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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF FIJI’S UN MISSION IN GENEVA**

Geneva Mon. 2nd June, 2014

 1100 Hours

**Your Excellencies, members of the Diplomatic Corps,**

**The Fijian Ambassador to Switzerland and the United Nations**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Bula Vinaka, Bonjour and a very good morning to you all.**

**I’m delighted to be with you all in the heart of Europe for a very special occasion – the opening of Fiji’s first United Nations Mission in Geneva and our first embassy in Switzerland. Given our strong relationship with the UN over the years, the establishment of this office is not only important for Fiji’s interests but is arguably long overdue.**

**Geneva is a unique and very special city, the main European base of the United Nations and home to 32 international organisations. Many of these are specialised agencies of the UN, including the World Trade Organisation and the International Labour Organisation – both of them important institutions for Fiji and Fijians. Geneva also plays host to some 250 non-government organisations, including the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society.**

**So in global terms, this is an extremely important centre. And Fiji has long needed to be in a better position to engage with these agencies and NGOs, to develop closer relations with them, benefit from their expertise, avail ourselves of the range of services they offer.**

**This is not a one-way street. While we have much to gain, we also have much to contribute. And with our presence here, we will clearly be in a better position to have our own views heard and contribute directly in these various forums - to add to the global debate as a thriving and increasingly influential Pacific Small island State. Indeed Fiji is now the only Pacific small Island Developing State with the direct presence in Geneva. We will not only fly our flag here in Geneva but also that of our Pacific island brothers and sisters.**

**Instead of being a visitor to Geneva, Fiji is now a resident. And we have an especially articulate voice to contribute in the form of our new Representative and Ambassador, Madam Nazhat Shameem, a former High Court judge and one of our most distinguished citizens.**

**In addition to forging stronger relationships with the UN agencies, Fiji plans to forge a new and strong relationship with Switzerland. Like Fiji, Switzerland is a country of great natural beauty, though naturally of a different sort. We, of course, have our 300 plus islands. You have the breathtaking vistas of the Swiss Alps. And I was extremely fortunate yesterday to be able to witness some of this staggering natural beauty up close.**

**I’d like to take this opportunity to invite the people of Switzerland to come to Fiji to witness our own natural beauty close up – our islands, beaches and a host of attractions – and to experience the famed hospitality of our people.**

**Our tourism slogan is: “Fiji, where happiness finds you”. But when you visit us, you will soon learn that it is less a slogan, more a way of life, as we increasingly share the Fijian experience and the rich diversity of our various cultures with the rest of the world.**

**Switzerland, of course, is also famed for its neutrality, the strength and courage to resist being dragged into other people’s conflicts, to pursue policies that are principled and are in the best interests of its own people. The position of neutrality is not one of weakness. On the contrary it takes greater strength to resist the pressure of those who are economically stronger, or who have bigger defence forces. It takes greater strength to ensure that policy is driven by what is just and fair. This is a stance that Fiji seeks to emulate, not least through our membership of the Non Aligned Movement.**

**Our own staunchly independent foreign operates on the fundamental principle of being “friends to all and enemies to none”. So in this, the Fijian people have common cause with the people of Switzerland. And today, we open this mission in the hope that the ties that already bind us become closer and we can work together for the advancement of the values and principles we share.**

**Fiji is also looking to expand its trading relationship with Switzerland in particular and Europe in general and we look forward to canvassing those opportunities in the months and years ahead. Our Fijian Made initiative is a comprehensive program to market the full range of quality goods and services Fijians produce – from talented village artisans to boutique producers and our expanding collection of global brands. We want Brand Fiji to be a byword for quality the world over, just as it is for Brand Switzerland.**

**Your Excellencies. Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to formally thank the Swiss Government for its generous assistance in helping Fiji to set up this mission. We have been struck not only by the renowned Swiss efficiency in the way that assistance has been delivered but with the warmth that has been showed to our delegation. As we say in Fiji: Vinaka vakalevu.**

**In the case of the United Nations, our relationship grows stronger by the year. My Government has adopted the notion of service to others as its overriding principle – service to our own people at home and service to the people of other lands abroad. And our main avenue of service is our proud contribution over more than three decades to United Nations peacekeeping missions around the world.**

**We have 508 Republic of Fiji Military Forces personnel currently serving in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force in the Golan Heights, Syria; 328 in the Multi-National Force and Observers in Sinai; 195 in the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq; and 15 in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan.**

**There are 20 in the United Nations mission in Darfur, Sudan; and 23 in the United Nations Mission in Liberia, all of them protecting vulnerable ordinary people in volatile areas of conflict**

**Every Fijian is extremely proud of these men and women, whose skill, courage and discipline, wisdom and restraint, is highly valued by the United Nations and is setting a global example of the highest standard. We will always be there to serve the international community as best we can and especially the ordinary men, women and children – far from our own islands - who look to us for protection. This is Fiji’s promise to the world.**

**We are also serving in a variety of other UN roles. Our Permanent Representative in New York currently chairs the governing board of the United Nations Development Program. Fiji, until recently, through the Minister for Communications, has been the Vice Chair of the Telecommunications Development Advisory Group (TDAG pronounced: TEE DAG) at the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).**

**Fiji has also been given a role of evaluating other countries in relation to their obligations under the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC).**

**And as Fiji’s Prime Minister, I had the honour and privilege last year to Chair the G77 Plus China – the biggest voting bloc at the UN.**

**Fiji takes its obligations and responsibilities to the United Nations, as a member state, very seriously. This is especially so in the development of substantive, fundamental human rights.**

**Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is a momentous year for Fiji as we approach the first genuinely democratic election in our nation’s history on September the 17th. For the first time, this election will be conducted on the universal democratic principle of equal votes of equal value instead of the skewered system employed in the past. For the first time, every citizen will go to cast their votes as a Fijian – a common and equal citizenry sharing the same name and enjoying equal political, economic and social rights while recognizing the special place of our indigenous people. Every Fijian will have equal access to substantive justice no matter who they are.**

**Last year, we reset our national compass with a historic new Constitution, including a Bill of Rights which is arguably one of the strongest in the world. In addition to civil and political rights, this Constitution guarantees Fijians access to a range of social and economic rights, most of them for the first time. Ordinary people now enjoy guarantees of free education, adequate housing and health care, social security, clean water and a clean environment. They also have a right to economic participation. The constitution also for the first time protects the rights of disabled Fijians.**

 **All these rights are not only enforceable through such bodies as the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, the Legal Aid Commission and the judiciary, these rights cannot be taken away.**

**So we are in the throes of a human rights revolution in Fiji, one which upholds the basic rights of ordinary people in a way that has never been the case before. We are also increasing access to justice for ordinary people - such things as access to the courts and their right to a fair trial – by increasing the budget of the Legal Aid Commission and by opening a string of Legal Aid Offices across the country.**

**My Government is committed not only to developing these rights but looks forward to a healthy jurisprudence emerging from Fiji which can serve as a guide to other countries considering the inclusion of social and economic rights in their own Constitutions and subordinate laws.**

**The old arguments against the development of social and economic rights as enforceable rights - that the judiciary should not make judgments which have resource implications and are an interference with executive power, are in my view no longer valid in Fiji. Our courts have been making important judgments in the development of civil and political human rights, for some time. Almost all those judgments have had resource implications, whether it was in the building of a new remand centre in accordance with the United Nations Minimum Standard Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, or whether it was to order the State to provide legal aid for a defendant in a treason trial. Almost all human rights cases have resource implications, whether the rights are civil and political, or social and economic.**

**In including all such social and economic rights in our Constitution, Fiji has shown commitment to the substantive development of individual rights and freedoms in our country. I say substantive because I and my Government believe that rights are only meaningful if they are able to cut across bureaucracy, cultural barriers, and institutional weakness to make a real difference to the rights of individuals.**

**Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. We have been determined all along to create a more equal society in Fiji, a more just society, one in which every citizen enjoys the same opportunity. I firmly believe that true equality is the foundation stone of genuine democracy. And so we have demolished entrenched privilege and laid that foundation of equality on which our nation can be rebuilt. One nation, one Fiji, with opportunity and justice for all.**

**For the first time, on September 17th, every Fijian will go to the polls as an equal, their vote worth precisely the same as any other citizen. And they will have the same rights and with it, the same dignity.**

**We have also ensured that the election process itself is completely independent, with an independent Electoral Commission and an Elections Office with dedicated staff to organise and conduct the one-day poll. This is instead of the previous practice of using civil servants to conduct the election, a process that was open to abuse. And we have reached overseas to recruit a team of international experts to avoid some of the fraud and mismanagement that marred previous elections in Fiji.**

**To ensure that ordinary Fijian voters fully understand the process, Fiji has embarked on a massive campaign of voter education. More than 550-thousand voters have so far registered using the new electronic system. And we have sent teams to those parts of the world where there are known to be large numbers of Fijians living to include them in the election process.**

**Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the stage is being set for a truly historic event in the life of our nation on September 17th – the introduction of our first genuine democracy. It goes hand in hand with the plethora of basic human rights that no Fijian has ever enjoyed before. In the midst of this revolution, I’m proud to be launching our first United Nations Mission in Geneva – a symbol of our commitment to the UN ideal and the rights of every Fijian.**

**And I now have great pleasure in declaring it open.**

**Vinaka vakalevu, Merci Beaucoup, Thank you.**

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