SPEECH AT MEETING ON AGREEMENT TO INSTITUTIONALISE PIDF

Novotel LAMI
Wed. 6 May, 2015
0930 Hours

Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Distinguished Guests;
Delegates and Participants;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I’m delighted to be here this morning to launch the first of two meetings to seek the views of our Pacific partners on a draft agreement to institutionalise the Pacific Islands Development Forum.

It is an important step on our journey together as Pacific Islanders to establish an institution that is a genuine expression of Island opinion, embracing Governments,
the private sector and civil society.

As you know, we have held two successful PIDF Summits in Fiji that drew widespread support from across the region and beyond. At the first in August 2013, Fiji hosted representatives of Government, the private sector and civil society from 13 other Pacific countries and territories. Plus 29 other nations from across the world, which have either become valued development partners or intend to do so.

At the second PIDF Summit in June last year, sixteen Pacific countries and territories attended plus our development partners. And as many of you will remember, we had the honour of hosting the then President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. To have such a distinguished global figure here in Fiji was ample evidence of the seriousness with which the world is taking the formation of our new organisation.

We had other representatives present from an extraordinary range of countries across the globe, from
as far away as the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Argentina, Kazakhstan and Morocco. Plus many of our old friends from nations and groupings such as China, the European Union, India, Japan and Korea - to name just a few.

It is clear beyond doubt from the two previous meetings that the concept of the PIDF is highly valued by Governments, the private sector and civil society groups, who have always felt excluded from the existing regional architecture. Yet they often speak more effectively than anyone for those who really matter in Pacific societies – our ordinary men and women strung out over the vast ocean we all call our home.

As I said at the time, we are a grand coalition who speak for the aspirations and dreams of all Pacific Islanders. And we have opened our doors to the world, to any Government or organisation that wants to work with us to protect our interests and improve the lives of all Pacific peoples.
We can all be extremely proud at the success so far of this wonderful initiative. But the time has come to take PIDF to another level by formalising and institutionalising it and give it the subsequent standing we seek in the global community.

The PIDF has been gazetted, the Secretariat born and its headquarters inaugurated. The next step is to institutionalise the PIDF through an international agreement that was mandated by the Governing Council at last year’s Summit.

Your task this week is to put forward your ideas as to what form that agreement should take. And to give us your input and expertise to create the best possible framework for the noble cause we embarked on together two years ago.

Fiji has had the honour to host the PIDF but now is the time to nurture and grow its regional roots. As delegates to the first Regional Consultation Meeting, you will begin directly shaping the institutional arrangements that
will bring our organisation to life.

It is an exciting time and yours is a noble endeavour - to help design the framework for an organisation that is effective, relevant to all Pacific Islanders, expresses the aspirations of us all and cements our regional solidarity – the genuine voice of the Pacific – now and in the years ahead.

In stark contrast with other regional architecture, we have thrown open the doors to everyone, to gain the widest possible input from across the region. I want to thank each and every one of you for your enthusiasm and commitment to our collective vision. Fiji, for one, regards the PIDF with the utmost importance as a truly genuine expression of the aspirations of our own people and our friends all over the Pacific.

Our organisation is unique, a gathering place for the widest cross section of Pacific society ever assembled. Regional governments and territories, some of which have been excluded from existing regional institutions,
such as New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. Governments from throughout the world who are engaging with us as valued development partners. The private sector, which is the primary generator of the economic prosperity on which we all depend. And those of you from civil society engaged in assisting our people and who represent a genuine voice.

I’ve said it before and I will say it again: we are not in the business of creating fat cat bureaucracies that waste our precious tax dollars. That is not the Pacific way. Our mantra must always be to do more for less, to create an organisation that is lean and efficient and that because of its integrity, enjoys the confidence and support of our development partners.

I know I don’t have to lecture you on this point. Because so many of you have always operated with scarce resources and know that this is no impediment to being effective. My own mantra in Fiji is that Government exists to deliver and to serve. And I urge you all to embrace the same values in the PIDF.
Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

There still appears to be a degree of confusion about Fiji’s attitude to our regional architecture, and especially our continuing participation in the Pacific Islands Forum. Allow me to take the opportunity today to set the record straight.

We will continue to participate in all Forum activities at the public service, technical and ministerial levels. The PIF Secretariat will, of course, continue to be headquartered in Fiji. But as Head of Government, I will not participate in any Forum Leader’s Meeting until the issue of the undue influence of Australia and New Zealand and our divergence of views is addressed. Australia and New Zealand are not island nations. And we believe that they are more development partners such as the European Union, China, India, South Korea, Indonesia and the rest.

This is not some ill-considered position based on
resentment against Australia and New Zealand for their punitive attitude towards our reform programme that produced the first genuine democracy in Fijian history. This is not me ‘mouthing off’, as the New Zealand Prime Minister so condescendingly put it.

But as things stand, we do not see Fiji’s interests reflected in the stance being taken by Australia and New Zealand. And especially on the biggest threat to our security we have ever faced collectively as Pacific Islanders – the rising sea levels caused by climate change.

In common with the European Union and a host of other countries, Fiji wants the global community to commit to binding cuts in carbon emissions to reduce the current rate of global warming. The scientists say these cuts are vital to prevent the sea level rises that in the near future threaten the very existence of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands. Plus vast tracts of land in other coastal island nations.

Yet rather than join us at the forefront of the
international campaign to cut carbon emissions, Australia in particular is dragging its feet. So much so that even major carbon emitters are complaining about Australia’s refusal to meet its international obligations.

Rather than side with us, Australia in particular is siding with what I call the coalition of the selfish. Those industrialised nations which are putting the welfare of their carbon polluting industries and their workers before our welfare and survival as Pacific Islanders.

We now find ourselves in common cause not with our closest neighbours and traditional friends – those who sit with us in the PIF – but with others such as the member countries of the European Union who also heavily invest in the long-term welfare of our people but stand with us on the issue of climate change.

The Europeans have proved to be our true allies in this most basic of struggles. And as we see it, Australia and New Zealand have been put to the test on climate change and been found wanting. So it should be no
surprise that we have formed the view that at the very least, their position as full members of our island nation Forum needs to be questioned, re-examined and redefined. They simply do not represent our interests as we face this critical matter of survival.

As a matter of fact, the Indian Ocean island nations of the Maldives and Seychelles have far more in common with us in respect of rising sea levels, development challenges and economic prospects than Australia and New Zealand will ever have.

I want to make it clear once again that we are not putting forward the PIDF as a competitor for any existing organisation. What we are doing is providing a space for everyone to have their opinions heard, which has not been the case with the Pacific Islands Forum. Though I’m pleased to note that the PIF appears to be following our example of opening its doors beyond the strict confines of Government.

I am not here to force Fiji’s view on anyone. It is for the
region as a whole to decide its future and the adequacy of the existing regional framework. But as Fiji sees it, we needed to create a piece of regional furniture that we are all comfortable sitting in and we have. An organisation for Pacific Islanders by Pacific Islanders. Free from undue outside influence and existing only to pursue the interests of Pacific Islanders, whoever they are or wherever they live.

And I want to stress that none of this affects our bilateral relations with the Australians and New Zealanders, who we continue to regard as friends despite our grave disappointment at their stance on climate change.

In the meantime, Fiji will concentrate its efforts on working with you all to build this wonderful new organisation – the true voice of the Pacific Islands. And a group that, unlike the PIF, is inclusive and embraces countries way beyond our region who nonetheless, want to work with us as genuine partners.

In this context, I want to thank all of those nations who
have given us their support and especially the People’s Republic of China, whose financial contribution towards the setting up of the PIDF Secretariat is deeply appreciated.

I also want to acknowledge the Secretariat for its input and everyone else associated with making the PIDF a reality. And I want to thank all of you for coming to Fiji for this important gathering to formulate the framework on which PIDF is to proceed.

We all look forward to the third Pacific Islands Development Forum in September, where the agreement that you are working on this week will be formally signed by Pacific leaders. I wish you well in your deliberations and now have the pleasure to declare this workshop open.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.