**HON PM BAINIMARAMA AT THE OPENING OF THE ADI NATUICAKE FESTIVAL**

**8/2/2017**

Vuanirewa Clan
Masi ni Vanua o Lau,

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I am delighted to be here this morning to deliver the Opening Address at the Adi Natuicake Festival.

I deeply admire that the Tikina of Lau have all come together, united in their effort to invest in the future of their communities. You’ve raised funds to make investments that will reap returns for your communities and help you lay down the foundation of prosperity for years to come.

I am here this morning to tell you that your vision for progress is shared by my Government, and we are here to support – in every way we can – that future you aspire to realise.

My fellow Fijians,
We are a nation spread across over 100 populated islands. Some of us are separated from one another by great physical distances. But the bonds that hold us together, as one nation and one people, are not diminished by any distance that keeps us apart – no matter how great. Because the common citizenship and national identity that we share, as Fijians, are what unite us and keep us all committed to building a better Fiji for every Fijian.
That has been the vision that has driven my Government’s work over the past decade, as we’ve brought services, infrastructure and opportunity to Fijians from every walk of life and from every corner of our country. And that is the vision that will carry us into the future.

Because as your Prime Minister, I do not represent only a handful of communities or provinces, nor any single part of Fiji. I represent every Fijian. I serve every man, woman and child that calls our islands home. And whether they live in our cities, our rural areas or our maritime regions, I believe every one of our people deserves to play a full and equal role in our development as a nation.

That belief applies to every community and every village, including every village in Lau. And that isn’t just rhetoric. We have ten years of real progress we can point to that shows my Government’s full and unrelenting commitment to improve the lives of Fijians all across our country, including in the Lau group.

It’s true, your geography presents serious challenges to development. But that is not your burden to bear. It is the duty of my Government to make special efforts to meet those challenges, and we are doing just that. By being innovative and thinking creatively we are extending the prosperity we are achieving for Fiji directly to your communities.

Our goal has been to bring developments and services to our outer islands that are on par with what Fijians residing on Viti Levu have available, because I believe that location in Fiji should never be a barrier to success. With that as our mantra, we’ve invested in schools, roads and infrastructure including access to water and electricity in maritime regions also, and we’ve invested in the social welfare of our citizens – to bring comfort and security to those in society who are most vulnerable.

Recently, we’ve announced that we will be extending the reach of Government services to the Lau group by establishing a births, deaths and marriages registry in Lakeba. Once that has been set-up, your communities will no longer have to travel great distances to simply register a birth, death or marriage. Instead, your entire region will have direct access to those services.

We’ve also introduced a number of tax packages to encourage investment in maritime services and thereby bringing Lau closer into the fold of our economic progress. These will give incentives to operators to maintain and expand the routes your communities rely on to sell goods, see loved ones and generally access the rest of our islands.
In this year’s budget, we’ve also reduced the duty on the importation of spare parts for maritime vessels to zero to make it easier to maintain vessels operating throughout Fiji.
Some of the islands in the Lau Group were some of the worst affected when severe Tropical Cyclone Winston arrived at our shores last year. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, our focus was on providing instant relief to your communities. Since then we’ve undertaken a massive rehabilitation programme in Lau to reclaim what was lost to the cyclone and rebuild your communities to a better and more resilient standard.

Next week, I will launch our AM radio services through our national broadcaster, FBC, to expand our AM radio network to cover 100 per cent of Fiji. That means Radio Fiji One, Radio Fiji Two and Gold stations will be transmitted at all hours of the day on AM frequencies to the Lau Group – bringing regular programmes, information on Government services and initiatives, and critical emergency information in times of crises. The big benefit is that AM radio infrastructure is far more resilient to severe weather than the FM systems. So if – God, forbid – another severe weather system strikes in the Lau Group, we will have a better chance of relaying disaster-related information that can ready your communities and, ultimately, save lives.
By December of this year, you will have access to free-to-air digital television. Through digital television, you will not only have access to 5 free-to-air channels but also educational programmes through the Ministry of Education, Agriculture and other relevant community services. Watching these channels will be at no cost to you. Our critical work to protect and empower women in Fiji also extends to your islands, because my Government does not believe in a Fiji where only half the population is given the chance to do well. And I know that we can never realise our nation’s full potential if we do not bring real opportunity into the lives of Fijian women.

As it stands, Fijian society does not do nearly enough to protect our women and girls or give them an equal shot at bettering their lives – and that is not acceptable. My Government is actively combatting those backwards mentalities in our society that are holding our women back, and we’ve poured resources into programmes that bring our women to the forefront of our national development.

In the Lau Group we’ve increased this year’s budget allocation for women’s’ resource centres, expos and income generating projects by $100,000 to continue the good work we are carrying out in your islands to uplift women in society. And just yesterday, as part of my Government’s effort to limit the use of plastic bags, I had the privilege of celebrating the work of women in Ba who produced 5,000 reusable shopping bags to sell instead of using plastic. And that programme will soon be rolled out to the rest of Fiji – giving our dedicated women entrepreneurs more work and protecting Fiji from the serious harm that plastic bags cause our environment.
We have, as you know, provided logging and saw milling facilities in Lakeba and other maritime areas to harvest the pine forest for the use of all members of those communities. We have also, as you know through our tourism efforts, attracting more visitors to areas such as Lau which will benefit all Lauans through new economic activity. It will also enhance your business opportunities.
In the years ahead, we will continue to be relentless in our work to bring real opportunity to the Lau Group – services, education, infrastructure and jobs – so that you can better your lives and better the lives of those around you.

Progress is being made. It won’t all happen overnight, but it is happening and it is happening for all Lauans, not just for a select few. And as we look to the future, my Government will continue to be there for your communities, not only to bring opportunity, but also to protect the intangible things you deeply value: your cultural heritage, your traditional knowledge and the unique aspects of your society that make it such a special place to call home.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.