

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

**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**

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE SIGATOKA LEGAL AID OFFICE**

Legal Aid Office Wed. 21st May, 2014

Sigatoka 1100 Hours

Members of the Judiciary;

The Solicitor-General and Chair of the Legal Aid Commission;

Na Ka Levu Vakatawa, Ratu Vosailagi

Invited Guests;

My Fellow Fijians;

Bula Vinaka and good morning to you all.

Today I have the privilege of officially opening the Legal Aid Commission's new Sigatoka office which has already been operational.

The opening of this office marks another major step in my Government’s efforts to ensure that all Fijians have equal access to the justice system.

In fact, we have made it a priority to ensure that the services of the Legal Aid Commission are available in every town and city around the country.

With the opening of this office, the residents of Sigatoka and its greater area will no longer have to travel to Nadi, or in some cases as far as Lautoka, to seek legal aid services.

Not only was this time consuming, it was expensive. And unfortunately at times it prevented Fijians from seeking the justice they rightfully deserved. With this new office, we are removing the obstacles of time, distance and expense.

Equal access to justice should mean just that—justice that is readily available to all. In fact, the Constitution now requires government to provide legal aid services to those who cannot afford to pursue justice.

At the end of the day, providing equal access to justice for all Fijians is the responsibility of the Government. In order for Legal Aid to work for the people, to do its job, it has to be adequately funded.

It is for this reason that my Government will ensure that the Legal Aid Commission has the staff, facilities, and funds it needs to assist people who cannot afford the services of a lawyer.

Over the last few years, we have steadily increased funding to the Legal Aid Commission, from $800,000 in 2012, to $2 million in 2013, to a record $4.4 million this year, which is the largest allocation for Legal Aid in Fiji’s history.

This funding has allowed for a huge expansion of Legal Aid services in Fiji, which this new Sigatoka Office is part of. It is the 5th new legal aid office that my Government has opened since 2006.

Like the others, it is modern, well resourced, and fully staffed with lawyers and support staff. It has facilities to accommodate clients including rooms for clients to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality.

Legal Aid offices now provide legal assistance in areas of civil law, which was not done before – such as drafting of Wills, taking out letters of administration, probate matters, and assisting with FNPF withdrawals in absence of nomination.

Apart from this, Legal Aid also provides legal representation in Family and Criminal Law matters, as well as offering advisory services in all areas of the law.

But we’re not stopping here. The expansion of Legal Aid services will continue. I’ve been informed that the Savusavu and Navua Offices have been completed and I am pleased to announce that I will shortly be officiating the opening for these two offices.

Also, 3 more offices are being planned for Nasinu, Taveuni and Tavua, which we anticipate to open by July this year.

This amounts to a radical transformation of the Legal Aid system in Fiji and it’s something I’m personally very proud about as your Prime Minister.

For those who qualify, it’s all free. Ladies and Gentlemen, my Government remains firmly committed to providing equal access to the justice system for every Fijian, in particular for those Fijians who are unable to afford the services of a lawyer, in particular for those Fijians who are underprivileged and marginalised.

And now I have much pleasure in officially declaring the Sigatoka Legal Aid Commission Office open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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