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**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Public Service, People’s Charter and Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

**SPEECH AT THE CLOSING THE 2014 TOURISM EXPO**

**Sofitel Fiji Resort & Spa Ballroom Thurs. 8th May, 2014**

**DENARAU 1920 Hours**

**The Attorney General and Minister for Tourism,**

**The Tourism Fiji Board, management and staff,**

**Industry partners from Fiji and abroad,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Bula Vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

I open and close a lot of events in Fiji and always enjoy the opportunity to meet as many people as possible. But it’s a special pleasure to be with you tonight to wrap up an event that by all accounts, has been a tremendous success and a credit to the entire Tourism Industry.

We all hoped that this inaugural Fijian Tourism Expo would be a landmark event for the Industry – 150 buyers from 16 countries gathered under the one roof to strike deals and forge partnerships with more than 240 of Fiji’s tourism operators.

It has proved to be that and more. Much more. Because I keep hearing from everyone that this Expo has exceeded all expectations - for individual sellers and buyers, Tourism Fiji, the responsible Minister and the Fijian Government.

As I keep telling ordinary Fijians, the role of Government is to serve - to empower people; give them the things they need to improve their lives; strengthen the country’s infrastructure; create a business climate in which Fiji attracts the investment it needs to give our people jobs; and to develop our nation and fulfill its destiny as the pre-eminent Pacific nation.

As you all know, this a momentous year for Fiji – the introduction of our first ever genuine democracy at a general election on 17 September. It will be fought on a level playing field that we have never had before and on the basis that all Fijians are equal, whoever they are and wherever they come from.

By embracing these ideals – that form the basis of every true democracy the world over – we have rebuilt the foundations of our nation and reset our national compass. We are convinced that great days lie ahead. And it’s extremely gratifying that the reforms that my Government has made over the past seven years are now bearing fruit and are being recognized as such by the international investment community.

Our economic growth projection for the current year has been upgraded to 3.8 per cent, more than our bigger neighbours, Australia and New Zealand. And I’m sure that many of you who are visitors to Fiji will have detected a palpable buzz in the air – a distinct feeling of a nation on the move.

Every single one of you in this room is important to our vision of a new Fiji - building blocks in the nation we are recreating together. Our 240 local tourism operators form the backbone of our biggest export earner. It is on your imagination, your commitment, your vision and your hard work that the fortunes of our economy and every Fijian depends. So we deeply value your investment and commitment and regard you as vital partners in creating wealth and developing the nation that we all love.

To the 150 buyers who are here from 16 countries; a big vinaka vakalevu for your efforts on Fiji’s behalf. We never take anything for granted. We never forget that your clients always have a choice of holiday destination. So we deeply appreciate the work you do to push them in our direction, to market the unique experience that Fiji offers to people the world over.

And finally to the Fijian people themselves – our prime product if you like – and without whose welcoming nature, hospitality and openness, Fiji would be just another string of beautiful islands. The word “unique” is often bandied around far too easily these days to describe things that aren’t necessarily unique at all. But I think that everyone in this room can agree that Fiji really is unique, not so much because of its islands but because of its people.

You can teach anyone – me included – to smile and say “Hello”, But you can’t teach the genuine friendliness, care and affection that come so naturally to Fijians and which have made us truly the place where happiness finds you.

You experienced the richness of our cultures and peoples in the opening ceremony through our youth. The indigenous or the iTaukei through their strong cultural roots and indeed the diversity within them from province to province; the Polynesian Rotumans; the descendants of the European and Chinese settlers and traders; the descendants of the indentured labourers who were brought over to slave in the plantations from British India; the Micronesians who settled here and many others who call Fiji home and are all now proud to be Fijians. Under my Government, Ladies and Gentlemen, we encourage the public celebration of our country’s rich and unique heritage. That is why you had that unprecedented opening ceremony. That is why we are where we are today.

If you choose Fiji Airways, the Fijian experience begins from the time you step onto your flight and we say “Bula, welcome to Fiji”. If you choose another of our airline partners, it begins when you arrive. But when it comes time to leave and we say “Moce” and sing “Isa Lei” - our famous farewell song - only the hardest of hearts don’t respond. Because the truth is that the hearts of many millions of people the world over have melted over the years during their visits to Fiji.

They leave genuinely sad to leave their hosts, their friends, behind but with the fondest memories of their stay. And they leave, more often than not, wanting to return. Which, as an Industry, is just the way we like it.

So my biggest “vinaka” tonight is to the Fijian people – the ordinary men and women who serve our international visitors, care for them, shower them with warmth and affection, share with them their diverse experiences and cultures, make them laugh or cry with genuine pleasure and send them home wanting more. It is on you that our Tourism Industry ultimately depends and with it, the economic future and well-being of our nation.

In closing, I would like to thank everyone who has made this Expo such a success. It has been the first but it is the first of many to come. To the Ministry of Tourism and Tourism Fiji team including the Board - thank you for your wonderful team work.

To our overseas visitors, “vinaka vakalevu” for coming and we hope to see you again soon. And thank you on behalf of our nation for joining hands with us, through your own efforts, to build the new Fiji.

I now declare the first Fijian Tourism Expo closed with a sincere invitation for you all to attend the next.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thank you.

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