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Minister for National Reconciliation & Unity; ALTA & Sugar Industry Reforms

New Year's Broadcast

Film & Television Unit
Nasese

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My fellow citizens.

We are at the start of a New Year, with all its fresh promise and hope. 2005 has slipped away and becomes part of our past.

It was an eventful 12 months as Fiji continued on the journey to that ultimate destination – a future of prosperity with an equal and secure place for every citizen.

The Government's continuing commitment to bringing our communities together, was reflected in its draft Bill to promote reconciliation, tolerance and unity. This has become the most discussed legislation in Fiji's history. There was an outpouring of opinion from throughout the country. Some of it was very emotional and extreme.

But as the months went by, the debate became more measured and mature. It became, in itself, a contribution to the difficult process of reconciliation.

The hearings by the Parliamentary Sector Committee on Justice Law and Order gave many citizens a chance to make their views known.

The Committee's report has been tabled. It has many valuable recommendations, based on what the people said, and its own conclusions.

All these are being considered by Government. It is our intention to introduce appropriate changes in February.

The Bill's main purpose remains the promotion of national reconciliation and healing. This is so vitally important for the harmonious and stable development of Fiji.

The economy slowed down somewhat in 2005, largely due to international events over which we had no control. However, a surge of growth continued in such industries as tourism and construction, bringing many new jobs and income opportunities.

A major disappointment was the failure of Parliament to approve urgently needed land legislation.

When he opened the current session of Parliament in August, His Excellency the President, once more appealed to Parliamentarians to reach agreement on successor arrangements for expiring agricultural leases.

The Government decided it could no longer tolerate the delaying tactics which were preventing a long-term solution to the issue. This has divided our people for too long. It has caused much suffering for the landowners and tenants whose leases have ended, or are about to end.

We, therefore, decided it was time to place this critical national issue before Parliament and appeal to the Members for their support. The proposal we put to the House of Representatives was balanced and fair. It was supported by the Native Land Trust Board and the Great Council of Chiefs, representing the Fijian people. The landowners would receive improved rentals and we would honour their wish for the leasing of all native land to be brought under one legislation. The tenants would have longer, secure and renewable leases. These would generally be for 50 years, with renewals of no less than 20 years.

The support of the Opposition was needed, in line with the Constitution, for the legislation to pass.

They failed to provide that support.

Here was an opportunity to put the land problem behind us. But it was not to be.

The greatest victims will be the poorest of the poor – our rural families with no land.

Our plan, would have encouraged the landowners to lease surplus land to them.

Now, they will be left again in uncertainty and despair.

When I travelled overseas in 2005 I was struck by the extent of the confidence in Fiji.

It was apparent everywhere I went among investors, international agencies and governments.

Tourist arrivals have reached new heights. Well over half a million people stay with us annually. A lot of them return year after year. This too is about confidence, the kind that converts into economic growth and increased prosperity.

Nowhere did I find as much goodwill and support as on my official visit to India. The Government of India and its people welcomed the Fiji delegation as honoured guests.

They want to help us in any way they can.

It was very helpful for me to exchange thoughts with the Prime Minister of India,

Dr Manmohan Singh, on our common challenges of managing ethnically diverse societies.

Both Governments are dedicated to ensuring that the rights and interests of all citizens are protected.

India's friendship is making a real difference to Fiji through the aid it has granted to our crucially-important sugar industry. Its Sugar Technical Mission is at the forefront of modernisation of the industry.

A loan of \$86 million from India's Exim Bank will finance the upgrade of our sugar mills and provide training to help farmers reach higher productivity.

Accompanying this is a joint project with the Asian Development Bank, to encourage cane farmers to diversify into other crops. This will help soften the impact of the expected decline in sugar earnings from Europe.

For rural people in non-cane areas, the Government is embarking on two initiatives to improve their standards of living.

The first is another project supported by India. A team of Indian specialists will visit early this year to advise on how we can get the best return from coconuts and copra, essential commodities for the wellbeing of many thousands of rural dwellers.

The second, which also involves the Asian Development Bank, will open up new economic opportunities for rural communities, including those in the outer islands. We expect to make the final decisions on this during 2006, with implementation to begin in 2007.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have my assurance that the Government will apply itself this year with renewed vigour to encouraging private investment that will create additional employment in the towns and cities.

We are a small country. The products we sell must compete in a very big and very demanding international market.

Our size should not stand in the way of our striving for excellence in everything we do.

Fiji's sportsmen and women have proven many times that our country can compete with the best. Just look at what has been accomplished by Vijay Singh in golf, Vilimaina Davu in netball, and Jo Rokocoko, Sitiveni Sivivatu, and Lote Tuqiri in Rugby.

They are world beaters - and they are from Fiji.

Our magnificent sevens players triumphed last year at the World Cup in Hong Kong.

They have recently done very well in Dubai and came out on top at the George Sevens. Let us rally again behind Waisale Serevi and his boys in their quest for gold at the Commonwealth Games and success in the IRB series.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is nearly five years since the last national elections. In accordance with the Constitution, the country must go to the polls again this year.

This will be another momentous event for Fiji. I urge you to make sure you are registered to vote, and then turn out to cast your ballots.

The elections are your opportunity to make your choice on the leadership of the country and its future direction.

I commend the Electoral Commission and Elections Office, as well as the Constituency Boundaries Commission, for their preparations.

They are independent authorities under our Constitution. I am confident they will again ensure we have free and fair elections.

Ladies and gentlemen, 2006 beckons.

Together, in a partnership for Fiji, we can make this a great year in the building of our nation.

May God bless you all.

May God bless Fiji.
