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Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development & Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources

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**REMARKS AT THE OPENING OF SUGAR RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF FIJI COMPLEX**

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**SRIF HO Thurs. 17th October, 2013**

**Drasa, LAUTOKA 12.00 Noon**

**Honourable Ministers and Ambassadors from the ACP**

 **Countries;**

**The Head of the EU Delegation to the Pacific;**

**Distinguished Delegates;**

**The CEO and staff of the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji;**

**Sugarcane Industry Stakeholders;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

After three days of intense dialogue at our ministerial talks in Sigatoka, I’m sure you’ll all agree with me that it’s great to be out in the field and especially in the beautiful surroundings of Drasa, Lautoka.

Drasa has been a training and research facility for the sugar industry stretching back to colonial times.

But you’ll also be interested to know that the first commercial airline flight in Fiji was between Drasa and Suva 62 years ago, in 1951.

The airstrip that was used for that flight has long been overgrown and largely lost to history. But that flight was a significant moment because it was the beginning of Fiji Airways.

Our national airline, of course, now flies out of Nadi with its brand new Airbus A330s. And indeed, I will soon be going to France to take delivery of the third and final of these state-of-the art planes.

It’s also worth reviewing some of the history of the sugar cane research effort in Fiji as we gather here in Drasa for the opening of the new Head Office of the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji or SRIF.

It was once a division of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia or CSR, which began its operations in Fiji in 1880 and dominated the sugar cane industry for the best part of a century.

In 1973, the Fijian Government bought the sugar operations from CSR for $10-million and renamed it the Fiji Sugar Corporation Limited or FSC.

I have to say that the value of the research effort in agriculture generally, and sugar in particular, isn’t always appreciated as much as it should be by policy makers and bureaucrats.

By its very nature, research can involve lots of dead ends and blind alleys in the pursuit of solutions to particular challenges.

Our experts must be given adequate time and resources to perform their tasks to the highest standards and not be hamstrung or placed under unnecessary pressure by the standards that apply in other workplaces.

We don’t want arbitrary deadlines for our researchers. We want a culture of excellence and the best possible intellectual environment to achieve optimum results.

Time isn’t necessarily of the essence. The right result certainly is.

I’m told, for instance, that it can take up to 18 years to breed a new variety of sugar cane. That’s the time it takes to breed a new voter under our new Constitution. The point is that neither can be rushed.

But having said this, we all know how vital research is to the future sustainability of the sugarcane industry – the quest for higher yielding varieties, higher sugar content, higher fibre content, cane varieties that are disease resistant and drought tolerant. The search for new breakthroughs never ends.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This new complex has been built at a cost of around $1.3-million dollars.

It is a partnership between the European Union, my Government, the Fiji Sugar Corporation and sugarcane growers.

And on the subject of partnerships, I would like to make a couple of observations.

We deeply appreciate the European contribution of around $760,000 or 58 per cent of the cost of building this facility.

We also appreciate the European funding for laboratory equipment, the training of staff and the various research projects under the EU-ACP Research programme.

Ambassador, please convey our thanks to our valued European partners.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure you will agree that for any foreign aid or assistance to be successfully implemented, the Government and the nation must be consulted and have input.

It is not merely a question of being courteous and respectful, but is surely the best way to achieve real and sustainable outcomes. In other words, to direct the aid and assistance to the right people and in an overall sense, complement a nation’s development goals and wellbeing.

After all, aid must only be temporary but its effects must be lasting.

Working with our external partners, it is for Fijians to determine our national priorities, Fijians to implement them and Fijian institutions to work with ordinary people to achieve positive and lasting change.

Today, the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji has a new complex and I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in bringing this project to fruition.

Let us all - Government, our development partners, the FSC, farmers, and NGOS - renew our collective commitment to work together for the benefit of the 200-thousand Fijians who depend on the sugar cane industry for their livelihoods.

We are at a critical turning point for the industry. When my Government assumed office, many people had simply written it off – an old industry on its last legs. But we were not prepared to allow the Fijian sugar cane industry to die on our watch.

Now our reforms show clear signs of producing a remarkable turnaround, even in the face of a challenging global trading environment marked by higher production and generally lower market prices.

As I told our ministerial meeting, confidence in the Fijian industry is growing, more land is being planted and our farmers have received a record payment for their efforts.

The Fijian sugar cane industry is very much alive. And with the assistance of the researchers in this wonderful new facility, we intend – working together - to take it to even greater heights, in the interests of the Fijian economy and all our people.

To our international guests, I’m glad you’ve had the opportunity to go beyond our ACP conference venue and see some of the real Fiji.

We bid you farewell and on behalf of all Fijians, I thank you for coming. Our discussions have been fruitful and conducted in an atmosphere of cooperation and goodwill.

We all hope you’ve enjoyed our hospitality and we look forward to seeing you in Fiji again.

With those words, I now have much pleasure in declaring the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji Complex open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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