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**SPEECH AT THE FIJI TAXI ASSOCIATION AGM**

**Civic Centre Sun. 23rd March, 2014**

**SUVA 1000 Hours**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start with a foreign review that I read recently: “don’t use this service. I’ve never had a more dishonest and unpleasant experience in my life. The cab-driver showed up 45 minutes late, even though I had called that morning to confirm the time. The web site said they had a flat rate to the airport, but the driver had left the meter on; orders from the boss he said. The cab-driver insulted his company, since they apparently do this to customers on a regular basis. The fare ended up being twice the flat rate”.

Could we learn from abroad? Yes, we can!

**1.Introduction**

International exchange of knowledge and experience in the taxi world can indeed be very inspiring. Therefore, my compliments to the Fiji Taxi Association as organizers of this annual gathering of Taxi industry people. An excellent initiative!

Taxi policy is above all a national item. Looking across borders can be very useful. For example, how can clients be served the best, what can the Government do about it, and what new developments are at stake.

That is why my Government supports this annual gathering of the Fiji Taxi Association.

And thus, I accepted wholeheartedly the invitation to present to you our beloved nations taxi policy.

But first, I would like to offer you a bird’s eye view on our nation: we are a transport country, especially on an international scale.

Thanks to our FOUR big main ports of entry – Nadi & Nausori International Airports and the Suva and Lautoka Wharves represents the gateway to greater South Pacific and the world at large. Enormous flows of passengers and goods enter or transit our country, on a daily basis.

At the same time, our Fiji has two main Islands and many smaller Islands and well populated country for its size. This means that we very carefully have to divide and utilize the vast space. And therefore, a sophisticated transport system to handle these flows adequately and fluently, is required.

In this perspective, the concept of a transport chain with its links fits very well. As your Prime Minister, I have to deal with the whole chain in public transport: the bus industry, mini-bus & RSL Transport industry and taxi/hire car industry. And our Government says this chain must improve its performance. Not only each species apart from each other, but the entire chain!

The taxi service is one of the links in that chain. You are all familiar with the taxi stands at our international airports, all cities & towns, rural areas and our Maritime Island zones.

That is why very recently our Attorney General & Minister for Local Government Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum carried out a widespread consultation for the public transport sector. We are looking forward to his findings and report to review your taxi industry.

Apart from this combination with the bus industry, taxis also has an important function of its own, namely in the transport from door to door. Everyone can order a taxi by phone, wherever you are, and the taxi gets you straight to your destination.

This is all commercial street taxi transport. However, in Fiji we should also introduce a system that should be called “contract hire taxi”. This shall be a subsidized transport of elderly or ill people, and people and pupils with mental or physical limitations.

This should be carried out with special taxis or maxi taxis. In this way, every Fijian has access to the mobility system.

As far as I know, our country has a unique system in that perspective. While seniors are an increasingly important part of our transport strategy, we also need to provide more focus on transportation for the physically challenged.

We are now working intensively to elaborate and implement the new policy of the Government. As regards to taxi industry, we have done this in recent years, and I would like to focus on that.

In 2011, we therefore started a profound reflection on the situation. We investigated the reasons why the taxi market operated so badly and what solutions might help.

This led to a new policy and a fundamentally different approach. We did this in close cooperation with the taxi industry people and the Fiji Taxi Association. Because we believed that support of all stakeholders was very important.

The new policy has clear goals, with the client as the central focal point.

Firstly: to improve quality and image of the street taxis.

Secondly: a higher reliability.

Thirdly: an affordable fare.

And fourthly: a healthy taxi market for operators and consumers.

To accomplish these goals we granted the taxi fare increase that came in effect from 7 November 2011. A year later we brought down the duty from 32% to 15% on cars less than 3000cc’s that are suitable for taxis and hire cars. Today for example, we see new modern fully air conditioned Fielders and Succeed cars running as taxis.

The biggest problems with taxis are in the cities, predominantly in Suva and Lautoka. If people are not satisfied with a taxi ride, mostly they don’t remember who the driver was or what company it was, to make a complaint afterwards. That is why we plan to give to all municipalities the authority to develop their own quality assurance system for the local street taxi market.

In addition, the two cities now have the opportunity to oblige taxi drivers to operate from their taxi base, as a requirement to get access to the local taxi ranks.

We believe that municipalities like Suva, Nadi, Lautoka, Labasa can much better determine what should be done locally, than a national ministry. In doing so, we’ve changed in a way a paper focused policy made on a national level, towards an effective approach at practical and local level.

Now, one year later, I am happy to compliment the city of Suva. They really are taxi pioneers. They are the first city to introduce the so called “taxi drop off” points. As a result of this taxi drivers are allowed to drop-off clients including senior citizens, sick and physically challenged citizens at the taxi drop off points.

Monitoring the quality and the enforcement of the rules are crucial in this new policy.

However, we don’t leave it all to the cities. We believe it is important to have national rules on the quality of taxis. Rules that apply to everyone. For example, every taxi operator and every taxi driver has to have a PSV license. To get one, they have to pass exams and get all the appropriate training.

Moreover, since November 2011, every taxi driver is obliged to give a receipt to his client after the ride. This receipt contains important information for the client. For example:

-the name and address of the taxi company;

-the build-up of the fare;

-the total fare;

-and where to make a complaint.

In this way, the reputation mechanism can do its work, because the driver is always traceable.

We, Government, also fix the fare structure of taxis, including the maximum rates. We do this to protect the client against exorbitant fares. But it also helps the Operators to operate in a healthy taxi market.

Moreover, every taxi operator has to have a procedure for handling complaints. And I suggest that every operator should join the Fiji Taxi Association that can establish a disputes committee to handle all taxi complaints. Together with the taxi industry, we should set up a national hotline for complaints though I believe that this system is currently handled by the Command Centre at LTA.

As you can see, we put a lot of energy in improving the quality of taxi transport on a national level. But the key element is the combination of national rules and local approach. I expect much of this fresh practical combination.

But we are not yet where we want to be.

So, Ladies and Gentlemen, exciting times ahead!

Like the expression says: *the proof of the pudding is in the eating.*

In the meantime, we have a couple of issues to deal -with.

As I stressed earlier, enforcement of new rules is very essential for the success of our new policy. The Ministry of Transport together with the Land Transport Authority monitors the public service transport sector closely, together with local FTA representatives.

Furthermore, we would like to see more self-regulation by the taxi sector. Our belief is that the Government, national or local, should not regulate too much. The system of group formation is a first big step forward, but more is needed in due course such as establishing call centres and pooling of individual operators by their area of operations.

Finally, the taxi sector should be more involved in implementing policies and enforcement of rules. The dress code, PSV drivers’ code of conduct and the taxi meter printout implementation should be a priority of every taxi operator.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

From what I have told you, I hope it is clear that our commitment is a set of national rules together with a firm, local approach. This should lead to an effective and efficient division of roles between national and local Governments. I am confident that this will be successful.

My responsibility as your Prime Minister concerns national requirements for improving the quality of taxis in Fiji. This regards to the following:

- in the first place, skilled and reliable operators and drivers;

- secondly, traffic safety and protection of drivers;

- and finally, attractive and affordable taxi transport for clients and transparent taxi fares.

This combination of rules and measures should lead to a healthy taxi market for clients, operators and drivers.

So all in all, a reliable Fiji Taxi Industry.

It is the best example how fruitful the exchange of experience can be.

Thank you – vinaka vakalevu.

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