**HON PM BAINIMARAMA AT LAUNCH OF PLASTIC BAG LEVY AND REUSABLE CLOTH SHOPPING BAGS TO REPLACE PLASTIC BAGS**

**8/1/2017**

The Honourable Cabinet Ministers,
Members of the Diplomatic Corp,
CEOs and Heads of Business Organizations,
CEOs of Fijian Holdings and RB PATEL Group and Board,
Representatives of the Women’s Group,
Members of the Ba Women’s Forum,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here as we mark the start of our new financial year and bring into effect an unprecedented measure to protect our natural environment from pollution – a new ten cents levy on plastic bags.
And today, we also have a chance to celebrate the work of our women entrepreneurs who have produced reusable, cloth shopping bags for the Fijian people to use in favour of plastic bags.

My fellow Fijians, we are lucky to live in one of the most beautiful places on the planet. People from all over the world dream of the chance to see our beaches and reefs and experience the mountains, forests and waterfalls that we are blessed to call part of our home.

But it is clear that sense of gratitude is lost on far too many Fijians. I say that because – unfortunately – many of our people feel it is okay to treat our home with disrespect by turning our islands into a rubbish dump.

It only takes a short drive down the Coral Coast, or any road anywhere in Fiji, to see exactly what I mean. Many of our beaches, roadways and communities are strewn with litter, and once-pristine parts of Fiji are now covered in refuse. Because throughout Fiji, many of our people are rubbishing their country in ways they would never rubbish their own homes.

The damage doesn’t end there, because that pollution doesn’t always stay on land. Much of it ends up in the sea, swept down by storm water drains into our rivers and, eventually, into open waters, where it pollutes our reefs, chokes our wildlife and does serious damage to our reputation as a beautiful and pristine island destination.

Anyone who has spent decades in Fiji can tell you, it didn’t used to be like this. But recently, we seem to have lost our way. And the sheer amount of litter in Fiji has reached crisis level proportions.

I am ashamed by it. We should all be ashamed by it. Because every piece of rubbish that is dumped across our islands represents a choice. A choice made by an individual, or a business, to do the wrong thing. It represents a decision to disrespect our home and our fellow Fijians. And it is high time we said enough is enough, and demand that we do better.

In our campaign to clean up Fiji, we can’t just focus on individuals. The sad reality is that we have business interests that also have proven to be very poor stewards of our natural environment. Just this week, an employee of a major waste management company was caught dumping rubbish in Nadroga. My Government has ordered an immediate investigation into that illegal dumping, and will take appropriate legal action to punish those responsible.

And I want to send a clear message to any other individual or business that thinks of dumping rubbish anywhere in Fiji: you will be caught and you will be punished to the full extent of the law. And if any employee is told to dump rubbish, they should report that instruction immediately to the relevant authorities.

My Fellow Fijians,
I am calling for a society-wide response to this crisis of littering affecting our islands. I know the vast majority of Fijians share that sentiment, and I urge them all to speak up. If you see someone litter, tell them to stop. Tell them what they are doing is wrong. And, day by day, we will change mentalities, we will shift our values and we will make a difference.

That response needs to also come from the policy side, and this new plastic bag levy is part of my Government’s commitment to clean up Fiji. The ten cents levy on plastic bags will give every Fijian incentive to shop more sustainably and limit the amount of plastic that ends up in our environment.

It may be news to most of you that a plastic bag can take 50-80 years to become bio-degradable. That means a plastic bag dumped in our environment today can take a half century or more to decompose on its own. So this is a serious matter that requires serious action to address.

As announced in our national Budget, all monies collected from this levy as part of the wider environment and climate adaptation levy or ECAL will directly fund environmental initiatives and programs that protect our natural environment and climate adaptation projects that boost the resilience of our nation to the severe effects of climate change. And as provided for in the new laws, we will publish detailed breakdown of the spend on these projects, initiatives and programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen, over the past decade that I’ve led our nation, one simple lesson I’ve learned is that when you do the right thing, good things tend to happen. And with this new plastic bag levy we’re not only building a cleaner Fiji, we are also bringing opportunity into the lives of the Fijian people.

Today, we are celebrating the work of the Ba Women’s Forum to produce 5,000 reusable shopping bags to give the Fijian people an alternative to using plastic bags. And I’d like to thank the Forum members and all of our women entrepreneurs for showing us how green initiatives and women’s empowerment can go hand in hand.

Through our Ministry of Women, we will be working alongside women’s groups to produce more reusable shopping bags throughout the country. And together we’ll help hard-working women take advantage of the exciting new market opportunity we’ve created through this levy on plastic bags. Whether in their homes or in community centres, all across our islands, women can go to work making and selling cloth bags that will replace the harmful plastic bags that have choked our environment for far too long.

Working with our Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism, we will ensure bags produced through this partnership are high quality so that they qualify under the Fijian-made brand. And, working alongside our women entrepreneurs, we will work to put reusable, environmentally-friendly cloth bags in every home in Fiji.

This programme is part of the massive effort undertaken by my Government to empower and support women in Fiji, and our record on women’s empowerment is something that makes me extremely proud. That work has ranged from providing greater economic and educational opportunities, to making Fiji a safer place for our women and girls so they have the security they need to succeed. And in the years to come, that commitment will remain a critical component of my Government’s vision to uplift the Fijian people.

I know full well that there remains a deep gap in Fijian society between what women are capable of achieving and what opportunities they are afforded. That gap is holding us back, because we can’t build the new Fiji when only half the population is empowered to do well.

We need to realise the immense untapped potential of Fijian women. We need their creativity, their ingenuity and their spirit of innovation if we are to do well as a nation. We need to empower our women, and we need the men of Fiji to be advocates for their success as well.

It is great to see our new partnership in action this morning, and I’d like to thank Dr Maria Doton, and all of the members of the Ba Women’s Forum for joining forces with the Ministry of Women and other women’s groups to produce these bags, and for setting an example for other women in Fiji to follow.

I’d also like to thank RB Patel for agreeing to promote the use of these new reusable bags in their outlets – and I encourage every business house in Fiji to step up and do the same.

With this new initiative, we are putting Fijian women on the front-lines of our effort to protect our environment and maintain the beauty and natural splendour of Fiji for the next generation, and you should all be very proud of the contribution you are making.

Today is the beginning of a new movement for Fiji. A movement to take ownership of the country we are all fortunate to share. A movement to take greater responsibility for our actions and decisions. And a movement to bring every member of our society into the fight to clean up our islands.

My Government will continue to lead from the front on this issue and, together, we will build a better and cleaner Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.