



Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration

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**RESPONSE BY THE HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) JIOJI KONOUSI KONROTE**  
**MINISTER OF STATE, IMMIGRATION AND EX-SERVICEMEN TO THE ADDRESS**  
**BY HIS EXCELLENCY, THE PRESIDENT, ON THE OPENING OF THE FIRST SESSION**  
**OF THE NEW PARLIAMENT ON TUESDAY, 6<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2006**

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Mr Speaker, Sir, It is an honour and privilege for me to rise for the first time in this august House to contribute to the debate on His Excellency The President, Ratu Josefa Iloilovatu Uluivuda's very moving and most gracious Address.

Before I do so, please allow me Mr Speaker, Sir, to commend and congratulate His Excellency for his courage, strength, foresight and wisdom in reminding us and the nation as a whole, on how we should *govern* and *interact* with our respective electorates in moving our country forward.

Ratu Iloilo epitomizes *loyalty* and *dedication to duty* and like his predecessors, his service to the nation during a most turbulent and challenging period in our short history is a paragon of great

*commitment, compassion* and more importantly, *love* and *caring* for all of us.

May the Good Lord continue to bless His Excellency and grant him good health and long life as President and Commander-in-Chief.

Similarly Mr Speaker, Sir, may I echo the sentiments expressed by the Honourable Members who had addressed this august House in previous days and add my own congratulations on your appointment as Speaker and Chair of this august House. Much has been said about your prowess and your very enviable reputation as a *Town Planner, Sportsman, Senior Civil servant* (PS for Housing & Urban Development /Tourism and Transport), *Diplomat*, and more recently a Government Cabinet Minister.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I warmly congratulate you on your appointment and wish you well and every success in your deliberations. Congratulations are also in order for the Leader of the House, the Honourable S. Kaitani, the Deputy Speaker, the Honourable N. Nawaikula and the Government Whip the Honourable M. Bulanauca.

It is indeed comforting and reassuring to know that we are in good hands.

At this juncture, Mr Speaker, Sir, may I acknowledge the love of Almighty God and His Divine grace in assisting and facilitating the election of each and everyone of us into this august House to govern this beloved country of ours for the next five (5) years.

In this regard, Mr Speaker, Sir , may I extend my warmest personal congratulations to the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Mr Mahendra Chaudhry, Leader of the Fiji Labour Party, the Honourable Mr M Beddoes, Leader of the Opposition and to each and every Honourable member of this august House for your success in being re-elected or being elected for the first time (as is in my case) into Parliament.

Our people have spoken. They have exercised their ***Democratic*** and ***Constitutional Rights*** by voting us as their respective Parliamentary representatives, therefore, Mr Speaker, Sir please allow me to acknowledge with great humility, profound gratitude and deep appreciation, the confidence and trust which has been bestowed upon me by the chiefs, elders and the members of our small Rotuman community as their MP. May I also acknowledge with gratitude the contribution of my predecessors (Colonel Paul Manueli and Mrs M Rigamoto) for serving the interests of our community during their tenures.

As an Independent member, Mr Speaker, Sir, may I at the outset, as it would be remiss of me if I do not acknowledge with humble gratitude, the Honourable PM's very kind and considerate invitation that I join his new Multi-Party Government as Minister of State for Immigration & Ex-Servicemen.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I consider it a great honour and indeed privilege to be appointed to the post and I would like to pledge my loyalty and total support once again to the Honourable PM and members of this august House that I look forward to working with you all and contribute as an effective team player in our individual and collective efforts in serving the interests of our nation.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in his address, HE The President reminded us that ***“Fiji is entering a fresh period in its history with the formation of a Multi-Party Cabinet and Government that is truly representative of our different ethnic and cultural communities.”***

I commend and congratulate the Hon Prime Minister and the Leader of the Fiji Labour Party, Mr Mahendra Chaudhry for having the courage, wisdom and commitment in consenting to the formation of our new Multi-Party Cabinet/Government.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Multi-Party concept of Government is a power-sharing arrangement mandated by Section 99 of our Constitution which

is designed to *foster multi-racial goodwill and cooperation through a consensual approach to decision making*. It provides us with a constitutional and political platform which in my humble opinion *obligates* us to guide and steer this nation during our term in office towards *greater prosperity, security, peace and unity*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, HE The President went on to remind us of our collective obligation as Honourable members of this august House and I quote:

“The challenge is for all of you in Government and in Parliament to make it work for Fiji ..... Your national responsibility is to ensure the success of the Multi-Party Cabinet by making your chamber *less a forum for partisan political debate and more an opportunity for constructive dialogue and to promote greater unity and harmony in our society.*”

Mr Speaker, Sir, and Honourable members of this august House, this is a *big ask* and a *most daunting challenge* to all of us, but I am convinced that *‘the battle is half won already,’* as I am sure the general public accepts this new Multi-party Government arrangement. This is evidenced by the very favourable comments in the Letters to the Editor columns of our daily newspapers, talanoas around the yaqona bowl, including praises and salutations of goodwill from community and church leaders alike.

I have been told by the veterans of this august House that there has been indeed a marked improvement to the standard and level of debate since this new sitting. The tone is more *conciliatory* and *mutually respectful*, a very promising start.

Furthermore, the speed and rapidity in which the European Union responded so favourably to our Ratu Kadavulevu School Appeal with the very generous and kind donation of \$1,000,000 is in my humble opinion, testimony to the acceptance of this new Multi-Party Government by the Non-Government Organisations and the international community.

Mr Speaker, Sir, our '*evolution into nationhood*' (if I may use the phrase) since independence has been somewhat turbulent and the political turmoil of the past two decades in particular, had regrettably tarnished the image of our young nation within the region and the international community as a whole.

*The people have spoken*, this new Multi-Party Cabinet and Government has been formed, but more importantly HE The President has *challenged* us, therefore Mr Speaker, Sir, Honourable members of this august House *it is now incumbent upon us to make it work*.

In recent years like the rest of the nation I had watched with great concern and sadness how political bickering and one upmanship within

this august House had stifled and impeded good intentions and initiatives from both sides of the House.

Mr Speaker, Sir, *the whole nation is now watching* and waiting with hopeful anticipation that we will put aside our different political and personal agendas and do the *right* and *honourable* thing by ensuring that we continue to put national interests first in all our deliberations and decisions.

May I re-emphasize and reiterate the words *right* and *honourable*, Mr Speaker, Sir, as we are being addressed as *Honourable Members of Parliament*, therefore let us heed HE The President's plea and *lead by example* in promoting *mutual respect, greater unity* and *harmony* within this august House. May I be forgiven for being presumptuous, but as a God-fearing person, I believe in being honest and forthright.

As a former Military Commander, one of the virtues of good command and leadership is to *lead by example*, and what better way to demonstrate our goodwill and commitment in promoting national unity, than to *engage in constructive dialogue for the good of all* within this august House.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am convinced and confident that despite our varying and different views and perceptions on issues, but, as *educated* and *responsible people*, I believe that we can *rise to the challenge* in

supporting our leaders within this august House to make this new Multi-Party Cabinet/Government concept work.

Let us not disappoint our people, *for this beloved nation of ours deserves better*. It is my humble opinion, Sir, that this new form of Government is like a *breath of fresh air* to the nation after a rather long period of uncertainty and distrust.

Mr Speaker, Sir, let history judge us fairly, and with Almighty God's guidance and blessing, let us be remembered as the Government that, *brought this beloved nation of ours out of the doldrums of partisan political confrontation to a new era of bi-partisan and consensual relationship, transparency and good governance*.

*National Reconciliation* and *Unity* must begin from within the walls of this august House with the manner in which we *interact* and *govern*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, it is only logical that unity within this august House would contribute towards a *positive political climate* conducive to peace and prosperity. This would inevitably bring forth an era of unprecedented *economic* and *political stability* for our beloved Fiji.

*Political stability* was something which I had been looking forward to during my entire tenure as our country's High Commissioner to the Commonwealth of Australia and the Republic of Singapore for the past



four years. It was like an *'elusive dream'* because it certainly *'cramped my style'* and indeed *hampered my sales pitch* in trying to attract potential investors and tourists alike by promoting Fiji as *'the way the World should be'*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the stigma of our rather turbulent political attempts at *achieving nationhood* and *democratic maturity* will continue to haunt us for sometime, but then, I am more than convinced that we had taken a giant leap in the right direction with *a successful general election and the formation of the new Multi-Party Cabinet/Government*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, please allow me to now speak very briefly on my core function responsibilities as a Minister of State for IMMIGRATION and EX-SERVICEMEN.

We now live in an *unpredictable, volatile* and *very dangerous* global village with the ever-growing threat of: *transnational terrorism* and *drug/people trafficking* as major threat and security concerns for most countries, including Fiji.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to take the precautionary steps to improve security and protect our border entry points like our air and sea ports.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Department of Immigration and the Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Services are the primary agencies responsible for border control and are currently working on an Advanced Passenger Information (API) system and CCTV which are to be introduced to our major points of entry later this year.

At this juncture, Sir, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Australian Government, particularly its Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) for training selected Border Control Officers of our Immigration Department on *Information and Policy Advisory matters* and the *provision of specialist surveillance and detection equipment*. Australia DIMIA has funded other Institutional Strengthening Initiatives like a recently completed Independent Border Assessment Survey which was carried out by the International Organisation for Migration.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Fiji is the current *Chair* of the *Pacific Immigration Directors Conference* which works very closely with the *Forum Secretariat* in providing Pacific Islands governments with information on migration trends and associated problems.

The issue of *Work Permits* for potential investors has been problematic for sometime, but with the establishment of the Investment Unit within the Department, closer liaison and cooperation with the Fiji Trades and

Investment Board and the Ministry of Commerce, we hope to achieve our target of 10 x days turnaround time very soon.

Mr Speaker, Sir, regrettably Fiji has been used by international criminal organizations over these past years as a '*transit point*' to further their activities within the region. The Department is now working very closely with local and overseas agencies in our collective effort to curb the flow of illegal immigrants and criminals through our ports.

*Improved surveillance capability* and the *timely exchange of intelligence* with our regional partners (Australia and New Zealand) has resulted in the arrest and deportation of some 'undesirables' from our shores.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Immigration Department is in the process of being reformed consequent upon and in accordance with the Government Reform Programmes in order to *improve its service delivery capability*.

For sometime now the Immigration Department has been plagued with problems and the latest Auditor-General's report about *corruption* within the organization has been very demoralizing to the staff and equally embarrassing to the Ministry and Government as a whole.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in his address, HE The President spoke about ***Good Governance*** and reaffirmed Government's commitment ***“to rooting out corruption, through a policy of zero tolerance”***.

A draft legislation is now being prepared to implement this ***zero tolerance policy*** and as Minister of State responsible for Immigration, I would like to re-assure the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable members of this august House that ***I intend to root out corruption from within the Department as soon as possible.***

Mr Speaker, Sir, Honourable Members, ***Corruption must be stamped out from within the Immigration Department*** and the whole Government machinery if we are to maintain the ***integrity*** and ***credibility*** of this country. ***Corruption must not be allowed to be the norm in how we interact and do business.*** God forbid.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Honourable Members, over the years many potential investors have shied away from our shores because of this, therefore may I appeal to your good judgment, assistance and support and let us as political leaders of this country ***stamp out this scourge from within our midst.***

Mr Speaker, Sir, Honourable Members, I know I can count on your support in this regard. Thank you!

Mr Speaker, Sir, may I now address the other part of my primary responsibilities as Minister of State for Ex-Servicemen. Before I do may I remind this august House that we now have women within the ranks of our Ex-Servicemen therefore I would like to refer to them as *veterans*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, as a former soldier myself, it is my humble opinion that *the plight of our veterans have been neglected for too long* and I would like to commend and thank the Honourable Prime Minister for appointing me as the Minister of State responsible for looking after the welfare of our thousands of servicemen and women throughout the country.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in acknowledging the sterling contributions of our past and present veterans, the Honourable Prime Minister and the last Government had declared *2007 as The Year of the Veterans*. This is indeed a much welcomed acknowledgement and great tribute to our fallen comrades and the present generation of servicemen and women who fought so gallantly to maintain peace and defend the freedom that we enjoy today. *Let us not forget them for they deserve better.*

The administration and financial assistance provided to veterans under the After Care Fund will have to be reviewed.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the decision by the *Royal Commonwealth Ex-Servicemen League* to hold its *30<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference here in Fiji* in 2008 is testimony to the reverence and high regard which this august international forum has for the sacrifice and contribution of our soldiers, seamen and airmen towards the British Imperial and Commonwealth effort during the *two World Wars*, the *Malayan Emergency*, the *Christmas Island Expedition* and more recently our participation in *United Nations* and *Regional* sponsored *Peacekeeping* and *Peace Support Operations Worldwide*. This is a great tribute for Fiji.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Honourable members, our veterans have served us well during our young nation's hour of need. They have brought *honour* and *glory* to this country and some have paid the *supreme sacrifice* to enable you and I to enjoy the freedom that we take so much for granted today. Our young servicemen and women of today who are continuing our proud and enviable reputation in serving in some of the most volatile and dangerous conflict zones in the world today, will become tomorrow's veterans.

*Let us remember them, lest we forget.*

### **Call to Service**

Mr Speaker, Sir, in concluding, HE The President reminded us, *'to make service to the country the guiding principle of our work'*. In

fact, HE had challenged us to take this opportunity as members of this new Multi-Party Cabinet and Government to guide our nation towards greater harmony and prosperity and be remembered by future generations that, *'we served our country well'*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the wizard, maestro, *Waisale Serevi* and his gallant band of warriors of the National Sevens Team are continuing in the proud tradition of serving our country well. I congratulate and salute them for their latest triumph in winning the International Rugby Board Series in Twickenham last week. We are now the World Champions and let us all rejoice and be proud about it.

Similarly, Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge and congratulate *Mr Vijay Singh* as well for his latest win in the international Golf circuit. Here is another son of Fiji who has done us proud with his *service* and prowess as a professional golfer.

### **Constituency Issues**

Mr Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, please allow me to address some constituency issues regarding our little indigenous Rotuman community.

Over the past week or so, I have been listening with great interest to contributions regarding HE The President's address from Honourable members of this august House.

Mr Speaker, Sir, many references were made to Government's '**Look North**' policy which sadly appears to me as extending only as far north as Udu Point?

As the only member for Rotuma, may I humbly request that despite the fact that our little island is administered under the Eastern Divisional Commissioner, an exception be made for Rotuma?

Mr Speaker, Sir, Honourable Members of this House our small island community in Rotuma face similar problems with the rest of our brethren throughout the remote islands and rural communities in Fiji.

We have:

- Roads to be repaired
- A hospital that needs to be renovated, properly equipped and staffed
- Schools to be repaired and renovated
- An airstrip to be upgraded
- A jetty to be repaired/improved
- Villages to be provided with electricity
- Improvement to air/sea services to the island
- Employment for school leavers

After having highlighted these issues, I would like to take this opportunity Mr Speaker, Sir, to acknowledge with great humility and deep appreciation the efforts of Government and past administrations in



addressing most of these within the constraints of limited funding allocation.

Mr Speaker, Sir, since coming into this august House, I am very heartened by the positive response from some of the Honourable members who have pledged their support to assist *in improving the lot* of our small community. We have agricultural and maritime resources to be tapped.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion Mr Speaker, Sir, may I once again acknowledge and thank the Chiefs, Church and Community Leaders of our small Rotuman community for having me elected as their sole Parliamentary Representative and with Almighty God's guidance and help I promise to serve them and our nation well.

To my campaign manager, Dr (now Honourable Senator John Fatiaki and Coordinator Mr. Tonu Nataniela, my wife Sarote and our children, members of our immediate families, relatives and supporters, I would like to say: *Noa'ia 'e Hanisi'*.

Mr Speaker, Sir, to the Honourable Prime Minister, may I once again acknowledge with profound gratitude and deep appreciation your very kind offer and invitation that I join your Government.

After 42 years of loyal and faithful service to our beloved country as a Military Officer, United Nations Assistant Secretary General and International Peacekeeping Military Commander, a Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs and Immigration and more recently a diplomat, I have returned with the intention and commitment to '*soldier on*' as a politician. I look forward to serving our country well by making a positive contribution towards National Reconciliation and Nation-building.

May God bless Fiji.

Mr Speaker, Sir, with those closing remarks I would like to endorse and support the motion.

Thank you

Vinaka Saka Vakalevu

Dhanyavaad

Faiaksea

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