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Feature Articles

Consumers deserve better shipping services

Festive season is one time when most people long to be in the company of their loved ones and for Christmas and New Year it is a must.

Thus, in that festive spirit, people travel long distances to make it to their families in time for the celebrations – but, unfortunately, not all make it on time, especially, those travelling on inter-island ships to Maritime Provinces.

The boat travelers are troubled with a string of problems. Their journey is either delayed or filled with discomfort, frustration and disgust.

This is well reflected in the complaints received by the Consumer Council of Fiji regarding the services provided by these passenger vessels, which shows the extent of operators' disregard for travellers comfort and care.

Consumers have had to endure loss of personal belongings and cargo, overcrowding, sudden change of schedule while travelling, delays in departure time, poor and inhumane conditions on board the vessels and general disregard for customer redress.

Apart from overloading their vessels, shipping companies have also cancelled and delayed scheduled trips without any prior notice to their passengers. This results in consumers incurring extra expenses for accommodation, travelling and food while waiting for the boat to arrive.

Case Study 1:

Mr Walter bought a boat ticket to travel from Rotuma back to Suva after spending the festive season with his family in the island of Rotuma. Mr Walter was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the boat since he has to return to work and start making school arrangements for his children. However, to Mr Walter's surprise, the boat did not arrive at the scheduled time.

Mr Walter had no choice but to pay for the services of another shipping company so that he is back to Suva on time. He requested for a full refund from the first shipping company as he did not use the services as the boat had failed to arrive on time.

He lodged a complaint with the Council and with the Council's intervention; the boat company was only willing to refund 75% of the fare paid by Mr Walter. He was not satisfied with the shipping company's response and lodged a claim with the Small Claims Tribunal.

Case Study 2 :

Ms. Prasad was travelling from Suva to Lau in an inter island shipping boat. She paid for all her fare including freight for her cargo, which included frozen meat. For the frozen meat, she paid \$15.05 freezing fee for the meat to be kept in the ship's freezer.

Upon arrival at her destination, Ms. Prasad was disappointed and frustrated because the meat wasn't frozen and it had gone bad.

Frustrated and disappointed, she lodged her complaint with the Council. Ms. Prasad demanded for a refund of \$15.05 and for the cost of the meat to be compensated by the shipping company.

The Council reasoned that it is the responsibility of the shipping company to see that the temperature of the freezers were kept at the required level, and due to their negligence, the meat had gone bad.

After the Council's intervention, the Shipping Company paid \$50 cash to Ms Prasad as compensation and refunded the freezing fee.

The shipping companies must act responsibly and follow their timetable to ensure that consumers reach their destination on time and not be stranded at the wharfs.

The Council is also urging the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) to take necessary proactive steps to keep these ships in check for passenger safety.