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**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**

**OPENING Address at the 8TH MEETING OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY**

**Vale Ni Bose Complex Mon. 18th Nov., 2013**

**COMPLEX 0900 Hours**

* **Honourable Foreign Ministers and Cabinet Ministers of SPC Member Countries**
* **Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps**
* **Representatives of SPC Development Partners**
* **Representatives from Participating SPC Member Countries and other agencies.**
* **Private Sector and Civil Society Representatives**
* **Distinguished Guests**
* **Ladies and Gentlemen**

Bula Vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

It’s a great pleasure for me to welcome you all to Fiji and to deliver the opening address for the 8th Conference of the Pacific Community, which Fiji is delighted to be hosting here in Suva.

Our theme is an important one for every member country: ***“Enhancing Sustainable Development in the Pacific Community – Helping Shape the Post-2015 Agenda”.***

In essence, it means the Pacific Small Island Developing States doing more to ensure sustainable development in our respective countries and the region as a whole.

And also doing more to have our voices heard as the global community shapes its development agenda for the years ahead.

The many challenges we face to our natural environment, our economies and the health and well-being of our people have all intensified since we hosted the last Conference of the Pacific Community ten years ago.

Yet Fiji believes that we have not done enough to begin to address those challenges. In many instances, our responses have been half-hearted and sporadic. In almost all of them, they have been inadequate.

At this conference, I urge you all to show more resolve when it comes to addressing our problems and formulate solutions that are realistic, affordable and can be implemented quickly and effectively.

I think we can all agree that on some of the biggest challenges we face, the Pacific Small Island Developing States are running out of time.

We are, of course, especially concerned about the lack of resolute global action on climate change, which threatens the very existence of some of our members.

Fiji is proud to have played a key role in putting the case of the PSIDS countries at the United Nations and in other global forums. But our regional organisations also need to develop a stronger voice so that we are heard before it’s too late.

We Pacific Islanders have a tendency to think that our problems can be solved in the fullness of time or *“vakamalua”* as we say in Fiji. Yet with so many of the challenges we face, time is a luxury that we no longer possess.

I urge you all at this conference to embrace what Barack Obama famously described as *“the fierce urgency of now”.*

**Honorable Delegates,**

You are in Fiji at one of the most crucial phases of our development – as we make the transition to a genuine parliamentary democracy and an election next year conducted for the first time on the basis of equal votes of equal value.

Our new Constitution establishes a common and equal citizenry- also for the first time -reinforces the protection of indigenous land and culture and provides every Fijian with a range of civil and political rights and unprecedented socio-economic rights. This Constitution meets the test of even the world’s most liberal democracies.

My Government is delivering what it promised when we embarked on our revolution nearly seven years ago. In place of the elitism, division and corruption that marred our national development since Independence, Fiji is now a nation where everyone is equal, everyone is a Fijian and has the same chance to get on in life. There is an emphasis on unity, zero tolerance for corruption and we are building institutions that are sound, transparent and worthy of a progressive modern state.

Coupled with our political reforms, our sound stewardship of the economy and the nation’s finances is also producing its own revolution. You will have noticed that we are finally fixing the nation’s roads. But this is just the most visible sign of the transformation of Fiji’s infrastructure, which includes reforming our ports and our airports to make Fiji the genuine economic and transportation hub of the South Pacific, and not just the geographical hub we’ve always been.

Our telecommunications revolution has connected Fijians to each other and the world through mobile broadband. And I’m extremely proud of the latest phase in our social revolution – the provision of free education in our primary and secondary schools and a government loans scheme to enable more affordable access to our universities and colleges.

We’ve have set ourselves a bold vision to become a clever country with the necessary skills – a nation in which poverty is no barrier to learning and excelling at school and university is as important as doing well on the rugby field.

We do it not just for ourselves as Fijians but because we also believe that a smarter Fiji can contribute to the welfare of every Pacific Islander.

I’m extremely proud at the growing numbers of our volunteer teachers, nurses and other professionals serving in our smaller neighbours – as proud of them as I am of our hundreds of troops serving the global community in UN Peacekeeping operations.

As the years progress, more educated Fijians will fan out over the Pacific, indeed the rest of the world, helping to raise living standards wherever they can.

In a very real sense, this is our human contribution to sustainable development in our region. It is also part of our vision not only to make Fiji Great but to make the Pacific Great.

Honourable Delegates,

It’s been a great disappointment to Fiji that some of our neighbours chose to isolate us because of that revolution. Rather than engage with us, to try to understand why our national compass had to be radically reset, they turned their backs on us and tried to damage us.

This hostility extended to what used to be the pre-eminent regional grouping – the Pacific Islands Forum. The two metropolitan powers who dominate that organisation used their muscle to have Fiji suspended. But it made us all the more determined not to be deflected from our reform agenda, not to kowtow to outsiders. There is no doubt that many functionaries including the technocrats of the Forum became, rather unprofessionally, politicized and some even continue to this day.

I want to thank all those stake holders who had the wisdom and who stood by Fiji while we did what we had to do to produce a genuine, inclusive democracy instead of the pale imitation that our critics preferred. Your confidence and trust has been deeply appreciated. I also want to assure you that as time goes by, that confidence and trust will be vindicated.

Honourable Delegates,

It’s now historical fact that having been shunned and isolated by the Pacific Islands Forum, Fiji looked further a field for support and found it. The irony is that the very thing that was designed to make us weaker actually made us stronger. The “Look North” policy that was forced on us encouraged us to go out into the world and make new friends who were prepared to listen to us – to understand that our reform program was for the benefit of every Fijian, not just a privileged few.

Indeed Fiji’s voice has never been stronger in the world through our role in chairing the G77 Plus China – the biggest voting bloc at the UN. And in our region, our exclusion from the Forum made us all the more determined to strengthen our ties with our Melanesian brothers and sisters in the MSG – the Melanesian Spearhead Group.

We are now collectively working towards a Melanesian Common Market for the free flow of goods, services and labour resources. And we quickly realised that there is strength in numbers when it comes to international trade – that we can negotiate far better as a regional bloc to achieve better deals for our people than as individual countries. Indeed this must be the case in the current EPA negotiations with the European Union.

We also heard the cry from civil society groups and the private sector for them to have a bigger say in regional deliberations by creating the Pacific Islands Development Forum – the PIDF. Where those groups had been excluded from the PIF, they are now at the heart of decision-making in the PIDF. It is a valuable partnership with Government for the benefit of all Pacific islanders. And Fiji is proud to have played a key role in bringing everyone together and creating a home for the organisation – a Secretariat – in Suva.

Honourable Delegates,

The lesson from the past seven years is that our regional organisations can only be weakened if they are used for political purposes or as blunt instruments of punishment. The effectiveness of such orgnisations and become muted and indeed their relevance is questioned when they become partisan.

We all know that the fundamental principal in the conduct of international affairs is respect for sovereign rights and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Why was Fiji an exception? We can all express our views about each other. Indeed, most of us welcome the advice and counsel of our friends. But we must never insist on imposing our will on others nor use our individual or collective muscle to degrade each other’s capabilities.

The so-called smart sanctions against Fiji included travel bans on government appointees that deprived us of the ability to draw on the expertise of some of our best and brightest people. That had a direct effect on the quality of governance of the Fijian people. So for some of our neighbours to claim that ordinary people weren’t being affected by their sanctions is nonsense.

Despite this experience which will doubt resonate in our future national policies, we hope for, as we have from the beginning, better relations as the truth dawns on some of these governments that our reforms were just and for the benefit of every Fijian.

**Honourable Delegates,**

I want to renew Fiji’s commitment here today towards achieving our common development agenda.  In July, we successfully hosted the first preparatory meeting of the Pacific Small Island Developing States, where high level Government Officials discussed the post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. We are taking the results of those deliberations to the global dialogue on the Post 2015 Agenda and the wider Small Island Developing States Conference that will be held in Samoa next year.

Through the PIDF, we are also stepping up our activities in the Pacific Oceanscape on Regional Cooperation, the first ever platform focusing specifically on Green Economies and Sustainable Development in the Pacific. And we are using the PIDF to better harness our regional preparations for the SIDS conference in Samoa and the ongoing global dialogue on Sustainable Development Goals post 2015.

We used our chairmanship of the G77 to specifically promote a distinctive Fijian brand of responsible global citizenship. And we’ve worked tirelessly to ensure that the challenges and priorities of the entire Pacific are not only voiced but placed at centre stage.

**Honourable Delegates,**

I especially want to say today how much we appreciate The Pacific Community for continuing to engage with Fiji and the rest of the region on programs to benefit our people. Your paramount obligation is to your Pacific Island members.

Too often, we see the metropolitan members trying to dominate the agenda and impose their will. This is totally unacceptable to Fiji and shows a blatant disregard of our sovereign rights as equal members of the organization.

That said, the SPC has to continue to show a very real understanding of the development needs of our people – their distance and isolation from major markets, their poor transport links, their limited export base and low economies of scale, plus the wider threats they face from natural disasters and climate change. Your technical and scientific assistance, your research, policy and training, has a hugely beneficial effect on the lives of all Pacific islanders.

You are working with us as we strive for excellent outcomes in sustainable development and Fiji is proud to both a partner and to host many of your activities.

Thank you all for your contributions to this effort. The SPC must continue on these positive aspects and learn from the recent experience vis-a-vis Fiji and the Forum.

In conclusion, I want to again welcome you all to Fiji and assure you of our continued support for the SPC. Your deliberations here this week will have a significant bearing on the lives of every Pacific Islander and I wish you all the very best for this – the 8th Conference.

As always, I also urge you to enjoy our Fijian hospitality and take time out, if you can, to see some of the rest of the country.

Vinaka vakalevu,Thank you.

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