

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

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Public Service, People’s Charter and Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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STATEMENT AT THE OPENING OF THE 49TH ASIA PACIFIC COCONUT COMMUNITY MINISTERIAL MEETING

Novotel  **Mon. 28th Jan. 2013**

**NADI 0830 Hours**

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**Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**The Executive Director of Asia Pacific Coconut Community (APCC);**

**Distinguished Delegates from APCC Member Countries;**

**Invited Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen;**

Bula Vinaka, and good morning.

On behalf of the Fijian Government and the Fijian people, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the 49th Asia Pacific Coconut Community Ministerial Meeting.

18 member nations are represented here today - a testimony to how important the Coconut Industry is to our economies.

It is a common resource that our rural and maritime populations rely on, for both sustenance and as an income earner.

In fact, the value of coconut palm in a traditional society is beyond measure. A great number of households throughout the APCC member countries depend on the industry.

The Fijian Coconut Industry was once a major source of exports. It employed thousands of rural and maritime farmers and workers and, was a source of foreign exchange.

In the 1950s, copra production was more than 40,000 metric tonnes per annum. Now, it is around 20,000 metric tonnes per annum. This decline has been attributed to the increase in low yielding trees, decreasing copra prices, high production and freight costs, and the inability to adapt to and adopt changes in technology and the global market.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The potential to improve the lives of our peoples through the development of the Coconut Industry is obvious. That is why the Fijian Government believes that the coconut industry needs to be supported with the appropriate and modern resources.

To this end, we are planning to open a new whole-nut processing facility on the island of Taveuni to act as a hands-on-training centre for farmers to learn about the various products and bi- products that can be processed from coconuts.

We have purchased machines for this facility - through the Coconut Development Program - to demonstrate to farmers how, with an upfront investment, they can add value to these products. By showing them how they can increase their returns, it is our hope that this will again make coconut a more lucrative source of livelihood.

Additionally, the Fijian Government is planning to plant 1 million coconut trees over a period of 3 years to increase yields in the future. And I am very happy to announce that we will launch this ambitious program during this Conference.

But we also recognise that we need support from the international community to help us revitalise our coconut industry. So we look to our fellow APCC member countries, to learn from your experience and to benefit from your assistance.

Many of you have already implemented similar initiatives and are reaping the economic benefits. Fiji is eager to follow your lead.

I would like to thank Mr. Romulo Arancon - the Executive Director of the APCC - and the APCC Secretariat for all their support in hosting this event.

I would also like to thank the representatives of regional and international organizations, NGOs and the business community for their presence here today. Your experience and expertise will greatly enrich the deliberations and we look forward to your support in promoting the Coconut Industry.

To all of our visitors, please take the opportunity to get out and explore our country and enjoy our world renown Fijian hospitality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now have much pleasure in declaring the 49th Asian Pacific Coconut Community Ministerial Meeting, open.

Vinaka --Thank you.

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**over 90% of world coconut production and exports of coconut prod**