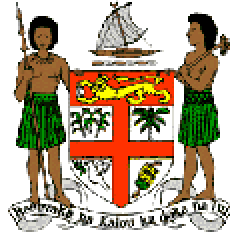


Please check against delivery



COMMODORE JOSAIA V. BAINIMARAMA

Prime Minister and Minister for Public Service, Peoples' Charter for Change,
Information, Provincial Development and Multi-ethnic Affairs and Indigenous
Affairs

**PRIME MINISTER'S STATEMENT AT THE UNITED NATIONS
63RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY – NEW YORK**

The President of the United Nations General Assembly
The Secretary General,
Distinguished Colleagues, Delegates,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Ni Sa Bula and Namaste to You All.

Mr. President,

The people of Fiji warmly congratulate you on your election to the Presidency of this, the 63rd UN General Assembly.

To your predecessor, His Excellency Dr. Kerim, we convey our sincere gratitude.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. President,

This General Assembly is addressing several issues of critical global interest: the Global Food Crisis; Climate Change; Peacekeeping; and the Law of the Sea.

All of these issues are of great and direct importance to small, island nations, such as Fiji. I will first briefly touch upon some of these issues.

GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS

Mr. President,

The people of Fiji have been affected, in a very real, immediate, serious, and impacting way, by the shocks transmitted to our small nation with the dramatic escalation in global food prices, energy price rises, and the downturn in the global economy.

In Fiji, we are taking advantage of these adverse external developments as an opportunity: to revamp our long neglected agricultural sector. We have ample land resources. We must put these to better and more productive use.

Mr. President,

The food crisis and the need for self-reliance, unfortunately, runs counter to the emergence of world trading rules. The principle of free trade dictates an open economy. Yet, small, developing economies like ours, in Fiji, need to protect our agriculture to ensure food security. We very much hope that the international trade negotiations, and multilateral and bilateral trade deals, will enable us to protect agricultural development in our small, vulnerable economies.

Mr. President, Fiji will support all concerted efforts, public and private, national and multinational, regional and sub-regional, which are being pursued, to address the global food crisis.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. President,

On the issue of Climate Change, Fiji looks to, and is **relying**, on your leadership. This is a very critical issue for the very small island and atoll nations in the Pacific.

While the rest of the World continues to endlessly debate the implications of climate change, in the very small islands and atolls in the Pacific, the problem is very much upon us; it is now a present and very real danger. It poses a serious risk to regional stability and security.

I appeal to the international community, and its system of institutions, to enhance efforts to assist us address the threat of global climate change. We need investments in adaptation measures. We need to move from rhetoric to a more pragmatic and speedy response. We call upon the agencies, and our regional partners, to coordinate efforts to ensure that we in the Pacific region have the capacity, both human and institutional, to deal with this new threat, especially as it is getting stronger. The observed and potential impacts on our people and ecosystems, due to climate change, are all too real and immediate.

We count on you, Mr. President, and also the Secretary-General, to exercise more vigorous and active leadership on this issue of global climate change.

PEACE KEEPING

Mr. President,

I will now speak briefly on Peacekeeping.

I convey our gratitude and appreciation to the out-going Under-Secretary General, Jean Marie Guéhenno, for his dedicated leadership at the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, DPKO. He was fair and generous in implementing the reforms within DPKO, and the development of a UN Peacekeeping Doctrine which will guide future UN peace operations and missions. We wish Mr. Guehenno well, and assure his successor our full support and cooperation.

Mr. President,

Fiji's soldiers have a proud track record in UN peace-keeping operations – a record of professionalism, discipline, compassion, and ability. Fiji's Military Force has shown that its training and ethics are an asset to peace-keeping operations. We continue to work very hard to keep intact, this exceptional record.

Yet despite this, the relationship between Fiji and UNDPKO has been under strain. This is because of Fiji Military's involvement in our Government, since December, 2006. We are however encouraged by the ongoing discussion between officials of our permanent mission and DPKO. It would be less than honest on my part if I did not observe that undue external influence appear to have been brought to exclude Fiji from participation in new peacekeeping missions. I express the hope that the opportunity will be extended to us to participate in new peacekeeping missions.

FIJI: ROAD MAP FOR THE WAY FORWARD

Mr. President,

Please allow me to now address this august body on Fiji's current situation, and on our efforts to take the country forward.

First, to look back, albeit briefly.

Fiji became independent on 10 October 1970. Our country, then, was seen as having great promise and potential. Our people, with high hopes, placed their faith on our country's leaders, to build a new nation that would be peaceful, stable, culturally vibrant, tolerant and prosperous. We felt then, that being part of the international family of nations, Fiji could demonstrate, by example, *"the way the world should be"*.

Since Independence, and for just over 15 years, we achieved some progress. However, following the coups of 1987 and 2000, the rot set in. Since then, Fiji's overall political, economic and social situation has continued to deteriorate. Our peoples dream, of a tolerant, united and prosperous nation, was replaced by a different reality: a reality characterized by political instability; economic stagnation; increasing religious and racial intolerance; ethno-nationalism, and politics based on ethno-nationalism; rise in crime, violence and corruption; increased poverty; and the emigration of many of our talented, skilled and experienced citizens. On 5 December, 2006, a political transition took place in Fiji following an intervention from the Fiji Military Forces.

Interim measures were put in place by H.E. The President in order to ensure Good Governance, maintain Law and Order and stabilize the economy.

His Excellency the President of Fiji subsequently appointed an interim Government which I head. The legality of these actions has been challenged; and this matter is now before the Courts of Fiji.

To-date, my Government, which remains in effective control of governance in Fiji, has done all within its power to adhere to the current Constitution. We recognize that this is the supreme law of our nation. At the same time, we have come to also recognize that the very foundation, on which we have been seeking to build our nation, has been shaky and weak. Therefore, our efforts must now focus on re-laying a more solid foundation, for returning Fiji to **sustainable** democratic governance.

Our island nation must be re-built on the solid, rock-like foundations of equal rights, social justice, democracy and good governance. We cannot, and must not, repeat the mistake of trying to rebuild again on the proven, proverbial foundation of sand, which is washed away by the evils of self-interest, incompetence, intolerance and greed.

Since January last year, the Interim Government embarked on a comprehensive examination of our political, economic, social, and governance problems. We did this to identify what contributed to the abysmal record of the successive governments since May 1987, but also, to find durable and just solutions.

Early in this undertaking, my Government decided to reach out to the people of Fiji, to ensure that they became better aware of Fiji's problems; and also, that they all became part of the solutions, going forward. We did this being mindful of the larger issue of mandate which the events of December 2006 raised. For my part, I took the view that the Interim Government must not pretend, that it alone had the capacity or the wisdom, to solve our country's problems entirely on its own.

Mr. President

My country faces deep-rooted and very fundamental problems. These are complex and structural. My Government, therefore, recommended to His Excellency, the President of Fiji, to set up a broadly representative, and independent, consultative body, to reach out to the people of Fiji, and to get them actively involved in charting the way forward for Fiji.

In late 2007, His Excellency the President of Fiji established a 45-member National Council for Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF), and officially launched what is now known as the Peoples Charter initiative. The President invited the leaders of all major political, social, community, business, and religious organizations in the country, to join the NCBBF and to contribute to formulating a Peoples Charter for Change, Peace and Progress.

Some, in particular those organizations that remain vigorously opposed to the Interim Government, chose not to accept the invitation of His Excellency, the President of Fiji. They willfully persistently rejected the call to engage in constructive dialogue, to work towards a broad consensus, on the way forward for Fiji.

Mr. President,

Last year, when I addressed this Assembly, I had briefly mentioned our preparations to launch the Peoples Charter initiative. I had said then, that through this initiative, the broad cross section of Fiji's people would be fully engaged and involved, through consultation and participation, to develop a comprehensive action agenda, and that this would be Fiji's own way of addressing its problems.

Today, I am pleased to inform you that very considerable progress has been achieved on this, the Peoples Charter initiative.

Mr. President,

The overarching objective of the Peoples Charter is to rebuild Fiji into a non-racial, culturally vibrant, united, well-governed, truly democratic nation; a nation that seeks progress and prosperity.

The vision for rebuilding Fiji that underpins this overarching objective is guided by a number of key principles, such as:

- Creating a just and fair society;
- Achieving unity and national identity;
- Ensuring merit-based equality of opportunity for all Fiji citizens;
- Transparent and accountable government;
- Uplifting the disadvantaged in all communities;
- Mainstreaming our indigenous people, the *i-Taukei*, in a modern, progressive Fiji; and
- Sharing spiritualities and interfaith dialogue.

Mr. President,

We embarked on this very bold programme of drafting a Peoples Charter advisedly, and for some very compelling reasons.

Fiji can ill afford to carry on “*business-as-usual*” and, in ways which continue to fragment and divide our nation. In this context, the process of drafting the Peoples Charter has been a unique and unprecedented one, a nation-wide participatory and consultation process of a scale and type, never before attempted in Fiji. The whole process is one of empowerment, the like of which the people of Fiji have never experienced before.

Too often, in national governance, and this applies to so-called democracies, it is the professional politicians who do the thinking for the people. While the cries and voices of the people are often heard, however, just as easily, they are ignored, by the elected representatives and so-called “leaders”.

Mr. President,

From the outset, after being appointed as Head of the Interim Government, I have felt that it was my duty to go to the people of Fiji in the most basic, democratic sense: that is, to consult, to actively involve our people, to put real peoples democracy to work : house to house, in each settlement and village, in the towns and cities, right across the country. Through the Peoples Charter initiative, this is what we have been doing.

Mr. President,

There are some, both in Fiji and outside, who are cynical regarding this. I am able to understand this, and not only because such a process has never ever been tried before. It is indeed a most challenging and difficult process to undertake. Even though the Peoples Charter process has been undertaken by the NCBBF at arms length of the Interim Government, there are those who oppose it simply because it is an initiative of the Interim Government. What they recognize, but choose not to admit, is that the Peoples Charter process is a real threat to their positions of vested power and privilege.

Mr. President,

When I addressed this Assembly last year, I had pleaded for the support of the International Community: to help us, in the wake of all the political and economic turbulence that Fiji has experienced since 1987. I pleaded for support to develop a political and governance framework that is truly democratic, accountable, inclusive, equitable, non-racial, and which will seek to unify Fiji's diverse communities as a nation. I had also sought constructive dialogue and engagement with the international community, with all our bilateral and multilateral development partners. I urged the international community to support us, in addressing Fiji's fundamental problems.

Mr. President,

I am asking the international community today not to focus only on the removal of a government; this has already been done exhaustively. We have been subjected to harsh international measures which we accepted. We have endured these through the suffering of our people.

The coups of 1987 and 2000 were executed in the interests of a few, based on ethno-nationalism, racism, and greed. The events of 5 December, 2006 were not for any such extremist motivation. In 2000, in quelling the civilian-led coup, as Commander of the Fiji Military Forces, I had played a pivotal role in the handing of political power to a civilian government.

Through the Peoples Charter initiative, I am seeking to empower the people of Fiji at large, to find just and sustainable solutions to our deep rooted and persistent problems. I wish to assure the international community that I am, personally, deeply committed to breaking the cycle of coups. Equally important, I am committed to breaking the cycle of bad and unjust governance which Fiji has suffered, since May, 1987.

To remove the "coup culture", and to commit to democratic and just governance and the rule of law, it is imperative that policies which promote racial supremacy, and which further the interests of self-seeking political, religious and traditional elites, are removed, once and for all.

In good faith, I had anticipated that the international community would rally behind and extend support for such goals, to help move Fiji forward. Regrettably, so far, this has not happened.

PUNITIVE MEASURES

To the contrary, Mr. President, since December 2006, punitive measures continue to be taken against Fiji. Travel sanctions continue, imposed particularly by Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the USA. These are applied to Interim Government Ministers, senior civil servants, military personnel, and statutory board appointees. These sanctions have had significant, adverse effects on our economy as well as on the functioning of our key institutions of State, those on which we rely, to promote good governance and accountability. Pressure has been mounted, on regional and multilateral agencies, not to extend to Fiji the much needed financial, development, and technical assistance.

As a result, we have not been able to make as much progress as we should have. We cannot travel and engage in discussions at important regional and international meetings abroad. This is despite the fact that Fiji has made every effort to engage and dialogue with our bilateral partners and the international community, in a constructive and transparent manner.

We have openly embraced and allowed various missions sent by regional and international bodies such as the Pacific Islands Forum; the European Union; the United Nations; and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

We extended to all of them our fullest support and cooperation in terms of engagement, in arranging appointments, and in making available to them whatever information they needed. This demonstrates that we are keen to constructively engage, and dialogue, with whoever is interested in helping move our country forward.

Following the recent Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Niue, I wrote last week to the Forum Chair, and indicated that the Interim Fiji Government is prepared to re-engage with the Forum Joint Working Group; and also, that we are prepared to welcome a visit, before December 2008, by the Forum Ministerial Contact Group.

Mr. President,

We are not able to schedule an election, to return Fiji to parliamentary democracy, in the early part of 2009, as earlier anticipated.

We realize that this has caused concern to some of our own people in Fiji; to our regional countries; and to some of our development partners.

The stance taken by the international community, in regard to the delay in the convening of the election, however, has provided much ammunition to our opponents within Fiji. They use this to vilify us, despite the progress that we are making towards just and sustainable solutions to our fundamental problems. I have already explained to Fiji's people about the need to delay the election, and I wish to inform our regional partners and the international community, represented here today, that the Interim Government

cannot convene an election by March, 2009. This is due to work still in progress towards agreeing on a democratic electoral system, one acceptable to the people of Fiji, and which is agreed to by all political stakeholders, through political dialogue.

We believe the General Election must be held as soon as practicably possible. This will be done only after we have achieved broad consensus in Fiji for a non-racial and truly democratic electoral system, and agreed on a Constitutional and legal way to introduce the changes. It is necessary to change our current electoral system because it is undemocratic and, it does not provide for a free and fair election. It contravenes the principle of equal suffrage, as set out in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights.

His Excellency, the President of Fiji has proposed that a Political Dialogue Forum be convened, as a mechanism independent of the NCBBF, to achieve this. It is through this Forum that we hope to reach a consensus and to introduce the reforms through legal and constitutional means. Again, I say with emphasis, the timeframe to achieve all this is not dependent on me or the Interim Government; it is the collective responsibility of all the stakeholders.

In May this year, Fiji sought assistance from the Commonwealth and the United Nations to facilitate, as a priority, and with urgency, the proposed President's Political Dialogue Forum. We had hoped that this Forum, which would initially focus on electoral reform, would have been convened by now. Little progress has been made; and we are concerned about the delay. I take this opportunity to reiterate our request to the United Nations and the Commonwealth to help us, urgently, in this regard.

After taking into account the feedback from our nation-wide consultations, the draft Peoples Charter will be amended, as necessary and appropriate, before its is finalized. It will then be adopted as a vision statement that identifies our core problems and the solutions recommended through the nation-wide consultation process. It is incumbent on my Government to build consensus on the Peoples Charter, as the common principles on which we should rebuild our nation. The Peoples Charter will present a considered way forward, for Fiji.

We are not obliged to abandon this enormous and important work, being achieved through an extensive participatory and consultative process, just because some people remain opposed, and who have decided not to participate. My Government's task now is to persuade these opponents to come aboard, to join, and to contribute. We hope to, and must, achieve consensus.

Mr. President, at this particular juncture of the history of our nation, leadership is more about how we take the present historic opportunity, to manage a transition from the Interim Government to a truly democratic government: to a democratic nation consisting of various ethnic communities, but which is one nation with its people in unity, in the true spirit in which the United Nations was created.

In concluding Mr. President, I re-affirm Fiji's commitment to the United Nations, and to the various UN conventions on human rights, rule of law, and democratic governance. We do not seek any special exemptions from our obligations under these conventions. All we seek from you is your understanding of our particular circumstances, and the complex situation of Fiji. We invite you to work with us, to assist us to rebuild our country, and move it forward.

Mr. President, Secretary-General, and distinguished delegates, I thank you all.