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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 PRESENTATION OF PENSION CHEQUES**

**RARAWAI & PENANG CANE PRODUCERS ASSOCIATION**

**Market Bure Friday 24th May, 2013
BA 1100hrs**

The Executive Chair of FSC;

The President and Members of the Rarawai/Penang

Cane Producers Association;

The Permanent Secretary for Sugar;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all. It’s a great pleasure for me to be in Ba today to honour some of our veteran cane growers with pension cheques for their lifetime of service to the Fijian sugar cane industry.

 Some 380 people over the age of 70 who have no other pensions are to receive $100 a month through the Rarawai/Penang Cane Producers Association.

This money comes from a fund set up under the Fairtrade initiative. This initiative was allowed and supported by my government and in conjunction with the FSC, Tate and Lyle, today we see one of the results of this collaboration.

In 2012, the Rarawai-Penang Cane Producers Association received $1.42 million dollars for its crop and is dispersing these pensions from its Fairtrade Premium Fund. I can think of no group in Fiji more deserving than veteran cane growers who have been the backbone of our country.

The Fijian economy has been built on the sugar cane industry and the sweat and toil of these farmers. I don’t believe that this fact has been acknowledged widely enough. Indeed I am saddened by the fact that it never was.

Before the growth of tourism and other sectors the sugar cane industry for nearly 100 years was almost the sole contributor to the prosperity of our country. Our cane farmers were the ones who contributed to generating revenue for our country, helping to build roads, hospitals and schools and create other industries.

Imagine what life was like on our cane farms more than fifty years ago, when many of these men started work.

No mechanisation and long hours under the tropical sun with bullocks and ploughs to till the soil.

Today we honour the backbreaking effort of these growers that made sugar Fiji’s biggest export earner.

As Minister for Sugar, I have tried hard to address the years of neglect by previous governments and the politicisation that almost took this industry to the brink of collapse. Some factors were and are of course out of our control, such as world market prices. But what we could control, we so often didn’t. And the reforms that were so badly needed were put off because it just seemed all too hard or it did not suit the agenda of the politicians.

Now, my Government has made the hard decisions needed to not only keep the Fijian sugar cane industry alive but to make it a durable and lucrative sector. And I’m pleased to report today – in front of these veterans of the industry to whom we owe so much – that our efforts are finally bearing fruit.

Fijian cane growers will receive nearly $80 a tonne for their recent crop instead of less than $50 a tonne two and a half years ago. It’s a stunning result.

In addition to this my Government and FSC have agreed to sell 60,000 tonnes of Fair trade sugar to Tate and Lyle to ensure that the farmers still receive the Fair trade premium price of $110 a tonne.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this pension initiative sits well with my Government’s policy of providing social security system for Fijians over the age of 70

We want our senior citizens to live out their twilight years without being unduly concerned for themselves and a burden on their families.

In our new Constitution, we are also enshrining social and economic rights for the first time – the right to health and sanitation, right to housing, the right to adequate food and clean water, right to economic participation, those things that constitute the necessities of life.

We will continue to work to improve the lot of elderly Fijians everywhere, and also improve the lot of all Fijians dependent on the sugar cane industry for their livelihoods through a holistic approach.

The Government has also guaranteed financial access to FSC to facilitate a quicker system of payment to growers. We are subsidising landowners for lease payments if they renew land leases. And we have set aside additional funding to assist farmers to increase production and yields.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to stress today the need to depoliticise the sugar cane industry. There are too many self serving old political faces who are trapped in the past and are still trying to sow doubt and fear.

To those of you dependent on the sugar cane industry, I urge you to think about their false promises and deception. I also urge you to think about what has been achieved under my Government regarding the improvement in the sugar cane industry, the genuine effort to improve the quality of your lives – the lives of all without discrimination; the improvement in and access to justice and equality and our focus on the future.

Of course, today we remember the past in a positive fashion and pay tribute to those of you who have given your working lives to this industry and who now deserve a degree of security.

These pensions and the certificates acknowledging your contribution is our way of saying “bahut dhanyavaad, shukria, vinaka vakalevu and thank you”.

Every Fijian joins me in paying tribute to you today and wishes you peace and contentment. Today we salute you for your service to us all.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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