Fiji’s Permanent Mission to ESCAP

75th Commission Session

Fiji’s Country Statement delivered by Hon. Mereseini Vuniwaqa
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Theme: “Empowering People and Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality”

[check against delivery]

Mr. Chairman
Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates

Bula vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

1. I wish to begin, Mr Chairman, by extending the most cordial congratulations, on behalf of the Government and People of Fiji, to His Royal Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn and the people of the Kingdom of Thailand on the King’s ascension to the throne with best wishes for His Majesty’s continued success as well as for the peace, well-being and prosperity of the people of Thailand.
2. My delegation would also like to congratulate you, Mr. Chairman, on your successful election as Chair of the Current Session and we look forward to supporting you to ensure a successful conclusion to this meeting.

Mr. Chairman

3. My delegation would like to salute the resilience of the people of New Zealand and Sri Lanka in overcoming recent terrorist attacks. We remember those who lost their lives and remind perpetrators that truth and love will always prevail in the end.

Mr. Chairman

4. Fiji is committed to creating an empowered, inclusive and equal society. For the last 9 consecutive years, Fiji has experienced strong and sustained growth with around 3 per cent projected in the medium term. This puts Fiji in an opportune space as we embrace shared prosperity and inclusiveness in our communities. It supports the commitment enshrined in the Bill of Rights of our Constitution in a manner that is consistent with international human rights law, and through targeted interventions to empower disadvantaged and vulnerable groups through:

(i) taking services to people living in rural areas through the REACH Programme, a partnership between the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and UNDP. To complement this, the Fijian
Government continues to develop and maintain infrastructure in the rural areas, ensuring that Fijians have better access to essential services;

(ii) in aligning with the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real", Fiji enacted its Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018, setting out the rights of persons with disabilities including the right to work and be employed;

(iii) in line with Fiji's National Gender Policy which is aligned to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action, monitoring gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting and gender programming through our gender results frameworks;

(iv) amending our Employment Relations Act by including provisions to recognize 5 days of paternity leave, 5 days of family leave as well as an increase in maternity leave duration from 84 – 92 days; and

(v) strengthening our social protection programme to protect the elderly, women and children and those living with disabilities in fulfilment of the right to social protection in the Constitution.

Mr. Chairman

5. To reduce the rural-urban education gap, the Fijian Government, has, for the past three years, committed 22% of its annual budget to the education sector. This is to further embed support for programmes such as free tuition from pre-school to secondary school; a scholarship scheme and a
tertiary loan scheme which provides for all Fijians who can access higher education. Technical colleges have also been established around the country especially in rural areas to stem the rural to urban shift.

Mr. Chairman

6. Financial inclusion is critical to reduce inequality and poverty while promoting economic growth; and due to this, Fiji has experienced a reduction in income inequality from 40.4 in 2008 to 36.7 in 2013 and during that same period, studies by the World Bank showed that the proportion of the population living in poverty fell from 35.2 per cent to 34.0 per cent.

Mr. Chairman

7. Climate change and the health of the oceans remain the main reference points for us in our pursuit for empowerment, inclusion and equality. We need to reverse the impacts of climate change and the battle on oceans is very significant. These demand a quantum leap in commitment and my delegation wishes to state the importance of adhering to 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels.

8. By taking the lead in ratifying the Paris Agreement, Fiji will continue to advocate that climate policy takes into account the particular vulnerabilities and potential of women, children and persons with disabilities. In this regard we urge more countries to sign the Geneva Pledge for Human Rights in Climate Change and to work towards integrating a rights-based approach to climate change in all UN agencies.
9. While continuously calling attention to this, Fiji and the Pacific recently hosted the United Nations Secretary General; and during this visit, he saw first-hand the impacts of climate change on our islands and our peoples in the Pacific. We are a resilient people and we are determined to continue to raise awareness and voice our concerns and aspirations through regional and global processes, including the upcoming Blue COP in Chile that will strengthen the link between oceans and climate change.

10. Leaders recognise the current reform of the United Nations as an opportunity to better serve member states and encourage the streamlining the work of agencies to effectively serve the Pacific.

11. I reiterate Fiji's full support and cooperation to the United Nations and its work as we take action to elevate human beings from poverty and degradation to health and hope, from conflict and fear to peace, and from an effort to tame our environment to a commitment to live in harmony with it.

12. It is not business as usual anymore. We call on all Member States to deepen cooperation and strengthen alliance through greater partnership with the Pacific in addressing capacity challenges and to address the climate crisis upon us, so that the Asia-Pacific is not left behind.

Vinaka vakalevu.

Thank you.