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

**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, I - Taukei Affairs, Provincial Development, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**OPENING OF THE ROTUMA DAY CELEBRATIONS**

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**Rotuma Island Tuesday 13th May, 2014**

**ROTUMA 0900 Hours**

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**The Chairman and Members of the Rotuma Council;**

**Chiefs of Rotuma;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls.**

Noa’ia, Ni sa Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be in Rotuma again and deeply honoured to be Chief Guest at these celebrations to mark Rotuma Day, 2014.

I was last here in 2008 and still have vivid memories of that visit and the wonderful welcome you afforded me as Prime Minister.

Every Fijian who has ever had the privilege to visit Rotuma always marvels at its natural beauty. It is a very special part of Fiji, not least because of the Rotuman people – their unique history, their culture and the wonderful contribution they make as Fijians to our nation as a whole.

There is no doubt that for such a relatively small and isolated place, you have had a disproportionate influence on Fiji’s development. We find Rotumans scattered throughout Government, the private sector, the Military and other professions.

I’m fond of saying that Fiji generally punches above its weight in the world. But its also true to say that Rotuma punches above its weight in Fiji. And every Fijian - no matter where they come from – honours that contribution to our national life.

So today is a special occasion – a joyous occasion – not only for Rotumans but every Fijian. I was especially keen to be here today – in the homeland of every Rotuman – to share in your celebrations and focus more national attention on the importance of the Rotuman community in Fiji. All over the country and overseas, similar commemorations are taking place as Rotumans everywhere gather together to mark their special day.

The great strength of the new Fiji we are building together is our ability to celebrate the richness of our respective cultures even as we embrace the overriding principle of one people and one nation. The opening ceremony of the Fijian Tourism Expo in Nadi last week featured a wonderful performance by our young people that brought all these strands together. It reminded everyone present that under the Fijian umbrella, we have a unique diversity of cultures: Polynesian Rotumans, the indigenous iTaukei, with their diversity even from province to province; the descendants of those brought from British India and Melanesia to slave in the plantations; the descendants of European and Chinese settlers and traders; the Micronesians who settled here and, and of course many others who now call Fiji home and are all now proud to be Fijians.

Under my government, we want to encourage the public celebration of our nation’s rich and unique heritage. To remind everyone of how we came to be where we are. And together, underline our determination to take Fiji forward in a united and inclusive way.

I have a fundamental belief that there is a place in the new Fiji for everyone, whoever they are and wherever they come from. It doesn’t matter to me what your background is. Together, we must all work hard to fulfill our destiny and make Fiji Great. And we can only do that if everyone is equal and has the same opportunities, the same responsibilities.

I also believe passionately that Government exists solely to serve the people. Our job is to empower you, to give you the things you need to improve your own lives and the lives of your family. Our job is to not make false promises but to deliver. And wherever you live and no matter how distant or isolated you are, every Fijian deserves the same level of Government services -education, electricity, water, better health services, better roads, better telecommunications.

Put simply, we want the people of Rotuma to have the same opportunities as anyone living in the other parts of Fiji. And all along, my Government has made it a priority to improve the infrastructure here and boost the level of services.

When I came here six years ago, I had thorough consultations with the Council and other community representatives to identify pressing areas of need. Flowing from those discussions, I specifically directed Government officials to launch a number of major initiatives and I’m pleased to say that these have gradually been delivered.

We’ve improved the roads around the island; improved the Oinafa Jetty; repaired and upgraded your airport; upgraded the Rotuma Hospital and are making plan to build a new one; upgraded the nursing quarters, established the Rotuma Export Market Company (REMCOL); and boosted a range of government services such as the Met Office, Immigration, Customs, Biosecurity and the Ports Authority to enable Rotuma to become a recognized Port of Entry into Fiji.

This week, we have provided a 20 foot freezer to REMCOL to raise the standard and quantity of your food produce; we’ve completed the transfer of 71 cattle to provide you with a better supply of meat and milk; we’re upgrading the water supply by drilling more boreholes and making it cleaner by introducing a treatment plant; and we’ve spent $204,000 to build a 10,000 gallon water tank at Penhulu Reservoir.

We’re also reviewing and modernising the laws under which Rotuma is governed. The Rotuma Decree and Rotuma Lands Decree will soon go before cabinet for approval.

And last but not least, we have upgraded the Rotuma High School and will soon begin work on new buildings, a teacher’s quarters and new furniture and equipment at a cost of more than $400,000.

Of course, Rotuman students now enjoy the free education that we have introduced for the first time in schools throughout Fiji. I urge every student here today to take advantage of the opportunities Government is providing and work hard to achieve your dreams. Because not only do you now have free schooling, but you can get a loan to pursue higher education at university or technical college and obtain living allowances to enable you to do so. And if you work really hard and get into the top 600 students, the Government will pay for everything. It’s all part of our vision to create a clever country in Fiji, which, of course, also means, a smarter Rotuma.

We also have a broader vision for Rotuma to keep raising living standards and create more wealth for its people. It’s encapsulated in the theme for this year’s Rotuma Day – Moving Rotuma Forward. I congratulate the Council for embracing this theme for Rotuma Day 2014. We are moving Rotuma forward. We are putting in place the building blocks for a brighter future. We are identifying further development opportunities and intend to capitalize on them.

We think the island - with its rich volcanic soil and favourable climate - has a lot more potential to develop its agricultural Sector. We need to free up more land for agriculture. We need increased production and higher yields. We need to improve our food security and do everything we can to boost our current export trade with Tuvalu. And we need to get produce destined for the Fijian mainland to the marketplace quicker and more cheaply.

A cornerstone of this plan are the new ships that are being acquired by the Government Shipping Service to service Rotuma and the other outer islands of Fiji. You’ve already seen the first of these vessels, the Sigavou, and now a second, the Vunilagi, that entered service last week and made its maiden voyage to Rotuma. Another, bigger, ship will join them this time next year and then another in 2015, taking the total GSS fleet to seven.

These new ships are not only providing a better travel experience for passengers. They also have modern freezers to keep produce in peak condition. And they have the ability to carry far more in the way of supplies, making it easier to build better houses and ferry new equipment such as generators. So they are playing a vital role in our overall plans to improve the infrastructure on islands like Rotuma.

As I said at the commissioning of Vunilagi last week, we are putting the “service” back into the Government Shipping Service and modernising its fleet to enable it to better meet the needs of Rotumans and other islanders. Until these ships arrived, the GSS hadn’t acquired a new vessel for 29 years. It’s taken my Government to do so, just as it’s taken my Government to finally tackle so many of Fiji’s infrastructure needs that were badly neglected until we took office.

In Rotuma’s case, we want to create further incentives for people to stay on the island if they choose to do so, providing for themselves and producing things that other people want to buy. Your population has been steadily declining over the years and there are currently five times more Rotumans living outside of Rotuma than the two thousand or so who remain behind. We want to arrest that steady decline by providing Rotumans with a viable, sustainable, economic future, not only for themselves but for future generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls, I repeat: under my Government, Rotuma is Moving Forward. As I say all over the country: there has never been a better time to be a Fijian. And on Rotuma Day 2014, I can also say to you all that there has never been a better time to be a Rotuman.

As you are all aware, elections will be held on 17 September. 4 political parties have already been formed, and I have put in application to register my party - the proposed FijiFirst. As you are aware, that I cannot campaign now until my party is registered. However, let me tell you one thing. As I said in my statement when I lodged the application, that we must as political parties campaign on the basis of honesty, sincerity, and love and affection and without any pretentions. This means telling all Fijians about your policies in a positive manner. This means not lying to win people’s favour. This means putting the interests of all Fijian people and Fiji first, before your own political careers.

To tell you the type of behavior that we should not engage in, recently one of the political parties was distributing a flyer that I was earning a salary of 1.7 million dollars. They have done so without any fact, or proof or evidence. I do not earn 1.7 million dollars. You will find out what my salary is after the registration of the proposed FijiFirst, when I will provide the declaration of my assets and liabilities to the Fijian Elections Office.

We must all work together to change this culture of malice and deceit that unfortunately many of the older politicians and political parties have practiced and continue to practice. If we are all to progress as a nation and as a country and improve the lives of people, no matter where they are in Fiji, we must embrace leaders who are sincere, truly care for everyone irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background or gender. Leaders who have policies for development, modernization and improving the lives of all Fijians.

Thank you for the wonderful welcome that you have given me and my delegation. We look forward very much to the day’s events, to meet as many ordinary Rotumans as possible and to see more of your beautiful surroundings.

It is now my great pleasure to declare the Rotuma Day 2014 celebrations open.

Faiaksia, Vinaka Vakalevu, thank you.