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PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON P J KEATING, MP
FOR THE PRIME MINISTER FOR THE SOUTH PACIFIC ENVIRONMENT
MINISTERS MEETING, HERITAGE HOTEL, BRISBANE,
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I am very pleased to be able to speak to you today both as Prime Minister of Australia and as Chair of the South Pacific Forum.

This is an important meeting - the first time Environment Ministers from the South Pacific Forum have ever met together.

So it is very disappointing that the event which has brought it about is such an unhappy one - France's decision on 13 June to resume the testing of nuclear weapons in the Pacific.

The response to that decision both within this region and outside it was swift and strong. Much swifter and stronger, I am sure, than the Government of France expected.

The reactions reflected, I think, a sense of betrayal. Betrayal by one of the current nuclear powers, which had only recently pledged to exercise the 'utmost restraint' in testing. Betrayal by a democracy. A betrayal of the hopes all of us felt with the end of the Cold War that the world might finally free itself from the awful threat of nuclear destruction.

The French decision was a bad decision, because it put at risk our efforts to secure two of the basic pillars of a non-nuclear world - the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and universal membership of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

And within this region - the region, far from France, where the tests are to be conducted - it raised particular concerns, of course, about the environmental damage the testing program might cause.

In response to France's decision many countries around the world have raised their voices in protest. Action has been taken by countries individually, in regional forums and globally - in the United Nations and other international organisations.

For its part, the South Pacific region contains some of the world's smallest and most ecologically vulnerable states. But all of them are in a profound material and spiritual relationship with the Pacific Ocean. And through the South Pacific Forum, especially, their voice has been heard in this international outcry.

Immediately after the French Government's announcement, a Ministerial Mission from the Forum visited Paris to express our concerns directly to the French. The delegation was led by the Australian Foreign Minister, Senator Evans. President Dowiyogo of Nauru, who is with us at this meeting, was present, too, together with representatives of Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Western Samoa.

Since then, a Regional Action Committee has been set up with the assistance of the Forum Secretariat to coordinate our responses to the testing program. It will meet again tomorrow here in Brisbane.

We are taking actions in other parts of the world, too. For example, Forum diplomatic representatives in Washington from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Western Samoa, New Zealand and Australia have made joint representations on nuclear issues to members of Congress and the Administration.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Secretary General Tabai, in particular, for the enormous effort he has put into developing and coordinating the Forum response.

The campaign against French nuclear testing by Forum members has been strong and consistent. And I believe it has already been useful - for example, in encouraging the welcome French decision on 9 August to pursue a zero threshold in the negotiations for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. But there is much further to go.

We will have a further opportunity to review where matters stand at the Forum meeting in Madang next month.

An important point to underline is that none of the responses to the testing decision by Forum members has been motivated by hostility to France or to its role in the Pacific.

Still less have our actions been the result of any antipathy towards the French people or French culture. It has concerned me whenever that line has been breached in public protests.

We are opposed, simply, to this single bad decision. And we want to see it changed.

Over recent years, with the Matignon Accords in New Caledonia and the 1992 French moratorium on nuclear testing, our region's relations with France had probably never been better.

That is the situation we want to see again - a productive and creative French engagement with this region.

But the testing decision has again raised questions about how well the French Government understands the attitudes and concerns of the people of this region.

Because the region's response should not have come as a surprise to President Chirac or his advisers.

Our history of opposition to the testing of nuclear weapons and the dumping of nuclear waste in this region has been long and consistent.

It has been expressed in a number of ways over many years: in communiques and declarations of successive South Pacific Forum meetings; in the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga and in the 1993 South Pacific Regional Environment Protection Convention.

This meeting is a further practical expression of our concern about the nuclear issue. I want to thank my colleague, John Faulkner, for the arrangements he has made to bring it about.

You will be focusing on the environmental consequences of the French Government's decision. Australia's Chief Scientist, Professor Michael Pitman has brought together a scientific advisory group of scientists with nuclear, geological, seismic, meteorological and marine expertise to provide you with scientific advice.

You will have an opportunity to review this evidence and to consider a possible monitoring regime for the region. Your recommendations will provide a very important input into the discussions when Forum leaders meet next month in Madang.

Soon after President Chirac announced his decision about testing I wrote an article for the French newspaper Le Monde, as Chairman of the South Pacific Forums in which I tried to convey to ordinary French people why it is that we in the Pacific oppose the testing program so strongly.

I wrote that "There is a world of difference between studying a map of the Pacific in Europe and living on the shores of the ocean in Sydney or Brisbane or Auckland or Suva.

"The map puts these places a long way from Mururoa. But when you live in these places you know that, vast though it is, the South Pacific is one environment and it binds all those who share it."

That knowledge which we all share is why this meeting is being held. It is why the issues you are considering are so important.

It is why people in all the Forum countries will join me in wishing you well in your discussions.