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## FIJI

Statement by the Honourable Mr. Isimeli Bose  
Minister for Commerce, Industry, Trade and Public Enterprises

May I, like those of my colleagues before me, join in thanking and expressing our gratitude and appreciation to the Government and people of the Republic of Singapore for their hospitality and the typical efficient manner in their organization, to make this first WTO Ministerial Conference a truly remarkable and memorable one.

May I also thank the Director-General and other Member countries for their reassurance, undertaking and commitments that the WTO will take cognizance of the plight, problems and issues of the least developed, and particularly the small island developing countries of the world.

For those of us in the micro and tiny island States of the South Pacific and indeed the world over, this comes as a breath of fresh air and has given us a sigh of relief and a sense of confidence that we, the small and vulnerable island economies, will not be marginalized or forgotten.

For us, the task of restructuring our institutions and reorienting our priorities, and indeed our vision for the future, will be a challenging one not only in terms of costs but indeed in terms of our very survival.

Fiji, an island State of three quarters of a million population, recognizes that its potential for a greater economic growth lies in a multilateral trading system that is non-protectionist, fair, and transparent. Trade liberalization is vital in a situation such as we are facing today, where global economic and political situations are changing quickly, and new competitors and market opportunities are continuously emerging.

Fiji, in its endeavour to be part of a liberalized and fairer multilateral trading system, has attempted to address the important basic principles embodied in the WTO Agreement. We have introduced transparency by gradually reducing our tariff barriers, removed most licences and subsidies, and have begun to make policy changes that will offer non-discriminatory trade practices to potential investors.

We have implemented all these changes within the confines of our limited and restricted financial and manpower resources. These limitations have affected our timely compliance with our WTO obligations.

Limited natural resources, small labour force, geographical fragmentation, remoteness from major markets and susceptibility to natural disasters such as flooding and hurricanes are typical features of most islands in the South Pacific region. Moreover, our economies are dependent, for foreign

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exchange, on one or two major commodities that are sold under preferential trade arrangements, and only a couple of major industries provide the bulk of our domestic employment.

Our trade preferences are eroding with the gradual dismantling of preferential trade agreements. This is a real threat to our survival. We are exploring alternative strategies to secure foreign exchange earnings with minimum social disruptions, but this will take time for adjustments.

Therefore, at this stage, we recognize the fact that we still cannot efficiently trade on the global market place without preferences. Time is needed to effectively restructure our industry in order to create an efficient and globally competitive industrial base.

I would like to inform this august body that the nature of the micro-economy island State that I represent, and the restrictive influences it imposes on the range of decisions and options we, as leaders, have to make, are indeed overwhelming.

We are told in a forum such as this, that we are all equal and we have a level playing field. However, when I consider my inability to influence opinion, to mobilize razor-sharp executives who lobby convincingly on our behalf, to stage-manage events as they unfold, and my lack of authority to influence the debate, then I realize that there is no level playing field in trade, and some are indeed more equal than others.

Fiji needs both financial and technical manpower resources to increase its institutional capacity, including the establishment of Fiji's representation in Geneva, to implement WTO obligations, take advantage of opportunities, and analyse the impact of those changes on the welfare of our people.

We find it extremely difficult even to implement our current obligations under the WTO Agreement, and the built-in agenda agreed to in Marrakesh. We are in the midst of modifying our Customs Valuation System. The new Customs Valuation Laws are at the Bill stage. We will have to harmonize to new systems of sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and to new rules of origin. We have to reorient our policies and procedures to account for the complex and technical provisions on anti-dumping, on subsidies and countervailing measures, on technical barriers to trade, and safeguard measures. All our efforts should be directed at making the provisions of this Agreement work, and work effectively.

I am particularly concerned that whilst Fiji is still struggling with the implementation of the current obligations, attempts are already being made to link in several new issues to the WTO.

Furthermore, debate on these issues seems to be divisive along North-South lines. The eight previous rounds of negotiations have worked so hard to achieve the solidarity of the multilateral trading system. Let us finish our commitments first.

Fiji looks to the multilateral trading system to uphold and voice our rights as an equal partner with developed economies. We therefore need time and assistance to put in place the basic industrial and legal structures that will facilitate our integration into the multilateral trading system, before new issues are introduced.

I should like to end with a caveat. In our collective enthusiasm for creating a new world trading system, we run the risk of forgetting one vital factor. Trade development is all about people.

In conclusion, we believe in multilateralism. However, trade liberalization requires prudent economic policies and industrial restructuring, and this requires time, particularly for island nations like mine. We need assistance and my delegation looks forward to our developed partners and the WTO Secretariat for such assistance to help us fulfil our commitments under the WTO.