



**ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, HERITAGE AND ARTS
DR.MAHENDRA REDDY**

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE INTERNATIONAL DAY
OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

**Shangrilas Fijian Resort,
Sigatoka.**

**Thursday, 3rd December, 2015.
9.00a.m.**

- **In Country Manager, Scope Global, Australian Aid - Mr. Daniel Taufaga**
- **Managing Director, Mc Donalds Fiji Ltd - Mr. Mark Mc Elrath**
- **Former Patron, Western Council of Special Educators - Mrs. Susana Daurewa**
- **Vice President of Fiji Disabled People's Federation - Mr. Fuata Faukataufon**
- **Chairperson, Special Olympics, Fiji - Mr. Bishwa Sidal**
- **President, Fiji Paralympics Association - Mr. Fred Fatiaki**
- **Vice President-Fiji Association for the Deaf - Mr. Serevi Rokotuibau**
- **Senior Staff of the Ministry of Education**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen**

Good morning and I must thank you all for the welcoming gesture accorded to me today.

It gives me great pleasure to give the keynote address today at the celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, The International Day of Persons with Disabilities has been commemorated since 1992 to promote awareness and mobilize support for critical issues relating to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and development. This important day works to promote action to raise awareness about disability issues and draw attention to the benefits of an inclusive and accessible society for all.

I am indeed pleased to see you all today representing your various institutions at this very important celebration. As you know, this government is absolutely committed to the core principle of “No one left behind”. The Bainimarama government has been pursuing alternatives recently to ensure that every ordinary Fijian is given equal opportunity to grow and develop to their full capacity.

The 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji includes significant provisions for persons with disabilities including the right to reasonable access to all places, public transport and information; sign language, Braille and other means of communication; reasonable access to necessary material, substances and devices relating to the person’s disability; reasonable

adaptation of buildings, practices and procedures to enable their full participation in society and the effective realisation of their rights.

Furthermore, the Constitution enshrines the right of every person to early childhood, primary, secondary and further education. In addition, the right to access quality education in local schools is supported by various Acts and captured in the Ministry of Education's Policy on Effective Implementation of Special and Inclusive Education, endorsed in 2011.

I am indeed pleased with the theme adopted for this year's celebration which states *Inclusion matters: access and empowerment for person of all abilities.*

Ladies and Gentlemen, the estimated one billion people living with disabilities worldwide face many barriers to inclusion in many key aspects of society. As a result, people with disabilities do not enjoy access to society on an equal basis with others, which includes areas of education, information, transportation, and employment as well as social and political participation. The right to participate in public life is essential to create stable democracies, active citizenship and reduce inequalities in society.

Ladies and Gentlemen, women and men with disabilities must be able to fulfill their role in society and participate on an equal basis with others. It is important to focus on the ability

and not on the disability of an individual. Often, the societal image of persons with disabilities is impacted by attitudes based on stigma and discrimination, as well as archaic ideas about disability and persons with disabilities that are often the greatest barrier to their full and equal participation in society and development on an equal basis with others. It is important to note that disability is part of the human condition, and that all of us either are or will become disabled to one degree or another during the course of our lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen, by promoting empowerment, real opportunities for people are created. This enhances their own capacities and supports them in setting their own priorities. Empowerment involves investing in people - in jobs, health, nutrition, education, and social protection. When people are empowered they are better prepared to take advantage of opportunities, they become agents of change and can more readily embrace their civic responsibilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, of the global population of persons with disabilities, 80% of them live in developing countries. One third of all out-of-school children have disabilities, and fewer than 2% of children with disabilities in developing countries are in school. These are shocking figures. Events such as this Day hope to raise awareness of this injustice in our societies and to mobilize us to make a change in access of persons with disabilities to education, information, employment, health care and other spheres of life.

Today, the horizons for persons with disabilities are expanding further and further thanks to the major technological advances we are lucky to be witnessing. Assistive devices and technologies such as wheelchairs, prostheses, mobility aides, hearing aids, visual aids, and specialized computer software and hardware increase mobility, hearing, vision and communication capacities. With the aid of these technologies, people with a loss in functioning are better able to live independently and participate in their societies. However, in many low-income and middle-income countries, only 5%-15% of people who require assistive devices and technologies have access to them.

Ladies and Gentlemen, there is a global movement working to ensure that all persons with disabilities have access to new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) that allow them access to information and knowledge and can benefit from this technological age. The power of technological and scientific progress for inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities have been acknowledged in the UNESCO Outcome Document – The New Delhi Declaration on Inclusive ICTs for Persons with Disabilities: Making Empowerment a Reality in 2015 by UNESCO's Executive Board.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Fiji is proud to be one of the Pacific's leading countries in the move to embrace and expand inclusive education, as upheld in global and regional charters such as the:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly outlined in Article 24;
- the Incheon Strategy to Make the Right Real for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific; and the
- Pacific Education Development Framework.

In partnership between the Ministry of Education and the Access to Quality Education Program (AQEP), a number of projects and initiatives have gone forward in line with the policy objectives:

- Five mainstream schools have been piloting Inclusive Education through AQEP since January 2013;
- in 2014, training was conducted for 345 primary school head teachers and 34 secondary school principals;
- special schools have been supported through the Allied Health Team of Australian volunteers, to strengthen classroom strategies for children with disabilities, and to strengthen their use of Individual Education Plans; and
- an increasing number of regular schools are enrolling children with disabilities.

In the recent 2016 budget address, a total of \$3.3 million have been directed towards special education and the grant allocation for students with disabilities have been increased from \$250 to \$500 per child to ensure that the child is provided adequate resources to develop to their full capacity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts I have much pleasure to declare the International Day of Persons Disabilities celebration officially open.

Vinaka vakalevu , Thank You and Dhanyavaad.
