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**Securing our future in the Pacific**

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Pacific Islands Forum  
with United Nations Missions  
*Australia, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji,  
Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Palau,  
Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands,  
Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu*

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**PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM STATEMENT FOR THE THIRTY-FIRST SPECIAL SESSION OF  
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

***DELIVERED BY***  
**H.E MR. KAUSEA NATANO**  
***PRIME MINISTER OF TUVALU***  
***ON BEHALF OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM***

**3-4 December 2020**

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Mr. President, Excellencies,

I have the honour to address you all on behalf of the 14 Member States of the Pacific Islands Forum with presence at the United Nations.

**COVID-19 and the Pacific**

As Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Blue Pacific Continent which covers one third of our planet's surface, we are determined to overcome old and new challenges that threaten our region. The COVID-19 pandemic presents an immediate and devastating threat to the Pacific and global community. We are deeply concerned about the rapidly worsening health, economic and social effects of COVID-19 across the globe. As a region, we quickly came together to confront this challenge by invoking the *Biketawa Declaration 2000* consultative mechanisms, a framework for coordinating responses to regional crises. In our Blue Pacific region, we are now faced with a three-pronged crisis: the impact of COVID-19, the devastating effects of climate change and natural disasters, and the fragile economic health of the region as a consequence of SIDS' inherent vulnerabilities. We remain mindful of the interlinkages between these crises and that cross-cutting recovery measures will need to be designed in consideration of and in strong response to the three-pronged crisis.

Our Leaders place the health and wellbeing of the Pacific peoples and Ocean as our greatest priority. We recognise that COVID-19 has placed significant pressure on national health systems and has the potential to further exacerbate our existing health challenges, especially our ongoing battle against non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Our region has taken bold actions to restrict the spread of the virus by enforcing unprecedented containment measures which have thus far resulted in two-thirds

of our Member States remaining COVID-19 free- likely the only countries in the world to do so from the onset of the pandemic. While our measures have saved lives, they severely restricted our links to each other and the world, affecting the timely procurement and distribution of essential medical supplies that would support any consideration of reopening our Pacific borders.

Furthermore, global response measures to COVID-19 have had devastating socio-economic impacts on Pacific economies, affecting key drivers of growth including the private sector, trade, tourism, remittances and fishing license fees to name a few. The Pacific region is now forecast to contract by an unprecedented 6.1% in 2020. The devastating costs of job losses, and their rippling effects, threaten the livelihoods of our people while gender-based disparities, particularly violence against women and girls continue to rise. As the pandemic rages on, existing inequalities are deepening and our vulnerable communities are being further marginalised. These circumstances have drawn our region even closer together to explore innovative, inclusive solutions to addressing COVID-19.

The impacts on our economies differ across the region. Tourism has essentially come to a complete standstill since the border closures in late March. Many Forum island countries are highly dependent on tourism flows for employment, incomes and public and private sector revenues. Countries with high dependency on tourism have lost between 30% to 40% of national incomes with Small to Medium Enterprise tourism businesses disproportionately impacted. However, our regional cooperation has supported the development of operating protocols to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission during fisheries operations, helping the tuna industry to continue operating safely and making a vital contribution to Pacific island economies.

Employment levels have declined substantially in directly and indirectly affected sectors. Household incomes have also plummeted, while informal sector activity has increased as displaced and newly unemployed families seek other sources of income and livelihood. We acknowledge again the need to address the disproportionate impact on women and girls who, in addition to gender-based violence, are facing increased economic insecurity, additional unpaid care work and reduced access to essential health, education and other social services. We acknowledge the psychological stress that the effects of COVID-19 have imposed on Pacific peoples, both caregivers and dependents, who may have been subjected to stress and abuse. We cannot allow the pandemic to set back our years of progress towards gender equality in our region as we implement the 2012 Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration. Women and girls have been essential to our pandemic response and will be to our recovery.

COVID-19 border closures have also exacerbated ongoing challenges in aviation and shipping. Air services have collapsed, affecting connectivity and the financial viability of our airlines. Economic growth and human development depend on safe, affordable and reliable air connectivity to transport passengers and freight to, from and within the Pacific region.

Pacific countries continue to face structural constraints to accessing affordable development finance and will therefore require continued support from the international community- including from International Financial Institutions- in order to manage the acute fiscal challenges lying ahead.

### **Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 and recovery efforts**

In the face of waning support for multilateralism among some in the international community, we in the Pacific offer a success story for collective action through our efforts to address COVID-19. The Pacific has a proud history of harnessing regionalism to address common issues and we have continued that legacy by invoking the Biketawa Declaration as one of many mechanisms to address the pandemic. In doing so, and under Tuvalu's leadership, our Foreign Ministers created the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (Pathway). The Pathway developed five regional protocols to facilitate the transportation of critical medical and humanitarian supplies across the Blue Pacific to assist our people.

Our Foreign and Economic Ministers maintain open dialogue, discussing and sharing approaches to addressing the harsh effects of the pandemic. We recall and reaffirm their statements on COVID-19<sup>1</sup>, and urge the United Nations and development partners to support identified issues and assist with recovery efforts across the Pacific through well-coordinated efforts aligned with national and regional priorities and plans. Now, more than ever, multilateralism is needed and must be the cornerstone of our regional and global efforts to combat COVID-19. We further acknowledge the need to ensure that the region's collective efforts and resources for alleviating the impacts of COVID-19 are targeted towards those most in need and most vulnerable. Pacific countries and development partners must also commit to adhering to regionally-agreed principles of accountability, good leadership, and unity against corruption, the latter as articulated through the *Teieniwa Vision*.

As we look towards our recovery, investment in our health infrastructure is of paramount importance to secure our peoples from ongoing and future crises. Our people deserve the highest quality healthcare which is affordable, accessible and available to all. We commend efforts around the globe to develop safe and affordable treatments and vaccines for COVID-19. Our Pacific economies rely heavily on open borders for travel, trade and business. Without treatment and a vaccine our people can trust to mitigate health concerns, devastating disruptions to all our interdependent economies will continue unabated. The Pacific must have timely access to treatment and a vaccine that is safe, affordable and has received stringent regulatory approval, when it is developed. Within that context, we urge global leaders to support the equitable and affordable distribution of safe COVID-19 treatments and vaccines to all peoples of the world.

We make a strong, concerted plea to development partners, including bilateral, multilateral, regional and development agencies, to support the recovery efforts of all Forum Island Countries (FICs), including those that have graduated to higher income classification, by:

- (i) providing debt relief to FICs, in line with the April 2020 G20 decision;
- (ii) enhancing flexibility in development financing modalities and priority areas of focus, including frontloading existing donor programs and project pipelines, and reprioritising current donor focal areas;
- (iii) International Financial Institutions are requested to reassess grant and loan eligibility and utilise all available instruments, so that FICs can respond effectively to the catastrophic impacts of COVID-19;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forumsec.org/2020/07/17/pacific-islands-forum-foreign-ministers-joint-statement-on-the-blue-pacific-response-to-covid-19/>; and <https://www.forumsec.org/2020/08/14/2020-forum-economic-ministers-meeting-outcomes-document-and-statement-on-covid-19/>

- (iv) IMF promptly considering a general allocation of Members' Special Drawing Rights, and enhancing support for Members having difficulties in meeting essential external commitments;
- (v) increasing the use of general budget support (concessional loans and grants) to supplement operating balances of FICs, including exploring innovative development financing mechanisms;
- (vi) continuing and increasing support to strengthen our social protection systems, including addressing gender-based violence while looking at the critical intersections between safety and protection, inclusive economic security and disaster preparedness;
- (vii) capitalisation of the Pacific Resilience Facility, when conditions allow, as a funding source that will be regionally available to FICs for building economic resilience and strengthening disaster preparedness; and
- (viii) mobilising funding support for equitable access to safe, effective and stringently approved COVID-19 testing cartridges and vaccines for FICs.

### **Climate Change and COVID-19**

We remain cognisant that climate change is the ***single greatest threat*** to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of peoples of the Pacific. Accordingly, we will maintain our collective advocacy, efforts and ambition to combat climate change, despite the deferral of COP 26 to November 2021. We reaffirm the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that based on the current rate, global warming is likely to reach 1.5°C by as early as 2030, unless urgent action is taken by the international community to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and abate the climate change crisis. We demand stronger mitigation action to put us on a 1.5°C pathway, including investment in low emissions technologies. We recognise 2020 as a milestone year for the Paris Agreement and urge that COVID-19 should not derail the global momentum and ambition required by all parties to deliver on their Paris Agreement commitments. We call on the international community to recommit and urgently accelerate climate change action now, as called for in the Pacific Islands Forum *Kainaki II Declaration*, and to ensure that all development financing and programming for COVID-19 aligns with the goals of the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda.

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of our region, which is highly prone to disasters and environmental shocks. This came to the fore when Cyclone Harold wreaked havoc in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga in April 2020, just as COVID-19 was spreading. As we prepare for the approaching cyclone season, we call on the international community to support and align recovery efforts within our national COVID-19 response frameworks and the regional Pathway, where appropriate, as effective mechanisms to respond to medium to longer term health, human and economic security needs.

As we reflect on a challenging 2020 thus far, we remain determined in our outlook and encourage a global recovery that is kind to our planet and inclusive and compassionate towards the needs of its peoples. It would be remiss of us as Leaders to not consider the opportunities that will arise from the COVID-19 pandemic, a shared consciousness that inspires our regional efforts to develop a *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

While our Members remain the main drivers of our strategies for recovery, we acknowledge with great appreciation the role and importance of development partners and regional and multilateral

entities in supporting us achieve our national and common goals. As we look to the future, we reaffirm our commitment to a Forum Member-led collaboration with *all* actors to putting an end to COVID-19 and creating a healthy, productive and prosperous future for the people of our Blue Pacific region and great Blue Planet.

I thank you. Fakafetai