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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 RELEASE OF TWO NEW CANE VARIETIES, NAMELY QAMEA AND VIWA**

SRIF Station or Ba Town Cncl Civic Hall Fri. 2nd May, 2014

BA 1200Hours

**The Permanent Secretary for Sugar,**

**Acting CEO for SRIF,**

**Members of SRIF Staff,**

**Cane Farmers,**

**Industry Stakeholders,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and good morning to you all.

I’m delighted, as usual, to be in Ba and especially to launch an important breakthrough for our sugar cane industry - two new varieties of cane that have been especially developed here in Fiji for local conditions and the benefit of Fijian growers.

Before I do, I want to send a simple message to everyone in the Sugar Cane Industry – whether you’re a cane farmer, harvester, lorry driver, mill worker or any other industry stakeholder.

My Government is fully committed to the survival, prosperity and future viability of Fiji’s Sugar Cane Industry. A healthy sugar cane industry means a healthy Fiji for every citizen, and not just the 200,000 Fijians dependent on sugar. And we are doing everything humanly possible to guarantee that future.

We are now at a critical turning point. When my Government assumed office, many people had simply written the industry off, convinced that it was on the verge of collapse. But we were not going to let that happen without a fight. And I’m delighted to report to you all that we are winning that fight.

Over the past two seasons, the reforms we have made to the Industry are showing clear signs of producing a remarkable turn-around.

But I also want to send you all another message: that it is vitally important for every Fijian that those reforms continue. That we keep working together to guarantee that viable future for the sake of those working in the Sugar Cane Industry now and the generations to come.

All of the progress that we have made so far can so easily be lost if we take our eyes off the ball. So I appeal to every Fijian working in the sugar cane industry to carefully consider who is best placed to take the Industry forward and closely examine the record so far.

The fact is that stability and growth are remerging in the Industry for the first time in years. We’re no longer in survival mode just trying to keep the Industry from sliding over the edge. We’re now developing a long-term strategy to ensure that sugar cane continues to provide sustainable livelihoods for ordinary Fijians in the Industry and maintains its position as our nation’s second biggest export earner.

Sticking to that strategy is crucial because in today’s world, the global trading environment for sugar is marked by unstable prices and market fluctuations.

For a small player like Fiji, this presents serious challenges and uncertainty, especially without preferential access to international markets.

But these challenges are not insurmountable. It just means that we can’t be complacent or rely on the old ways of doing things. We have to be smarter, more adaptable, constantly on the lookout for opportunities, constantly able to change. And we have to be strategic and plan for the future.

To this end, we are actively engaged in tough negotiations with the European Union for continuing access for our raw sugar exports. Those negotiations have been very challenging but we are not putting all our eggs in one basket.

On the domestic front, we have ambitious plans for the future to increase production, boost efficiency and diversify the Industry. We are adopting a holistic approach to reform in the Sugar Industry Decree that the Government is currently formulating. Because all aspects of the Industry are inter-dependent and there is no point in reforming some and not the others.

Last month, I announced plans for the Fiji Sugar Corporation to assume the management of all harvesting and transport. This will relieve cane growers of some of their costs and improve the efficiency and reliability of transporting cane to the mills.

In the meantime, the FSC has already begun serious work on rehabilitating Fiji’s rail system that carries much of the cane to the mills. This includes the purchase of 2 more locomotives from Queensland and 10 6-tonne rail bins, which we intend to trial for the future cartage of cane. These could, over time, replace the existing 3 tonne bins.

On another front, key stakeholders are also looking at the possibility of establishing a “price stabilisation fund” to ensure a better return for our farmers. We think we can get higher and more predictable prices than we can by relying on the present 70/30 percent sugar proceeds sharing formula.

Essentially, our aim is to provide more stability and confidence for growers in particular but also the rest of the Industry so that we can generate more investment in sugar.

The FSC has also made a substantial capital investment in cogeneration in its Labasa Mill -and shortly in its Rarawai Mill – to give them the ability to produce all the energy they need themselves. This will not only save costs but eventually enable any surplus energy to be sold to the FEA. And it’s all part of our overall effort to reduce Fiji’s reliance on diesel fuel and lower our billion-dollar-a-year fuel import bill.

As a nation, we have ample cause to be excited about this year’s crush. The FSC has set an ambitious target of two million tonnes of cane this year – producing around 210,000 tonnes of sugar. And as Sugar Minister, I am very optimistic that this target is well within our reach.

As part of ensuring that this year’s crushing season will not face any uncertainties and in my Government’s commitment to reduce all difficulties for all sugar cane growing stakeholders, I take this opportunity today to announce that the dispensation given to all cane lorries last year will continue for this cane crushing season. I have already issued a directive to this effect and the MOU that was signed last year will be extended to this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Research and development play a big part of my Government’s plans for the long-term sustainability and growth of the Sugar Cane Industry in Fiji. The quest is for higher yielding varieties, higher sugar content, higher fibre content, cane varieties that are disease resistant and drought tolerant.

The search for new breakthroughs never ends. It is driven by the need to continuously look at raising levels of efficiency and effectiveness relative to the scarce resources that are available to us. It is about doing more with less.

We must cultivate a culture of excellence and the best possible intellectual environment to achieve optimum results. And we must understand that achieving these results can take time.

It can take years to breed a new variety of sugar cane. Years of hard work and fine-tuning. But we can’t let this dampen our resolve. It’s worth the wait. The right variety of sugar cane can have a huge impact on the fortunes of our farmers and it can be a big boost the Industry as a whole.

Today, we are gathered to celebrate the culmination of this journey of painstaking research and development with the release of two new sugar cane varieties. We can be very proud because both are genuinely Fijian Made and both are suited to the Fijian climate.

**Qamea** took 20 years to develop. It is an early-to-mid maturing variety with high cane yield, suitable to all soil types, no sheath hair (convenient for harvesting by hand) and high millable stalks.

**Viwa** took 10 years to develop. It is a mid-to-late maturing variety; thin but tall cane; does not lodge; is tolerant of dry conditions; grows well in very poor soils; has high fibre content – which is suitable for cogeneration – and has never flowered, meaning that it never stops growing.

**Qamea** and **Viwa** are the 18th and 19th cane varieties, respectively, to have been developed in Fiji by our very own scientists and I thank them on behalf of the nation for their sterling effort.

I want to pay special tribute to one of the pioneers of the Sugar Cane Research Centre - Dr. Ram Krishna Murthi. People like Dr. Murthi is the embodiment of the clever country my Government envisages for Fiji across every sector of the economy.

I’m told that for the first time after the research phase, the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji carried out field trials on seven farms to test these new varieties in different environments. Later this morning you will have the opportunity to hear feedback from these growers.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After the release of the new varieties this morning, the onus is clearly on cane growers to make good use of them. We now have 19 commercial varieties available to choose from and growers can approach either the SRIF, the Sugar Cane Growers Council or the FSC for advice on which variety is suitable for their particular farms.

I would like to take this opportunity to announce the appointment of a new Interim SRIF Board to take the Institute to another level. It will be chaired by the Executive Chair of FSC, and other Board members will be Permanent Secretary for Sugar, the CEO for the Sugar Cane Growers Council.

I also wish to announce that the acting CEO for SRIF will be Mr. Sanjay Prakash.

The Interim Board and the acting CEO will prepare and guide SRIF to undertaking adaptive research that meet the requirements of the Fijian Sugar Cane Industry so that SRIF remains relevant and ready to meet new challenges.

I now have great pleasure in formally releasing the two new cane varieties -**QAMEA** and **VIWA -** to the Fijian Sugar Cane Industry.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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