**HON PM BAINIMARAMA OPENING REMARKS AT “A BLUE COMMONWEALTH” – HIGH LEVEL ROUNDTABLE AT THE OCEANS CONFERENCE**

**6/8/2017**

Your Excellency, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth,
Your Excellency the Vice President of the Republic of Seychelles,
Distinguished participants from other Commonwealth nations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

The Commonwealth continues to play a leading role in global affairs and I’m delighted to be given the opportunity to open this important side event - a high level roundtable on what the Commonwealth can do to support the implementation of SDG14.

I particularly welcome the emphasis on maximizing innovation and economic opportunities in the development of blue economies. I made the point when I addressed an event for the ACP countries this morning that many of us are already making great strides in this area.

We may be powerless to prevent the degradation of our seas and coastlines by other nations. But for the areas we do control, some of us have already developed policies that are making a difference. And I urge you all to embrace the principle that Fiji has embraced. That no development on land or at sea must take place if there is any risk to the environment whatsoever. It is a central tenet of our Green Growth Framework and national development plans. And – as I said this morning - we are very proud as a nation to have drawn this responsible line in the sand.

I also welcome today’s emphasis on mobilizing partnerships within the Commonwealth – this unique organisation that binds us all together – and on fairness, equity and the empowerment of women. Because we all know that when women are empowered, they become powerful agents for change, wherever they are in the world and in whatever capacity they are able to direct their talents. They are the backbone of our societies and in many places, are already leading the way to a more sustainable future.
No-one knows this more than our distinguished Secretary-General, Patricia Scotland, who hails from a Small Island Developing State in the Caribbean and is a living embodiment of the leadership women can provide with empowerment. More than most, she also knows the challenges we all face in the SIDS countries because of the steady degradation of our oceans and seas. And we certainly look forward to hearing her proposals for the development of a ‘Blue Charter’ - a set of guiding principles for sustainable, fair and equitable economic development of our oceans based on the Commonwealth Charter. Once again, Baroness Scotland, we thank you for your leadership on this issue and many others.

The wonderful thing about the Commonwealth is the strength we all derive from our ability to share our experiences and learn from each other. And we all look forward to hearing about the challenges and successes of developing blue economies from a range of speakers who also embody the diversity of our organisation. From Bangladesh, Barbados, Cyprus, Grenada and Fiji’s close neighbour and friend, Tonga. As well as representatives of the Commonwealth Foundation and UNCTAD.

Welcome to you all and thank you for your own commitment to the great task before us this week, which is, quite simply, to save our oceans before it is too late.

Our thanks go to the Government of the Seychelles and the Commonwealth Secretariat as our hosts. And I now have great pleasure to declare this high level roundtable on a Blue Commonwealth open.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thank you.