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Official Speech:

**Honourable MELTEK SATO KILMAN LIVTUNVANU,
Prime Minister of Vanuatu and Minister Responsible for
Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), and
Telecommunications**

**Given at United Nations Headquarters to the United Nations
General Assembly, in New York City, USA**

Mr. President, Honourable United Nations Secretary-
General, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and
Gentlemen:

Vanuatu is very pleased to be able to be called to speak today before the United Nations General Assembly. This is only the fourth time that a Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu has spoken before this august body. I am very pleased that the occasion today is the acceptance of an award from the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to Vanuatu, for “ICTs in Sustainable Development.” It is especially pleasing for Vanuatu to receive this award during the 150th anniversary year of the founding of the ITU, the oldest UN agency, in 1865 in Paris.

This award was given for using ICTs – information and communications technologies -- to help achieve the United Nations “Sustainable Development Goals.”

This prestigious award reflects Vanuatu's many achievements in ICTs in engineering, policy, market structure, governance and regulation.

Over the past few years, Vanuatu has:

- Created a competitive ICT market structure
- Created a powerful, centralized Government Chief Information Officer (CIO), staffed by a highly trained Vanuatu citizen
- Set up an independent and effective Telecom Regulator
- Constructed our first submarine fiber optic cable to the outside world
- Built the Vanuatu Internet Exchange – the first IXP (Internet Exchange Point) in the Pacific Island nations
- Dramatically increased household mobile penetration, from 15 to 94 percent
- Launched and run an effective government-wide communications network
- Drafted cyber-security legislation
- Commissioned the world's first detailed Mobile E-government Strategy, which was undertaken by the United Nations University
- Made Vanuatu open to inward investment in ICTs and in all other sectors
- Reached an agreement between our Telecom Regulator and our major private telecom operators, so that 98 percent of our population will have access to broadband

ICTs by January 1, 2018. Importantly, we are already well on the way toward reaching this vital goal.

Mr. President, all of these achievements are tied together and driven by our National ICT Policy. This Policy specifically refers to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. And the Policy anticipated the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, by identifying education, health, employment, gender equality, climate change and disaster management as top priority concerns.

It may surprise you to find that we think that our National ICT Policy is actually 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 not identified as a key driver of improvement and change in every sector.

Second, our Policy stresses the importance of using ICTs to preserve, document and celebrate our local island languages and cultures. With 123 languages and cultural traditions and only 255,000 people, Vanuatu is the most linguistically and culturally dense country on Earth. There are 7000 languages and cultures around the world, and half of them are in danger of being lost. This is a problem for Vanuatu and for the planet, and this neglected issue needs as much attention as species loss and environmental pollution.

Mr. President, the importance of ICTs in disaster management recently hit home in Vanuatu when we were hit by a terrible

catastrophe -- Cyclone Pam. ICTs allowed us to give a week's warning to our citizens that this Category 5 cyclone was approaching, with winds of up to 320 kilometers per hour. The cyclone displaced or severely affected 132,000 of our people, over half the total population. Only one cell tower in the entire country was left standing after the storm, and our Government ICT network was destroyed.

After the cyclone passed, our government ICT staff and private Vanuatu telecom firms responded rapidly to rebuild damaged or destroyed ICT infrastructure, so that government operations and private business could return to normal.

ICTs are playing a major role in the recovery in every sector. In our top priority sector, education, we are focusing on building computer labs in our schools. These labs will have high speed Internet access, and will be open to the community and to local businesses in the evenings and on weekends.

The computer labs are part of our larger Universal Access Policy, which we think is one of the most progressive in the world. Under that policy, our Telecom Regulator can either require the licensed operators to "pay" a set annual fee, or "play" by contributing directly to the Universal Access effort. Our three largest operators have all agreed to "play," and the plan is working well.

This major UN award assures us that our on-going, substantial commitment to ICTs is correct and appropriate. To continue our progress in ICTs, we are in the process of working with the World Bank on a major loan and grant package in ICTs, focused on e-government and ICT development. This is in addition to the larger World Bank loan that will help us re-build

the infrastructure damaged by Cyclone Pam across many sectors.

I want to thank the many organizations that helped Vanuatu win this award, especially the Australian Government, the World Bank, the United Nations University, the Commonwealth Telecom Organization, our Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO), our Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator (TRR), our major operators Digicel, TVL, Wantok, SPIM and Telsat, and our cable operator Interchange.

I particularly want to thank the ITU's Secretary-General, Mr. Houlin Zhao. The ITU theme this year is "Telecommunications and ICTs: Drivers of Innovation," and I think the ITU and its Secretary-General is playing a key role in driving innovation world-wide.

I call on all persons involved in Vanuatu ICTs to re-double their efforts to work together harmoniously to achieve even greater heights, and receive even more awards in the future.

Thank you again for this honor, which I accept in the name of the people of Vanuatu.

As we say in Vanuatu, tank yu tumas – and may God bless the United Nations!

#end#

[986 words, about 8 minutes]