Honourable Members of the ACP-EU-Joint Parliamentary Assembly, Co-Secretaries General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

Suva - our beloved capital - has seen many great events over the years. In 1928, the men making the first Trans-Pacific flight from the United States to Australia landed in the park opposite us here, Albert Park.

In the same place 45 years ago this year, Fiji celebrated its independence from Great Britain. And in the grand building opposite Albert Park last September, the first Parliament to ever be elected in Fiji on the basis of one person, one vote, one value, gathered to herald in our new democracy.

Today, in this equally grand hotel – where the guests have included Somerset Maugham, James A Michener and Queen Elizabeth the Second – we gather for another historic occasion – the formal opening of the 29th Session of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

Today, Suva becomes the meeting place for many of the elected representatives of the European Union – the world’s largest single market – and the representatives of the one billion people in the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, who look to Europe to empower their peoples through development assistance and trade.

On behalf of the Fijian Government and the Fijian people, I warmly welcome you all to this gathering.

It is a great honour for us all to have you here – from the great countries of Europe and the great countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific – all of us united in the desire for friendship, cooperation and fair play. And with our eyes set firmly on empowering our peoples and improving their lives.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The circumstances that have brought you here are tinged with sadness as we remember the people of Vanuatu – where you were first destined to hold this gathering – who are still reeling from the devastation of Cyclone Pam.

May I, on behalf of everyone in this room, extend our sympathy to the people of Vanuatu for the devastation they suffered – including the deaths of more than 20 people and the dislocation of many thousands more.

Even today, 100,000 people in Vanuatu are still without safe drinking water. But we can all be proud as global citizens and citizens of the Pacific that with our assistance, Vanuatu is now well on the road to recovery. I’m sure you will all join me in saluting the resilience of the people of Vanuatu and send them our collective best wishes as the recovery effort continues.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all come from countries with vastly different political, social and economic challenges. Indeed I am struck as I look around this room at the great diversity of both the member countries of the ACP, as well as the new Europe.

Yet we are all united in our desire to extend the benefits of development to all our peoples. And to give them the best possible return for their labour under a global trading system that must be fair.
We have some immense challenges before us in the relationship between the ACP countries and Europe. But I’m sure you will all agree that with understanding and goodwill, nothing is impossible when it comes to meeting those challenges.

As we sit here in Fiji, let us remind ourselves of the hundreds of millions of ordinary men and women in the 79 ACP countries who look to us to empower them more and improve their standard of living.

It is they who must be at the forefront of our minds. And the European Union deserves credit in the community of nations for the effort it has made to give these people access to markets. And for working with the ACP countries as a genuine development partner to improve our own ability to expand the opportunities for our people.

We also need to remind ourselves that 2015 is a pivotal year for us all – a year in which, working together, the global community can truly change the course of history.

In three month’s time, world leaders will gather in New York to endorse the global development blueprint for the next 15 years - the Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 Development Agenda. At the core of this ambitious plan is a commitment to eradicate extreme poverty in all its forms by the year 2030. But Fiji – for one – believes that much more needs to be done to empower developing countries through trade and development assistance if we are to have any hope of achieving these development goals ourselves.

In six month’s time, the nations of the world will gather in Paris for the World Climate Summit, where the industrialised nations will be asked to confront – once and for all - the global threat of climate change - to deliver the commitments that are needed to reduce carbon emissions, arrest global warming, and halt the sea level rises that threaten vast areas of the world and every Small Island Developing State.

With these two seminal events before year’s end, we are at a unique point in history. As the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, has so aptly stated: “We are the first generation with the potential to end poverty and the last generation to avoid the worst effects of climate change”.

So Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The world is at a crossroads and some very tough decisions have to be made.

In terms of our development goals, we need to collectively uphold peace, stability, social equity and substantive justice. And only by pursuing policies that encourage economic and social inclusion can we hope to empower our peoples, give them a sense of dignity and purpose and improve their ability to earn decent livings for themselves and their families.

When it comes to the challenge of meeting the threat of climate change, I would argue that we are at an even more critical point.

Because unless we can achieve binding cuts in carbon emissions from the industrialised nations at the Paris Summit, disaster awaits us all. And especially the citizens of Small Island Developing States in the Caribbean and the Pacific and low lying areas of all countries.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have firmly committed Fiji to waging a concerted campaign in the remaining months leading up to the Paris Summit - and at the gathering itself - to get the world to finally face up to this crisis.

Here in the Pacific, we are all - to a greater or lesser extent - already facing serious consequences from the rising sea levels. Even in a nation of mostly mountainous islands like Fiji, we are having to move whole villages and have identified more than 600 communities that are directly threatened by the encroaching seas.

But as I keep repeating at every opportunity, the threat we face pales into insignificance against the threat to some of our neighbours. In the case of three of them – Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands – their very existence as sovereign nations is at stake.

The scientists tell us that unless urgent action is taken, these low-lying atolls will simply sink beneath the waves during the lifetimes of some of their young people. The first member countries of the United Nations to simply vanish.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a catastrophe in the making that is simply unacceptable. As a global community of nations, we cannot allow our industrialised members - who are the principal carbon emitters - to continue to put their own economic interests and the jobs of their own people before the wellbeing, and in some cases, the very survival of the citizens of Small Island Developing States.

I make no apology for describing those industrialised countries who are refusing to sign up to the necessary cuts in carbon emissions as the coalition of the selfish. Because there is no other way to describe their behaviour. They must be shamed into action. The sheer immorality of their position must be exposed.

And on behalf of every Small Island Developing State - many of whom are in this room - I ask you all to return to your capitals determined to place our grave concerns about this issue at the forefront of your own national debates and the formulation of
your own national policies. We need your support because time is rapidly running out.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to warmly thank the countries of the European Union for facing up to that moral challenge and taking a lead on climate change. The EU has committed itself to reducing carbon emissions by 40 per cent by 2030. And you are leading the global movement for change in a manner that has commanded respect and gratitude from Fiji and other small island nations.

In contrast to some of our bigger neighbours in the Pacific, you are proving to be a development partner in the true sense of the word. In that you are putting the interests of more vulnerable nations such as ours before the interests of some of your carbon polluting industries.

With so many members of the European Parliament in the room today, can I extend to each and every one of you our sincere thanks for the principled stand that you and your nations have taken. Fiji seeks your continuing support in the lead up to the Paris Summit. And especially your individual efforts to highlight the plight we face and do whatever you can to make our concerns known in Europe and elsewhere.

We have just under six months collectively to get the world to realise that the time for merely talking is over. This is the time for concrete action. And if the global community again baulks at decisive action, history and the generations to come will judge those developed nations which didn't act extremely harshly for their selfishness and stupidity.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

While we are at one on the importance of climate change, Europe and the ACP countries have a number of obvious challenges in our relationship. So I would also appeal to the European MPs in the room to give their utmost attention to these challenges – such as the EPA - and gain a greater appreciation of the dynamics from our perspective.

You naturally have your constituencies and your obligations to the economic wellbeing of Europe as a whole. We – on the other hand - continue to face the challenges of being developing not developed countries, with all that entails in terms of our disparity of resources and financial strength. And many of us have European colonial pasts and European-derived institutions that have not always served us well. In the case of Fiji, an institutionalised division of our people that contributed to decades of social and political upheaval and that we have only recently cast off.

I am the first to acknowledge – as the leader of a developing country - that we can do a lot better to manage ourselves, our available resources, to become more efficient, to modernise and embrace change. But we can only do so within our limited financial constraints and look to our development partners to help make these reforms and transitions possible.

We especially look to the EU and the rest of the developed world to give us a fairer trading environment. One which accepts that the harsh realities of the global marketplace are always a lot harsher for those hundreds of millions of ordinary men and women struggling to produce goods and services and for whom ready markets are not available.

I'm sure I speak for all the ACP countries in expressing our gratitude to the EU for its support over the years. But having said that, we are now at a crossroads. It is time for the EU and the ACP to conclude an Economic Partnership Agreement that is equitable and fair but that has been so long in the making and still eludes us. We must break the current impasse so we can go beyond 2020, strengthen our relationship and benefit mutually from those renewed ties.

We ask Europe to be more flexible in these ongoing negotiations. And in turn, the ACP countries must do more themselves to implement the necessary reforms. Unity and solidarity must be our guiding principles. We must speak with one voice in global forums to have our message heard. Because only by doing so can we hope to address the collective challenges that face us all.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have said, 2015 is a pivotal year for both the global development agenda and climate change.

But let us resolve in Suva today to also make 2015 a pivotal year for the ACP and EU, to develop new avenues of cooperation, a better understanding of each other’s position and to strengthen the goodwill that has always been at the foundation of our relationship. The solidarity of the people of Europe with the one billion people living in the ACP countries.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I close by wishing you well in your deliberations. And to urge you all to use your time in Fiji to learn more about our nation and the extraordinary journey we have taken in the past few years.

The stability, social equity, substantive justice and economic and social inclusion I referred to in a global context is something that we are very proud to have finally achieved in Fiji.

Last September, the introduction of the first genuine democracy in the history of our nation brought to an end decades of political instability and set our nation on a new path. For the first time, our new Constitution established genuine equality and opportunity for every Fijian.

We empowered people on the margins of society, whoever they may be. And we created a common and equal citizenry for the
first time, which is critical for any nation to be truly successful.

Many believed it couldn't be done, including a number of people in this room. Some preferred the notion of democracy for democracy's sake, rather than substantive and true democracy.

But last September, we got there, and the world has responded extremely positively. Our new democracy has also heralded in a new era of prosperity, in which we intend to capitalise on the longest running period of economic growth since Independence to improve the lives of many more Fijians.

So Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I appeal to you all to see for yourselves the progress we are making in the new Fiji. Our nation is a work in progress and I always say this is a journey that will never end. But you are all here in Suva at the most promising time in our entire history. And I again welcome you all and urge you - beyond the conference room - to meet as many ordinary Fijians as you can and enjoy our world famous Fijian hospitality.

Vinaka vakalevu, thank you.

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