Ni sa bula vinaka, namaste.

President and members of the Spinal Injuries Association, the CEO of Vodafone Fiji, the Superintendent of Tamavua Rehab Centre, the head of Vodafone Foundation, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to have been asked to attend this handover ceremony for mobility and assistive equipment – sent by the British charity PhysioNet.  PhysioNet was founded in 2005 by a great philanthropist whom I have had the pleasure of meeting, Mr Peter Thompson.

Many of you will know that PhysioNet have been working for 5 years with the Fijian Spinal Injuries Association, and that this is their sixth shipment of this badly needed equipment.  Physionet carry out a great deal of work at the UK with their volunteers, and also with inmates in British prisons, to recondition equipment that is no longer needed in the UK, and make it ready to help people in need overseas.  As the charity has grown it has developed a very professional operation to collect, store, refurbish, pack and export this equipment.  They have supported disabled people in around 20 countries worldwide.

On the Fijian side, I would like to pay tribute to the hard work put in by the Spinal Injuries Association, the Ministry of Health, and Vodafone.  All the partners work hard to assess carefully the individual needs of people here, to ensure they get the right equipment to help them in their daily lives, to deliver it to them, and to provide training and support.  Taken altogether is a shining example of a valuable partnership between the UK and Fiji, based on people-to-people contacts, hard work and shared values.

I am also pleased to note that Physionet and the SIA have also been able to start to supply equipment to people in neighbouring countries, like Kiribati, where the needs are just as great.

It is fitting that we gather here today, because 3rd December is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.  This day is designed to draw awareness to persons with disabilities and the problems they face in their everyday lives.  Persons with disabilities around the world make up 10% of the population, and around 80% live in developing countries.  Even where disability laws are in place, their effectiveness can be held back by negative attitudes towards disabled persons.

The theme of the International Day this year is - Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology.  This aims to focus attention on three issues, all very relevant in Fiji and other Pacific Island Countries:
-          Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Responses, because people with disability face disproportionate risks in disaster situations.
-          Creating Enabling Working Environments, because there is much that still remains to be done to make all working environments, in the public and private sector, fully accessible and supportive of the needs of disabled people.
-          Disability-Inclusive Sustainable Development Goals, because we need to mainstream the rights and needs of this valuable 10% of humanity in all we do.

I hope that the Fijian government will work with the UN and its international partners to make progress in all three areas.

We are very proud to continue to support Physionet’s work, and to highlight the good work being done by the Spinal Injuries Association here.

Thank you very much, Vinaka vaka levu, shukria.