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**SPEECH AT THE COMMISSIONING OF DREKETI GRID EXTENSION**

**Maramarua Primary School Thurs. 16th Jan., 2014**

**DREKETI 1100 Hours**

**Cabinet Ministers,**

**Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corp,**

**The Fiji Electricity Authority Board, CEO and staff.**

**The People of Seaqaqa, Batiri and Dreketi,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

Many Fijians have grown up having access to electricity all their lives. So they naturally have little idea what it must be like not to have it all.

To not be able to reach for a switch to read your book, plug a kettle into the wall, keep your food cold in the Refrigerator or turn on a television.

They’re things a great many Fijians simply take for granted. Yet for large numbers of their fellow citizens, being able to access the national power grid has been a distant dream, and that includes the people of this region.

Until now, you’ve all needed a diesel generator to have electric light and power. And for many of you, that has simply been too expensive. The cost of a generator and the cost of the fuel needed to run it has been beyond your reach.

And so here, and in other isolated parts of Fiji, many people have grown up dependent on kerosene lamps and lanterns. And you’ve learnt to do without the electrical appliances that have revolutionised household chores elsewhere.

Entire generations of Fijians like you have cooked their evening meal on a fire or a primus. Entire generations of school children have done their homework either before the sun goes down or by squinting at the pages under a kerosene lamp.

All that comes to an end today in this new phase of my Government’s Look North Policy, in which we have made it a priority to develop Vanua Levu for the benefit of its people and the entire country.

I’m delighted to be here with all of you at the Maramarua Primary School to formally turn on the power, to launch the Dreketi Electrification project.

It’s the culmination of two year’s work to install a new 33-thousand volt Transmission Power Grid from Labasa to Dreketi via Seaqaqa at a cost of more than 14-million dollars.

Jointly funded by the Government and the FEA, it will provide power along the 70 kilometres from Labasa to Dreketi to some eight communities and 243 customers, with the ability to add more as the region develops.

It’s a great occasion for you – the people in this corridor from Seaqaqa, Batiri to here in Dreketi - and an important milestone in my Government’s effort to develop the North.

Coupled with the new road from Nabouwalu to Dreketi, we are, in a very real and practical manner, finally unleashing the economic potential of northern Vanua Levu and laying the foundation for new investment, job creation and prosperity.

By providing electricity and a proper road instead of a dirt track, we are creating the basic infrastructure that every society needs to grow. From these improvements are bound to come more people, more businesses and more wealth. And that means more opportunities for the people of this wonderful but previously neglected part of Fiji.

I’m told that about 5,000 people living along the Dreketi Seaqaqa highway will immediately benefit from this project – among them, families, schools and farmers on whom so much of our economy depends.

These Fijians finally have a Government that responds to their needs. Gone are the days in Fiji when Government came to look at what you needed, pretended to listen and then went away and did nothing. My Government is here to serve, to improve the quality of your lives and provide opportunities for you and your families.

We cared that you didn’t have access to power, that many of you couldn’t afford generators, that your evenings were filled with dim lights from candlepower and kerosene. We cared that some of you couldn’t afford to send your children to school, so we got rid of the fees and are opening up new schools to provide every Fijian with education and the opportunities that come with it.

We cared that your road was a rough track that became a mud track in wet weather, that your children had to walk through to go to school, that it took you too long to get medical help, too long to get to Labasa, too long to get to Nabouwalu.

We cared, we acted and we’ve delivered. And I am humbled by the number of people who have come up to thank me and have told me how much that commitment has meant to them. In turn, I want to pay tribute to the Board, management and workers of the FEA, and its contractors, who have made this project possible. You have done us all proud and we thank you for your service.

With the 24-million dollars set aside in this year’s budget to continue our electrification program, we look forward to soon strengthening the supply to the Tavua-Korovou corridor. This will allows rural communities and businesses in Ra and Tailevu to enjoy the same benefits that have now come to Seaqaqa, Batiri and Dreketi.

Fiji has also signed an agreement with the People’s Republic of China to construct a 700 kilowatt Mini Hydro Power Plant in Taveuni.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we begin 2014 as a nation in much better shape than when I and those around me embarked on our revolution eight years ago to create a new and better Fiji.

We now have a new Constitution that gives you more rights than ever before, we are addressing years of neglect when it comes to providing our people with basic services and in eight months’ time, we will have the first genuinely democratic election in our history.

I will soon be announcing the formation of a political party that I will lead to contest that election. We will, of course, be standing on our record of delivering basic services such as this and on the way in which we have created a fairer and more equal society, with justice and opportunity for all.

I will never accept that someone living in Dreketi deserves fewer services just because they live in a more isolated part of the country. I want you -and everyone in Fiji- to have the same basic services as people living in Suva – the same access to electricity, to water, to education, to basic health. It is an ambitious goal but I’m determined to achieve it by putting more money in basic infrastructure for the benefit of ordinary people and their families.

During the forthcoming campaign, I will also be laying out my vision for Fiji after the election, in the new and genuine democracy that we are creating and in which I want you all to play a part.

That vision is to build on the progress that we have made and the stability we have created to attract new investment to Fiji and provide new and sustainable jobs for our young people.

These young people will be prepared for life in a way that few young people in Fiji will have ever been prepared before. With our free education initiative, more of them will gain basic skills and knowledge in our primary and secondary schools and the ability to go on to higher education. With our scholarships and training programs, they will have more chance of being able to afford to acquire the specialist skills that higher education provides.

We want to provide them with more of the opportunities they deserve and that their parents could only ever dream of. And that means broadening their horizons way beyond their island home, to get more Fijians thinking of themselves as educated citizens of the world.

We see ourselves becoming the Singapore of the Pacific –vibrant, brimming with opportunity and a byword for quality, whether its our national airline, our tourism industry or the quality of the things we manufacture and export.

Ladies and Gentlemen, all this is within our reach if we can continue to think imaginatively and stay disciplined and focused. The lost years are over but only if we pursue the right course and think not just of ourselves but each other and our nation. If we put Fiji First.

All of us can detect a sense of real excitement in the air here today as we power up this area of Fiji for the first time. But I’m convinced that the future holds a promise that is limitless if we can harness the power of all Fijians to deliver our new democracy and the new Fiji.

With those words, I now have the privilege of officially turning on the electricity supply to the Seaqaqa, Batiri and Dreketi corridor and surrounding villages and communities.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thankyou.

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