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**SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF THE VUNIDOGOLOA VILLAGE RELOCATION PROJECT**

**Vunidogoloa Village Thurs. 16th Jan., 2014**

**VANUA LEVU 1500 Hours**

**Cabinet Ministers,**

**Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,**

**The People of Vunidogoloa,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Lest anyone doubt the impact of climate change on coastal communities in Fiji, let them come to Vunidogoloa.

Today, we launch the first project in Fiji to save an entire village from the rise in sea levels caused by climate change.

It is real. It is happening now. And this is just the first community in Fiji to be so seriously threatened that it has to be moved.

We’re already planning to do the same at Narikoso in Kadavu, which will be the second of the Government’s pilot relocation projects. But unfortunately, this is just the start. Many more communities and ordinary families in Fiji will also have to be relocated.

I’m delighted to be here today and want to express my warm thanks to the people of Vunidogoloa for the wonderful welcome they have given me. The message I bring on behalf of the rest of the Fijian people is that we are with you all the way as you face this challenge.

As I keep saying whenever I get the opportunity, people like us in Small Island Developing States around the world are bearing the brunt of climate change through no fault of our own.

We are the victims of a planet that is warming and ice caps that are melting, pushing sea levels higher and swamping the land that we’ve traditionally occupied.

The scientists tells us that this warming is taking place because of the high levels of carbon emissions being pumped into the earth’s atmosphere by human activity, especially the factories of the industrialised nations.

We don’t have any control over this but keeping urging these countries to take the necessary steps to address this global phenomenon. And while we wait for them to do the right thing, we must do what we can. We know that God helps those who help themselves.

We’ve identified 676 communities around the country that are threatened in some way. This includes the loss of coastal land and infrastructure due to erosion or flooding and the threat of storm surges. We don’t need the scientists to tell us – although they do – that the frequency and severity of the cyclones we experience in Fiji has increased. This poses a risk to our homes and our lives. In the last cyclonic event – Hurricane Evan – we were spared any loss of life, largely because of the preparations we made.

Of these 676 affected communities, we have identified 42 that have the potential to be relocated in the next five to ten years. The project that we are launching here in Vunidogoloa today and the other in Narikoso, Kadavu, are pilot projects – benchmarks - for the rest. The lessons we learn here as we relocate your village will help us deal with this crisis at a wider national level and the threat to other communities.

Here in Vunidogoloa, we realised the urgency of taking drastic action in 2010 after Tropical Cyclone Thomas. The village was flooding during heavy rain and high tides and the intrusion of seawater was undermining your houses, softening the ground below them and rotting your posts.

A high level Government team came here to inspect the situation and – working with you - concluded that only the most drastic action – moving the entire community – could meet the challenge you were facing.

The total cost of preparing the new site, building 30 new houses and putting on a new water supply is just under one-million dollars. 240-thousand dollars of this has come from your community through your existing arrangement with a Labasa company to log the forests that you own around you. That company will provide timber for your new houses based on the value of the logs extracted from Vunidogoloa. So the community has a real stake in this initiative, working in partnership with Government, and I want to pay tribute to you all for making that partnership succeed.

The point is that instead of just sitting around and playing victim, we Fijians are banding together to fight back against the rising seas and the devastating effect of extreme climate events on our communities.

I have made this a national priority. While we fight in international forums to get the industrialised nations to face up to their responsibilities on carbon emissions, we will battle the encroaching sea here in Fiji in places like Vunidogoloa. In launching this project, I want to assure all Fijians that my Government will ensure that together, we will face this challenge. And together, we will succeed.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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