

**Commodore J.V. Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc**

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

SPEECH AT THE FRU JERSEY LAUCH

Holiday Inn Mon. 16th Dec., 2013

SUVA 1830 Hours

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Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I address you this evening, it is hard to imagine that 100 years ago, the first rugby club was formed by New Zealander P.J Sheehan. Since its humble beginnings in 1913, rugby in Fiji has grown to be the number one sport in the country.

Tonight we celebrate that history, and also the many Fijian players who have played their hearts out for Fiji, making us one of the few countries who have reached a century of rugby.

We have a rich history around our rugby prowess with our fair share of ups and downs. We have shown the rest of the world the rich athletic talent our rugby players are blessed with. There is surely no game on earth better suited to the robust talents of the Fijian people, than rugby.

Someone once said rugby is *“the game they play in heaven”*. Whoever coined that phrase must have been witness to a game featuring Fijians, with their free-flowing style of rugby that delights spectators the world over.

Who would ever forget the giant strides of Joe Levula, the effervescence of George Cavalevu, the elusiveness of Rusiate Vuruya, the versatility of Isimeli Batibasaga or the magic of Waisale Serevi?

How can one not remember the inspiration of Ratu Sir George Cakobau, the enigmatic leadership of Meli Kurisaru nor the raw talent of Pio Bosco Tikoisuva or Rupeni Caucaunibuca?

Fiji’s contribution to world rugby can never be understated; our natural flair for the game is undeniable. In both 15’s and 7’s rugby we have produced world-class players. The evolution of the game has made it necessary for Fiji rugby to evolve accordingly, bringing with it new challenges.

Crucially, the people of Fiji have been there all the way. Indeed, there is no other phenomenon in Fiji that unites the nation more than rugby. The diversity of political, religious and economic positions of the Fijians mean little when it comes to rugby. There is simply nothing else that evokes nationalistic pride more than when a Fijian rugby team takes the field.

It is hard to believe but Fiji rugby owes much to the Welsh Rugby Union, not only for the hospitality offered to the Fiji team in 1964, but the opportunity which was created by Wales which truly put Fiji on the world rugby map.

There can be little doubt that the honor which fell to Fiji of being the only union to make a tour of England in 1970 in the centenary year of the Rugby Football Union, was a direct result of the impact of the 1964 tour on the British rugby public.

The 1964 tour to Wales and France and Canada was the door opener for Fiji Rugby to the European rugby supporters and administrators.

It was truly an extraordinary tour which went away beyond whatever borders a sport may have linked the two peoples in a remarkable way. The film of the Cardiff match found its way to many other corners of the world and complimentary letters were received in Fiji from places as far apart as South Africa and California. As one paper put it *“it was a victory for the game of rugby”.*

Tonight, I ask you to join me in congratulating the Fiji Rugby Union for what indeed is a milestone achievement and challenge the future rugby players with this quote from the late Nelson Mandela a famous leader who used rugby to unite his nation at the 1995 Rugby World Cup, and I quote *“I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear”* unquote.

Vinaka Vakalevu and Thank you.

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