

**SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF  
INTERNATIONAL CUSTOMS DAY  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER,  
MR. JITOKO TIKOLEVU ON  
26<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY, 2009**

Distinguished Guests  
Staff and Management of FIRCA  
Director of Environment  
Oceania Customs Organization Management  
Ladies and Gentle men

Bula

And a very good morning to you all.

**Happy International Customs Day!**

It is a pleasure to see you all present this morning participating in this important occasion. I take this opportunity also to acknowledge your efforts and thank you for being part of the Customs family.

Each year on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, customs organizations everywhere around the globe celebrate the **International Customs Day**.

The World Customs Organization Secretariat in Brussels had decided that

this year's International Customs Day will focus on CITES, and this will be the area of action for 2009.

This year World Customs Organization together with all customs organization globally are celebrating the International Customs Day with the International theme of

**“Customs and the environment: protecting our natural heritage”**

As you are aware, CITES<sup>1</sup> aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their sustainable survival. Customs is tasked with securing compliance with the Convention and national legislation, preventing illegal trafficking across borders and collecting duties and taxes.

Illegal trade in wildlife undermines the conservation efforts of all nations, affects the income of rural populations, and has driven some species to the brink of extinction. Added to this is the alarming rise in certain wildlife diseases, such as SARS and avian influenza, crossing species lines to infect humans and endanger public health. Illegal trade in wildlife can be as profitable as narcotics. A growing body of evidence has also shown that some forms of wildlife trafficking involve organized crime groups using highly sophisticated smuggling techniques.

Annually, international wildlife trade is estimated to be worth billions of dollars and it includes hundreds of millions of plant and animal specimens. The trade is diverse, ranging from live animals and plants to a vast array of wildlife products derived from them, including food products, exotic leather goods, wooden musical instruments, timber, tourist curios and medicines.

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<sup>1</sup> CITES: Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Levels of exploitation of some animal and plant species are high and the trade in them, together with other factors, such as habitat loss, is capable of heavily depleting their populations and even bringing some species close to extinction. Many wildlife species in trade are not endangered, but the existence of an agreement to ensure the sustainability of the trade is important in order to safeguard these resources for the future.

Because the trade in wild animals and plants crosses borders between countries, the effort to regulate it requires international cooperation to safeguard certain species from over-exploitation. CITES was conceived in the spirit of such cooperation. Today, it accords varying degrees of protection to more than 30,000 species of animals and plants, whether they are traded as live specimens, fur coats or dried herbs.

I must acknowledge the assistance by the Oceania Customs Organization for jointly sponsoring this celebration. We are looking forward for their continued assistance and support for organising such events in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen Customs can not operate in isolation. . Therefore your present here, this morning, is being recognised and which shows that we are establishing a strong partnership approach in fighting this worthy case -- **Customs and the environment: protecting our natural heritage** May I add, in future, please keep this as a high priority in supporting Customs in carrying out its responsibilities .

The World Customs International day is a very significant day set aside by Customs for celebration.

Today, we all will appreciate that customs administrators are facing new challenges, that they must ensure the smooth flow of trade, whilst playing and guaranteeing protecting the health and safety of the community. Customs are in the front line in the fight against fraud, terrorism and organised crime. To achieve the correct balance between these demands, control methods must be modernised and co-operation between the various Government enforcement must be reinforced.

Until recently, the role of the Customs consisted primarily on collecting dues and indirect taxes at import. Numerous developments, including enlargement and the development of e-commerce on the one hand and the threat of terrorist's attack and the role of organised crime on the other have altered the environment in which Customs operate.

It's prudent for me to mention that we have 300 islands and due to our geographical location and managing border at these places it is not easy. Ladies and gentlemen, as a loyal citizen of this country it becomes our citizen responsibility to act, respond to these challenges.

**Happy International Customs Day and Thank you for celebrating with us.**

Vinaka Vakalevu.

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