



Hon. Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

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

OPENING OF RURAL ACCESS ROADS AND ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE (RARAI) PROJECT

Malolo
NADI

Tues. 14th March, 2017
1100 Hours

Head of Delegation of the European Union to Fiji -

His Excellency Mr Andrew Jacobs,

Chief Advisor to the Director-General of SPC –

Ms Patricia Sachs-Cornish,

Permanent Secretaries and Chief Executive Officers,

Sugar Cane Industry Stakeholders,

Cane Farmers – Malolo Sector,

Kemudou na Turaga ni Koro o Moala kei Korovuto,

Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Bula vinaka and a good afternoon to you all.

I'm delighted to be here in Malolo to officially commission an entire network of upgraded rural access roads across the sugar cane belt. These roads will serve our farmers in Malolo, Drasa and Koronubu and allow farmers to transport cane to mills and produce to market safely and conveniently.

There are more than **1,800** sugar cane farmers and their families in Malolo, Drasa and Koronubu. You are a part of a community of more than **200,000** Fijians throughout our country who rely on the health and vitality of our Sugar Cane Industry for their livelihoods. And my Government has a steadfast commitment to not just sustain this Industry, but to keep it growing well into the future. We cannot do that without proper agricultural infrastructure.

These new rural access roads bring that promise of connectivity here. They will ensure that your communities remain a part of the growth that Fiji is enjoying. The road to markets in Fiji and beyond begins here, where you take

produce and cane that you have just harvested from the fields. These roads will reduce delays and unnecessary labour, and they will help ensure that as our Sugar Cane Industry grows and remains a sustainable source of livelihood for our people, your cane will get to the mills and your crops will reach markets in Fiji and beyond. They hold the promise that the way of life you all know and cherish can continue unabated.

The days spent worrying about the quality and condition of roads you depend on are over. Journeys that were once arduous and inconvenient are quicker and, most importantly, safer than they have ever been. These new roads don't just offer an easier ride to town. They have brought infrastructure that you can rely on, with the proper drainage and crossings to resist the rains and flooding that are becoming more frequent and more severe in your communities.

We had a torrential thunderstorm last week. I think it was Wednesday night. Rain came down in buckets for more than an hour, and the thunder sounded like cannon fire. And believe me, I know what cannon fire sounds like. It almost had me running for cover.

As I sat in my house, I couldn't help thinking about how the unusual storms we have been experiencing can flood your fields, wash out your roads in a heartbeat, and leave your roads in a deteriorated state.

The changing climate is placing challenges before all of us, which is why I will be dedicating a good part of the next year to leading the global effort to slow that change down and help people adapt to it. It is so important that I have decided that Fiji will defer our candidacy for a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council. We are a small country, and this year our Ambassador in Geneva and our foreign-policy resources need to be focused on climate change and our presidency of COP 23. We simply cannot

do them both and do them well. And right now, climate change is the wolf at our front door. But I can assure you that we will renew our candidacy following our presidency of COP 23.

I don't have to tell any of you here what climate change has to do with our roads, because every unpredictable storm, every season that is unusually wet or unusually dry, can mean hardship and financial loss. But today we have **THESE** roads, and they will keep your communities connected to the rest of Fiji for generations to come. They are your bridge to the outside world, to the markets you depend on, and to the enormous possibilities that our growing economy offers every Fijian.

As I have mentioned, it's not just our sugar cane farmers who will benefit from this infrastructure. This project will make a major difference for the nearly **6,000** households in these three (3) sectors who depend on other types of farming, farming that produce crops that need to reach

their markets before they lose their freshness and quality. Those farmers can use this same road network to bring their goods to market, and they have the same opportunity to find success through their own hard work and diligence.

But these roads have meaning beyond the growing and marketing of sugar cane. They build communities because these roads will also help your children get to school, and help you get medical care when you need it, and help your families travel to take care of the many things they need to do.

These upgraded access roads come under the four-year development assistance programme with the European Union to empower our local communities who depend on farming. I want to thank the EU for this invaluable assistance on behalf of our cane cutters, our lorry operators and all of our farmers and their families whose secure future is guaranteed by the long-term strength of this industry. I also want to commend the EU's larger work

with my Government to reshape our Sugar Cane Industry to make it the most competitive and productive it has ever been, even in an era of great change in the global sugar market.

The new reform programme for our Sugar Cane Industry will guarantee that these new access roads always carry your cane to mills where it can be crushed and prepared to send on to eager buyers in markets all over the world, where Fijian sugar is definitely in demand. And it will also ensure that we get the best return possible from every stalk of sugar cane we produce as we improve productivity and find new ways to use cane and its by-products.

Today, you join the many thousands of Fijians who are enjoying the modern, capable infrastructure projects my Government is delivering throughout the country. But I will confess to having two regrets—that governments before us did not take on this task seriously and conscientiously, and that we can't do everything that needs

to be done at once. But with the capacity existing in Fiji, we have to make hard choices. We must make our plans to improve conditions year by year and stick to those plans until every cane farmer is as connected, protected and supported as you are today.

Our commitment to you all and to this Industry doesn't end with this project. Our Sugar Cane Industry is here to stay, and so is my Government's support to our sugar cane farmers. We are with you, we support you and we will do whatever is necessary to keep your interests protected. These new access roads are testament to that commitment.

As you know, I believe strongly that we must depoliticise our sugar sector and take a technical and commercial approach to the relationship between the Government and the Industry. Infrastructure is a part of that. But it also means bringing in new technology to increase yields and reduce yield costs. It means giving our farmers the advantages of the latest scientific research. And it means

bringing Government resources together—in a prudently and intelligent way—to support the sector. You may have seen in the papers that we are seeking proposals to purchase cane harvesters. I am happy to announce as Minister for Sugar that I have approved an expenditure of **\$2 million**, which we will make available to sugar cane co-operatives to help them purchase the harvesters. And we will be announcing more initiatives like this by Government and FSC in the next few months.

I wish you all every success as you begin this exciting new chapter of sugar cane farming in these sectors. I encourage you all to be ambitious, take advantage of this infrastructure and work in confidence knowing that our Sugar Cane Industry is strong today and will remain strong in the years to come.

Vinaka vakalevu - Thank you.