**HON PM BAINIMARAMA SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS EXHIBITION**

**7/11/2017**

Your Excellency, the United Nations Resident Co-ordinator
and other UN staff in Fiji,
Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Representatives of civil society and the private sector,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bula vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

When we talk about the importance of implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, it’s very easy to see them as someone else’s agenda. A set of targets agreed to by the member nations of the UN in far-off New York that have little bearing on our day-to-day lives here in the Pacific. And that’s the importance of this exhibition that I have the pleasure to open tonight – that it brings home to all of us the relevance of these SDGs to everyone living in vulnerable parts of the world such as Fiji. And their critical importance in sustaining all 7.5 billion people on Planet Earth. Ensuring our very survival.

I want to congratulate the organisers at UNDP Pacific and urge as many Fijians as possible to come to the Fiji Museum to see it. Because it transforms the 17 SDGs from words on a page – a bold statement of principles – into compelling images to which we can all relate. We can all appreciate.
And these images underline why the comprehensive plan of action the SDGs entail to improve the state of our world is so important for every Fijian.

I had the great privilege last month to be co-host – with the Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden – of the World Ocean Conference in New York. This was a gathering of the nations of the world to put the spotlight on the importance of implementing SDG 14 – to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources”. And to take urgent steps to combat the pollution and over-fishing that is degrading our oceans and seas the world over and poses such a threat to our planet and the livelihoods and well-being of our people.

It was a wonderful conference, not only because we achieved so much agreement on the need for decisive action but because, as co-host, we brought the special Fijian “Bula Spirit” to New York.

To be able to hold a yaqona ceremony and tabua presentation before the main podium of the UN General Assembly was a very special moment. Every Fijian in that great auditorium swelled with pride at the sight of the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, downing his bilo in one hit. And also hearing him praise Fiji for its rich cultural tradition and its service to the world.

Diplomats at the UN are usually a pretty unsentimental bunch. But a distinct wave of emotion also swept the vast room at the end of the conference when the entire Fijian delegation invited our Swedish partners to come forward and join us in the singing of “Isa Lei”.

The UN auditorium has seen many memorable moments over the years. The Russian President, Nikita Khrushchev, banging his shoe on the lectern. Yasser Arafat waving his pistol in the air. Fidel Castro giving the longest speech in UN history – Four hours and 48 minutes. But those present had never seen dozens of Fijians singing their hearts out and others joining in with them. And it was a special moment that none of us who witnessed it will ever forget. And, of course, made us all very proud to be Fijian.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the reason I am telling you this story is that SDG 13 also commits the global community to “take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”. As you all know, Fiji has the privilege to be the incoming president of COP23 – the ongoing UN negotiations on climate change. And when we go to COP23 in Bonn in November, we will also be stamping the event with the Fijian “Bula Spirit”. As well as the concept of talanoa – of the world coming together to discuss the challenges we all face in the Pacific way – in a spirit of genuine dialogue, co-operation and mutual respect.

As the incoming President, I can tell you that we are going to need all the collective strength we can muster to keep these negotiations on track. To preserve the multilateral consensus for the implementation of the Paris Agreement for decisive action on climate change that was agreed at the end of 2015.

As you all know, President Trump has – very regrettably – decided to withdraw from the Paris Agreement and has set the American Government on a collision course with the rest of the world over this issue. I’m still hoping that the President will change his mind. And as I’ve said before, the door is always open for him to re-join the rest of us in staying committed to the reductions in heat-causing greenhouse gases we all agreed to in Paris.

But in the meantime, those of us who remain committed and are leading this campaign – including me as incoming COP President – are going to stick together. Because we simply cannot afford to drop the ball on decisive climate action. Our very survival in the Pacific depends on it, as I have said so many times before.

I was in Kadavu early on Friday morning when I got a phone call from President Macron of France. And in that call, he gave me the heads-up and sought my support for the announcement he made this past weekend of a special summit of global Leaders, which will be held in Paris on December the 12th to mark the second anniversary of the Paris Agreement.

The President invited me to be there and of course, I will be. Because it will be concentrating on one of the issues that is of most concern to me as COP President – access to finance to do what vulnerable nations need to do to adapt to the terrifying new world that awaits us. To build our resilience to the rising seas levels, extreme weather events and changes to agriculture caused by climate change.

It will be just over three weeks after COP itself in Bonn. But I agree with President Macron that we need to keep up the momentum. And the more we can focus global attention on this the better. Because as the new French Leader has said: There is no plan B other than decisive climate action because there is no Planet B.

I very much appreciated President Macron telling me that he fully supports me in the Presidency of COP23. And that France fully supports Fiji as it builds a Grand Coalition of governments at all levels - civil society, the private sector and global citizens everywhere - to keep this process on track. I regard the new French Leader as a very important partner and we hope to forge a much closer relationship with France in the lead-up to COP and beyond.

As Incoming President of COP23, I welcome the statement by the G20 Leaders who have just met in Hamburg that whatever the position of the US Government, the “Paris Agreement is irreversible” and must be fully implemented. Pacific Island Leaders’ meeting in Suva last week for our Climate Action Pacific Partnership event were looking for a strong statement from the G20 and we were pleased to get it.

Because we cannot afford to give any ground at all on our collective plan of action, which is to limit the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial level and pursue efforts to keep it to 1.5 degrees.

To do that, we need net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 at the latest. So among other things, this means every country striving to emulate France’s lead in banning petrol and diesel powered vehicles after 2040.

But, Ladies and Gentlemen, as I keep saying, national governments alone cannot achieve the transformation needed. Which is why the Grand Coalition that Fiji is leading is so important. Because decisive climate action must also come from state and local governments throughout the world, from civil society, from business and citizens everywhere. We all have a role to play and we must play it.

We must also put a human face on the impacts of climate change and the other SDGs. This is not some abstract thing that exists in charts and graphs. It is a real-world challenge affecting the lives and livelihoods of people around the world. Which is why an exhibition like this is so important in highlighting the urgency of implementing all of the SDGs and especially SDG 13. Because as I have said repeatedly: no sustainable development is possible without decisive action of climate change.

As I urge every Fijian to try to see this exhibition, I also want to use the opportunity to announce a photographic competition of my own specifically related to climate change.

At COP23 in November, we want delegates to be confronted with powerful images of the impacts of climate change on our region and on our people.

And so the incoming Presidency is launching a competition for both professional and amateur photographers to submit photos that show the human and environmental impacts of climate change, and how individuals and groups are mobilising to counter this threat.

To enter, participants must be over the age of 18 and reside in the Pacific. The full details, including the rules of the competition, are available on the COP23 website. And I encourage all those who are passionate about this issue, and have an interest in photography, to consider entering to help us tell our stories to the world.

And with that shameless plug of my own, Ladies and Gentlemen, I now have the great pleasure to again thank the organisers at UNDP Pacific and formally open this exhibition on the 17 SDGs.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.