

**KEY NOTE ADDRESS AT THE 2013 VODAFONE & WESTPAC PRIME MINISTER’S EXPORTER OF THE YEAR AWARDS**

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***Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Provincial Development, Sugar Industry, Lands and Mineral Resources***

**Shangri-La Fijian Resort – Sigatoka**

**Saturday 16th November 2013**

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* Cabinet Ministers;
* Your Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corp;
* The Chairman and Board of Directors of Investment Fiji;
* CEO’s, Permanent Secretaries and Private Sector Participants;
* Event Sponsors and co-sponsors;
* Members of Media;
* Distinguished Guests;
* My fellow Fijians.

Bula Vinaka and Good Evening

It is a privilege as well as a pleasure to be here tonight to celebrate and acknowledge the outstanding achievements of our exporters through; 2013 Vodafone & Westpac Prime Minister’s Exporter of the Year Awards.

I feel honored to be in the company of the cream of Fijian exporting community. For me, this is one of the most significant events on the national calendar.

As you are all aware, export trade is a key sector of our economy. It supports balance of payments, servicing of external debt, stable currency and sustenance of adequate foreign reserves. In addition, export trade contributes significantly to employment and wealth creation. Indeed, the sector is a key driver of our economy and is expected to complement the efforts of the Bainimarama Government in achieving the projected economic growth.

We all know that a vibrant export industry is vital for meeting our primary objective, a better life for all Fijians. An agreement on what is to be achieved is, however, one thing. Clarity on the steps needed, is another. More so still, is the implementation of what has to be done. This is especially so in the changed environment in which we find ourselves, as a nation in general and in particular as far as exporters are concerned.

Our theme for this year’s awards; “Expanding Beyond the Horizons of Fiji”, is fitting as it comprehends the work of my government in enhancing global integration and international relations. It necessitates looking beyond our traditional partners to improve investment performance, trade facilitation and negotiation. The theme outlines the importance of strengthening local capacity and enhancing global relations.

We want Fiji to be the country where more people think ‘I start my own business and I can sell to the world.’ as it is true testimony to our national brands which makes us proud and brings us prestige. If the “Fijian Made” tag is synonymous with quality, then Fiji itself stands tall.

We need to show real optimism about the future. And we need to show real aggression about pursuing Fiji’s interests in the world.

The markets are there to be tapped. The deals are there to be done. The opportunities are there to be capitalized on. Now together we must seize them. It will be our collective effort that will pave the future of our Fiji.

As we applaud this year’s winners of the 2013 Vodafone & Westpac Prime Minister’s Exporter of the Year Awards, we can also celebrate some export successes as a nation.

As your Prime Minister, I acknowledge your determination to come through difficult times stronger, to trade our way to growth and creating jobs. I appreciate opportunities, applaud the commitment and recognize that it is our shared vision that makes this all happen.

The new international openings are being investigated and expanded by my government with the view of obtaining the most favorable terms and opportunities for Fijian exporters.

The direction of my government’s policy is clear: it is creating an environment in which businesses, big and small, will prosper. The government is committed to facilitating the processes of restructuring which are essential if Fijian business is to become internationally competitive.

Many reforms over the past years are starting to produce results. There is a new wave of optimism about our economic prospects because of the policies of my Government. The tax cuts and investment incentives have helped. But people start spending and investing when they have confidence. And confidence in Fiji – which was once in short order – has not only rebounded but reached new heights.

We do not intend to rest on our reforms. We must continue. There is still corruption, some tax evasion and too much waste. We must all work together to increase productivity, maximize efficiency and provide the investment climate in which real jobs are created and sustained. And sustainable improvements in working terms and conditions are achieved.

Therefore, Ladies and Gentlemen, I ask everyone in this room to commit themselves anew to the Government, the private sector and employees working hand in hand to improve our economic performance and the lives of all Fijians.

For the first time, Fiji meets the standards of the world’s great democracies and will join their ranks.

We now have a Constitution that meets the test of a genuine democracy that upholds the legal and moral basis of a common and equal citizenry without losing individuality or culture. The 2013 Fijian Constitution enshrines principles that are at the heart of all the great liberal democracies - an independent judiciary, a secular state and a wide range of civil, political and socio-economic rights.

You will find that it meets the standards of the most liberal of democracies and international norms and conventions. Every month that passes we are building the foundations of our new parliamentary democracy. Close to 540,000 Fijians have registered to vote for the 2014 election, a testament that Fijians are committed to the changes that we are paving, so we must remain vigilant in our efforts.  
  
As I’ve already pledged, I will subject myself to the will of the Fijian people at the polls before the end of September 2014. It is they who will pass judgment on me and my political party, under this new constitution.

We are now a more just and a more caring nation. Our reforms have been strengthened by the guiding principles of; firstly Empowering Fijians through education, financial inclusion, employment, basic services and connectivity, secondly by creating a legal regulatory and a transparent framework based on best international practices and thirdly by removing systematic corruption and inefficiency.

My Government is and will continue to make conscious efforts to improve the lives of all Fijians. We are listening to our people more and we are listening to our business partners, our stakeholders and our investors so that we can find practical and holistic solutions to our common problems.

I am happy to share that this engagement at all sectors of our community has been an outstanding success with the recent inaugural Pacific Islands Development Forum.  
  
Pacific Island countries came together for the first time as Governments, territories, civil society groups and businesses to confront some of the development and environmental challenges we face as Pacific Small Island Developing States with the theme of “Leadership, Innovation and Partnership for Green-Blue Pacific economies”.

My fellow Pacific leaders and I agreed to formally establish a Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Development Forum. Work has commenced on establishing the Secretariat to maintain the momentum of the discussions.

Before I take my seat, I wish to acknowledge the efforts of our loyal and committed exporters and partners who continue to be a part of the Exporter of the Year Awards and I also welcome those who have come on board for the first time. Thank you for your support.

Once again congratulations to all the Fijian exporters! I am convinced that, with the new opportunities and challenges, all of us will able to show our mettle. I wish you every success in your efforts and look forward to even greater achievements next year.

As a symbol of the partnership between the private and public sectors, I want to thank our principal sponsors tonight -  Vodafone (Fiji) Ltd and Westpac Banking Corporation – along with all the other sponsors who have made this event possible. Vinaka vakalevu.

It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge and reward our best exporters.

Congratulations to all of you. Please enjoy the rest of the evening

Vinaka vakalevu.