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

**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**

**OPENING AND HANDING OVER OF PIDF SECRETARIAT BUILDING**

Domain Road Sat. 26th April, 2014

SUVA 1200 Hours

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**Your Excellencies, the Ambassadors and High Commissioners, Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies &Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here for a truly historic occasion in the life of our nation and our region - the inauguration of the new Headquarters of the Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Development Forum.

We are beginning a new era of regional cooperation – one that is much more inclusive than that of any existing structure.

The PIDF is a grand coalition of Pacific Governments, civil society organisations and business, all working together to enhance the cause of Pacific peoples everywhere. And it is a great honour for Fiji to be given the responsibility of providing this new organisation with a home. Every Fijian joins me in welcoming the PIDF Secretariat to Fiji, and especially the citizens of our capital, Suva.

All around us in recent years, we have witnessed the rejuvenation of Suva as we cement its position as the true hub of the Pacific. The PIDF is another great adornment to the harbour city we all love. And we regard it as an immense privilege to have been given the opportunity to give this new regional body a permanent base.

I said at the inaugural Pacific Islands Development Forum in Nadi last August that were determined to avoid any hint of extravagance as we set out to build the PIDF from the ground up. My fellow Pacific leaders and I all agree on the basic premise of doing more for less.

We want the PIDF to reflect the values of the grassroots – ordinary Pacific islanders – because that is who we are here to serve. So this is not a grand headquarters - a luxurious new building to house a bloated bureaucracy – but an old colonial residence that more recently housed the Fijian Government’s Audio-visual unit.

I’m sure you’ll all agree that the restoration and refurbishment of this building has provided us with a very serviceable headquarters for the Secretariat. It is relatively modest in keeping with our objectives but I’m sure it will also be a pleasant and productive environment for those who work here.

While we are starting small, let there be no doubt that the thirteen Pacific countries who have already joined Fiji in the PIDF have big ambitions for the organization.

We would like to see it as the pre-eminent regional grouping for one simple reason. That for the first time, we have an organization that gives voice to the aspirations of all Pacific Islanders and not just the elites. One that is closer to the grassroots because it reflects the views of all sections of Pacific society – Governments, civil society groups and business.

It is not a question of prestige or establishing yet another talkfest. It is about creating an organization that is more attuned to our development needs as Pacific countries. It is about creating an organization that is relatively free of interference from outsiders. But above all, it is about creating an organisation in which all Pacific decision-makers at every level feel they have a stake. That reflects the concerns of ordinary people and addresses their needs.

Fiji, for one, is convinced that the current regional architecture is inadequate. We don’t see the PIDF as a competitor for the existing Pacific Islands Forum. It is not a question of Governments having to choose between the two. But Fiji no longer believes that the Pacific Islands Forum – in its existing form - adequately serves the interests of all Pacific islanders. We also believe that the Forum has become overly bureaucratic.

Moreover, the fact that membership of the Pacific islands Forum is confined to governments means that the agendas and priorities of important segments of Pacific societies have been ignored.

Governments do not have a monopoly on wisdom when it comes to solving the complex social, economic and environmental questions we face as Islanders. Regional leaders cannot merely prescribe solutions to the challenges we all face. We badly needed to cast the net wider and with the PIDF, we have.

With this partnership between governments, civil society and business, we are in a much better position to listen more to our people and their common sense approach to problem solving. And we are in a much better position to tap into the knowledge of our business communities, who generate the jobs we all need to raise living standards and improve the lives of our people.

For its part, Fiji wants a fundamental realignment of the Pacific Islands Forum before it considers rejoining that organisation. But in the meantime, we see our future firmly planted in the PIDF. And we are encouraging all Pacific countries and territories – along with their civil society groups and business leaders – to join us.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, in closing I would like to pay tribute to all those involved in bringing this project to fruition. All of what you see here has happened since last August so our thanks go to everyone for a wonderful effort.

Given our interest in conservation and the Green and Blue Economy, I’m especially pleased to learn of the special effort that has been made to source the timber used in the renovation from sustainable sources and to use forest residue and offcuts in some of the furniture.

In two months’ time, we will all gather in Nadi again for the Second Pacific Islands Development Forum, where I look forward to welcoming my fellow leaders, along with the rest of our coalition partners.

We have a lot of preparation to do and especially those in the Secretariat. So it gives me great pleasure now to officially declare the PIDF Secretariat building open and hand over the keys.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thank you.

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