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

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Statement for the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council (HRC)  
High Level Segment

22 – 26 February 2021.

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- The President of the Human Rights Council;
- The President of the General Assembly;
- Secretary-General;
- The High Commissioner for Human Rights;
- Heads of State;
- Heads of Government;
- Excellencies;
- Distinguished delegates;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

## Bula vinaka and Warm Greetings from Suva

1. I am honoured to address this High-Level Segment of the 46th Session of the Human Rights Council.

2. When I addressed this body at its 40<sup>th</sup> Session, Fiji had recently been elected into the Council. We were proud to take our place on the Council as part of a conscious and deliberate effort to play a more active role in solving the problems of the world. Fiji has long contributed disproportionately to United Nations peacekeeping, and we are very proud of our contribution.

But we also have a valuable perspective to offer to other global challenges as a committed democracy and a small island developing state, and we want to bring our voice and our experience fully to the table as the world confronts those challenges.

3. I am speaking to you today as we mark another milestone, Fiji's election as President of the Council. This responsibility is testament to the unique power of multi-lateralism, which recognises that all nations have the ability to lead, to forge consensus, to pursue truth and to bring perspectives that solve problems.

**Madam President,**

4. Your fellow Fijians congratulate you on your election to the Presidency of this Council. I am confident that your tenure will be marked by unflinching efforts to strengthen human rights in these perilous times, and you have our full support.

**Madam President,**

5. 2020 was indeed a challenging year, with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing a new reality for the global community and for every nation. We began 2021 by surpassing 2 million COVID deaths worldwide. Many countries have suffered severely, and I offer them my deep condolences.

We have not had a case beyond the border quarantine area in Fiji since May, but that success has come at great cost to our economy. We had to shut our borders and essentially bring our Tourism Industry, which generates nearly 40% of our GDP, to an abrupt halt.

6. The pandemic is not just a health crisis; it is also an equally distressing social and economic crisis, and it will have long-term health, social and economic consequences across the globe. It has already challenged us to uphold principles of human rights based on equity, fairness and the dignity of every human being.

We have not only given up our freedom of movement in order to fight the virus, but we are struggling to ensure that all people from all nations have timely and effective access to the vaccines that promise eventually to restore our normal way of life.

7. No nation wins in a world of immunity inequality, and so Fiji is working tirelessly to advocate the principle that vaccines will be available to the poorest of the poor as well as people in the wealthiest nations and make that principle a reality.

We also know that developing nations will need vast inflows of capital—including grants, concessional loans and debt forgiveness—to recover from the economic crisis caused by the pandemic. It is the next great global challenge awaiting us, and we must be ready. Before the pandemic struck, we had been making great gains in improving conditions for people in the developing world and lifting millions out of poverty. We cannot accept a situation in which tens of millions of people finally gain protection from the COVID virus only to be thrust back into abject poverty. The road to recovery must be walked together, with no one left behind.

8. The world has made significant progress in human rights over the years, and yet we see human rights threatened daily by intolerance, authoritarianism, fear and greed. Democracy is the great hope of humankind, and that hope rests first on free, fair, and credible elections, but also on respect for and adherence to civil, political, and socio-economic rights, on access to substantive justice, on gender equality, on strong and independent institutions, and on economic freedom. With these building blocks in place, nations grow and prosper, and their people thrive. Fiji's experience shows that this is true.

9. I am proud to say that the Fijian Constitution enshrines an array of civil, political, and socio-economic rights – including the right to a clean and healthy environment – and Fiji has ratified the nine core human rights conventions as part of our commitment in our Universal Periodic Review (UPR). More importantly, we practice these universal principles of democracy and good governance, and within two years' time we will hold our third genuinely democratic election in eight years.

**Madam President,**

10. The rights and freedoms enshrined under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are as relevant and necessary today as they were in 1948. No matter what challenges a nation or the world faces, we must continue to defend those rights and to insist that they be respected.

11. Governments have undertaken exceptional measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus and protect the security of citizens.

It is vital to ensure that these exceptional measures—necessary as they may be—do not erode the fundamental freedoms enshrined under these Conventions. Exceptional measures must be applied judiciously, and which promote the values that underlie a democratic society based on human dignity, equality, and freedom.

12. In the Pacific, the climate crisis continues. Extreme bio-diversity loss, frequent and intense weather events, and sea-level rise have serious consequences that cut across every aspect of our socio-economic development. Indeed, our very sovereignty is threatened.

There is no choosing between battling the pandemic and battling the climate crisis. Fiji and our neighbours in the Pacific region are battling both simultaneously. The climate crisis is a global crisis because of its far-reaching implications. It is not a crisis of the future. It is a crisis now, in our time. But we can prevent it from becoming a crisis of the future if we do what we all know we must do today.

13. Since 2016, 13 cyclones have struck our islands. One of those storms set the record as our hemisphere's strongest-ever, and another – Cyclone Yasa – devastated the North of our country just this past December, which was followed by the more recent Cyclone Ana, which had caused widespread flooding in all divisions of Fiji. This has become our new normal.

14. Through it all, Fiji continues to press on towards carbon neutrality by achieving net-zero carbon emissions.

Fiji recently announced new and stronger nationally-determined contributions under the Paris Agreement and pledged to achieve society-wide net-zero emissions by 2050. This commitment will soon be legislated through a ground-breaking Climate-Change Bill.

15. Our National Adaptation Plan maps out a multi-billion-dollar effort to strengthen our climate resilience. Our commitment to plant 30 million trees and sustainably manage all 1.3 square kilometres of our ocean by 2030 could very well mean Fiji becomes a carbon-negative society in the not-too-distant future.

16. Of course, human health is linked to the health of our environment, including our oceans. This linkage is both obvious and significant, because human beings need a clean, pollution-free environment to thrive. A sustainable ecosystem will contribute to preventing future outbreaks of disease and will produce fewer health risks that can be attributed to human activity, such as air pollution, toxic waste and contamination of waterways. Threats to the ecosystems, including pollution and climate change, must be addressed in order to preserve human health.

That is why we are planting those 30 million trees—and restoring mangroves and investing in natural barriers against floods and tidal surges.

**Madam President,**

17. The world is now at a crossroad, and our future will be determined by our choice to strengthen the global human rights agenda. But what does this mean? It means more than talk. It means we protect and advance freedom, oppose oppressive rule, promote democracy, enshrine tolerance and empower people.

In this last decade of sustainable development, countries must work together and collectively take bold and courageous decisions for the betterment of our peoples.

18. Likewise, we must see the fight against climate change as a fight that is interwoven with the need to advance and protect human rights. The measures we take to mitigate climate change and adapt to its effects must be taken in consultation with the people and with respect for the communities and traditions the people have established. In Fiji, we have plans to move some 43 communities in whole or in part away from encroaching seas, and we have already moved six.

It is not just a matter of building a new community. People have lived in these communities for generations. Their grandparents and great-grandparents are buried there, their lives and culture are deeply tied to that place, and yet they must move. Each move is planned in close co-operation with the residents themselves so that we can find the best solutions together. Likewise, we work closely with every community to encourage sustainable practices, to adapt structures, infrastructure, schools and agriculture to the new reality. It is not for Government to dictate; it is for Government to listen, to inform, to encourage and to pave the way.

19. Unfortunately, Madam President, some Leaders sometimes find human rights to be an unwelcome obstacle to the actions they fervently believe they need to take. But that is folly, and the Leaders who trust the people always learn that ultimately people are rational and wise, and the people will help them find solutions that are practical, effective and just.

20. Vinaka vakalevu and Thank you.

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