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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

SPEECH AT THE FRU CENTENNIAL JERSEY LAUNCH

Holiday Inn Mon. 16th Dec., 2013

SUVA 1845 Hours

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Bula vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

It’s hard to imagine that we are here to mark 100 years of rugby in Fiji.

We join an exclusive club of countries that can boast a century of playing one of the world’s favourite sports.

Tonight, we celebrate that achievement.

In 1913, the first rugby club was formed by New Zealander P.J Sheehan. Since then, the game has grown from its rather humble beginnings to be one of the top sports in Fiji.

In the process, we have won a well-deserved spot amongst the ranks of the world’s elite rugby nations. Rugby spectators everywhere know that there is a unique way that Fijians play the game. They either love us or hate us because when we’re playing well, we’re hard to beat.

Our natural flair for rugby is undeniable. Fiji’s free-flowing style has won over legions of fans from well beyond our shores and has earned our men and women places on teams from every corner of the globe.

Fiji’s contribution to world rugby cannot be understated. Year after year, we have produced world-class players in both 15’s and 7’s rugby.

Tonight, we gather to celebrate the generations of Fijian players who have played their hearts out for Fiji.

Who would ever forget the talent of Joe Levula, George Cavalevu, Rusiate Vuruya, Isimeli Batibasaga or Waisale Serevi?

Or the magic of Ratu Sir George Cakobau, Meli Kurisaru, Pio Bosco Tikoisuva or Rupeni Caucaunibuca?

As we remember these players, and the scores of others who have been household names in Fiji, we can’t help but remember some of the great triumphs they won for Fiji, as well as the humbling defeats.

This reminds us of sport’s amazing ability to lift our national spirit and bring Fijians from different backgrounds together. Of its ability to form bonds between people who attach themselves to a common cause – celebrating the same victories and lamenting the same defeats.

Whether its rugby, football, or any of the other sports we play in Fiji, support for a team can give people a common source of pride and a shared association like little else can.

Perhaps no one understood this better than the late Nelson Mandela, whom we gathered to remember at a special memorial service in Suva today. This famous South African Leader understood the power of sport to bridge divisions in society, as he demonstrated to the world during the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

There’s no doubt that like in South Africa sports in Fiji – at their various levels – give us a pride for ourselves, for our school, for our town or city, for our district, for our province and for our nation.

This is why a hundred years of rugby is truly something to celebrate, because it’s a hundred years of a sport that has enhanced our lives and made us proud to be Fijian.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I go tonight, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight one episode from the century of rugby history in Fiji. I’m sure it’s well known to some, but to others it might come as a surprise.

It’s hard to believe, but Fijian rugby owes much to the Welsh Rugby Union. That’s right, the Welsh.

In 1964, their hospitality opened the door to Europe and the world for Fijian rugby and we have never looked back.

The 1964 tour to Wales, France and Canada showcased Fiji to a legion of new supporters, coaches and administrators who took an interest in Fiji that they haven’t shaken since.

There can be little doubt that the honour that fell to Fiji of being the only international union to make a tour of England in 1970 – the centenary year of the Rugby Football Union – was a direct result of the impact of the 1964 tour on the British rugby public.

The 1970 tour was truly extraordinary and the famous Cardiff match was one of Fijian rugby’s most important ever. Film from that match found its way around the world, which has been obsessed with Fijian rugby ever since.

Tonight, I ask you to join me in congratulating the Fiji Rugby Union for what indeed is a milestone event.

I also take this opportunity to challenge our future generations of rugby players to uphold Fiji’s proud tradition of playing this game – Fijian style – for the next hundred years.

I have no doubt that many exciting times lie before us.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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