



## Grand Chief, Sir Michael Somare's Statement during the occasion of the Fiji MSG Silver Jubilee Celebrations

18 March 2013, USP ICT Centre, Laucala Campus, Suva, Fiji

(Foreign Minister, Members of Parliament of Fiji, Chiefs of Fiji, Chancellor and Vice Chancellor of USP, Church Leaders of Fiji, distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen)

Let me also specifically acknowledge the presence of Sitiveni Rabuka, former Prime Minister of Fiji, whose decision made it possible for Fiji to become a member of MSG in 1996.

It is indeed nice to be back in Fiji.

My only regret is that Lady Veronica is not with me on this occasion to enjoy the warm and generous hospitality that the Fiji Government and people always accord me.

The occasion is made the more special for me as Fiji and the MSG occupy an

important place in my political belief for a more constructive, assertive and prosperous Melanesian peoples.

Fiji offers additional substance to the MSG and the MSG as a grouping offers a good conduit for greater cooperation and development amongst Melanesian peoples.

The special Silver Jubilee celebrations offers an opportune time to reflect on where MSG has come from as an organisation, take stock of what we have done, or equally important what we have not done, assess the current and emerging challenges and seek to chart the future of the MSG given the experience, prevailing circumstances and Melanesian heritage.

We owe it to our peoples of Melanesia to keep MSG relevant.

I thank the Government of Fiji for inviting me to share my thoughts on MSG during your celebrations to mark MSG's 25 years of existence. I consider it an honour to be amongst those in the region whose views are being sought on MSG cooperation.

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I consider it also very relevant that my address is being given at USP – a bastion of intellectual exchange amongst pacific peoples and arguably one of the best symbols of cooperation in our region.

Fiji is an appropriate place to discuss matters of regional and sub-regional cooperation. Its leaders have willingly accepted responsibility for many cooperative arrangements between pacific peoples. USP itself, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Fiji School of Medicine are but some examples.

No doubt, during the course of the silver jubilee celebrations there will be a lot of proposals canvassed to strengthen the MSG, make it more relevant to the times and, more importantly, make it more responsive to the interests and needs of its members.

I am aware that some new thoughts on directions and parameters of cooperation are already being discussed under the ambit of the Review of the Agreement Establishing the MSG and the Strengthening of MSG Cooperation considered by the Special Foreign Ministers Meeting last year under Fiji's

chairmanship.

Likewise, the Secretariat's proposal on the development of a Melanesian Vision, the various efforts undertaken under the MSG Trade Agreement and the work of the various sectoral committees and the Technical Officials Meetings all seek to do the same.

I would like to, therefore, think that the crux of our challenge is to ensure that our focus is streamlined and the necessary political will and resources are provided to bring to fruition these ideas.

The truth is that all good initiatives will come to naught if the political will is not there and member Governments are not prepared to pay for the costs. In other words, MSG will only succeed in its efforts if its members allow it to.

### **MSG/Pacific Islands Forum**

As we seek to strengthen and redefine our organisation, suspicions have been echoed in some quarters on the real intentions of MSG.

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Let me make this observation. A stronger MSG will serve as a solid building block for broader regional cooperation and integration pursued by Pacific Islands Forum under the Pacific Plan.

MSG's objectives and intentions are the same as those of Pacific Islands Forum, although approaches to issues may differ sometimes. MSG's successes can only help precipitate successes within the Forum.

### **Political and Security**

#### *Kanaky/New Caledonia*

MSG was born from the crucible of a desire by four of our founding leaders to advance the aspirations of the Kanaky people, the indigenous people of New Caledonia, to exercise their inalienable rights to self-determination as recognised under the United Nations Charter. This objective must continue to occupy our organisations' best efforts or we run the real risk of losing our reason for existence.

The MSG has been in the forefront of interventions at the United Nations to maintain New Caledonia on the agenda of the Committee of 24. In large part to the concerted efforts of MSG countries representatives in New York and direct representations made by our capitals to the Government of France, serious efforts have been made by the United Nations and the Government of France to enable the people of New Caledonia exercise their right to self-determination.

We must intensify these efforts.

The MSG's greater challenge is to continue to put pressure to bear on the United Nations, the Government of France and the powers that be to not lose sight of the fact that the Kanaky people, their interests and aspirations are central and critical pieces in the preparations towards the exercise of self-determination and the outcome of that process itself.

We must continue to encourage regular UN Missions to New Caledonia and insist on affirmative action by the UN and France to the needs of the Kanaky people.

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I am happy to see the MSG Secretariat's efforts towards greater exchanges with the United Nations and commend them for the conclusion on the Letter of Exchange with the UN Department of Political Affairs on information sharing with respect to New Caledonia.

The process brought about by the Noumea Accord and the ultimate end product of that process must reflect the genuine interests and aspirations of the Kanaky people. The MSG as a grouping owes it to the Kanaky people to ensure they exercise their right to self-determination, envisaged under the Noumea Accord, in ways that recognise and take into account their standing as indigenous people.

We must continue our own independent MSG technical and high level political missions to New Caledonia. We must, in a substantive way, translate our Governments offers of assistance to the Kanaky people from mere rhetoric to practical help.

To further emphasise the importance with which we attach to the Kanaky cause, we must ensure that the MSG Secretariat has a dedicated unit dealing with the Kanaky issue.

### *Nuclear Free Pacific*

An issue that has somewhat dropped off from MSG's original agenda is that of nuclear weapons testing, emplacement in and transshipment of nuclear weapons and nuclear material in the Pacific.

By and large this is due to the fact that Nuclear Powers have recognised our concerns over these issues and have conducted themselves in ways that respect our wishes and interests.

MSG obviously cannot claim sole credit for this positive disposition in Nuclear Powers but our persistent criticisms of Nuclear Powers scant regard for our peoples' health and safety in their nuclear development programs helped galvanise international support for the cessation of nuclear testing in the Pacific and the adoption and acceptance of a Pacific Nuclear Free Zone under the Treaty of Rarotonga.

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MSG would be well advised to keep a watching brief over efforts to establish appropriate compensatory facilities for coastal states in the event of accidents involving nuclear powered vessels or during transshipment of nuclear material through our waters.

### *Fiji*

Political Developments currently underway in Fiji require MSG's close attention and understanding.

Fiji is a member of MSG and there is a general expectation for MSG to play a prominent role in bringing about a long lasting solution to the political challenges confronting Fiji.

But of more fundamental importance to me is the position that MSG members adopt on Fiji. The choices MSG members make on Fiji as it grapples with its complex maze of challenges strikes at the very heart of how we want to

resolve problems in our region.

Many of you would be familiar with my views on the difficult and complex situation here. I have always spoken out against a quick fix and have criticised attempts to impose prescriptions from outside.

I have counselled others not to pressure Fiji to artificially tinker with the constitution simply to appease development partners or to quell criticisms from our big boys in the region. I have argued that, that solution would be short lived.

I have also cautioned against attempts to force Fiji to satisfy certain lofty ideals and pious principles for the sake of conformity and acceptance. I have pointed out that a one-fits-all solution risks being counterproductive if local conditions are not factored in.

I have also pleaded with our friends at the Pacific Forum and the Commonwealth to show patience, compassion and understanding on Fiji and not exclude her from their membership. I have always held the view that working our differences and disagreements from within is less antagonistic and therefore more helpful to lasting solutions and enduring relationships.

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MSG must provide understanding and support that Fiji requires to navigate through its political challenges via the Strategic Framework for Change. Fiji is almost at the end of the process on the new Constitution aimed at restoring democracy. The Fiji Government requires our patience and the Fiji people deserve our trust in their judgement.

Whatever the end product, it is for Fiji and its people to decide and no one else. We must respect this. MSG must be unequivocal on this point.

I for one have no doubt in the wisdom of the Fiji leaders and peoples to arrive at a responsible outcome.

### *Membership Issues*

With regard to the question of Membership, MSG must remain open to other Melanesian peoples joining or participating, in one form or another, when

agreed guidelines and criteria have been fulfilled.

In saying that, let me make this observation on a critical matter that appears to have been lost in the midst of our discussions on membership.

MSG is not an inter-governmental organisation. It is not an organisation made up of independent sovereign states.

I make this point to remind us that one of the original members of MSG, FLNKS, is a Melanesian liberation movement. I encourage us to be bold and inventive in considering membership requests from other Melanesian peoples and communities.

I am aware of the sensitivity of one of our Melanesian peoples, West Papua, joining our organisation but that should not stop us from allowing it to be involved in our cultural, sporting and information exchange programs while MSG members search for a consensus agreement on their membership request.

Caution and patience must guide our actions on this matter. Dialogue and extensive consultations should underlie our approach on West Papua.

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Caution will ensure that the interests and needs of individual existing members are taken into account and patience will allow for enabling environment to prevail first in West Papua.

We must also allow our organisation to benefit from interactions with our other neighbouring countries that have expressed a desire for such cooperation. I understand that one or two of our brothers from the Micronesian grouping have informally expressed such an intention. Perhaps an MSG plus formula might be a way to accommodate this.

Experience suggests that closer working links with other organisations and appropriate interface with development partners and other international actors can only be beneficial to the organisation. Thus, mechanisms such as observers, associate members and special guests must be developed to cater

for this. The Secretariat must continue its refinement of these arrangements.

### *Emergency Response Force*

I will now turn to an issue which was first suggested by my good friend, Sir Julius Chan, in the wake of the Kumul Force deployment to Vanuatu. I refer to his call for consideration to be given to the idea of a Peace Keeping Force or an Emergency Response Force.

Fiji can play a crucial role in this area.

Santos, Bougainville and RAMSI suggest that such an idea is not so far-fetched. Regular natural disasters and their effects on our respective countries responses also underlie the need to establish a joint emergency response unit.

This must be seriously considered by our Governments. If the wider Forum region is still harbouring some reservations to this proposal then MSG can take a lead on this idea. I note the MSG is progressing this matter through the MSG Humanitarian & Emergency Response Force.

The MSG countries are situated in an area prone to natural disasters. Almost every year our countries are subjected to the full fury of nature with devastating effects on our economies and peoples. More often than not the devastation itself renders individual Governments responses inadequate.

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Timely response by individual countries is often lacking due to capacity constraints. This is further compounded by resource limitations thus exacting unnecessary suffering on our peoples.

Evolving political and security concerns within our countries suggest that an arrangement such as a rapid response unit might assist local authorities alleviate if not address these concerns.

I encourage MSG Governments to establish the MSG Humanitarian & Emergency Response Force as soon as possible.

### **Trade and Economic**

Trade and economic relations within the MSG members have blossomed since

the MSG Trade Agreement was signed. MSG can feel satisfied with its successes in this area.

Fiji's role in this area of success for the MSG cannot be underestimated. Since its admission in 1996, MSG trade and investment has exponentially grown.

From a mere three item list (tin fish, tea and beef) on our trade schedule, it has now gone over a thousand tariff items; surpassing initial expectations. So much so that the cynicism which first met our efforts to encourage trade with each other has now been replaced with envy and awe at how successful we have been.

Trade and economic cooperation provide the natural complementarity to political cooperation.

Trade and economic cooperation provides a vehicle for our countries prosperity. It provides jobs for our people, it puts food on the table for our people and it enables our Governments to provide basic health services, education and infrastructure development.

I note the efforts we are currently making in the areas of MSG Skills Movement Scheme, Trade in Services, reciprocal mutual recognition arrangements, Rules of Origin, Quarantine, Bio-security and phythosanitary measures. These are commendable.

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MSG goal now must be to take this cooperation to the next level. Fiji and Papua New Guinea must provide the spring board for this leap forward.

Our cooperation must be intensified and expanded. Trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation must be undertaken with aggression by our Governments and corporate citizens.

Our corporate citizens are in fact already giving substance to our political plans for greater economic cooperation. For instance Fijian Holdings, Datec, Communications Fiji, City Pharmacy, Pacific Building Solutions, Punjas, CJ Patel, Vinod Patel are already operating in Papua New Guinea.

For Papua New Guinea, we already have BSP, Credit Corporation, MRDC and its

subsidiaries, Kramer Ausenco, Lamana Holdings, NASFUND and Wesram have taken up investments here in Fiji.

Trade and investment choke points must be identified and removed to further assist our corporate citizens.

If, for instance, manuals and standards on Rules of Origin, Quarantine and immigration inherited from our metropolitan powers are proving to be stumbling blocks to our efforts towards greater trade and investment liberalisation then lets us review them.

Let us tailor new manuals and develop appropriate standards to allow for greater movement of skilled manpower and better flow of investment capital between our countries.

MSG members need to further bolster their cooperative efforts in the trade and economic area.

### **Cultural and Sporting**

Obviously our grouping represents a certain defined cultural heritage and identity. In order to promote and preserve this rich cultural heritage and identity we must continue to encourage cultural and sporting exchanges amongst our peoples.

The Melanesian Cultural Festival must feature prominently in the Budgets of our relevant Government agencies responsible for cultural affairs.

As I alluded to earlier on, other Melanesian communities that are not yet full members of MSG can and should be encouraged to be involved in these activities.

There is no reason why our tourism and cultural affairs bodies cannot organise package tours for the MSG countries to coincide with cultural events in our respective countries. In other words, instead of selling our countries separately to the foreign tourist or traveller, we promote and sell our countries as one destination.

In sports, there is considerable scope to further strengthen exchanges between ourselves in the different sporting codes to develop our competitive edge. This will lead to better preparation for our respective countries participation at the SP Games and other regional and international sporting meets.

The current Melanesian Soccer Tournament can serve as a template for the other sporting codes such as netball, rugby, cricket and perhaps an athletics meet.

## **Conclusion**

The MSG has come a long way from its humble beginnings 25 years ago in Goroka, Papua New Guinea. We should all feel rightly proud of our achievements since then.

But we must continuously seek to maintain MSG's relevance as an organisation. Fiji has an important role in this regard.

I note, with some sense of trepidation, that our agenda has since expanded to cover many aspects of relations between countries. While this correlates with the growing cooperation between and amongst members of our MSG grouping, we would do well to focus our attention, energy and limited resources on our core mission and the few things we can do well.

Let us not forget Kanaky peoples political aspirations and renew our commitment to them. Let us not put on the back burner the Nuclear issue as defined by the Rarotonga Treaty.

The challenge is to resist the temptation of trying to duplicate what other regional organisations, to which we are members, are doing. We must therefore choose carefully what we want to embark on and commit ourselves fully, both in political will and requisite resources to accomplish the task.

MSG has had its fair share of cynicism since its inception.

Our detractors have labelled us with the unsavory tag of the "arch of instability" and many of the initiatives we have proposed or undertaken have

been viewed by so-called learned observers as duds – representing nothing more than political posturing.

Our well-earned successes have, more often than not, been belittled as accidents, products of circumstance or resulting from the benevolence of other countries.

I for one believe that these sentiments are but manifestations of sour grapes from those that envy our successes; from those that wanted us to fail in our venture.

Let me just make this analogy, stones and sticks are normally thrown at trees that bear fruit not to those that are void of fruits.

MSG is bearing fruits. MSG member countries economic growth patterns of recent times manifest this. We are doing something right!

Let us note the criticisms and use them as incentives to forge ahead with our cooperation initiatives.

Let no one tell us otherwise, MSG is here to stay.

I have no doubt MSG will only continue to grow from strength to strength.

I can feel the undying passion with which our peoples attach to the objectives of the MSG.

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I know the strong commitment and deep desire of our Governments, present and future, to ensure MSG succeeds.

All of these make for an enduring and prosperous future for the MSG and for which we should all embrace and nurture.

Let us turn MSG into the “arch of prosperity”.

Papua New Guinea and Fiji are capable and can provide the nexus for MSG’s cooperation towards prosperity.

Long live MSG!

I thank you.

