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

CANE FARMER AND LANDOWNER CONSULTATIONS 2018

Shirley Park
LAUTOKA

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1500 Hours

My fellow Fijians,

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

I have come here today to talk face-to-face with our cane farmers and with our landowners, to discuss how we can work together to find new ways to help build our growing economy.

Make no mistake, our game plan for our Sugar Industry is about keeping our cane industry at the heart of our economic growth. And our work with our iTaukei landowners is about giving you the tools you need to develop your land and get the most out of your land resources. So that all of you, our farmers and our landowners, can have the assurance and stability you need to do well by yourselves and your families.

I'd like to speak with all of you about a number of issues that affect our cane farmers and our landowners. I do so as your Prime Minister, and I do so because I am driven to make life better for my fellow Fijians; ordinary people like yourselves who deserve to know that when you work hard, that work will be rewarded and that you and your families will benefit.

My commitment extends beyond any one industry. It drives my Government's entire agenda to give all of our people an equal shot at doing well in our growing economy. It extends to the protections we've put in place to give every Fijian equal status and equal protection under the law, and the chance to give their children access to even greater opportunities.

To improve the lives of every Fijian, my Government is spending a great amount of money on roads, on water, on electricity and other services. I know some of you may still not have access to electricity or piped water. But many of you now enjoy these services for the first time. And my Government will continue its program of extending them to as many people as possible across the country.

We have also provided a lot of money for education – free schooling, free textbooks and subsidised transportation to school. We’ve massively expanded access to scholarships and tertiary loans to enable many more of our young people – your children and grandchildren - to gain access to higher learning. Those scholarships are being granted on the basis of merit, and merit alone. So that any child -- including the children of any farmer, anywhere in Fiji -- can earn good marks and go on to university and earn qualifications to get better jobs, start their own businesses and participate in our wider economy.

I’d like to first speak directly to our cane farmers here today, I’d like to begin by recognising all of you for the work you put in every day to build this Industry. You are among the hardest working people in Fiji, and my Government supports you and stands with you – now and always.

When it comes to the Sugar Cane Industry, there was no question that it was in steady decline until my Government intervened to put it on a better footing. For example, the amount of cane needed to produce sugar has been drastically reduced by making the process more efficient. The TCTS just a few years ago was about 13 or 14. Last year it was just over nine.

We've set aside unprecedented funding towards capital programmes this financial year. In total, the Budget toward the Sugar Industry was increased to **60 Million Dollars**, nearly double last year's allocation. And with our support, cane production in 2018 is anticipated to reach close to two million tonnes.

Too often, we hear big promises from the Opposition, but we don't hear real solutions. They talk about giving 100 dollars per tonne, but they never talk about how to bring down the actual cost base for your cane.

And that is the only way you'll really see bigger profits, now and over the long-term. Only when we bring down the costs of production, can we put this Industry on a real path to a more sustainable and more profitable future.

That is why my Government has given wide reaching assistance that is seriously lowering your cost base. We are boosting cane production and improving extension services, transportation and harvesting. We've helped transfer new and better technologies to farmers. We've set aside nearly **16 Million Dollars** for the Cane Replanting Programme, and that major funding increase has led to 5,671 hectares planted in 2017 compared to 3,900 last year. Still, our reports indicate that we have 30,000 hectares of land that remains idle or under-utilised, so I encourage all of you to take advantage of this grant to plant more cane.

My Government introduced the fertiliser subsidy in 2009, and in the last budget we've made that subsidy even more generous, lowering the price paid by our famers to only 20 dollars per bag, and we've seen a fertiliser sale increase of nearly 40 per cent since January last year. So keep taking advantage of this great subsidy.

I know many of you face ongoing issues with labour shortages. That is why we've made a big push towards mechanised farming. We assisted 21 co-operatives with **90,000 Dollars** each deposit payments on mechanical harvesters. Already, we've increased the total percentage of cane harvested by mechanical harvesters from eight per cent last year to 18 per cent.

My Government also introduced a new, **6.3 Million Dollar** Weedicide Subsidy program this financial year aimed at helping our cane farmers maximize the yield of their harvest through assistance in paying for the herbicides that are necessary to protect your crops. Now, our farmers are paying only 45 per cent of the total price.

Through our Sugarcane Rehabilitation and Small Grant Scheme, my Government has set aside **1 Million Dollars** for supplies like fencing materials, pumps, and water tanks, all of which will allow our smaller sugar farms to keep pace in a rapidly-changing industry.

My Government has also continued to pay the Sugar Levy to the Sugar Cane Growers Council, taking the burden off of farmers by covering all of the Council's administrative costs. And – as we promised – we covered the entire cost for all cane that was transferred from the Penang Mill area to the Rarawai Mill.

So, no farmer was unable to supply their cane -- despite some very bold, and very false, claims from the Opposition.

We've made the Ministry more responsive to farmers' complaints and concerns through the establishment of toll-free lines, and the FSC can be reached at 0800-6661972.

Friends, I'm the Chair of the TLTB, and, as many of you know, I have directed the TLTB and also the Lands Department to ensure that for all leases that are expiring, the lessee must be told five years in advance whether the lease is to be extended or not renewed. No longer will you be in danger of finding out just before the lease expires that you have to leave. This gives you certainty and enables you to make proper plans to find somewhere else to live. It is about giving leaseholders security and peace of mind - to enable them to properly manage their affairs and their lives.

As you all know, we are now in an election year. But you also know, my commitment to each of you doesn't depend on what's on the political calendar. I've always been right here -- at the grassroots level -- with you, our cane farmers, hearing you out, updating you on what's happening and about where this Industry is headed. My commitment is unwavering, and it doesn't depend on anything; it is my own personal commitment to you, your families and our beloved Fiji.

Unfortunately, we can all expect that in the lead up to the Elections, my opponents will come with their same doomsday predictions for this Industry and their same false promises. They don't have belief in your potential or in this Industry, they don't have real plans and they don't have real interest in your well-being. For them, it's all politics; it's all about how you can help them, and never the other way around.

Remember, securing a future for this Industry isn't about smiles and sitting around the grog bowl spinning fantasies. It is about leadership. It is about having a strategic vision and plan for this Industry. It is about being honest, telling the situation as it is and being clear about what is necessary moving forward. I've always been honest, and I always will be. I've always been here for you, and I always will be. And I've always had a plan for this Industry, and we are steadily realising my Government's vision.

I'd also like to take time to speak directly to our landowners.

My Government is dedicated to not only preserving and protecting native iTaukei land, as we have enshrined in our Constitution, but also to promoting new ways for it to become a stream of income for you, your children, and your grandchildren to rightfully enjoy.

And we are making good on our promises; more iTaukei lands are steadily being reverted back to iTaukei land owning units, more land is being freed up for farming and development, and in effect, more money is in the pockets of tens of thousands of Fijian farmers and landowners.

Government continues to support the CBUL initiative, which was set up specifically in 2010 to assist farmers in the renewal of their agricultural leases while, at the same time, providing incentives to landowners to give their unutilised land for leasing. CBUL has turned out to be a clear win-win relationship for not only our farmers and landowners, but also the Fijian economy.

Just this week, Government released a CBUL payment of **3.72 Million Dollars** to the iTaukei Land Trust Board to be distributed to a total of 1,479 land owning units, and 138,899 individual members' bank accounts, at Yavusa, Mataqali and Tokatoka level who have given their consent to renew agricultural leases under the CBUL initiative.

This most recent payout adds on to an impressive total: since 2010, Government has paid out more than **50 Million Dollars**, and the impact is clear: the renewal rate of agricultural leases has increased from 47 per cent just seven years ago to over 80 per cent as of December 2017.

I am also pleased to note TLTB's recent progress in facilitating the return of Schedules A & B lands to the iTaukei landowners who need them. After proper due diligence, this initiative has now been fast-tracked and is nearing completion. TLTB has already allotted a full 95 per cent of Schedule A lands, and 87 per cent of Schedule B lands, to their landowning units.

We are here to help determine how to best help our landowners make the most of their land. But the only way we can do so is through an open and facilitative dialogue. We are here to learn, we are here to listen, and we are here to help you grow both yourself, grow your businesses, and by extension, grow all of Fiji.

With your constant input, we are working to lay the groundwork for a system that is fair, predictable, and allows both landowners and tenants to plan for the future.

Friends, I hope that through this consultation session this afternoon will bring us both progress and clarity. We have gathered a capable team here today, and they are at your disposal -- please take advantage of this valuable opportunity.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.
