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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**

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**SPEECH AT OPENING OF FIRST SECTION OF SEALED BUCA BAY ROAD**

**Buca Bay Mon. 8 Sept., 2014**

**CAKAUDROVE 9.00 Hours**

I’m delighted to be here today in Buca Bay for a very important event in the lives of the people here and for the Northern Division as a whole – the first completed stretch of the new, sealed Buca Bay Road.

This project is a sign of my Government’s commitment to the welfare of the people of the North and a cornerstone of our Look North Policy. We have a vision to transform the North, to extend to the people of Vanua Levu the same level of services Fijians enjoy on Viti Levu.

I have a fundamental belief that every Fijian – no matter where they live – not only deserves the same access to such things as sealed roads, electricity, water, education, health and telecommunications, it is their right. Of course none of this can happen overnight. The neglect of past governments to properly develop our nation in the four decades since Independence is a terrible stain on our body politic.

Indeed, no past Government saw fit to provide a sealed road here to unlock the economic potential of this area, increase the value of iTaukei land and improve the lives of ordinary people.

Well, today, those decades of neglect come to an end as I proudly open the first 10 kilometres of the planned 30-kilometre sealed Buca Bay Road, which starts in Nagini and will soon continue all the way to Kasavu. The total value of the project is estimated at around $40-million and is expected to be fully completed by May 2015.

The sealed road will cut travel times and improve accessibility to a whole section of Cakaudrove, including a number of settlements along its course. Many people will directly benefit from this new stretch of road, along with thousands more in villages and settlements further that the sealed portion is yet to reach but will still enjoy shorter journeys because of it.

Of course, school journeys will now be faster for the students at schools along the road. Less travel time means more play time and – I hope – more study time. I hope that students and parents use the new road to take the best possible advantage of the free schooling my Government has provided to become part of the clever country we envisage for Fiji.

It’s now going to be much quicker – and much cleaner – for local farmers to get their produce to market in Savusavu. This all-weather road and the year-round access it provides mean less disruption from extreme weather events. And the speed with which trucks can now travel along it spells more efficiency and the possibility of greater competitiveness.

The better road also means a faster trip to hospital if anyone gets sick. And the wear and tear on vehicles is also reduced, enabling bus operators to spend less on maintenance and repairs and more on providing a proper service.

Even the simple of task of heading to Savusavu to shop or sell things at the market becomes more of a pleasure and less of a chore. The days of getting dust in your face and hair are over for those lucky enough to live along this stretch. And we’re hoping to eventually bring these benefits to more and more people as our road construction program continues.

But a proper road means more than just improved convenience for the people living here. All over the world, the record shows that building modern roads in rural areas increases economic activity, empowers ordinary people and enhances their prosperity and security. In Fiji, the right to economic participation is guaranteed by the Constitution and so as a Government opening lifelines into remote areas of the country is one of the best ways we can achieve this.

On the one hand, new roads enable people to access markets, sell their products and sell their labour because their travel times to potential employment are reduced. And on the other hand, they promise to open up previously cut off areas to development, to attract new enterprises and create new jobs.

This could mean any number of things, the most notable of which is opening the door to the tourism industry in this beautiful part of our country. Before now, the journey was simply too long and too rough to make this part of the Northern Division a serious prospect for most tourism developers. What this new road does is allow people to now finally focus on the potential of the area and not worry about its remoteness and inaccessibility - to focus on all the opportunities it offers for future development.

For landowners, these new opportunities mean that land in the area will be more attractive to potential investors and businesses and as a result the value of the land will increase and in some cases increase significantly. This is very good news giving landowners more choices about how to put their land to use.

But this leads me to a very important point that I want to clarify. Despite what some political parties are saying, the right that landowners have to decide what to do with their land is absolute, the same as it’s always been, and is in no way under threat.

I urge landowners not to listen to anyone who tries to tell them that Government will force them to use their land in a particular way without having any say in the decision. This is a bold faced lie. The sole intent of Government is to create opportunities for landowners and then to help them take advantage of those opportunities, so that they benefit and Fiji benefits.

The point is here that the new Buca Bay Road creates opportunities for businesses and investors that make the surrounding land more desirable and worth more money. As a result, landowners will now have more options about how best to put their land to productive and profitable use.

Indeed, one option may be to go into the business of being landlords themselves rather than leasing their land to others, be it for commercial, residential or tourism projects. If elected in the upcoming election, my Government will set aside $10-million to help the iTaukei develop their lands for subdivision. This initiative will encourage landowners to reap direct commercial benefits from their land. The funding will be made available as a grant to assist landowners to meet development costs, such as the provision of electricity, water and roads. This initiative will not only empower the iTaukei but will also contribute to national economic development.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would also like to take this opportunity to once again address some of the lies being told about my Government and its development agenda in the North.

To the people of the North I say: examine for yourself the claims by some would-be politicians that nothing has been done for you and my Government’s look North Policy is all talk. Here we are today opening a major piece of infrastructure that will transform the lives of thousands of Fijians. Of course, on the other side of the island, we’re also spending $228-million dollars to build an all weather highway from Nabouwalu to Dreketi and all the way to Labasa.

Earlier in the year, we completed a major extension of the power grid to Dreketi via Seaqaqa and a few weeks ago in Somosomo I launched a $15-million dollar project to provide Fijians in Taveuni with affordable electricity.

Thousands of ordinary Fijians in the North have benefited from government training programs, thousands have been given help to start their own ventures and businesses, thousands have been given the opportunity to build new homes or have their cyclone damaged homes repaired.

The sugar industry in the North is being expanded, land is being reclaimed for growing cane and we intend to crush one million tonnes of sugarcane a year in Labasa by 2020.

In Taveuni, coconut growers stand to benefit from our program to revitalise the copra industry, to replace senile trees with younger ones that have higher yields. And for the first time, Fiji is selling Virgin Coconut Oil in Korea at $13 a bottle – a new export industry that promises to transform the lives of many people in the North.

It is genuine achievement – real progress to benefit every Fijian in the North and in the case of our export industries, the economic welfare of every person in the country. And it has happened under my Government, which doesn’t make false promises but delivers.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in closing I would like to thank all those who’ve brought this project to fruition; the Fiji Roads Authority, the financier, the Exim Bank of China; and the contractor, China Railway 1st Group and all of the project workforce.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare this new 10- kilometer sealed section of the Buca Bay Road open.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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