**

Rear Admiral Hon. J.V. Bainimarama, CF (Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry**

**SPEECH AT THE HEADS OF MISSIONS CONSULTATIONS OPENING**

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**Holiday Inn Mon. 17 Nov., 2014**

**SUVA 0830 Hours**

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**Cabinet Ministers;**

**Heads of Missions;**

**Permanent Secretaries;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be with you this morning at the start of a momentous week in Fiji’s relations with the world – a week in which the leaders of the two most populous nations on earth will be visiting our shores.

Nothing is more symbolic of our nation’s new status in the global community than for us to have the opportunity to host both the Indian Prime Minister and the Chinese President.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi heads a nation of more than 1.2 billion people – the largest democracy in the world, a global power and one with which we have a long standing close ties of friendship.

And President Xi Jinping rules a nation with a population of 1.3 billion people – a global superpower with whom we have in recent times further strengthened our friendship.

Together, India and China have more than two and a half billion people within their borders – 36 per cent of the world’s total population. And this week their leaders are coming to Fiji, our small island developing nation with just under a million of us.

I can scarcely believe it myself - the opportunity for us not only to welcome these Leaders to Fiji and host the Leaders of our island neighbours - further strengthening our regional position - but to show case Fiji.

Why are they coming? There’s undoubtedly a strategic component to these visits – India and China as emerging global powers wanting to also have more of a presence in the Pacific. But they are also coming because they regard Fiji as important. They acknowledge us as a regional leader – a pre-eminent island nation that is also playing an increasing role on the wider global stage and having carried out substantive constitutional, legal and political reforms that have been applauded, commended and accepted internationally.

On the international front: We’ve led the Group of 77 Plus China – the biggest voting bloc at the United Nations; We’ve played an important role in the UN system by chairing the General Assembly and heading the United Nations Development Program; We’ve led our Pacific neighbours into the important Asia-Pacific Bloc at the UN and co-ordinated our collective effort to get the international community to address the threat posed to Small Island Developing States by climate change; We’ve led the international sugar industry and focussed attention on the needs of sugar cane growers around the world; And we’ve sent international peace-keepers into troubled parts of the world such as the Golan Heights and taken risks that others weren’t prepared to take.

Make no mistake our resolve in the past 8 years, our strategic direction as a nation and our ability to think outside the box has gained Fiji much respect around the world. We have also delivered on our promise to introduce the first genuine democracy in Fijian history, and returned our nation to parliamentary rule under a much acclaimed constitution.

I want to thank every Fijian including those in this room, for the effort made to bring our beloved nation to this wonderful point in our history. It is the dedication and hard work that has put Fiji well and truly on the map. And it is through our collective effort – including my Government’s reforms over the past eight years – that we now welcome two of the world’s greatest leaders to Fiji.

They are coming because they recognise our achievement. They are coming to assist us our newly elected government. They are coming to encourage us in our overall foreign policy objective of being “friends to all and enemies to none”. I will be telling them that there is room in the Pacific for everyone of goodwill, for everyone willing to assist our island nations to reach their full potential. And I will be telling them – just as I told the Fijian people before the election – that if we can work together, even greater days lie ahead.

Without pre-empting our talks, I can tell you that Prime Minister Modi recognises the great historical link between India and Fiji and wants to help us develop our nation in a range of ways which we will discuss. I can also tell you that President Xi and I will sign a number of Memorandums of Understanding covering further assistance and co-operation with China. In the case of both countries, our relationships will be stronger and deeper because of these visits.

They do not replace our existing relationships with others. Only a few weeks ago, I had highly successful meetings with our other development partners, in which the Minister for Finance and I outlined a number of areas in which we can work together to enhance Fiji’s capability and development. Indeed we will in the new year publish a development plan for Fiji for the next 5 years. This development plan will not only set our agenda and focus in a transparent manner for the next 5 years but will also assist our development partners to identify areas they can work with us on a sustained basis for the benefit of all Fijians.

I also only about a week ago had highly successful meetings with senior officials of both the World Bank – which is assisting us with our reform of the Civil Service – and with the Asian Development Bank, which is offering us financial and technical assistance with our developments and reforms in infrastructure and the public sector.

Fiji is on the move. Fiji is open for business. And in the coming year, I urge all our diplomats to place more emphasis on expanding trade, finance and investment links as part of your key objectives. This means that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the capital and the missions abroad need to work very closely, directly and collaboratively with the respective ministries such as Agriculture and Industry and Trade to name a couple. There is also the need to ensure that the our Missions are always positioning Fiji in the diplomatic circle through highlighting our national and international objectives – whether it is at ILO or through the climate change forums.

The Fijian economy is currently growing by a remarkable four per cent a year in only the third sustained burst in our post-independence history. But we urgently need to close the gap between our imports – the goods and services we are bringing into Fiji – and our exports, the goods and services we sell. This trade deficit must be reduced. On the other hand we must also continue to source better and competitively priced imports. We cannot simply depend on our traditional suppliers of goods and services.

When a Fijian exporter and importer for that matter walks into any of our missions overseas, I urge you all to treat him or her as a VIP because there is no doubt that these people are crucial to Fiji’s economic wellbeing. It is on their enterprise and the contribution of their workers that our future prosperity depends, a fact that we will also celebrate later in the week at the Prime Minister’s Exporter of the Year Awards.

I urge you to continue to find opportunities for Fiji. Whether it is in collaborating with new development agencies or finding financing opportunities or establishing better relationship with multilateral agencies, you must continue to push the boundaries and position Fiji. Don’t wait for the opportunities to come to you. You must create them for Fiji.

It must be remembered though that in your pursuits you need to always put Fiji’s overall interest first. So even though an import of some cheap product may improve your kpi or tie you up with some multi-national corporation, it maybe detrimental to our local industry or bring in a new disease. You cannot pursue this. In the same way you must draw a line between your willingness to entice investors to Fiji and giving them preferential treatment breaching accepted standards of transparency and anti-corruption.

I see the theme of this Consultation Meeting, is***“Pushing Boundaries in Service Delivery”***. This is precisely what I have talking about. We need to do this so that we can better serve the Fijian people. I will personally be judging your ministry and every other ministry’s success as much on this imperative as any other.

The Ministry can look back on a busy year, including yet another expansion of our global relationships. As you all know, we have opened a new mission in Geneva, which has already proved its worth.

We now have 18 foreign missions and two consulate offices so our global footprint is also expanding. Once again, we have also established formal diplomatic relations with a number of countries and that process will continue. Because we don’t intend to rest on our laurels and have further ambitions in the UN system and beyond which will become apparent as time goes by.

Ambassadors, High Commissioners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

 We enter the New Year with a determination by this Government to reform our Civil Service to make it more efficient, responsive to the needs of our people. This will include an assessment of performance and restructuring. All ministries are linked and there is a need to ensure not only that civil servants are selected on merit in a transparent manner but to ensure that all ministries are focussed on collaboration to ensure that the government’s objectives are met. That is the ultimate goal. As has been shown, selection based on meritocracy results not only in improved efficiency but also naturally results in a diversity of staffers being chosen reflecting gender and marginalised groups. We also cannot have incompetency or turf warfare between ministries because this will be to the detriment of our country.

I ask all members of the Ministry to work with us to achieve the changes that are needed. Foreign Affairs, like every Ministry, can do better. It can be more representative of the broader Fijian community. It can work more holistically with the rest of Government to achieve our broader objectives. And like the rest of the Civil Service, it can be more efficient and responsive as it carries out its duty to broaden and enrich Fiji’s relationship with the world.

Ambassadors and High Commissioners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I especially want to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Mission in Abu Dhabi for pushing boundaries in their effort to secure the release of our 45 soldiers in the Golan Heights back in September.

It was an extremely challenging and worrying time for all of us. But you rose to the challenge as a Ministry, we rose to the challenge as a nation, and more importantly, our brave men rose to the challenge in a way that inspired every Fijian. Because they kept their cool, because we kept our cool, we showed the world the quality of the Fijian spirit. And we are back doing what we do best - keeping the peace on behalf of the global community for those citizens in troubled parts of the world far from our island home.

I have never been more proud to be Fijian than the day our boys were released and I know every Fijian feels the same.

Ambassadors and High Commissioners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

With those words, I now officially declare the 2014 Heads of Missions Consultations open and wish you a very successful week. A great week for our nation and hopefully a great week for you.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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