

**Commodore J. V. Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc**

**Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, the Public Service, People’s Charter and Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

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SPEECH AT THE COMMISSIONING OF THE WHOLE NUT PROCESSING FACILITY

Taveuni Coconut Centre  **Mon. 11th March, 2013**

**TAVEUNI 1300 Hours**

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**Lalagavesi Vua na Turaga na Tui Cakau;**

**Government Officials;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Good morning and Bula Vinaka to you all.

It is indeed an honour and of great pleasure to be here today, on behalf of the Government to Commission this Whole Nut Processing facility here at the Taveuni Coconut Centre in Mua.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Agriculture for the invitation and also thank all Government officials in the North, especially here in Taveuni, for the warm reception.

On behalf of the Government, I would like to thank you and your families for your commitment and dedication in the work that you are entrusted with and carrying out, especially in serving our people here in the North. Thank you for your perseverance in the face of all challenges that you are facing. It is my prayer that God will bless you, your work and your families.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the people of the Vanua of Lalagavesi for your continuing support to this Government in building a better, prosperous and peaceful Fiji.

Ladies and Gentlemen the Coconut Industry in the form of copra was once an important export industry raking in much needed foreign exchange for the country before sugar took over. However, the collapse of its market in 1971 had put a halt to all the momentum of its development and the coconut industry has been on the decline almost ever since.

The continuing decline of the Fiji Coconut Industry is largely due to the consequences of natural disasters, expiring land leases, industrial development, coconut timber harvesting from senile palms, the shift to a more lucrative shorter term crops like Dalo and Yaqona, low yields and high transportation costs with unfavorable market prices, has caused many farmers to loose interest in this industry. This has affected an estimated 100,000 farmers who are rural dwellers are dependant on this industry.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our established coconut producing areas are concentrated in the Eastern and Northern Division of Fiji and the coastal area of the main island (Viti Levu). Currently, we have around 10 million scattered and planted trees over an area of approximately 65,000ha of land mostly under a mixed cropping and livestock farming system. Around 70% of Fiji’s coconut palms are more than 100 years old and are of the Fiji Tall Variety while 30% of the coconut tree population is under 50 years old. The average nut production is 25 – 30 nuts per tree per year for older trees while younger palms below 50 years is around 50-60 nuts per tree per year.

Total estimated whole nut production is 165 million nuts per year, of which about 35% is used for household consumption; 35% for copra and around 30% projected un-harvested and germinate under bearing trees in the plantations.

Ladies and Gentlemen, after years of neglect, my Government has realized the importance of this industry based on its sustainability, its social and economical contribution to the development of Fiji and its people. We have included in the Strategic Priority for this Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture, various initiatives to rehabilitate and revitalize this ailing industry. One of those initiatives is the establishment of this Whole Nut Processing Facility here at Mua.

This whole nut processing facility is a project that seeks to address a number of issues that face farmers and their families who are solely depend on copra production as a form of livelihood, in terms of “IMPROVED FOOD SECURITY, LIVELIHOOD ENHANCEMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION”.

For your information, the objectives of the Whole Nut Processing Facility are:

1. To establish a commercially run small to medium whole nut processing facility at the Taveuni Coconut Centre, Mua, Taveuni;
2. To build up capacity of rural communities in coconut growing areas through hands on training in processing/production of coconut bi-products as an income generating activity. The idea is to make use of the raw materials from coconut and turn these into income generating products before we look at downstream processing; and
3. To encourage the rural communities in income generating activities as part of their contribution to stimulating economic activity through the use of readily available resources.

Ladies and Gentlemen, once the participants are fully trained from here, they will be issued with a TPAF/FNU Certificate which should be a basis for them to seek funding from financial institutions for the establishment of their selected business ventures. Also the Government through the Ministry of Agriculture through the program can contribute as one third or one tenth of the initial cost of starting their coconut business venture.

In addition to that, products that will be developed from this facility are expected to enter the different levels of markets that exist, which includes Pure Fiji for VCO, Hotels for handicrafts and VCO and other niche outlets that can fetch higher return.

Ladies and Gentlemen, since 2006, my Government has implemented policies to promote and develop this industry and to maximize its potentials. One such policy is the merging of the Coconut Industry Development Authority (CIDA) with the Extension Division of the Ministry of Agriculture to allow for a better co-ordinated effort that entails the overall coconut based crop diversification program.

In 2010, a Coconut Industry Taskforce had been formed to produce a Coconut Industry Reform Framework with the purpose of advancing the development of the industry.

Since 2011, under the Government funding support, a number of mini Bio-fuel mills were establishment in some of the outer islands. The mini mills use coconut oil to generate electricity for rural village lighting.

For targeted replanting programs, we will renovate and refurbish laboratories and research facilities and activities at TCC and Wainigata in addition to the establishment of this whole nut processing factory.

In addition to that, replanting program is not only concentrated in the North and Eastern Divisions, but similar planting and replanting efforts is planned for the Western Division where we have set up few coconut nurseries for that purposes.

As you might have heard and known, during the Asia Pacific Coconut Community (APCC) Ministerial Meeting which was held in Nadi from the 28th – 31st January 2013, where the ‘**One Million Coconut Tree Planting Programme**’ at Yadua in Sigatoka, Nadroga, was launched. This is all in our effort to address food security, creating employment and generating income for rural people to raise their standard of living.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Government through the Ministry of Agriculture and its Work Program this year has and will continue to redress the issues of senile palms, low planting and replanting rate, unavailability of seedlings, farmers training and the provision of technical support.

There are a number of MOUs that are being formalized between Donor Countries/Agencies and the Fiji Government through the Department of Agriculture for the enhancement of the Fiji Coconut industry. This will focus on technical cooperation such as the exchange of experts and information, training, and many more activities that we see will boost the development of coconut in Fiji.

In addition, my Government is working hard to create an investment environment that will attract more investors both foreigners and local to invest and develop such important industries.

With those few words, once again I wish this Whole Nut Processing Facility good luck and I now declare it “Open”.

Vinaka Vakalevu.

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