

*COMMODORE JOSAIA VOREQE BAINIMARAMA,* ***CF(Mil),OStJ,MSD, jssc, psc***

***Outgoing Chair of the MSG and Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji***

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**ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE 19TH LEADERS SUMMIT OF THE MELANESIAN SPEARHEAD GROUP (MSG)**

**TO HAND OVER THE CHAIRMANSHIP**

Tjibaou Cultural Centre Wednesday 19th June, 2013

NOUMEA 1800 Hours

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The Incoming Chair of the MSG &

Spokesperson of the FLNKS,

Mr Victor Tutugoro;

The Prime Minister of Solomon Islands,

Hon. Gordon Darcy Lilo;

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu,

Hon. Moana Carcassas;

The Deputy Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea,

Hon. Leo Dion;

Ministers of Foreign Affairs;

Observers;

Special Guests;

Senior Officials;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula Vinaka, Good Evening and Bonsoir.

This evening marks a very significant milestone for the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), because we are gathered not only to hand-over its chairmanship, but to celebrate its twenty-five years as a leading regional group.

For a quarter-century, the MSG has provided an opportune forum for our nations to forge closer political, economic and social ties, to search for areas of common interest, and to find ways to mutually improve the lives of our peoples.

Tonight, as we pause to reflect on the MSG’s short but impressive history, we should all have a deep pride in what we’ve already accomplished.

As a result of our shared vision for closer regional integration, MSG solidarity has never been stronger. Together, we are restructuring the Pacific landscape to better suit the needs, demands and aspirations of our peoples.

When Fiji assumed the MSG chairmanship just over two (2) years ago, our focus was on channeling the bonds of Melanesian solidarity into concrete policy developments.

Thanks to the strong support of all member nations, we were able to accomplish a number of significant achievements. Tonight, we are turning over the chairmanship of an organisation that has grown stronger, that has carved out a firmer regional and international presence, and that has a clearer vision and roadmap for the future.

On the economic front, inter-MSG trade is on the rise. As a group, we have re-affirmed our commitment to a bold vision: a single market and economic union to allow for the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital.

We have already made much progress in this direction. Meaningful steps have been made towards the full implementation of the MSG Trade Agreement with the ongoing removal of tariffs for trade between our nations.

And the MSG Skills Movement Scheme will now provide for the free movement of skilled personnel within the region.

I’m also pleased to note that our Trade Ministers, in their historic inaugural meeting just a few weeks ago, recently endorsed a revised draft of the MSG Trade Agreement that provides the basis for a deeper integration beyond goods, into services, investments and the temporary movement of labour. I’m personally very excited by the potential this has for our economies and for our peoples.

Since trade in goods and services and investment is crucial for our economic development and improvement in the living standards of our peoples, I believe it is critical that the MSG Trade Ministers’ forum is institutionalized and that this forum reports directly to the MSG leaders on a regular basis.

These two years have also seen advancements on a number of other fronts. Notable achievements have been made in the areas of customs cooperation, biosecurity, fisheries, and cultural preservation.

We have committed to regional co-operation and collaboration between our law enforcement agencies to tackle transnational crimes.

A Department of Peacekeeping Operations has been established at the MSG Secretariat to help establish a MSG Peacekeeping Unit for peacekeeping missions.

And with the clear and present threat of climate change, we have committed ourselves to safeguarding our environment and the people who depended on it for their livelihoods. I note that a Melanesian Green Climate Fund is being considered, to finance regional environmental initiatives.

However, we must also acknowledge that there are still many challenges to overcome and much yet to accomplish.

I encourage you to carefully consider the report prepared by the MSG Eminent Persons Group that will be presented to us during this Summit.

In this context we need to be realistic, innovative and future focused.

Distinguished Colleagues,

I am confident that we will be in very good hands as the MSG chairmanship passes to Front de Liberation Nationale Kanake et Socialiste (FLNKS) of Kanaky or New Caledonia.

This comes at a crucial moment in the history of the Kanak people. They are in the midst of charting the course for self-determination, decolonisation, and independence.

This ceremony is taking place in the Tjibaou Cultural Centre - a venue named after one of the preeminent leaders of Kanak political emancipation.

And today, we, the MSG, re-affirm our support for the FLNKS and their political aspirations.

Distinguished Colleagues,

Before I finish, I would like to thank you all – on behalf of the Fijian people and Government – for your support over the past two years.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the many government officials whose tireless efforts have driven significant progress.

I also wish to extend my sincere gratitude to the MSG’s regional and international partners, most of whom are present at this Summit, for their support and generosity.

And of course, our success would not have been possible without the dedication of the Director General and the MSG Secretariat staff. As always, your support has been invaluable. I call on all member states to continue support to our Secretariat.

Distinguished Colleagues,

With those words, it is now my great pleasure and privilege to officially hand-over the Chairmanship of the MSG to the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanake et Socialiste (FLNKS) of Kanaky. I wish them well in their tenure.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you. Merci Beaucoup. Oleti.

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