

STATEMENT BY
THE MSG CHAIR & PRIME MINISTER
OF THE REPUBLIC OF VANUATU
HON. CHARLOT SALWAI TABIMASMAS
ON THE OCASSION OF MSG DAY 14TH MARCH 2024.

Salutations

- Honourable Members of Parliament
- Director General of the MSG Secretariat
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- President of the Malvatu Mauri House of Chiefs
- Distinguished Guests
- Staff of the MSG Secretariat
- Ladies and Gentlemen

Citizens and good people of Melanesia and friends of Melanesia!

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

I also stand here this morning to address you, on behalf of my fellow colleagues leaders from our MSG Membership, Honourable James Marape, Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, Prime Minister of Fiji, Honorable Manasseh Sogavare, Caretaker Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, and Mr Victor Tutugoro, Spokesman for the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanake et Socialiste (FLNKS) to wish you all a Happy MSG Day.

Today marks yet another occasion where we gather to celebrate the successes, remind ourselves of the ongoing challenges and accept responsibilities for the things we could have done better in pursuit of our goals and vision as contained in the Principles of Cooperation amongst Independent Melanesian States and the Agreement Establishing the MSG.

We have come far and proven many sceptics wrong in thinking that our Organisation would not last long after its formal establishment in 1988.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to repeat a comment made by one of the founders of the MSG, Rt Hon. Ezekiel Alebua of Solomon Islands. He stated, **no one could have imagined, then, that what had started off as a small pressure group within the Pacific Islands Forum, could transform into an important and strategic regional grouping with an established Secretariat in the region.**

No one could have imagined then, that what had started off in the Melanesian Free Trade Agreement with only three (3) items; Tea from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands Canned Tuna and Vanuatu Beef, could now have more than a thousand trading tariff items. I can proudly state that the MSG Free Trade Agreement is the only successful free trading agreement, amongst members of a sub-region, in the entire Pacific Region to date.

This trade-in-goods only agreement will soon be succeeded with a Melanesian Free Trade Agreement (MFTA) that includes the services sector, to allow for such things as Skills Movement, sharing of educational services, and cross border investments.

My fellow Melanesians, excluding Australia and New Zealand, the MSG constitute almost 98% of the land area, 86% of the population, 91% of the GDP, almost half of the EEZ, and some accounts has close to 90% of the natural resources in the PIF area. These characteristics rightfully imposes on us a responsibility to be in the forefront of regional actions as we prosecute Pacific regionalism within the Blue Pacific Ocean Continent.

Last year, decisions taken by the MSG Leaders affirmed our Group's leadership role in shaping regional conversations on issues of importance to countries in the region.

MSG's Udaune Declaration on Climate Change, determination to pursue the ICJ Advisory Opinion on responsibility of States with respect to Climate Change, commitment to support the Port Vila Call to action on Fossil Fuel, the strong undertaking not to allow Deep Sea mining in MSG jurisdictions and call for a region wide ban on sea bed mining has in fact set the tone and framed discussions on this existential threat – Climate Change.

Likewise, MSG's Efate Declaration on Respect, Responsibility, Cooperation and Amity has injected into the regional security discussions a more appropriate narrative, suited to regional interests and needs. MSG countries aspiration to explore self-help security arrangements, insistence for partners to respect their national sovereignty, and the reaffirmation of their rights to choose their security is precipitating conversations towards less lecturing and more listening by our partners.

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.

In Vanuatu, I acknowledge the leadership of the likes of the late founding Father of the Republic of Vanuatu, Fr Walter Hyde Lini, Barack Sope, His Excellency Nikenike Vurobaravu, Joe Natuman and other successive Vanuatu Leaders. In Papua New Guinea, I acknowledged the Leadership of Honourable Paias Wingti, Sir Julius Chan, the late Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare, William Dihm and Gabriel Dusava and successive Papua New Guinea Leaders. In the Solomon Islands, I acknowledge the Late Rt Honourable Ezekiel Alebua, late Sir Peter Kenilorea, and the late Wilson Ifunaoa, late Lindsay Misros and successive Solomon Islands Leaders. In New Caledonia for the Kanaks, I acknowledge the leadership of the late Jean-Marie Tjibaou, late Yann Celene Uregei, late Eloi Machoro, Paul Neontine and Rock Wamytan and successive New Caledonia Leaders. In Fiji I acknowledged the leadership of Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka who brought in Fiji to join the MSG, and successive Fiji Leaders.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I made reference to the founding fathers and the MSG Leaders who have been in the forefront of the establishment of the MSG Group, as prelude to announce with delight, that we will witness today another milestone achievement for our MSG Group.

In 2013, during the MSG Leaders Meeting in New Caledonia, the MSG Leaders approved to establish a Fr Walter Hyde Lini Scholarship for young and inspiring Melanesian students to undertake studies in MSG higher institutes of learning, including Universities.

I am proud as the MSG Chair to announce that the MSG Leaders mandate will now be fulfilled today with the award of the first two (2) recipients of the Fr Walter Lini Scholarships.

But, before I make that formal announcement, let me at this juncture acknowledge the perseverance of the Director General of the MSG in his pursuit to find the necessary funds to kickstart the Fr Walter Lini Scholarship. On the same note, I also extend my, and that of my colleague MSG Leaders, profound appreciation to the Government of Australia, through their High Commissioner in Port Vila, Her Excellency Ms Heidi Bootle, for her readiness and commitment to support the work of the MSG. Thanks to her efforts, Canberra has agreed to provide financial assistance towards the female recipient of the Fr Walter Lini Scholarship.

At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Lini Family with us. Special mention to Lady Mary Lini, the surviving wife of the Late Walter Hyde Lini and her Children present with us this morning. To Lady Mary Lini, please be rest assured that the legacy of your late dear husband still lingers on. Tabeara !!

With that, I now have the pleasant duty to announce the inaugural recipients of the 2024 Fr Walter Hyde Lini Scholarship that have been selected by our professional academia at the National Vanuatu University to pursue their tertiary studies at the National University of Vanuatu for the 2024 Academic year.

The names are as follows:

Mr Kariso Korisa – Year 3 Student, who will be completing a Bachelor in Environment.

Ms Carole Raupepe – Year 3 Student, who will be completing a Bachelor of Administration and Economics.

On behalf of the MSG Group, let me congratulate both of you for your fine achievements in your respective areas of studies and for successfully being selected as the inaugural recipients of this prestigious MSG Scholarship.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the recognition given to these two bright young leaders is a testament of MSG's shared commitment to ensure that our youth – our future Leaders, are given the opportunity to excel in whatever they aspire to do in life to be resourceful citizens, not only to their families, but to their community and the nation at large.

It is my sincere hope that the Fr Walter Hyde Lini Scholarship will continue to provide and produce amazing young Leaders, not only for Vanuatu but for the wider MSG membership.

The MSG is on the right track. Let us all reflect on our past decisions, recalibrate our actions and consolidate what we are doing right so we can remain relevant in the service of our peoples in this ever changing global and regional landscape.

As we journey into the future, we must remain committed to the ideals and objectives set by our early Leaders. 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.

May MSG continue to be relevant and influential.

HAPPY MSG DAY! LONG LIVE MSG!

Thank you and May God Bless Melanesia.