**HON PM BAINIMARAMA SPEECH AT HANDOVER OF FIJI PINE LEASE SECURITY BONUS PAYMENTS**

**8/4/2017**

 Turaga Na Talatala,
Turaga Na Tui Vitogo,
Marama Na Tui Ba,
Turaga Na Tui Yakete,
Turaga Na Tui Nalolo,
Turaga Na Tui Vatu,
Turaga Na Tui Sesevia,
The Executive Chairman of the Fiji Pine Group of Companies
Board Members,
Landowners,
Staff and Management of the Fiji Pine Group,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m very glad to be here as we gather to again acknowledge the excellent work of the Fiji Pine Group and celebrate yet another successful year achieved by your staff and management team.

Today, I have the pleasure of distributing 1.5 Million Dollars in lease security bonus payments to our landowners – matching the record setting payment that was distributed last year. It’s hard to believe that our first lease bonus payment in 2013 stood at 350,000 Dollars, and today – only five years later – this payment stands at more than four times that amount, as we celebrate another big win for Fiji Pine, our landowners and the entire Fijian economy.

Fiji Pine is currently in the midst of a massive capital construction programme to upgrade their major infrastructure and bring modern, state-of-the-art factory facilities to service our Pine Industry. And I’m very proud to see that even while carrying out such a capital-intensive agenda, you’ve still kept faith with our landowners through this 1.5 Million Dollar bonus payment.

Since 2011, every year, we’ve seen the Fiji Pine Group surpass its performance and strengthen its relationship with our landowners to turn this Industry into an unqualified success story. As my Government has brought a record eight straight years of growth to the Fijian economy, Fiji Pine has ridden that same wave of success, and that has set you up to fund the critical upgrades you need to keep this Industry on its rapid path of development in the years to come.

As part of that effort, I’m delighted to be here this morning to also officially open a brand new 3.6 Million Dollar water treatment plant. And with this opening, we will now have successfully upgraded 85 per cent of Fiji Pine’s infrastructure assets that were in dire need of repair.

As was the case for the entire upgrade of the Drasa factory, including the new sawmill, kiln, planner mill and power generation plant – not one cent was borrowed to complete this project. It was entirely funded through the Company’s reserve cash flow saved over the past few years. So it’s safe to say, the days of verging on bankruptcy are well behind us.

That hasn’t come about simply by chance. That has happened because of leadership – bold and visionary leadership – from my Government and the dedicated management of the Fiji Pine Group. That has happened because, six years ago, my Government took a long, hard look at the state of this Industry and decided that business as usual wasn’t good business for anybody.

I’ve spoken many times about the years of mismanagement that brought this Industry to its knees, and I know many of you here today lived through those years yourselves and saw first-hand just how close this Industry came to catastrophe.

Those were the days of high debts, insolvency, neglect and rapidly depleting forestry resources. Those were the days of poor returns, rampant corruption, exploitation and abuse. And in those days, there were deep gaps in trust between our landowners and the company. And I know that because our landowners told me so themselves. I went to them – six years ago – to hear them out and understand their concerns so we could remake the Fiji Pine Group into an organisation they could trust. It was their ideas and their experiences that shaped the comprehensive reform my Government launched for this Industry.

Since then, we’ve rebuilt that trust by proving to our landowners that we’ve brought in the right management and right strategic vision to produce consistently high returns for our Pine Industry – and there is no better proof of that than this fifth consecutive lease bonus payment being distributed today.

Back in 2011, no lease had been renewed with Fiji Pine for nearly a decade. And that goes to show just how much faith had been lost in this Industry. But that was then and this is now.

Over the last six years, we‘ve renewed nearly 23,500 hectares of expiring leases. That hasn’t happened because our landowners were forced to do so. That has happened because our landowners believe in this Industry and they have faith in where it’s headed.

My fellow Fijians, this Industry is making real progress. The Fiji Pine Group is recording real achievement. And our landowners are realising real opportunities. Those are the facts. And in case they miss my remarks this morning, I would ask that someone please inform the members of the Opposition of just how well this Industry is doing – because they badly need to be told.

Maybe if they had some idea of what we’ve achieved they’d stop spreading so many lies within our iTaukei community. But then again, even if they did understand the facts, they’d probably still find it hard to tell the truth. Because, unfortunately for them, the truth is completely at odds with every doomsday prediction they’ve had for this Industry, and every one of their attempts to deceive the Fijian people.

Time and time again we’ve heard them claim that iTaukei land in Fiji is at-risk – that our landowners aren’t secure. But the facts on that are clear. Not one inch of iTaukei land has been lost under my Government. The fact is, we have a Constitution that enshrines the ownership and protection of iTaukei land. They claimed my Government was going to take land away from landowners if they didn’t renew their leases. But the facts are clear there as well. And our landowners are renewing their leases because they are choosing to do so, because they see the potential in this industry that we are all working to realise.
The fact is, we haven’t taken anyone’s land by force, and we never will. We are empowering our landowners so they can get the most out of their land and from their lands’ resources.

And now they are trying to discourage some of our landowners from renewing their leases by lying again about this Industry’s prospects. But the facts, again, are clear. And no landowner is better off sitting on the side-lines while this Industry continues to do exceptionally well. To dissuade them from being a part of this progress is irresponsible and is an insult to the intelligence of the landowners. Indeed some of these people who are going around telling landowners who have pine leases not to renew the leases and in the process making all sorts of false promises, are the very people who did exactly that with sugar cane leases which led to the shrinking of the Sugar Cane Industry.
Beware of these individuals. They don’t genuinely care about you or the Industry or your future generations or our country. They only care about their political fortunes.

The Opposition has dug themselves into a very deep hole with the lies they’ve already told. But instead of coming to terms with reality, they’ve chosen to keep digging. They’ve chosen to keep playing politics and keep spinning lies and, unfortunately, they are doing it at the expense of our landowners. They are doing it at the expense of our country.

So while my Government is busy working to improve the lives of ordinary people by bringing as many Fijians as possible into the fold of our economic prosperity, they are doing the exact opposite. They are negative. They don’t have any original ideas. They want to divide us. And they don’t genuinely believe in nation building. They are unpatriotic.
They don’t want our landowners to take part in real progress, because they know that every time any of our landowners does well, their entire ideology becomes less relevant. And their vision for a divided and backwards Fiji becomes even more distant.

So to all 20,000 Fijians in our landowning communities who depend on our Pine Industry, whether you lease two hectares or 2,000, I assure you our commitment to your success is unwavering. This Industry isn’t just surviving, it is doing extremely well, and we want each of you to play an equal part in its continuing success.

But this Industry can’t only rely on financial stability alone. We have to take the sustainability of our forestry resources just as seriously. If we don’t make an equal effort to replant and reclaim what we take from our forests, the development of our entire Pine Industry will come to a screeching halt.

When it comes to putting this Industry on a more sustainable trajectory, we have a lot of lost ground to make up. Because, prior to 2012, our forests suffered from nearly a decade of almost no replanting at all. Since 2012, our replanting programmes have begun in earnest, and Fiji Pine has set aside another 2.3 Million Dollars this year to replant land and lay down a foundation for a more secure and sustainable future for this Industry.

So we are making headway. But we need everyone working in our Pine Industry to remain committed over the long-term to protect our forests from disasters, such as fires, and replant our forests so that our sons and daughters, and our grandchildren, can inherit the same bounty that our forests provide us with today.

Thank you again to Faiz Khan, the Executive Chair and the Board Members of the Fiji Pine Group for your energy, dedication and commitment to turning this Industry around. Keep up the great work, and keep showing us what is possible when effective management, sound planning and worthwhile investment come together to work for the Fijian people.

May God Bless our people and our Pine Industry. And may God Bless our beloved Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.