Maiden Speech by the Honorable Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ratu Inoke KUBUABOLA, at the First Parliamentary Session, 7 October 2014

Madam Speaker,

1.0 It is a great pleasure and honour to stand before you today and to see you presiding over this House. Like the Honourable Members who have spoken before me, I wish to congratulate you, Madam Speaker, on your appointment in this august House, and more significantly, in being the first woman Speaker in Fiji and in the Pacific.

2.0 May I also acclaim and congratulate His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, for his comprehensive and moving address on the occasion of the opening of the first session of parliament on 7 October 2014.

3.0 In his address, His Excellency the President urged that we, and I quote, "... dedicate ourselves once and for all to the democratic ideal – of genuine equality for all Fijians. And resolve to work constructively in our new democracy and in this refurbished parliament for the benefit of all our people." He appealed to us all to "... work cooperatively together to advance the national interest and to adhere to the highest standards of collective and personal conduct." He further emphasized that "As democratically elected members of
parliament, your first duty must always be to keep the trust and confidence of those who have sent you here.”

4.0 The people of this great nation have indeed spoken in the recent general election. Their pervading message is loud and clear; they want and demand that their leaders come together in a genuine spirit of cooperation. I ask that we unite in this common purpose and seize the moment, as we can ill afford to fail and run the risk of our history repeating itself.

5.0 Fiji’s international persona

5.1 As we look back over the 44 years since our independence and the evolution of our nation’s political and international identity, we have much to be thankful for. The last few years in particular have given us much reason to celebrate and work even harder.

5.2 In his address to this House on 7 October, His Excellency the President, encouraged us, and I quote "...to build on the reforms of the past eight years to continue improving the lives of ordinary Fijians and better equip our young people for satisfying roles in a growing, thriving economy.” His vision of Fiji is to be, and I quote, "...a modern-nation state, taking a pre-eminent role in our own region and strengthening our voice and presence in the global community at large.”

5.3 Many of our traditional friends, who were wedded to the Western concept of geo-political relations, had questioned our decision to forge deeper bilateral relations with countries like the People’s Republic of China or the Russian Federation, among others. The Government’s foreign policy motto of 'Friends to all, enemy to none’ was the driving force behind
that decision, and the pursuit of expanding our diplomatic relations and enhancing our international persona.

5.4 As a result, Fiji’s relations with the international community have grown considerably in the past 8 years. Our international profile has been boosted significantly.

5.5 We are a small and vulnerable country. We can never again permit ourselves to be dependent—politically, strategically or economically—on a narrow group of powerful countries. Our security must lie in establishing a broad set of relationships that protects us from the political winds that occasionally blow from one nation or another. More importantly, it will also give us more sources of trade, cultural exchange, development cooperation, financing, technology and military and diplomatic cooperation.

5.6 But that does not mean that Fiji’s foreign policy priority is simply to seek protection. Fiji has and will have a foreign policy that unselfishly and unashamedly pursues our national interest based on openness, equality, principle and leadership. We will pursue productive relations with as many states as possible under terms that guarantee our equal treatment and that contribute to the well-being of the people of Fiji.

5.7 But, Madam Speaker, we know that we Fijians are not a selfish or mercenary people. We are a generous and principled people, and our foreign policy must be generous and principled. In that context, we will continue to do more than our share to promote peace and understanding in the world. We also know that this small country, Fiji, is larger and more developed than many of our neighbors. We have an obligation to provide leadership and resources that will help lift this entire region. It is an obligation we undertake
gladly and with modest pride. The Pacific region is not just our neighborhood; it is the home of our brother and sister Pacific Islanders, with whom we are forever bound and with whom we must work closely to ensure our common future.

5.8 Madam Speaker, we have made these ideals and priorities the basis of our foreign policy. In turn, that has led us to take actions that have raised our stature in the world. But stature is not our goal; stature is the result of a foreign policy that is based on enlightened self-interest, principle, generosity and leadership. Fiji is a proud nation, a more confident nation, a nation that knows that it has a contribution to make, a voice to be heard, and an obligation to serve. We have a place at the table because we have demanded it and have shown that we deserve it. And, of course, all other nations know they can count on us to do more than our share.

5.9 Please permit me, Madam Speaker, to share some ways in which Fiji has increased its reach and stature in the world. These include the establishment of six (6) new overseas Missions; Fiji’s Chairmanship of the 133-member developing country bloc of the Group of 77 & China; our chairmanship of the International Sugar Organisation; our hosting of the 13th ACP Ministerial Conference on Sugar; high level exchange visits with the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation; a state visit by the President of the Republic of Indonesia; and of course, the fact that we were the driving force behind the creation of the Pacific Islands Development Forum and hosted the inaugural meeting.

5.10 I am confident that Fiji’s international persona will grow even stronger in the comings years as we stick to these guiding principles.
I remind us again of the wise words of His Excellency the President, delivered in this House on 7 October that, and I quote, "In this parliament begins the task of capitalizing on the progress of the past eight years and building on the goodwill - at home and abroad - that has accompanied the arrival of our new democracy. We have much to be grateful for as a nation. We are unified and at peace. Our recent election has been hailed as credible, free and fair. As we embark on this new journey, let us join hands – whatever our political allegiances – to work together to move our beloved nation forward."

As the Minister responsible for Fiji’s foreign affairs, I will do my utmost to fulfill that charge. I am committed to working closely with you all in delivering the best Fiji has to offer to the international community and in return, to win their confidence and attract their investment.

Fiji in the World

Madam Speaker, the Government’s foreign policy has decidedly projected a more independent, fair and more respectful stance. Fiji is a responsible and contributing global citizen, ready and willing to play its part under the banner of the United Nations and within its rules.

His Excellency the President asserted when he opened this parliamentary session that, and I quote, "We are no longer just a small nation in some far off corner of the Pacific. We no longer can isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. The recent capture of 45 of our UN peacekeepers has reminded us yet again that the world’s problems are our problems. We are an integral part of the global community and must carve out a successful place in it."
6.3 In this regard, Fiji has since 2007 embarked on a major review of its diplomatic relations and widened its areas of diplomatic contacts by countries as well as regions to cover the entire globe. Our diplomats are taking a message of hope, reconciliation where there is conflict, and peacekeeping and peacebuilding where there is discord. The latter explains our active and longstanding participation in UN Peacekeeping Missions for the last 36 years.

6.4 In the implementation of Fiji’s foreign policy, we do not sit in judgment of countries we make contact with, because we respect their sovereign right as independent nations to decide for themselves what they and their people decide is best for them. Fiji would like to be a bridge to countries needing understanding and support when they are going through difficult times. We do not intrude on the domestic affairs of nation states.

6.5 At a time like now, when many countries with which Fiji has close diplomatic ties are facing difficult challenges, we offer our solidarity and support for their efforts in promoting dialogue as the cornerstone of finding solutions to the problems they face.

7.0 Fiji and Sustainable Development in the Pacific

7.1 Fiji sees the entire Pacific – not just the South Pacific – as an integrated region that is driven by the shared value of “Collective self-reliance as an Engine of Growth”. Because of Fiji’s geographic location and relatively more developed status than most other Pacific States, it is the obvious hub that can take a more significant role in Regional Cooperation through the newly established Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). It is the first platform in the Pacific focusing specifically on green economies and sustainable
development as established in the U.N.’s Global Agenda on Sustainable Development. PIDF’s inauguration has also launched a new era of regional cooperation through partnership and genuine consultation between Governments, Civil Society groups and the Business Community, hitherto excluded from the Pacific Governments’ decision-making processes.

7.2 We are committed to working actively to establish a robust global follow-up system to make all nations accountable and ensure that the very critical interests of small island developing states—like Fiji and our neighbors—are respected and advanced.

8.0 Climate Change

8.1 Madam Speaker, I wish to underscore the great importance of addressing climate change. Fiji, like other small island developing States, is extremely vulnerable to sea-level rise and the adverse impacts of climate change. They pose significant risks to our livelihood and our efforts to achieve sustainable development. It represents the gravest of threats to the survival and viability of many islands nations, including for some, through the loss of territory.

8.2 Fiji has proven its commitment to confront this global crisis. We have established a national climate change coordinating committee, and we are actively engaged wherever people are working to find solutions. It is our responsibility to urge all Parties to work with an increased sense of urgency and purpose towards an ambitious, comprehensive and meaningful outcome to the current negotiations for a Protocol under the Framework Convention on climate change that is legally binding and applicable to all Parties.
9.0 People-to-People & Cultural Exchange

9.1 Fiji will build and capitalize on the unique characteristics, skills and talents of its people. We intend to explore official friendship programmes with other countries and regions of the world. The cornerstone of this friendship program may be an increase in people-to-people exchanges and contacts through sporting events and cultural and educational exchanges at all levels. Our love for sports provides an excellent base through which Fijian increase people-to-people contacts.

9.2 We are also keen to engage with those countries that possess rich musical and artistic tradition, from whom we in Fiji can learn. The same is true when it comes to Fijian culture with all its diversity. Cultural exchanges with bilateral partners will enrich our understanding of each other.

9.3 Madam Speaker, the citizens of Fiji are our greatest national asset. Their talent, energy and good will can advance our national interest, help build strong relations with other nations, and give and receive cultural and technological wisdom through these citizen exchanges. As we engage our citizens in our diplomacy, we become a stronger nation, a wiser nation, and a more confident nation.

10.0 Collaboration

10.1 This House is full of leaders, representatives of communities and of our beloved nation. Your commitment to ensuring that the name of Fiji will always stand for something good and noble, regionally and globally, is essential. But the work of many others outside this house is also required. Fortunately, Fiji has no shortage of dedicated, principled and energetic citizens.
10.2 Like all the problems we face in Fiji, we begin with a commitment to fix what is wrong, to persevere in what is required, and to accept only success. This is how we have tackled problems in our past, and this is what is required now to build a strong and secure society for all.

10.3 I feel it is important to recognise that none of us stands in parliament alone. We are born into a community, live in that community, and as individuals are at our strongest when we are in the midst of that community and those that matter to us most. I implore us all to work cooperatively and collaboratively to meet the challenges ahead of us and take advantage of the available opportunities for the betterment of our nation.

11.0 Conclusion

11.1 In concluding this maiden speech, Madam Speaker, I wish to thank the people of Fiji for the trust they have placed in me. Many people worked hard to get me here, and I cannot thank them enough. I was amazed and humbled by the number of friends who offered to help along the way. I refer to not only members of the Fiji First Party and those whom I know, but also those who are not members of the Fiji First Party and whom I do not know. I thank them all and promise to honour their efforts. I could not and would not have taken this journey without the love and support of my wife, ..., and our children ...

11.2 I commit myself to represent the people of Fiji and to contribute to the well-being and growth of this great nation.

11.3 Madam Speaker, I thank you for your patience and indulgence. I commend and support the address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, to this house.
May God Richly Bless Fiji.

Vinaka vakalevu, sukria, bahootdhanyavaad, and thank you.

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