**HON PM VOREQE BAINIMARAMA REMARKS AT SPREP SIDE EVENT: THE PACIFIC VOYAGE – OUR OCEAN, OUR PEOPLE, OUR PACIFIC**

**6/9/2017**

Your Excellencies, my fellow Pacific leaders,

Your Excellency, my Ocean Conference Co-chair, the Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden,
Your Excellency, the UN Assistant Secretary-General and Director of UN Environment,
The Director General of SPREP,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is a very clear message coming through at this conference and that is the critical importance of integrated ocean management, not only in the Pacific but for all the seas and oceans of the world.

The challenges we face to ocean quality are so comprehensive that only solutions that are practical and holistic should be considered. And it has become abundantly clear this week that we must redouble our efforts, especially in the Pacific, because of the urgency of the situation we find ourselves in.

We have all spoken at length about the challenges we face – the crisis that the whole world is facing because of the continual degradation of our oceans and seas. But the challenge we face in the Pacific is even more daunting because, as coastal communities, we rely so much on our seas for sustenance – our food security – as well as a means to make a living. The economic foundation of so many ordinary men and women and their families.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, as we have said repeatedly, the threat to the quality of our oceans and seas is a global one. No nation with a coastal boundary is immune. We look to the global community as a whole to deal with this crisis in a practical and holistic way. And what we have achieved in New York this week has been to galvanise the global community into a renewed determination to tackle this crisis head on.

But while we in the Pacific await this global response, we must do what we can ourselves. And the point that I want to make today is that we must make a much greater effort to work together among ourselves to confront the challenge we collectively face.

We have done a great deal together through organisations like SPREP to ensure that our own management of our seas and oceans is integrated. But I think a lot more can be done. And I am very pleased that we have so many Pacific leaders at this session because much of this is a question of political will. At every stage we must use our influence as leaders - our mana - to push this agenda forward. And to marshal our people to do what they can to improve the management of our oceans.

You’ll have heard me make the point several times this week that governments alone can’t solve this crisis. Governments working with civil society can’t solve this crisis. We need ordinary men, women and children to make a personal commitment to join the fight to save our seas and oceans. And that means changing some of the things we do in the Pacific and adopting a more enlightened approach to ocean management.

There is no point is continually saying that “something must be done” if we expect others to do it for us. We must all take responsibility for it ourselves. Yes, there are some things that are beyond our ability to influence, like the greedy nations and greedy commercial interests that are stripping our ocean of the bounty that is rightfully ours. Invading our economic zones in the knowledge that we lack the means to adequately defend them.

I said this week how much Fiji appreciates the assistance we are getting from the navies of New Zealand, Australia, the United States and France to defend our own economic zone. Their occasional deployments are an effective deterrent. When they take place. The rest of the time, we are largely at the mercy of these invaders. And I would encourage all these friendly nations who understand the importance of this to consider doing a lot more to enable us to be better protected.

We can also do little about the rubbish – the plastic bags, plastic bottles and refuse of all kinds – that is drifting down to our waters and shores from the nations of the Pacific Rim. Any one of you in this room can attest to the appalling deterioration of the state of our waters and seas from this foreign rubbish. This foreign invasion.

I spoke at the start of the week about my own experience as a Fijian Navy man and the pain I feel about the steady deterioration of our own waters during my lifetime. I honestly fear that unless the whole world comes to terms with this crisis – and especially certain countries with a propensity to generate more rubbish than others – my own grandchildren may not have the pleasure of experiencing healthy seas at all.

We all know from bitter experience as Pacific Islanders that this is a crisis because we can see the evidence with our own eyes. So the kind of collective global response that we have seen in New York this week is critical.

But I also want to address some very pointed remarks to our own people – Fijians and other Pacific islanders. Because you simply can’t blame outsiders unless you are doing the right thing yourselves. And in so many instances, we are not.

It is for other leaders to address this issue in relation to their own countries and the behaviour of their own people. But I’m not at all happy with the way so many Fijians are treating our own environment with contempt. I’m sorry, but there is no other word for it.

We can blame the bigger countries around the Pacific Rim as much as we like – and God knows they need to clean up their act. But we also need to clean up ours. In far too many parts of Fiji, the Fijian people are rubbishing their country in a way that they would never rubbish their own homes. Too many people think nothing of throwing their food wrappings out of the car or bus window. Too many people think nothing of dumping their own rubbish – whether it is an old mattress or a broken piece of furniture – by the side of the road.

So we have a situation in Fiji where large parts of the country are strewn with litter. Just take the Queens Road from Suva to Nadi and look at all the litter than has been left behind at Deuba or all along the Coral Coast.

We go the world advertising our pristine image and yet this is how we treat our precious surroundings. Well guess what? So much of this litter, this rubbish, ends up in the sea. It is swept down storm water drains and creeks into our rivers and then makes its way into open waters.

We have some of the best beaches in the world in Fiji. Yet because of our carelessness, our thoughtlessness, they are often strewn with plastic bags and bottles. Fortunately, we have responsible citizens who take it upon themselves to occasionally clean it up. But the point I want to make is that we all have a responsibility to preserve our surroundings. And I want more people to take that responsibility in the interests of protecting our environment on land and at sea.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, others can speak about the technical challenges we face. But we cannot talk about integrated ocean management without highlighting the responsibility of every Pacific Islander to assist us in this process.

Fortunately, there are also lots of success stories, of communities that have banded together to protect their surroundings. I am greatly encouraged by the number of island communities in Fiji that have coral regeneration programs. We must assist their environmental activism at a local level by working as leaders with the rest of the world on the big picture. Because the threat that climate change poses to our reefs and the health of our communities can no longer be ignored.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention and I look forward to hearing the contributions of other participants.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.