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

OPENING ADDRESS AT THE UNITED NATIONS OCEAN CONFERENCE

United Nations Headquarters
NEW YORK

Monday, 5 June 2017
1000 Hours

Your Excellency, my Co-President, the Deputy

Prime Minister of Sweden,

Your Excellency, the President of the General

Assembly,

Your Excellency, the United Nations Secretary

General,

Distinguished Heads of State and Government,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

We come together at a time of unprecedented challenge for the community of nations in terms of our quality of life. Climate change poses the biggest threat the world has ever known. And the quality of our oceans and seas is also deteriorating at an alarming rate.

Climate change and the state of our oceans cannot be separated. They are interlinked.

Because rising sea levels, as well as ocean acidity and warmer waters have a direct effect on our reefs and fish stocks and the prosperity of our coastal communities.

I have the privilege as the leader of a Pacific Small Island Developing State to preside over our collective approach to meet this simultaneous challenge. I am incoming President of COP23 - the ongoing UN climate

negotiations - as well as Co-Chair of our discussions this week with my distinguished colleague from Sweden.

We come from opposite ends of the earth but are united in our determination to meet this challenge head on. And I want to begin by paying tribute to Sweden for the leading role it is playing the world on both oceans and climate change.

I also want to thank all those nations and organisations that have committed themselves to the agenda that we are discussing this week, along with the billions of ordinary men, women and children who are joining us in our commitment to improving the quality of our oceans and seas.

I particularly want to appeal to young people across the world to do what you can to highlight this crisis and become an agent for change - whether it is collecting plastic bottles from a

beach or banding together to clean up our coastal areas. Every single person in the world can make a difference. And remember: you don't have to live in a coastal area to be contributing to the problem of litter and pollution.

So much of what we dispose of carelessly finally ends up in our seas through storm water drains, creeks and rivers. Our waterways are choking. Our seas and oceans have become vast rubbish dumps. And the creatures who live

in them are suffering acutely - turtles, dolphins and sharks caught in netting, whales with stomachs full of plastic bags and other rubbish.

Humankind is slowly killing off one of our most precious resources - the rich bounty of our seas and oceans that generations across the millennia have relied upon for sustenance and to earn a living.

This degradation must stop. We must act in concert as a global community to roll back the tide of neglect and preserve our marine

resources, not only for ourselves but for the generations to come. And that effort starts now. Here in New York this week, let us send a clear message to the whole world. That time is running out to save our seas and oceans. Just as it is running out to decisively tackle the fundamental causes of climate change.

In both cases, we are all vulnerable. We are all at risk. And no one country, no one government can afford to ignore the magnitude of the current threat.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, like every Pacific Islander, I grew up with the sea all around me. As I got older, I joined the ranks of the Fijian Navy and rose to the position of Commander. I have the air of the sea in my nostrils, the Pacific Ocean running through my blood. And it pains me deeply to have witnessed the rapid deterioration during my own lifetime of this precious resource - the economic lifeblood of our people.

Refuse from the countries of the Pacific Rim is making its way down to our waters at an alarming rate. Where there was once abundant fish - where I was able to throw a line overboard and quickly bring in a catch - the haul is increasingly sparse or nonexistent. In too many instances, greedy nations and greedy commercial interests are robbing us of our food and our livelihoods. Because overfishing threatens both our food security and our economic base.

Small island developing States like Fiji lack the means to effectively police our economic zones.

And in this context, I want to use this opportunity to warmly thank our larger neighbours - New Zealand, Australia, the United States and France - for coming to our assistance with the occasional naval deployment to ward off intruders.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, this week the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 rockets to the top of the global agenda.

And I appeal to every person in this room and the governments and organisations you represent to make the World Ocean Conference a success. The registration on our online portal of more than 600 voluntary commitments to date is very encouraging - governments, civil society organisations, intergovernmental bodies, the private sector and individuals coming together in a concerted effort to address this crisis. But we must do more. Much more.

We seek a commitment from all 7.5 billion people on earth to join our crusade to improve the quality of our oceans. Let us all seize this moment in history to make a difference. To place SDG 14 at the very top of the global agenda alongside decisive climate action. We can do it. We must do it. Because the alternative in both cases is catastrophe.

My warm thanks goes to all of you who have worked so hard to prepare for this gathering - the permanent representatives of Portugal and

Singapore and their teams, the President of the General Assembly and his team, the conference Secretary General and the UN Secretariat staff, and again, the Government of Sweden.

I also want to pay particular tribute to my fellow leaders in the Pacific, who are playing a key role in placing this issue on the global agenda.

We stood side by side at our preparatory meeting in Fiji back in March, and we stand side by side in New York this week.

And with those words, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you all for your attendance and let's make the World Ocean Conference a resounding success.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.