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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 NASAU CULVERT CROSSING ON THE WAINIBUKA RIVER**

NASAU WAINIBUKA TUESDAY JULY 8

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**Honourable Minister/ Ministers**

**The Chairman and Chief Executive of the Fiji Roads Authority**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all,

I’m delighted to be here in the Wainibuka to open a very important project for the people of this area – the Nasau Culvert Crossing linking the village of Nasau to the Kings Road and beyond.

It’s important because finally, after 30 years or so, the people of Nasau can now travel to and from their village without getting wet.

There used to be a crossing here that I’m told was built about 70 years ago but was gradually swept away by successive floods and cyclones. Incredibly, it’s taken this long to finally replace it, to get the 280 people of Nasau and those in the surrounding area out of the river and back onto a proper structure to get them across.

I’m ashamed to say that this is just one of the many instances of neglect by previous governments over the years that are finally being rectified. And I want to apologise to the people of Nasau that it has taken so long for their needs to be addressed.

There is no excuse for what has happened here – the failure to replace an existing piece of infrastructure that was vital to the wellbeing of ordinary people. When I was told that children were having to wade across the river to get to and from school, I was determined to get this crossing replaced as a matter of urgency.

I want to thank the head teacher at the Turagabeci Primary School, Tevita Puamau, for writing to me in September 2012 to alert me to the seriousness of the situation. He told me that 45 primary students and 15 pre schoolers from Nasau had to cross a river and a creek every day to reach the school. And whenever there was heavy rain and flooding, that crossing was impossible.

In 2012 alone, these children missed out on seven days of schooling because the river was impassable. How could we become a knowledge-based society, he asked, if this was happening to these children? I couldn’t agree with him more and I also shared his fears for the safety of these children getting to and from school everyday.

I will not allow our children’s lives to be put at risk in such a manner. I asked the Fiji Roads Authority to attend to this crossing as a matter of priority. And I want to thank them for doing such a good job.

This crossing has been constructed at a cost of $1-million. And it is money well spent, not just for the children but for all the people of Nasau.

Now you have easier access to the Kings Road and beyond. Now you don’t have to carry your dalo and bananas across the river to load them on a vehicle to get them to market. The vehicle comes to you.

Now you have the opportunity to explore other ways of making money – maybe jobs if the manganese and natural water projects currently being examined go ahead. Or if someone starts bringing tourists to see the area’s legendary caves.

Now, getting medical assistance if you’re sick is easier and quicker. And of course, everyone – and especially our mothers – have the peace of mind knowing that your child will be a lot safer making this crossing.

As I keep saying all over Fiji: the role of Government is to serve. To meet the needs of ordinary people and give them the things they need to improve their daily lives. And it gives me immense pleasure to have served the people of Nasau.

I also want to say something to you all about some of the lies that are being spread by certain politicians who are standing against me in the general election on 17 September. They have accused me – a fellow i’Taukei – of weakening the protection of i’Taukei land and of weakening the position of the Christian churches in Fiji. On both counts, these are lies. They are simply not true and let me explain why.

There is no threat to i’Taukei land. None. You don’t have to take my word for this. You can read it for yourself in our Constitution, which we translated into i’Taukei for the first time so you can all understand it.

In black and white, it says that no I’Taukei land can ever be taken away permanently. Never. A particular portion can be used for a period of time if the Government needs land for some public purpose like a road or airport. The provision to use land for public purpose has been there in all our constitutions and all our previous laws. This happens all over the world also. But now under our new constitution the landowners must be paid compensation and when that land is no longer needed, that land must be returned to the traditional owners. This provision is new under our constitution and it is a wonderful provision.

So i’Taukei land is safe. And my Government has made it even safer by closing off some legal avenues that former politicians were using to convert i’Taukei land to freehold land. They did this by first converting it to Crown land and then selling it on.

This land was lost forever. I stopped this practice. I closed these loopholes. And I did it specifically to make our land safer, to put it beyond the reach of those unscrupulous people among us who are willing to sell off our birth right for personal gain.

I urge you all to ignore those who are trying to scare you into voting for them by making you feel insecure. Turn your backs on them. And read the Constitution for yourself. That’s when you’ll realise that they are trying to fool you. I repeat: there is no threat to I’Taukei land. In fact, the opposite is true. It is protected for all time.

Another lie these would-be politicians are spreading is that there is a threat to Christianity because Fiji is now a secular state and that Jesus needs defending. Jesus doesn’t need defending. If anything, his position in Fiji has never been stronger.

For any Christian, he is our Lord and Saviour. He is at the centre of our lives and nothing can change that. Let me explain what a secular state really means. Because it isn’t a threat to Christianity. It protects it, along with all the other major religions in Fiji.

All it means is that the State – the Government – is neutral when it comes to religion. It doesn’t take sides. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a 7th day, a Methodist or a Catholic or a Pentecostal. The Government doesn’t interfere with what you believe it and treats every religion equally. For example if you go for a Government job, what church you go to does not matter. what matters is whether you can do the job and deliver service to the public without discrimination.

Let me also make this clear. There is nothing to stop Christians from worshipping publicly or in private, preaching the Gospel or saying Christian prayers in our schools. Nothing. And that’s the case with the other religions too.

What no religion can do is force people of another religion to worship or pray for a supreme being they don’t believe in. And that is the right thing to do in a multi-religious nation like Fiji.

We all know Christianity is the main religion in Fiji so I am at a loss to know how it can be threatened at all. But imagine if you as a Christian lived in another country where Christianity wasn’t the main religion. You’d expect the freedom to follow Jesus. And that’s what we’re doing in Fiji. Keeping the State and religion separate and guaranteeing the right of every Fijian to practice whatever they believe in.

So I call on the people of Nasau and every Fijian to turn their backs on the politics of fear and embrace my vision of a new and better Fiji in which we all work, hand in hand, to build a better future for our children.

We are now giving those children free education to equip them for better lives and to build a smarter Fiji. As I keep saying all over the country: There has never been a better time to be Fijian. There has never been a better time to be a citizen of this nation – with its growing economy, the promise of more prosperity, punching above its weight and standing tall in the world.

My opponents want to take Fiji backwards. They want to take the lease money I have given you to decide for yourselves how it is spent and give it back to the elites. They want to divide the country again rather than unite it, which is my vision and the only way we will ever fulfil our promise.

They treat you like fools, make false promises and lie to you to get your vote. Whereas I believe in your basic decency and common sense. Your ability to see through those lies, recognise that actions speak louder than words and reject the politics of division.

I urge you all to think wisely how you will vote on 17 September. We must not allow the reforms of the past few years to be lost - those reforms that have given us the means as a nation to finally deliver outcomes for ordinary people like this one

I have my eyes firmly on the future, not the past. I have a vision for this nation which is inclusive and which will benefit every Fijian, not matter who they are or where they come from. And I ask you all to join me on that journey as together, we make it our mission to put Fiji first and make Fiji great.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it now gives me great pleasure to officially declare the Nasau Crossing open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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