Statement for the 77th Session of the Economic and Social Commission of the Asia Pacific (ESCAP)

The Under-Secretary General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific;

Leaders of Government;

Excellencies;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and warm greetings from Fiji
This pandemic is not just a health crisis. It is also a social and economic crisis with far-reaching consequences. Indeed, we will be living with those consequences long after we mourn the last victim of the virus. And it is no secret that these consequences are disproportionately harsher for developing countries and small states.

We do not have the large, broad-based economies and financial tools that large developed and advanced developing countries have to spur recovery. Recovery is truly a longer and steeper road for us.
Access to concessional finance will be critical in dealing with fiscal and debt risks if we are to have a chance at a sustained economic recovery. Of this there is no doubt.

We are in a crisis, and the global community must make bold collective efforts to build back—and to build back better. So the theme for this 77th Commission Session, “building back better from crises through regional co-operation in Asia and the Pacific,” could not be better.
The four areas for regional co-operation that have been proposed in the theme study give us a useful guide for building back better together as a region.¹

The intersection of the pandemic with the climate crisis and the emergencies it brings also exacerbates existing inequalities across a range of areas including health, education and livelihoods. Therefore, our actions must be tailored to meet the needs of those who are most vulnerable in our societies and in the greatest danger of being left behind.

¹ Proposed four areas of regional cooperation – (i) social protection (ii) sustained economic growth (iii) strengthening connectivity and supply chains (iv) protecting environmental health
Small Island Developing States cannot be forced to sacrifice climate action to meet our immediate socio-economic needs.

None of us can succeed alone. Regional policy tools and co-operation mechanisms are necessary to build stronger economies. Sustainable cooperation can help withstand shocks to our economies, yet the current pandemic clearly illustrates our weak co-operation platform as a region.
Up to 40 per cent of our region’s GDP is dependent on Tourism. So our full recovery requires the opening of international borders, which in turn depends on the availability of vaccines.

Still, we depend totally on the good will of our multilateral and bilateral partners to receive full immunisation from COVID-19. But I believe we require stronger dedication and commitment at the UNESCAP regional levels.
In this last decade of the Agenda 2030, we must resist any attempt to return to the pre-pandemic, environmentally unsustainable development path, but rather capitalize on the opportunity to build back better, through international solidarity and regional cooperation.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thank you.