

FIJI

The President of the General Assembly,
The Secretary General of the United Nations,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates.

Bula vinaka and a very good day to you all. Madame President, allow me to congratulate you on assuming the presidency of this 73rd session of the General Assembly. Every year brings fresh challenges and new crises, even as the crises of last year and the year before await some resolution, or even some respite.

This body—the United Nations—is continually challenged to stand between parties in conflict, to ease the suffering of refugees and migrants, and to continue its work to build a more peaceful, just and equal world. The Fijian people have always been proud of our nation's full engagement with the United Nations. We have been a willing and energetic presence in peacekeeping efforts around the world,

and we are now proudly putting every ounce of energy we have into the fight to save this planet and its people—all of us—from a catastrophic warming of our climate.

Madame President, Fiji will soon celebrate national elections for the second time since our return to democracy. I say celebrate with a purpose, because truly free elections are the very starting point for democracy and freedom. If the people cannot choose their government freely, then their other freedoms are always in jeopardy.

I am proud of what we have accomplished in our Fijian democracy. Where we once had only the shell of democracy, we have now pierced that shell, and we have brought the Fijian people into a genuinely inclusive society in which minority rights are respected and all citizens are equal not just in name, but in fact. That is the great promise of the 2013 Fijian Constitution, which has been the beacon for our

progress through its vast array of political and socio-economic protections for every Fijian.

Today in Fiji and forever, we make no distinctions based on ethnicity, social status or religion, and we enforce our laws that guarantee that equality. We have reinforced our democracy by passing laws to empower girls and women and protect them from violence. We have reformed our education system so that it provides real opportunity for all Fijians, regardless of income and regardless of whether they live in the capital or the most remote islands and regardless of gender. This year, we achieved an over 90 per cent level of literacy in the country, over 90 per cent of girls in Fiji complete 15 years of secondary education, and just under 90 per cent of our boys do the same. We are building our future on this firm foundation of education.

We have also reformed our welfare programmes to provide not just a stronger safety net, but also to create greater opportunity for the most vulnerable in our society.

So while we provide free medicines and subsidised electricity, we also award grants to micro businesses as a way of lifting people out of poverty and rewarding and encouraging self-reliance and entrepreneurship.

This approach goes beyond mere government programmes for the disadvantaged, Madame President. It is based on a fundamental principle that the socio-economic rights of all Fijians must be protected. Those include the right to a quality education, the right to receive treatment and medication when they are ill, the right to decent housing, the right to clean water and electricity, and the right to transportation that is affordable and accessible.

We have also strengthened our independent institutions—our judiciary and the independent commissions that protect consumers, fight corruption, provide legal assistance, advocate and promote human rights and carry out many of the activities of government that must be free of political considerations. I may be disappointed at times when my government loses a case in court, but those defeats are signs of strong, independent institutions, something that we must support and reinforce. They serve to strengthen the people's belief that everyone in Fiji can get justice. If people believe in the courts, they will go to the courts to settle their disputes, and they will trust the courts to adjudicate without fear or favour.

There is no doubt that the Fijian people have a strong and abiding love for freedom. We want to live free,

and we see freedom, democracy and—perhaps most important of all—tolerance as powerful forces for peace in the world.

It is with this clearly demonstrated vocation for personal freedom, tolerance, and social justice that Fiji is a candidate during this General Assembly for membership on the United Nations Human Rights Council. We have thought hard about human rights and taken actions to be a better nation, a nation that encourages respect for the dignity of every person. And we look forward to bringing that point of view to the critical work of the Council.

Fiji looks to a future free of racism, nepotism and privilege. A future where the rights of all persons are guaranteed and enforced by a robust constitutional framework that reaffirms and protects civil and political rights as well as social, cultural and economic rights.

Madame President, our value to the Human Rights Council is also underpinned by our long experience in peacekeeping. It was exactly 40 years ago when Fiji first participated in UN Peacekeeping.

Over those 40 years, which have seen Fijians serving in Africa, the Sinai, East Timor and throughout the Middle East, we have come to identify ourselves as a peacekeeping nation, and it makes us proud. It is something we offer to the global community, to our fellow human beings.

Also in those 40 years, we have witnessed first-hand the way intolerance embraces and leads to repression, violence and mass migration. We have had our experience with intolerance in Fiji. It was an ugly experience that corroded our trust in each other and our sense of who we are as a people. We must remember it so that we do not repeat it, and we will never stop working to keep it in our past.

Madame President, I am proud to stand before you and report that Fiji is in its ninth year of strong

economic growth. I believe that is due in no small part to the democratisation that has taken root and is flourishing.

Democracy is based on a belief in the people, in the belief that everyone is capable of great things if only they are given equal opportunity.

When people see that they have opportunity, that they can get justice, that they can speak their minds and be heard, and that their hard work will be rewarded, they invest their money and their sweat in their future and in greater possibilities for their children. They stay at home and contribute rather than emigrate. And they feel free to let their hopes and ambitions soar. And that drives a thriving economy.

But that optimism must be nurtured and supported through intelligent government actions. In Fiji, we have reformed the tax laws to make them simpler and more just. As a part of that, we have begun rigorously

enforcing our tax laws to ease the burden on those who have little and to ensure that whoever needs to pay, pays their fair share.

People who take risks and mount successful businesses should enjoy the fruits of their hard work, but they must also do their part to sustain the nation. Tax cheating is an offence against the people, and we will root it out and penalise it wherever it exists.

We have also reformed our state enterprises to make them profitable and efficient. The people of Fiji and the employees of these companies have been the main beneficiaries, because better capitalisation and better management has produced better service, increased investments, and higher wages.

We also see small and medium-sized enterprises as important ways of promoting growth and lifting people out of poverty. I am proud to say that my government has given grants worth 32.4 million dollars to small and micro enterprises, and we have

been rewarded with explosive growth and extraordinary innovation in that sector.

A free people, Madame President, need an economic structure that serves them and makes them optimistic. It is one of the basic pillars of democracy.

Madame President, Fiji is coming to the end of its presidency of COP23, of the United Nations' ongoing climate negotiations among the nations of the world, but the struggle to fight global warming and to end the degradation of our oceans will continue to be Fiji's highest priority.

The many disastrous effects of climate change that we are seeing in the South Pacific or around the world are well-documented. The same can be said of the enormous stresses on our oceans arising from acidification, overfishing, warming and plastic refuse. The time to debate those facts is long past.

As the Fijian Prime Minister, I meet thousands of Fijian women, men and children every year who have suffered from the latest wave of climate-related impacts; the cyclones, the flooding, the prolonged droughts, and the steadily rising seas. I meet with the farmers whose crops have been washed away, the teachers and students who have lost their schools and the families whose homes have been destroyed. They want their Prime Minister to demand that the world take action on their behalf.

The commitments we have all made through our Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs fall woefully short of the mark. They simply will not get us to the goal of the Paris Agreement of reducing the rate of global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius target —let alone the more ambitious target of 1.5 degrees.

What matters now, Madame President, is action. Fiji will press for more action on climate change and ocean health in every forum that we are a part of.

We can't simply wait on the rest of the world, with climate impacts already bearing down upon us. We are already taking steps to boost our resilience.

Fiji has begun a project to improve access to sustainable water supply and sewerage services to approximately 270,000 Fijians. We will provide cyclone insurance coverage for low-income households. We are relocating entire villages and communities to escape the rising seas. We're rebuilding our infrastructure back from cyclones to a higher, far more resilient standard. We're working to protect communities that face unacceptably high risks of flooding. Fiji became the first emerging market to issue a sovereign green bond to fund such activities.

But, Madame President, no government alone can combat climate change. The challenge is simply too great. That is why, from the beginning of Fiji's presidency of COP23, I have sought to build a Grand Coalition of governments, the private sector, labour, religious groups and civil society to take initiative and bring forth ideas and solutions great and small.

Madame President, I am confident that I speak for all Fijians and all Pacific islanders when I say that I lose patience with national leaders who proclaim their deep concern over climate change and then do little or nothing to lead their nations on a more ambitious path to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

Leaders who ignore this threat and give their people new coal-fired power plants instead of a better future for their children are either tragically short-sighted or simply engaging in a most cynical form of betrayal. And their people—all people—will bear the burden.

Madame President, the world has embraced the Pacific tradition of Talanoa - a tradition of open and honest dialogue. It will help to raise our collective ambition. But ambition without action—without a plan—is just talk. The Talanoa Dialogues will reach a crescendo in Katowice at COP24. We cannot let Katowice fail. Katowice cannot become another Copenhagen.

Madame President, we are not only calling on other to act – we are leading from the front. Earlier this week, I announced that Fiji will commit to significantly raising its NDC. Fiji will be a net-zero greenhouse gas emission country by 2050.

Madame President,

Fiji is proud to have launched the Ocean Pathway Partnership with the Government of Sweden. We know that the interaction of ocean ecology and climate change is so profound.

We cannot attempt to solve the crisis of one without confronting the crisis of the other.

Our oceans are suffering from the stress of human activities that go beyond climate change, including pollution, overfishing and acidification.

Madame President, I draw the world's serious attention to the need to help developing nations—particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable to overcome climate and oceans stresses. They need access to finance, they need practical solutions. They need the United Nations to help them get there.

Madame President,

It has been an honour for Fiji—and for me personally—to lead the United Nations efforts on climate change this year. I am proud of what we have accomplished.

The World has never needed the United Nations more. The existential problem of climate change requires us to work together. The challenge of mobilising finance for climate resilience requires us to work together. More complex and more globalised conflicts require us to work together.

Madam President , Fiji is firmly committed to the United Nations. We need the United Nations to be at its best if we are to have any chance of overcoming the grave challenges that Fiji and the world now confront.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.