Prime Minister receives United Nations ICT Award

...Speaks to UN General Assembly on Vanuatu's achievements

PRIME MINISTER SATO KILMAN has accepted a major award from the United Nations for Vanuatu's achievements in information, communications and technologies (ICT).

The award was especially prestigious since it was given on the important 150th anniversary of the founding of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the UN body with jurisdiction over ICTs.

The award was given in New York City at a dinner held in the United Nations General Assembly Hall. Speaking before an audience of UN officials, heads of state, prime ministers, ambassadors and other dignitaries, the Prime Minister stated that, "I am very pleased to accept this award from the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union to Vanuatu, for ICTs in Sustainable Development."

Mr Kilman spoke to the UN General Assembly just a day after Pope Francis had addressed the same body, in the same location at the United Nations Headquarters building on the lower east side of Manhattan. Speaking on September 26, 2015 about the current ICT Award, the Prime Minister stated that, "This prestigious award reflects Vanuatu's many achievements in ICT engineering, policy, market structure, governance and regulation. Over the past few years, Vanuatu has:

• Created a competitive ICT market

• Created a powerful, centralized Government Chief Information Officer (CIO), staffed by a highly trained Vanuatu citizen, and set up an independent Telecom Regulator

• Constructed our first submarine cable to the outside world

• Dramatically increased mobile phones, from 15 to 93 percent of households

• Launched an effective government broadband communications network

• Made Vanuatu open to investment in ICTs and in all other sectors

• Set a goal that 98 percent of our population will have access to broadband ICTs by January 2018 — and we are already well on the way toward reaching this vital goal."

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Kilman stated that, "All of these achievements are tied together by our National ICT Policy. This Policy specifically refers to the UN Millennium Development Goals, and it anticipated the UN's Sustainable Development Goals."

The UN Sustainable Development Goals are 17 world-wide goals that include reducing poverty, increasing education and life-long learning, improving health care, empowering women, providing needed employment, and addressing climate change and reducing its impacts, among others. The 17 goals replace the previous "Millennium Development Goals" developed in the year 2000, which expire at the end of 2015.

Kilman stated that in at least two respects, Vanuatu is actually ahead of the rest of the world in regard to the Sustainable Development Goals. He said, "It may surprise you that we think that our Vanuatu National ICT Policy is actually a bit better than the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in two important areas: First, our Policy states that ICTs are essential to increasing productivity and equality in every sector. In the SDGs and their proposed indicators, ICTs and the Internet are briefly mentioned, but are not identified and called out in each substantive area, as a key driver of improvement in every sector."

The PM continued, "Second, our Policy stresses the importance of using ICTs to preserve, document and celebrate our local island languages and cultures. With 126 languages and cultural traditions and only 255,000 people, Vanuatu is the most linguistically and culturally dense country on Earth. There are 7,000 languages and cultures around the world, and half of them are in danger of being lost. This is a major problem for Vanuatu and for the planet."

Turning to climate change, PM Kilman stated that good ICTs had allowed the government's disaster management, meteorological and geo-physical scientists to give over a week's warning to the people of Vanuatu of the impending Cyclone Pam disaster. He also stated that, "We are working with the World Bank on a major loan and grant package in ICTs, focused on e-government and ICT development, as well as a major multi-sector loan that will help us re-build the infrastructure damaged by Cyclone Pam."

ICTs are important to individual citizens of Vanuatu in many ways, stressed the Prime Minister. "At our annual Pacific ICT Days in Vanuatu, many young women have stood up and said that ICTs are bringing them learning, education, ideas and job opportunities that never existed for them before. When we hear that, we know we are on the right road."

The Prime Minister thanked various external organizations which had helped Vanuatu earn the prestigious award for ICTs in Sustainable Development. He said, "I want to thank the many external organizations that helped Vanuatu win this award, especially the Australian Government, the World Bank, the United Nations University, and the Commonwealth Telecom Organization." He said that, "I particularly want to thank the ITU and its Secretary-General, Mr. Houlin Zhao, who are promoting innovation in ICTs world-wide."