

# **2018 OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE COURTS OF VANUATU**

## **THE HONOURABLE CHIEF JUSTICE LUNABEK**

- **His Excellency Pastor Obed Moses Tallis, President of the Republic of Vanuatu**
- **Hon. Charlot Salwai, Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu and Madame Salwai.**
- **Hon. Esmon Sai , Speaker of Parliament of the Republic of Vanuatu**
- **Hon. Judges of the Supreme Court of Vanuatu and Spouses**
- **Magistrates of the Republic of Vanuatu and Spouses**
- **Hon. Ronald Warsal, Minister of justice and Communities services**
- **Other Hon. Ministers of the Government of the Republic**
- **Hon. Ishmael Kalsakau, Leader of opposition in the Government of the Republic**
- **Excellency Members of the Diplomatic Corps**
- **Attorney General**
- **Public Prosecutor**
- **Public Solicitor**
- **Ombudsman**
- **Director Generals and Directors of Government Departments**

- **Commissioner of the Police**
- **President of the National Council of Chiefs**
- **Vanuatu Law Society and its newly elected President**
- **Members of the Legal Profession**
- **Members of the Law Faculty**
- **Registrar of the Supreme Court, Court officers and Staff**
- **Representative of Women**
- **Representative of the Press/Media**
- **Representative of the Churches**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen, Big Men and Women, Pikinini mo People blong Vanuatu**

I bring to you all, Greetings from the Judges, Masters, and Magistrates, Island Court Justices and courts' officials and support staff of the Judiciary of the Republic of Vanuatu.

On behalf of the Judiciary, I extend a warm welcome to all of you to the Opening of the Legal Year. It is my privilege and pleasure to address you on this special occasion of the opening of 2018 legal year and I thank you all for coming.

As always we need to ponder on the workload and performances of the courts in the past years and look back to the good things, the bad things and the challenges Vanuatu and its people have gone through in the past legal years with the work of the courts and the development of the law in the life of the people. We must then reflect back on the achievements, values, strengths and weaknesses. We must learn from

our mistakes and weaknesses so as to ensure that we set new directions for the future.

Allow me first to provide you with case summary 2017.

## **2017 CASE SUMMARY**

- I am confidently informed and advised that on regional and international comparative bases/ situations, there is not a court, for example, in Australia that would stand up publicly within 1 month of end of year and provide the people and public with the year case performance of the courts. We can do that for the courts and in the courts of the Republic.
- I am proud and grateful to the staff of the Court that I am able to present/comment on the performance of the Court(s) for 2017, so early into the new year of 2018. This reflects the hard work and diligence they apply to managing their caseloads in our CMS.
- The Courts have a very good picture of how we travelled in 2017, and there are some clear highlights, and some acknowledged areas of work needed.
- Under the stewardship of the Chief Magistrate, with gratefully acknowledged support from NSW Magistrate Fleming (through the SRBJ Program), and all the magistrates and staff of the court, the Magistrates Court have made significant inroads to closing cases, bringing cases on before a Magistrate, and pleased to say that through active case management, well over 50% of their pending caseload have a future court appearance.

- What is now visible to us though is the reduction in criminal cases being presented to us in the Magistrates Court, and we will work closely with Police and Prosecution to understand and address this situation.
- At the Supreme Court, we are well aware of the imperative to reduce the timeliness it takes to finalise a civil matter, and while criminal cases are dealt with expeditiously on average in 180 days, there is still much to do with management of civil cases. Similarly, we acknowledge that not enough of our cases have a future listing, which means uncertainty for our litigants – and will be working on this in the coming weeks.
- Overall, while we have reduced the number of our reserved judgements across all courts to under 90, we still have approximately 50% older than 90 days, and we aim to reduce this % to internationally accepted 10% within the next 3 months.
- Our Island Courts are still significantly impacted by the availability of resources, both financial and personnel, and our focus in the coming months is to address these issues.
- The Court of Appeal continues to deliver a world class level of justice with its delivery of judgments in the same sitting as the appeal. We aim to continue this tradition.
- Lastly, much of what I have focused on is case based, but we do have the ability to interrogate the types of criminal offences/charges presented to us, and the decisio

ns/outcomes we make, e.g. the length of sentences imposed for sexual offence matters. In conjunction with my senior registry staff, I will be undertaking a detailed analysis of this, and will report back to the wider community.

- Numbers of charges presented in PI cases at the MC - slightly down in 2017 from 2016 (note - 2015 - this was early days for data recording)

Count of Description	Column Labels			Grand Total
	2015	2016	2017	
<b>CUSTOMS ACT OFFENCES</b>		1		1
Dangerous drugs	1	30	1	32
<b>DRUG OFFENCES</b>	6	33	47	86
<b>ESCAPES AND RESCUES OFFENCES</b>		1	1	2
<b>FAMILY PROTECTION ACT OFFENCES</b>	1	1	9	11
<b>FORGERY OFFENCES</b>		1		1
<b>FRAUD OFFENCES</b>	2	9	2	13
<b>MISCELLANEOUS OFFENCES</b>			5	5
<b>MISLEADING JUSTICE OFFENCES</b>		1		1
<b>OFFENCES AGAINST MORALITY</b>	12	82	65	159
Abduction			1	1
Act of indecency with a young person	2	8	7	17
Act of indecency without consent		8	7	15
Aggravated sexual intercourse with a child	2	7	2	11
Incest	1	1	5	7
Sexual intercourse with child under care and protection	1	2	4	7
Sexual intercourse without consent	4	31	34	69
Unlawful sexual intercourse	2	25	5	32
<b>OFFENCES AGAINST PROPERTY</b>	7	27	31	65
<b>OFFENCES AGAINST PUBLIC INTEREST</b>		5	1	6
<b>OFFENCES AGAINST REPUTATION</b>		1	1	2
<b>OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON</b>	8	34	45	87
Abortion			1	1
Attempted intentional assault			1	1
Intentional assault	2	9	19	30
Intentional homicide	1	5	5	11
Kidnapping	1	2	2	5
Threats to kill person	3	14	14	31
Unintentional harm	1	4	3	8
<b>OFFENCES AGAINST TRAFFIC</b>		2	3	5
<b>PARTICIPATION OFFENCES</b>			1	1
<b>PUBLIC ORDER OFFENCES</b>		2	1	3
<b>WEAPONS OFFENCES</b>		2	2	4
(blank)	136	24	19	179
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>663</b>

- Total charges presented in criminal cases in MC (note - 2015 - this was early days for data recording)

Count of Description	Column Labels			
	+ 2015	+ 2016	+ 2017	Grand Total
OFFENCES AGAINST PROPERTY	95	184	191	470
FAMILY PROTECTION ACT OFFENCES	50	190	169	409
OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON	97	148	125	370
OFFENCES AGAINST PUBLIC INTEREST	19	97	42	158
OFFENCES AGAINST REPUTATION	22	45	57	124
OFFENCES AGAINST TRAFFIC	41	26	38	105
MISCELLANEOUS OFFENCES	9	15	30	54
FRAUD OFFENCES	9	11	15	35
PUBLIC ORDER OFFENCES	7	5	13	25
OFFENCES AGAINST MORALITY	3	11	5	19
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>732</b>	<b>685</b>	<b>1769</b>

- Total charges presented in criminal cases in Supreme Court (note - 2015 - this was early days for data recording)

Count of Description	Column Labels			
	+ 2015	+ 2016	+ 2017	Grand Total
OFFENCES AGAINST MORALITY	10	71	50	131
OFFENCES AGAINST THE PERSON	2	19	29	50
OFFENCES AGAINST PROPERTY	4	13	16	33
DRUG OFFENCES		9	15	24
FRAUD OFFENCES	1	5	3	9
OFFENCES AGAINST PUBLIC INTEREST	1		6	7
FAMILY PROTECTION ACT OFFENCES		3	3	6
OFFENCES AGAINST TRAFFIC	1	3		4
MISLEADING JUSTICE OFFENCES		2	1	3
WEAPONS OFFENCES		2	1	3
PUBLIC ORDER OFFENCES	2	1		3
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>273</b>

- We can go down to specific charges...
- We can also go and look at results where finalised e.g Guilty.
- We can also go to Orders made e.g of average 4 years for a certain charge/offence.

- **CUSTOMARY LAND DISPUTES**

- I. Pending customary land disputes in the Island Courts  
– 47

- II. Customary land dispute disposed of in the Island Court –  
2
  - III. Land Appeals completed by the Supreme Court –  
4 cases
  - IV. Pending Land Appeal in the Supreme Court – 78 cases
- Island Court (Land) Reviews under Custom Land Management Act;  
  
Pending Cases - 17  
Completed Cases - 2
  - Chiefly Title Cases;  
Pending Cases - 47  
Completed Cases - 3

Allow me now to mention about some events for this year 2018.

## **EVENTS FOR 2018**

- 1) A judge of the Supreme Court will be appointed in the first part of this year in replacement of Mary Judge.  
It has taken longer than expected to finalize this process but I am sure that it will be finalized either in February or March 2018.
- 2) Honorable Justice Paul Geoghegan's terms of appointment as a Judge of the Supreme Court of Vanuatu will end by the end of March of this year. His replacement will start sometime on 26 March 2018. Judge (Gus Andree Wiltens) is a District Court Judge of New Zealand. I take this opportunity to thank the Government of New Zealand for their understanding, appreciation and continuing support to the Supreme Court of Vanuatu. I understand that the Judge will be arriving with his wife on Saturday for a week to look around and familiarize himself with

the local set up by spending some time with Hon Justice Geoghegan.

- 3) Justice David Chetwynd term of appointment to the Supreme Court will also end on 31 August 2018. Steps will be undertaken also to have a replacement.
- 4) A Deputy Master of the Supreme Court (Ms Aurelie Tamseul) has been appointed to support the office of the Master of the Supreme Court. She is now under the direct supervision of the Master. She is being undertaken intensive training development in her new responsibilities. I welcome her to the workforce of the Judiciary through the office of the Master.
- 5) Mr. Shemi Joel is now Acting Chief Registrar of the Supreme Court of Vanuatu after Former Chief Registrar (John Obed Alilee) has ceased his employment with the Judiciary at the end of December 2017. I ask you all, lawyers, Court users, judicial officers and court support staff to support him in his interim appointment. The position of the Chief Registrar of the Supreme Court of Vanuatu will be regularized at the end of the current 6 months interim arrangement.
- 6) Among other activities to happen in 2018, there will be regular meetings between the Judiciary (Judges and Magistrates) the members of the legal profession, Vanuatu Law Society, the office of the Public Prosecutor, the Public Solicitor and state prosecution on issues common to all and affecting the criminal justice and also equally how we can better deal or address the efficient and effective case management of cases by the courts, lawyers and parties.



## **ISSUES AFFECTING THE NATIONAL JUDICIARY AND THE COURTS**

- 1) Absence of or No Supreme Court Hall of Justice since 2007.
- 2) Absence of or No Magistrate's Court building in Port Vila since 2017.
- 3) Constant needs for repair and extension of Provincial Courts.
  - Isangel, Tanna Court house;
  - Lakatoro, Malekula Court House;
  - Luganville ,Santo Court House;
  - Tongoa, Banks and Court Houses.
  - Urgent Needs for repairs for Chief Justice official residence;
  - Urgent Needs for repair for Chief Registrar residence in Port Vila;
  - Urgent Needs for repair for official residence of magistrate at Isangel Tanna.

I have taken some steps in discussing with the government through the Ministry of Justice of practical ways forward as to what and how these matters could be addressed. I am confident that the government will do something about them.

I believe the needs of the judiciary for reform as an institution must be undertaken as part of a national reform effort with the scope of enhancing its independence and core functions to enable the Judiciary to become a modern judiciary on the basis of the following vision:

### **“VISION OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE”**

A Judiciary that is independent, effective and efficient, and worthy of public trust and confidence, and a legal profession that provides

quality ethical, accessible and cost-effective legal service to our people and is willing and able to answer the call to public service.”

*Elaborating on this vision is the policy statement of this vision, which enunciates the following:*

## **“POLICY STATEMENT”**

The Judiciary is the constitutional designated arbiter of all legal disputes in our democratic system of government in this Republic and as such must, at all times, maintain its independence and remain immune from undue influence, not at the cost, however, of sacrificing comity with the co-equal branches of the Government. It is essential that the Judiciary and the members of the legal profession, as Officers of the Court, be of utmost competence and highest integrity.

As the Judiciary is meant to serve the people through the dispensation of justice, the Bench (Judges) must be fully accountable to the public by remaining transparent, yet not betraying those aspects of the judicial process, which require utmost confidentiality. Members of the Judiciary and court personnel must always adhere to the constitutional precept that public office is a public trust. Dishonesty, incompetence, inefficiency and any form of unbecoming conduct are impermissible and will not be tolerated in the Judiciary or in the legal profession.

The system of administration of justice must be geared to achieve the goal of delivering fair, impartial and swift justice. Therefore, the core values of the rule of law, equal justice, judicial independence and the pursuit of excellence should be preserved and at all times be predominant.”

2018 is a new legal year. We must prepare and look forward for it. I must say from the outset that 2015, 2016 and 2017 were certainly important historical years for the development of the law and the Courts in this Republic.

On this special occasion, I invite you to reflect with me on the impact of the law on the community, and on the roles of the Judiciary and the legal profession within it.

Vanuatu society places important value on the concept of the rule of law as a cornerstone or pillar in our community. It is important to understand Vanuatu's legal system and how justice is administered. I say that because, conceptually, this is after all the purpose of the law. Vanuatu's legal system is mainly based on the laws enacted by Parliament, on the common law principles, some aspects of French law and judicially declared customary law by relevant tribunals.

Fairness, transparency and access to justice are also the foundational characteristics of Vanuatu's legal system.

It is important to say that the Key players include those who are most intimately connected with the law's operation, the courts and the legal profession, but of considerable importance is also the understanding and acceptance by everyone especially those with influence or power (among whom is of course the government and all those within it), the purpose of the law.

The law is there to facilitate the well-being of the people of Vanuatu and society. It is not to be seen as somehow obstructing them.

Some basic fundamentals are necessary. Laws regulate the activities and the often complex interactions between persons or institution.

The object is to enable Vanuatu people and their families to realise their ambitions as best as possible, and to achieve mutual respect between all those within the community. To realise these objects, it is necessary to have in place an infrastructure to ensure that those objects can be fulfilled.

The infrastructure of the law starts with the important requirement that all laws must conform to certain constitutional norms and requirements.

The Constitution, as the Supreme law of the Republic, on/with which all laws in Vanuatu must conform to it, *recognizes that all persons are entitled to the following fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual without discrimination...:*

- (a) life;*
- (b) liberty;*
- (c) security of the person;*
- (d) protection of the law;*
- (e) freedom from inhuman treatment and forced labour;*
- (f) freedom of conscience and worship;*
- (g) freedom of expression;*
- (h) freedom of assembly and association;*
- (i) freedom of movement;*
- (j) protection for the privacy of the home and other property and from unjust deprivation of property;*
- (k) equal treatment under the law ...*

*(2) Protection of the law shall include the following –*

- (a) everyone charged with an offence shall have a fair hearing, within a reasonable time, by an independent and impartial court and be afforded a lawyer if it is a serious offence;*
- (b) everyone is presumed innocent until a court establishes his guilt according to law;*
- (c) everyone charged shall be informed promptly in a language he understands of the offence with which he is being charged;*
- (d) if an accused does not understand the language to be used in the proceedings he shall be provided with an interpreter throughout the proceedings;*

- (e) a person shall not be tried in his absence without his consent unless he makes it impossible for the court to proceed in his presence;*
- (f) no-one shall be convicted in respect of an act or omission which did not constitute an offence known to written or custom law at the time it was committed;*
- (g) no-one shall be punished with a greater penalty than that which exists at the time of the commission of the offence;*
- (h) no person who has been pardoned, or tried and convicted or acquitted, shall be tried again for the same offence or any other offence of which he could have been convicted at his trial*

The Constitution also contains provisions that help define Vanuatu's system of law. Article 95 says:

- (1) Until otherwise provided by Parliament, all Joint Regulations and subsidiary legislation made thereunder in force immediately before the Day of Independence shall continue in operation on and after that day as if they had been made in pursuance of the Constitution and shall be construed with such adaptations as may be necessary to bring them into conformity with the Constitution.
- (2) Until otherwise provided by Parliament, the British and French laws in force or applied in Vanuatu immediately before the Day of Independence shall on and after that day continue to apply to the extent that they are not expressly revoked or incompatible with the independent status of Vanuatu and wherever possible taking due account of custom.
- (3) Customary law shall continue to have effect as part of the law of the Republic of Vanuatu.

The Constitution also makes reference to the ratification by Parliament of Treaties negotiated by Government, among other matters, when they affect the status of people (Article 26). Treaties include

International conventions. Vanuatu has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which shall be implemented through Vanuatu's laws. It is to be noted that many of the rights I have referred to earlier are to be found in the ICCPR as well.

In examining the content and substance of the rights contained in the convention, one must have regard to recognised international jurisprudence. One such right is equality before the law.

The concept of equality is critical to an understanding of Vanuatu's system of law. It is important to understand that the law applies equally to every person. No one person or institution is above the law and the application of the law. Therefore, the Government is subject to the law in precisely the same way as everybody else.

No special group, institution or person is above the law and equal application of the law.

Equality is a fundamental component of the rule of law. The proper understanding and acceptance of this means a proper respect for the rule of law.

This brings me to the roles of the Court in our community. The Courts only become active when legal disputes require adjudication. This may be in a criminal context when the guilt of a person has to be determined. It may be in a civil context when civil rights, commonly about money or property, have to be resolved. It may be in a public context which engages not only the rights of the parties actually before the courts, but more importantly, the public interest as a whole. I will

say more about public law, constitutional and judicial review type cases later.

The constitutional role of the courts is clear from the Vanuatu Constitution and the courts are to act independently. The independence of the Judiciary is enshrined in the constitution. Much has been said about the independence of the Judiciary but it always bears repetition to say that an independent Judiciary is pivotal to the existence of the rule of law.

I move onto that part of the infrastructure that represents the practice of the courts. This is the day to day activity of the courts: what judges do in dispensing justice, how they do it and how litigants access justice.

The determination of legal disputes by the courts is a constitutional responsibility. I emphasize the term “legal disputes” because the business of the courts is to determine disputes in accordance with the law. The types of dispute coming to the courts for determination arise from a variety of circumstances and the motives behind the cases brought in our courts also vary a great deal. Be that as it may, as far as the courts are concerned, it is only the legal outcome of the dispute that is relevant. As has been pointed out on numerous occasions by the judges, the courts only deal with the legal questions that arise for consideration. This is after all the concept of justice itself, the adherence to the law, legal principle and the spirit of the law.

In the handling of legal disputes, judges must give fair consideration to the viewpoints of all parties. Fairness – one of the principal characteristics of the system of law in operation in Vanuatu, I have earlier identified – requires that everybody who comes to court will

have their arguments fully and properly considered. It is sometimes said that all litigants should have “their day in court”, but it is more accurate to say that each party has a right to be heard. This is the essence of a fair hearing. The disputes before the courts are often complex, requiring different viewpoints to be carefully analyzed before a just outcome can be reached. Sometimes, hearings can be lengthy and this is reflected in the judgment of the court, but the reason for this is almost always indicative of the complex nature of the dispute and, more important, the need to deal carefully and fairly with the arguments before the court. This is an indication to the public that the court has come to a properly considered view and has acted fairly. A losing party is entitled to be assured that a fair hearing is always guaranteed by the courts.

It is important that the work of the courts and the way cases are handled by judges is open for all to see. Openness is an objective indicator to test the effectiveness and fairness of our legal system; if you like it is a measure of the rule of law operating in practice. Transparency in the judicial process becomes critical in our legal system, and this takes the form of almost all court proceedings being open to the public or in the publication of almost all the written judgments of the courts. I say “almost all” to exclude those few cases where the subject matter is of such sensitivity that it would not be in the public interest to make them public.

Transparency in the activity of the courts accordingly provides useful objective tool to measure the effectiveness of the legal infrastructure I have described earlier. But there must also be access to justice - the last of the three characteristics of our legal system. The existence of user – friendly and effective court procedures contributes to this and was one of the main reasons for the Civil Justice Reform, which came



into operation nearly fourteen years ago since 2002. This can be measured objectively. Objectivity is important. Many people have different points of view – and they are entitled to them – but in the final analysis, the only way properly to assess these views, positive or negative, is to do so objectively.

Access to justice can also be measured by reference to the existence of legal assistance through public legal institutions. Legal assistance has over the years provided the necessary access to justice for many litigants. These have included people who have suffered serious injuries, their families, those persons who have had matrimonial problems and other people who have needed the protection of the law but who did not have the private means to engage legal representation.

It is to public law cases and judicial review I now turn.

For the public, it is in this type of case where the three important characteristics of fairness, transparency and access to justice can best be seen and tested. Public law case, very often with constitutional principles at stake, involves by definition the public interest. Thus, since 1980 Vanuatu courts have had to deal mainly with many important constitutional and public law issues.

Public law cases on the whole involve the very rights and liberties that are protected by the Constitution and which, as are enjoyed by every member of the community. They reflect fundamental societal values. A greater awareness of rights and liberties means that in the public sphere, proper responsibility and accountability for decisions affecting every aspect of life and activity in Vanuatu are now expected by the community. Proper responsibility and accountability in the public sphere is called good governance, and good governance is another

term for an adherence to the requirements of the law and to its spirit. In other words, it embodies the concept of the rule of law. This is the essence of that type of case known as constitutional challenge and or judicial review and, most often, these types of case involves the Government or a department within the Government, although it can also involve other public bodies. In judicial review or constitutional case, the public interest is always engaged and the effects of a decision of the court in this type of case will almost always affect sections of the public beyond the immediate parties in court. Sometimes, the whole community is directly affected. A decision of the court in public law litigation will often serve as a guide to good governance, whether looking at events in the past or perhaps more importantly, the future. Although there may occasionally be inconvenience, constitutional challenges and or judicial review overall serve the public interest and facilitate the well-being of our society. This status should properly be recognized.

It is precisely because of the public interest being engaged in this way that in dealing with constitutional and or judicial review cases, the court will be anxious to ensure that all proper legal arguments are permitted to be ventilated before a decision is made. Owing to the fact that in public law case, reliance is often placed on various rights and liberties that operate in different directions, the court is faced with difficult and complex arguments. As in any type of case, a judge must fairly hear all proper points of view. I have earlier referred to the aspect of fairness as being a characteristic of justice in the courts. Constitutional and Judicial review cases are certainly to be treated in no different a way. It cannot be otherwise when the public interest is engaged.

It is inevitable given, the nature of the type of case that is involved in a constitutional or judicial review that political, economic and social factors form a part of the background to such cases. However, as Judges have said on numerous occasions, the court is only involved in the legal questions which arise. It is usually simply irrelevant to enquire into the motives, political or otherwise, of the parties before the court: what matters are the legal merits. To be preoccupied with the motives of the parties before the court will not be helpful in reaching a proper legal outcome. I reiterate this point: that constitutional or judicial review type case is all about legality and not the merits or demerits of a political, economic or social argument.

It is for this reason that in judicial review or constitutional cases, the court is required to be particularly astute in ensuring that only proper cases ought to be considered. Unlike most other types of claim processes, the permission of the court is required before any constitutional application or application for judicial review can be instituted. Where the required standard is satisfied, a court will proceed to consider the arguments in the same way as any other cases to arrive at a result that is in accordance with the law. The infrastructure of the law is there to ensure such a result.

And it is open for all to see and ultimately to judge for themselves.

The importance of the law in Vanuatu makes it imperative that the quality of our Judiciary and the court houses where the members of the Judiciary do their work should be of the highest possible standard. Judicial appointments, proper and friendly court houses with easy access for and to all must reflect this and must be among the national priorities of the National government.

There is, however, a continuing need to be aware of practicalities as well. For this reason, following a detailed internal review, the Judiciary has written to the Government within proposals to improve the conditions of service of judges and the conditions under which the judges, magistrates and support staff are working and most importantly the Supreme Court Hall of justice building and the Magistrate's Court building in Port Vila. These matters are of considerable importance to the community to ensure and encourage recruitment of the best lawyers/judges to the Judiciary. The maintenance and improvement of the competence of the members of the Judiciary is essential to the judicial functions and responsibilities I have earlier described.

The Government has over the years supported the needs of the Judiciary, and we acknowledge and are grateful for the support. The Judiciary has for some time also been discussing with the Government its mid- and long-term accommodation requirements.

However, since June 2007 (date of destruction of the Supreme Court building by the fire) however, since the destruction of the Court House by the fire on 7 June 2007, the Supreme Court Hall of Justice project was put at hold. I ask the Government to revive this important national project for the benefit of the community in this country and treat it as a priority in the national project of the government.

I have attempted today to give a brief overview of the way justice is administered in Vanuatu. No doubt improvements can be and will be made but I believe that structure I described to be sound. I welcome the public's greater awareness of our legal system, for therein lies the key to its continuing utility and acceptance.

I now hereby declare that that the court session for 2018 is officially open.

I thank you for your attention.