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**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 LAUNCH OF COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE SCHOLARSHIP

FNU  **Thurs. 6th Feb., 2013**

**KORONIVIA 1000 Hours**

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**The Acting Minister for Agriculture;**

**Vice Chancellor of the Fiji National University;**

**Distinguished Guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

**And most important of all, our Farmers of tomorrow.**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

Nothing is more important to Fiji than our ability to produce food.

For too long, we’ve dropped the ball when it comes to the task of feeding ourselves.

We’ve relied far too much on imports. This reliance becomes even more marked when we have vast tracts of under-utilized fertile lands capable of producing the food we need. Indeed we are capable of producing not just for our basic needs but for the hotels and for markets overseas.

Under my Government, all that is changing. We’re modernizing agriculture to make it more productive for the nation’s needs. The policies of my Government are focused on ensuring that we become self-sufficient.

Food security – guaranteeing access to enough crops and livestock to feed our populations – is one of the biggest challenges for any country in the 21st century.

We need to be more efficient in what we already produce. And we need to constantly explore new agricultural methods, introduce new technology, new seed varieties, new crops, new farming techniques and improve animal husbandry.

We also need to boost the quality of our farmers. That is why we are all here today - to launch a major new initiative to encourage our young people to become farmers. And become professional at that.

In a world of scarce resources and a growing global population, the job of a farmer is undoubtedly more important today than at any time in history.

It’s no longer just a question of putting a few seeds or cuttings in the ground or getting a few cattle or goats and fattening them for sale.

Farming today is a highly specialized skill and farmers need proper training to do the job they’re now expected to do.

That is why my Government has set up a partnership with the Fiji National University to pioneer a new scholarship program in Fiji that has two basic aims.

First, we want to produce a new generation of farmers in Fiji - people with the right skills to optimise food production so that we can feed ourselves and become food exporters, not importers.

Second, we want to encourage young people to become farmers and give them the ability to do so. They also need to understand and know that to run a farm they need to be also commercially savvy and astute. It is after all a business.

I want to thank the FNU for having the foresight to join us in this bold plan – a scholarship program for the farmers of tomorrow.

Each year, after a rigorous selection process, successful scholarship recipients will attend a 12 month certificate course at the FNU Agricultural School that will train them in the various agricultural disciplines. This will be of the highest standard from an institution with a growing reputation for producing graduates with practical skills as well as academic knowledge.

Under this program, these agricultural graduates will emerge from their studies with a career path and significant Government assistance to enable them to achieve their ambitions.

When they graduate, each student will receive a loan package to the value of $70,000.

This will cover the cost of:

* 100 acres of farm land;
* A tractor and basic farm implements;
* Fertilizer and other materials;
* A house and shed;
* And start-up cash of $2,000.

This initiative guarantees that each graduating student starts off on an equal footing. It doesn’t matter what your background is, where you come from or how much money your family has. It is up to you – once you are given these benefits – to work hard and create your own opportunities. It is up to you to fulfill your dreams. It is up to you to help secure Fiji’s ability to feed itself as you work to fulfill your own needs and those of your family.

You will not be alone. The Government will be here to help you. Each student will be supervised by an Agricultural Extension Officer, and given specific performance targets which we expect you to meet.

It’s all about encouraging many more young people to become farmers, give them sustainable livelihoods, boost the nation’s food security, and reduce Fiji’s dependence on imported food.

I ask you all to imagine the difference this initiative can make in a few years’ time. A new breed of farmers all formally trained and equipped with the tools to do their jobs. This initiative we believe will change the way we Fijians view farming and farmers.

It’s all part of my Government’s promise to provide genuine opportunity and better services to all Fijians. But we don’t just promise. We deliver.

This initiative goes hand in hand with the other major program I announced in the 2013 Budget – the allocation of $5-million dollars this year for a new scholarship program to cover tuition fees for more than 1,000 students to undertake vocational courses at FNU.

This initiative is to increase the number of trades people in Fiji - to expand the nation’s skills base and provide jobs for our young people.

They will learn specialized skills across the trade spectrum – electricians, plumbers, deckhands, carpenters, mechanics and engineers.

In addition, through the $1.8 million Government funded program, we are continuing to support FNU’s vocational training for those living in rural and maritime communities.

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are collaborating with FNU on a number of initiatives and it’s a sign of the confidence we have that it can deliver and indeed it must continue to deliver.

Both my Government and this University share the same vision – for a smarter, better educated Fiji. We see ourselves as partners to give our young people meaningful, challenging and sustainable futures; For Fiji to be a leader in the Pacific in the training of human resources; For Fiji to have a strong economy in which jobs are created and the benefits flow to all of our people; To hold our heads high as Fijians in the community of nations.

To the scholarship recipients here today, I have one message. You are being given a unique opportunity.

Seize this opportunity for yourselves, your families and for all Fijians. You will make them and us proud.

Vinaka vakalevu.

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