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FIJI DAY 2021 MESSAGE (For Diaspora Community)

Bula Vinaka and a very happy Fiji Day!

Last year, our celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Independence in Fiji was one for the history books -- but amidst our pride and happiness, I'll never forget the cloud of uncertainty that hung over us. We were apart from our Fijian family and friends around the world, and no one could put hand over heart and say how long our separation would last.

One year on, it's all very different. I may still be speaking with you through a screen for now, but we know that this is the last Fiji Day that we will be forced to celebrate apart from each other. Finally, this pandemic has an end date. We are going to travel again, and we will travel safely. That day is coming very soon.

It has been a hard journey to get here. Much has happened in Fiji, and we can be proud of the way we have overcome almost unspeakable adversity and hardship. No one escaped this ordeal, whether they were in developed countries or developing countries, wealthy or poor, in cities or on remote islands, young or old, male or female.

This was a burden shared around the world, but it is a burden we are shedding - bit by bit, every week. And we can be proud of what we have overcome and of the way we have overcome it - together. Through it all, many of you have done more than watch from afar. You have stood with Fiji and your fellow Fijians with prayer and with financial support. Remittances to Fiji from our Fijian diaspora from everywhere in the world are up.

I want you to know: we are doing far more than enduring this challenge, we are emerging from it stronger. We have rallied as a nation -- day by day and jab by jab -- we are making Fiji the safest it has been since the start of the pandemic.

On 19 March 2020 -- 570 long days ago -- we shut the tap on regular passenger travel into Fiji. It was a drastic step, but we had no choice. It came at great cost. Overnight, we lost at least 40% of our GDP and 115,000 Fijians became unemployed.

We had to act quickly to aid our people, and we did it by rolling out the largest cash transfer between Government and the people in history. We are still providing unemployment benefits -- with another 100 Million Dollars disbursing next month. We're supporting farmers to grow our way to an economic recovery. We are supporting micro, small and medium enterprises with loans.

We are removing administrative roadblocks to improve our ease of doing business and encourage investments. And we are providing financial incentives and removing legal impediments to raise the value of iTaukei land and make it more attractive for investment so that landowners are empowered to take full advantage of their land

When the Delta variant erupted in Fiji, we didn't muck around with our people's health or risk losing the battle to misinformation before it began. We made COVID-19 vaccines a requirement to work or receive unemployment benefits -- and it worked.

Fiji is one of the fastest-vaccinated countries in the world. Over 75 percent of adults are fully vaccinated and over 96 percent have one dose.

As those numbers keep climbing, hospitalisations are decreasing, our curfew hours are steadily shortening, and our businesses, workplaces, and houses of worship have re-opened from the 4th of October to double-dosed adults. Our children between the ages of 12 and 18 are being vaccinated so we can get our schools back open. We are grateful to India, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States for supplying us with the doses we've needed to protect our people and re-open to the world. That day cannot come soon enough.

It pains me to know that so many of our citizens have been denied what we all once took for granted: the freedom to travel about our country and be with friends and family. I have missed that in my own life. I have missed traveling to the communities, I have missed being face to face with our people, and I have missed large family gatherings, especially in times of grief. Yet I know it has been a much greater burden for you - one that I want to lift from your shoulders as soon as possible.

In a matter of days, 80% of adults in Fiji will be fully vaccinated. Our plan is to welcome fully vaccinated travellers from a “green list” of countries that will include countries with high rates of vaccination and low case numbers.

It will be a no-jab, no-fly policy. So, I urge you to be vaccinated wherever you are. If you have not gotten your jabs yet, do so as soon as you can.

Our plan will be to allow fully-vaccinated tourists with no quarantine requirement. We will have tourism areas established where visitors can safely enjoy the best of our islands. If you are a resident in Fiji, or simply have friends and family you are aching to see outside of our tourism areas — don't worry, we have you covered. You will be able to do so in accordance with a new package of protocols we'll announce soon.

The safest way to return to Fiji is on Fiji Airways. Our national carrier has achieved the highest possible SKYTRAX 5-Star COVID-19 Airline Safety Rating and the Diamond certification by the Airline Passenger Experience Association or APEX. I've seen their protocols first-hand — the Fiji Airways team have been awaiting this day for months, and they are more than ready to fly you safely to our shores. And once you arrive, nearly every hotel and tour operator in Fiji is certified under the "Care Fiji Commitment" program.

I'm sure all of you remember well the last time you were in Fiji. The last hug you shared with friends and family, the last sunset you watched in our islands. None of us expected that it would be nearly two long years between drinks.

But there is a light at the end of this tunnel. And we are walking towards it together. This Fiji Day, when we say we will see you soon, we mean it.

Vinaka vakalevu. Happy Fiji Day. God bless you all.

