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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, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

**SPEECH AT THE LAUNCHING OF VODAFONE’S 4G LTE NETWORK**

**ANZ Stadium Wed. 4th Dec. 2013**

**LAUCALA BAY 1945 Hours**

**The Attorney General and Minister for Communications;**

**The Managing Director of Vodafone Fiji;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

Tonight we launch the latest phase of the telecommunications revolution that is sweeping Fiji and has transformed all our lives – fourth generation mobile or 4G.

Once again, we are at the cutting edge of technology and I’m very pleased that Vodafone has been able to deliver that technology so quickly and to be here as Prime Minister to share the moment.

I’m especially gratified that ordinary Fijians have already benefited from this initiative even before it was delivered. In mid-year, Vodafone and the other service providers took part in an auction for the radio waves of the 4G spectrum, which are owned by every Fijian. In a completely transparent auction process that was the first of its kind to be conducted in Fiji, the Government raised more than $5-million.

It’s barely two months since the 4G spectrum allocation was made. So for Vodafone to deliver a fully functioning 4G network in such a short space of time is a genuinely impressive achievement. The speed of the rollout reflects the connection speed of the technology itself, which now places Fiji in the front rank of the world’s telecommunications providers.

What is 4G? For some young people, you will already know and be excited about all the possibilities for faster downloads and high speed Internet. You may have already picked out the smart phone that you intend to buy to take advantage of this technology.

We have put zero duty on these phones to make it easier for you to afford them.

And as I announced in the 2014 Budget, a task force has been set up to ensure that the benefits of the zeroing of duty is passed on to every Fijian. In other words, smart phones must become cheaper. All importers and retailers; please take note of this.

Put simply, here’s what 4G will essentially mean. From now on, the public can have access to state-of-the-art ultra-broadband Internet, through their laptops with USB wireless modems, smartphones and other mobile devices.

It means faster data speeds so that a Skype call, for instance, will no longer suffer from lags or delays in any conversation. Video streaming and conferencing means that a group of business people in Suva can talk to their clients in Rakiraki in real time as if they were in the same room.

The faster speeds also mean a revolution in the way we deliver some Government services. It will now be possible, if you have the latest technology, to have a doctor in Suva diagnose a patient in Savusavu over the Internet as if they were in the same room.

In education, we can have smart classrooms, remote classrooms, where a teacher can be in Suva giving instruction to students scattered around the country. The telecommunications revolution goes hand in hand with the new education revolution to form our vision for a clever country – a smarter Fiji.

In addition, 4G has a bigger footprint or wider coverage than the existing 3G network so you don’t need as many towers to service a large area with telecommunications services. This means that service providers will now be able to service remote rural and maritime areas in Fiji much more effectively and at a lower cost.

And for an average computer user who buys the technology, 4G opens up a range of other possibilities, such as storing your information externally on cloud services. Cloud also allows you to access software remotely and more cheaply on a pay-on-demand basis without having to purchase an application.

Yes, it all might sound complicated – I think so too - but only because it’s new. However as we’ve seen recently, if technology is accessible and affordable, the uptake of that new technology is rapid. Fijians have already shown a willingness, even a passion, to adapt to new technology when it becomes available.

Look at the way we’ve embraced mobile phones, which our parents would never have imagined but which have transformed all our lives in the 95 per cent of Fiji where they can currently be used. 4G is going to help allow us to take that closer to 100 per cent – the whole of Fiji.

We’re also extending existing services through our Universal Service Access Subsidies, which the Government will pay service providers like Vodafone to move into remote areas that aren’t commercially viable.

Remarkably, using the traditional measurement, we already have mobile phone penetration of 102 per cent, almost two thirds more than that of the biggest Pacific nation, Papua New Guinea.

We’re empowering ordinary Fijians, just as we’re empowering you with our free education program, our new roads, water and electricity, giving you and your families a better chance to get on in life. It’s what my Government is here for – to serve the ordinary families of Fiji, to expand their horizons, connect them with each other and the world and give them the opportunity to acquire knowledge with the best technology available.

26 per cent of Fijians so far have access to the Internet and that figure is growing with every Telecentre that the Government opens. 15 Telecentres are operating so far, with five more coming on stream in the coming months in Kadavu, Nadi, Nausori and two in the Suva area in Lami and Kalabu. The number of Fijians using these centres has already exceeded 40-thousand and these new centres will push that figure even higher.

This alone is a huge boost to the ability of ordinary Fijians to access information and increase their knowledge and skills. I happen to believe that education is a life-long process, not just the accumulation of knowledge in our schools, universities and technical colleges.

The point I want to make is that when we talk about a clever country, it’s an inclusive vision, not just free education for our children in primary and secondary schools and tertiary loans in our universities and technical colleges. It means everyone, no matter what their age, getting smarter as they access the facilities and initiatives that the Government provides to empower them and improve their lives.

It’s not some empty gesture for short-term political gain but an attempt, over time, to fundamentally reposition Fiji for a better future. And not only for ourselves but for our neighbours, many of whom look to us for leadership and assistance.

Our relative strength in the telecommunications sector means that we see ourselves as an increasingly important regional hub, just as we do for shipping and aviation. Because the future is all about connectivity, we want Fiji to be the conduit. Our vision is to be at the centre of a web of connectivity linking our island neighbours with the rest of the world. A true hub, not just the geographical hub that we’ve always been.

Our domestic reforms continue, with our plan next year for a national switch, which all financial institutions will be required to join and will break down existing barriers to enable bank customers to access their funds from any ATM. Even companies like Vodafone will be able to join the national switch. The National switch is also critical for E-ticketing.

We’re also finalising laws that will facilitate infrastructure sharing between the existing Telcos and any new entrant to the market. It will dramatically reduce the cost of building new infrastructure, which will mean savings to be passed on to consumers and an increased focus on services.

Ladies and Gentlemen, none of these initiatives is being done in isolation. Telecommunications is not a luxury but an essential service like any other. If those Fijians who are already marginalised miss out on our ICT reforms, they’ll be even more marginalised than ever and the existing disparities in our society will grow. We need to close the gap, not widen it. So the expansion of mobile and Internet services needs to go hand in hand with the provision of other basic services such as education, health, water, electricity and roads.

Tonight is another great leap forward not only for Vodafone but our entire ICT sector, which is the envy of our neighbours and indeed much of the rest of the world.

In the various global ICT forums that the Minister and I have attended, other delegates are genuinely impressed that a Pacific Small Island Developing State could have achieved such big outcomes in such a short time to best international practice. We were recently recognised by the G77 for the enormous strides we have made in ICT development.

So thank you, the Vodafone team, for being an important part of that revolution. Congratulations on this milestone and we look forward to many more years of partnership as we work to improve the lives of every Fijian.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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