**VERBATIM NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COMMITTEE ROOM (WEST WING), PARLIAMENT PRECINCTS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS ON MONDAY, 12TH JUNE 2017 AT 9.25 A.M.**

**Submittee: Department of Immigration**

In Attendance:

1. Mr. Nemani Vuniwaqa - Director
2. Mr. Litia Saumaka - A/ADI
3. Mr. Pete Suliano - MPV
4. Ms. Esther Mario - A/SAO (P)

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DEPUTY CHAIRMAN.- A very warm welcome to everyone. Our apologies for having to wait. We were waiting for the whole team to arrive then we would start with our session, but nonetheless since everyone from all the various ministries are here, I welcome you all to the meeting of the Public Accounts Committee, dated 12th June, 2017. We have rescheduled our meeting to Monday because we are having a conference on Thursday, so Parliament has instructed us that Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday would be our meeting days for this week, and if there were some last minute changes in the schedule of the Department, we apologise for that.

Nonetheless, let me also introduce the Honourable Members: the Honourable Chairman of the Committee is out in Malta for the African Caribbean Pacific (ACP) meeting and Honourable Alexander O’Connor who is the Assistant Minister for Health and also part of the Committee is out on ministerial responsibilities. On my left, we have Honourable Ratu Nanovo and Honourable Radrodro, the representatives from the Opposition side of the Committee. On my nearest left and right, we have our secretariat staff and on our far right, we have officials from the Ministry of Economy and on the far left, we have the officials from the Auditor-General’s Office who are here also assisting us with our deliberations.

I believe we are represented by the Director of the Department of Immigration. Mr. Vuniwaqa, on behalf of the Public Accounts Committee, I welcome you and your team. Very shortly, I will be giving you the opportunity to introduce your team and then take us through your submission but nonetheless, just for the information of everyone, please, be mindful that we are here to discuss the Reports of the 2015 Audit Report of the Department. There will be some related supplementary questions whilst you will be doing your submission.

Without further ado, I give you the opportunity, Director, to introduce your team and then perhaps from there, you or your designated official can take us through your submission.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chairperson, thank you for the welcoming remarks this morning. I take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Members of the Public Accounts Committee and also for the invitation to come and present or provide some clarifications on the three issues that have been raised.

Just as a matter of introduction, as you have rightly said, I am the Director of Immigration, on my right is the Manager, Permits and Visas, Mr. Pene Suliano; and immediate left is Ms. Litia Saumaka who is the Acting Assistant Director; Ms. Esther Mario who is on the far left, a Senior Immigration Officer responsible for Passports. We are here just to clarify the issues that have been raised on the clarifications of the three questions on Part B of the Audit Findings, that is on 6.6 – Anomalies in Passport Records; 6.7 – Poor File Management System; 6.8 – Delay in Bond Refunds.

I guess, Mr. Deputy Chairperson, we have already appeared before the Committee with regards to our updates or the actions that have been taken and I know that the Committee is seeking clarification on those three issues. I have in front of me the responses of which have also been distributed to the Members on the three issues or what we have done thus far, we can say, after we have also appeared before the Public Accounts Committee.

If you will allow me to start off with the response on 6.6.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Yes, you can take us through the Audit Findings, that is Part B.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chairperson, on 6.6 – on the Anomalies in Passport Records. The Department is currently in the process of merging all passport processes to the Integrated Border Management System (IBMS), the system that we are currently using. A copy of the documents and what we have done thus far is at Annex 1 of our Report.

No. 2, the Passport Section, we have also reviewed the existing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), that is really to enhance our service delivery.

No. 3, we have also introduced a register to reflect pending applications from previous years. I guess, coming to the Committee in the last appearance, we did not have this in place but now we have that registered and that really shows the big number of passport applications that are still there in the Department. A lot have applied for the books over the years, they still have their books in there but we have got a separate register for that and those that have been tallied. This practice really will address the variance in the applications received against the issuance because one of the issues that had been raised; the number of applications received and the issuance from the Department, that is for the first question, Deputy Chair.

HON. RATU S.V. NANOVO.- Still on that, Deputy Chair, I do thank the Director for the explanation given so far regarding the work that they have done to-date. My question to them: were these initiatives not there before, these are totally new procedures that you have come up with in order to address the situation at hand?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, through you, the question from the Honourable Member is a valid one. Yes, that is affirmative. These are new initiatives that we have taken in order to rectify the issues that have been identified from previous reports.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I have a very general question for the Director. There are three types of reconciliation of passport systems which are mentioned in Table 6.4 as per the Audit Report. One says IBMS System the other one I believe is the Monthly Reports and then the last one is DARDIS. Just for the information of the Committee, if you could just explain briefly in general what these three systems are in nature, if possible? I just wanted a brief information on these three systems; how does the recording system of IBMS work; the facts and figures which are there in these monthly reports; these are carried out through which process – if there is a manual process or a computerised process or whatsoever; what is this DARDIS?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chairman, DARDIS is a software company which the Department or the Passport System is using at the moment. The IBMS is a new system that was introduced in 2014 and these two systems are not integrated. What is happening right now, the DARDIS contract is expiring at the end of the year and that is when we are coming up with introducing the new system that is mentioned on our response in No. 1, just to merge all the current processes in one and that is the Integrated Boarder Management System.

In having these and the monthly reports is the manual reporting system used.

We have found out that there were anomalies in the number of books that have been mentioned, the number of applications that have been applied for and the number of books that have been issued, they were not tallying and therefore we have come up with this system.

We had discussed with the company to have a representative from within the Department as a way forward. Right now all the other applications or processes in the Department are integrated under IBMS but passport, because DARDIS contract was in place previously even after IBMS came into play, our engagement with DARDIS had been on-going. But now, like I said, they were not integrated which resulted in the anomalies that have been identified in the Report.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Just a question to the Director. I have seen the responses and the related supporting annexes, can you just give us a timeline when will this be put in place? It says 15th September, but it does not state which year?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- In response to the question on the timeline, I affirmatively stated that by the end of 2017 we would have all these in place.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- In between now to 2017, how do you wish to address these anomalies in passport records?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Honourable Member, the issues will be addressed by the registers that we have already put in place and the system, we have already received a quote from the providers – Informatics Limited. It is also in our budget submission and hopefully we will get all that in place so that we can address all these issues that have been identified.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- What is the total cost of this new IBMS System; what is the condition of the acquisition; is it through tender and whether the licence will be maintained by the Department of Immigration or is there a separate annual licence fee that comes with it?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Deputy Chairperson, through you, like I said, we have just received a quote. I can come back to the Committee with the clarification or an update on the prices. IBMS has already been in place, it is just another software (I do not really know the technical term) to integrate this Passport System into the current system that is in place.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Director, you can move on to the next issue.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Deputy Chairperson, on the second one, 6.7 - Poor File Management System. After our appearance in the last meeting with the Committee, the Department has worked fairly hard in order to have the files that were evident in the previous reports. They have worked overtime to manage and approve pending files as per our findings in Annex 4. The batching was done on both closed and open files.

Thirdly, the Department is currently securing mobile compactors to replace the old filing cabinets and also identify space to store the expired files. We have also issued an internal circular on the 5th April this year and also, just an internal instruction via e-mail to all staff reminding them of whoever is responsible or authorised to be entering our registry.

All these measures have been put in place in order to remedy the issues that have been identified and like I have stated, these are some of the actions that have been taken by the Department after our initial appearance to the Committee.

HON. RATU S.V. NANOVO.- Deputy Chair, based on what has been submitted to-date as outlined, we note that there is much improvement in accordance with what was identified last time. Just a question on the filing. Each day, do the staff have to return the file at the end of aworking day or do they hold on to the file or what?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Honourable Member, the return of files really depends on the processing of those files by a particular officer. As long as the file has been actioned and accounted for, then it will be returned to where it should be returned.

HON. RATU S.V. NANOVO.- In your filing team, when they take out a file, is there a file register that they have to fill?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Honourable Member. Yes, there is a file register and there is a system in place whereby the files are accounted for. There is a card system that the registry officers use to account for the movement of files within the Department, or even if it goes outside of the Department.

HON. RATU S.V. NANOVO.- The team that looks after the filing system, do you have a team leader? I am just comparing that to what we had at the Fiji Development Bank. I think that will really improve the situation as compared to what we were advised before.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair and Honourable Members, yes, we have a registry. We have officers who are in the registry team. We have registry officers who work on having thefiling of these office files. Just to add further, we have identified a training through FNU to send our registry officers, that is the 5-S training which we have already identified and identified the officers, not only registry officers but other officers who will be attending this particular training.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- There is a need for an Immigration and Finance Manual that “the Director Immigration must ensure that the agency control is reviewed on a regular basis, to ensure that they are meeting the intended purpose.” We note the submission that has been prepared, especially the supporting annexes, the improvements that have been shown in terms of filing, how regular is the review of the internal control processes that have been undertaken by the Department?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair and Honourable Members, the Department will ensure to abide by the Finance Manual, to guide our review for registering in response to the question that has been raised.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Is the review undertaken six monthly, quarterly or annually in terms of the internal control processes that are currently there?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair and Honourable Member, as was discussed, that is something that we have also taken on board after our last appearance to the Committee and we are conducting the review with the guidelines that have been there, that is on a six-months basis.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- A question to the Ministry of Economy, when was the last time you did an internal audit at the Department of Immigration?

MOE REP.- Deputy Chair and Honourable Members, the last audit that the Ministry of Economy conducted for the Department of Immigration was in 2015, the exit meeting for which was conducted in 2016. We noted an improvement, the management of documents has been a recurring issue as has been highlighted by the Office of the Auditor-General and we noted an improvement in this area. This has been reflected in the submission of their reconciliation. The Department’s reconciliation has been up-to-date, that is the current status. The last reconciliation that they submitted was up to the month of March, 2017.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Just a question to the Director, Immigration in terms of security of information and security of confidential information in the files. How is the Department of Immigration ensuring that this is maintained at all times given the improvement in terms of filing but I note that it is still in boxes in terms of the filing system?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Just adding onto that, actually, that is what I also wanted to ask.

Looking at some of the photographic evidences which the OAG’s report is reflecting, there seems to be space issues in the Immigration Department, probably there is no enough space or storage facilities and we do note that problem.

Storage has been a problem for other ministries as well, we acknowledge that some written instructions for a file management system is already there. However, how about in terms of storage facilities which also is supplemented to the question which the Honourable Radrodro asked? You have the proper ones?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Sir, with respect to the question that has been asked by the Honourable Radrodro, I will request the Assistant Director to address that and then we will respond to your particular question, Deputy Chair?

HON. RATU S.V. NANOVO.- Still on that, Deputy Chair, maybe just a request to the Director, just go around to FDB and look at their filing system, it will give you some ideas, it is really tidy.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Just for your information, Honourable Nanovo used to work at FDB.

MS. L. SAUMAKA.- Deputy Chair and Honourable Member, in response to the question from Honourable Radrodro, as it is, we have the general files in our registry. The confidential subject files are kept with the Director’s Office and the confidential personal files are in my office, just to monitor and to control the movement of files, whereas for the respective Managers of Permits and Citizenships, they have the files in registry but they are monitored by our registry staff.

For the current space in our office, we have identified a room that was normally used for social gathering. We have identified that room so that some files from our registry are moved to that room to ensure that we have more space in the registry.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- In addition to that, Deputy Chair, as you mentioned, the space is an issue and therefore we have sacrificed our recreational room. We have worked with the company to have a smaller space for our recreational room and a much bigger space to have our new compactors stored in it.

Also I take the invitation from the Honourable Member to visit the FDB, we take it as a learning experience and we take the suggestion positively.

From the findings that were there in 2015, I also invite the Honourable Members of this Committee to come around to the Department and have a look. I can say that it is in a far better state than what you see in these pictures. Like I said, we have worked hard to ensure that we have files stored and therefore, we continue to learn. Like I have said, we have identified a training to send our officers and if we can use them to better manage the filing of the files. There are more than thousands of files in the Department that we have at the moment right now.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- We do understand this issue of resources and storage facilities within a Ministry or Department and we are very much thankful that the Department has in actuality sacrificed one of its recreational rooms just to look into this issue.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Deputy Chair, the other question following from my earlier one is, looking at the pictures here, basically, most of it are manually storage spaces and if there is a fire, whether the Department of Immigration is ready to collect all those information, I am talking about a back-up system. Does the Department of Immigration have a proper back-up system to what is currently the filing system that is in place? Also, we have noted recently there is a new office in Labasa, how do they correlate and share the specifics of information?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, in terms of the last question that has been posed in terms of how the two offices correlate in terms of sharing of information, we have that Integrated Border Management System in place. That system connects all the information or the data that has been shared in terms of applications that are received through work permits or even passports.

The Labasa Office is not working in isolation in terms of applications that they receive. They need to check through the system whether that particular applicant’s birth certificate presented to the Department is an authentic one, therefore the system is linked to the registry’s office. They can do that from the Labasa Office, not only the Suva Office as used to be the case. We have integrated that service.

In terms of the question that he has posed regarding the manual filing system that is in place, if there is a fire, all the files that are there will go up with that fire but like I have said, we are working on having most of the information and data into the system so that we can have a back-up system in place.

There is only one service right now that is not integrated into the system and we are working with the company to have that, that is on Citizenship. That has a lot of information too. Weare working right now on having that and the data being integrated into the system.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Does the Department of Immigration utilise the ITC Services for the new Integration System?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, yes, the ITC is required to be working with that. That is one of the requirements for the company to be working with ITC in all our IT services.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Just out of interest, would you be able to inform the Committee how many passports have you currently in circulation from your Department?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- That requires data and statistics so if the Department is unsure of the exact figure, you can always get back to us with a written response.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Deputy Chair, can we come back to you with a written response on that?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Yes.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Just a question of clarification - : Honourable Member, are you asking for the number of passports that have been issued?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Yes.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- In this financial year or just from January?

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- I think the question is the total number of passports which are currently in circulation amongst the citizens of this nation.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- That, Deputy Chair, we will have to go back to the last ten years because the validity of the passport is ten years. It is much easier to come to you with the passports that we have been issued on a yearly basis. If I go back to the last ten years, just a matter of clarification, I will not be coming to you with an exact number or an exact figure because some that have applied in the last ten years have reapplied for extension, because of the fact that they have lost their passports, some have got new passports so they have applied twice.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Do you have a record where it says, “What is the current available issued?” Even if one reapplies, then the earlier issue will cancel, so is the system able to accommodate all those information where only the current circulation becomes the valid number? Does that system have that information?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- That is for the ten-year period. We can come back to you with a written response to that, Deputy Chair.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- It was because of the picture that I have here, a lot of passports have been issued.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- As for passports, all the applications are stored in boxes. Those files are for other processes in the Department; residence permits, work permits but for passport applications, they are stored in boxes on a yearly basis. It is easier for us to follow up on those passport applications.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- You can an update on what was issued on a yearly basis over the last period.

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, that can be provided.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- 6.8?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, on the delay in bond refunds, the Department has strengthened its file census in order to control the movement of files in-and-out of the registry as per Annex 11.

There are regular meetings within the bond officer or the Permits Division emphasising on the importance of meeting the timelines.

We have also introduced the Technical Officers *Talanoa* Session (TOTS) where we have identified all the issues, complaints that come through the Department. This session is only for our technical officers where we address all the issues that have been raised with the Department like the delay in bond refunds and trying to identify strategies in order to mitigate these issues that have been identified.

After the previous meeting, we have also created an excel sheet for ease of doing business too within our Registry Department.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Just basically for general information, what is the structure of these bond amounts, like for a work permit, how much are they required to put as bonds, is there a certain structure?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, the bond is equivalent to the return air fare (Economy Class) for an applicant, that is how the bond is structured. If it is from a Chinese national, the return air fare to China, for New Zealand national, a return air fare (Economy Class) for that particular applicant. If he comes with the family, all the family members will also have to pay bond.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- These bonds are repatriated back to the country where they are from?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Yes, Deputy Chair, it is for that reason, once they have completed their term in Fiji, when they go it will be refunded to the applicant.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- To that country where they are from?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Yes, it is paid by the company and it will be refunded to the company. The bond is really in place as a control measure. Take for example, if that particular applicant has breached his terms and conditions and likewise to be repatriated, that money will be utilised. Sometimes we have an applicant who is unwilling to leave the country. Take for example, if there is a situation whereby the company is not aware, we have identified a breach and the removal procedures have to be initiated, the company sometimes is unwilling to say “No, we are not going to release him because we are not really aware of the findings.” We will have to use that money in order to repatriate that particular applicant. When he completes the term, the money is refunded to the company.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Is the bond applicable for other immigration permits, for example, dual citizenship or someone wanting to migrate to Fiji, just like what we have in Australia, I think there is a bond of $40,000. Do they have the same structure for Fiji as well?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair, as a matter of clarification, for someone who has applied for citizenship, he does not require a bond because he is a Fiji citizen. We only repatriate foreigners who apply for whatever permit – work permit, student permit, residence permit; the bond is applicable to those applications.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- For student permit and if someone is seeking PR in Fiji, a bond is also applicable on that as well?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Yes, Deputy Chair.

HON. RATU S.V. NANOVO.- One issue, Deputy Chair, we have noted lately that the Government has recruited so many expatriates for the position of Permanent Secretary. Do they also have to pay that kind of bond?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chairperson and Honourable Member, for those who have been contracted to the Government, they are exempted. There is a particular provision in the Immigrations Act which allows for those who have been contracted and are working in any Government Ministry regardless of whether it is the Permanent Secretary, they are exempted from paying the particular permit fees and other fees that are associated with it.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- … time to review the Act.

Deputy Chair, just a question to the Director, in terms of getting people to work, are there any specific strategies in place by the Department of Immigration to ensure that expatriates that have come in do not take over overcrowded spaces for the local where the locals are left with no jobs? Does it have a role in terms of ensuring that we get only the necessary technical qualification?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Honourable Member, yes, the Department has a mechanism in place. We have a Work Permits Committee that scrutinises all the work permit applications that come in before decisions have been made and at all cost, we try to ensure that at all times, and all the positions that are taken cannot be taken by locals.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Lastly, on this particular audit issue, what has happened now to these bonds that have been highlighted here; the delays in the processing of refunds?

MR. N. VUNIWAQA.- Deputy Chair and Honourable Members, all those that have been listed in 6.5 have been refunded. There is no interest incurred, Honourable Member.

DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON.- Thank you, Honourable Members, I believe there are no more questions so on this note, I thank the officials from the Department of Immigration, led by the Director for their deliberation in addressing the audit issues and the findings that we sent as questionnaires.

I thank you once again, Sir, and your team for availing yourselves before the Committee today. On behalf of the Committee, we wish the Ministry all the vert best. We note that there were not much audit issues, just some technical audit issues and we have seen that some stringent measures are already in place to address that, and we are very thankful for that.

Without further ado, if there are any final comments from you, Mr. Director, before we conclude our submission.

(Silence)

Thank you, have a blessed day.

The Committee adjourned at 10.11 a.m.