



HIS EXCELLENCY
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**ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE 34th SESSION OF THE
FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL ORGANISATION (FAO)
ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL CONFERENCE**

Sofitel Hotel
Nadi

Thursday 12 April 2018
0815Hrs

- The Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) – Dr. Jose Graziano da Silva
- The Chairperson of the 34th Session of the FAO Asia-Pacific Regional Conference, and Fiji's Minister for Agriculture, Honourable Inia Seruiratu
- Honourable Ministers and Senior Officials from the Asia-Pacific Region
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Ni sa bula vinaka and good morning.

Please allow me to say at the outset that I am deeply honoured to join you all and to officiate at the opening of the 34th Session of the Food and Agricultural Organisation's Asia-Pacific Regional Conference. And, in addition to the traditional ceremony of welcome that you have just witnessed, I also offer a very warm Fijian welcome to all the delegates, especially to those of you who have travelled from abroad and braved the adverse weather conditions these past few days.

The arrival of two tropical cyclones in the span of two weeks was not the type of warm welcome we had hope to subject you to. Sadly, however, we know that these types of storms are only becoming more severe due to the impacts of climate change, and that will have a very serious impact on us, just as it does for all other low-lying nations in the Pacific and across the world.

We are determined to bounce back from the severe effects of these tropical cyclones and build a more resilient Fiji, and we are equally determined to keep the fight against climate change on top of the global agenda - not only through our presidency of COP23, but in every other avenue

possible. And, I appeal for your continuous support on behalf of all the victims of climate change the world over.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am told that this is the first high-level FAO Asia-Pacific regional conference to be held in the Pacific after more than two decades. And, as Fiji's President and Head of State, I know I speak for every Fijian when I say we are proud to host you all. We collectively thank the FAO, along with all the member countries in the Asia-Pacific region, for giving us this wonderful opportunity.

I also wish to express the Asia-Pacific member countries' gratitude to the FAO Director-General, Dr. Jose Graziano da Silva, whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Rome in March last year, for your leadership of the FAO. We applaud in particular the many changes you have brought to the organization, and especially in charting the way forward towards promoting sustainable agricultural development and towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1 and 2 on reducing poverty, and on ending hunger and all forms of malnutrition.

We also commend the FAO not only for leading the charge towards achieving the SDGs, but for also keeping a close tab on the situation on the ground. I am aware of the FAO's 2017 Report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, which estimates the number of undernourished people to have increased from 777 million in 2015 to 815 million in 2016. The Asia-Pacific region was noted as one of the most affected regions, with many people suffering from undernourishment.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, this regional conference is, therefore, very important and timely to synchronise the work of the FAO with the needs of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. After all, successfully achieving SDGs 1 and 2 are fundamental requisites to achieving sustainable development for all. It would be of significant impact if we could all re-commit ourselves to working with the FAO to make further progress in achieving SDGs 1 and 2.

Ladies and gentlemen, we also have to accept the reality that we are facing a global epidemic of unhealthy people – including the many of those who are overweight and obese. Again, statistics reveal that overweight and obese people are growing in number, mostly in developing and developed countries in the Asia-Pacific region. And this is linked directly to their lifestyle and dietary habits. The high costs of domestic food production exacerbate the reliance on cheap, imported, processed food. Processed foods, including grains like wheat and corn, and livestock products like meat and dairy are among the top five food import categories. Given the high level of dependence on food imports, the nutritional quality of many imported foods is of great concern. The result has been a “dietary transition” away from traditional, domestic staples like root crops, tubers, fruits and vegetables, towards diets high in processed foods and animal source foods, sugar, fat and salt.

Here in Fiji, I am also proud to be Fiji's lead advocate and champion in the national campaign to reduce Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD), which currently account for 80 per-cent of deaths of people below 70 years. The World Health Organisation has found that this very high rate of

NCD-related deaths is consistent throughout the Pacific, and Fiji has the second-highest rate of deaths caused by NCDs; with diabetes and cardiac-related illnesses being the major causes.

Fiji conducted a national nutrition survey in 2014-2015 and it noted that we had a food eating pattern that included daily consumption of cereal, bread and breakfast crackers. These were the three most commonly eaten products, and twice as many households consumed them daily compared to traditional staples like cassava, taro, banana, sweet potato and yams. Furthermore, instant noodles were reported to be consumed daily by over 60 per-cent of households, and approximately four out of every 10 households consumed fruit including mango, pawpaw and bananas on a weekly basis. Fewer households consumed vegetables daily. However, unfortunately, the daily consumption of vegetable oil was reported to be in nine out of every 10 households. Fizzy, sugary drinks were reported to be consumed daily by more households while daily addition of sugar was in nine out of every 10 households. For newly born children, 8.3 per-cent were born underweight - less than 2.5 kilogram, while 12.7 per-cent were born overweight or more than 4.0 kilogram; Forty-nine per-cent of children under six months old were exclusively breastfed while 34 per-cent of children continued to be breastfed between 12-15 months.

The eating pattern for Primary School children aged 5–14 years revealed that 38 per-cent had snack after breakfast, 53% had snack after lunch, and only 9 per-cent reported having snack after dinner. The four most popular snacks eaten were salty snack, sweets, sugary drinks and Indian savouries. For Secondary School students aged 15-19 years, their eating patterns showed that the six most commonly consumed foods were sugary drinks (31.2 per-cent), salty snacks (22.5 per-cent), sweets (10.1 per-cent), sweet flour products (9.8 per-cent), fried cassava or chips (7 per-cent) and Indian savouries (6.7 per-cent). This transition has been identified as a leading driver behind the sharp rise in rates of malnutrition, micronutrient deficiency, obesity, diabetes and other non-communicable diseases in Fiji.

I am told these trends can be seen in other countries in the Asia-Pacific region as well. Obviously, we have a lot of work to do. And in my role as a champion in promoting a fit and healthy nation I have appealed to our people to take appropriate action to reverse the unacceptably high trend of NCDs in Fiji. I am especially grateful for the opportunity this morning to make the same call to the policy-makers in the Asia-Pacific region to address this situation. The first key is the promotion of healthy diets and the availability of healthy food options. We need to make our people aware of what they are eating and informed of their eating options.

Ladies and gentlemen, at this regional conference we should also be focusing on women in agriculture and employment for rural youth. This is a huge challenge for the Pacific as the contribution of women and youths are not always recognized, despite their playing a major role in agriculture.

In Fiji today, about 60 per-cent of the population rely on the agricultural sector as their main source of livelihood, especially with family farming. Agriculture will continue to be an important socio-economic sector and will generate employment opportunities in the coming years. But, we

also recognise that the sector may not be able to absorb such a high volume of new workers in the coming decades. Perhaps the FAO could work with its member countries in the Asia-Pacific region to assist with job creation in the entire spectrum of the food value chain. These include processing, packaging, transportation, distribution, marketing and services provision, especially financial and business services. Most Asia-Pacific member countries need rural and structural transformation that fosters synergies between farm and non-farm activities as that can reinforce rural-urban linkages. The growing demand coming from urban food markets can create job opportunities in all agriculture-related activities. And not only agricultural employment, but also non-agricultural employment in rural areas, such as agro-tourism and other services.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is also important to implement rural development strategies that recognize the importance of family farming. As you know, more profitable urban markets can lead to the concentration of food production in large commercial farms, and to the creation of value chains dominated by large processors and retailers. In this context, smallholders and family farmers need specific policies and regulations. This includes providing access to inputs, credit and technology, and improving land tenure rights. Ladies and gentlemen, as I alluded to earlier in my address, the Asia-Pacific region is particularly affected by, and vulnerable to, climate change. It is, therefore, of utmost importance to promote the adaptation of food systems to this changing climate, especially for low-income, rural communities.

With Fiji presiding over COP23, I would like to stress the profound impact that climate change can have on agricultural development. Issues related to agriculture such as food production and food security are explicitly mentioned in the Paris Agreement concluded by COP21 in 2015. And at COP23, the parties reached an historic agreement on agriculture, the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture, to develop and implement new strategies for adaptation and mitigation within the agriculture sector, that will help reduce emissions from the sector as well as build its resilience to the effects of climate change.

It is my hope that this year's Conference here in Nadi will provide us with the opportunity to present and discuss issues and solutions relating to food and nutrition security that are specific to small island states while keeping with our goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Through this conference, we should also discuss how FAO can best help member countries in planning and implementing actions, as well as in mobilizing financial support to build resilience of rural livelihoods. The Green Climate Fund (GCF), for instance, is one of the mechanisms now available to finance developing countries in relation to climate change.

I commend the FAO for working closely with countries that have formally requested for assistance through the Fund. I am convinced that the FAO will continue to support all countries that wish to have access to the Fund, especially to Small Island Development States in the Pacific and other low-lying Nations throughout the world.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, to further set the pace for this conference, I would also like to recap some of the major agreements from the 33rd Conference held in Putrajaya, Malaysia in 2016:

- The Conference delegates called on FAO to move forward with regional efforts to eradicate hunger, malnutrition and to counter threats to agriculture from climate change by 2030;
- The Conference further stressed the need to revitalize the image of the agriculture sector to promote agriculture as a career choice for young people;
- The Asia-Pacific member countries further endorsed the Organization’s future course of work, particularly its four Regional Initiatives to achieve zero hunger, improve rice production, blue growth, and further develop value chains in the Pacific Islands.

Ladies and gentlemen, the 34th Conference will give us the opportunity to further move forward with these topics and to discuss the specifics for Pacific Small Island Developing States. Many of the struggles regarding food and agriculture go beyond the borders of our individual countries. The regional conference gives us the opportunity to discuss these challenges while advancing our regional coherence in the Asia-Pacific region.

I wish to conclude by saying that many challenges remain ahead. But with steadfast commitment, we can deliver on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate that we will continue our support to FAO and the region to deliver the ambition of inclusive growth and shared prosperity for all. No one can be left behind in our common quest for sustainable development.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I now have the greatest pleasure to open the 34th Session of the FAO Asia-Pacific Regional Conference.

May Almighty God bless our respective nations and our peoples.

Vinaka vakalevu and thank you.
