

**Rear Admiral Hon. J.V. Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc**

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry**

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**SPEECH AT THE DIWALI CELEBATIONS**

Girmit Cultural Centre Sat. 18th Oct., 2014

LAUTOKA 1900 Hours

**The Organisers of the Diwali Event,**

**My Fellow Fijians.**

Aap sab ko mera ram ram -- mu sa cola vina – a very good evening to you all.

I’m happy to be with you today as we join all those around the world who are preparing for Diwali, one of the most important festivals in the Hindu calendar. In Fiji, Diwali has assumed an important place in our national life, not just for Hindus, but for all Fijians as we look forward each year to the Festival of Lights.

Every child in Fiji grows up with a sense of excitement about Diwali. All over the country Fijians will be celebrating with their families and friends. In the coming week, people will be lighting candles, setting off fireworks and meeting with loved ones and neighbours during one of the most exciting and festive times of the year in Fiji.

Diwali marks the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, happiness over sorrow, knowledge over ignorance, health over sickness. It symbolises the light we must all shine on our shortcomings as individuals and as a nation and overcome them.

It’s a time for each of us to reflect on that which is most important in our lives, which we can all too often lose sight of in the course of our day-to-day responsibilities. It’s also a time to find fellowship with our neighbours – to reach out to fellow Fijians with acts of kindness and hospitality. And, like all of our religious festivals in Fiji, it’s a time to give thanks for the spiritual aspect of our lives and the strength we derive from our beliefs.

To me, Diwali is about Fiji coming together as one nation to rejoice and give thanks for the glory of God and the bonds of family and friendship.

It’s always been a matter of great personal pride how openly we embrace each other’s different religions and how ready we are to include those of different faiths in our observances.

Such acceptance and understanding is one of the brightest lights in our national life, and it’s up to each of us to protect the spirit of peace and harmony that we gather today to celebrate. To extend tolerance and goodwill towards our fellow Fijians.

In fact, Fiji is one of only a handful of countries in the world that celebrates public holidays for the great commemorations of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. And we do so proudly. This underlines the unique nature of Fiji in our own region – a multi-faith nation with a Constitution that guarantees religious freedom and establishes a secular state, in which all religions are equal. We also do it as a personal gesture of respect for our fellow citizens of other faiths, knowing that whatever beliefs we hold, we are one people, one nation, and have a common destiny.

Many Fijians have come to realise that religion can actually be a unifying force, a bridge between us all, no matter what we believe. That’s because a sense of spirituality – a belief in something greater than ourselves – is common to the overwhelming majority of Fijians, no matter what their religious background.

We can find common ground with each other precisely by understanding and respecting that principle, because the wonderful thing is that the teachings of our many religions are inter-connected.  They embody many of the same values – of consideration for others, especially the less fortunate; of honesty and integrity in the way we live our lives; and of duty and service to each other, our nation and the higher being we worship.

Of course, this spirit of tolerance and harmony is not limited to our religious lives; it extends to our national life as well. Because we have established once and for all that every citizen deserves the same rights and opportunities as anyone else. Everyone is a Fijian. We all belong, no matter where we come from and whatever our beliefs. It’s a wonderful time to be Fijian as we set our sights on a united future, with all the possibility that holds for us all and for future generations.

In this Festival of Lights, may we all find peace and joy and a renewed commitment to caring for each other. May we continue to be compassionate and generous to all people. And may we all embrace knowledge and light over ignorance and darkness.

I wish all Fijians a joyful Diwali and our Hindu brothers and sisters a Happy New Year.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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