



MSG Director General Leonard Louma's Opening Statement
Foreign Ministers Meeting (FMM)
21 August 2023
Pacific Farea, Warwick Hotel, Port Vila, Vanuatu

Foreign Ministers of MSG
Head of the Delegation of the Associate Member
Head of Delegation of the Observer
Special Invited Guests
Heads of Delegations

Firstly, let me extend a warm welcome to all of you to Port Vila.

I join the Chair of the Foreign Ministers Meeting, Hon. Matai Seremiah Nawalu, MP, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and External Trade of Vanuatu in acknowledging, with appreciation, the landowners of this land where we are conducting our Meetings.

I join him too in expressing confidence that after a hiatus of some years the MSG FMM will arrive at decisions that will rejuvenate the MSG cooperative enterprise.

Much of what I will say here will be a repeat of what I stated at the Senior Officials Meeting.

Heads of Delegations, thanks in part to COVID 19, the last meeting of a proper face-to-face MSG FMM was in Fiji in 2020. As I mentioned at the Senior Officials Meeting, much has transpired since and many things, affecting our economies our security, increasing our vulnerabilities, have happened in our region.

It is worth repeating, what I said at the Senior Officials meeting, that Climate Change, our existential threat, continues to show no mercy on our Membership. A good example of this are the two (2) Tropical Cyclones (Judy & Kevin) that devastated Vanuatu last year and, I hear, there was a recent earthquake in Bougainville that caused a lot of damage.

Our shores continue to be eroded by rising sea levels, our gardening lands continue to be destroyed by the increasing salinity of the soil.

Temperature rise above 1.5 degrees Celsius seems unlikely to be reached due to lack of real action by industrialized nations and big emitters of hazardous gases. So, in all likelihood, the target of limiting temperature to 1.5 degrees will not be achieved. This is much to our detriment.

Our region continues to be the subject of intense competition by big powers.

I said this at the SOM and I want to reaffirm this in an emphatic way here, the geo-political posturing imperils us – it does NOT protect us. Let us not delude ourselves, if we are not careful we will be used as pawns and surrogates.

We are being made to believe that taking sides is in our BEST INTERESTS. May I hasten to suggest IT IS NOT. Experience elsewhere teaches us that proxies and surrogates always end up losing more than they bargained for. Lessons we would do well to note and avoid at all costs in MSG.

I need not remind you that the rationale for establishing the MSG was to unite MSG members to prosecute issues of shared interest and for common good.

Let us not pursue and unnecessarily invest time on prosecuting issues that portend to divide MSG. Let us wean ourselves off these divisive issues.

Many MSG Leaders decisions, of past, continue to languish on the shelves of our offices at HQ with no real signs of a desire to implement them. Why, do I ask?

Well, let us look at our MSG Free Trade Agreement. Our MSG Free Trade Agreement, with the inclusion of the Services Sector, have somehow been tethered to other trade and commercial arrangements. This is our flagship achievement in the trade and commerce cooperation space. We need to operationalize the Melanesian Free Trade Agreement as soon as practicable.

Certain issues continue to appear on our Agenda with no genuine urgency to bring closure to them, in ways that are mutually satisfactory to all Members. Again, I am left with this question, why is this so?

Generally speaking, MSG members enthusiasm to cooperate in many areas appear to have waned.

This situation cannot be allowed to continue.

We need to rejuvenate this enthusiasm and appetite for MSG cooperation that once characterized the resolve of our founding MSG Leaders to influence conversations and actions on such matters as trade cooperation, decolonization and nuclear testing.

Bold and decisive actions need to be taken – and taken now.

But bold actions does not necessarily mean uncompromising positions. We need to make the necessary concessions on certain political issues for purposes of unity and cohesion of the Group.

This meeting with the theme “MSG being relevant and influential” is a clarion’s call for MSG to rise up to the challenges of our time and take leadership action. You will be deciding on two (2) Declarations on Climate Change and Security that have been proposed by the Senior Officials for you to recommend to the MSG Leaders for adoption.

I urge you to approve these two Declarations and recommend them to the Leaders for their adoption. These two (2) Declarations seek to stamp MSG as a serious player, as a Leader and influencer on matters of real concern to the region.

Let us make this series of meetings mark a watershed moment in our journey of sub-regional cooperation.

Let others, that come after us, remark that in 2023 MSG asserted, once again, its relevance and influential role in regional matters.

We, at the Secretariat, are your servants. We will be good listeners in our approach to our work in the service of **you – OUR MEMBERS**.

I am confident that the meeting will be successful and that the decisions arrived at will meet the objective of the theme chosen for the Leaders Summit, “MSG, to be relevant and influential.”

Let us sharpen the MSG Spear, NOW!

Thank you, Tangio tumas, Tenkyu tru, Merci Beaucoup, Oleti.