**HON PM BAINIMARAMA AT THE NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI – EXPO 2017 ASTANA**

**8/16/2017**

The Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan,

The Honourable Fijian Minister for Industry Trade, Tourism, Lands and Mineral Resources,

Your Excellency, the Fijian Ambassador to Kazakhstan,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

12,700 kilometres from our island home, we gather today to celebrate Fiji’s national day at EXPO 2017 in the spectacular city of Astana - the capital of Kazakhstan. I’m both delighted and proud that the vast distance between us has been bridged. And that I can be with you to showcase Fiji to the world and celebrate our strengthening ties with the government and people of Kazakhstan.

I’d been told that Astana is an impressive place but nothing really prepares you for the spectacle of this ultra-modern city. So I begin by extending my thanks to the Kazhak government - and especially HE Mr. Kairat Abdrakhmanov - for your hospitality and convey the warmest greetings of the Fijian people to you all.

We have worked hard on the Fijian side to ensure that we bring as much of our Bula spirit of friendship and happiness to Astana as possible. Bula is not only the everyday Fijian greeting that everyone uses in our country but also means life in the iTaukei language of our indigenous people. And we certainly intend to bring Fiji to life here at EXPO 2017 with our music, dancing and other cultural displays. A big slice of our Pacific way of life transposed to this vibrant setting in central Asia.

I urge you all to get into the Bula spirit yourselves and especially on this very special day for us, as we showcase Fiji to the representatives of 115 nations taking part in EXPO and, of course, the people of Kazakhstan. We have already done a great deal to bring us closer together. A week ago, the first Fijian ambassador to Kazakhstan, His Excellency Iona Naivalurua, presented his credentials to your President, His Excellency Nursultan Nazarbayev. So we have begun to explore ways in which we can grow our relationship and part of that is raising the profile of Fiji in Kazakhstan and through this Expo, to the rest of the world as well.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the theme of the Astana Expo - focusing on the promotion of green and clean energy - is one that is very close to my own heart. Not only because it is vital to us in Fiji but also because I am the incoming President of COP23 – the ongoing UN negotiations on climate change. But before I address the issue of climate change and renewable energy in detail, I want to say a few words about Fiji’s attractiveness as a tourist destination and a place to invest. In many ways for us, the two go hand in hand. Because the future of our nation and its economic prosperity very much depends on the world taking decisive action on climate change.

We place a great deal of importance on our National Green Growth Framework because the preservation of our natural environment is our number one priority. The pristine beauty of our islands draws almost a million visitors a year to Fiji. And we have made it clear to the world that no development in Fiji will get the go-ahead unless we are satisfied that it is environmentally sustainable.

We are especially keen to attract investment in renewable energy because we know this is critical to the future of Fiji and the whole world. At present, we spending about a billion dollars a year on imported fossil fuel. And we know that we must turn increasingly to hydro, wind, solar and biofuels if we are to meet our own commitment to the global community through the Paris Agreement to reduce our own carbon emissions by 30 per cent by 2030.

There are many benefits of investing in Fiji, such as our position as Hub of the Pacific; our rapidly improving infrastructure – better roads, better airports, more efficient ports; our general connectivity and world class telecommunications; our educated, committed English- speaking workforce; our investment incentives, including duty concessions, investment allowances, some of the lowest corporate and personal taxes in the region; and we have had eight successive years of solid economic growth, which means that investor confidence in Fiji has never been higher.

I keep saying at every opportunity: Fiji is open for business. We are also taking the Fijian Made brand of quality goods and services to the four corners of the earth and have become one of the world’s most desirable holiday destinations And at every opportunity, including this one, I invite the world to come to Fiji to experience our unique brand of hospitality and friendship. In the words of our tourism slogan, Fiji is the place where happiness finds you. I always say you can find a nice beach and cool drink in many places. But only in Fiji will you find the friendliest people on earth. So wherever you live in the world and however far it might be from our Pacific home, try to make the effort to visit Fiji because I can assure you that an unforgettable experience awaits you.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the preservation of our way of life and all that we hold dear in Fiji and the other Pacific island nations hinges on a decisive global response to climate change. Which is why I have embraced the opportunity to lead the ongoing UN negotiations as incoming President of COP23.

I have also decided because of the urgency of the task ahead of us that it is also a time for plain speaking. For me to be Frank by name and frank by nature. To abandon some of the usual language of diplomacy and start telling it like it is.

When the nations of the world gather in Bonn, Germany, for COP23 in November, it will be against the backdrop of a serious challenge by the United States Government to the multilateral consensus for decisive action contained in the Paris Agreement of 2015. I say again to President Trump that the door is still open for you to join the rest of us as we confront the greatest challenge humanity has ever faced. Fortunately, many American states and cities and many US citizens remain committed to decisive action. But irrespective of the official American position, the rest of the world has embarked on a course of action that is irreversible and cannot be delayed.

The paramount objective, of course, is to keep global warming to well below 2 degrees above that of the pre-industrial age and to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. But let me make this perfectly clear. Encouraging and enabling an effort by the global community to stay within 1.5 degrees must be our mission, however difficult that appears to be.

Last month, other Pacific leaders joined me in Fiji to commit ourselves to the 1.5 degree goal. It is of the utmost importance to our people, our economies and our environment. Because the extreme weather events, rising seas and changes to agriculture associated with climate change pose the gravest threat to our way of life in the entire span of human history. And the same applies to many other vulnerable nations, indeed the entire world.

So that is what I am determined to go for in Bonn – more decisive and more ambitious climate action. And no more prevarication or postponement. The Paris Agreement thankfully is now in force, more rapidly than people expected, but many of its provisions are not due to be implemented until after 2020. In my view, this simply not good enough. We want more action all over the world and at all levels of government now. And that is why I am building a Grand Coalition of governments at all levels, civil society, the private sector and ordinary citizens to keep up the pressure. Because national governments alone will not fix this. And I appeal to the Government of Kazakhstan and all 115 nations represented at this EXPO to join me in this quest.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, if we are to achieve any of these objectives, there is no alternative but to embrace an alternative energy future. And that is what Fiji is doing. Our own theme for EXPO 2017 is quote “ensuring access to affordable, reliable and sustainable and modern energy for all”. And I encourage you all – as you visit our pavilion - to examine the progress that Fiji has made in developing hydro, solar, biomass and other viable energy sources. And the efforts we are making – through various incentives – to attract investors into the renewable energy sector. Among other things, the Fijian Government has partnered with the International Finance Corporation and our Central Bank to issue $100-million in “green bonds” to raise capital to fund projects that have environmental benefits.

I want to take this opportunity to warmly thank the Government of Kazakhstan for the financial support that you are providing to Fiji to undertake research on our future energy needs. The resulting report is displayed inside our pavilion, where you’ll find maps showing where we are already utilising wind and solar energy and where there is potential to do more. It’s a valuable contribution by Kazakhstan to our national development and a wonderful example of how a comparatively small outlay can make a great deal of difference. Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.

So Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I close by urging you all to inspect the Fijian pavilion and the entire Pacific islands Plaza. Here we showcase the richness of our natural and cultural diversity; highlight our dependence on the ocean and seas around us; demonstrate the effect of climate change on Pacific Island countries, promote a sustainable energy future for the Pacific; encourage tourism and trade; display our growing collection of Fijian Made quality products and services. And showcase the investment opportunities in Fiji that await anyone with imagination and enterprise looking for new horizons.

My thanks goes to all of you who have worked so hard to make our presence in Astana a success, including the teams from Fiji and Kazakhstan. It has been well worth the long journey for me to be with you today. And I now have great pleasure to officially launch the celebration of the National Day for the Republic of Fiji at the Astana EXPO 2017.