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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**

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**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF WOMEN VENDORS ACCOMMODATION & FOUNDATION LAYING OF OPEN MARKET SHED**

**Lautoka Sugar City Mall Carpark Fri. 18July, 2014**

**LAUTOKA 1400 Hours**

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The Special Administrator of Lautoka,

The Representative of United Nations Women,

Distinguished Guests,

My fellow Fijians.

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all,

I’m delighted to be back in the West and the sugar city of Lautoka, which has always had a special place in my heart because I spent part of my childhood here.

It’s been a great thrill for me to see the development that has taken place here in recent years and the ambitious plans we have for the future to cement Lautoka’s place as an important centre in our national life.

I’m especially pleased to be here today to open something that will mean so much to ordinary Fijian women who will use it – those mothers, wives, sisters and daughters who are the backbone of our nation and who my Government and I are here to serve and care for.

I’m very proud of what we have been able to achieve for our women – not only the thousands of self-help projects that we have started all over the country to empower them but the laws that we have brought in, or toughened, to protect them from violence and sexual assault.

Today, I am here to officially open a facility that will transform the lives of ordinary women from outside Lautoka who travel here, sometimes from many kilometres away, to sell their produce and crafts to raise money for their families.

This Women Vendor’s Accommodation and Resource Centre will provide about 60 women from rural areas with a home away from home in Lautoka – decent sleeping facilities, a place to eat and wash, and other amenities.

No longer do you have to sleep on the pavement next to your produce. No longer do you have to worry about the weather or your personal security. No longer do you have to struggle to find a toilet or to wash. All this is now available to you here. And you can sleep soundly at night knowing you are safe and your families at home can sleep soundly at night knowing that their wife, sister, mother or daughter is secure and protected.

Among the many things that my Government has done- - and we have made serving the people our most important priority – few have given me such a thrill than to see this facility built here in Lautoka, along with similar ones in other parts of Fiji.

I want to warmly thank the United Nations Agency – UN Women – for providing $A103,000 to fund this project and for working with the Lautoka City Council to bring it to fruition.

Of course, providing women with decent accommodation is one thing. But this project has another hugely important dimension – the Resource Centre attached to it to give many more people the assistance they need to improve their earnings and provide for their families.

The days of coming to market with what you have to sell and having to fend for yourself – to learn the principles of selling and of business practice generally all on your own – are also over.

Here, we’re providing a facility for the 600 or so market vendors of Lautoka to get practical advice, training and assistance to grow and even diversify their businesses. If you have a problem, there is now someone to help you. If you need advice on meeting the various council and health requirements, that advice is now available to you.

And I urge all of the market vendors of Lautoka to support this initiative and take advantage of the new services available to you.

My Government regards you all as a crucial part of the Fijian economy. In fact, small to medium enterprises are the engine of growth in our economy. The well-being of hundreds of thousands of ordinary Fijians - especially in rural areas - depends on all of you doing well. So we want to help you gain more skills, become more competitive and make more money for yourselves and your families to benefit our economy as a whole.

As I keep saying, a healthy economy in Fiji cannot come from slicing off big pieces of the existing national cake and giving them to special groups, as some politicians want to do. We have to work together as one nation – hand in hand – to **grow** our national cake so that there is more to share and every Fijian can have a bigger slice.

That’s precisely what my Government is doing; growing the cake so we can all benefit. The Fijian economy is set to grow this year by 3.8 per cent, a growth rate bigger than Australia and New Zealand. And as our economy grows, confidence and investment grows. Investors - both local and overseas – can see the opportunities in Fiji.

Businesses start to expand. And when that happens, it creates jobs. People have more money to spend. They buy more from you at the market. And they also pay tax to the Government. And more people paying more tax means that the Government is getting money that it can spend on you in the way of better services. More access to electricity, clean water, better schools, better hospitals, better roads, better markets – all the things we need for ourselves and our children. And more facilities like this to help our women, who deserve to be, and are, the most important people in our lives.

But that prosperity can only continue if we remain focused and united, there is a continuation of policies and we turn our backs on the old voices preaching division who have suddenly re-emerged in the election lead-up. As I keep saying; don’t judge me on what I say. Judge me on what I do. And the record shows that my Government delivers and will continue to do so if you put your trust in me.

All over Fiji, we have built new infrastructure – new roads, new bridges, new hydro-electric and solar power plants, new health clinics, new Telecentres, new Women’s Resource Centres. Which leads me to the second project that I am here to launch today – beginning work on the Lautoka Open Market Shed.

When it is built, this shed will accommodate around 300 weekend vendors who currently sell their produce in the open space between the old bus stand and the market. I am very happy about this project too. Because the days of hard working vendors selling their produce under a hot sun, in the dust and the rain, will also soon be over.

When it’s finished, you’ll have a proper roof over your heads, proper tables to lay out your produce in a healthy and appealing fashion. It will be clean, it will be more attractive, it will be safer with the new concrete pavement and the days of rushing to tie down your tarpaulins when the rain comes pelting down will be gone forever. It will be good for business, good for you and your customers, good for the wonderful city of Lautoka.

Again, I want to thank UN Women for working with the Government to deliver this project, which is another sign of our commitment to improve the lives of ordinary Fijians. And thanks also to the Special Administrator of Lautoka for his energy and commitment in delivering this and other projects.

With those words, I have great pleasure to declare open the Women Vendors Accommodation and Resource Centre and launch the construction of the Market Open Shed.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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