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ENVIRONMENT**

**“STRENGTHENING ACTIONS FOR NATURE TO ACHIEVE THE
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS”**

TUESDAY 1ST MARCH 2022

- His Excellency, the President of the United Nations Environment Assembly;
- Under Secretary General of the United Nations and the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme;
- Heads of Delegations;
- Colleagues;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very warm welcome from the isles of Fiji.

The globe is reeling under a severe planetary crisis, seriously harming all life on earth. The Biodiversity Loss and Climate Change are the two most impactful risks affecting multiple sectors.

The relentless demands placed on the earth’s resources exceed all our planetary boundaries - driving over a million species of plants and animals to the brink of extinction. This loss in biodiversity is catastrophic, fueled by climate change, causing irreversible damage to the environment and

human health. As a result, the emergence of public health diseases is on the rise globally.

Studies have confirmed that many of the public health diseases are linked to the loss of biodiversity and climate change that we see today. The origin for zoonotic diseases for example, the Ebola virus outbreak in the years, 2014 to 2016 stems from environmental degradation - particularly, deforestation, which has forced bats (a disease-vector), out of their natural habitats. Another candid example is the Chikungunya virus.

However, the good news is that, we humans have the power to reverse it. Intrinsically, a nature-positive global approach from us is all that is required to prevent another pandemic.

Ladies and Gentlemen, by embracing agro-ecological practices, such as agroforestry, bio-conservation and regenerative agricultural practices, can restore and sustain the ecosystem services like soil health, flowing waterways and the sinking of carbon. This also helps close yield gaps. Our Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) instruments safeguard the focus on the above as developments are considered. This includes agro-ecological practices that are applied in every relevant area of development.

It is important to recognize that biodiversity underpins the delivery of all ecosystem services on which the humanity rests and that these are critical for the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Global and national targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Paris Agreement.

We must ensure that as one global family, we adopt best practices that protect, manage and restore nature, while gradually meeting the fundamentals of human rights to healthy and nutritious food supplies for all.

The Fijian approach

In Fiji, we are working tirelessly to protect, manage and restore our ecosystems. As a small island nation vulnerable to climate change, we are relying on nature and are actively promoting and incorporating Nature based solutions (NbS) to our ever-increasing disaster management models.

We have taken a number of steps in Fiji to combat climate change. The approach taken by Fiji supports the recovery of nature as a basis for the recovery and resilience of our people and our economy, One such exemplar is the "Jobs for Nature Rehabilitation" (J-NR) Programme. The programme promotes ecosystem restoration projects such as reforestation, mangrove and sea grass restoration, riverbank and coastal protection, and degraded land rehabilitation using sustainable agricultural approaches. This program is directed to the heart of the problem – the need to buy-in ownership from our communities – a shared responsibility from our communities to commit to restoring nature within the spaces where they co-exist with Nature. Thanks to this innovative model, apart from instilling community ownership to tackling Nature and Biodiversity loss/ restoration, it also provides employment opportunities to hundreds of Fijians.

Additionally, we've produced evidence-based tangible outputs on the ground as our vision lies in the realms of long-term perspectives, taking

our cue from lessons learnt in the past – it is this quest that keeps us future-fit, adjusting our trajectory towards a brighter and better Fijian destiny.

A fitting example of this are the four (4) programs mandated under The Fijian Ministry of Waterways, with each program tied to the on-going protection of our communities from the disastrous effects of climate change, which are:

- a) Coastal Erosion Protection Programme
- b) Land Drainage and Flood Protection Programme
- c) Drainage for Farmland & Rural Residential Programme
- d) Irrigation Support for Farm Development Programme

Fellow Ministers and Distinguished Guests, the Fijian Government, recently passed the Climate Change Act 2021 outlining a comprehensive solution to addressing Climate Change. Apart from safeguarding our Biodiversity, the legislation specifies Fiji's climate mitigation and adaptation measures, trials, coordinated responses to climate emergencies and displacement, and creates committees, protocols, and regulations ensuring Fiji meets its climate targets and commitments under the Paris Agreement.

Fiji strongly believes that a holistic and comprehensive global instrument/ agreement will greatly enhance our global/ national efforts in addressing marine litter and plastic pollution and will also support the development of national action plans. It is the best possible way to connect and drive the momentum around sustainable materials and consistent stewardship towards managing the plastics menace.

It is also critical my fellow leaders that our youth and women are given a seat at the table. This will provide leverage to their collective voice(s). Voices that would advocate, lobby and lead campaigns in support of environmentally sustainable behaviors and legislations.

I am heartened with the resumption of the UNEA, and I plead that we no longer equivocate but reach an understanding to make the necessary inroads to immediately mitigate the effects of climate change. For this to happen, a concerted global effort is the only solution to curbing our global warming woes and the drastically changing climatic patterns.

“A Once in a lifetime Opportunity”

It's is my sincerest hope that the many one to one interactions, the leadership dialogues and the side events that are taking place and those that are due to take place during the week will unwrap solutions to some of the gravest environmental challenges the globe is facing today. A once in a lifetime opportunity is at hand to identify and grab a collective and **game-changing solution** that will result in a **'nature-positive world'** – **snatching the world from the jaws of irreversible biological disaster.**

Fiji wishes all participants at the United Nations Environment Assembly 5.2 the very best for a meaningful week.

Thank you Mr. President.