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Rear-Admiral (retired) Hon Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

**Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry**

**KEY NOTE ADDRESS AT THE 5TH PACIFIC URBAN FORUM**

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Urban Resilience and Climate Change

**Tanoa International Hotel Tues., 2 July 2019**

**Nadi, Fiji 1000 Hours**

* **Honourable Ministers;**
* **His Excellency - the New Zealand Ambassador to Fiji;**
* **Secretary General - Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat;**
* **Head of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (UNESCAP);**
* **Regional Director Commonwealth Local Government Forum;**
* **Regional Director Asia Pacific Regional - UN-Habitat;**
* **Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all. It’s my pleasure to welcome you all to Fiji.

For decades in our country, entire communities have languished on the fringes of our urban development in – what we call – informal settlements. These settlements are home to squatters who do not own the land on which they reside. For these families, security is tenuous and life difficult; their lack of tenure has left them shackled by uncertainty and isolated from mainstream development, and planning for the future is all but impossible. And like many other Pacific countries, these informal settlements – plagued by underinvestment – are the least equipped to deal with worsening climate impacts.

In Fiji today, we’re righting that historic injustice by handing over 99-year leases to squatter families on land they’ve called home for decades. I’ve officiated at several of these title handovers. I’ve met personally with many of those families.

I’ve seen the tears of joy, I’ve heard – first-hand – how their lives have been changed for the better. But what has stayed with me most vividly, is hearing the dreams these families now aspire to achieve after finally being granted a level of ownership over their communities.

Empowered by the dignity of long-term tenure, these families see the world through a new lens. When parents look to their children, they can think more seriously about the communities they will leave behind, as they can now build to better standards that will last for generations. With land as collateral, they can fully step into our financial sector, access loans from mainstream banks and build better, stronger and more resilient homes, business and communal buildings.

Oftentimes, these communities understand their own adaptation needs better than anyone else can, and when they’re able to think 99 years into the future, they can plan better and they can build better.

And when climate impacts bear down on our country, the adaptive investments they are making today will spare future suffering and literally save lives.

The stories of these Fijian families are top of mind for me this morning, because I believe they get to the heart of our mission at this Fifth Pacific Urban Forum, as we discuss the critical issue of urban resilience and climate change.

In our countries, as I speak, we’re seeing some of the most rapid rates of urbanisation on the planet. Families are moving to cities looking for work or to further their education, sometimes they’re escaping climate impacts, and other times they’re simply seeking the conveniences of city living. Regardless of the reason, it’s on us to ensure that when our people make that move, they find towns and cities that are capable of supporting their well-being.

And the impact of our actions, the boldness of our decisions and the strength of our cooperation at this Forum and beyond will determine whether those urban centres emerge as engines of sustainable development, or bastions of inequity and climate vulnerability.

This isn’t a Pacific issue alone, these are challenges being felt worldwide, and we cannot afford to limit our response within our individual nations or to this region. In May of this year, I made the journey to Nairobi, Kenya where I officiated the opening of the first-ever UN Habitat Assembly. While in Kenya, I again sounded the alarm on the climate crisis that is consuming the planet. A crisis to which we gave our collective recognition at the Climate Action Pacific Partnership event in Suva earlier this year.

Urban regions in developed countries have historically been the most damaging sources of harmful carbon emissions that cause climate change. But – for the sake of humanity – that narrative must change.

In Nairobi, I called not only for greater resilience in urban areas, but for decisive cuts in carbon emissions to prevent the present climate crisis from spiralling into unchecked chaos.

I didn’t go to Kenya to portray Pacific people as victims, I did so to assert that our interests are the interests of every person on earth. The waves lapping at the doorsteps of homes in Port Vila are the same waves that threaten to swallow communities from the beaches of Miami, Florida to the coastlines of Bangladesh. Whether they are called cyclones, hurricanes or typhoons, these ferocious superstorms besiege growth and prosperity on a global scale. And farmers in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean and here on Viti Levu are seeing their livelihoods wrecked by prolounged droughts, devastating flooding and volatile and unpredictable weather patterns. And for every nation, the sobering truth remains that in our urban areas, those who are most disadvantaged are those who are most vulnerable.

As we’re seeing through the regularisation of our informal settlements in Fiji, ownership, dignity and community engagement are among the most effective tools we wield in building climate resilience, in urban and rural areas alike. I mention rural areas as well, because rural regions must be considered as part of a more holistic approach to national development. It is almost never any family’s first option to pack up their entire lives and make the costly and risky move from their rural home to an urban area. In Fiji, that is why we’re bringing the security and conveniences of city life directly to our rural areas, extending services, high quality infrastructure and opportunity to these communities that allow their residents to lead safe and fulfilling lives where they already live, and where they’d generally prefer to remain.

While that effort is easing the mounting pressure of rural to urban drift, the need to adapt our cities remains as pressing as ever.

Our populations will continue to grow, and our urban areas are projected to grow even faster, consuming greater swaths of rural areas as part of our towns and cities. We need to cater for that development by considering all development under national master plans that not only address our urgent challenges today but that consider long-term trends within our economies.

Fiji recently hosted a legend in the world of urban planning, Dr Liu Thai Ker, the man known as the architect of modern Singapore. Dr Liu was in Fiji to work with us to marry lessons from Singapore’s renowned development experience with the realities on the ground in Fiji.

His team has proposed that Fiji consider development fifty years into the future in order to prepare ourselves for unprecedented growth and migration towards our major towns and cities. I believe that’s advice we’d all benefit from taken seriously.

Too often – whether due to lack of resources and lack of inclination – development in our region has been focussed on cheap, short-term fixes rather than well-considered, long-term aspirations.

Let me give you an example, a road may need to be extended to a new area, so we build one. But twenty years later, that road is too narrow to serve increasing flows of traffic. When we go to expand that road, unfortunately, we also need to remove and replace the water and wastewater pipes that were impractically built directly adjacent or even underneath the road itself. We need to entirely re-pave shoddy sections of roadway that weren’t built to standards or to withstand climate impacts. We need to move homes, businesses and other infrastructure constructed by the roadside. And, when all is said and done, the project ends up costing too much and taking too long, all because of short-sighted planning two decades prior.

Now, we’re thinking differently, prioritising future growth and development from the start of every development project. Our 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plans have set out comprehensive blueprints for our national development, with specific benchmarks to measure progress and regular reviews to keep our eyes set on updated long-term aspirations.

Climate adaptation is engrained throughout every aspect of the NDP, and we’ve also undertaken a comprehensive climate vulnerability assessment across our economy that has placed a US 4.5-billion-dollar value on the resources, technology and expertise we need to adapt the Fijian economy over ten years. That’s no small cost.

But we recognise that bearing such expenditures today will spare future generations from paying to fix our mistakes. Guided by these strategic documents, along with the mandates of the Fijian Constitution, we’ve put forward innovative programmes to increase home ownership among Fijian families, create more opportunities for affordable housing, and build economic ecosystems on foundations of reliable and resilient infrastructure and services, with amenities such as markets, food stalls and schools, creating environments that improve urban well-being and work to implement the 17 SDGs.

In implementing those goals and delivering on the 2030 agenda, there is a great deal we can learn from the experiences of other nations. But still, we must recognise that we in the Pacific are not the rest of the world. We face unique challenges owed to our geography, our history and our systems of land ownership and tenure.

Overcoming those challenges requires we actually listen to our citizens who are living in our urban areas, or who are faced with the prospect from moving from their rural communities. And we must put forward policy that is tailor-made to the realities they live out every day, but adopting international best practices and standards. That doesn’t only apply to governments, it applies to development organisations, NGOs and any and everyone else working in this space.

In three months’ time, when we gather in New York at the SDG Summit during the 74th General Assembly of the United Nations, we’ll review progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for the first time since its introduction in 2015. As Pacific island countries, we must come prepared to be more than passionate advocates for sustainability, we must be shining examples of sustainable practices and resilient development. We must live out the expectations we’re demanding of the rest of the world.

Because while much of our fate may be tied to the strength of global commitments, we can best inspire decisive action by showing how we in the Pacific are achieving sustainable development and advancing the greater interests of humanity.

Again, I welcome you all to Fiji, and wish you well in your discussions.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.