Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Officials and representatives of Member States,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour to be joining you all virtually today to share with you the special perspective of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in Maritime Connectivity.

I take this opportunity to thank the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in ensuring Fiji’s participation in this forum. And it is my utmost pleasure, as the Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and
Transport, to represent the Fijian Delegation at the 4th Ministerial Conference on Transport.

Greetings and Bula Vinaka from Fiji.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Maritime Connectivity is a critical aspect of life for SIDS. You can say that Maritime is not only critical for transport connectivity but is a necessity in the lives of people living in SIDS.

This is because most countries or member states classified as SIDS may have more ocean space than actual land mass. Therefore for many SIDS, the majority of the natural resources they have access to, come from the ocean. That was the case decades ago, but it is now up to us to ensure that this remains the case for decades to come.
An example, ladies and gentlemen, Fiji is an archipelagic state of more than 300 islands, out of which 110 of these islands are inhabited, scattered over an area of more than 18,000 square kilometres.

Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covers about a 1.3 million sq.km of the South Pacific Ocean with a population is more than 880,000 Due to its sparsely distributed islands, Fiji relies on inter-island shipping as its main transport connecting outer islands to the main ports, towns and cities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Sea transport is the lifeline of most SIDS, particularly, Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and communities, moving the vast majority of people, goods and resources.
It is crucial for trade and economic development and impacts upon virtually every development initiative. Yet for many PICs, existing maritime transport services are increasingly unaffordable and unsustainable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While challenges in maritime connectivity are global in nature – SIDS are burdened with added limitations. Being geographically isolated from international markets adds to high transportation and logistical costs – further inhibiting our ability to achieve economies of scale.

Susceptibility to economic shocks, fragile land and marine ecosystems, also make SIDS vulnerable to biodiversity loss and climate change because they lack economic alternatives.
Transport connectivity in SIDs is critical to provide essential services, improve trade and tourism, and access domestic and international markets. In the Asia and Pacific region, 15 members and 7 associated members of ESCAP are classified as SIDs.

The impact of COVID 19 may not have evidentiary impact on SIDs but has created unique challenges in SIDS such as UNCTAD has described; a high level of dependence on external trade; remoteness and prohibitive transport costs; food security; infrastructure gaps; resilience; sustainability; access to finance.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Because of the cutbacks in ship carrying capacity and port calls during the pandemic, Trade to and from SIDS were disrupted. Because most member states rely heavily on maritime transportation, a ship not calling into port will have a direct impact on their economies and local populations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Covid 19 has brought about a new normal to most countries, where the transport sector, particularly shipping, has evolved into an even more essential service that has stayed put to serve citizens of most countries with the supply of essential supplies whilst complying with the covid safe business and health protocols and measures.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
In fact, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of two million global seafarers who serve on the merchant trade shipping vital medical supplies, food, and other basic goods. Despite the numerous humanitarian crises encountered by seafarers, the overall resilience of shipping during this pandemic has been significantly recognised globally.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

SIDS have a significant impact on the structure of economies, almost guaranteeing that they will be larger actors in global commerce than their size suggests. At home, we are a nation of over 300 islands – separated by oceans.
Trade has been kept flowing thanks to the maritime sector. During the pandemic, the seaports remained open, ensuring that medicine, food, and necessary supplies, like as vaccines, were transported and made available to the most vulnerable.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Impacts on international shipping have a trickling effect on domestic inter-island shipping in several SIDS. Delays in ship arrivals, port closures, lockdowns in specific areas, and varying quarantine periods, for example, can have a negative influence on domestic inter-island shipping during a pandemic.

Ladies and Gentlemen;
Many SIDS rely heavily on imports, the most of which are transported by ship. When international shipping lines are disrupted or influenced by blank sailing or temporary bans in sailing, along with limited connection, it raises concerns and has a significant impact on the provision of food, pharmaceuticals, and much-needed medical equipment to most SIDS.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

SIDS are intrinsically sensitive to several shocks that can occur simultaneously due to our geographical, topographical, and climate-related characteristics. The pandemic has caused a new setback for SIDS in the Pacific, which were already dealing with climate change-related and extreme weather events like severe tropical Cyclone Harold in April 2020, which devastated Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, causing widespread destruction and loss of life.
Ladies and Gentlemen

The Regional Action Programme 2022-2026 in this instance will be an important living document for the Small Island Developing States (SIDs) that aims to guide and illustrate that transportation is not just an enabler of the SDGs, but also a pre-requisite for success.

Ladies and Gentlemen

SIDs in most regions are subjected to natural disasters, particularly severe cyclones of Category 4 and 5 intensity, which disrupt the transportation of crucial food to our economies. As a result, you should be aware of the very serious impact of climate change on the transportation sector.
Climate change has been recognized as the single greatest threat to the Pacific people's livelihoods, security, and well-being.

While SIDs are useful in ensuring maritime connectivity and service efficiency, we must find a balance to guarantee that these services and connectivity are supplied in a long-term manner.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A key priority in many SIDS is to promote sustainable shipping as a means of providing access to reliable and cost-effective maritime transport. It is the development of sustainable maritime transport networks that serve these states to address many of the challenges that their economies face, including a significant dependency on fossil fuel imports, coupled with limited national
budgets, resulting in heightened environmental and climate change-related vulnerabilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Several SIDS have embarked on ambitious national and regional sustainability initiatives to create low-carbon coastal maritime transportation systems, because for the most part, our basic survival is dependent on it. In this sense, the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership, for example, is a country-led project to catalyse a multi-country transition to sustainable, resilient, and low-carbon shipping through large-scale blended financing investments.

Ladies and Gentlemen
The majority of SIDS from the Pacific, the Caribbean, and other parts of the world actively participate in the International Maritime Organisation's negotiations on greenhouse gas emissions reductions and the implementation of maritime environmental protection measures. SIDS, on the other hand, will require help in order to build much-needed sustainable and resilient infrastructure and shipping services.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Impacts of Covid 19 and increasing environmental concerns such as frequent Tropical Cyclone of very high categories and sea level rise cause severe impacts and undermine SIDS financial and economical capabilities. Therefore, coordinated policy action at the global level to support SIDS will be most welcomed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Enhancing preparedness and risk assessment, mitigation and adaptation capabilities with regard to pandemics and climate change-related impacts and other shocks is key for resilience and recovery. Small Island Developing States require significant investment to transition to resilient and sustainable maritime transport and connectivity. Access to Finance and opportunities for investment is critical for economic growth, resilience and recovery.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Without taking much of your time, I wish all the delegates well in the remaining sessions of this Ministerial Conference.

Vinaka and Thank you.