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

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE KALABU SECONDARY SCHOOL TELECENTRE**

Kalabu Secondary Sch. Thurs. 13th March, 2014

KALABU 1000 Hours

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**The Attorney General and Minister for Communications,**

**The Principal, Staff and Students of the Kalabu Secondary School,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**My fellow Fijians,**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here at the Kalabu Secondary School to open yet another of the Government’s Telecentres – the latest to be established as part of our communications revolution.

It’s the second day running that I’ve had the pleasure of seeing so many bright, shining faces of our young people, eager to join that revolution by gaining access to the Internet.

You are about to join the 55-thousand Fijians who already have access to Telecentres in Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, Ovalau and Kadavu. And as I keep saying, I will not rest until every Fijian – wherever they live - has the same opportunity.

I want to tell you all what I told the students at the Sila Central High School yesterday; this is your chance to connect with the wider world. With the click of a mouse, you can get instant access to every piece of information known to mankind. Grab the opportunity to broaden your horizons and run with it.

Never before in Fiji’s history have our young people had so much opportunity to get on in life, to carve out worthwhile, interesting careers, to grow up with the ability to look after themselves and their families.

There has never been a better time to be Fijian, to be a citizen of a nation that stands tall and proud in the world, punches above its weight and has a wonderful future ahead of it. Provided we stay united, work together as a team, care for each other and always put Fiji first.

I know that most young people I meet share this vision, this dream. And not just for themselves but for Fiji – one nation working towards a prosperous and just future for every single Fijian.

As your Prime Minister, I urge you all to join me in this crusade. I’m relying on every one of you to do your part, to work as hard as you can so that we can all make Fiji great.

With this event and the opening of the Telecentre at Sila Central yesterday, the people of the Nasinu Corridor – the most densely populated area of Fiji - are being connected to the world.

As I said yesterday, you may be close physically to our nation’s capital. Many of you may have mobile phones. But I know that very few of you have had access to personal computers and internet connection. In the case of the Kalabu School, there hasn’t been a single personal computer in the entire school. Until now. And it’s a big reason for us all to celebrate.

This communications revolution goes hand in hand with my Government’s proudest achievement – the education revolution that is the biggest investment Fiji has ever made in the future of its young people.

Never before has even the poorest Fijian child been given such a leg-up. Because instead of the heartbreak of ordinary families unable to provide an education for their children, we have given them hope.

Every Fijian knows that education is the best way to break the cycle of poverty in any country. And we have started to break that cycle by giving every Fijian child the opportunity to get an education all the way up to tertiary level.

We are building a smarter country through our free primary and secondary schooling, plus the tertiary loans scheme to enable children from ordinary Fijian families to afford to go to technical colleges or universities. There is also our scholarship based on merit for the top 600 students for the selected courses that will propel our country forward. In addition we are continuing our scholarship for civil servants to further their skills and knowledge but now the selection is on a transparent basis.

Of course, education never stops, no matter how old you are. The Internet access here is not just for the students during school hours. As with every Telecentre in Fiji, the wider community, the adults, can come here out of hours and on weekends. And I want to encourage you all to do so to expand your knowledge of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, as you all know, I am now a civilian Prime Minister and will soon begin the process of gaining the five thousand signatures I need to register the political movement I am forming to contest the general election. At that election, I will be calling on the Fijian people to make a clear choice between my vision of a better future in the new Fiji we are building together over any return to the Fiji of old. To look to the future and not the past.

I fundamentally believe in the good sense of the Fijian people, in their intelligence and their ability to separate false promises and outright lies from the truth. So today, I want to tell you a fundamental truth about what our Constitution really says about your right to practise your religion.

I have to admit that I was astonished by the suggestion by the older politicians that our new Constitution means that God is no longer at the centre of our national life. It is a lie and I ask every Fijian to reject the idea.

The truth is quite clearly laid out in the Constitution and I urge everyone to read it. In simple terms, the right of every Fijian to follow his or her own religious belief is protected. It is enshrined in our supreme law.

Every Fijian has the right to worship privately and publicly. And every school has the right to conduct religious instruction – both religious based schools and government schools.

In other words, there is no barrier to any school holding scripture classes or holding prayers, as some people have either mistakenly or deliberately mis-interpreted the law.

What the new Constitution requires all of us to do is to respect the religious beliefs of others. It requires us not to force our own particular beliefs on others, not force others to worship as we do, not to force others to pray to the supreme being in the manner we believe in. Because they may believe just as fervently in their belief, as we do in ours and we must respect our different ways. We must give people the choice to choose for themselves.

It is a question of common decency. It is a question of fairness. That we must all have the right in life to follow our own beliefs without interference from people of other religions, denominations, the wider community or the State.

That is why our Constitution provides for a secular state. It simply means that the State - the Government of the day, the lawmakers, the judges, everyone – cannot favour any one religion or denomination.

The State must be neutral, just as they are in democracies like United States of America, France, Australia and New Zealand. We are protecting everyone’s religious rights, upholding their right to their beliefs. And rejecting the bigotry of religious extremists whoever they may be.

God has always been present. God is with us now and God will be with us as we move forward.

The major religions and denominations share fundamental common values – our love of God, our love for our fellow human beings. I also believe that God stands for justice and truth. And God stands for love, compassion and tolerance, and that includes religious tolerance.

It also means that we all can pray together as a nation – to share our common belief in a supreme being greater than ourselves. And today, I would like to close by reciting the prayer that was given at the Presidential assent of our new Constitution last September. It’s a prayer that can be recited by every Fijian, irrespective of their individual beliefs - a prayer for Fiji.

Let us pray:

*“Oh God, we ask you to bless us as we gather in your name. Guide us in our prayers and thoughts and help us to do your will. We pray for our country and our leaders and ask you to grant us wisdom.*

*We pray for every Fijian, both at home and abroad. We pray for equality, justice and compassion in our national life. Help us to assist each other and especially the vulnerable.*

*May we always strive for what is just and good.*

*In your name, Amen.”*

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.

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