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Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, i-Taukei Affairs, Sugar Industry, Lands and Mineral Resources

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ADDRESS AT THE GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY FOR NABOUWALU/DREKETI ROAD

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­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­Dreketi Fri. 15th March, 2012

BUA 1200 Hours

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Cabinet Ministers;
The Ambassador to Fiji for the People’s Republic of China,

 H.E.  Mr Huang Young;
The Chairman, Fiji Road Authority;
The Directors of China Railway First Group;
The Commissioner Northern;
The Labasa Town Administrator;
Permanent Secretaries;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

It is my pleasure to be with you here as my tour of Vanua Levu draws to a close.

This week, I’ve had the opportunity to see the progress being made across a broad front in the Government’s program to deliver better services to ordinary Fijians living in the North.

And today is perhaps the highlight of my visit – launching the biggest infrastructure project of all – the upgrading of the road between Dreketi and Nabouwalu, one of the main gateways to the North.

Service delivery is my Government’s most important task – to not just promise better access to electricity, clean water, Government services, and roads, but provide them.

As I keep saying: Unlike previous governments, we keep our promises. We deliver!

Our program is on track. We know where we’re heading and it’s towards building a better Fiji for everyone.

We are determined to give all Fijians the things they need to empower them - better access to telecommunications, better access to education, access to affordable housing, access to water and

electricity, access to legal aid, access to skills training for our young people and – of course – access to better roads.

Every Fijian knows that our roads desperately need attention after decades of neglect. The shocking state of our roads is holding our country back. It is hampering our economic development.

That is why in the 2013 Budget, my Government decided to decisively tackle this nation-wide problem once and for all.

I announced an ambitious spending initiative – the single largest in Fiji’s history – of $420-million dollars to maintain, repair, upgrade and build roads and bridges.

This is a massive investment in Fiji’s future. It needs to be done and every Fijian knows it. And especially those who use this road, easily one of the worst I have ever travelled on, especially in the recent rain. We saw several trucks carrying cargo bogged in the mud or toppled into drains. It is a major impediment to trade and it cannot continue.

Today, as we break ground on the  Nabouwalu-Dreketi Highway, we are celebrating a significant milestone in our mission to transform Fiji’s road network.

This is by far our most ambitious undertaking and our biggest new project.

It represents a $228-million dollar, four-year long, road development project that will provide a whole range of benefits for the Northern Division.

In fact, it’s hard to overstate just how massive an undertaking this is and how important it will be for the development of the North – for the Fijians living here, for the farmers here, for the businesses here, for those looking to invest here, and for a whole array of industries that operate or that can potentially operate from here.

The upgrade of the 70 km highway will greatly increase economic activity in this area of Vanua Levu.

It will support the Sugar Industry, the Mining Industry, Forestry Operations, Agriculture and Tourism.

And it will also open up new opportunities, yet to be explored. The convenient access that this new highway will provide will attract both local and overseas investors, who before now were turned off by the lack of basic infrastructure here.

The new road will reduce travel time and vehicle operating and maintenance costs. It will increase the potential for more goods and services to flow into and out of this area, at competitive pricing.

Truly the road ahead is paved with opportunity.

Just as important as the economic benefits is, the difference a proper sealed road will make in the daily lives of ordinary people

– whose welfare matters to me above all else.

It will mean less stress, shorter travelling times, no dust, better quality of life and better access to a whole range of services. Easier access for children to school. Easier access to markets for farmers and small businessmen. Easier access to health services for the sick.

When I passed through here at the beginning of the week, I inspected one of the side roads and came across a group of school children immaculately dressed, but up to their ankles in mud.  I directed that their school be given 120 pairs of gumboots so that the children don’t have to start their classes with wet and dirty feet.

It was a small gesture – of course - but it certainly made me realise what a truly important project this is and how much it will improve the lives of our people.

The new Highway will benefit everyone who rely on this route for their day to day activities.

But we also expect that over the 4 year construction period, 40 per cent of the project cost will be pumped directly into the local economy.

Where possible, local materials such as aggregate and cement will be used.

The project will also provide jobs. I’m told that 700 Fijians in the North will be directly or indirectly employed.

And with these jobs, there will be a focus on skills transfer and developing local capacity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today marks a new beginning. Not just because of the massive investment we are making, but because of the high standards we will be demanding from those who build our roads.

We’ve become aware over recent months that some of the work done by contractors has not been up to the required standard. This cannot continue.

My philosophy is simple: If you’re going to build a road, build a good road. If you’re going to build a house, build a good house.

As I signalled in the 2013 Budget, we are not going to continue to have road crews filling in pot-holes just to have them re-appear again every time it rains.

We are not going to have corruption and incompetence blocking our path. We demand high quality work. And we will give the whole country the same standard.

The new Fiji Roads Authority will be our watchdog. If the roadwork isn’t up to scratch, we will demand that it be redone at no cost to the taxpayer. This has never happened before in Fiji. We are serious about quality, and will no longer accept sub-standard work.

I would like to take this opportunity to convey our sincere appreciation to the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China, His Excellency Mr. Huang Young, for facilitating the funding negotiations with the Exim Bank of China, and for your continued support.

I would also like to thank all those whose hard work has brought us to this point. This is the beginning of an exciting new phase in the improvement of Fiji’s road network and I wish you all the best as work commences.

It is now my pleasure to break ground on this new project.

Thank you. Vinaka vakalevu.

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