Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana
Under-Secretary-General of United Nations and Executive Secretary of United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

Welcoming Remarks
Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (PFSD)

14 December 2020

Excellency Mr. Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, Attorney General and Minister of Economy, Civil Services and Communications and Acting Minister for Transport, Fiji,

Excellency Ms. Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat,

Mr. Sanaka Samarasinha, UN Resident Coordinator Multi Country Office in Fiji,

Excellencies, Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the Fourth Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and Capacity Building Workshop for Pacific small islands developing States (SIDS).

ESCAP is very pleased to co-organize this event with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and is grateful for the continuing partnership with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the support of the UN in the Pacific; and our Host Government, Fiji.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has largely spared the Pacific people due to the swift implementation of containment measures, it is causing significant damage to the Pacific island economies as the GDP growth is projected to contract by 5.5 per cent in 2020.
With devastating impact in the services industries such as tourism, retail trade, hospitality and civil aviation and growing public expenditures to support the implementation of stimulus measures, the governments are facing challenges to maintain fiscal balance.

The COVID-19 crisis is having a profoundly adverse impact on the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals, adding greatly to the ongoing existential crisis of climate-related disasters in the Pacific.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to recognize that member States in the Pacific have been actively taking solutions-oriented policy measures to ensure an effective recovery from the current COVID-19 induced crisis.

Furthermore, the work of the UN system in the Pacific, along with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat with other regional organizations on COVID-19 are important steps to recover better through regional cooperation and approaches.

In this context, please allow me to highlight four policy areas for your further reflections and directions.

First, ensure economic recovery.

The Pacific SIDS have been undertaking various relief and economic stimulus measures to address the rising poverty and inequalities due to COVID-19. These financing strategies are concrete actions to protect people’s livelihoods.

Importantly, we are also strengthening our engagements with policymakers and stakeholders on innovative financing strategies to support the micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) and promote women entrepreneurs’
access to finance. We would like to further scale up some of these programmes, in close coordination with our Pacific partners, to benefit increasing number of member States in the Pacific.

Second, strengthen connectivity and supply chain management.

There is a much stronger need to improve coordination between trade and transport policy responses through regional and subregional mechanisms.

ESCAP is further creating momentum by harnessing partnership with member States and regional organizations to share information and harmonize procedures in the Pacific. I am confident that these coordinated efforts will ensure contactless, seamless and collaborative solutions on transport, trade and logistics operations in the post-COVID-19 era.

Third, accelerate digital connectivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the growing importance of the digital connectivity and technology in addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Pacific is one of the most digitally disconnected regions.

ESCAP is working with governments and private sectors in expanding regional collaboration to scale up broadband Internet capacities for the effective use of technological innovation with a focus on e-commerce and digital finance.

We are also working to support a drafting committee to prepare the modality for the shared Internet exchange point (IXP) between Fiji, New Zealand and Samoa. This landmark initiative will not only improve Internet traffic quality between these countries, but also dramatically improve Internet quality for the
remaining South Pacific island developing countries already connected directly by submarine fibre-optic cable to any one of these three countries.

**Fourth, focus on “blue-green recovery”**.

The Pacific governments are already undertaking ambitious clean energy targets and climate action with a focus on “blue recovery”. There are encouraging opportunities to manage tourism and fisheries by promoting a common Pacific brand.

ESCAP is promoting regional approaches for effective ocean governance. Through our work in the Global Ocean Accounts Partnership, member States can better measure and manage progress towards sustainable ocean development. Member States must seize this opportunity to be a part of the Ocean Accounts initiative.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

This Forum’s outcomes and recommendations will feed into the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2021. We will also ensure that your policy guidance is part of the ESCAP’s 77th Commission Sessions’ Theme Study on “Building back better from crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”.

ESCAP, along with the UN Pacific system, stands ready to work with governments and intergovernmental organizations such as PIFS, SPC and all stakeholders to build the capacity and support the Voluntary National Review (VNRs).

May I take this opportunity to congratulate the Government and people of Vanuatu on graduation from the category of least developed country status on
4 December 2020 as endorsed by the UN General Assembly. This is a remarkable achievement for Vanuatu.

I look forward to listening to your recommendations on the future course of actions towards attainment of the SDGs and count on your commitment to build back better in the Pacific region.

Thank you for your attention.