

SPEECH – NAKOAENA COURTHOUSE OPENING (Rovo Bay, EPI)

Chief Justice Vincent Lunabek

Tuesday 4 July 2023

Honourable Prime Minister

Honourable Minister of Justice

Honourable Minister of Internal Affairs

Excellencies High Commissioners blong Australia and United Kindom

Distinguished guests

Oi Chiefs blong Vanuatu long Epi Island

Oi Women, men blong Vanuatu long Epi Island

Oi pikinini blong Vanuatu long Epi Island

I am delighted to be here this morning for this inauguration of the courthouse and the police post on Epi Island.

I thank you all distinguished people, chiefs, women, men mo pikinini blong Vanuatu long Epi, for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us in this brief but memorable ceremony.

Today is a historic day. It is a day of celebration of a building purposely built for courts on Epi Island. It is also historic as we celebrate the launch of the first ever

building purposely built for courts in Vanuatu since 1980. Currently, courts in Vanuatu operate in very basic buildings or human residences transformed for use by the courts

The government of Vanuatu is responsible for building courthouses and for the assistance of “*ready access to courts in the provinces and islands of Vanuatu for the promotion of justice*”. This is clearly, calls for the provision of courthouses to satisfy needs of each province and island of Vanuatu.

The government of Vanuatu in partnership with the government of Australia deserve commendation for providing this courthouse. This courthouse is made up of a registry, a closed courtroom with facilities, chambers and offices for the clerk, assistant registrar, visiting magistrate/judge, a conference room (fully equipped with technology to connect remotely), a filing room, a battery Room, 12,600-watt solar plant (to generate the power for the whole building and light), 1 water tank and washroom with running water for staff and 2 walk ramps (accessible to the building for people with special needs). This courthouse is extended with a children play ground/space.

The Judicial Service of Vanuatu, as part of its extensive medium to long term reforms, has begun to make significant efforts addressing the challenges which impede effective justice delivery. It is important that courthouses are built and or given the necessary facilities to create a conducive working environment to cater for the justice needs of the people.

The significance of today’s inauguration lies in the fact, that it is a step further to ensuring that justice can, and will be accessed, at the doorstep of citizens through the islands of Vanuatu like, here, in and around Epi Island. This building

symbolizes the rule of law, and as such, Island Court Justices of Epi, visiting magistrates and judges are expected to dispense justice without fear or favour, affection or ill will. I am equally happy to know that the use of the office space can be utilized to offer Alternative Disputes Resolutions (ADR) services to the people of Vanuatu on Epi Island.

I urge members of the public/litigants and the visiting lawyers to fully patronize or use the court connected alternative dispute resolution programme. There is no denying the fact that ADR has proven to be speedy, cheaper and less laborious, as compared to the formal adversarial traditional court system.

To the judicial officers and court officials, I urge them to exhibit a high sense of professionalism. And to the public, never hesitate to report any member of the judiciary or court staff who makes any unlawful demands, in performing his or her judicial duties, for disciplinary action to be taken against that person or group of persons.

Let me end by once again, commending the Vanuatu government in its partnership with the Australian Government.

I could recall the humble beginning when the Epi Chiefs approached me back in the early 2000 when the Court heard cases in an open condominium old house partly destroyed by the cyclones, for a proper court house at Rovo Bay, and the Epi Area Secretary (Luis Kora) showing to me the location to build the court house there. Here we are, we have a request, a place on the public land at Rovo Bay to build a court house.

I remembered the various approaches I made to the government for a proper courthouse on the islands of Vanuatu including Epi.

I remembered back in 2006, the Judiciary of Vanuatu ended up using its own budget to build a courthouse at Craigcove, Ambrym; and on the following year 2007, we built the Epi courthouse. So now on Epi Island we have a new and old courthouse. We built the old courthouse with a budget money worth 1, 300, 654 vatu with the participation of 3 communities on Epi who built it.

I sense the old court house will be given to the Epi Area Provincial Government to use it for their own provincial and administrative purposes.

I remembered I approached and requested the Australian High Commission Services in Vanuatu when they decided to build a police post on Epi Island, to also build a courthouse. That request was made to the Australian High Commission services in Vanuatu based on the bilateral arrangements between the Government of Vanuatu and the Government of Australia with the emphasis that the Government of Australia will assist the Government of Vanuatu in its security and justice development needs through what is called STRETEM ROD BLONG JUSTICE. That request is translated now into this new courthouse of Epi worth about 44,200,000 vatu that we are launching today.

At the time of the request, I was informed that the Australian Government through STRETEM ROD BLONG JUSTICE had funded and built a new police office extension at Lakatoro, Malekula. I was very surprised as I did not know and I did not have information about such assistance in the Police and Justice Sector Developments at Lakatoro, Malekula. So, I insisted that the next time that the Vanuatu Government in partnership with the Australian Government build a

Police Post anywhere on the islands of Vanuatu, I requested, on behalf of the Judiciary of Vanuatu, that they also build a courthouse so as to ensure that we can increase, improve, enhance the physical access to justice by enabling the rights of the people who seek justice- in particular the vulnerable people, namely, the elderly, women, children and people with special needs throughout Vanuatu.

When the request was accepted to build this Epi courthouse, I ask them to put on their list Saratamata Courthouse as the next courthouse to build under this partnership as Penama Province is the only province in Vanuatu that does not have a courthouse.

That is part of the history of this courthouse and it is now behind us.

I convey the Vanuatu Judiciary's appreciations and gratitude to the Government of Australia through the Australian High Commissioner who is with us today for their assistance. Thank you tumas.

I thank the chiefs, the women and men and the children of Vanuatu who live on Epi Island for their patience. Please enjoy this historic day for Epi and Vanuatu. Mi Please long ol chiefs, women, men mo pikinini blong Vanuatu we oli live long island blong Epi blong lukaotem gud courthouse blong yumi.

Thank you, tumas.