

Talanoa Statement On National Unity

1 December, 2000

*The Warwick Fiji
Korolevu, Sigatoka, Fiji Islands*

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We, citizens of Fiji from different groups but expressing ourselves as individuals, make this statement of commitment to a talanoa process of dialogue and action to promote the national unity of Fiji.

The Basis of Talanoa

Our talanoa is based on the principles of reconciliation, inclusion, sincerity, honesty, respect for each other as individuals, respect for the rich indigenous and other cultural traditions domiciled in Fiji, and respect for our national assets and institutions including spirituality, human values, aspirations for economic and social justice, and basic constitutional principles.

Our talanoa is forward-looking. Taking account of and learning from the reality of the past, we seek to establish the basis for national unity in the future based on social and political stability.

National unity requires both dialogue and actions to increase understanding among the peoples of Fiji and dialogue and actions to address basic problems that underlie disunity. National unity also requires the highest standards of leadership and good governance.

Promoting Understanding and Respect

Prejudicial stereotyping, cultural insensitivities, and a failure to work concertedly to build bridges across cultures are serious national problems. To ensure mutual understanding and respect, we urge a concerted program of inter-ethnic and multi-ethnic exchanges, educational programs, and research designed to strengthen understanding of the various social institutions and structures, traditions and cultures, and faiths of the nation. We urge that there be a special position for the study and appreciation of indigenous history and culture. Histories and cultures of other communities in Fiji must also be studied. Such a program, carried out in good faith and on a sustained basis, will help build for mutual respect and national pride in our multiple cultures.

Mutual understanding and respect can also be promoted through building and strengthening cross-cultural social and other relationships. Our basic and indissoluble connection is that we all live in the same country. Interdependence in all facets of life in local communities and at the national level means that the well being of each group depends on mutually beneficial relations with the others.

Addressing National Problems

Understanding and respect cannot be a basis for unity without addressing the real problems of our country. In this first stage of talanoa, we only began to identify issues in four key arenas for priority attention and action: economics, natural resources, politics, and education.

The growing economic gap between “haves” and “have nots” needs priority attention. The existence of disadvantaged communities disadvantages the nation as a whole. A key problem is the lack of self-confidence on the part of the poor. Support services and business training are needed. The impact of basic structures, including culture and custom, on the process of unity building should be reviewed.

Politically, institutions of good governance need deeper rooting, providing protection for the legal right to disagree and respect for the law, order, and the sanctity of contracts. The integrity of traditional and democratic institutions relative to globalisation and the relationships between them need contextual examination.

Education gaps are often parallel with and reinforce the economic gaps. A good educational system is an investment in the future of our children and the nation of Fiji. We seek more educational choices and family/community participation in and value given to education, particularly for rural children. Deficiencies in the educational system need to be addressed, including adequate funding in the national budget.

With respect to natural resources, land is a key and critical issue in unity building. We recognize there can be no change in the ownership of native land. But the fears and tensions associated with land can be reduced by fair tenancy agreements that provide access to land, and fair returns and real security for owners and tenants. Real security means that owners should not fear their land being taken from them, while tenants would be assured of their sustained livelihood.

The Role of Leadership

Leadership, committed to the vision of the nation based on inter-ethnic harmony, cultural respect, and the rule of the law, is of utmost importance to carrying out the actions we have described.

Leadership requires honesty, consistency, flexibility, trustworthiness, tolerance, broadmindedness, and commitment to constitutional processes. It is the special responsibility of leaders to seek to understand differences and harmonize divergent views in the interests of the nation as a whole rather than to add to the differences.

Effective communications and networking between leaders and the grassroots are essential. Leaders need to understand local issues and to bring concerns and grievances to national attention. Leaders also have a responsibility to disseminate a national vision and priorities to the grassroots.

The Future of the Talanoa Process

We welcome public discussion and comment on this talanoa. We are pledged to continue the “Talanoa Process” of free and open discussion of national issues to promote the well being and national unity of our country.