endorse that Fiji accedes to the SAR Convention. Operationally, air SAR coordination is undertaken through the Nadi Aeronautical Rescue Sub-Centre operated by the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji and the Fiji Rescue Coordination Centre responsible for maritime incidents. The Committee noted that the Nadi centre is equipped with modern operational systems, including communication switch systems, high-resolution display platforms, automated message handling, and real-time aircraft and maritime traffic monitoring capabilities, supported by established standard operating procedures.

The Committee notes that air SAR operations are coordinated through the Aeronautical Rescue Sub-Centre in Nadi, with support from aviation partners and regional stakeholders. Fiji continues to maintain aeronautical SAR services and facilities and has achieved approximately 97 percent implementation under the International Civil Aviation Organisation Asia-Pacific SAR Implementation Assessment as of April 2025. Ongoing efforts are also being undertaken to strengthen SAR capabilities in line with international aviation standards, including developments under the Global Aeronautical Distress and Safety System (GADSS).

The Committee further noted that Fiji's aeronautical SAR responsibilities are guided by key international conventions, including the Convention on International Civil Aviation and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, while a Cabinet submission has been prepared seeking approval for Fiji to accede to the SAR Convention. At the domestic level, the legal framework is supported by the Civil Aviation Act and ongoing work on a dedicated SAR Bill currently undergoing review.

In reviewing the framework, the Committee noted several challenges affecting the effectiveness of SAR coordination. These include delays in the ratification of the SAR Convention and the enactment of the SAR Bill, the absence of a national SAR Council to facilitate multi-agency coordination, and operational issues relating to the disposal of obsolete emergency beacons. The Committee also noted coordination challenges arising from differences between aeronautical and maritime SAR boundaries, particularly where Fiji's aeronautical SAR region overlaps with the maritime SAR region managed by New Zealand. In addition, the Committee was informed that there are currently no formal SAR agreements with aircraft operators.

The Committee further noted that Fiji's SAR framework has evolved through several key milestones, including the establishment of an inter-agency SAR Memorandum of Understanding in 1992, its review in 2009, and the launch of the National SAR Plan in 2019. National SAR exercises conducted in 2014 and 2019 have also contributed to strengthening inter-agency coordination and operational readiness.

Overall, the Committee noted that Fiji has established a functioning SAR framework and maintains a high level of aeronautical SAR implementation. However, further progress is required to strengthen the legislative framework, formalise coordination mechanisms, and enhance regional cooperation to ensure a fully integrated national SAR system.

4.2.6 Fiji Airways

The Fiji Airways Operations Control Centre (OCC) is the airline's central hub responsible for the safe and continuous management of flight operations for Fiji Airways and Fiji Link. Operating on a 24-hour basis, the OCC provides real-time monitoring, operational oversight, and incident response across the airline's network to ensure regulatory compliance, manage operational risks, and maintain flight schedule integrity.

The Committee noted that the OCC oversees key operational functions including flight planning and dispatch, crew coordination, live operations monitoring, and the management of irregular operations. These functions support the safe planning of flights, ensure crew compliance with duty-time regulations, monitor aircraft movements in real time, and manage disruptions such as severe weather, airport congestion, or operational delays.

The Committee observed that Fiji Airways maintains a structured emergency response framework for aviation incidents. When a distress signal such as a MAYDAY or PAN PAN is declared, coordination occurs with relevant air traffic control authorities, and an Incident Assessment Team is activated. Where necessary, the Crisis Management Centre is convened, involving senior airline executives and coordination with emergency services and international response partners.

The Committee further noted that the OCC maintains multiple communication systems and monitoring technologies to ensure operational continuity and rapid response to deviations or emergencies. The Centre also oversees the operations of Fiji Link and supports broader operational functions including flight documentation, electronic flight systems, aircraft performance monitoring, and regulatory compliance.

In addition, the Committee was informed that Fiji Airways' crisis management structure extends beyond aviation incidents to include responses to national emergencies such as cyclones and flooding, enabling coordinated action across operational, technical, and leadership teams.

Overall, the Committee acknowledged the critical role of Fiji Airways in maintaining aviation safety, operational resilience, and supporting Fiji's national connectivity and economic stability.

4.2.7 Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation

The Committee notes that Fiji is a State Party to the Convention on International Civil Aviation, which requires States to establish and provide search and rescue services for aircraft within their area of responsibility. These obligations are further detailed in ICAO Annex 12 – Search and Rescue, which sets out international standards and recommended practices for aeronautical SAR operations. The aeronautical SAR in Fiji is provided for under the Civil Aviation Act 1976, which establishes the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji as the national aviation regulator. CAAF is responsible for regulating civil aviation safety, implementing international aviation standards, and overseeing the technical and operational aspects of aeronautical search and rescue.

The Committee notes that the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation provides policy leadership, legislative oversight and international coordination in relation to aeronautical SAR. The Ministry is responsible for:

- Developing and overseeing national civil aviation policy, including SAR-related policy;
- Ensuring Fiji's compliance with international obligations under the Chicago Convention; and
- Supporting legislative and institutional arrangements necessary to implement international aviation standards.

The Committee further notes that CAAF is responsible for implementing and enforcing aeronautical SAR requirements, establishing SAR arrangements in accordance with ICAO standards, and providing regulatory oversight of aviation service providers. This includes ensuring that Fiji's aeronautical SAR system meets international safety and operational requirements.

The Committee finds that Fiji's institutional framework clearly separates Government policy and oversight functions from technical regulatory responsibilities. The Ministry provides policy direction and governance, while CAAF is responsible for the operational regulation and technical oversight of aeronautical SAR activities. The existing framework enables Fiji to maintain an aeronautical SAR system that aligns with international aviation standards, while ensuring clear accountability and effective coordination between Government policy bodies and technical regulators.

4.2.8 The Solicitor-General's Office

The Committee noted that the SAR Convention establishes a global framework for maritime search and rescue operations to ensure that persons in distress at sea receive prompt assistance without discrimination. The Convention was adopted under the auspices of the IMO and entered into force in 1985, with more than 100 States, including Australia, Cook Islands, Kiribati, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, already party to it.

The Committee further noted that accession to the Convention would require Fiji to maintain adequate SAR services, operate rescue coordination centres, ensure continuous emergency communications, and strengthen regional and international cooperation in responding to maritime distress incidents.

In this regard, the Committee observed that Fiji already conducts search and rescue operations through national agencies, including the RFN, the FPF, and the CAAF, supported by established coordination centres and operational systems. However, accession to the Convention would further strengthen Fiji's legal and institutional framework for SAR coordination and enhance alignment with international maritime safety standards.

The Committee also noted that accession may have financial implications, including potential investment in communication systems, surveillance, training, and capacity building for SAR

operations. At the same time, existing partnership programmes and regional cooperation arrangements may assist in supporting these capacity-building efforts.

From a constitutional perspective, the Committee noted that the Convention aligns with the protection of the right to life and human dignity under Fiji's Constitution, as the SAR framework promotes life-saving operations and humanitarian assistance at sea.

The Committee further noted that Fiji follows a dualist legal system, meaning international treaties become binding domestically only after approval by Parliament. While the Convention contains a tacit acceptance procedure for amendments to its technical annex, any domestic legal effect in Fiji would still require parliamentary approval, thereby preserving parliamentary authority and national sovereignty.

4.3 Committee Analysis

Accession to the SAR Convention is an important step in strengthening Fiji's maritime search and rescue framework. Becoming a party to the Convention would formalise Fiji's participation in the international system that coordinates responses to maritime distress incidents and promotes cooperation between States in saving lives at sea.

At present, search and rescue operations in Fiji are carried out through existing institutional arrangements involving the Republic of Fiji Navy, the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji, the Fiji Police Force, and other relevant agencies. In the absence of the SAR Convention, interim measures currently in place include the National Search and Rescue Manual (2019), interagency agreements, bilateral memoranda of understanding with regional states, and compliance with the IAMSAR Manual. While these arrangements support operational coordination, they operate without a comprehensive legislative framework that fully reflects the standards and obligations set out under the Convention.

Acceding to the Convention would provide Fiji with a clear and internationally recognised legal framework for the coordination of search and rescue operations. It would also strengthen collaboration among national agencies and enhance cooperation with regional and international partners in responding to maritime emergencies across Fiji's extensive search and rescue region.

In addition, accession would support the development of domestic legislation and operational structures necessary to effectively implement the Convention. This would further enhance Fiji's capacity to coordinate search and rescue activities and reinforce its role as a key search and rescue coordination hub in the Pacific region.

However, evidence presented highlighted that the Republic of Fiji Navy currently lacks dedicated funding to consistently train Search and Rescue Watchkeepers, who play a critical

role in coordinating maritime and aviation rescue operations. These Watchkeepers have historically received specialised training in New Zealand, where they undertake a four-month programme accredited by the Civil Aviation Authority of New Zealand and Maritime New Zealand.

Although six officers have previously completed this internationally recognised training, only three remain in service due to attrition and migration to overseas employment opportunities where such specialised skills are in high demand. Training opportunities have also been inconsistent, as participation has largely depended on the availability of sponsorship or surplus funding.

Establishing a dedicated annual allocation of FJD85,000 to train at least two Watchkeepers annually would help ensure continuity in developing internationally accredited search and rescue coordination expertise. Such funding would also strengthen operational readiness and support Fiji's capacity to effectively implement obligations under the SAR Convention.

Furthermore, concerns were also raised regarding the absence of compulsory vessel reporting requirements for vessels operating within Fiji's maritime zones. Evidence indicated that many vessels, including visiting yachts, do not consistently keep their Automatic Identification System (AIS) activated, limiting authorities' ability to monitor vessel movements and respond effectively to maritime incidents.

While AIS was originally designed as a collision-avoidance tool, it has become an important monitoring and tracking mechanism that supports maritime safety, security, and search and rescue operations. Officials further highlighted that the proportion of vessels entering Fiji with AIS activated has declined significantly in recent years, reducing maritime domain awareness.

Introducing compulsory vessel reporting—whether through AIS or other emerging technologies—would improve authorities' ability to track vessel movements, reduce response times during distress incidents, and strengthen maritime surveillance. Such a system would support Fiji's operational readiness to meet the requirements of the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue and align national practices with measures already implemented in countries such as Australia.

The establishment of a compulsory vessel reporting system would therefore be an important measure to enhance maritime safety, improve search and rescue coordination, and strengthen Fiji's preparedness to implement the SAR Convention.

In relation to aeronautical SAR operations, the Fiji Search and Rescue Region (SRR) is strategically aligned with its Flight Information Region (FIR), encompassing approximately 6 million square kilometres. This alignment facilitates coordinated aeronautical and maritime response across a vast area, enhancing operational efficiency and safety. The Committee

acknowledges, however, that Fiji's maritime SAR boundaries do not fully coincide with its FIR.

Certain areas, including the waters surrounding New Caledonia and Port Vila, fall under French jurisdiction, while portions of the maritime region are managed within New Zealand's Maritime SAR Region. These jurisdictional distinctions underscore the importance of strong regional cooperation and coordination mechanisms to ensure timely and effective SAR response across overlapping areas of responsibility. The Committee further recognises that Fiji's ability to maintain robust SAR operations depends on sustained collaboration with neighbouring countries, adherence to international SAR conventions, and the continued development of integrated national systems that bridge aeronautical and maritime responsibilities.

4.4 Other Recommendations

The Committee noted issues raised from consultations with key stakeholders and recommend the following to support Fiji's SAR operations:

4.4.1 Tabling of the Search and Rescue Bill

The Committee recommends that the Government prioritises the tabling of the Search and Rescue Bill within the current parliamentary term.

4.4.2 Statutory Provisions for Coastal Radio Operations

The Committee recommends that statutory provisions be incorporated within the legislative framework to clearly define and mandate coastal radio operations in support of national SAR coordination.

4.4.3 Risk and Specialist SAR Duty Allowances

The Committee recommends the introduction of risk and specialist SAR duty allowances to recognise the specialised skills, operational demands, and responsibilities of SAR personnel in maritime, land and air SAR operations, and to support staff retention. This would align with international best practice.

4.4.4 Dedicated Funding for SAR Watchkeeper Training

The Committee recommends the allocation of dedicated funding of FJD 85,000 annually to the Republic of the Fiji Navy to support internationally accredited training for SAR Watchkeepers to ensure the maintenance of professional standards and operational readiness.

4.4.5 Regional Technical Agreements for SAR Coordination

The Committee recommends that the Government formalise technical agreements with regional Global Rescue Coordination Centre partners in Australia, New Zealand, Honolulu, and Noumea to strengthen regional coordination and cooperation in maritime search and rescue operations.

4.4.6 Strengthening National Disaster Response Preparedness

The Committee recommends that the Government provide dedicated annual budget allocations to support the relevant agencies in SAR operations. The conduct of a Large-Scale National Disaster Response Exercise is recommended to strengthen communication, coordination, and operational readiness among relevant national agencies during real-time disaster situations. The Committee further recommends that the exercise be conducted annually during the dry season period from May to October and simulate major disaster scenarios such as Category 5 cyclones and tsunamis. The exercise should emphasise international collaboration and involve the participation of international search and rescue teams, including partners from Australia and New Zealand, working alongside Fiji's national response agencies. The exercise should focus on the deployment and integration of international teams with local units, coordinated primarily from Suva, to strengthen joint disaster response capabilities.

4.4.7 Expediting the Job Evaluation Exercise for the Republic of the Fiji Navy

The Committee recommends that the tender evaluation process for the Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE), advertised in December 2025, be expedited. Members noted that the JEE tender is currently under evaluation and emphasised the critical importance of progressing this process without delay, given the wide-ranging and essential nature of SAR operations undertaken by the Fiji Navy. The Committee further observed that the last JEE for the institution was conducted in 2004, over two decades ago, and that remuneration and role structures have not been systematically reviewed since that time. Updating the JEE is therefore necessary to ensure that positions, allowances, and operational responsibilities reflect current demands and challenges. Accelerating the evaluation process will strengthen operational readiness, enhance inter-agency coordination, support the retention of trained personnel, and ensure Fiji's SAR capacity meets both national and international obligations.

5.0 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

The SAR Convention supports several of the United Nations SDGs through its focus on maritime safety, protection of life at sea, and international cooperation. Fiji's ongoing SAR operations, coordinated through national agencies and rescue coordination centre, contribute to advancing these global development objectives.

SDG 3 – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

The Convention supports SDG 3 by strengthening emergency response systems that reduce fatalities and injuries associated with maritime and aviation incidents. In Fiji, SAR operations coordinated through national agencies, including the Republic of the Fiji Navy, the CAAF, AFL and the FPF, enable timely responses to distress situations and contribute to the protection of human life at sea, land and in the air.

SDG 5 – Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all women and girls

Fiji's SAR operations actively support SDG 5 by promoting gender equality and inclusion in maritime and aeronautical search and rescue. Gender equality and inclusivity remain key priorities for SAR operations in Fiji and across the Pacific, ensuring that women are fully represented and engaged in emergency preparedness and life-saving activities. Women's engagement in SAR operations is reflected in the growing involvement and leadership as watchkeepers, coordinators, and community responders. To further strengthen this participation, Fiji has committed to enhanced collaboration with the Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA), creating professional development and capacity-building opportunities that empower women in maritime SAR. By integrating gender-responsive approaches in training, planning, and operations, Fiji not only improves the effectiveness of SAR missions but also advances SDG 5 targets on equal opportunities, leadership, and inclusive decision-making for women.

SDG 9 – Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation

Through the establishment of rescue coordination centres, communication systems, and operational procedures, the Convention supports the development of critical safety and transport infrastructure. In Fiji, this is reflected in the operation of the Nadi Aeronautical Rescue Sub-Centre and the Maritime Essential Services Centre, which utilise advanced communication and monitoring technologies to support effective SAR coordination across Fiji's extensive area of responsibility.

SDG 14 – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

The Convention promotes safe maritime operations and strengthens mechanisms to respond to emergencies occurring in marine environments. Fiji's SAR services help safeguard those

engaged in maritime transport, fisheries, and other ocean-based activities across its large maritime domain, contributing to the safe and sustainable use of ocean resources.

SDG 16 – Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Implementation of the Convention strengthens national governance arrangements for emergency response. Fiji's SAR framework operates through coordinated efforts among multiple government agencies, supported by national policies, operational plans, and legislative frameworks that guide SAR responsibilities and inter-agency cooperation.

SDG 17 – Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

The SAR Convention promotes cooperation among neighbouring states and international agencies in responding to maritime distress incidents. Fiji's SAR operations require close coordination with regional partners, including neighbouring Pacific states and international aviation and maritime organisations, to ensure timely assistance across overlapping search and rescue regions and to strengthen regional collaboration in saving lives at sea.

6.0 Conclusion

The Committee concludes that accession to the SAR Convention will further strengthen Fiji's legal and institutional framework for SAR coordination, enhance regional cooperation, and align Fiji's national systems with internationally recognised maritime safety standards established by the International Maritime Organisation.

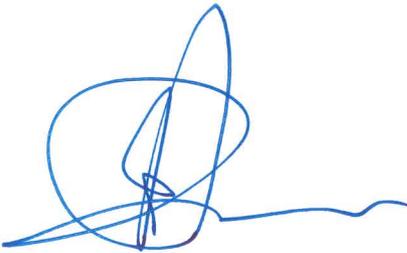
While Fiji has made considerable progress in establishing operational capabilities, the Committee emphasised the importance of progressing key supporting measures, including the enactment of the national Search and Rescue legislation and the continued strengthening of inter-agency coordination mechanisms.

Overall, the Committee strongly recommends that the Parliament approves that Fiji accedes to the SAR Convention. This will reinforce Fiji's commitment to maritime safety, support the protection of human life at sea, and strengthen national and regional cooperation in responding to search and rescue incidents across the Pacific.

7.0 Committee Members' Signatures



Hon. Lenora QEREQERETABUA
Chairperson



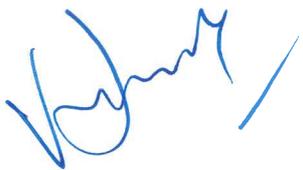
Hon. Rinesh SHARMA
Deputy Chairperson



Hon. Isikeli TUIWAILEVU
Member



Hon. Penioni RAVUNAWA
Member



Hon. Virendra LAL
Member



Hon. Taito ROKOMATU
Member

8.0 Annexure

Published evidence

Written evidence, transcripts, and supporting documents can be viewed on the Parliament website at the following link:

<https://www.parliament.gov.fj/committees/standing-committee-on-foreign-affairs-and-defence/>