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

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

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE NAKADI/TAULI ACCESS ROAD**

NAITASIRI TUESDAY JULY 8

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**Honourable Minister/Ministers;**

**The Chairman/Chief Executive of the Fiji Roads Authority;**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**,

Bula vinaka and a very good morning/ afternoon to you all.

I’m delighted to be here in Baulevu, Naitasiri, to open a very important project for the people of this area – the Nakadi/Tauli Access Road.

It’s important because finally, more than 30 farming families finally have access to a road that links them with the outside world. They can now travel to and from their properties over a proper surface that can bring vehicles to their doors and ends their relative isolation.

You really have to be without a road yourself to realise the difference this is going to make for the people who live here – farmers, mothers, school children, the elderly, everyone who now have what many of us take for granted in other parts of Fiji.

I know from talking to some of you how hard life has been without proper access. Farmers who’ve had trouble carting their produce to market. School Children who’ve had trouble crossing the Rewa River on their way to classes during bad weather. The inconvenience and time wasted for everyone trying to cross the river and reach the outside world.

Well all that has finally come to an end. You are no longer cut off. You are no longer isolated. A long journey that used to be arduous has become an easy ride. You have joined the many thousands of Fijians who’ve benefited from my Government’s program to open up new roads and upgrade existing one. And as your Prime Minister, I couldn’t be more delighted.

What this means for you will become clearer in the months and years ahead. This new road will not only make your journeys to Nausori and Suva easier and quicker but will open up new opportunities.

The ability to get your produce to market quicker and in greater volumes means that you can expand your agricultural activities. With my Government’s drive to make Fiji more self sufficient in food production, there are opportunities to exploit, money to be made, to improve your standard of living and that of your family.

And of course, if you get sick, you are closer to hospitals and other health care, children are closer to their schools, everyone is closer to the other government services that are available in Nausori. Everything suddenly seems closer as distances shrink and travelling times are reduced.

I’m delighted that the $94-thousand that it cost to build this route has been put to such good use. Because nothing pleases me more than to see the lives of ordinary Fijians transformed as we do what in many cases, should have been done years ago.

As I keep saying all over Fiji: the role of Government is to serve. To meet the needs of ordinary people and give them the things they need to improve their daily lives.

We don’t make false promises as a Government. We deliver. Talk is cheap. Actions speak louder than words. And I expect the Fijian people to judge me on what I do, not what I say, when it comes to deciding how they will cast their vote in the General Election on 17 September.

I want to say something to you all about some of the lies that are being spread by certain politicians who are standing against me. They have accused me – a fellow i’Taukei – of weakening the protection of i’Taukei land and of weakening the position of the Christian churches in Fiji. On both counts, these are lies. They are simply not true and let me explain why.

There is no threat to i’Taukei land. None. You don’t have to take my word for this. You can read it for yourself in our Constitution, which we translated into i’Taukei for the first time so you can all understand it.

In black and white, it says that no I’Taukei land can ever be taken away permanently. Never. A particular portion can be used for a period of time if the Government needs land for some public purpose like a road or airport. The provision to use land for public purpose has been there in all our constitutions and all our previous laws. This happens all over the world also. But now under our new constitution the landowners must be paid compensation and when that land is no longer needed, that land must be returned to the traditional owners. This provision is new under our constitution and it is a wonderful provision.

So i’Taukei land is safe. And my Government has made it even safer by closing off some legal avenues that former politicians were using to convert i’Taukei land to freehold land. They did this by first converting it to Crown land and then selling it on.

This land was lost forever. I stopped this practice. I closed these loopholes. And I did it specifically to make our land safer, to put it beyond the reach of those unscrupulous people among us who are willing to sell off our birth right for personal gain.

I urge you all to ignore those who are trying to scare you into voting for them by making you feel insecure. Turn your backs on them. And read the Constitution for yourself. That’s when you’ll realise that they are trying to fool you. I repeat: there is no threat to I’Taukei land. In fact, the opposite is true. It is protected for all time.

Another lie these would-be politicians are spreading is that there is a threat to Christianity because Fiji is now a secular state and that Jesus needs defending. Jesus doesn’t need defending. If anything, his position in Fiji has never been stronger.

For any Christian, he is our Lord and Saviour. He is at the centre of our lives and nothing can change that. Let me explain what a secular state really means. Because it isn’t a threat to Christianity. It protects it, along with all the other major religions in Fiji.

All it means is that the State – the Government – is neutral when it comes to religion. It doesn’t take sides. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a 7th day, a Methodist or a Catholic or a Pentecostal. The Government doesn’t interfere with what you believe it and treats every religion equally. For example if you go for a Government job, what church you go to does not matter. what matters is whether you can do the job and deliver service to the public without discrimination.

Let me also make this clear. There is nothing to stop Christians from worshipping publicly or in private, preaching the Gospel or saying Christian prayers in our schools. Nothing. And that’s the case with the other religions too.

What no religion can do is force people of another religion to worship or pray for a supreme being they don’t believe in. And that is the right thing to do in a multi-religious nation like Fiji.

We all know Christianity is the main religion in Fiji so I am at a loss to know how it can be threatened at all. But imagine if you as a Christian lived in another country where Christianity wasn’t the main religion. You’d expect the freedom to follow Jesus. And that’s what we’re doing in Fiji. Keeping the State and religion separate and guaranteeing the right of every Fijian to practice whatever they believe in.

So I call on the people of Naitasiri and every Fijian to turn their backs on the politics of fear and embrace my vision of a new and better Fiji in which we all work, hand in hand, to build a better future for our children.

We are now giving those children free education to equip them for better lives and to build a smarter Fiji. As I keep saying all over the country: There has never been a better time to be Fijian. There has never been a better time to be a citizen of this nation – with its growing economy, the promise of more prosperity, punching above its weight and standing tall in the world.

My opponents want to take Fiji backwards. They want to take the lease money I have given you to decide for yourselves how it is spent. They want only the elite to benefit. They want to divide the country again rather than unite it, which is my vision and the only way we will ever fulfil our promise.

They treat you like fools, make false promises and lie to you to get your vote. Whereas I believe in your basic decency and common sense. Your ability to see through those lies, recognise that actions

speak louder than words and reject the politics of division.

I urge you all to think wisely how you will vote on 17 September. We must not allow the reforms of the past few years to be lost - those reforms that have given us the means as a nation to finally deliver outcomes for ordinary people like this one

I have my eyes firmly on the future, not the past. I have a vision for this nation which is inclusive and which will benefit every Fijian, not matter who they are or where they come from. And I ask you all to join me on that journey as together, we make it our mission to put Fiji first and make Fiji great.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it now gives me great pleasure to officially declare the Nakadi/Tauli Access Road open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.