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REMARKS AT LEADERS ROUNDTABLE ON NATURAL DISASTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Fiji is giving enthusiastic support to the Vulnerable 20's Global Preparedness Partnership, given our recent experience dealing with a severe natural disaster in the form of Tropical Cyclone Winston.

We had been satisfied with our own preparedness and response to the previous event - Cyclone Evan at the end of 2012 – in which no Fijian lives were lost despite the widespread destruction it caused to homes and infrastructure. But we are the first to acknowledge that Cyclone Winston three months

ago stretched our resources to breaking point. And while the effectiveness of Fiji's overall response has been praised by our development partners, we realise that we need to do a lot better next time. And we need the support of the global community through this initiative to do so.

Winston's crushing strength – a Category 5 event with winds of more than 300 kilometres an hour - made it the most powerful cyclone ever to make landfall in the southern hemisphere. Despite our best efforts, 44 Fijians were killed, 40,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, along with public buildings and infrastructure. And it has left us with a damage bill of 1.4 billion US dollars that will take many years to repair.

We were extremely fortunate to have our own relief effort reinforced so quickly and effectively by our friends in the region and the rest of the world. And especially the hundreds of military personnel from

Australia, New Zealand, France and Tonga – backed up by warships and aircraft – who were able to assist Fijian relief workers cope with the vast challenge Winston presented.

We are extremely grateful to these nations and others – notably India, China, Korea and the UAE – that undertook airlifts of relief supplies or gave donations in cash or in kind. But the scale of this disaster has been a sobering lesson to us all of the inadequacy of our current preparedness and the acute need to upgrade our response to future events.

Fiji is now going to the world appealing for access to the finance we need to rebuild our homes and infrastructure to a much higher standard to withstand such events. And we are reevaluating our disaster preparedness for a new era in which the scientists tell us that we can expect stronger and more frequent cyclones because of climate change.

Fiji urges the community of nations to embrace the V20's Global Preparedness Partnership to provide the funding we need to prepare for future disasters. The world must set aside enough resources to deal with the new frightening new era that is dawning on small and vulnerable nations because of extreme weather events and rising sea levels. And I am here to testify that if any example is required of the urgent need to implement this initiative, Fiji's experience with Winston is it.