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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**

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**STATEMENT TO THE NATION ON THE RELEASE OF FIJIAN PEACEKEEPERS**

**PRESS ROOM 12th Sept, 2014**

**Govt Bldgs / Suva 7.00am**

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My fellow Fijians,

I’m delighted to announce to the nation that the 45 Fijian peacekeepers being detained in Syria have been released unharmed. They are now safely back in a United Nations compound, they are all healthy, they are in high spirits and they will soon be in contact with their families and loved ones here in Fiji.

Our men will need to be debriefed and they obviously deserve a period of rest before they return to their duties, but I know that they are all keen to continue their mission.

I know all Fijians join me in feeling a great sense of relief and joy, as well as a deep appreciation for all those who had a hand in securing their safe release, including the skilled group of UN negotiators and our superb team in New York and Suva, who worked constantly behind the scenes to produce this outcome. As a nation, we thank you.

These 45 men are heroes.  They kept their cool and showed restraint under the most extreme circumstances imaginable. Because of their discipline, not one militant was killed and none of our soldiers were harmed. They upheld the integrity of UN peacekeeping and as a result have strengthened Fiji’s reputation in the international community.

We’ve shown the world our discipline and resolve and have maintained the respect and trust of the United Nations for our participation in present and future peacekeeping missions.

Peacekeeping is about providing a calm, stable and neutral presence in hotspots around the globe in order to ease tensions and prevent violence. Our men never once breached this mission and as a nation we should be extremely proud of their conduct.

As I often say, Fiji stands tall and proud in the world, and today because of these brave men, we stand even taller and prouder.

During this ordeal, the courage of the families has been remarkable. They were naturally distressed and anxious during this difficult time but they never once questioned why their loved ones were sent to the Golan Heights in the first place. They know better than anyone else that our mission is to bring peace and security to people living in troubled areas around the world.

It is a noble mission, which we will continue to perform whenever we are called on by the United Nations to serve. For the families, as for all Fijians, it is a matter of great pride that our peacekeepers are able to make such a significant contribution to the wellbeing of others who are less fortunate than us – who are vulnerable living in places that have been torn apart by division and violence.

I would like to thank all those who kept these men in their thoughts and prayers. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support for our soldiers from Fijians across the country, from all backgrounds and of all faiths. We care for each other like family and during times like this the welfare of the men and their families was never far from our minds.

As you all know, we united as a nation to pray for our men’s safe return and today our prayers have been answered.

God bless our peacekeepers, God bless their loved ones and God bless Fiji.

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