



## **HIS EXCELLENCY RATU EPELI NAILATIKAU**

CF, LVO, OBE (Mil), KStJ, CSM, MSD

**President of the Republic of Fiji**

### **ADDRESS AT THE STATE DINNER IN TUVALU**

Funafuti

Tuesday 18 February 2014  
6.30pm

Your Excellencies the Governor General of Tuvalu, Sir Iakoba Taea Italeli and Lady Italeli,  
The Honourable Prime Minister, Enele Sopoaga and Mrs Salilo Sopoaga  
Mr. Speaker  
The Acting Chief Justice  
Honourable Ministers  
Honourable Members of Parliament  
Your Excellencies the High Commissioners and Ambassadors,  
Members of the Diplomatic Corp,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

*Ni sa bula vinaka, good evening and talofa*

I bring you the warmest greetings of the Fijian people and the Fijian government.

It is a great honour for me to be making this official visit to Tuvalu. And it is an even greater pleasure to be amongst friends, with common values and a common destiny as Pacific neighbours.

The official ties between Fiji and Tuvalu have always been close, as have the personal relationships we have forged on both sides.

Your Excellency, your own distinguished career includes having studied law at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, being admitted to the Fijian bar as a Barrister and Solicitor of the High Court of Fiji and before that, attending the Fiji Police College.

Honourable Prime Minister, you too have a significant Fijian connection, having once been Tuvalu's High Commissioner to Fiji.

Many other Tuvaluans also have close links to our country. Indeed every Tuvaluan who travels overseas by air passes through our airports.

Our formal diplomatic relationship dates back to 1977. And in those 37 years, we have done much to expand our trading relationship and our regional and global cooperation.

Together, we face many of the same challenges. Together, we are building new regional structures to give ordinary Pacific Islanders a bigger voice.

Tuvalu is a valued partner in the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), which includes representatives of civil society groups and business.

Fiji sees the PIDF as a means to give greater weight to the views of the grassroots in our member countries. And the PIDF is a genuinely Pacific Island grouping, relatively free from outside influence.

We are making that Pacific voice heard in the great forums of the world.

The Pacific Small Island Developing States - with each of us playing a substantial part - are placing the issues that matter to us, like climate change, before the United Nations and its various agencies. It is the best opportunity that we have of getting our needs and concerns heard and addressed.

These are partnerships that benefit all our people.

Because only by working together closely and speaking with one voice can we hope to be heard above the competing interests of other nations.

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I have come to Tuvalu as part of Fiji's effort to bind us even closer together.

But in my meetings, I have been quietly explaining and will continue to do so about the huge strides we have made and are making in Fiji to produce a nation that is fairer, more just and provides better opportunities for every Fijian.

Before the end of September, we will hold the first genuinely democratic election in our history, of equal votes and of equal value instead of the racially weighted formula that we employed in the past.

We have a new constitution that establishes a common and equal citizenry that guarantees a range of civil and political rights and that provides ordinary Fijians with an unprecedented array of social and economic rights, such as the right to education, housing, and clean water.

This year, we have achieved what we believe is a transforming breakthrough, in being able to provide our young people with free primary and secondary school education as well as a tertiary loans scheme so that poverty is no longer a barrier to higher studies.

Our national infrastructure - such as our roads and ports - is also being upgraded to encourage investment and thereby to create jobs on which the ultimate fortunes of every Fijian depends.

And all over Fiji, rural and maritime communities are gradually and finally receiving basic services such as electricity and water that have been continually promised over the years but never delivered.

This social, economic and political revolution over the past seven years will soon deliver a genuine democracy in Fiji that meets the highest international standards.

And even some of our more skeptical friends are now coming to see the merits of that revolution.

We are determined that our general election before the end of September will be free and fair and express the genuine will of the people.

Fiji is proud to have forged an independent foreign policy based on the fundamental premise of being friends to all and enemies to none.

We have five hundred and eight RFMF personnel serving in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force in the Golan heights, Syria; one hundred and ninety five in the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq; and fifteen in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan.

There are twenty in the United Nations mission in Darfur, Sudan; twenty three in the United Nations Mission in Liberia; three hundred and twenty eight in the Multi-National Force and Observers in Sinai; and two in RAMSI, Solomon Islands, protecting vulnerable ordinary people.

And we are sending our civilian volunteers, including teachers and health workers, into our Pacific neighbours to boost their capacity and to improve the lives of their people.

Nine primary school teachers will soon be coming to Tuvalu as part of the Fiji Volunteer Services Scheme.

With your concurrence, we have plans to considerably boost this program in the coming

months and years and to expand the capacity building to other professional fields.

So while we stress the notion of serving our people at home, we also stress the need to serve our fellow Pacific Islanders and the global community in whatever way we can.

We are especially keen in working closely with Tuvalu and our other neighbours to lead and assist our joint effort to persuade the rest of the world to finally take decisive action on climate change, which, of course, poses a threat to the very existence of your nation? I repeat here what I said on my visits to Kiribati and Nauru last week.

It is simply not acceptable for the world to stand by and watch the three regional states that are most vulnerable to rising seas – Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands - sink slowly beneath the waves.

Fiji is using every possible means at the United Nations and in its agencies to draw attention to your plight and the selfishness of the big carbon polluters in putting their interests before those of us who suffer the most in the Pacific. Our recent leadership of the biggest voting bloc at the United Nations – the G77 plus China – gave us a unique opportunity to advance this cause.

We sit on the main United Nations Committee on Climate Change. And by recently taking the chair of the governing board of the United Nations development program, we are also in a position to push our collective agenda forward.

This matters not just to the people of Tuvalu but to every Pacific Islander.

In Fiji, we have already moved one village altogether out of the way of the rising sea and a second will soon be also relocated. But we have identified a further 676 communities throughout our nation that are threatened in some way, including forty-two that will need to be moved in the next five to ten years.

Of course, all this pales into insignificance beside the catastrophe you in Tuvalu are facing, along with your neighbours in other low-lying atolls – the potential loss of your entire country.

I am here to make the same offer that Fiji has already made to Kiribati. We will stand shoulder to shoulder with you as you face this crisis, as well as in doing everything possible to try to avert it.

But in a worst case scenario and if all else fails, Fijians are willing – with open hearts – to take some or all of you in and provide you with a new home.

You will not be refugees. You will be able to migrate with dignity. The spirit of the people of Tuvalu will not be extinguished. Like your neighbours in Kiribati, that spirit will live on somewhere else because a nation is not only a physical place.

As I said in Tarawa, only a week ago, a nation – and the sense of belonging that comes with it - exists in the hearts and minds of its citizens wherever they may be.

As our Prime Minister told the Recent Pacific Islands Conference on Conservation and Protected Areas, Fiji will not turn its back on our neighbours in their hour of need.

We accepted the Banaban people when they were forced to leave Ocean Island because of the pressure of phosphate mining there. We also accepted the Tuvaluans from Vaitupu when they came to live on Kioa.

And if necessary – with the assistance of the international community - we will do it again.

I also want to repeat the message that I have been sharing on my visits throughout the region: that we must all do more as Pacific Islanders to take charge of our own affairs. We need a fundamental change in our psyche – in our mindset - and the way we see the world.

We need to take ownership of our problems, to acknowledge our own roles and responsibilities instead of seeing them as someone else's.

When someone once asked the great Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew: quote: “What are you going to do for me?” he replied: “What are you going to do for yourself?” This carries a very important message for us all.

We need to stop looking for donors and start looking for development partners.

And we need to stop asking those partners, “What are you doing for us?” But “What can you do to help us to help ourselves?”. We need to abandon our tendency to seek handouts and ask for leg ups.

I also want to again stress the urgent need for every one of us in the Pacific to start taking charge of our personal surroundings – to dispose of our rubbish properly; to keep our coastal areas clean; for every man, women and child to pick up the litter, the plastic bags and the empty bottles that are despoiling our beautiful surroundings.

It means everyone accepting personal responsibility for the state of our environment.

It means everyone remembering and accepting that our coastal areas and the seas around us are our food source.

We need to preserve and protect our island homes not only for ourselves but for our children and the future generations.

Your Excellencies, Mr. Prime Minister, ladies and gentlemen. I look forward very much to seeing more of Tuvalu, of meeting more of your people and of strengthening the great ties of friendship between our countries.

Thank you for the wonderful hospitality you have shown me and my delegation.

*Vinaka vakalevu and fakafetai lasi.*

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