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**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 THE OPENING OF THE KOROVOU CREMATORIUM**

**Korovou Tues. 8th July, 2014**

**TAILEVU 1100 Hours**

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**The Chairman of the Korovou Cemetery Upkeep Committee;**

**Members of the Committee;**

**The Turaga Na Komai Teanuca and People of Matacula;**

**The Advisory Councilors;**

**Distinguished Guests**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m happy to be with you today to open this new crematorium for Korovou and the surrounding area, something that the members of this community have been wanting for many years.

I’ve been told that the Korovou Cemetery was established in the late 1930s on land kindly donated by the Naiduki family of Matacula Village for the use by all Fijians living in the northern part of the Tailevu province stretching from Verata Wailevu to communities living close to the border of Ra.

The old crematorium, built in the 1970s, served families in this area for more than 40 years, with occasional repairs paid for by community fundraising drives. Many Fijians will have powerful memories of saying their final farewells to loved ones there, but the fact is that the facility was falling apart and it just wasn’t up to an acceptable standard.

In fact, given its run down state it posed a threat to the safety of those attending ceremonies there. Clearly an unacceptable situation and one that the members of this community have long spoken out about.

For years, they have asked for a facility where they can say a dignified farewell to their loved ones – where they can gather together safely in surroundings that match the solemnity of the event and give due respect to those who have passed on.

I’m proud to say that my Government listened to your request, and we delivered. We are true to our word and we genuinely care about following through on the commitments we make – doing what we can to improve the lives of ordinary Fijians.

The new crematorium – built at a cost of **$76,000** under the Prime Minister’s Small Grants Scheme – includes a new waiting shed and water tank.

The local community will be responsible for its maintenance and upkeep, and I urge you all to look after it well so that it can serve the families of this area for generations to come.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is the job of any Government to understand the issues that matter most to people and then to do what it can to address them. Sometimes they can be national issues that affect all Fijians – like the economy and the cost of living. And sometimes they can be local issues that affect a specific community or area of the country – like this crematorium.

In either case, the only way we can learn about these issues is by travelling around the country and speaking with people directly, to hear their concerns and to understand their hopes and aspirations.

Unfortunately, this practice was far too rare in the past. Politicians would only travel outside of Suva in the lead-up to an election in order to make some quick promises to win support and preserve their privileged positions in the capital. Indeed, we’re seeing this trend re-emerge as the September election draws nearer.

As I keep saying wherever I go, I believe in the common sense of the Fijian people to see through such thinly veiled political tactics. By contrast, Fijians know that since day one my Government has made service delivery a matter of policy, not politics.

They know that we have remained utterly consistent in our commitment to extending Government services more extensively across Fiji than at any other time in the past. And I pledge to you that my Government will always stay true to this commitment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I’ve just come from the opening of the Nakabi-Tauli Access Road in Navuso, Naitisiri this morning. At that event, I explained to the Fijians there what a secular state really means, telling them that no religion in Fiji is under threat. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. Religious freedom has never been better protected than it is under our Constitution.

It’s important to repeat this explanation here, especially as we are gathered in a cemetery that is dedicated for use by Fijians from all religions.

It has burial grounds for all, and of course the crematorium is used mainly by Hindus, whose final rites are conducted through cremation.

In fact, the cemetery is a great example to explain what a secular state means. Just like this cemetery doesn’t discriminate against a particular religious group, but treats all equally, a secular state – the Government – is also neutral when it comes to religion.

It doesn’t take sides. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist. The Government doesn’t interfere with what you believe in and treats every religion equally – just like all religions are treated equally here at Korovou Cemetery.

This has always been one of the unassailable principles that my Government has insisted on upholding. It underscores our belief – which I know most Fijians share – in the importance of respecting all of the country’s religious traditions and treating them equally - one Fiji joined together in tolerance for our different beliefs and practices.

With those few words, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is now my pleasure to officially open Korovou’s new crematorium and attached waiting shed.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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