



Australian High Commissioner

Vanuatu

Speech at the Vanuatu Government Information Centre

Prime Minister's Office (*English*)

Friday 6 May 2022, 1:30pm – 2:30pm

I am honoured to represent Australia as our 16th High Commissioner to Vanuatu, as together we celebrate 42 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries. Our people-to-people links run deep – through diaspora in both of our countries, indigenous culture including Australia's South Sea Islander Community, sports and students, churches and volunteers and our labour mobility partnership.

The interconnectedness of our history, our present and our future is clear - whether it is our combined responses to regional and global challenges, our security partnership, our work together on education, health and employment or our response to humanitarian crises.

I was very pleased this week as one of my earlier actions to participate in the Port Vila ANZAC day dawn service. Vanuatu, New Zealand and Australian security forces stood together at dawn as Pacific family, to remember the fallen and to honour the spirit of the ANZACs. This was a moment of solidarity and reflection at which we demonstrated our solemn respect for those who have served our nations in all wars, conflicts and peacekeeping missions.

Our security partnership delivers on the needs of ni-Vanuatu people, communities and Government. Our forces have strong interoperability. Last year, Australia delivered Vanuatu's Guardian-Class Patrol Boat, RVS *Takuare* which has played an important maritime security role but also in Vanuatu's COVID-19 vaccine rollout in the Shepard Islands.

Vanuatu and Australia are also working together to establish the Vanuatu Government National Emergency Radio Network. This network will support Vanuatu's decentralisation efforts and national disaster resilience. We know our region is disaster prone: cyclones, earthquakes, bushfires and floods, and Australia is a longstanding humanitarian partner.

In my first month as Australia's High Commissioner, I have had the honour of meeting the President of Vanuatu, His Excellency Pastor Obed Moses Tallis, members of Vanuatu's Council of Ministers including the Honourable Prime Minister Bob Loughman Weibur, chiefs, community members and partners. I have focused on listening and learning how I can advance Australia's relationship with Vanuatu to achieve our shared goals.

COVID-19 has understandably been at the forefront of my discussions. Vanuatu maintained its COVID-free status longer than most other countries in the world and successfully kept out more severe variants of the disease. Australia supported Vanuatu's priorities for COVID-19 preparedness, including through vaccination and health infrastructure in every province.

When community transmission occurred, we responded swiftly to Vanuatu's request for doctors, nurses, paramedics, and allied health staff to work alongside ni-Vanuatu healthcare workers. Recommendations by the Australian Medical Assistance Team have helped inform



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the Government of Vanuatu's plan to reopen borders so that Vanuatu can rebound from the economic impacts of the global pandemic. Australia supports twice weekly flights between Australia and Vanuatu under our Pacific Flights Program which has allowed for the delivery of vital humanitarian and medical supplies, and the essential movement of people, during the pandemic.

As Vanuatu's principal security partner, we have discussed how we can best respond to pressing security concerns including climate change and health security.

Australia has increased its commitments to climate financing and is investing heavily in low emission, climate-resilient investments in the region. This has included climate resilient road infrastructure under our Roads for Development program. Australia's Bureau of Meteorology is working with Vanuatu Geo-Hazards and Meteorology Department to prepare for climate extremes and communicate seasonal forecasts. We are working with partners to develop sustainable livelihoods to support Vanuatu's coral reef ecosystems and is helping rehabilitate and protect forests in North Efate, West Santo and Erromango to support landowners through carbon markets.

Australia is working to support Vanuatu's productive sector. We are working with farmers, primary producers and exporters to improve market access for Vanuatu's key export industries, including kava and cocoa – and we are seeing results. Since the commercial kava pilot commenced in December 2021, Vanuatu has exported over 7,000 kilograms of kava to Australia.

I know there is more our countries can do to support Vanuatu's productive sector. Thousands of ni-Vanuatu labour mobility workers will soon return to Vanuatu, and we can work together to ensure the skills and knowledge they have developed in Australia are used to support their families, communities and livelihoods. The international border reopening will be a burst of opportunity for Vanuatu's tourism and hospitality sector; and Australia will stand with Vanuatu every step of the way.

Renewed travel between our two countries will provide even more opportunities for exchange of knowledge, culture and skills between Vanuatu and Australia. As Australia's chosen representative in Vanuatu, I will work to deepen these links; especially between ni-Vanuatu and Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander communities.

I look forward to working with Vanuatu to forge a stronger, closer and more ambitious partnership. Tugeta yumi stanap.

