**

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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 OPENING OF HEADS OF MISSIONS CONSULTATIONS**

**Borron House Wed. 24th July, 2013**

**SUVA 1130 Hours**

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**Cabinet Ministers;**

**Heads of Missions;**

**Permanent Secretaries;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

This year’s annual examination of Fiji’s diplomatic strategies may be the most important since we gained independence. We are in the midst of an unprecedented expansion of our international relations.

It is absolutely essential to ensure that we are meeting our international commitments, delivering tangible results to the Fijian people, and best representing Fiji’s interests amongst the community of nations.

After gaining Independence in 1970, Fiji became the 127th member of the United Nations. Our diplomatic presence overseas was the *‘bare minimum’.*

Just five years ago, Fiji still only had eleven Missions abroad. Today, there are 17. This number will continue to grow as we strengthen and develop new relationships with non-traditional partners and friends.

The significant expansion of Fijian diplomacy in the past five years, stands testament to our growing influence and diverse interests in a dynamic and evolving global landscape.

Fiji is becoming a cohesive, unified force that is truly independent. We are taking charge of our own destiny and carving out our own niche in the world. We don’t see ourselves as beholden to anyone.

We will act in our own interests, not the interests of those who attempt to impose their will on us. The days of us being dictated to by outsiders are over.

In 2013, I can proudly say that Fiji has demonstrated its leadership credentials – in our region and to the world. We have shown that the strength of our leadership is in our ability to form solidarity and unity amongst fellow nations. As a result, our international standing has never been higher.

Fiji has assumed the chairmanship of the largest negotiating bloc at the United Nations, the G77 plus China, and Fiji has actively advanced the causes of the developing world.

Fiji has been elected the chair of the International Sugar Council, the peak body of the International Sugar Organisation, which consists of 86 countries representing 97 per cent of the world’s sugar production.

And Fiji has emerged as one of the world’s most dynamic countries in delivering ICT services and infrastructure to our people, presenting our reforms in a number of international conferences, including a High Level Forum in Hong Kong last week.

Within the region, we are restructuring the landscape of the Pacific, together with our neighbours, to better suit the needs, demands and aspirations of our peoples.

We recently handed over the chairmanship of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, having—during our leadership— achieved significant strides toward achieving a bold vision: a common economic union and single market. This includes convening the first-ever meeting of MSG Trade Ministers in May this year.

Fiji has also assumed a leadership role within the Pacific ACP – after our full reinstatement last year – and we are working with our fellow Pacific nations to negotiate a favourable and appropriate Economic Partnership Agreement with the European Union. Last December, Fiji chaired the EU-ACP Trade Negotiations in Geneva, and in May we hosted a meeting of PACP Trade Ministers.

But perhaps the most exciting honour for Fiji will come at the beginning of August when we host the very first meeting of the Pacific Islands Development Forum. Twenty-three Pacific countries will participate, as well as 10 foreign countries with observer status.

The Forum marks a significant new beginning in the Pacific. It is the first of its kind. It will bring together not only Leaders of Government, but also representatives from civil society and the business sector. It will allow participants to discuss and debate Pacific issues, values and interests without the influence and interference by our larger, traditional partners.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These exciting developments in Fiji’s international position are matched by developments underway at home: economic, social, environmental and political.

This is a story we need to be telling the world. We are finalising a new Constitution that specifically includes – for the first time – socio-economic rights for all Fijians.

This includes the right to economic participation, the right to work and the right to a just minimum wage, as well as to such things as transportation and adequate food and water.

Our new Constitution will introduce long overdue democratic principles– for the first time – an electoral system that removes the legal enforcement of ethnic voting, enshrines one person, one vote, one value and helps voters focus on the merits of the policies the respective political parties are offering.

It will introduce an entirely new regime of accountability and transparency.

We’ve also embarked on a massive drive of voter registration, using biometric technology that will help us eliminate vote fraud and identity theft. So far, 530,000 Fijians – representing more than 80% of eligible voters – have registered to vote. And we’re not done; we plan to keep registering voters until the election writs are issued. This will also mean that we will be registering Fijians living offshore and we will require assistance from your Missions.

So now, I would like to pose a question to every one of you: how are your Missions contributing to the greater movement of reform, development and progress in Fiji now?

What are the tangible results you are delivering to the Fijian people?

Is there more you could be doing?

Are there new markets to be developed? Opportunities for new imports, or new exports?

Are you doing enough to seek out investment that will grow our economy?

What are ways to better advance our nation’s interests abroad?

Answering questions like these is what this week’s consultations are all about. More importantly, answering these questions is our responsibility to the Fijian people.

You are on the front line in your posts overseas. In addition to your traditional diplomatic roles, it is up to each of you to develop new markets for Fijian products, to attract new investment to our shores, and to sell *“Brand Fiji”* to the world. You must constantly be focussed on creating opportunities for Fiji and Fijians.

We now have Fiji Airways, Film Fiji, Tourism Fiji and Investment Fiji. We are carving out our own space in highly competitive international markets.

We are marketing high-quality, niche products that capitalise on our unique and pristine environment and people.

It is critical that you establish direct links with the respective agencies. Following the co-ordination of all the key agencies and personalities from those agencies, the Ministry of Industry and Trade sent out late last year to you all, a list of all the approval agencies and contacts who you can liaise with directly.

Last night you met with some of the Fijian businesses interests. You must be able to directly and efficiently co-ordinate with Fijian businesses and the relevant approval agencies. Let’s cut down on the red tape and unclog the pipeline and remove the bureaucracy. We must be focussed on creating new opportunities for Fiji and all Fijians. Whether it is furthering our national interests at international forums or through international law and committees; accessing education and training opportunities for our people; attracting quality foreign investment, promoting trade or creating trading and investment opportunities for Fijian products and companies - We cannot relent on these objectives.

My Government will ensure that you are empowered, ably supported, and provided with the right tools and tradecraft to lead the implementation of Fiji’s policies.

I urge you to over the next few days, use this forum to consolidate your strengths, identify the gaps in your respective Missions and here in the capital. Pose as many questions and make as many concrete suggestions to enable us all to achieve our national objectives and your respective key performance indicators.

Ambassadors and High Commissioners, with those words, I now officially declare the 2013 Heads of Missions Consultations open.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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