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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 COMMISSIONING OF THE MV SIGAVOU**

GSS Premises Wed. 19th Feb., 2014

WALU BAY 10.30 Hours

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**Cabinet Ministers;**

**Permanent Secretaries

Shipping Stakeholders;

Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very Good Morning to you All.

As you know, I attend a lot of public functions as Prime Minister. But for someone who has spent so much of his working life at sea, it’s a special thrill to be commissioning a new ship that is going to make such a difference to the lives of so many ordinary Fijians in our maritime communities.

I’m told that the last new vessel acquired by the Government Shipping Service was 29 years ago in 1984. Frankly, for a maritime nation like ours, this is a huge embarrassment. For too long, the GSS has been neglected. But worse, the people who it is meant to serve have been neglected – the ordinary men and women in our maritime communities who deserved better service delivery but haven’t got it. Until now.

Today marks the start of a remarkable resurgence in the fortunes of the GSS. Because in less than a year, no fewer than three new vessels are being commissioned to finally end the years of neglect, to finally give ordinary people the level of service they deserve. And I’m immensely gratified that my Government has been able to do it.

Today, we welcome and commission the first of these vessels, our new flagship – *“Sigavou”*. In i’Taukei, of course, it means *“New Day”* and that’s what this occasion marks – the beginning of a new era of inter-island shipping in Fiji.

This landing craft – which can carry 20 passengers –was purchased in Malaysia at a cost of 2.6-million US Dollars. To the delivery crew, Captain Pauliasi Vakaloloma and his team, congratulations on making the 5000 nautical mile journey safely over 26 days.

In April, we will welcome a second landing craft from Malaysia that can carry 30 passengers as well as its cargo. And in January 2015, the third and biggest vessel is due to arrive in Fiji - one capable of carrying 80 passengers.

What this means is that by the beginning of next year, the Government Shipping Service will be transformed – three new ships to add to the current fleet of six. That means that the economic prospects of the islands these vessels serve will also be transformed. We will finally have workhorses capable of carrying the goods and the people needed to open up these places for further development.

I don’t think anyone will argue that maritime transportation has been one of the most neglected sectors of our nation. As a result, parts of Fiji like the islands in the Lau Group, Lomaiviti, Rotuma and Kadavu have lagged behind the rest of the country in particular, infrastructure development.

You all know that I have made service delivery to ordinary Fijians the central task of my Government. We don’t just promise better services. We deliver. And with these new vessels, we **will** be able to deliver a better standard of service to Fijians living in some of the most far-flung places in the country.

This 47 meter, 149 tonne landing craft is ideal for Fiji’s needs - with its two dedicated freezers and a forklift that can transport heavy goods and bring the produce of maritime communities quickly and efficiently to markets on the mainland. Fish, seaweed, copra, coconut oil - all the things that maritime communities rely on to earn an income.

They will also be able to cart their goods from Viti Levu to the islands more readily, conveniently and with the economies of scale at more cost efficient freight rates.

We are also going to be able to kick-start some of the projects that have been stalled because we didn’t have the proper capacity to deliver – for example providing these communities with water supplies and generators for electricity.

As I keep saying, we are determined as a Government to provide every Fijian with the same level of service, no matter where they live, whether its access to water, electricity, education, health, mobile phone connectivity or the internet. So I make no apology for the Government Shipping Franchise Scheme, in which we also subsidise the private sector to keep serving uneconomical routes. Whether you live in Lau or Kadavu, Lomaiviti or Rotuma, you will not be a second class citizen under this Government. Everything we do is designed to keep cargo freight rates and passenger fares affordable.

And with these new vessels, we are doing more than ever before to keep you connected to your fellow Fijians.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, I just want to mention our program to ensure that our school leavers can continue to carve out careers at sea. We’ve linked the Fiji National University and its School of Maritime Studies with CINEC, a renowned Sri Lankan maritime training academy that is one of the world’s best. With this partnership, we intend to produce a new generation of mariners in Fiji with the skills to compete globally, to both service our island communities better and extend their horizons to the world at large.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as I keep saying, our horizon as a nation has never looked brighter as we move towards the first truly democratic election in our history. For the first time under our new Constitution, we are all Fijians, we all belong, no matter where we live in Fiji. So let us unite and work together to put Fiji first and make Fiji great.

As we commission the *“Sigavou”* – the New Day – we wish her light winds and safe seas, just as we wish the same for the nation we all love.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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