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Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry

**COUNTRY STATEMENT AT THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL
ORGANISATION (FAO) CONFERENCE**

FAO HQ
ROME

Mon. 8 June 2015
10.41 am

Your Excellency the Chair;

The Director General of the Food & Agriculture Organisation of
the United Nations;

Fellow Heads of Government;

Excellencies and Delegates;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I'm delighted to join you in Rome as the Head of
Government of a leading Pacific Small Island Developing
State to contribute our perspective to the overall
discussions.

[As delivered]

There have been some notable highlights for me personally over the past couple of days – the side event on the work of FAO with Small Island Developing States; my meeting with the Director-General and the signing of a host country agreement that will see a FAO office established in Fiji; and, of course, the award that Fiji received yesterday recognising our own achievements in the fight against hunger.

And I especially welcome the opportunity today to share some of our experiences with you in my country statement and to learn from the experiences of others.

Excellencies,

Like any Small Island Developing State, Fiji has some immense challenges which my Government is in the process of systematically addressing. Aided immensely by our development partners plus a renewed sense of national confidence after our return to Parliamentary rule last September in our first truly democratic election of one vote, one value.

I want to acknowledge FAO for its support over the years not only for Fiji but for all Pacific Islanders. The Organisation has played a key role in ensuring that more Fijians than ever before have regular access to nutritious, high quality food. And in doing so, it has rendered valuable assistance to us as a Government to raise living standards and improve the health of our people.

We in the Pacific share many of the challenges of developing countries generally in meeting the needs and expectations of our citizens. Fiji does not yet have an overarching national policy on food security. But I am pleased to inform you that we are currently working on a holistic programme covering agriculture, fisheries, biosecurity, nutrition levels and education. And that programme is being incorporated into an overall national development strategy for the coming years and decades.

Last week, I was able to launch a milestone initiative in the life of our nation – a comprehensive Green Growth

Framework for Fiji that gives us a blueprint for the sustainable development of our resources now and into the future.

This comprehensive document encompasses ten primary areas at the heart of our quest for a Green and Blue Growth economy. And of course guaranteeing our food security is one of them.

The other components are to build resistance to climate change and disaster – one of the principle threats to food security for any nation; to manage our waste properly; to keep our island and ocean resources sustainable; to insist on inclusive social development; to adequately manage our freshwater resources ; to guarantee our energy security and develop alternative energy sources; to have sustainable means of transportation; to embrace technology and innovation; and to achieve the “greening” of our tourism and manufacturing industries – both mainstays of the Fijian economy.

[As delivered]

We are now acutely focused in Fiji on the need to ensure our food security – which we define in our Green Growth Framework as “the ability to produce safe, healthy affordable food for all Fijians at all times”.

This definition encapsulates four key elements: having the domestic capability to produce enough food to feed our local population; having a sufficiently diverse food production base to satisfy dietary needs; having the distribution systems in place to link people to markets and ensure ease of access to food supplies; and monitoring the efficiency of our farms to ensure that local produce is competitive prices and is affordable for ordinary Fijians.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We continue to face major challenges in meeting the preconditions for a food secure Fiji; volatile commodity prices, low economies of scale, the loss of arable agricultural land, the poor level of efficiency of existing farms and the need to meet the growing food demands

of our tourism industry., to feed our international visitors and maintain the health of our primary export earner.

We recognise that these are challenges that Fijians need to meet themselves. But there is one factor threatening our food security over which we have no control whatsoever: the increasing frequency and intensity of the natural disasters we are experiencing in the Pacific that are being attributed to climate change.

These are already having a grave impact on Fiji and other Pacific Island nations, the most recent, the devastation caused to Vanuatu by Cyclone Pam. But we are also facing a terrible collective threat from rising sea levels caused by global warming. And this is already having a serious impact on island nations, with much worse to come.

In Fiji – a string of mainly mountainous islands – we are already having to move entire villages, losing precious arable land and have identified more than 600

[As delivered]

communities that are directly threatened by the encroaching seas.

Yet in the case of three of our neighbours – Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands, which are low lying atolls – the threat is existential. And under the current scenarios being advanced by climate scientists, these sovereign members of the United Nations are destined to sink beneath the waves altogether in the lifetimes of their young people.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The rising seas caused by the melting icecaps constitute the gravest collective threat to Pacific Small Island Developing States in the entire sweep of history. And unless this process is arrested, it is certain to compound the dire consequences extreme weather events are already having on our overall food security and ability to feed our people.

To focus global attention on this crisis, Fiji intends to play a lead role at the World Climate Summit in Paris at the end of November. And with the other Small Island Developing States, we will be calling for immediate action on the part of developed nations to sign up to the binding cuts in carbon emissions that are vital to avert catastrophe.

I have branded those nations that are dragging their feet on climate change as members of the “coalition of the selfish” – nations putting the health of their economies and the jobs of their workers before the very survival of the citizens of Small Island Developing States.

The time for prevarication is over. The time for life, the time for action is now. And I appeal to you all and the rest of the international community to join our alternative “coalition for action on climate change”. Because we are at five minutes to midnight on this issue and time is rapidly running out. We have the chance as a community of nations to stop the clock in Paris and start

winding it back. And we must seize that opportunity before it is too late.

Excellencies,

History will judge the industrialised nations very harshly if they do not stand with us at this critical juncture. Because it is clearly not only our future in the Pacific that is at stake but the future of mankind as a whole.

It stands to reason that small island developing nations like Fiji are powerless to act ourselves because our own carbon emissions are negligible. So we have turned our attention to building resilience in the face of climate change. To do everything we possibly can to mitigate against its effects with a comprehensive approach to national disaster management.

Fiji survived the last major hurricane that carved a path of destruction through our nation two years ago – Tropical Cyclone Evan – without the loss of a single life. So these management plans are working and are a clear

demonstration that we are doing everything in our power to help ourselves.

As well as building climate change resilience, we have placed the principle of sustainability at the core of our national agenda. And we are incorporating our Green Growth Framework into two national development plans that are currently being formulated – one for the next five years, the other for the next twenty years up to 2035.

The need to develop a holistic food security policy for Fiji is a cornerstone of this programme. Recognising the deficiency of our existing approaches, we are stepping up our efforts to develop a new policy framework on food. A major component of this is the collection of proper data to be able to assess the scale of the challenge before us. So we are developing a domestic food production database for agriculture and fisheries by 2017 and a joint agriculture and fisheries census survey by 2019.

As part of this holistic effort, we are also improving efficiency at farm level by establishing production efficiency targets for key commodities by next year. We are also encouraging such things as organic farming and the recycling of farm waste. As well as encouraging the use of alternative energy sources and embracing new technologies in agriculture.

Recognising that we also need to improve market arrangements for agriculture and fisheries produce, we will have a register of farmers by next year. And we are strengthening our ability to collect and disseminate market information, enhancing research and development and upgrading traditional farming skills and knowledge.

As part my Government's education revolution – in which we introduced free schooling in Fiji for the first time last year – we have also increased the number of scholarships and incentives for young people to take up farming. And to embrace the notion of larger scale commercial production of food rather than the

traditional subsistence model that has been the norm in Fiji and other Pacific countries.

Excellencies,

Fiji recognises that we urgently need to address the lack of an overarching framework for food production. Because our current shortcomings when it comes to the availability of basic data means that we simply cannot objectively assess the status of our food security.

This reform programme isn't only being driven by the need to streamline our performance and pursue best practice. Our new Constitution specifically requires the State to ensure that every Fijian has access to adequate food and water. These are justiciable rights of individual Fijians and the Government in turn has a legal obligation. So the Fijian Government accordingly has a legal imperative to improve the performance and sustainability of our agriculture and fisheries sectors on top of any other commercial and social imperatives.

Last year, we launched a draft five-year agricultural development plan with food security as its core objective. And while there is much to be done, our overall objective is to modernise the industry and make Fijian farmers the most competitive and successful in the Pacific Islands region.

We also have new fisheries and forestry plans in the pipeline and I want to thank FAO for the technical assistance to be able to develop these policies. Under the current Pacific Island Country Programme Framework - which takes us to 2017 - a total of US \$8.3 million dollars has been allocated for 20 projects in Fiji.

This is on top of around US \$17 million dollars provided by the FAO between 1996 and 2012. So the Organisation is making a big difference in Fiji and the rest of the Pacific. And Fiji regards FAO as a key development partner, critical to our food security and the nutrition levels of our people.

[As delivered]

Whether it is assistance with improving our statistical data; our efforts to increase productivity; the training of our farmers in at least 20 field schools; or the development of our Codex strategy to improve food quality and safety under our Food Act, we have been able to rely on the FAO to assist us improve the lives of the Fijian people and for that we are truly grateful.

I also want to thank the FAO for its rehabilitation assistance after our three most recent cyclones. And for the leadership on improving our food security currently being provided by the Pacific Regional Food Security Cluster, part of the Pacific Humanitarian Team led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

We still have a long way to go in Fiji. Disaster risk reduction in the agriculture sector is still at an embryonic stage. We have few, if any, disaster risk reduction plans in place specifically for the agriculture, fisheries, food and forestry sectors. And we have to do a lot more in this area as time goes by.

But we have at least recognised the need to do so and intend to build on the small-scale interventions that are currently taking place with a much more coordinated and sustained effort across the board.

We need to be smarter, more adaptable and more responsive. And as I stress again: We need a holistic approach in which Government and our development partners work closely to identify areas that need attention. And then work closely with our farmers, fishermen and forestry workers to improve our collective response to the many challenges that are yet to be tackled.

In Fiji, our primary industries are the backbone of our economy so the imperative to improve their efficiency has never been greater. Primary industry contributes around 12 per cent to our GDP and employs about 60 per cent of our population. So these sectors are critical to our economic development and sustained livelihoods and, their efficiency is a prime factor driving our growth.

We can do a lot better than we have. And we intend to place a lot more emphasis on efficiency and productivity in our new five-year and twenty-year national development plans.

While observing that there is much to be done, we can also acknowledge some things that are cause for celebration. We are proud that the prevalence of undernourishment among Fijians has been reduced from 6.6 per cent in 1990-1992 to 4.5 per cent in the most recent survey – a fact acknowledged by the award I received yesterday on Fiji's behalf.

That more of our people are eating better and their levels of nourishment have reached acceptable standards is a very positive sign and we must do everything we can to keep improving this record.

The rate of undernourished children in Fiji also declined from 15 per cent to 6 per cent in the 29 years between 1980 and 2009. But we still have challenges in reducing the prevalence of malnutrition in children five years old

and under. Too many of our children still suffer from stunting or low height for age because of long-term insufficient nutrient intake; wasting or low weight for height for the same reason; or micronutrient deficiencies resulting mainly from diets that lack essential vitamins and minerals.

And anaemia, usually caused by an insufficient intake of iron, remains widespread among women and girls, affecting about half of those under the age of five.

My Government has introduced a number of initiatives in this respect to arrest these problems. These amongst other things include food voucher programme for rural pregnant women, targeted and increased social welfare assistance through a food voucher programme, free medicine, free water and subsidised electricity for those with low incomes. It also now includes free milk for class one students at all our primary schools.

So Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The fight to eradicate malnutrition, hunger and food insecurity in Fiji goes on, just as it does throughout the developing world.

As we all know, that fight is linked to the elimination of poverty and the development of economic and social progress for every citizen; plus the sustainable management and use of our natural resources, including the land we till, the water we drink and the air we breathe.

I again thank the FAO for its efforts throughout the world to assist us as Governments to address these most fundamental rights and needs of our people. And for bringing us all together here to learn from each other's experiences and refine our own approaches to meeting those needs as soon as possible.

Let me close by again asking for your support in the struggle by Pacific nations to get the world to finally recognise the growing crisis posed to us all by climate

[As delivered]

change. And to help us take this fight to the World Climate Summit in six month's time.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.