

Vice Chancellor and President of USP, Professor Pal Ahluwalia

Andy Fong Toy, Head of UN ESCAP

Dr Neelesh Gounder

Ladies and Gentlemen

By now we are all aware that we are at another critical juncture – in my mind the most critical juncture ever – in the history of our region and its future.

Our Blue Pacific faces not just the existential threat of climate change, but many other challenges in relation to geopolitics, superpower conflict, major social and economic challenges, declining resource base in fisheries and forests, environmental degradation and debilitating health problems.

I know – it's a depressing list and a somber note on which to start on. But the problems I have highlighted are undeniably becoming pervasive and protracted. What we face are not new problems and when you, the Pacific Update delegates, take stock of where we are across the Blue Pacific, one of my questions to you is whether the situation is improving or not.

Make no mistake – this is a crucial question: only by assessing where we stand in relation to the past can we properly understand what we need to do in relation to our future.

I am a big believer in learning from history.

What is clear, or should be clear, to all of us is that as a region we are not in entirely good shape. There are many indicators of this but a major one is the physical health statistics of our people – I say major because we should always put people first.

In terms of human health, a key indicator of economic and social prosperity, we have regressed in major ways due to the prevalence of lifestyle diseases in too many of our counties. To add to this, reports on gender-based violence and the disadvantaged position of women make for depressing reading. To me, these two problems alone mean that we are neither a happy nor a healthy region. There are too many of us suffering in too many ways.

I have deliberately chosen to highlight these problems not only because they affect our economies, but also because they impact every sphere of our lives.

I am starting to suspect and fear that some of these problems are becoming normalized. That we are starting to shrug them off as a normal part of life. If so, that would be a disaster, at least to my mind.

So, I hope that in your deliberations you keep some of these issues at the heart of discussions in relation to your research, rather than divorced from it, since it concerns the everyday realities of our lives.

I see the Pacific Update as an important event to contribute to our wellbeing by investigating problems and sharing information with the aim of identifying solutions. Some of your presentations will throw more light on the state of play across the Blue Pacific – across its economy, across our communities. I look

forward to listening to many presentations and reading as many as I can over the next few days. Some of the macro trends are all too clear. Several have been glaringly obvious for a long time. As I was saying, our region has fallen further behind in securing the SDG's – the global goals that we have signed up to.

The region is failing to deliver on its promise of decent and well-paying new jobs for our young – wherever they may be – in FSM, across PNG, and across our region. The deficit in decent job creation is causing unease across our region and most importantly in urban centres – across the Pacific.

Our region has been unable to make significant progress in reducing the gender gap. Figures and trends for GBV are distressing. If anything, the gender divide has been worsening in several countries, and across many sectors of the economy. Our region has suffered disproportionately from distant wars in Ukraine. Price rise arising from Russia's war on Ukraine is ravaging communities in our islands by way of price hikes that are making the basics unaffordable. Even though not a single grain of wheat is imported from this region, the price increase for a loaf of bread across the Pacific is probably among the highest in the world.

This is unbelievable, not to mention unjust.

Supply chain failures have seen cost of shipping goods and of services spiraling. Container shipping costs in some cases have increased by several hundred percent. This is true for both the northern and the southern Pacific regions.

In the past two years alone, PNG, Vanuatu and Fiji have experienced wholesale assaults on their economic security through organized cybercrime gangs.

In the backdrop of all this, or shall I say forefront, is a runaway climate crisis whose profoundest and acutest impacts are felt by small island states.

To reiterate – climate change is not just a threat to the Pacific, but to the entire world. The Pacific is the canary to the world. In other words, the world needs to take heed of what’s happening in the Pacific.

The impacts of climate change on our economies and societies are systematic; they are widespread, and they are growing.

Last week the world marked World Oceans Day. No one knows more than us about the devastating impacts of climate change on our oceans – from collapsing reef systems to collapsing marine life, migrating fish stocks and deteriorating food security. This may sound like an all too obvious list of problems faced by our region, and they are. But I have described these to make three arguments.

First, all the Pacific Island states from Niue to PNG face these challenges – even if some more than others – but all of us as states, as economies and as societies confront these threats. Second, we have a shared understanding of these challenges and their origins. A small part of these challenges is a consequence of bad decisions at our leadership levels. A much larger part are consequences of decision made by large states and international institutions.

Now I come to the third point – what we must do both as individual small states and as a collection of small states to overcome these challenges.

We know only too well that each of our problems has a large global element to it.

The growing impacts of climate change on health, poverty, wellbeing and security across the region has its origins in a global economic system that is premised on fossil fuels. Wars in distant Ukraine that the Blue Pacific has nothing to do with still impacts the Blue Pacific. It is felt by each parent when buying bread each morning.

In addressing the Pacific's world class researchers and scholars today, my ask is simple. I hope your research will throw light on the supercharged geo-economic competition for critical minerals, and how control and access to new technologies causes disruptions with regards to pressures and strains on our economies and regional institutions. I hope your research will throw light on how runaway climate change harms security, well-being and stability across the Blue Pacific.

We must build our knowledge base for these. This must be our knowledge. This cannot be knowledge about us that is given to us. As some of the leading scholars of our times, I urge you to study how climate change, geopolitics and geo-economics interact to constrain our development prospects. How do they interact to limit our potential as a region?

Ladies and gentlemen, how we respond to climate change will be how we write the story of the Pacific Islands for the next 50 years. It may indeed be how we write the story of survival of our nation states. The stakes could not be higher. This is a moment for stepped up regional solidarity. This is clearly the moment for a fundamentally rebooted Pacific regionalism. This is the time for a renewed determination by our peoples and their leaders. The global geopolitical context demands this of us. The scale and gravity of our developmental and existential challenges requires this of us.

The luxury of Pacific time – that is well behind us. A commonwealth of small states lacking in unity does not have a fighting chance against such difficult global headwinds. A geo-economics of a Western and a China trading block does not have the interests of our subsistence farmers, of our artisanal fisherwomen, of thousands of our small businesses in its line of sight.

As a commonwealth of small states lacking in determination, we will be unable to have even marginal influence in reshaping global financial systems.

Geopolitics is not framed with our interests and countries in mind. The Blue Pacific is only the frontline of the fault-lines of a new geopolitical order.

Ladies and gentlemen, Fiji's Coalition Government places its greatest priority on rebooting Pacific regionalism with a renewed sense of purpose and of urgency.

It is not coincidental that our Prime Minister Hon Sitiveni Rabuka has wasted no time in visiting Kiribati, PNG and Samoa. Stability, inclusive prosperity and enhanced security across the Blue Pacific is the absolute priority of our government – it must be the absolute priority of governments and communities across this region.

The Pacific needs a breakthrough moment. We need to break through the constraints that a tired and archaic global financial architecture imposes on our countries. We need a breakthrough moment to sidestep the harsh fallout from a geo-economics that is about the interests of the largest states and economies. Blue Pacific's North Star, the Blue Pacific's 2050 Strategy is foundational. It gives purpose, direction and framework for how the Blue Pacific engages with the global system.

For far too long, we have been on the receiving end of having things decided for us. For far too long, we have suffered from having programs conceived for us in distant capitals; of having our security challenges being determined for us. That period – that era – has now ended.

Fiji's Coalition Government has a clear vision on what solidarity can mean for us as a nation. A strengthened Pacific solidarity means that the Pacific's regional institutions can do more for us. Strengthening USP as the region's premier learning institution means that we will have better trained and educated graduates to help us respond better to the challenges I have described. A strengthened FFA means that we become better at curtailing IUU and fisheries related crime in our waters and on the high seas between our EEZs. Fiji will benefit from strengthened Pacific regionalism. So will all other states across the Blue Pacific.

A fully integrated Blue Pacific must be the near-term ambition for our region. A united and strengthened Pacific regionalism is the crucial starting point for that. Our people should be able to move back and forth between all our countries. They will build their careers across these countries. Our businesses should be able to easily expand across the whole region. As they do so, they will create new opportunities and they will use the Pacific-wide presence to expand into Asia and further afield. They will create opportunities for the region.

I have said before and I repeat – Australia and New Zealand must be part of the Pacific story. There is no salami slice part of the Pacific family. A unified Pacific wide single market must include Australia and New Zealand. A starting point for

that must be visa-free travel between Australia and New Zealand and Pacific Island states. The time for that has now arrived.

Fijian and Pacific businesses must be able to grow in the Australia and the New Zealand markets. Similarly Australian and New Zealand businesses should be able to expand across the Pacific. Out of this, we will create large businesses who will be able to stand their ground better in a new geo-economic universe.

It simply cannot continue to be the case that it is easier for Lithuanians to travel in and out of Australia than it is for Fijians. It simply cannot continue to be the case that Latvians have easier travel access into New Zealand than do Solomon Islanders.

The Blue Pacific must reach out into the World with a determination that is grounded in our history, that is knitted into our cultural fabric, and that reflects our identity.

As island states, we are stewards of nearly 20 per cent of the World's EEZs. As island states we are cultural custodians of some 15 per cent of the world's languages – over 800 in PNG alone. We are stewards of some of the world's most extensive biodiversity. The bio-origins of medicine and health products of the future lie in the Blue Pacific. Some 40 per cent of the World's tuna comes from our region. In a climate and food stressed future, blue foods from the Blue Pacific will play an important role for food security for all humanity.

So, as we seek to change the nature of our engagement with the world, we want the world to understand that we are not distant and powerless small states. We want

the world to know that we are large ocean states. We are states that collectively have a large stake in humanity's future.

We are the world's largest continent – the blue continent. We are the world's lungs – providing oxygen for ourselves and for a growing oxygen-starved world. When we therefore think about the economic context that we find ourselves in, let us know that we will meet the world at a halfway point. To get to that halfway point, Fiji's Coalition Government is unequivocally clear – our solidarity and our shared sense of purpose, our urgency, are our starting points.

Our economic wellbeing rests on our solidarity. In many ways our very future as a people depends on our solidarity. The best days of Pacific regionalism clearly lie ahead of us.

I wish you well for the rest of the deliberations.

Thank you.