Subregional Perspectives on Building Back Better from Crises through Regional Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific
10:00-11:00 (GMT+7), 28 April 2021
Virtual Meeting

- Excellencies
- Ladies and gentlemen.
- Good afternoon to you all from the Pacific region.
- I thank the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for this opportunity to address this subregional dialogue this afternoon.

COVID-19 from an international perspective

- At the outset, allow me to acknowledge with deep respect the global efforts that have been invested in trying to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This is has been global crisis like no other and has costed us so many lives across the world.

- For us in the Pacific region, the pandemic is more than a global health crisis – it has exposed the region's fragile systems and our inherent vulnerabilities and triggered an unprecedented economic crisis.

- Most importantly, we are now faced with these challenges in the face of our ongoing battle against the devastating effects of climate change and disasters.

- The region, and indeed the world, has entered a new era of volatility with many development partners capitalising on the current vulnerabilities to advance their own geopolitical interests and priorities.

- I would urge us all to use this sub-regional dialogue as an opportunity to share experiences, and identify areas of coordination and where possible, cooperation.

- Indeed, if there is one key takeaway from this pandemic it is this, global challenges require global solutions, and strong international cooperation is absolutely imperative for this.

- Allow me to reflect for a moment on our experiences and response in the Pacific region.
Implications for the Pacific region

- Excellencies, this time last year, Pacific Island Forum Members took bold actions to collectively restrict the spread of COVID-19, and enforced unprecedented containment measures. This resulted in about a third of our Pacific Islands Forum Members remaining COVID-19 free.

- While these measures were necessary and saved countless lives, they severely impacted our links to each other and the world and have set economies back significantly on their development trajectories.

- In the Pacific region, and indeed across the world, we see rising unemployment and food insecurity. The pandemic has undermined hard-won gains in social cohesion across all economies and issues such as domestic violence against women has spiked across the region.

- Key economic sectors, including tourism, have come to a complete standstill for many of our tourism-dependent Forum Island Countries, including the Cook Islands, Fiji, Palau, Samoa and Vanuatu.

- Finally and perhaps most pertinent, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified and reaffirmed the detrimental resourcing pressures continually faced by all developing countries when health, social and economic priorities compete for limited budgetary allocations at a national level.

Regional Response to COVID and Building Back Better from the Crisis

- As a region, Forum Leaders responded quickly and collectively to confront the pandemic by invoking the Biketawa Declaration - our regional framework to collectively respond and support one another in times of crisis.

- Pacific Forum Foreign Ministers established the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 (PHP-C) and thereby initiating an enabling political environment to efficiently and effectively respond more immediately to Member countries' request for assistance.

- What set this mechanism apart was that it was an entirely member-driven process and thereby respected and complemented national efforts and regional initiatives in place.
• From a short to medium term perspective, Forum Leaders continue to work to ensure that the region is able to *build back better* and emerge as more resilient economies from these crises’.

• Indeed, this pandemic and its related crises has been an opportunity for all of us to take a step back and reflect on the resilience of our own economies, our own unique traditional and cultural knowledge and reinforce and consider how to best support ourselves.

• As we look forward to supporting the rebuilding of economies in our regions, I acknowledge, first and foremost, that the burden of COVID-19 recovery falls on national governments and by that tenor, we as regional and international agencies must target our support to best complement national efforts that are underway.

• That said, in rebuilding our economies, our Forum Economic and Foreign Ministers have identified key focus areas for more immediate attention. We must:

  ➢ support social cohesion and ensure quality social services, including health and social protection services that are accessible, effective and ensure universal coverage, so no one is left behind;

  ➢ advocate for development packages that are climate smart and support the sustainable management and use of our Ocean;

  ➢ we call on partners to support recovery priorities identified through collectively established mechanisms such as the COVID-19 Economic Recovery Taskforce. Priorities which include strengthening our e-Commerce capacity, building our ability to participate in the digital economy, sustainable development financing that will not add to our economic burden, and pathways to safely open up our borders through the establishment of a regional travel bubble.

• To reaffirm, whilst we recognise that whilst COVID-19 is our immediate crisis, climate change presents the single greatest threat to our Blue Pacific region over the longer term.
Looking forward

- As a region, we are pursuing innovative solutions to combat climate change and build our region's resilience for the long term.

- A hallmark of this endeavour is the ongoing work to develop a **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent** – it is one that builds on the challenges we are faced with today and looks forward to ensure that we protect our people, place, prospects and drive our own development vision for our region.

- It also includes the development of a Pacific Resilience Facility - the first Pacific designed, led and owned initiative to build resilience, preparedness and adaptive capacity of communities before disasters strike.

- Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, effective solidarity starts with our ability to discuss, talanoa, collaborate, and formulate meaningful and genuine partnerships. And it is our hope that moving forward, we can work together to deliver for our Pacific people.

- I thank you.