



Fiji

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

COUNTRY STATEMENT AT FIJI-UNESCAP 71ST SESSION

Bangkok
THAILAND

Thurs 28 May, 2015

Your Excellency the Prime Minister of Thailand;
Your Excellency the President of Kiribati;
Your Excellency the President of the Marshall Islands;
Your Excellency the Prime Minister of Tuvalu;
Your Excellency the President of the Republic of Nauru;
Your Excellency the Prime Minister of Cook Islands;
Your Excellency the Deputy Prime Minister of Solomon Islands;
Your Excellency Mr Ly Tuch of Cambodia, Outgoing Chair of the
70th Commission;
The Executive Secretary of ESCAP;
Distinguished Delegates;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

It is a great honour for me to assume the Chair of the 71st ESCAP Session – only the second time a Fijian has done so, the last, 25 years ago.

I convey to you all the warmest greetings of the Fijian Government and the Fijian people.

We take our participation in ESCAP very seriously. And at the outset, allow me to convey our sincere appreciation for the assistance ESCAP has provided to Fiji over the years. And the role it has played not only in our own socioeconomic development but the development of the entire Pacific Islands region.

Let me also again thank the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand for the wonderful welcome that has been extended to Fiji and to all of us as we gather in this vibrant capital - Bangkok.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We gather at a time of positive economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region. Recent assessments of the regional economy by ESCAP and the Asian Development Bank paint an encouraging picture for the region as a whole – a forecast growth rate of 6.3 per cent this year.

As always, the outlook varies from country to country. Some nations are implementing structural reforms such as the liberalisation of trade, investment and labour markets and modernising their civil service that are politically difficult but necessary for their continued prosperity.

But certainly the overall economic picture is a lot more encouraging than at many stages of our development. Spurred on by robust domestic demand and such factors as lower oil prices, which have eased a crippling burden on many countries such as my own.

We all recognise the need to pursue prudent economic policies, to invest in the necessary infrastructure to

encourage economic growth and empower our people. And in those countries dependent on commodity exports, to diversify our economies and strengthen our resilience to price volatility.

In the case of my own country, Fiji is poised to register its sixth consecutive year of growth – a forecast 4.3 per cent of GDP this year after three years of growth of around 4 per cent or more.

Our economy is on the move, foreign and domestic investment levels are healthy and as a Government, we are investing heavily in our nation's infrastructure to continue to ride this wave of prosperity. This includes massive spending on our road network, the reform of our wharfs to efficiently facilitate exports and imports and also a massive investment in our airports and our national airline, Fiji Airways, to strengthen our links with the outside world.

Since our General Election last September which introduced the first genuine democracy in Fiji of equal votes of equal value, we have also strengthened our links

with international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, which is assisting us with a major reform of our Civil Service to make it more efficient and responsive.

Fiji is open for business. Fiji is on the move. Our comprehensive reforms over the past eight years have set us on the path to achieve our vision of becoming a modern nation state.

And we have also set ourselves the goal of becoming a clever and skilled country by introducing free primary and secondary school education for the first time, opening a network of technical colleges to increase our skills base and providing more scholarships and the nation's first tertiary loans scheme to encourage our young people to embrace higher education.

So as a nation, we are doing everything in our power to raise the living standards of our people and to boost Fiji's presence and contribution to our region and the world at large.

Our new democracy – with its provision of equality and justice for all – gives us the opportunity to shake off more than three decades of arrested development while we argued about which of our citizens deserved more rather than develop a cohesive and unified nation.

And as I will soon detail, we have placed sustainable development at the core of everything we do, insisting that only projects that pass the sustainable test are given the green light.

Yet for all that, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are some factors way beyond our control. And I know I will be speaking for my fellow Pacific Island leaders here today when I say that the greatest of these is the threat posed to us all by rising sea levels caused by climate change.

We are all suffering in the Pacific already to a lesser or greater extent by the encroaching seas. In Fiji we've

already had to move some villages out of harm's way and have identified more than 600 other communities that are under threat and need close attention.

Yet our own challenges pale into insignificance compared to those of some of our neighbours. His Excellency the President of the Marshall Islands presides over a nation that will simply disappear altogether if the current projections of climate scientists are accepted. And two other nations, Kiribati and Tuvalu, will also sink beneath the waves.

It is a looming catastrophe that we are utterly powerless as Pacific Islanders to avert. Because it is not our industries that are pumping out the carbon emissions that the scientists tell us are causing global warming and the ice caps to melt. It is the industries of the developed world.

Our own carbon footprints are totally insignificant, even though in Fiji, we are making carbon emission reductions an important part of our Green Growth Framework and future development plans.

It is the carbon footprint of the developed nations that are the problem. And the onus must be on them to act and act immediately to reduce those emissions and give those of us in the Pacific a fighting chance. In the case of these three nations, a chance to survive.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have been extremely critical of certain of our neighbours and especially Australia for dragging its feet and refusing to sign up to the binding cuts on carbon emissions that we are told are needed to avert this catastrophe. I have caused a certain amount of upset in official circles for saying that Australia and others are part of a coalition of the selfish. But I do not resile from this description when so much for us in the Pacific Islands is at stake.

Fiji will be going to the World Climate Summit in Paris in November to lead the charge with the rest of our island neighbours to persuade the global community to sign up to binding carbon emissions reductions. We are very

encouraged that in this struggle, we are not alone. And I thank the nations of the European Union, in particular, for their insistence on a 40 per cent cut in global emissions by 2030.

I have already remarked that the EU member countries are proving to be our true allies in this struggle and not some of our bigger neighbours. Again, I make no apologies for this. Because we in the Pacific judge our friends not by their words but by their deeds. And we need the international community to stand shoulder to shoulder with us if we are to have any hope against this existentialist threat.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fiji and the other Pacific nations welcome engagement with any nation, organisation or individual who values us as friends and is concerned for the welfare and prosperity of our peoples and the protection of the ocean we call our home.

In the case of Fiji, our differences with Australia and New Zealand that saw us suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum encouraged us to seek a fresh avenue to engage with the region and the rest of the world.

And so we joined our island neighbours in developing a new regional organisation called the Pacific Islands Development Forum or PIDF. Unlike the PIF – which is confined to Governments and dominated by Australia and New Zealand, two countries that are not Pacific Small Island Developing States – the hallmark of the PIDF is inclusiveness.

We have forged a grand coalition of governments, the private sector and civil society groups, which in so many instances represent the real voice of the grassroots. Everyone has now been brought into the room to discuss the challenges we all face. And by far the most important of these is the issue of sustainable development, which also happens to be the reason we are all here today.

“Green Growth in our Blue Economy” – the sustainable use of resources on both land and at sea – has become our catchcry. And we have been joined not only by this coalition of Pacific peoples. We have gone beyond the region to expand our membership to any nation or organisation that wants to join us in the quest for sustainable development of the Pacific Islands region.

The PIDF stands for cooperation and inclusion. We are not consumed with regional politics but in advancing the interests of our peoples. It is an organisation designed by Pacific Islanders for Pacific Islanders. And we are determined to be free of outside interference by those who seek to impose their wills on us. But, of course, if they seek partnerships and collaboration, we will work with them.

We are extremely gratified that apart from a growing number of regional Governments – including my fellow leaders here – we have attracted a host of other nations great and small to also join us. Whether it is China, the

European Union, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey or Argentina – to name but a few.

We had the great honour at our last Summit to have as Chief Guest the then President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. And at our third Summit in September, we have invited Thailand to be the main external participant, with the (Prime Minister/ Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister) as chief guest.

Our theme this year is “Building climate resilience. Green Blue Pacific economies”. So I’m especially struck by the synergy with the theme of this 71st Commission Session of ESCAP – “Balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development from integration to implementation”.

Yesterday in our deliberations, I had the privilege to outline Fiji’s own journey towards building a framework for our own sustainable development. And in those comments, I emphasised one of the most crucial aspects of the journey we must all take to secure the sustainable development of both our individual and collective resources.

Governments cannot work in isolation in the quest for sustainable development. They can only achieve progress by forging grand coalitions of their own – with their development partners and, most important of all, their own citizens across every sector of society.

It is meaningless for a Government to preach the message of sustainable development if the private sector fails to embrace the notion. It is meaningless for anyone to preach sustainable development while a single community engages in overfishing and strips a particular reef; citizens dispose of plastic bags and bottles in the sea; or schoolchildren fail to pick up litter and treat the upkeep of their surroundings as someone else's problem.

So we need partnerships and we need to be holistic in the solutions we embrace.

I apologise to those who heard me speak yesterday if I repeat some elements of Fiji's own experience in forging

the first Green Growth Framework among the Pacific nations.

At our first national Green Growth Summit in June 2014, a grand coalition of Fijian stakeholders sat down to consider a master plan to build a more sustainable economic model for Fiji and place it at the very core of our national development. That Green Growth Framework was subsequently endorsed by my Cabinet and is now central to everything we do as a Government.

Sustainability is now the criteria against which every national development project is measured. And if any project is not sustainable and jeopardises our natural resources in any way, it will not proceed.

For a country with limited resources like us, this sometimes entails significant sacrifice. Indeed a huge copper and gold mining venture just outside our capital is currently on hold. Because we have yet to be satisfied that it meets the necessary criteria to protect the environment for the benefit of our people and future generations.

I always stress as Prime Minister that nothing is worth squandering our resources in the present for economic gain. Because we merely hold those resources in trust for future generations. And we have a sacred pact with the unborn to preserve their sustainable use that must never be broken.

Our Green Growth Framework covers the full range of measure needed for sustainable development. Whether it is reducing carbon footprints and building climate change resilience; improving resource productivity and doing more with less; structural reforms to encourage competition and efficiency; incentives for the efficient use of natural resources; and making ordinary people more aware of their own responsibility to care for their surroundings.

I said yesterday that the Fijian model is one that can be emulated by our island neighbours and indeed many other developing countries. But I stress again that Governments cannot work in isolation and neither can individual arms of

Government. We need to take all of our people with us on the Green Growth journey.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fiji's Green Growth Framework will be the mainstay of a new five year development plan – together with a wider twenty year plan – that my Government is formulating to take Fiji forward.

I want to again thank our development partners such as UNESCAP, the Global Green Growth Institute and the Asian Development Bank for helping us set out on our more sustainable journey.

That journey has no end in sight because sustainable development is ongoing. As Governments, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. And our policies need to be constantly evolving – smart, highly responsive to individual circumstances and affordable in the context of our limited budgets and resources as Small Island Developing States.

As we take this path, we look to the world to support us because while the Pacific Ocean is our home, it is also part of the global heritage and we all share a responsibility to nurture and protect it.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

That is why I want to close by asking you all to support us as Pacific nations at the World Climate Summit in Paris in six month's time.

We can talk all we like about sustainable development. But the overwhelming imperative for us all must be a decisive global response to the greatest challenge of our age. And we must meet this collective test together or be judged extremely harshly by future generations.

Thank you for your attention. And Fiji stands ready to work with you all to make this gathering a success and to meet the great challenges ahead.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.

