

**DG MSGs STATEMENT AT THE MSG DAY CELEBRATIONS
PORT VILA, 14 MARCH 2024**

Prime Minister and Chairman of the MSG, Hon. Charlot Salwai Tabimasmās
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Hon. Matai Seremiah Nawalu
Members of the Council of Ministers
Former Head of State, H.E. Matas Kelekele
Former Head of Government, Joe Natuman
President of the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Heads of Regional and Sub-Regional Organisations
Director Generals and Directors of the Vanuatu Government
Members of the MSG Senior Officials (Committee for Reinforcing Commitment & Obligations to the MSG)
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning. It is only proper that I start by acknowledging with appreciation the Ifira Landowners on whose land the MSG Secretariat Building stands, and in whose precincts the staff of the Secretariat do their work.

Today, we celebrate another anniversary of the founding of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) - made up of the Melanesians States of Fiji, PNG, Solomon Islands and the FLNKS of New Caledonia.

And celebrate we must. There is much that we have achieved as MSG from our humble beginnings in Goroka, PNG, in July 1986. Our founders subsequently formalised our Organisation with the signing of the Agreed Principles of Cooperation Among the Independent States of Melanesia on 14 March 1988 here in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

It is for this reason that 14 March is celebrated each year as MSG Day, and today we celebrate 36 years of MSG's existence.

It has been a rollercoaster 36-year journey for the MSG.

From its very inception, MSG faced headwinds in its pursuit of better coordination of effort in:

- prosecuting political issues of interest to its members,
- greater cooperation in trade and economic matters,
- enhanced promotion of Melanesian cultures, traditions and values, and
- realising ambitious aspirations to share resources and services.

All of these were with a view to achieving the goals of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security.

Cynics and political observers at that time, and I suspect some still do today, never thought that we could last this long. Commentaries such as "the extent of MSG solidarity is overstated" and/or "despite

the rhetoric, the interests of MSG countries are not identical”, were common and presented as reasons why **MSG represented a fad – here today and gone tomorrow.**

What they overlooked was our shared Melanesian values and cultures, the innate resilience of our peoples to overcome adversity, and the resolve and tenacity of our political leaders to pursue their goals.

The dissent in 2009/2010 amongst our MSG Members over the expulsion of Fiji from PIF, and calls to impose sanctions on Fiji - with differing positions adopted by MSG Members provided good fodder for sceptics. Their doomsday narrative was somewhat strengthened when there was a trade feud between Fiji and Vanuatu over kava and biscuits, and when a commercial discord appeared between PNG and Fiji over Ox & Palm.

Our respective MSG Members rose to these challenges and resolved them to the mutual satisfaction of all concerned.

In fact, I can proudly state that commercial activities amongst MSG countries are thriving.

For those doubting Thomases, let me help you out, and start with the obvious.

MSG is the only sub-regional organisation in the PIF family of nations to have its own Secretariat. No other sub-region has that.

MSG is the only Pacific sub-regional group that has a Trade Agreement, and the MSG Trade Agreement is working very well. And, because it demonstrates in a very real way the resolve of the MSG countries, I want to remind everyone that the MSG Trade Agreement started with only three (3) items, namely Tea from PNG, Tuna from Solomon Islands and Beef from Vanuatu. We now have around a thousand tariff items traded under the MSG Trade Agreement.

You will have to excuse me, but I feel compelled to dwell a little longer on what MSG has achieved thus far - because certain parochial interest groups, often dismiss the utility and relevancy of MSG when MSG members are not able to pursue their issues due to lack of consensus among the MSG Members.

Early this week, His Excellency the President of Vanuatu, Nikenike Vurobaravu, one of the architects of the formation of the MSG, when he was Vanuatu Foreign Affairs Secretary, was kind enough to grant me and my Team an audience with him. I had requested that His Excellency tell his story in the documentary that the Secretariat is producing on the MSG.

His Excellency affirmed that MSG was formed to forge cooperation between the Melanesian countries in the areas of social and culture, trade and economics, and encouraged by the cooperation in settling the Santo events of 1980, agreed for MSG countries to crusade for decolonisation of New Caledonia.

MSG is not a ‘single-issue’ organisation. Nor is it a ‘single-approach’ organisation when seeking to resolve issues of interest to it.

Let me mention a few more of what MSG has done in the last 36 years.

MSG cooperative efforts have resulted in: -

An MSG easy short-term entry visa for MSG nationals that could be issued on arrival at the port of entry. Our MSG Heads of Immigration have met on Tuesday this week to discuss an MSG Business

Travel Card to make it easy for our business executives to travel around our countries and investigate investment and business opportunities.

In 2005, an Agreement was reached by MSG to allow the spouses, of working citizens from MSG countries in other MSG countries, to be employed in the host country. Our citizens are already able to work in each other's countries, and a Skills Movement Scheme is already part of the new MFTA that will succeed the current MSGTA.

In the social space, the MSG has a Treaty on Custody and Maintenance of Children.

In the cultural area, we have the ongoing colourful 4-year Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival (MACFEST), and we have a Treaty on Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture.

In sports, we have the very successful annual MSG Prime Minister's Cup. If you look at the results of soccer at the recent Pacific Games in Honiara, it was the MSG Teams that finally fought out the finals – a vindication of the MSG PMs Cup.

In education, we are already helping each other train each other's leaders of tomorrow. The Vice Chancellors of the MSG National Universities will be meeting this year in May to further discuss ways in which they can cooperate to develop our human resource capital. **Today, the Prime Minister and Chair of the MSG will officially kick-start the Walter Lini Scholarship by announcing the first two recipients of the scholarship.** Let me acknowledge with appreciation the Australian Government for agreeing to partner with the MSG Secretariat to fund the female recipient of Walter Lini Scholarship. I wish to also thank the Vice Chancellor of the Vanuatu National University and his Team for diligently assisting us with the choice of recipients. I know the two recipients are worthy of the award.

In the judiciary area, MSG has a Treaty on Reciprocal Enforcement of Foreign Judgements. Discussions are already being had for MSG judges to sit on the Appeals Court of each other.

In the Security space, MSG has concluded its MSG Security Strategy and will be going out on a consultation exercise to seek the views of its NGO's and CSO's on the Strategy. The Strategy incorporates the already concluded Framework Agreement for Formed Police Unit, Agreement Establishing the Regional Police Academy. Finance and logistics will continue to pose challenges for implementation. But, let no one underestimate the tenacity and commitment of the MSG Leaders to pursue the objectives of the

MSG, as you can see, is not resting on its laurels. We are seeking out and engaging in activities that will bolster our relevance in today's changing world.

Our MSG Heads of Broadcasting will be meeting next month to develop partnership programs that will allow them to share content, re-broadcast each others daily news after their daily national bulletins, prepare specific programs that promote Melanesian cultures and ways (like the SPC's Pacific Way). As the media would say – **stay tuned, and watch this space. Who knows, an MSG TV may be in the making.**

MSG Leaders decisions last year on the Efate Declaration on Security, the Udaune Declaration on Climate Change are influencing in a significant way the framing and tenor of the conversations on climate change and security.

True to the symbol of the "spearhead", MSG is leading the charge on Climate Change, with the ICJ Advisory Opinion on Responsibility of States with respect to Climate Change, and with the decision not

to allow deep seabed mining in MSG jurisdictions. MSG countries have all agreed to support the Port Vila Call for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific to the bewilderment of some observers. Some people I spoke to before the August MSG Leaders meeting told me that PNG would not subscribe to this proposition.

Under the Efate Security Declaration, MSG has committed itself to self-help security arrangements. We have emphatically made it clear that respect for our sovereignty is non-negotiable, no one chooses our friends and enemies, and we will determine who we partner with in the different areas of security.

This is manifestation of the continuing relevance of MSG.

The MSG Senior Officials will be meeting as a Committee for Reinforcing Commitment & Obligations to the MSG. MSG is positioning itself to play its rightful leadership role in the region.

The indomitable spirit of resilience of the Melanesian will see us through for another 36 more years and onwards.

Long Live MSG and its beacon of hope for Melanesia.

Thank you, Merci beaucoup, Tangio Tumas, Tenk yu tru, Vinaka vaka levu, Oleti!

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY