

**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, Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
* Chairman, Board of Directors, CEO and Staff of Investment Fiji;
* Permanent Secretaries and Members of the Private Sector;
* Event Sponsors and co-sponsors;
* Distinguished Guests;
* Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula Vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

It’s always a great pleasure for me to attend this event and this year is no exception – the 2013 Vodafone & Westpac Prime Minister’s Exporter of the Year Awards.

These awards are one of the most significant events on the national calendar. Because in this room tonight are the people on whom the health of our national economy depends and with it, the fortunes of every Fijian.

On behalf of the nation, I want to thank every exporter of Fijian goods and services for the contribution you are making to improve the lives of everyone.

You contribute to keep our balance of payments healthy, which assists us to service our external debt, keeps our currency stable and ensures we have adequate foreign reserves – which is one of the highest it’s ever been. Because of your exports, you also create the jobs on which ordinary Fijians depend, generate wealth and grow our economy.

The bigger the pie, of course, the bigger the slice everyone can receive. So in a very real sense, your success is our success. And tonight, we are especially proud to honor the best performing exporters among you – the winners of these awards.

Our theme this year is “Expanding beyond the Horizons of Fiji”. It means seeing further than we can already see, beyond the traditional. It means taking the “Fijian Made” brand further afield into parts of the world we haven’t yet reached. It means being smarter, more innovative, more imaginative. We have wonderful goods and services and new ones we can develop. How do we identify them? What are they? How do we develop new markets? These are the questions we need to constantly ask ourselves, both and together as Government and the private sector. We need to strengthen our partnership with the view that any growth must benefit every Fijian.

We are opening up new markets and unleashing some exciting possibilities. On Thursday, Fiji Airways announced a new interline cargo agreement with Emirates that produces a quick and seamless link between Fiji and the wealthy markets of the Gulf States and beyond. A fresh food producer in Fiji can now send his produce on Fiji Airways to Auckland or Sydney and immediately connect with Emirates flights to Dubai and the rest of the Emirates network. Along with the increase in frequency of Fiji Airways flights to Los Angeles and Hong Kong, and the real possibility of now flying direct to Singapore, for which we have allocated funds in the 2014 Budget, these developments provide better opportunities for the marketing of Fijian goods and services. You must capitalize on these Government-led initiatives.

Even within our existing horizons, my Government believes we can do better and we must invest in. In the 2014 Budget that I announced last week, we have allocated resources to appoint a full time Trade Commissioner in Papua New Guinea. We will now refocus the role of the Counselor Office in Sydney to that of a Trade Commissioner. We have done this because we believe that there numerous opportunities in the largest Pacific Island country - which has a population base nearly double the size of New Zealand and growth led by mineral and oil and gas exploitation - and in a developed economy like Australia which has numerous untapped potential areas. The same thinking is behind our Budget decision to send a Fijian trade mission to New Caledonia, the island state with the highest income per capita in the Pacific.

So we are broadening our existing horizons and seeking new ones – all in partnership. We made great strides in expanding our markets within the Melanesian Spearhead Group in particular with the removal of the negative list by Papua New Guinea. This I know has resulted directly in the investment by Fijian businesses targeting exports. There will be some new announcements made very soon regarding the expansionary policies of business houses to capitalize on the access facilitated by my Government.

Many of you accompanied me on my state visit to Papua New Guinea which doubled up as a trade mission. It was extremely gratifying for me to see how successful a trip that was in opening up new opportunities for Fijian exporters.

Our aim, of course, is a common market within the MSG for the free flow of goods, services and human resources. As I keep telling my fellow Melanesian leaders, the idea of a Common Market is both good policy and good sense. We will be far more effective in the global marketplace as a trading bloc than as individual countries, especially when it comes to our negotiating power. Indeed such strength in solidarity is most critical as we negotiate the EPA.

Tonight, I also want to talk about the importance of the partnership between Government and the private sector in the context of the 2014 Budget. As you all know, the budget has been overwhelmingly well received, even by some politicians. I’m very proud of its centerpiece – the introduction of free education in our primary and secondary schools and the tertiary education loans scheme for those seeking studies in our universities. Never again will a Fijian family worry about how they are going to pay to educate their children. But the half-billion dollar investment in the education sector is also the boldest and best investment made by any Government in Fiji. Because it is an investment in all our futures.

I am certain that everyone in the business community shares our vision of a clever and well trained and skill based country. Now that we are taking education to a new level, my Government is certain that the opportunities for new investment – new growth in our economy - will be even greater. We do it not just for ourselves as Fijians but are convinced that a smarter Fiji will be better placed to take a leadership role in our region and improve the lives of every Pacific Islander.

Some people, mainly politicians and one or two of the same economic academics have asked, perhaps rhetorically – how can Fiji afford to make this investment? Where’s the money coming from? As I stated on 8 November we can afford to make these investments because of our reforms. The answer lies in the strength of our commitment to prudent financial management, identifying and paying off expensive debts before due dates at cheaper interest rates, reconfiguring past practices of managing operational costs, enforcing rules pertaining to revenue collection, smartening up our state owned and run enterprises, and working more closely with all stake holders.

Smartening up our state owned enterprises has also provided the opportunity for the Government to divest some of its interests. Unlike previous governments we are not using fly by night consultants and advisors to sell to dubious and/or $2 companies. We are and we will target worthy partners who not only will bring in the equity but will make those enterprises more efficient. We will also use such divestments to truly grow our capital markets and provide investment opportunities not just for the big and specialist investors but for the ordinary mums and dads.

It’s already happening on the nation’s wharfs, where the Sri Lankan company, Aitken Spence, has bought a stake in our ports and has taken over operations in Suva and Lautoka. This Fortune 200 Blue Chip publicly listed company has a solid record of revolutionizing port operations in Asia and Africa and is set to drastically improve shipping turn-around times here in Fiji. The days of you having to pay higher shipping charges because of delays on our wharves will end soon. It will help our exporters and also our importers and with improved efficiency shipping companies will use Fiji as a transshipment hub. This of course will create new opportunities including new jobs.

The same public-private partnership model will soon see a major international player join us through Airports Fiji Limited. It is expected that the announcement of the new partner will be made within 3 months time. We are already positioned to be a shipping hub for the region; we plan to become a true aviation hub also. And we have plans to divest some of interests in Fiji Electricity Authority with the view to amongst other things reduce Government’s current debt exposure. A reduction in debt exposure will, of course give Government increased fiscal flexibility.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is all part of our vision – our grand plan – to take the country forward. It includes the new Fijian Constitution, which enshrines the principle of equality and fairness in our national life and guarantees ordinary Fijians a range of civil, political and for the first time comprehensive socio-economic rights. It lays to rest categorically the anxieties of land ownership and access. And it includes our determination to hold an election next year that is not only free and fair but conducted to international best practice.

We are building a new and better Fiji and all have a stake in that vision. I appeal to the business community to play your part. The days of the shady, tax-dodging Fijian businesses are over. When corporate and personal taxes are so low, why avoid them? Why still try and bribe the civil servant or the police officer? Why still pay below the minimum and fair wage and not pay your FNPF contribution? I urge you all to rethink your position, your attitude in the new Fiji. Don’t cling to the past because it will not pay dividends.

Now is the time to invest, to ride the wave of new opportunities. Confidence is high. New levels of prosperity are imminent as we hold Fiji’s first genuine parliamentary elections next year. Together, and with my Government’s vision and focus we all can ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for every Fijian, their children and future generations. Together, we can make Fiji great.

Thank you again to our exporters for your efforts on behalf of all of us. A special thank you and congratulations to the winners tonight. Again, it’s a great pleasure to be with you and please enjoy the rest of the evening.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you

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