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PRESS RELEASE

Shipping companies need to be held responsible

The continued disregard for the safety and comfort of passengers on inter-island shipping vessels needs to be addressed as matter of urgency.

Numerous complaints are made every year to the council and we wonder whether Shipping Companies- who operate without regulations on service quality- are using this to absolve themselves of their responsibility to consumers.

A look at complaints against shipping companies registered by the council shows the same recurring issues from overloading of vessels to instances of missing and damaged cargo, cancellation and delay of trips/schedules without notices

Consumers incur costs in these cases and inexplicably there is no formal legislated system to provide any form of compensation for consumers.

The most recent complaint was regarding Goundar Shipping's Lomaiviti Princess 5 that forced passengers to wait on board more than six hours from reporting time before the vessel eventually departed for Vanua Levu.

During this time, passengers were told they could not disembark to buy food and the company also failed to inform passengers of departure time or the cause of delay. A complainant stated food on the ship was too expensive and while some were still hungry, the caterers on the vessel had stopped selling food.

The Council also noted that while ticket receipts showed reporting time, the shipping company failed to stipulate departure time to the consumers, showing a lack of accountability on the part of the shipping company.

Shipping companies have invested heavily in boosting their fleets to make inter-island travel easier but it seems their customer service policies are decades behind.

When the Council reached out to Goundar Shipping to ascertain the reason behind the incident, the company was non-committal and declined to answer any of our queries.

Consumers pay good money for their services and as such the inter-island shipping travel system needs to be overhauled to make them more accountable.

The Council has recorded 17 complaints since January against shipping companies valued at \$2,288.

As part of its budget submissions this year, the Council has requested the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) develop regulations from consumer perspective to improve *service quality* and shipping business practices. The regulations must clearly reflect the rights and responsibilities of consumers and shipping companies to curtail the issues faced by maritime travellers.