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NATIONAL STATEMENT AT THE 72nd SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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

Bula vinaka and a very good evening to you all,

Mr President, I want to begin by congratulating you on assuming the presidency of the 72nd session and to wish you every success in the year ahead. As we all know, the global community faces a great many challenges, of which climate change is only one.

But I'm sure that we all want to send a message of solidarity and sympathy tonight to the millions of people in the Caribbean who are again suffering from the ravages of Hurricane Maria. It is an especially cruel ordeal so soon after Hurricane Irma carved a path of destruction through the Caribbean and southern United States. And the thoughts and prayers of all of us are with those who are affected.

The Fijian people share a special sense of solidarity with those who have either lost loved ones or their homes and possessions in these events. Last year, we lost 44 of our own people and a third of our GDP when Fiji was struck by the biggest cyclone ever to make landfall in the southern hemisphere. So as incoming COP President, I am deeply conscious of the need to lead a global response to the underlying causes of these events. And the appalling suffering in the Caribbean and the US reminds us all that there is no time to waste.

Mr President, I also want to pay tribute to your predecessor, Peter Thomson - the first Fijian to occupy the presidency of the General Assembly. Ambassador Thomson carried out his role with great distinction. And I especially want to thank him for the role he has played in bringing the parlous state of our oceans to global attention. The Ocean Conference in June that Fiji co-hosted with Sweden was an unqualified success. As a global community, we have begun the massive task of restoring the health of our oceans. And to tackle the overfishing that is stripping our oceans of marine life and depriving many millions of people of a precious resource, now and into the future.

I salute the United Nations for appointing Ambassador Thomson as Special Envoy for Oceans. It is an honour for Fiji to have one of our own leading this vitally important effort to ensure the implementation of a crucial sustainable development goal.

Mr President, next year will mark the 40th anniversary of Fiji's contribution to UN Peacekeeping. As a small nation, we have suffered a great deal of pain from the loss of some of our finest troops on peacekeeping duties over the years. But this contribution is a very important part of how we see ourselves as a nation – our men and women in uniform serving the global community by protecting ordinary people in troubled parts of the world.

For 40 years, we have helped to make the world more secure. And now we are determined to make a successful contribution to the wider security of the planet through our leadership of COP23.

Mr President, there is no escaping the fact that climate change is as great a threat to global security as any source of conflict. Millions of people are already on the move because of drought and the changes to agriculture threatening their food security.

Throughout history, we know that human beings will fight over access to water. And unless we tackle the underlying causes of climate change, we already know that some places will become unlivable and others will disappear altogether.

In my own region, three of our neighbours are at risk, which is why Fiji has offered to give refuge to the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu in a worse case in which their homes sink beneath the waves altogether.

For the Fijian people, climate change is real. It affects our lives altogether. Whether it is the whole villages we are moving out of the way of the rising seas; the loss of our ancestral burial grounds; the salinity affecting our crops; or the constant threat of destruction to homes and infrastructure of the kind we experienced last year.

The reason our hearts go out to the people of the Caribbean right now is not only because we can empathise with them but because we fear the same fate. And I say to the nations of the world: Imagine another third of your GDP destroyed within a year or so. Imagine another cyclone scoring a direct hit and wiping out decades of development.

It is clear, Mr President, that global warming changes our very understanding of what our national interests are. It challenges us to understand that the only way for every nation to put itself first is to lock arms with all other nations and go forward together. Anything else is self-destructive—for the world and for each nation. It may be tempting for political leaders to show that they are protecting some national industry or near-term economic goal, but at what cost? The wise leader must work hard to convince the people to embrace the path we know we must take.

There is no choice to be made between prosperity and a healthy climate. For how prosperous can we be if we must devote our resources to relocating entire populations or reinforcing major cities? What does it cost to find new places to farm? And what about the consequences for global and regional security if nations begin to compete for safe land or have conflicts over the movements of climate refugees? It is obvious that we need to cooperate.

We need to learn from each other and to use the world's considerable resources to do the most good for the most people. We need to continue to create prosperity and to ensure the well-being of the nations and ecosystems of the world. If we view this as some sort of negotiation in which each country tries to preserve its narrow national interests, we will all lose. We will be powerless to protect our own people from the consequences of climate change. Collective action is the only way forward. Wise men and women will understand that.

Mr President, that is why I took on the role of COP President, why I eagerly embrace becoming the first Pacific Islander to do so. Because it is about ensuring that my own people flourish and prosper now and into the future. And by collaborating with the other nations of the world through this process, we ensure that together, humanity can flourish and prosper.

Mr President, the ball will be passed to me and Team Fiji in Bonn in November by Morocco. And we thank the Moroccan Presidency of COP22 for making such great strides down the field towards the end game of fully implementing the Paris Agreement. Next year, Fiji will pass the ball to Poland. And I want to assure the Presidency of COP24 that Fiji will be supporting you all the way to the line.

Mr President, our own presidency would not be possible without the wonderful assistance of Germany. We simply could not have staged an event of this size and complexity in Fiji. But out of necessity, we have forged a bond with Germany that is an example to the world of how countries at opposite ends of the earth and of vastly different means and size can work effectively towards a common goal. We did it with Sweden with the Ocean Conference and we are equally proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with Germany to deliver what the Paris Agreement was meant to do.

Mr President, Fiji is deeply conscious that governments alone cannot meet this challenge. Which is why we are placing such emphasis on the notion of a Grand Coalition of governments at every level, civil society, the private sector and ordinary citizens moving this agenda forward. I am reaching out to governors, mayors, leaders of every sort across our societies. People of faith.

People on the front line of the climate struggle. Women. And the young people who represent our future.

Mr President, we are going to do things in Bonn differently. The formal proceedings will be led by our Chief Negotiator, Ambassador Nazhat Shameem Khan, and I will play a roving role. I will be on hand to resolve any difficulties in the formal negotiations. But to reflect the importance of our Grand Coalition, I will be travelling between the two zones in Bonn - the formal negotiations and the climate action zone - with my good friend, our Climate Champion, Inia Seruiratu, and my fellow Pacific leaders. I am counting on them to help me get the message across that, only by working together can we move this process forward further and faster.

In the Climate Action Zone - the Bonn Zone - Fiji and Germany are bringing together all those who have a part to play in making this Grand Coalition a great transformation. Climate activists, companies at the cutting edge of technology, artists and creative people, dancers and performers. And we will be stamping this zone with the Fijian Bula Spirit of optimism and inclusiveness that has made our islands famous the world over.

In the formal zone – the Bula Zone – we want the nations of the world to embrace what we call the talanoa Spirit in Fiji and certain other Pacific countries - a dialogue based on trust, empathy and the collective good. In our experience, it is the best way of getting things done, especially in difficult circumstances. Engagement that is respectful, honest, cooperative and acknowledges that no-one, no matter how powerful, can solve the climate challenge on their own. For humanity to survive, flourish and prosper, we have no alternative but to cooperate.

Mr President, we have already established a solid foundation for our work as President. The formal negotiations are progressing. And we are looking forward to ministers and their delegations and representatives of civil society coming to Fiji next month for our Pre-COP. We are already delighted by the energy and sense of purpose of the leaders who make up the Grand Coalition.

I'm especially grateful to the Special Envoy for States and Regions that I have appointed to help me - Governor Jerry Brown of California who heads an impressive list of political leaders around the world in the Under 2 Coalition.

Mr President, as we all know, the Paris Agreement calls for global warming to be kept well under two degrees over that of the industrial age and as close as possible to 1.5 degrees.

A year ago, I stood here before being appointed President of COP23 and called for 1.5 degrees to be our target. I meant it then and I mean it now. There is an urgent need to fix this number as our objective and as soon as possible.

I certainly carry with me the authority of the Pacific to pursue this objective. And at this point, I want to pay a fulsome tribute to a Pacific islander who we have just lost but whose legacy will live on in these negotiations. Tony De Brum of the Marshall Islands took a very powerful slogan to Paris two years ago: “One point five to stay alive”. We intend to honour Tony’s legacy. And I intend to draw upon his spirit during my presidency.

Mr President, as well as ensuring decisive action to limit global warming, we must also do a lot more to make nations and communities more resilient to the effects of climate change. We know we are all going to have to adapt.

But we must make special provision for those who are most vulnerable and have the least resources to cope with the catastrophic consequences we are witnessing all around us.

We are pleased to be part of a serious engagement with governments and the private sector to secure innovative and more affordable access to insurance to enable those affected by disaster to recover more quickly. It is a question of fairness and economic development. Because without insurance, restoration and rebuilding is simply too great a burden for many nations and communities.

We are also encouraged by the rapid development of clean, affordable alternative energy solutions for countries across the world. This offers great promise that we can achieve this 1.5 degree target and prosper.

Mr President, I am in no doubt that the role that I have embraced as COP23 President is the most important any Fijian leader has undertaken. I appeal to my fellow Pacific leaders to support me as we tackle the greatest challenge to our own region and the greatest challenge to the world. I want to acknowledge the work of the Alliance of Small Island States these past 30 years, which has consistently looked after the interests of our people. And has reminded the world that our interests are the interests of every global citizen.

We are all in the same canoe. Which is why we will have a Fijian ocean going canoe – a drua – in the main hall in Bonn to remind everyone of the need to fill its sail with a collective determination to move this process forward. To deliver on the promise we made to each other in Paris.

And to all the nations that have yet to ratify the Paris Agreement, please do so.

So, Mr President, I appeal to the nations of the world and all the leaders of the Grand Coalition to support me. I draw my power as COP president from you and I will do everything in my power to use it wisely.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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