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**SPEECH AT THE GROUND BREAKING CEREMONY OF THE NEW BA HOSPITAL**

**Ba Hospital Wed. 6th Aug., 2014**

**BA 1600 Hours**

**Cabinet Ministers;**

**President of the Ba Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Dinesh Patel;**

**Distinguished guests;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen;**

Bula Vinaka and Good afternoon to you all.

It’s a great pleasure to be here today for this important occasion to officially break ground for the New Ba Hospital.

Last October, my Government signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding, facilitated by the Minister for Industry and Trade, sealing the public-private partnership for the construction of a brand-new hospital for Fijians living in and around Ba, including Tavua, Rakiraki and Lautoka.

With that MOU, Government joined forces with the Ba Chamber of Commerce, marking the first step of an ambitious capital project that has the potential to benefit around 140,000 people.

I would like to once again thank the Ba Chamber of Commerce for its leadership and initiative. It is thanks in large part to its hard work and bold vision that we are breaking ground today.

I often discuss the importance of public-private partnerships in delivering quality, efficiency and transparency to the Fijian people and the Ba Hospital is a perfect example of this.

The spirit of collaboration and community on this project is truly commendable. Not only are the Ba Chamber of Commerce and the Ba Hospital Steering Committee playing a key role in partnering with Government to ensure the successful completion of the new hospital, but a number of companies and professionals have also come on board and provided their expertise and services free of charge.

To me, this strikes to the heart of the kind of place Ba is. Ba sets a wonderful example of how the values of community, tolerance and understanding can triumph over the division, fear and mistrust that some old politicians are clinging to.

Yesterday, one of Fiji’s main political parties claimed that Fijians can never be equal – a statement of the same brand of racism that has brought Fiji to its knees before. This party has finally revealed its true colours for all to witness, showing once and for all that it hasn’t changed, despite repeated claims of multi-racialism and unity.

This statement demonstrates that this party does not believe in the fundamental human rights as set out in the UN Declaration. It demonstrates that it doesn’t believe in the belief that all men and women are equal in the eyes of God. A party that doesn’t believe in true equality and discriminates on the basis of race, ethnicity and religion will also discriminate between rich and poor, rural and urban, abled and disabled, young and old.

Fijians should not only condemn this bigoted party but also all other parties aligned with it.

Luckily, as I look around Ba and the community gathered here today in a spirit of unity and togetherness, I am reassured about just how wrong and just how backward-looking this party is. We Fijians know that it’s possible to enjoy a future of equality, justice and prosperity for all. All we have to do is refuse those who are trying to drag us back to the divisions and discrimination of the past.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

So far, work on the new Ba Hospital is progressing well. Earlier this year, professional design consultants were appointed and I understand that the design concept is expected to be signed-off on within the next couple weeks. After that, the detailed design work will commence.

Also, the tender for early civil works is expected to be awarded by next week. And the actual construction is expected to begin as early as November this year.

My Government is always on the lookout for opportunities to form productive partnerships with communities and NGOs to improve the lives of our people. This alliance with the Ba Chamber of Commerce provides a great example of how such co-operation can work.

The new Ba Hospital will be constructed to World Health Organisation standards and when it’s complete – in 2016 – it will serve as a bridge between the smaller Tavua and Rakiraki hospitals and the larger Lautoka Hospital.

It will replace the current facility in Ba, which has lived well beyond its years and is becoming increasingly expensive for Government to continue to maintain to make it comply with the required standards.

The new hospital will offer a range of crucial services, including a birthing unit, a 24-hour emergency facility, an x-ray and scan department, a laboratory, a dental unit, operating theatres, a mortuary and a pharmacy, amongst others. The total project represents an investment of around $30 million.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of my fundamental beliefs is that all Fijians deserve access to quality and compassionate health-care no matter where they live or what their background is.

In an ideal world, we would have unlimited resources to spend on boosting our health services. But I have always been very up-front and honest with the Fijian people about what we can and cannot do in the health care arena.

Unfortunately, this policy of honesty stands in stark contrast with the politicians who are happy to tell the Fijian people that fixing the problems in health is as easy as a few simple reforms. I believe that Fijians are clever enough to see this for what it is: a bunch of meaningless talk. They understand how easy it is to rattle off nice-sounding promises in the bullet points of a manifesto. However, it requires real leadership to deal with the reality on the ground and develop pragmatic, innovative solutions. The health sector doesn’t need more promises; it needs smart leadership and strong, action-based decision-making.

The one thing I will promise the Fijian people is this: my Government will continue to constantly seek imaginative ways to overcome the problems we face – to enable us to meet an acceptable standard of health care for a country of our size and means.

It’s no secret that my Government over the past six years has been playing a catch-up game in terms of the availability of equipment, of local specialists, nurses, professional health care givers and more importantly, in the attitude of some medical staff to their professional duties and to the patients they serve.

We understand that hospitals and health centres are where babies enter the world, where our family members go to be healed and where we often spend our final moments with loved ones. Therefore, we need a better level of sensitivity shown towards patients and their families during these important and often life-changing moments.

But if any Fijian needs an indication of just how seriously we take our responsibility to improve Fiji’s health services, the past week offers a fine example. Exactly one week ago, I was in Navua opening a brand-new state of the art hospital; today, we are in Ba breaking ground for a new hospital; and tomorrow, I am in Lautoka to launch a refurbishment of the emergency department and operating theaters, as well as a hospital extension.

On top of this, in Ba Province alone, we are also planning the upgrade of the Ba Health Centre together with significant maintenance works at Balevuto Health Centre and Namau Nursing Station.

All told, no other government has ever made the level and manner of investment that we have made and are still making, in such a short period of time, to deliver a better standard of health care in Fiji.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to once again thank the Ba Chamber of Commerce, the new Ba Hospital Steering Committee and the Minister for Industry and Trade for all of their hard work so far. With Government’s support, I am confident this project is in good hands.

With those words, it’s now my pleasure to do the ground breaking for the new Ba Hospital.

Vinaka Vakalevu. Thank you.

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