



Hon. Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

Prime Minister of Fiji and Chair of the 71st session of the UNESCAP
Commission

REMARKS BY THE OUTGOING CHAIR/ COUNTRY STATEMENT

Bangkok

Tuesday 17 May 2016

Madam Executive Secretary,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege as the outgoing Chair of the 71st Commission to preside over the opening of the 72nd session and to welcome you all to Bangkok. I am sure you all join me in conveying our appreciation to the Government and people of the Kingdom of Thailand for their customary hospitality.

It has been a great honour for Fiji to chair the 71st session of this great organisation to which we all belong. UNESCAP's underlying mission is to advance the cause of everyone living in Asia and the Pacific by promoting sustainable development. And for all our many challenges, we can look back on a year in which we have made some genuine progress towards implementing our sustainable development goals.

We have all committed ourselves to the 2030 SDG Agenda. We have made a bold commitment to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development. We have embraced the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. And perhaps most important of all - certainly for Fiji - we came together in Paris last November and forged a historic agreement at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change. The nations of the world making a commitment to cap global warming at two degrees Celsius above the level of the pre-industrial age.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, our biggest challenge now is to implement these global initiatives in a collaborative and concerted manner. And as the most representative and inclusive body in Asia-Pacific, ESCAP has a very strong leadership role to play in meeting that challenge.

I am proud that Fiji is the first country in the world to have formally approved the Paris Agreement and lodged the instruments of ratification. And I urge all countries to follow our lead as a matter of urgency. But, Excellencies, ladies and gentleman, I also want to use this opportunity to convey a strong message to you all on behalf of Fijians and other Pacific islanders about where we need to go from here.

From our perspective, Paris was merely a positive start. Much more needs to be done and we must all act quickly and decisively. The scientists tell us that a two degree cap on global warming is still not

enough to save us from the rising sea levels and extreme weather events caused by climate change.

Three of our number in the Pacific that are coral atolls – Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands – are still destined to slip beneath the waves altogether. Large areas of arable land on mountainous islands like those in Fiji will also be lost to the seas. And we will all be subjected to the terror of the extreme weather events that are also increasing in strength and frequency and which Fiji recently experienced.

Just over three months ago, on 20 February, the biggest cyclone ever to make landfall in the southern hemisphere slammed into the Fiji group with winds of more than 300 kilometres an hour. Tropical Cyclone Winston killed 44 of our people and left a trail of devastation across much of the country. Around 40,000 homes were damaged or destroyed,

along with 229 schools and other public buildings and infrastructure.

We have been left with a total damage bill estimated by the World Bank at around 1.4 billion US dollars. And we are not alone. The year before, Tropical Cyclone Pam slammed into Vanuatu, killing more than 20 people and devastating the local economy.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, fortunately in the case of Fiji, Winston spared our main tourism areas. Our international visitors kept coming and the overall impact on the Fijian economy hasn't been as great as we feared. But along with small and vulnerable States everywhere, we now face a terrifying prospect: That a single extreme weather event scoring a direct hit on us could devastate our economies for many years to come. And reverse all the development gains that we have worked so hard

to achieve and that this great organisation has always supported.

I come with a very sobering message today. That for all our talk of the 2030 Agenda, countries like Fiji have little or no hope of achieving their Sustainable Development Goals without the urgent assistance of the global community. We need immediate access to avenues of funding for climate adaptation – to build the resilience we must build to survive future events. Stronger homes, stronger infrastructure. And I urge you all to persuade your governments to place this at the top of the regional and global agenda.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, history will judge the industrial nations very harshly if they leave small and vulnerable nations to their fate without extending the appropriate helping hand. We have not caused global warming. They have. And they must use a portion of the wealth they have derived from the carbon emissions of their industries to assist

those of us who aren't as wealthy as they are and are bearing the brunt of the crisis they created.

Fiji urgently needs to access avenues of finance to build our own resilience. Yet some of these avenues have been closed off to us because we have been officially designated a middle-income nation. In a very real sense, we are being punished for our success just when we need this funding most.

I call for these impediments to be lifted as a matter of the utmost urgency. Because we know a repetition of Cyclone Winston is just around the corner and we need to be better prepared. As it was, we were only just recovering from the previous event three years ago, Cyclone Evan, when Winston struck. So I appeal to you all on behalf of the citizens of all small and vulnerable nations to give finance for climate adaptation the priority it deserves.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, we also need to draw global attention to the need for more radical action to curb carbon emissions – to cap global warming lower than the two degrees agreed to in Paris. Since our last meeting, Fiji and the other members of the Pacific Islands Development Forum – including civil society and the private sector – issued what we called the Suva Declaration. Formulated at our summit in the Fijian capital before the Paris talks, this declaration calls for global warming to be capped at one-point-five degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

Unfortunately, that was judged to be too ambitious in Paris. But the Pacific Islands are sticking to our position – that a one-point-five degree cap should at least be the next step.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Fiji is proud to be sponsoring a resolution on climate change for consideration at the 72nd session. Along with

another one on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Asia Pacific.

The climate change resolution is a sign of our own determination to place this issue on the regional and global agenda. I call on you all to give this resolution your support. Because while we in the Pacific may be bearing the brunt of climate change, it is a global problem and undoubtedly the greatest challenge facing the world today. And we will all be judged by future generations on how effectively we in the here and now meet the current threat.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I repeat: All the talk in the world about sustainable development is empty rhetoric if we don't ensure the sustainable future of the one planet we all share. And guarantee sustainable lives for the many billions of global citizens looking to us for leadership on this issue.

Fiji shares that sense of collective responsibility for the future of humanity. Our own carbon footprint is negligible - a mere 0.004 per cent of total global emissions. And yet we have committed to reducing our own emissions by 30 per cent by 2030, mainly by replacing fossil fuels with alternative energy sources such as hydro and solar.

We are also working with UNESCAP to strengthen our disaster management processes and become a regional hub for disaster response. We are already sharing the lessons we have learned from Winston. And Fiji will be hosting a side event here on Thursday, 19 May, to explain our response to the cyclone and our recovery and rebuilding effort. The World Bank will also be with us sharing its experience in formulating the Post Disaster Needs Assessment for Winston. So I encourage you all to attend this event on Thursday at 9.00am.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, of course there are many other complex development issues facing us all at the present time – economic uncertainty, energy security, resource constraints, rapid urbanisation, demographic and social change. Plus the special needs of women, children, the elderly and the disabled - the most vulnerable of our people who we must also place at the top of our list of priorities.

But as the outgoing Chair, I hope you'll excuse me for dwelling so much today on climate change. Because it has emerged as by far the biggest development challenge for Fiji and other small and vulnerable nations.

I want to close by thanking those ESCAP member nations who came to Fiji's assistance in the immediate aftermath of Winston and especially those who are providing ongoing support. There are still many avenues in which you can help the Fijian

people, including our Adopt a School program to get our children back into proper classrooms. And I will be happy to explain that program to you and give you the necessary details.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have been very proud to lead the Fijian nation at this time. We came together in a unique and inspiring way to support each other in our hour of need. To give comfort to the bereaved and food, shelter and support to those in the direct path of Winston's fury. But the ordeal we suffered was also considerably lightened by the knowledge that we have so many loyal friends in the world.

I have also been proud to chair the 71st session. So thank you again for the privilege and I wish you every success in your deliberations this week.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.