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**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, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON NOBILISATION OF ERIANTHUS \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Novotel Hotel Thursday 23May 2013
NADI 0945 Hours**

The Permanent Secretary for Sugar;

The Chief Executive of SRIF;

Renowned Sugarcane Scientists from Overseas;

Distinguished Guests;

Sugarcane Farmers;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula Vinaka and good morning.

On behalf of the Fijian Government and people, I welcome you all to this workshop, especially those visiting Fiji from overseas.

Fiji takes its role as host of such international gatherings very seriously. And when it comes to sugar, as the current chair of the International Sugar Council (ISC), we are firmly committed to advancing the cause of this global industry and the millions of ordinary people the world over who depend on it for their livelihoods.

As we gear up for the 43rd session of the ISC to be held here in Fiji next month, it is indeed a great pleasure to be with you this morning to launch one of the world’s first international workshops on the breeding of “Erianthus” – to create a sugarcane variety that will drastically improve yield in sugar and fibre. It is nothing less than a potential game-changer.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no doubt that the global sugar industry is facing exceptional challenges. World sugar prices have been unstable over the past couple of years.

The market has been altered by major shifts in production in a number of key sugar-producing countries, which have drastically decreased the volume of sugar traded internationally.

And, naturally, it is the small players such as Fiji that are most vulnerable to these uncertainties and fluctuations of the marketplace.

I mention all this, ladies and gentlemen, because although there are certain forces that are out of our control, we must act on the reforms that are within our control.

It means being smarter. It means adopting new practices. It means taking advantage of new technologies and techniques.

In Fiji, the sugarcane industry my Government inherited six years ago was wracked by neglect, mismanagement, a lack of vision, a lack of financial and commercial discipline, political interference, and corruption.

For all the uncertainties that existed in the international market, there was certainty in Fiji that the industry was in serious trouble. So we set ourselves to carrying out a comprehensive series of reforms. It has been a demanding process to change the old mindsets. However, with vision and planning it will pay dividends.

In this respect, I am pleased to say that only last week I was able to announce to the Fijian people a record payment to cane farmers for last year’s harvest, as well as a high price secured for next year.

A healthy sugar industry means a healthy Fiji and a viable and sustainable future for all our citizens, not just those directly employed in the industry.

So last week’s announcement marks a huge achievement for us. It is a sign that we are beginning to see a stability and growth re-enter the industry.

But this does not mean we can become complacent. We need to seize the opportunities that present themselves at every turn.

For the sugar industry, these opportunities often come in the form of new sugarcane varieties. In fact, the development of new cane varieties forms an absolutely critical part of the industry.

Like many of the countries represented here, Fiji has a sugarcane research centre. We have produced many commercial varieties of sugarcane, and we have achieved great successes in developing cane varieties low in impurities, adaptable to poor soils, requiring less water and resistant to hurricanes and droughts.

But we are gathered here to discuss a new horizon: a hybrid of Erianthus that is high in sugar, high in fibre, and resilient to common diseases.

The results of research carried out in a number of countries have been very promising. But as of yet, widespread success in breeding this hybrid remains elusive.

I have been told that only two groups have claimed to have successfully bred Erianthus, and that most others are at various stages in the so-called nobilisation process – the breeding procedure for creating the hybrid.

Leading this workshop, we have distinguished research scientists from eight nations who have had different levels of success with the nobilisation of Erianthus. This represents a unique opportunity for us to learn from each other, and bring the knowledge we gain back to our respective countries.

It is my strong hope that – over the course of the five days – we come a step closer to unlocking the potential of this hybrid.

I wish you all the best in your discussions and research. I am confident that collaboration in this area will lead to a brighter future for the sugarcane industries in all our countries.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.