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ICT Takes Centre Stage

By Ezra Toara

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Vanuatu celebrated Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Day yesterday at The Melanesian Hotel Conference Room in Port Vila with panel discussions on the theme “Empowering the LDCs through ICTs — Access, Affordability, and Digital skills.”

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Government Chief Information Officer Gerard Metsan said yesterday's event coincided with what the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) calls the World Telecommunication and Information Society Day. It is a day set aside to celebrate achievements in ICT and to reflect on what can be done in the ICT sector to help citizens access government service delivery.

"In places where traditional access to services is stopped, we can use ICT to make service delivery easier, enabling interaction between the government and the people," Metsan said. "ICT has played an important role in linking people, including the government during COVID-19, so this is the avenue that we want to rely on for the future."

Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu, Heidi Bootle, said this event is particularly significant for Vanuatu this year due to the importance of ICT during the two cyclones.

Satellites were used to track images and share information with government databases, ensuring that supplies reached those in need.

"Digital connectivity was strengthened to achieve those practical outcomes, and with this year's celebration theme, it becomes more significant because it is an area where Vanuatu needs to strengthen," she said. "Vanuatu graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in 2020 was in many ways an aim to prepare the use of ICT to drive development."

High Commissioner Bootle highlighted the government and the people's investment in digital infrastructure, the development of new ICT capabilities, and the adoption of policy and regulatory frameworks as driving forces behind Vanuatu's digital transformation over the years.

"This work helps drive economic development, which has been one of the goals in Vanuatu's graduation. As we can see, the government network is now accessible in all six provinces," she said.

The High Commissioner expressed Australia's pleasure in supporting Vanuatu's digital journey and working with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) and the Telecommunications Radiocommunications and Broadcasting Regulator (TRBR) on strategy and policy development.

The support extends to the Ministry of Trades in developing the electronic single window to facilitate quicker, cheaper, and easier trade, as well as facilitating electronic connectivity among banks.

Additionally, Australia is partnering with the United Nations (UN) Pacific digital economic program to support the application of e-commerce.

“Therefore, the internet may be challenging, but the technology we need does not depend on understanding. We must educate our people on how to use the Internet,” she said.

Prime Minister (PM) Ishmael Kalsakau acknowledged the significance of ICT in Vanuatu’s journey, noting that this year’s themes are important for creating platforms that emphasize the affordability of information on various platforms.

“We want everyone to access information, and of course, we will try our very best to ensure information reaches even the most remote parts of our islands,” he said.

While Vanuatu graduated from the LDC status in 2020 and benefited from using the internet and digital communication during the challenges of COVID-19, PM Kalsakau emphasised the need to remain aware of other natural events such as cyclones, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis. These experiences present a significant challenge.

“When we reflect on the power of ICT, we realise that it has driven us on a highway where we can talk, communicate, and share information without leaving our comfort zones. It has truly helped us,” he said. “Our biggest challenge is to strengthen our systems to withstand the impact of cyclones and maintain a constant focus.

“We need effective strategies that align with our status to demonstrate that we have graduated from the LDC status. ICT plays an important role in ensuring that all people of Vanuatu can access goods and services, encouraging the use of technology without discrimination based on age, ability, or financial status.”

Distinguished guests present at the opening ceremony of the ICT Day included Minister of Finance John Salong, Minister of Trade Matai Seremaiah, Australian High Commissioner Bootle, Japan’s Ambassador to Vanuatu, and members of other diplomatic corps.