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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 LAUNCHING OF THE LAGILAGI HOUSING PROJECT**

**Jittu Estate Thurs. 7th Nov, 2013**

**SUVA 1400 Hours**

**Attorney General and Acting Minister for Housing;**

**The Special Administrator, Suva City Council;**

**Permanent Secretaries;**

**Father Kevin Barr and PCN Representatives;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

I have had the pleasure this week to preside over a number of events of importance to the country, notably the arrival of our latest Airbus and the ground breaking ceremony for the modernisation of Nadi Airport.

But nothing is as important to me personally than to be here today to see so many homes being provided for ordinary Fijians and realise how much it will mean for their happiness and wellbeing.

It gives me immense pleasure to open the Lagilagi Housing Project and launch the first thirty three residential units of this housing project initiated by my Government.

This is a significant milestone in my Government's commitment to provide decent and affordable housing to every Fijian as we continue our program to build a new and better Fiji.

That commitment goes beyond the empty promises of the politicians of the past. Fiji’s homeless know more than most that talk is cheap. What they want to see is roofs over their heads and my Government is determined to provide them.

Indeed we take our obligation so seriously that we have enshrined it in the supreme law of our nation. The new Constitution promulgated by His Excellency the President in September specifically states that every Fijian has a right to adequate housing and sanitation.

What it means is that within its resources, all Governments are legally obliged to provide Fijians with adequate housing. Empty promises won’t be enough. My Government and all subsequent governments must dedicate adequate resources to building more and more homes. If we don’t, we are breaking our country’s Supreme Law.

Of course we can fulfill this obligation even faster if the economy grows. This means Government having to encourage private sector growth, it means creating a climate of confidence for investment, it means that employers and employees need to be reasonable when negotiating on working terms and conditions - all our focus should be growing the economy because it means more jobs, it means sustained jobs, it means that Government can use monies from increased revenues to provide better infrastructure including more housing projects such as this.

So today is an important step in that commitment, a commitment we also made when we endorsed the National Housing Policy and its Implementation Action Plan in 2011.

That policy recognised the need for a new approach to improve the housing conditions of ordinary Fijians and made it a national priority. It provided for a fundamental shift away from the direct delivery of housing to enabling the housing sector as a whole to perform better. And it was based on the premise that experience shows that people are capable of addressing their own housing needs given the right policy settings.

Since then, my Government has introduced a number of innovative measures aimed at providing more decent and affordable homes. We’ve established a Land Bank to provide land including for housing development. We’ve facilitated competitive low home loans from Commercial banks and financial institutions. We’ve provided tax refunds for new home owners to build their homes up to a value of $12,000. We’ve put price controls on building and construction material. And we have encouraged more lending for homes through the FNPF.

But above all, we have targeted our efforts at providing decent homes and security of tenure for Fiji’s poorest communities, and especially our squatters. And we have done it in a way that is innovative and inclusive.

This Lagilagi Housing Project is part of our Participatory Squatter Upgrading Projects, which involve a partnership between Government, NGOs, our development partners and ordinary Fijians. They are a new way forward for housing the poorer members of our community because they provide them with a genuine stake in their homes and in their futures.

We have not just given them a roof over their heads and security of tenure. We have required them to contribute financially within their limited means. And by contributing to the cost of their units, they are gaining a sense of ownership and pride. They are being empowered. And for the first time, through the new legal framework, they will be able to use their properties as security to enable them to obtain loans for other purposes - not go to the money lender. It is a holistic approach to improving their lives and a radical, positive departure from the mindset and conditions of the past that has held many poorer people back.

I want to pay tribute to those who have put so much effort into developing this model, which my Government believes has given us a blueprint to genuinely improve the lives of many poorer Fijians as the years progress.

The Lagilagi Housing Project is a joint partnership project between my Government through the Ministry of Local Government, Urban Development, Housing and Environment, People Community Networks [PCN] and Misereor, the German Catholic Organisation.

It has been a mammoth task - with a civil engineering phase that involved the relocation of squatters within the project site to other parts of the Jittu estate, to enable earth works and the provision of water and sewerage. And a building phase for the initial construction of 33 homes at a cost of almost $3-million, with another 101 to come.

All up, new homes for hundreds of poorer Fijians and their families, providing them with a new start and renewed hope for a better future.

Of the 33 now completed, 24 are two bedroom units, four are three bedroom units and five have been specifically designed for the elderly and disabled. One of these will be allocated to the Ministry of Health for the next two years to provide health care for the whole community.

In addition to the work here, my Government has approved the leasing of the whole of Jittu Estate to the People Community Network to facilitate the proper and decent housing of more than 10,000 poor or squatter families in Jittu, Wailea ,Nanuku Settlement and other settlements within Suva City.

I want to reiterate our commitment here today to improving the lives of these people. And I will have a lot more to say about our plans in tomorrow’s Budget.

I wish to also mention to all of you who will live in this estate. Please look after it. Look after your apartments. Take pride in it. Keep the surrounding clean. Because if you do so, it will not only mean a better environment and something good to look at but it will also mean that the value of your property will increase. When it increases in value it means that you have access to more money.

Thank you all - the People Community Network, our Fijian contractor Fortech and the various Consultants - for the commitment you have shown to contribute to our objective of improving the lives of our people.

I now declare the first 33 residential units of the Lagilagi Housing Project open.

Vinaka Vakalevu, Thank you.