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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 OPENING OF THE VALLEY ROAD UPGRADE**

Loma Primary Sch. Ground Thurs. 8th May, 2014

Valley Road, SIGATOKA 1100 Hours

Cabinet Ministers,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Cola vina and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here today in the Sigatoka Valley for a very important event in the lives of the people here and for the nation as a whole.

Since the 1970s, the Sigatoka Valley has been known as the food bowl of Fiji – or the salad bowl as some people call it – the source of a great amount of what we eat.

Yet for 40 years, no Government saw fit to provide a sealed road to enable that food to be taken from the Valley quickly and more efficiently to the markets and on to consumers, both here and overseas.

Well, today, those four decades of neglect come to an end as I proudly open a new sealed section of the Sigatoka Valley Road stretching 15 kilometres up into the Valley itself. And it’s a day to celebrate – for the growers who cultivate these rich river soils, for those who transport produce by road to market and for every single ordinary Fijian who calls this Valley, home.

This project - at a final estimated cost of $45-million dollars – has involved about two and a half years of preparing and sealing the road itself and the construction of 20 major box culvert crossings.

From now on, it will cut travel times and improve accessibility to many rural parts of the Provinces of Nadroga and Navosa. They include the villages of Nakalavou, Naduri, Narewa, Narata and Nasovotua and the farming settlements of Barara, Qereqere and Bilalevu.

All these places will directly benefit from this new stretch of road, along with more villages and settlements further up the Valley that the sealed portion is yet to reach but will still enjoy shorter journeys because of it.

Of course, it’s now going to be much quicker – and much cleaner - for local farmers to get their produce out of the Valley. This all-weather road and the year-round access it provides mean less disruption from extreme weather events. And the speed with which trucks can now travel along it spells more efficiency and the possibility of greater competitiveness.

But the benefits go way beyond the agricultural sector to improve the lives of everyone. School journeys will be faster for the students at schools along the road – including this one, Loma Primary School, the Nokonoko District School, the Sigatoka Valley High School and Waicoba District School.

For these students, less travel time means more play time and – I hope - more study time. I want you all to work as hard as you can and take advantage of the free schooling my Government has provided to become part of the clever country we envisage for Fiji.

The better road also means a faster trip to hospital if anyone gets sick. And the wear and tear on vehicles is also reduced, enabling transport operators to spend less on maintenance and repairs and more on providing a proper service.

Even the simple of task of heading down to Sigatoka to shop or sell things at the market becomes more of a pleasure and less of a chore. The days of sitting on a bus getting dust in your face and hair are over for those lucky enough to live along this stretch. And we’re hoping to eventually bring these benefits to people living further up the Valley as our road construction program continues.

But above all else, this new road also promises to open up more of the Sigatoka Valley for development, to attract new enterprises and create new jobs. All over the world, the record shows that building modern roads in rural areas increases economic activity, empowers ordinary people and enhances their prosperity and security.

They’re better able to access markets, sell their products and sell their labour because their travel times to potential employment are reduced. So that is the vision my Government has for the Sigatoka Valley, as well as other parts of Fiji, including Vanua Levu, where we are also providing proper sealed roads for the first time.

It’s all part of our plan to transform Fiji into a thriving modern nation state and improve the lives of every Fijian. And of our determination that no matter where they live, every Fijian deserves the same level of government services.

Ladies and Gentlemen, while I’m on the subject of roads, I also want to make a special plea today to the nation’s drivers to exercise more caution. Like every Fijian, I have been horrified by the recent spate of minibus accidents and especially the dreadful loss of a mother and child in an accident at the Suva Bus Station on Tuesday afternoon.

As a Government, we are doing everything we can to improve the quality of the nation’s roads. We have made it one of our most important budget priorities including education because better roads not only grow our economy but result in fewer accidents. But I want to say that no amount of spending on our roads will reduce the appalling number of accident fatalities if ordinary Fijian drivers don’t take responsibility for their own actions.

Too many mini bus drivers are still driving recklessly, too many people think the national speed limit of 80 kilometres an hour is for someone else, not for them. Too many people still drink and drive. Too many drivers are still being caught using mobile phones while driving. I appeal to every Fijian driver to examine their own behaviour, and their own consciences, and reflect on some of these recent accidents that have claimed the lives of too many innocent Fijians. It has to stop. And that begins with a change of attitude by all of us.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in closing I would like to thank all those who’ve brought this project to fruition; the Fiji Roads Authority, the financier, the Exim Bank of China; and the contractor, China Gezhouba Group and all of the project workforce.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare this new 15- kilometer sealed section of the Sigatoka Valley Road open.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thank you.

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