

**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**

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**SPEECH AT PRESENTATION OF FIJI PINE LEASE SECURITY BONUSES**

**Lautoka Fri. 5th Sept., 2014**

**12.00pm**

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**THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR PUBLIC ENTERPRISES,**

**MARAMA NA TUI BA,**

**TURAGA NA TUI VITOGO,**

**TURAGA NA TAUKEI NALOLO,**

**TURAGA NA TAUKEI NA VO,**

**LIULIU NI MATAQALI TAWA,**

**TAUKEI SAQELE,**

**MARAMA NAI TALATALA,**

**EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN OF FIJI PINE,**

**ALL LANDOWNERS,**

**EMPLOYEES OF FPL GROUP.**

Bula Vinaka and good afternoon to you all.

I’m pleased to be with you this morning to pass out the second round of lease security bonuses. I’m also happy to have this opportunity to talk frankly with you so that I can set the record straight on some of the lies that are being told by political parties in an attempt to damage the reforms that Fiji Pine and Government are trying to bring about in the industry for the benefit of the landowners.

Until recently, the relationship between Fiji Pine Group, which includes Tropik Wood, and landowners has been growing stronger and this has led to a remarkable turn-around in the fortunes of the industry. When I spoke at the payment of the first-ever lease security bonuses in February, I said that Fiji Pine had become an example to the rest of the country of what can be accomplished when stakeholders share a vision and then join forces to accomplish it.

The fact is that Fiji Pine is the largest leaseholder in Fiji and depends on the renewal of leases for its continued survival. But for years, this was the biggest problem the company faced. From 2000 to 2011, many landowners were unwilling to continue their partnership with the company. When I visited them personally to ask them why this was, I always received the same answer, that they were not happy with the returns provided to them over the decades. The cries of loss of faith in the pine industry because of too many years of abuse and lack of fair returns was deafening. The concept of Vanua is important to the landowners and I understood that.

Looking at the state the industry was in, I didn’t blame them for their concerns. The numbers didn’t add up, and corruption and mismanagement were rife at all levels of the operation; not even the best salesman could convince them otherwise.

I realised that the only way to save the industry from total collapse was to prove to landowners that with the right management the pine industry is a smart investment that can produce consistently high returns. A strong and healthy relationship, built on trust, between the company and landowners is absolutely essential to survival and prosperity of the industry. There is no alternative.

Over the course of the last four years, the executive chairman, Faiz Khan, and his management team have worked hard to achieve a drastic reversal in the fortunes of the company. I’ve spoken in detail about these reforms before, so I won’t go into them now, but the important thing is that they’ve resulted in Fiji Pine’s ability to deliver significantly greater returns to landowners in the last four years than in the preceding decades

In 2013, the company paid more than $2.9-million directly to landowners through ground rent, stumpage, lease security bonuses, and forest base levies. Of course, this is in addition to the $17.3-million the company invested in replanting and logging, which has allowed Fiji Pine to employ thousands of landowners in the industry.

Today, we are here to celebrate the handover of the second round of lease security bonuses totalling more than $360,000. The bonuses are designed to encourage landowners to renew their leases with Fiji Pine. They are a sign of change for the better and an indication of more benefits to come. Under this system, bonuses will be paid to landowners with land currently leased to Fiji Pine that has at least 15 years of the lease term left or land that already has pine plantations on it. This will allow Fiji Pine to replant land that is currently not being used. Because there’s no point planting a tree today if the land will be taken away tomorrow.

I’m happy to say that the forecast numbers for 2014 look even better. Between lease bonuses, ground rent, stumpage and forest levies, the direct payment to landowners is expected to be more than $4.3-million. And it’s worth mentioning that more of this money will go directly into their pockets because we have reduced TLTB poundage on ground rent from 25 per cent to 10 per cent, and we have reduced poundage on stumpage payments from 25 per cent to zero per cent.

So it’s really no surprise that starting in 2012 landowners started voluntarily renewing expired leases. More than 18,200 hectares of land leases have been renewed in the past two and a half years because landowners can finally see that they can get better returns from the better management of the industry.

This is a remarkable accomplishment and demonstrates that the partnership between the company and landowners is finally being restored to the appropriate level of trust and support.

This is why I am deeply concerned to hear reports that lies are being spread by political agents amongst landowners in attempt to damage this relationship. I’ve heard that landowners are being told that I will take their land away from them by force if they refuse to renew their leases voluntarily. This is complete rubbish. Let me make this perfectly clear, under the Fijian Constitution, land can never be taken away from its indigenous owners by force. The decision to renew a lease is for the landowners to make, freely and of their own accord.

I urge you to focus on the facts and disregard the lies. The facts are that the vast increase in the renewal of pine leases over the last couple years is not because my Government forced them. It’s because thanks to our reforms landowners can see a relationship based on mutual benefits and equitable returns and so they have voluntarily decided to maintain their partnership with the company. And with the reforms in full effect, the returns are only going to increase in the years to come.

Unfortunately, these lies are typical of the campaigns of fear and division being run by some of the political parties contesting the upcoming election.

One party in particular is fighting this election claiming to protect the interests of the i’Taukei. Yet the truth is that it protects the interests of a self-serving elite rather than the interests of ordinary i’Taukei and some of its leading figures have a record that is shameful.

The people who converted native land to freehold using a legal loophole and lost it forever, now have the audacity to portray themselves as the defenders of i’Taukei land. The truth is my Government closed the loophole the previous Governments allowed to betray the iTaukei people.

The future has never looked brighter. Your land is safe. As I said before, your ownership of it is guaranteed in the Constitution. In fact, my Government has strengthened that ownership since I was appointed Prime Minister eight years ago. So reject the lies and look at the facts. Look at our record. And then decide who can be trusted – the person who has defended your interests or the people who claimed to defend your interests but betrayed you.

I am a proud i’Taukei. To tell me and everyone else that I need protecting because I am somehow under threat is not only a lie. It is demeaning. It is offensive. It is portraying me and my community as weak when the truth is that as a people, we have never been stronger. We have never had cause to be more proud. And we have never had a better future ahead of us.

i’Taukei children today live longer than ever before, thanks to our better health facilities. More i’Taukei than ever before can get a proper schooling, thanks to the free education my Government has provided. More i’Taukei than ever before can go on to technical colleges and universities, thanks to our scholarships and government loans. Our language is now taught as a compulsory subject in all primary schools. We are thriving as a people. Our land, traditions and culture are intact. We are respected. We punch above our weight in Fiji and the world.

In fact, wherever the i’Taukei go, they are the protectors, not the protected. Our UN Peacekeepers protect other communities in far off lands and they do it better than anyone else. They are brave - as we have been newly reminded in recent days. They are fearless. And they have made the i’Taukei renowned throughout the world for their courage.

The average i’Taukei doesn’t need protecting, nor do they want it. They want to be empowered. To have a Government that serves them, that gives them what they need to improve their lives and those of their families. Free education, better health facilities, electricity, clean water, better roads, telecommunications and - as with this project – better housing.

So the record shows that this Government has served the i’Taukei – and all Fijians – and empowered the i’Taukei, along with all Fijians. And yet on one of the most important issues of all – the power of the i’Taukei to decide how they spend the funds they get from the equal distribution of lease money – some want to turn back the clock and disempower ordinary people. As you all know, I gave the lease money direct to ordinary people, individually and equally, to decide for themselves how it is spent. But now SODELPA wants to take it back and restore the power of the chiefs to decide how it is spent.

I honestly can’t think of a single election anywhere in the world where a political party has gone to the people promising to take money off them. And yet that is what SODELPA is doing in Fiji. It is the height of arrogance, a mentality of self-entitlement. Of not putting the interests of ordinary people first.

They are saying *“We know better than you, how you can spend your money. So give it to us, we will take what we want, and decide how much you get”.* Money that rightfully belongs to the people. Their inheritance. Their birthright. Money that they should be allowed to keep and decide how to spend themselves, not to be treated like children.

Some of their other policies are just as illogical. They say the word *“Fijian”* belongs to the i’Taukei and can’t be shared with everyone. Fijian is an English word. It’s from the English language. How can it belong to the i’Taukei? It belongs to everyone and describes a person who comes from the place that the English called Fiji. That makes us all Fijians, just like a person who comes from Australia is an Australian or a person who comes from America is an American.

The i’Taukei word for Fiji is Viti. Strictly speaking, we should be Viti-ans. But they say no, we are the Fijians and the rest of you, at best, are Fiji Islanders. On this logic, any Australian who isn’t an Aborigine should be an Australia islander. Any American who isn’t a Red or American Indian should be a United States Continental.

We are all Fijians because we come from a place that Captain Cook – not the i’Taukei - called Fiji. This English word belongs to all of us. It describes all of us. And it unites us by giving us a word we can all use to describe ourselves. A common identity. Proud citizens of Fiji. Fijians. It is what we are and where our future lies. One nation. One people. Not a collection of separate tribes in the South Seas fighting over the use of an English word. Calling everyone Fijian does not mean that our land is going to be taken away or we are going to lose any of our special rights.

And let’s examine their stand on the secular state – a cornerstone of our Constitution that guarantees religious freedom for all Fijians. Again, they treat the people like fools by saying *“this is a threat to Jesus”, “This is a threat to Christianity”.* These claims are completely false. The secular state protects Jesus, protects Christianity. It guarantees your freedom to follow him, to worship him in public and in private, just as you have always done.

The only difference is that the State – the Government – remains neutral and treats everybody alike. The State doesn’t say *“because you’re a Christian you should get the best jobs in the civil service or because you’re a Hindu and Minister for Education you can favour only Hindu schools or because you’re a Pentecostal civil servant you should only serve members of your church first before others like the Methodists and the Anglicans”*. Every single citizen is treated the same whatever they believe in. That is the way it is in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, France and most of the other great democracies. And that is the way it should be in Fiji, where our people are of different faiths and different denominations but there is now a guarantee that whatever they believe in, the State treats them the same.

And that is the logic some parties are using when they now argue for Fiji to be declared a Christian State. That because there are more Christians in Fiji than anyone else, their religious beliefs should take precedence; their religious beliefs should come first.

This is not the way of Christ, who said *“Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”.* In other words, the State and religion are separate and our obligations to both are different.

And so with just over two weeks to go before Election Day, I make this appeal to every Fijian voter: turn your back on the past and embrace a brighter future. Reject the politics of division, the lies and the crude attempts to pit Fijian against Fijian.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, my Government’s underlying philosophy is embodied in what you see around you today. Not empty promises, but concrete achievement. We are building homes for ordinary Fijians and their families. We are building dreams.

And I want the children who grow up here to dream big dreams for themselves and our nation. To join hands to help build a better Fiji. To make Fiji Great.

So let’s work together to continue to strengthen this partnership between Fiji Pine and landowners and renew leases to ensure a long-term, successful future for the pine industry.

With these words, ladies and gentlemen, it is now my pleasure to hand over the second round of lease security bonuses.

Vinaka vakalevu.