

**ADDRESS TO THE HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE ON FOOD SECURITY
THE CHALLENGES OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIOENERGY**

**Country Statement for the Republic of the Fiji Islands
Delivered by the Interim Prime Minister
The Honourable JV Bainimarama**

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Director General, Esteemed Heads of States, Distinguished Guests, Fellow Delegates and Friends.

I welcome this opportunity to put to this High Level Forum the common problems that face small developing states in the South Pacific and the challenges facing Fiji in particular.

Agriculture is at a turning point in Fiji with the sugar industry undergoing a significant transformation. Sugar has been our traditional trading commodity for over a hundred years but eroding world prices, declining preferential access and an infrastructure that urgently requires massive refurbishment has caused us to look elsewhere in our agriculture sector for viable alternatives. The present Government is very conscious that the agriculture sector has the ability to drive our economic recovery. Scarce financial resources are being allocated for the sector accordingly. However, the current background is that the prices of staple foods are rising out of all proportion to incomes.

The non-sugar agriculture sector contributes approximately 6% per cent of GDP and sustains about 54% of the total population. The sector is dominated by subsistence farming where over 80% of farms are less than four hectares. Fiji is in the same position as other Pacific Island States in that our production levels are so small that we are incapable of dominating any international trading scenario. We cannot fix prices and we remain at the mercy of our big brothers.

The fisheries sector in Fiji makes an extremely important contribution to the lives of many Fijians. The sector is a large employer generating over 9,100 jobs and the annual consumption of fresh fish is estimated at over 44Kg per capita. The sector contributes 2.8% of GDP and generates an average 9% of total exports. The bulk of contribution (85%) from the industry is attributed to the harvesting sector of inshore and offshore fisheries and aquaculture. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the present Government establishes management systems that are consistent with best practice so that Fiji can maximize the economic contribution of the sector within the framework of conservation and environmental objectives.

Management of inshore fisheries is a challenging task but progress is being made under the joint Department of Fisheries/Fiji Section of the Locally-Managed Marine Area – an alliance that is undertaking an unprecedented survey of inshore areas. However the process needs to be accelerated, and surveying methods more focused on the pressing issues for the inshore management areas. The emphasis is changing from our policy of fisheries development to a programme that is focused more on resource conservation and development through credible relevant management plans. This will lead to redirection of fishing activity more equitably. High priority will be placed on developing management plans and increasing the resources applied to the fish warden system as illegal fishing practices are common in many parts of the Fiji Islands.

Many years of trial work in aquaculture has persuaded us to redirect our emphasis on the *location* of farms based only on environmental concerns rather than Fisheries Department influencing the size and location of farms on the basis of economic efficiency.

Recent regional meetings have cemented commonality for this thinking throughout Pacific Island States.

Turning to the agriculture sector as a whole, price rises have resulted from natural phenomena such as drought-related falls in wheat yields. Others we believe have resulted from the work of speculators. Oil-dependent items such as fertilizers and farm implements are now a significant contributor to increased food production costs. We do, however, believe that stock foods such as maize have increased in price as a result of speculation in far-off lands.

In any event the world is now living with these price rises and those profiteering from our plight are not likely to relinquish their growing wealth within the foreseeable future. Within Fiji there have been beneficiaries. For instance, our rice growers are now enjoying unprecedented incomes and the rice industry has received a long-overdue boost. We are adding to the momentum by allocating resources to the industry and I would pause to offer my sincere thanks to the Food and Agriculture Organisation for their kind gift of small-scale rice harvesting equipment.

Ultimately it is the poor within our nation who have suffered most. The present Government is equitable in its approach to all who live in our country. Officers in the Ministry of Primary Industry have reacted to rising prices by putting in place a number of programmes designed to alleviate the difficulties faced by those members of our community most at risk.

Fiji is in the early stages of a programme that will exploit our advantages and meet aspects of the current crisis. Our starchy staple crops are now in greater demand in overseas markets than in our recent history. Our local consumers are benefiting from the increased momentum in this sector. Production in outer lying areas is increasing as a result of the intervention of the Ministry of Primary Industry and a programme is in place that will see my Country self-sufficient in dairy products by 2015. We are going through an exhaustive evaluation of an industry based on the production of ethanol from cassava - again the momentum and spin-off from such activity will benefit the poorer members of our community. Other assistance has been secured in other areas. We are grateful to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community for a programme that endeavours to make breadfruit available year-round. This has ramifications for trade as well as for local consumers. The SPC are also assisting in establishing a farm for high quality sheep production.

In addition, we have recognized the important role that the private sector has to play in processing and marketing. Their involvement is creating greater demand for other items including fruits, the full range of vegetables, especially sweet potato which is a very attractive item for value-adding. Just recently we assisted the private sector in the importation of stud goats as a nucleus for greater exploitation.

My Ministry of Primary Industry is initiating a self-help programme through a 'Plant Five a Day,' campaign which has attracted private sponsorship. It will be aimed at all sectors of the community but effort will be especially directed towards schools by provision of seeds. They will be in the vanguard of a 'Save Your Seeds,' campaign to be launched later in 2008. These activities will exploit another initiative of the present Government which has been the establishment of a formal Committee for the Better Utilisation of Land. This aims to increase planting throughout the nation particularly in rural, disadvantaged areas. At the same time access

to markets has been facilitated through the establishment of the AgroMarketing Authority which seeks to provide outlets for crops – especially in rural areas.

Unfortunately fundamental problems remain with us. Almost all our programmes and initiatives are confounded by a lack of production – resulting basically from insufficient planting material. For the coming period, we will need assistance in improving our propagation techniques and resources. We will always need assistance in monitoring new species and strains of crops and assessing their suitability to Fiji. Right now we need assistance in helping our farmers to make their profession meaningful, income generating enterprises through training in running small businesses. This will help us to make life in rural areas much more attractive and ease the burdens on our urban infrastructures. We will always need assistance in streamlining, developing and honing the Extension Services in the Ministry of Primary Industry although my officers are currently looking at ways in which the service delivery can be improved through secondment and privatization.

Esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen thank you all very much for allowing me to present this statement on behalf of my country.