

**STATEMENT BY
THE MSG CHAIR & PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF VANUATU
HON. ISHMAEL KALSAKAU
ON THE OCCASION OF
MSG DAY 14TH MARCH 2023.**

Citizens and good people of Melanesia!

It gives me great pleasure, as the Chairman of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) to address you today on the occasion commemorating the MSG Day.

This is an opportune occasion for the peoples of Melanesia to celebrate their efforts in cooperation through the MSG. “Melanesia, Storian blo Yumi”.

While many ascribe the beginnings of the MSG to meetings held in the early 80s up in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the seeds of Melanesian cooperation were actually planted here in Vanuatu in our struggle for independence.

After the events in Santo, and encouraged by that partnership between PNG and Vanuatu that led to our independence, Sir Julius, then Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, and Fr Walter Lini, our Nation’s founding Father, agreed to travel to Honiara to meet with Prime Minister Peter Kenilorea to discuss ways and means in which more enhanced cooperation amongst our three countries can be developed. These three countries became the founding members of MSG, with FLNKS co-opted as a member and Fiji joining in 1996.

The idea of cooperating amongst PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu further morphed into the historic resolution of the first ever, MSG Leaders meeting held in Goroka on 17 July 1986 where they agreed to establish the MSG and have FLNKS to be included in the MSG. This formed the platform for galvanising common positions when advocating for the rights and interest of our people.

Although Vanuatu was the youngest sovereign member amongst the other two members, Vanuatu maintained a critical role in MSG matters when the signing of the *Agreed Principles of Cooperation* on 14 March 1988 was held here in Port Vila, Vanuatu. This formally allowed MSG to be recognized as a sub-regional organization for the first time.

In 2007, *the Agreement Establishing the MSG* was signed here in Port Vila by our leaders setting our vision for a secure, prosperous and resilient Melanesia. The Agreement was registered with the United Nations in 2010.

Vanuatu's leadership in the MSG saw it organize for a Secretariat to be built, on behalf of the other members, to better implement decisions of MSG Leaders. In 2008, the MSG Secretariat building was formally opened and Vanuatu is proud to host the MSG headquarters here in Port Vila. To date, MSG is the only sub-region in the PIF that has a Secretariat and the other two sub-regions have approached us to help them set up their Secretariats.

Today, we commemorate 35 years of MSG's existence – an achievement we all should be proud of.

At the time of the inception of the MSG, many cynics were sceptical about our vision, relevance and cohesion as a group. Many political observers derided our sub-regional efforts in cooperation as divisive and destructive to regional cooperation. We have proven the cynics and sceptics wrong.

MSG is still viable and we are still forging ahead with the pursuit of our social, political, economic and security interests underscoring our resoluteness, tenacity and resilience as Melanesian people. Sub-regionalism is no longer frowned upon but now regarded as a building block for stronger regional cooperation as exemplified in the PIF regional architecture changes incorporated in the Blue Ocean Continent. MSG sub-regionalism has been vindicated.

Today, as I deliver this statement, I wish to pay special tribute to past Leaders of the MSG, some of whom have already left us, for their steadfast resolve, unwavering commitment and dedication to the noble objectives of cooperation within the MSG to which we are celebrating today.

As we mark this momentous occasion, let me remind us of certain important achievements of our cooperation efforts, over the years. In particular, I wish to mention:-

The successful inscription of New Caledonia on the decolonization list in the United Nations, in 1986. This is a clear testament of our MSG cooperation and resolve. To this day, MSG continues to provide a platform for advocating and supporting the right to Self- Determination of the people of Kanaky recognized under the United Nations (UN) Charter.

Furthermore, we should all recall with pride the firm resolve with which our MSG Leaders pushed anti-nuclear testing issues at the Pacific Islands Forum meetings that eventually led to the conclusion of *the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty* (Treaty of Rarotonga) that entered into force on December 1986.

Today, I am also pleased to note, that MSG is the only sub-regional organization that has its own Trade Agreement that is functioning in the region. The success of this trade-in-goods Agreement has led to other sub-regions in the Pacific wanting to join. It is no secret that PICTA and PACER plus are still yet to operate as intended.

Emboldened by this MSG Trade Agreement, and assured that our Governments' have embraced trade and investment liberalization, MSG registered commercial entities are already cross-investing in our countries. In Vanuatu, this is manifested in the presence of BSP, Kramer Ascenco, Capital Insurance, Credit Corporation, Vodafone, Ranier, Colourite, Punjas and Prouds to name a few. These investments provide essential services and employment to our people.

Furthermore, our leaders have signed the MSG "*Treaty on the protection of traditional knowledge and expressions of cultures.*" The only Sub-region that has adopted such a Treaty in the Pacific. Our traditions and cultures are the '*glue that hold us together.*' I am proud to note that Vanuatu will be further strengthening this glue when it hosts the Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival (MACFEST) in July this year.

When all other dispute settlement measures have failed us, we had utilized our Melanesian cultures and traditions to resolve our differences in the "*Melanesian Way.*" And we have used it to the benefit of the wider Pacific family as was demonstrated recently in the return of our Micronesian brothers to the PIF-fold.

MSG Leaders have also approved the Skills Movement Scheme in 2012 to facilitate employment of our people across the MSG borders.

MSG has also provided the critical mass needed to advance regional issues within the PIF and at international meetings. We have contributed towards

framing regional positions on issues, such as the climate change, and have taken leadership roles in their advocacy at multilateral meetings.

But MSG must do more. There is much to do and no time to rest on our laurels.

MSG is the largest grouping, by any measure, in the Pacific Islands Forum family. We must assert a leadership role in the Region and “spearhead” initiatives as our name suggests.

During my tenure as Chairman, I want the Secretariat to assist the Members bring to a closure many of the outstanding issues.

I expect the Secretariat to implement the main recommendations of the Implementation Strategy for the 2038 Prosperity for All Plan. The MSG Free Trade Agreement (revised Trade Agreement) must be brought into operation quickly so we can benefit from its provisions on Services. The Skills Movement Scheme (SMS) must be promoted widely so our people can fully take advantage of it. The required domestic legislation on the Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture must be enacted in the other MSG countries.

In our collective efforts, going forward, let us not forget that COVID 19 has caused considerable economic disruptions to our MSG economies. The Secretariat will need to focus attention on how best to channel assistance from our development partners to get our economies back to performing in a resilient and robust manner.

Natural disasters, such as tropical cyclones, like the two which we recently experienced in Vanuatu, flooding and earthquakes continue to occur in our part of the world threatening and impacting on the welfare and livelihood of our people. MSG must operationalize the humanitarian and emergency response arrangements agreed by MSG Leaders under the MSG HERCC concept. In this regard, let me just acknowledge with appreciation the arrival of the Fiji Team over the weekend to help with the rehabilitation and restoration efforts after TC Judy and TC Kevin.

In the face of ever increasing and emerging threats, that often result in open conflict, affecting adversely law and order situation in our countries, MSG must, as a matter of urgency, bring into force the MSG Formed Police Unit, which MSG Leaders have already approved.

So, as we journey into the future, we must remain committed to stand in solidarity and in unity to forge meaningful pathways forward for the benefit of all our people and where no-one is left behind.

Hand in hand, we should stand, side by side we should walk, and together, as one big Melanesian family we will overcome whatever befalls us.

HAPPY MSG DAY! LONG LIVE MSG!

Thank you and May God Bless Melanesia.