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**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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**PRIME MINISTER’S SPEAKING NOTES FOR THE MEETING WITH AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN MINISTER JULIE BISHOP**

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1. Bula Vinaka, Minister, Welcome to Fiji. It’s great to have you here. I hope you had a good journey. What can I do for you?

(let her talk).

1. I was looking forward to the Abbott Government assuming office because we understood there was going to be a change in the attitude to Fiji. You had said publicly when in Opposition that you disagreed with the former Labour Government and wanted full engagement with Fiji. I’m interested to hear precisely what you mean by that.

(let her talk)

1. Minister, you’ve now been in power since last September – nearly six months – and unfortunately, I can’t really see how much your policy has changed. You’ve kept the sanctions that the previous Government imposed and you’ve kept the travel bans. Now I want to briefly explain our attitude to these bans. We’re very upset by them, not because I particularly want to go to Australia but because they’ve degraded the quality of governance that we can give our people.

I keep hearing Australian officials say, *“Oh we’re targeting the regime, not ordinary people”.* From where, we sit, that simply isn’t the case. Ordinary people have been badly affected. And that’s because we simply haven’t been able to get the best people to work in Government or become Board Members of public enterprises. Or even for that matter represent us in our sporting events. The people we approach because they are the best people for the job say *“no, I need to travel to Australia for whatever reason”.* Or that it will affect the ability of all their relatives to travel. So the whole sanctions regime has had a very adverse impact on the quality of governance in Fiji. Of course that has had and continues to have a negative impact on ordinary people.

I also don’t understand how in this modern globalised world, you can possible justify this kind of punitive behaviour. We need to have free movement of people around the world, free trade, free movement of people within our own region. We also have some grievances in the area of trade. We believe that the Double Taxation Agreement that we reached with Australia doesn’t provide the benefits that it should. In fact, it penalises Australian investors in Fiji. There are other trade-related issues that the Attorney-General and Minister for Industry and Trade will raise with you in your meeting with him later.

1. The base line is this. As far as we’re concerned, nothing has really changed. Yes, you’re now dealing with visa applications on a case-by-case basis. But the fact remains that the travel bans are still in place and many of our citizens are still being adversely affected. We’re especially perplexed by the fact that our Judges and the rest of the Judiciary have been affected. You and the New Zealanders think our Judiciary is *“compromised”.* But we find that grossly offensive. Our Judiciary is independent. It operates completely separately from the Executive. So as far as we’re concerned, for our Judges to be targeted in this way is unacceptable.
2. I have to be frank with you. Until these sanctions and travel bans are lifted, we are not prepared to formalize the relationship and re-establish full diplomatic ties. We will not be accepting an Australian High Commissioner in Suva. If and when Australia changes its policy, we can talk again. But for now, that is our position.
3. That said, I think it’s great that you’ve come to Fiji and can see for yourself what is going on here. There is no question whatsoever that we will hold a general election before the end of September 2014. It’s what I promised and what I am determined to deliver. It will be the first genuinely democratic election in Fijian history, equal votes of equal value instead of the racially weighted formula of the past.

The election will be free and fair and held to the highest international standards. We have a new Constitution that declares a common and equal citizenry, declares everyone a Fijian and gives people unprecedented political, social and economic rights. This Constitution meets the test of all the great democracies. We have set a high standard and we are meeting it.

1. I particularly want you to look around while you’re here and see the work we are doing to improve our infrastructure, the work we are doing to improve the delivery of basic services to our people. We have introduced free education in our schools and a tertiary loans scheme for higher studies. These are unprecedented moves in the history of our country.

And we’ve done all of this with zero tolerance for the kind of corruption that has crippled the quality of governance in other developing countries. We strongly feel that while these accomplishments are acknowledged by most of the international community, Australia and New Zealand have a blind spot. The fact is we are producing a democracy that is a better democracy than we had before. We have a genuine election in which every person’s vote has the same value. We’ve met the test.

1. I intend to subject myself to the will of the people. I am standing down as Military Commander at the end of the month and will announce a new political movement which I will lead to the election. So from the end of the month, I will be a civilian. I am doing what I said I would do, in in my view, that ought to be acknowledged.
2. We’re obviously keen for the relationship to get back on track. I always say *“We love Australians. They’re some of our greatest friends in the world. It’s their Government we’ve had a problem with”.* Unfortunately, until the sanctions are lifted, that remains the case. From our point of view, the ball is in your court.

10.As you know, we’ve developed other international relationships in recent years. I have to say we’ve found the rest of the global community a lot more understanding about what we’re trying to do – to create a fairer and more just society. As you know, we’ve expanded our links with the MSG since we were suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum and we’ve set up the Pacific Islands Development Forum. We see the PIDF as more representative of Pacific Islands grassroots opinion because it includes civil society groups and business.

10.Frankly, we can survive without the Pacific Islands Forum. We’ve done so successfully since 2009. And in fact, we think our regional interests have been better served since we left the Forum. So we’re not eager to re-join the PIF and would need a very good reason to do so.

11. In conclusion, Minister, preparations for elections are well advanced. We have a seven-member independent Electoral Commission in place, the rules covering the conduct of the election will soon be announced, as will an Elections Supervisor. It is happening. It will happen and we welcome whatever support we can agree on to make it happen. We also look forward to re-engaging fully with Australia when the time comes but as I’ve said, that is dependent on your Government lifting its sanctions and travel bans.

I’m very pleased to have the opportunity to meet you. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you. I certainly hope you enjoy your time in Fiji. You are personally very welcome. Thank you.

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