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**SPEECH AT THE COMMISSIONING OF NEW GOVT. SHIP “VUNILAGI”**

Walu Bay Wed. 7th May, 2014

SUVA 1000 Hours

**Cabinet Ministers;**

**Permanent Secretaries;
Shipping Stakeholders;
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very Good Morning to you All.

I’m delighted to be here for the second time this year to commission yet another ship as part of my Government’s ongoing program to improve the level of service to ordinary Fijians in our remote island communities.

Before the first of these vessels – the Sigavou - was commissioned in March, the Government Shipping Service hadn’t acquired a new vessel for 29 years.

I described it at the time as a national embarrassment for a maritime nation such as ours and I think few people in Fiji would have argued with that. Well, now we have another new ship in less than three months. And I’m extremely proud that my Government is finally making the investment needed to improve our ability to serve our maritime communities and finally give them what they deserve.

For too long, successive governments neglected ordinary Fijians living in these isolated places. In many ways, they are the backbone of our nation yet they constantly do without the benefits that many of us on Viti Levu take for granted. These men and women and their families should have been better served over the years. They deserved more resources to empower them and give them the things they needed to improve their lives and those of their families.

All along, we have been determined as a Government to provide them with those resources, whether it is access to telecommunications, free education, better health or in this instance, better transport links. And we have. The years of neglect are over.

I have a fundamental belief that the role of Government is to provide the same level of service to every single Fijian wherever they live. We are bridging the gap between those who live in Lau or Lautoka, Rotuma or Rakiraki. It is a cornerstone of my Government’s philosophy that all Fijians are equal. And we will not rest until a child growing up in the remotest part of the country is no longer disadvantaged by that distance or isolation.

We also are determined that the Government Shipping Service – which was never provided with the investment it needed to do its job properly – be finally given the tools to meet that level of service and pursue a culture of excellence. We don’t need a fancy fleet of luxury vessels in Fiji. But we do need a fleet of modern, reliable, fuel-efficient craft capable of servicing these remote areas. And we need a workforce that takes pride in its work and is fully dedicated to the principle of meeting the needs of their fellow Fijians. We intend – working together – to put the “service” back into the Government Shipping Service.

The arrival of the Sigavou in February and now the Vunilagi is just the start of this process, which will continue with the planned arrival of a third new vessel this time next year. And there are also plans for a fourth as we continue to upgrade the current fleet of seven vessels and build on the remarkable resurgence we are now seeing in the fortunes of the GSS. It is truly the dawn of a new era of inter-island shipping in Fiji and cause for great celebration, especially in those isolated places where these new vessels will soon become a familiar sight.

Like the Sigavou, this landing craft, the Vunilagi – which can carry 30 passengers plus cargo - was purchased in Malaysia at a cost of $2.4-million. To the delivery crew of eleven, under the command of Captain Pauliasi Vakaloloma, congratulations on making the 5000 nautical mile journey from Sibu to Suva in 23 days. I know as a sailor myself the challenges you will have faced and we thank you all for bringing our valuable new national asset home safely.

Like its sister vessel, this 45.5 metre landing craft is ideal for Fiji’s needs - with its dedicated freezers and ability to transport heavy goods and bring the produce of maritime communities quickly and efficiently to markets on the mainland. Fish, seaweed, copra, coconut oil, pine wood timber – all the things that maritime communities rely on to earn an income.

We’re also going to be able to kick start some of the projects that have been stalled because we didn’t have the proper capacity to deliver – building houses and providing these communities with water supplies and generators for electricity.

And I’m pleased to say that the biggest and best is yet to come. Because our third ship, which is due to arrive in Fiji next year will be even more capable - a roll-on, roll-off vessel with a capacity to carry 100 passengers plus cargo.

The Government Shipping Service as we know it will be transformed. And so will the economic prospects of the islands these vessels serve. We will finally have workhorses capable of carrying the goods and the people needed to open up these places for further development.

I don’t think anyone will argue that maritime transportation has been one of the most neglected sectors of our nation for the past 20 to 30 years. As a result, remote parts of Fiji like the islands of the Lau Group, Lomaiviti, Rotuma and parts of North-eastern Vanua Levu have lagged behind the rest of the country when it comes to infrastructure development.

It is a mammoth task but my Government has begun to reverse that neglect. As I keep saying, we’re determined to provide every Fijian with the same level of service no matter where they live, whether its access to water, electricity, education, health, mobile phones or the internet. So I make no apology for the Government Shipping Franchise Scheme, in which we also subsidise the private sector to keep serving uneconomical routes.

This scheme is currently being reviewed, with a final report to be presented to Cabinet in June. But whether you live in Lau or Rotuma, Lomaiviti or Vanua Levu, I guarantee you this: you will not be a second class citizen under this Government. Everything we do is designed to keep cargo freight rates and passenger fares affordable. And with these new vessels, we are doing more than ever before to keep you connected to your fellow Fijians.

I want to stress today that it is vital for every Fijian that the reforms we have made continue. As I also keep saying, we cannot rest on our laurels as we strive to modernise Fiji and its economy. We cannot take our eye off the ball for even a minute without risking the progress we have made over the past seven years.

So I make this appeal to everyone as we approach the general election on September 17th. Please think very carefully about who is best placed to continue to take our nation forward.

Do not be swayed by big talk and cheap promises. Look carefully at the record and examine the facts before you make your choice. Because it is no exaggeration to say that your future and the future of your children is at stake. Our future as a nation depends on the choice you make. So for Fiji’s sake, choose wisely.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as I keep saying, our future as a nation has never looked brighter as we move towards the first truly democratic election in our history. For the first time under our Constitution, we are all Fijians, we all belong.

So let us unite and work together to make our nation great. As we commission the *“Vunilagi”* and prepare for her maiden voyage to Rotuma on Thursday night– we wish her light winds and safe seas - just as we did for her predecessor - and just as we do for our beloved Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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