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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, Provincial Development, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY OF THE SOMOSOMO HYDRO-ELECTRIC POWER PROJECT**

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**Your Excellency Ambassador of the People’s republic**

**of China;**

**Turaga na Tui Cakau;**

**Masi ni Vanua o Lalagavesi;**

**Government Officials from the Various Ministries;**

**Ladies, Gentlemen, Youths and Children;**

Ni sa bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m very pleased and honoured to be here today, to officiate at the Ground Breaking Ceremony for the 700 kW Somosomo Hydroelectric Power Project. A project that has been made possible through an Aid in Kind to the tune of Fifteen Million Dollars from the People’s Republic of China.

Today marks another milestone with respect to the assistance of the People’s Republic of China to Fiji. The project may not be as big, but it is surely a strategic and important one for Taveuni and for Fiji.

Therefore, the gathering today is a celebration for many reasons:

It is a celebration of the work that has been done by my government, its private sector partners, and the development partners who have worked tirelessly together to ensure that the project has been well-prepared in a transparent and accountable way; that a partnership has been established and that the project is able to move decisively forward in the implementation phase.

It is a celebration of bilateral cooperation – with the Government of the People’s Republic of China demonstrating its ever strong commitment to the people of Fiji and promoting regional stability and mutually-beneficial economic growth through increased energy and infrastructure links in a way that will promote growth while protecting the environment.

I, therefore, also take this unique occasion to extend my sincere appreciation and that of the people of Fiji to the People’s Republic of China for standing by us and giving us the shoulder during those difficult times. I certainly believe that without such support it would indeed have been very difficult eight years for Fiji.

Our gathering today is also a celebration of the public-private partnership which has been the foundation of the preparation for this project, and will be a key factor in the implementation and on-going operations of the project. Private sector commitment to preparing and delivering the project, in close partnership with my government and the many public and private stakeholders, is a prime example of the sort of capacity building and knowledge transfer work that is indeed possible under my leadership.

And, it’s a celebration for the people of Somosomo – who have patiently waited a very long time, have listened to many speeches, talked to countless visitors, and have participated in many consultations. Today the work to supply power to the communities from Wairiki to Welagi commences. Today, the waiting is over. Let us start with this and I certainly believe it is only in a matter of time before we extend the same benefits to the remaining communities in Taveuni.

I would like to remind us all that my Government will continue to forge ahead by way of positive initiatives that we have come to witness today. Similarly with the FEA we have continued to search for renewable solutions as we have done for Nadarivatu. It is hoped that such initiatives will also go a long way in providing the much needed awareness on the need to reduce global warming by reducing the use of the fossil and other imported fuels.

With the groundbreaking today, our focus will be on ensuring that:

1. the project delivers real, durable benefits for the people of Taveuni;
2. the project is done transparently, in adherence to the environmental and social safeguards that were identified during the Environmental Impact Assessment;
3. that my Government continues with its program of economic and structural reform, and puts in place a sound system of project operation and management geared at reducing poverty and protecting the environment; and
4. that my Government works to ensure that the people whose lives will be affected by the project will not just be the same but in fact be better off, and that development partners all continue to give their support and assistance along the way, to see that this project delivers benefits to the people.

The Somosomo Hydro Electric Project will have environmental and social effects – as any other project of this magnitude. There may be problems – which will need to be addressed quickly by a responsive and accountable implementing team. But we believe the project, if implemented well, will be able to help the people of Taveuni – by giving them the opportunity for a better life, by providing real avenues for poverty reduction programs, and building a more environmentally-sustainable future.

We must, therefore, all ensure that we are indeed committed to working together in the spirit of cooperation and partnership that has defined our journey thus far, and together achieving our ultimate, underlying goal – harnessing the strength of hydropower and the will and commitment of the people – into a development success story, one capable of improving lives, reducing poverty, and giving Taveuni a better hope for the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in the census that was conducted in 2007, it was noted that 85% of our total population have access to some form of electrification. With the work carried out through the current Government it has been estimated between 90 - 95% of our total population now have some form of electrification. We are inching closer to our 100% target and we truly believe that we will achieve this target in the not too distant future. As we move closer to the targets we have also observed the importance of reliability of supply electricity to our people. To this end, through my Government we are now converting diesel generating sets that were installed in the past years to more reliable supplies through renewable energy sources.

Electrification and other forms of infrastructure development have over the years concentrated in our urban areas. As a result, it has widened the gap in terms of lifestyle, standard of living and other facets of development in these two areas (urban and rural). With the current work undertaken by your Government, we believe that it will enhance the opportunities that our rural areas can provide in contributing to the economy and nation building.

With those few words, I am certainly grateful to participate in the Ground Breaking of the Somosomo Hydro Electric Project.

Thank you – Vinaka vakalevu.

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