

**STATEMENT AT THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON  
DISASTER REDUCTION, KOBE, JAPAN, THURSDAY 20 JANUARY 2005**

**By**

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Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed a honor for Fiji to participate in this international conference and for the opportunity to make a contribution in our quest for a safer, secure and better world.

I would like to congratulate you in your appointment as Conference President and to express our sincere appreciation to the Government of Japan and its people for the warm hospitality, generosity and assistance extended to us this week, and as far as Fiji is concerned, over the years through its association with the JICA program of assistance.

My delegation also extends to ISDR and the donors its appreciation for the leadership and vision and for providing the platform to launch us into the future.

Fiji joins other countries to express its deepest sympathies and condolence to the countries and families affected by the recent unprecedented tsunami tragedy in the Indian Ocean, unfathomed in terms of human loss and suffering and the enormous socio-economic disruptions caused.

Fiji has had its fair share of natural disasters with serious consequences, which have taken years to repair.

The accepted characteristic of SIDS in the context of our big ocean and small islands contributes to our exposure and vulnerability to natural hazards. We further recognise that our unique traditions and cultures have provided us with an intrinsic resilience to cope with disasters. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the financial and social costs of disasters has increased significantly over the past decade, in particular climate variability and extreme weather events are becoming more prominent, and we have become exposed to new disasters (eg HIV/AIDS) for which we have little or no capacity to cope.

Mr President, it is timely to consider the need for a broader definition of disasters to include not only those resulting from natural hazards but also social, environmental and technological hazards. In this context we note the Declaration of the Pacific Health Summit for Sustainable Disaster Risk Management, Honolulu, Hawaii, June 2004, that local disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery capacities must be strengthened collaboratively with existing public health and medical care systems to address health hazards.

Furthermore, we recognise the emergence of comprehensive disaster risk management as a new tool in an integrated holistic approach to development, and underscore this paradigm shift as an approach towards disaster risk reduction.

Disaster risk management in Fiji is currently undergoing a major review, manifested in the development of policy initiatives and institutional framework in our quest for sustainable human development and community resilience. Limited community participation in the past had perpetuated dependency and complacency, and even to the point of apathy. The institutional reform however aims to galvanise community participation in disaster risk management and the overall decision making process, therefore shifting from **Self Pity to Self Help**. These new initiatives are integral part of the current review, which involves the disaster management legislation and plans. Amongst other things, the review is aimed at streamlining the management of natural and human induced disasters and to determine emergency management arrangements for technological disasters and complex emergencies. Although disaster risk management programs and activities are in place focusing at education, awareness and training, vulnerability and risk management studies and early warning system to mention some, regional and international support will continue to be pursued to implement some of these activities. To this end I must place on record our sincere appreciation to the government of France, Australia and New Zealand through the FRANZ co-operation program for their

continued support and commitment in this area. I would also like to commend SOPAC and OFDA for the marvellous work they are doing in the region and to appeal for continued donor support.

Whilst we endorse the need to develop a global early warning system and to commend the Republic of Germany's initiative and commitment to host the International meeting on Tsunami Early Warning System in early 2006, it should also be pointed out that there is an urgent need to develop in-country mechanisms in SIDS to complement early warning system like the Pacific Tsunami Early Warning Centre in Hawaii. To this end, we seek the assistance of regional and international organisations, institutions and donor governments and agencies in the area of technical and scientific support. Fiji is not only joining the bandwagon in making this appeal, projects are in place in the country particularly in the area of earthquake, tsunami and flood hazard and risk assessment.

Civil society, including community groups and the private sector have played and will continue to play an increasing role in disaster risk management. Furthermore, we recognise the need to strengthen partnership between government and civil society and all stakeholders including the community in particular.

We accept Mr President, that the primary responsibility rests with the country but we need regional cooperation and support from the international community with technical capacity and resources as required. In this regard, we highlight as a means of strengthening existing and securing new partnerships to assist in implementation, the Pacific Region Partnership Initiative to Develop Capacities in Pacific SIDS to Manage Vulnerability and Build Resilience to Disasters as launched by the Leaders at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

Mr President, we cannot ignore the vulnerability of SIDS and their exposure to the varying degree of risks as reflected explicitly in the statements made by Ambassador Koonjul, Mr Chowdhury, and the President of Marshall Island on behalf of Pacific Island Countries, which underline the need to pay particular attention to the plight of SIDS. We would like this to be addressed in the same spirit it has been discussed here in this plenary session in the 2005 Kobe World Conference Action Plan.

We cannot overemphasise the importance of mobilising global efforts to assist the disadvantaged and the vulnerable groups in our society in the various regions of the world. We in this Conference are the catalyst to ensure that we live in a world where the safety and security of our people is paramount.

Mr President, and distinguished delegates, the world keenly awaits the outcome of this Conference.

It reminds us of the word of the Lord to his prophet Jeremiah – “For I have plans for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you and to give you a future and hope.” We gather here this week as instruments for the physical manifestation of that prophesy. This time, let us do it together, and we will be there! Finally, to you Mr President and the host country Japan, Domo Arigato Gozaimas. Thank you distinguished delegates. God bless you all.