

## **HON PM BAINIMARAMA SPEECH AT LAUNCH OF HELP FOR HOMES INITIATIVE AND LAUNCH OF ADOPT A SCHOOL WEBSITE**

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

Seven weeks ago today, the biggest tropical cyclone the southern hemisphere has ever seen slammed into Fiji and left behind a trail of death, misery and destruction.

The families of the 44 people killed are still coming to terms with the sudden loss of their loved ones. Many of those who were crushed in their homes or were hit by flying debris are still recovering from their injuries. But we have come together as a nation in a united response to this tragedy in a way that has inspired every Fijian and impressed the rest of the world.

Our many friends in the international community have come to our assistance with a level of generosity and commitment that has deeply moved us. And with their help, we can be proud of what we have done over the past 49 days to get food, water and shelter to those who need it and begin the task of rebuilding their lives.

We had another setback during the week when torrential rain in many places triggered widespread flooding, including in Nadi, Ba, Naitasiri and Rakiraki. But we thank God that we were spared the full force of yet another cyclone - Cyclone Zena - that bore down on us with frightening speed but lost power and changed direction just when we most feared another direct hit.

The whole nation breathed a sigh of relief. Because we can again concentrate fully on the recovery plan for Winston. In the knowledge that a similar threat may come again but, hopefully, no time soon.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Cyclone Winston has not only brought the Fijian people together and made us stronger than before, it has also helped identify a number of gaps that we need to urgently address. So my Government's number one priority is to rebuild Fiji and to "Build Back Better" – better than before, stronger than before. Public infrastructure and housing built to proper standards to withstand future cyclones and to save us the money and the misery that Winston has cost us.

So today, I am announcing a number of initiatives that form the first phase of our national rebuilding effort.

The period of our rebuild effort will be influenced by the availability of appropriate expertise, financial resources and our ability to bring together all stakeholders.

The first phase includes our new Help for Homes initiative that will provide financial assistance for homeowners to rebuild their homes. It includes our Adopt A School initiative and the website I will launch later this morning to encourage the world to come to the assistance of our students in cyclone- ravaged areas. It includes a pioneering partnership between the Fijian Government and The Fiji Institute of Engineers to make sure the massive task ahead of us is done properly. This partnership is in line with Government's civil service reform and benefits from the additional assurances and accountability provided by outsourcing to the private sector. And it includes important messaging to every Fijian and every foreign government and donor organisation intending to assist us.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, the cost of the relief effort so far has amounted to tens of millions of dollars as we cater for the immediate needs of those affected. But even more significant outlays

lie ahead in the rebuilding phase - a commitment that will stretch our finances to the limit and require even more assistance from our development partners.

We ask you all to give as generously as you can. But we also need to form a closer partnership between Government and the private sector in Fiji. To combine our financial resources and our human resources to rebuild Fiji together.

That is why our new partnership with The FIE is so important and why I want to warmly thank them for the assistance they are providing us. They have helped assess the costs to rebuild our public buildings, including schools under our Adopt A School program. They will also help us future proof Fiji with engineering and building standards appropriate to the challenging new era we are facing due to the effects of climate change – increased flooding and more frequent and devastating cyclones.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I regret to say that the FIE has told us that many of the public buildings, including schools, erected in the past have failed to meet established building code standards, let alone the higher standards we are going to require in the future. This includes certain buildings financed by our development partners that haven't met the required standards.

This must never be allowed to happen again. As I keep saying: there is no point in rebuilding our public buildings only to have them come down in the next cyclone. Any new public building must adhere to the required stringent standards to maximise our ability to endure the elements.

Currently, the laws in Fiji allow for anyone to form a building or construction company without receiving any accreditation or licensing.

This can no longer be tolerated. Any construction company operating in Fiji needs to meet high and internationally benchmarked standards.

We will be putting new laws in place to control the quality of our construction companies and the entire construction industry. And we are doing so not just for the safety of the Fijian people, but because we owe it to the taxpayers and donors of other nations and the taxpayers and donors of Fiji who will be contributing towards the rebuilding effort.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, every public building in Fiji and every piece of infrastructure that has been damaged or destroyed by Cyclone Winston will be rebuilt to these stringent new standards. To the extent that we can control it, every new home – and certainly public housing – will be built to these new standards. But the reality is that the intensity of Cyclone Winston has caused unprecedented damage to our homes and it could take years to repair or rebuild new homes for everyone and make the necessary repairs.

As you all know, I have travelled throughout the country over the past seven weeks listening to ordinary Fijians about what they need to get back on their feet. And the overwhelming request has been for resources they need to rebuild their own homes. So today, we are responding to those requests by announcing the new 'Help for Homes' initiative.

This initiative is intended to help Fijians repair their homes themselves by giving them access to building materials. This, Ladies and Gentlemen, is not a hand-out, it is a leg-up.

This initiative is designed to benefit affected Fijians who do not have the means to finance repairs on their own – households whose annual income falls under 50,000 dollars a year.

These households will receive a pre-paid electronic card, like M-PAISA, with a set amount on it and a pin number to purchase the building materials from selected hardware outlets. The amount on the card will depend on the amount of damage to people's homes. A 1,500 dollar limit for partial roofing damage. A 3,000 dollar limit for serious roofing damage. And a 7,000 dollar limit for almost or completely demolished homes.

The individuals will not be restricted to purchasing from only one hardware outlet. For example, the cost of timber may be cheaper at one outlet and the cost of corrugated tin may be cheaper at another company. The cards will grant Fijians the flexibility to take advantage of the competition between hardware outlets. We encourage everyone to be thrifty – maximise the funds you've been given and be a smart shopper.

When purchases are made, copies of the FIE issued building code guidelines will be provided. These guidelines will help build better, more resilient homes by showing Fijians, for example, how to properly strap down their roofing.

These electronic cards are being provided by Vodafone free of charge as a contribution to the rebuilding effort. And I especially want to thank Vodafone for this wonderful act of generosity.

In tomorrow's Fiji Sun, we will be calling for expressions of interest for hardware outlets to bid for the right to sell materials to the recipients of these cards. The successful hardware outlets will receive card reading machines and be open to all cardholders.

There is an initial 70 million dollars available for this initiative. Of course, this amount can be revised depending on how many

applications are received and how much donor assistance is provided. I urge the hardware sector to be as competitive as possible in the tender process to keep prices down in the interests of everyone. We expect that electronic cards will be issued from the start of May and the funds are to be redeemed by 30 June.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation will take the lead in distributing the - cards. They will issue the cards at local distribution points to make it easier for recipients to collect their cards and avoid long queues.

The ordinary Fijians who apply for these cards need to do so honestly. Your need should be genuine. You must meet the criteria and your application be truthful and accurate. We don't want this scheme to be delayed because we have to check every claim and every roof. We are depending on you to be honest.

As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, this initiative puts a lot of faith in the ordinary men and women of Fiji to do the right thing. To use these resources as they are intended to be used. This is an unprecedented initiative, one that will succeed due to the character and industrious spirit of the Fijian people. And it is only fair to those people who do the right thing, that unscrupulous people who attempt to cheat the system are punished.

Spot checks will be carried out by audit teams from the Ministry of Finance after the cards are dispensed. And anyone found to be cheating – abusing this scheme – will face the full force of the law.

In fact, we are going to introduce legislation in the coming sitting of Parliament to impose special penalties – including jail terms – on any Fijian who tries to benefit personally from this crisis by making a false claim. Do not cheat because I can assure you that you will be caught

and you will be punished.

We are determined, at all costs, to protect the credibility and integrity of the recovery and rebuilding process. We have the names of individuals whose homes the National Disaster Management Office has identified as partially or severely damaged, and this will be used to verify the claims made by applicants. That said, there may be others out there who haven't had their properties officially assessed. These Fijians are also free to apply and will receive electronic cards if they have a genuine claim. And regardless of where you are in Fiji, we encourage everyone who needs assistance to apply for this initiative. Whether you are in a rural or maritime community or in an urban centre, we are giving you the relief you need to rebuild your homes better than they were before.

In the coming weeks, we will also announce the additional assistance that will be given to those Fijians who need to transport their hardware supplies to maritime areas.

We also understand that multi-lateral organisations and NGOs have already assisted a number of people with their rebuilding efforts. To avoid any overlap, we will coordinate with these organisations so that the Help for Homes initiative benefits those who have not or will not receive housing assistance from these organisations.

In the aftermath of TC Winston, many people took loans or borrowed money from their employers or communities to put a roof over their heads. For these Fijians, we will reimburse funds to the value provided for under the Help for Homes initiative. But it will take time and require substantial documentation and the details of that process will be announced in the coming weeks.

I want to make it clear. It is not enough to simply rebuild. We need to

also strengthen the current regulatory provisions that protect Fijians from whatever crisis the future holds. Cyclone Winston has also shown us that a number of sectors need to take greater responsibility for the role they play in our national life. In addition to the licensing of construction companies and the improved building standards I mentioned earlier, Fiji's insurance industry is also in dire need of reform.

There has been too great a focus by our insurers to offer coverage to urban communities and tourism-related infrastructure. Our rural and maritime communities are not being given the options for insurance coverage that they deserve. So I've asked the Attorney-General and Minister for Finance to get the insurance industry on track and relevant to all Fijians. For example, many insurance companies currently do not offer flood risk coverage for ordinary Fijians living in Nadi and Ba. In many countries, such a discriminatory practice would not be tolerated.

Again, I want to acknowledge The Fiji Institution of Engineers for partnering with Government on the Adopt A School program, the website for which will be launched later this morning. FIE provided services – free of charge as their donation to the Winston relief effort – to get this project off the ground. The FIE has sent 70 structural assessors in 22 teams to identify the precise needs of the 229 schools and other public buildings such as health centres, that have been damaged or destroyed by Winston. The assessments and FIE's involvement in rebuilding the schools will ensure that our children's schools are rebuilt better and stronger than before.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for setting aside your Saturday morning to attend this announcement.

The past seven weeks have been very challenging for all of us. Occasionally, mistakes may have been made, but as Winston Churchill



once said, the important thing is to learn from your mistakes and that is what we have done. I certainly believe that we have done the best we can under the most trying of circumstances. And I'm very gratified to have received the praise of so many of our development partners for a job well done.

I want to leave you all, and the nation, with a final message and it is to repeat the two words I've used many times before. Integrity and credibility. Above all else, this needs to underpin the rebuilding effort.

We as Government must provide assistance with integrity, and we cannot leave behind any affected Fijian, family or household. We also need to prove that we are worthy of assistance by maintaining the confidence of those extending a helping hand. And if we can maintain the integrity and credibility of the rebuilding process, Fiji will definitely rise again, bigger and better than before.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank