

**Commodore 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**

**SPEECH AT THE 2013 FIJI SPORTS AWARDS**

**Vodafone Arena Fri 21st Feb., 2014**

**LAUCALA BAY 1900 Hours**

**The Chairman, Board and CEO of the Fiji National Sports Commission,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Sportsmen and Women of Fiji,**

Bula vinaka and a very good evening to you all.

I’m delighted to be here yet again for the Fiji Sports Awards – an evening in which we celebrate our love of sport and the many accomplishments of our sportsmen and women.

This is among the most enjoyable of the many public engagements I undertake as Prime Minister. So I’m as keen as anyone to get back to my seat and will keep this brief.

Like all of us, I’m looking forward to hearing from our guest speaker – Petero Civoniceva - one of the greatest sportsmen Fiji has ever produced and a wonderful ambassador for our country.

I’m always bemused by the way the Aussie rugby league commentators mangle the names of our players, as in “there goes “Petro Sivoneeseeva!” But there’s no doubt about the respect and affection that our Fijian players in all codes have carved out in the hearts of fans all over the world.

The other day, the Australian Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, presented me with a jersey signed by Nic Naitanui, the Fijian ruckman for the West Coast Eagles AFL team. She’s a big fan of his and it was a wonderful moment. Because it reminded me yet again of the huge contribution our Fijian sporting heroes overseas make in bridging divides and bringing people together.

They also happen to be making a big contribution to our economy. Of the $360 million or so dollars flowing into Fiji from overseas remittances, I’m told that about $100-million of that comes from our sportspeople. So if you want proof of the wisdom of Government’s investing in sport, there it is.

This evening, of course, is all about celebrating the achievements of the nominees for these awards. Whether you are athletes, coaches, administrators, volunteers or sponsors, you all play a key role in making Fijian sport what it is. And I want to pay tribute to your contribution, the long hours and effort you put in and for being the role models you are to the community and especially our young people.

Sports bind us together as a nation in a unique way and every Fijian join me tonight in thanking you for your dedication and service.

My Government has made a big investment over the years in the development of sporting facilities, not just in our cities and towns but in our rural and maritime areas. We do so not just because of our national love of sport but also because of its key role in nation building, instilling a sense of pride and, of course, keeping our population fit and healthy.

You’ll have heard me say many times that a central belief of my Government is that people living in rural and maritime areas should enjoy the same facilities as Fijians living in our cities and towns. So we are funding integrated sporting facilities in communities across the nation, whether it’s Vunidawa, Seaqaqa, Rakiraki, Gau, Kadavu or Korovou.

We’re also upgrading rural sporting facilities elsewhere, funding scholarships, overseas tours and outreach programs and providing incentives to encourage the recruitment of international coaches and the sponsorship of more sporting events.

The Government’s own performance in the sporting arena is producing some big wins. In August, some of the world’s top golfers will be in Fiji to play in the inaugural Fiji International Tournament - a PGA Australasian event at our spectacular Natadola course. We’ve invested a large amount of time and effort in attracting this event because of its potential to showcase Fiji to hundreds of millions of television viewers around the world.

While this isn’t an evening for politics, I can assure you all that this program to nurture and encourage our sportspeople will be a key element of the manifesto I will take to the people as I seek your support to continue our program through the forthcoming general election. Whatever the competing priorities, we will always be willing to make the proper investment to keep Fiji a great sporting nation and help realise the true potential of our sporting men and women.

Finally, to the nominees: You have all shown discipline and commitment in your various fields and your mere presence here means you are among the best of the best. To the winners: our special congratulations for your exceptional performance. I urge you all to fully enjoy your time in the spotlight but remember that it also carries a special responsibility - to continue to be excellent role models for others.

Young Fijians – like young people the world over – are invariably looking for heroes. We want them to grow up in their everyday lives emulating the best of every great sportsperson – competing with each other in a friendly spirit, winning with humility, and losing with grace.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as I keep saying: this is a great time to be Fijian and also a great era for Fijian sport. Congratulations to you all and I hope you have a wonderful evening.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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