

Honourable J.V.
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Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD,

Prime Minister of Fiji and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry

SPEECH AT THE CLOSING OF THE 11TH PACIFIC HEALTH MINISTERS MEETING

Event Centre
Fijian Hotel, YANUCA IS.

Fri. 17 April, 2015
1700 Hours

**Honourable Ministers of Health of the Pacific;
Chief Delegates of the Various Health Ministries around the Region;
The Regional Director for the Western Pacific of the World Health Organization;
The Director-General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community;
Donor Partners and Agencies;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

I'm delighted to officially close the 11th Pacific Health Ministers Meeting Fiji 2015. We are honoured by your presence in our country and I hope that your gathering has been a success and that you have also enjoyed our Fijian hospitality.

The health of all Pacific peoples is a prime development priority for all of us and regional governments generally are highly focussed on this issue.

Sadly, while we have made great strides in certain areas in recent years in delivering better health outcomes to our people, we are still falling way short of the mark on the issue of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs).

It is a tragedy that while we often live in pristine surroundings, breathe some of the cleanest air in the world and also have ample means to eat well because we are surrounded by an ocean teeming with life, the health of many of our people is so deplorable.

It ought to be a cause of regional shame that the Pacific now has - on a per-capita basis - the highest incidence of NCDs in the world.

We can preach to our people all we like about why they are suffering so grievously from preventable diseases such as heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. We can point to the extraordinary level of amputations in our hospitals directly caused by NCDs. But it all comes down ultimately - in so many instances - to an issue of personal responsibility.

It pains me as leader of one of the larger Pacific nations that far too many Fijians are failing to heed our pleas to adopt better lifestyles. And I know that all of you will share that pain and especially those countries where the diets and lifestyles of the people are even worse than ours.

For our part, Fiji is doing everything we can to improve the health outcomes of our people by opening new hospitals, new healthcare centres and new clinics across our islands and especially in those rural and maritime areas that have been neglected over the years. In the 2015 Budget, we also introduced free medicine for any Fijian with a household income of less than \$20,000 a year.

We have medical personnel receiving education and training not only locally but as far afield as Cuba, India, Turkey, Malaysia and Thailand - to name just a few.

We have also increased taxes on tobacco and alcohol - two factors that are driving the poor health outcomes of our people. And we've reduced the tax on imported fruit and vegetables to encourage more consumption of these foods.

Yet for all that, we cannot regulate the diets of our people by making it illegal to eat badly. And that is why we must redouble our efforts through public education and awareness and especially starting with the very young.

Last month, I had the great pleasure to introduce a major initiative that we hope will encourage a lifetime of good eating on the part of ordinary Fijians. Every Fijian child in Year One of Primary School is getting a free allocation of milk and Weet-Bix every day of the school year.

I have specifically chosen to launch this programme personally in schools across Fiji to reinforce a crucial message : That these Year One students should use their milk and Weet-Bix and the protein and fibre that comes from them to embark on a lifetime of eating properly. Choosing fruit instead of sweets. Choosing fresh fish instead of canned fish or meat. And choosing the fresh vegetables that grow in such abundance in our fertile island gardens but which so many people ignore for frozen foreign vegetables in our supermarkets.

We are also using the launch of our Free Milk and Weet-Bix Initiative to underline the importance of exercise. And I am pointedly telling these young people : Don't grow up to be like older Fijians who haven't looked after themselves properly and are now paying the price.

Honourable Ministers,

I call on you all individually and collectively to keep hammering home this message to our young people across the region. They have so much to live for, especially in those countries like Fiji where they are now getting free education and the opportunity to have more fulfilling lives.

But far too many of them are slowly killing themselves, robbing themselves of healthy and happy futures, and robbing us of the human resources we need as nations to prosper.

Just as I urge our Health Ministry in Fiji to concentrate more on NCDs, I urge you all to take this message back to your own governments and citizens.

Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you again for the opportunity to close your important meeting.

On behalf of every Fijian, thank you for coming. And I now have great pleasure to declare the 11th Pacific Minister Health Ministers Meeting closed and wish you all a safe journey home.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.
