

**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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UN General Assembly - High-Level Thematic Debate  
“Galvanising Momentum for Universal Vaccination”

**25 February 2022**

- Mr President, may I offer my condolences for the lives lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our thoughts are with those grieving around the world. We have lost many loved ones in the Blue Pacific, and we remember them every day.
- Our global community is facing unprecedented times and we now face the colossal task of rebuilding our lives alongside this devastating virus. Recovery will not be easy, but I can assure you that in the face of adversity, Pacific people are resilient and will overcome this together as a family.
- Our discussion today on COVID-19 vaccines is one that is integral to Fiji and the Blue Pacific’s recovery from the pandemic, and I welcome the opportunity to share with you the collective vision of the Pacific Islands Forum’s 18 Members.

*Pandemic effects and response efforts*

- Two years ago the COVID-19 pandemic prompted the largest and most abrupt disruption to ordinary life in recent history. Since then we have seen drastic changes to the global landscape, marked mainly by the enforcement of strict border and containment measures the world over.
- While these measures saved countless lives in the Pacific, they also had substantial flow-on economic impacts stemming from the movement of people, trade and essential goods and services. High-contact services such as tourism for example, provided almost half of all income in some Pacific Island countries prior to the pandemic. As we all know, these industries have suffered deeply.

- In April 2020, the Pacific Islands Forum collectively responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and common challenges by establishing the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway for COVID-19. The Pathway developed five regional protocols and oversaw the establishment of a regional air service. It has effectively facilitated the transportation of critical medical and humanitarian supplies, technical experts and most critical in our fight against the pandemic, vaccines.

### *Vaccines*

- From the outset, the Pacific voice has been consistent on the issue of vaccines – they are a critical prerequisite for our health, our livelihoods, and economic recovery from the pandemic. As such, Pacific Leaders have made repeated calls for the timely and equitable access to safe and effective vaccination for all as a global public good. Unequal access to vaccines poses a significant risk to an already uneven and fragile global recovery and we have already witnessed unethical demonstrations of vaccine hoarding among some of the wealthiest developed nations. We will not overcome this virus by acting in self-interest – we can only help ourselves by working together and for each other.
- A proposal to waive intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines was tabled to the WTO in October 2020. Fiji and Vanuatu joined as sponsors of the proposal. It is a shame that such an initiative, that could reduce great suffering, has failed to bear fruit.
- In the Pacific, many nations have comparably small populations and limited purchasing power in competitive global vaccine markets. I am thankful for initiatives such as the COVAX facility, and the support of development partners in providing vaccines for the region.
- Last year, our 18 Leaders committed to collectively ensuring that comprehensive vaccination coverage is achieved for Pacific peoples by setting a target of 80% of the eligible population subject to country readiness by the first quarter of 2022. In Fiji, they have successfully administered second doses to over 93% of the eligible population.
- Several other Pacific countries have achieved similar vaccination rates and offer a proven model for overcoming the many obstacles that continue to hinder global vaccination rates.
- We nevertheless remain cautious. As the Omicron variant demonstrated late last year, this pandemic is far from over, and we must continue galvanising momentum for equitable global vaccination.

- Our experience has also highlighted the importance of combatting vaccine hesitancy and the spread of false and misleading health information, including through social media and other platforms.

### *Climate Change*

- In the Pacific we are dealing with a three-pronged challenge: the impacts of COVID-19, the effects of climate change and natural disasters, and the fragile economic health of the region as a consequence of inherent vulnerabilities. While the COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating, climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific. We urge the global community to address the challenge of climate change with renewed urgency, as we have done for COVID-19. They are both ongoing challenges that traverse all borders, and we must harness this momentum in our fight against the climate crisis facing our Pacific Island Nations.

### *Conclusion*

- Without over-simplifying the challenges that lay ahead, COVID-19 vaccines offer some of the most compelling solutions to overcoming this pandemic. I am sure we all agree however that the development and production of vaccine vials must be equally matched by considered domestic, regional, and global policies that stimulate a global-wide recovery as opposed to temporary fixes for a select few. But we need action. We can't afford for our intentions to remain visions – they must become reality. We will not beat this virus until all households in every corner of the world have timely equitable access to a vaccine. We support and look forward to working with all stakeholders in driving this universal vaccination effort.
- Thank you.