

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 27TH MARCH, 2020

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 27TH MARCH, 2020

The Parliament met at 9.46 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Dr. Ratu A.R. Lalabalavu; the Honourable Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu; the Honourable M.R. Leawere; the Honourable A.M. Radrodro; the Honourable J. Saukuru; and the Honourable L.D. Tabuya.

MINUTES

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 26th March, 2020, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

HON. SPEAKER.- I welcome all Honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament. I also welcome the members of the public watching the live broadcast of the proceedings on television and the internet. I thank you all for taking an interest in your Parliament.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE COVID-19 RESPONSE BILL 2020 AND CONSEQUENTIAL BILLS 2020

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament passed on Thursday, 26th March, 2020, we will now proceed with the resumption of the debate on the COVID-19 Response Bill 2020 and Consequential Bills.

Honourable Members, I wish to remind that each Member may speak only once on the COVID-19 Response Bill, as well as the Consequential Bills.

Honourable Members, before I give the floor to the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, I ask for the cooperation of the Whips on both sides of the House to look at the speaking times and the sequences of speakers and let the Secretariat know, so that I am well informed.

I now call upon the Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Sitiveni Rabuka, and as per Parliamentary Convention and tradition, the Leader of the Opposition may take up the same time as the Honourable Attorney-General's address last night. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Your Excellency the President, who will be listening in on the proceedings of this honourable House this morning; may I address my chiefs in the vernacular, *Oi kemuni saka na Turaga Bale, Marama Bale kei kemuni na Turaga ni Vanua*; the Honourable Prime Minister; Honourable Cabinet and Assistant Ministers; Honourable Members; ladies and gentlemen; young people of Fiji; *ni sa rogorogo tale tikoga mai na Turaga na Roko Tui Suva*; today I thank the Almighty God, Creator of the Universe and Jesus Christ the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, for granting me life and good health, to be able to deliver this main Opposition response to the COVID-19 Response Budget as tabled last night by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy.

I have the distinct honour, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to deliver the first Opposition response as part of our responsibility of defending the rights of the people who had voted us into this Chamber.

Before I continue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I congratulate my friend, the newest Honourable Member of the House, who took his oath of allegiance and of office yesterday. Welcome, Mr. Koya.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to continue with this debate, five Honourable Members of the SODELPA Party are listening in; two are in advised isolation, having been overseas or been in contact with someone who has recently returned from overseas, the Honourable Aseri Radrodoro and Honourable Leawere. The Honourable Saukuru is in Lautoka and not being able to get out; Honourable Dr. Ratu Atonio Lalabalavu, who is confined to bed with an ordinary flu in Taveuni; and the Honourable Whip, who is still in police custody undergoing investigations.

I also would like to acknowledge and salute the dedicated health workers; the doctors and the nurses, the orderlies, the ambulance drivers and all who are directly or indirectly involved in the mammoth task before them in association with the risk of the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also thank the members of the Disciplined Services, law enforcement agencies, who work day and night to ensure the safety of our people and our country.

This time in Fiji and the world have been quite accurately and internationally regarded as a universal crisis time, as the whole world is actually affected psychologically and definitely economically by the COVID-19 Pandemic brought about by the breakout of coronavirus from Wuhan, China in December 2019, thus the figure “19” as part of the brand name given to it - COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with the sentiments expressed by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy in saying that we are living in extraordinary times and extraordinary measures must be put in place to cushion the impact of our current adversity.

In the face of this adversity, we must all stand united. It is time for us to reflect and it is time for us to take stock as individuals, as families, as a community and as a nation. We must be united and be steadfast. Our political differences and personal agenda must be placed at the back-burner for the common good.

As national leaders and legislators, we must work together and reassure our people that we are united as one people. We must instil confidence to our people rather than instilling fear and panic, as experienced in the last week or two due to poor dissemination of vital information to our citizens and the bad use of social media.

As Leader of the Opposition, I renewed my call for a bipartisan approach to the Honourable Prime Minister in addressing this pandemic through a letter that was sent by e-mail on 21st March, 2020. I believe he has seen that letter, perhaps it is too late now for us to go through that process of bipartisan discussion before the presentation of the Budget yesterday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the first time that our nation is facing adversity of this degree, but we have always overcome such events through our national resilience, the resilience of our people and through unity.

As highlighted by the Honourable Attorney-General, we must learn from history and we must learn from our experiences in facing adversity. Some of the crisis we have come across in the past and he mentioned it yesterday was the measles epidemic in 1875; we have gone through World War I; the Spanish flu the world went through in 1918; we went through World War II; we went through the period of Communist Revolution and the Expansionism Policies of the Communists in Asia; we have been participating in the Middle East Conflicts as peacekeepers; we have gone through a period of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and natural disasters, such as *Hurricane Bebe* and the most recent severe *TC Winston*; and now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19.

In all these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe, Fiji as a colony and as a nation with its people, have played a very important part. Perhaps, as the Honourable Prime Minister has repeatedly said, “We have punched above our weight in those crisis.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this pandemic has come, so each nation is facing its own epidemic. And I believe that we can ask the international communities if we can be relieved from some of the international duties that we have been performing on behalf of the international communities, to come back and fix our own in Fiji.

Most of our military personnel, particularly the leaders, are trained for crisis and operate in crisis. Sadly, only a few learned to plan for peace while in crisis. We tend to rely a lot on Government hand-outs and pensions when our uniforms are gone, our youthful exuberance is gone and become old soldiers.

But this is such a time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we can all bring some of them back - the retired doctors, perhaps, those who served in the Military, those who are professional doctors in the Ministry of Health and have retired. I believe some of them may be on the list to be called back to help, like retired nurses.

What do we do now, Mr. Speaker, Sir? I believe we have sadly gone past great opportunities of learning. Perhaps, what we have learnt is that, we have not learned. A lot of those things that we have gone through in the past should have put us in good stead that we prepare for any unknowns in our future.

Despite early warnings from the international communities and experiences from other countries, I believe we delayed our pre-emptive measures. We could have prevented the pandemic reaching our shores by closing our borders earlier, just like other Pacific countries, despite the fact that their economies are much smaller than ours and much more vulnerable than ours.

I have made a number of suggestions in the past, asking Government to take necessary steps to reduce those risks. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 29th January, 2020, I called on the Government to put in place stricter controls on entry into Fiji, including requiring passengers to present medical reports, clearing them four days prior to travel, the establishment of quarantine centres near all ports of entry,

to check travel history of passengers for the previous 14 days, and for 14 days voluntary quarantine for passengers upon arrival.

I was criticised and nullified by the *Fiji Sun* on 31st January, 2020, which insisted that Government alone should decide on anti-coronavirus measures. I do not dispute that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I believe we can contribute to the decisions made by Government. Since then, I have issued several statements, including calling for the ban on travel by Ministers and Civil Servants and for the ban on cruise ships, which have been implemented.

In contrast, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government only recommended voluntary 14-days quarantine on 15th March, 2020. The next day, Patient No. 1 returned from San Francisco. His employer, Fiji Airways, did not quarantine him then but instructed him to fly to Auckland and back to Fiji on 17th March, 2020. He did not fall sick until 18th March, 2020, Sir, and the Honourable Prime Minister announced the presence of COVID-19 in Fiji and the lockdown of Lautoka seven days ago on 19th March, 2020.

The Honourable Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications must answer for that laxity because the mandatory quarantine was not announced until 19th March, 2020. So I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government cannot blame Patient No. 1 for not quarantining himself when the Airline instructed him to fly to Auckland one day after his return from San Francisco.

It is because of the lack of vision and haste, our very own national carrier became the virus carrier. The Government should stop putting the blame on others ...

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- ... as usual and face the music, and take full responsibility of being an accomplice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reiterate in this august House and to the people of Fiji the concerns raised by this side of the House with regards to the manipulation, even abuse of Standing Orders, which is your guiding principle in the conduct of our affairs in this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is sad to note that the Government declined the urgency to justify railroading this through, calling it parliamentary processes. If the funding required was so urgent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to combat COVID-19, why could the Government and the Honourable Minister responsible for the economy not use the funds from the 2019-2020 Budget which was already allocated and already approved by Parliament, and let the Parliament Budget process as provided for in the Standing Orders, continue as required by the rules and principles of good governance and transparency, to let Parliament perform its function to properly scrutinise the proposal from the Executive Branch.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- The Government should not make Parliament a rubberstamp by defeating the rules of Parliament itself.

This sham process is a disservice to the nation, a disservice to the people and to us, the elected representatives. The Legislature will have performed its function rather than be railroaded into rubberstamping the proposal from the Executive. The suspension of the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure yesterday, deprives the House the opportunity to properly carry out scrutiny of this Bill that is before the House.

I have doubt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we all agree that as a responsive Government as always claimed by the Honourable Minister for Economy, we will take the necessary steps to minimise any real or perceived risks in extraordinary events as we are experiencing today, with the announcement of COVID-19 as a pandemic. We must not wait and be reactionary, but we must be proactive.

Many books have been written in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about planning for these unseen or unforeseen (we say unforeseen, but people had seen them before) but I believe they can be intelligently anticipated. Therefore, Government must intelligently prepare for that.

Are there other options available to Government, taking into account that we are only three months away from the end of the current financial year? Would it be prudent for Government to make the necessary adjustments within the law in reallocating expenditure to priority areas from the existing Budget of the current financial year? Does the Government have the necessary fiscal space for the Supplementary Budget? We have to be very clear in our mind and differentiate the concept behind a supplementary budget and a mini-budget.

From a layman's perspective, a supplementary budget means an additional expenditure from other sources on additional revenue measures, and we had started raising this even before the last Election. I will deliberate on the issue later in my response to the so-called Supplementary Budget.

It is time now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this august House and the people of Fiji must be told the truth and the reality on the ground. It is unfortunate that the FijiFirst Government, under the Honourable Prime Minister, has been misleading and deceiving the people of Fiji, and manipulating the figures, particularly in this Budget, which I will touch on later. The economy and its release is at the whim of the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy, just as the decision to keep our borders open when it was more prudent to have closed them.

In the 2019-2020 Appropriation Bill passed by Parliament in July last year, Sir, \$1.488 billion was under RIE in different Ministries, while \$400 million was in Head 50. It will be interesting for the Honourable Minister for Economy to inform this august House, how much of these funds have been utilised as of today because the control for their usage lies squarely under his authority.

In reviewing figures in the Supplement to the Budget, it is worth noting that a fair share of the \$1 billion budget increase for COVID-19 is being used for purposes other than COVID-19 activities. How does the increase of 1.5 million for passports improve our response to COVID-19? How does a new item for deportation of \$38,000 improve our response to the pandemic? It is, indeed, a surprise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to see new expenditure items and increases being sneaked in via the so-called COVID-19 Response Budget.

(Hon. A. Sayed-Kaiyum interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Another interesting observation under Head 50, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the increase in allocation for vehicle leasing from \$20 million in the 2019-2020 Budget to \$29.1 million, almost a 50 percent increase in the Supplementary Budget, an

increase of \$9 million. On average, Government spends around \$18 million annually on vehicle leasing. How practical is this leasing arrangement and what is the opportunity cost of leasing? Most Governments who have trialled leasing, have abandoned the system because in most cases, leasing has become very costly for them.

It is interesting to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Fiji Corrections Service has been allocated an additional \$1.5 million for the purchase of goods and services (ration) under Head 15, Programme 2, Activity 2, SEG 5.

I note an increase of \$1.7 million has been allocated to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces under Head 19, Programme 1, Activity 2 – Logistics Support Unit, Item 5; for the purchase of goods and services, that is, Warlike Stores. I believe there is no direct core relationship between that and an activity in response to COVID-19.

Again, an additional \$1.6 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been allocated to Programme 1, Activity 1, under Item 7 - VAT Clearance Charges. Again, it is unclear how this allocation is related to the COVID-19 Response.

Is the construction of new police stations a priority in addressing COVID-19? I note that an additional \$10 million has been allocated for the construction of the Nakasi, Nadi and Nalawa Police Stations. The Honourable Minister for Economy should have, at least, explained the allocation of resources in his speech rather than hiding those non-COVID-19 related activities.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I did not have the time to review all Heads of Expenditure to identify the variations. I went home at 6 o'clock this morning after trying to read right through both documents, the one that was presented to us in the middle of last year and the one presented to us last night. We should have time to thoroughly study and scrutinise the figures given to us by our elected Executive.

It is very clear that a fair share, Mr. Speaker, of the allocation from the COVID-19 Response Budget is not directly related to the response to the pandemic, but to correct the poor budgeting and planning in the allocation of resources to those institutions. We just have to review the budget in the last three years to know the truth.

In the 2016-2017 Budget, our total expenditure was estimated to be around \$3.6 billion, and estimated revenue was estimated to be around \$3.2 billion. The actual revenue collected was only \$2.8 billion. The revenue shortfall was around \$338 million. The gap was significant, despite the actual expenditure of only \$3.06 billion, a shortfall of \$583 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again in the 2017-2018 Budget, our estimated expenditure was around \$3.4 billion and our revenue collection was estimated to have been \$3.86 billion. The actual revenue collected was only \$3.24 billion, a shortfall of \$513 million.

In the 2018-2019 Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our estimated expenditure was around \$4.65 billion, revenue estimate was \$4.24 billion but collection was short by \$980 million. The Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy will argue that these figures are only estimates, but the concern is the variance between the estimates and the actuals have always been on a high side.

I believe due to poor budgeting, the Government was forced to reduce expenditure in the 2019-2020 Budget by \$809 million. The reduction of over \$809 million in expenditure for the 2018-2019

Budget clearly suggests that something is wrong and this is a clear reflection of the poor revenue forecasting and the manipulation of figures in previous years. That reduction confirms that the FijiFirst Government is in dire straits, therefore, the nation.

I am certain that the actual revenue for the 2019-2020 financial year will be much lower than what is in the Budget Estimates, particularly in the sale of assets, despite the reduction of over \$809 million.

The projected sale of assets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the projected figures have not been realised in the past, the figures have been inflated on the revenue side to show a reduction in deficit, even though it is common knowledge that sales were not executed.

The poor forecasting and manipulation of budget figures has the following grave implications:

- Growth figures were manipulated to create a rosy picture. These will need to be further revised downwards.
- Debt level as a percentage to GDP ratio was incorrectly dubbed as positive.
- GDP growth will increase by almost 10 percent which is unsustainable and unacceptable for a small vulnerable economy like Fiji. Surely with the current trend, our economy will fall into debt trap. We are already in it, taking into account the slowdown of economic growth with our traditional partners. The percentage of GDP is around \$127 million at current price.
- Government deficit will surely further increase from the estimated 2.7 percent to around 8 percent to 10 percent of GDP. In fact, the document yesterday puts a figure at 9 percent. There will be a further reduction in Government expenditure, which means that the economy will further contract.
- The reduction in Government expenditure will surely affect the current services which are currently already in a poor and dilapidated state. Infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, jetties and water supplies will continue to deteriorate.
- Government no longer has the fiscal space to manoeuvre, as clearly reflected in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Article IV Report of February 2019 and the World Bank: Weathering Growing Risks Report of October 2019.

Despite all the indicators, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and despite all the sound advice from experts that we must manage our economy better and consolidate Government finances, Government continues to paint a false rosy picture, insisting and telling us that everything is alright.

It is so sad that independent institutions, such as the Reserve Bank of Fiji, continues to support Government's views that the economy is buoyant. Its latest report on the economy now clearly suggest that most of the key productive sectors of our economy have not been performing well in the past five years.

The latest announcement by the Honourable Minister for Education in the reduction of education grants to schools and the delay of its payment is clear testimony that Government has a cashflow problem.

The release of the Fiji Sugar Corporation Annual Report last week clearly indicated that it made a financial loss of \$18 million in the 2019 financial year. Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC's debt is hovering around \$300 million which will be very difficult to manage, taking into account the current trading environment.

The increase in the price of basic food items without any corresponding increase in wages and salaries in the last five years is another indication that we are in financial crisis.

The increase in revenue measures and fees and charges two months after the Budget announcement which reduced expenditure by a whopping \$809 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a clear sign of desperation. The reduction of \$809 million in Government expenditures simply means that the economy will now contract further by, at least, \$1.6 billion with conservative multiplier effect of 0.2 which we really cannot afford at this time.

The law and order situation is deteriorating and the Honourable Prime Minister has been given special treatment by the criminal justice institutions which should be independent in enforcing the law. Instead of "everyone being equal under the law", we are seeing the famous "some are more equal than others being practised in Fiji.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- In addition, our debt level is unsustainable in the medium and long-term. Today, our debt is around \$5.8 billion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an increase from \$2.6 billion in 2006. It has almost doubled.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You contributed to that.

HON. MAJOR GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- The economy is in crisis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the dictatorial approach taken by the Bainimarama-led Government in implementing the wrong policy mix for the last 13 years because it is determined by only one individual in the interest of a selected few, rather than the nation as a whole.

The lack of consultation with the people of Fiji, particularly the private sector and Civil Society Organisations has led to the lack of confidence in the economy.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Despite the claim of buoyant levels of liquidity, commercial banks have increased their interest rates on loan twice in the last four months alone.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- I borrow, I know!

(Laughter)

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- These are clear indications that the people of Fiji, in particular, investors and the private sector, have lost confidence in the Bainimarama-led Government.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Expenditure in the last three years continued to surpass revenue which has led to higher debt.

It is unfortunate to note that the Government does not have the fiscal space to respond to unexpected and extraordinary events in the short and medium term, despite sound advice given by experts. The FijiFirst Government continued its bullish spending without due consideration to our vulnerability as a small island nation.

Based on reality on the ground, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last three years of bullish operating spending for consumption and shortage of revenue, collection and poor implementation of Government programmes, one wonders at the practicality of measures now suggested. The marginalisation and removal of key institutions has made it worse and allowed a dictatorial two-men Government without checks and balances.

Despite all the indications and sound advice from experts that we must manage our economy better and consolidate Government finances, the Government continues to paint a rosy picture, insisting that everything is hunky dory.

It is sad, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that independent institutions, like the RBF as I said, continue to speak favourably of Government and their follies. Our debt level is unsustainable in the medium and long-term. Today, it is round 5.8 percent. As I had said, 2.6 percent in 2006; unacceptable. The reduction in overnight policy rate of 2.25 percent is perhaps too little, too late.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to just compare the two - page 8 in the document presented to us yesterday and the one presented to us in July. The expenditure in July for this normal current year is \$3,840,928,000. For this COVID-19 Response Budget - \$3.536 billion. Revenue, normal budget - \$3.491 billion, now down to \$2.507 billion. Gross deficit - \$604,436,000, is now \$1.282 billion. The net deficit as a percentage of GDP now is 9 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Those are not encouraging figures.

We agree that we need to take extraordinary measures at this time. After looking through the allocations that they have come up with, I believe, too little too late, and in the wrong areas. Perhaps, a redistribution of the normal budget per year, concentrating it on the areas that needed the most rather than the areas we want to please, would be a great move for Fiji for this crisis and to prepare for the good times ahead of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this week and next week, we are going through Lent. We are going through to celebrate the Passover Feast, and Christians and Jews all over the world will be celebrating. It is a time when they remember the angel of death going past every door that was marked with the blood of the lamb.

I believe, Sir, that if we do this right, we will be celebrating soon, as the angel of death will go past Fiji. In crisis, prepare for peace. While you are hunkering down, prepare for the celebration and as you are celebrating, remember bad times can also come again.

Last night, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government made emotional statements that the people of Fiji urgently need the Supplementary Budget to be approved. In fact, the urgency is to cover over the mismanagement of the economy and of the nation. Not since staff college years, Sir, have I stayed up preparing until 6 o'clock the following morning. I did that last night and I am glad that I am capable and able to deliver this response, hoping that Government will learn from what we contribute in our responses so that the people of Fiji benefit.

As I have said before and I say it again, too little too late. Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leader of the Opposition for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Prime Minister, do you wish to take the floor now?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

The Honourable Speaker of Parliament, the Honourable Members, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka*.

Honourable Speaker, I am not here today to make a long speech. I am not here to play politics and unlike what we have seen from the other side, I am not here to grandstand for a few minutes of screen time. I am here to get this Budget passed, and get Fijian workers and businesses the support they badly need.

I do not think that many on that side of the House really appreciate just how important it is that we get this Budget over the line. I think some of us in this Chamber seriously do not realise what is happening around the world right now, and just how bad things are going to get. After the Parliament Sitting last night, Honourable Speaker, someone sent me a caption that says, "Some people are like old TVs, you need to slap them around before they see the picture."

This morning, Honourable Speaker, there are over half-a-million confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide. Everyday, hundreds or more deaths are reported. The entire world has been grounded to a hard and fast halt. The global economy is hurtling towards the most devastating economic crisis of our lifetime. People are losing jobs, industries are collapsing and companies are going under.

Given this grim reality, Honourable Speaker, I know the Fijian people shared my frustration last night, listening to the tedious back and forth that delayed hearing what this Budget contained and the support it provides, before it was even announced by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy.

There is a lot I could say about the conduct of the Honourable Members of the Opposition, but I will not waste my time or words on them this morning, not when Fijians have their jobs on the line, when they live with the spectre of the COVID-19 outbreak, and when businesses are facing their hardest year in history.

Anyone with a little brain, and more importantly with a heart, knows that we need to turn this Bill into the relief our people need. We need to put money in Fijians' pockets now. We need to extend a lifeline to Fijian businesses. We need to get our doctors and nurses more of the lifesaving supplies they need to test for and treat this virus.

Mr. Speaker, we have been working closely with Foreign Missions, to make sure Fijians can get home and expatriates in Fiji are able to return to their countries. As I had mentioned a couple of

days ago in my statement, there are three final evacuation flights scheduled this weekend. So far, only one is confirmed. It is coming in from New Zealand to bring Fijians back home and repatriate Kiwis and other foreign nationals. All of these incoming passengers, Honourable Speaker, as always, will be placed under compulsory self-quarantine for 14 days upon arrival. Once these flights are sorted, passenger travel out of Nadi Airport, again, will shut down.

That measure is part of Fiji's stringent COVID-19 containment effort, a nationwide response we have rolled out with breakneck efficiencies to stop this virus in its tracks.

Just to recap, Honourable Speaker, the Lautoka confined area, the location of our first case, is on total lockdown. Cruise ships are banned. Anyone entering Fiji must immediately shut themselves in self-quarantine for 14 days. Inter-island passenger shipping ends on Sunday, 29th March, 2020. Gatherings of 20 or more people are banned. Non-essential travel should not be happening anywhere in Fiji. The elderly should stay at home at all times and so should children.

These measures are saving lives, and we did not waste any time going around to every political party in the country asking for permission to put them into effect. We stepped up and got the job done because the job needed to be done now.

Honourable Speaker, I have said in my frequent COVID-19 press statements I have delivered over the past week that we are not afraid to ramp up these containment measures, if we feel the Fijian public is not taking this crisis seriously. When it comes to the type of activities and behaviours that we have discouraged to stop the spread of coronavirus, like non-essential travel, close contact and large gatherings, too many Fijians seem to think that when the sun goes down, the rules stop. That is why today, Honourable Speaker, I am also announcing a new nationwide curfew from 10.00 p.m. to 5.00 a.m. every night, everywhere in Fiji. This will take effect from Monday evening, 30th March, 2020.

There is far too much risk of socialising and unnecessary travel at these hours. If you are out during these hours, unless it is work or another life sustaining purpose, the Police will direct you straight home. We will be announcing the full details of this curfew soon.

Mr. Speaker, some of us, having to work in very early hours of the morning, deserve special recognition. While most Fijians are fast asleep, our COVID-19 Team at the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is starting their day, working to spearhead our response and containment efforts.

Every morning at 3.00 a.m., Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Minister and his Team are up listening to the advisories and assessments coming from the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Geneva and reviewing the latest on the global situation. By the time most people are just heading to work, this Team under the Honourable Minister have already begun compiling our daily COVID-19 briefing and coordinating with the Disciplined Forces and other Ministries in our nationwide virus response.

I thank the hardworking team for keeping me and all Fijians informed, so we can face this fight head-on and on the frontlines of our war on Coronavirus are our doctors and nurses serving in isolation wards, fever clinics and in contact tracing teams to keep Fiji ahead of the spread of the virus.

Mr. Speaker, these Fijians deserve far more than just our thanks. They certainly do not deserve a pay-cut, they deserve our help, and every Fijian in this Chamber can show their appreciation by backing this Budget and giving these Fijians the tool they need to do their jobs well.

I also want to take a moment to speak directly to the Fijians listening at home, whether you run a hotel, work in a factory or sell produce at the market, I know this economic crisis hangs a dark cloud over your future, but none of you are in this struggle alone.

Our economy has endured global recessions and record-breaking cyclones. We are the same people who proved ourselves stronger than the *Category 5 TC Winston*. Honourable Speaker, we are the same people who pulled ourselves out of the global financial crisis, and propelled ourselves onto Fiji's longest ever economic expansion. We did not beat those challenges alone, Honourable Speaker, we did it together.

Once again, we must find strength in our unity, we must work together in pursuit of our common mission – to keep our people safe, to keep our people employed and to prepare our economy for its rebound because when the dust settles, Honourable Speaker, tourists will get back on the planes, Fijians will return to work at our hotels, restaurants, factories, call centres, gymnasiums, markets and shops, and the engine of our economy will get back up and running.

Coronavirus cannot take away Fijians' pristine natural beauty. It cannot kill the tenacity of the Fijian spirit. It cannot rob us of our ingenuity and it cannot hold us back from our nation's incredible potential.

I hope my fellow Honourable Members will today follow my lead and keep their contributions short and focussed on the Fijians we all meant to serve. Our nation needs us, they need us to treat this crisis seriously, and they need us united in putting their wellbeing, their jobs, their health and their future first.

I have had to scold the irresponsible behaviour of Fijians who are not taking COVID-19 seriously a few times already this week but now, I feel the need to direct that fire at the Opposition. Cut the nonsense! Jobs are on the line. Businesses are on the line and lives are on the line. Let us be the leaders our people deserve.

Before we get this Budget passed, Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition attacked me in his statement about the institution that supported me supposedly. I have been taken to task, Honourable Speaker, by yourself but he has not been taken to task for the events that transpired on 2nd November, 2000 up at the Camp. He should be in jail right now.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- The institution let him free. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, we will now take an adjournment for refreshment. After refreshment, we will continue with the Debate and these are the first four speakers, so be ready, the:

- (1) Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi;
- (2) Honourable Jone Usamate;
- (3) Honourable Niko Nawaikula; and
- (4) Honourable Mereseini Vuniwaqa.

After that, I will give you the list as we go. I hope that I have made myself clear.

We will adjourn for morning tea and we will resume in half an hour. Thank you.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.45 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.16 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and there has been a slight change in order of proceedings. The first speaker will be the Honourable Professor Biman Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, if there was one time in the life of this Government to show genuine leadership, bipartisanship, compassion, opportunity to shed their ego and arrogance, this is the time, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me ...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... tell the people of this country and tell the Honourable Prime Minister that my offer to him through that letter was absolutely genuine.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There are people in this country, when I travel around the country, they always say, “Why do you not work with this Government? Why do you not support this Government?” My response to them, Mr. Speaker, has always been that in the last five years, in the last term of Parliament and in this term of Parliament, on many occasions we have supported Government’s proposal. But not once, Mr. Speaker, have they supported a proposal for a Bipartisan Committee to work together and I thought that this was a time when we could have seen genuine leadership.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, let me say to the people of this country, “Please, do not expect this Government ever to work with the Opposition. If they cannot work with the Opposition in this crisis now, then please do not expect them to work with us in the future.”

Mr. Speaker, we support some of the measures that the Government is taking, but we also want to put on record that this is an absolutely disappointing and a dishonest Budget. In fact, people will remember this Government and remember this Budget and the dishonesty that has come out as a result of what they are presenting to the people.

This Government, Mr. Speaker, did not bring the coronavirus to Fiji, but now as I said last night, we are confronting a double tragedy. The first tragedy is the devastation and loss that this virus will bring, the second, Mr. Speaker, is that we have no money to respond to it.

The Honourable Minister for Economy says that this is a billion dollar Budget, Mr. Speaker. We know, the Government knows and the people know that this is not a billion dollar Budget. The Government itself is promising only two useful things. The first is to make \$16 million available to

top up low FNPF balances and the other is to add \$40 million to the budget of the Ministry of Health. This is what the Government is doing. After that, Mr. Speaker, it is up to everyone else.

Mr. Speaker, here is a thing which troubles me the most, it has become obvious that the Government really has no plans for this crisis. The Government is behaving as though we will have only a few cases and we will only have to keep Lautoka locked down and everything will be fine. We know that is not true.

We just heard that there will be a curfew, Mr. Speaker, in addition to the Lautoka lockdown. We know that just as it has everywhere in the world, the virus will and could spread widely in our country and sooner or later, most of us in Fiji could face a lockdown. We will be confined to our homes, unable to go to work, all of the businesses that we depend on now of going to work, the transport industry, shops, eating places in town, banks, services including Government services will all stop. It is quite possible.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is the tourism workers today but it could be all of us tomorrow and that is why, Mr. Speaker, I am saying that there is really no plan for that. There is no money. To be very honest, there is no money to respond to that.

Mr. Speaker, the real Coronavirus Response Budget should tell us what the national crisis plan is. Once you have a plan and you put that out, then they should tell us how the money will be spent on that plan. We do not have that plan and we do not know where the money will come from and where that money will be spent and the work on that plan.

We do not want to know that the Government will buy shares in the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC). We do not want to know about the Fiji Investment Corporation investing in businesses. No one is interested in tax rates right now to build new hotels.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Why not?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is not what the people need to know right now, Mr. Speaker. The people need to know that the Government has a plan to lead them out of the crisis. But last night, Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister proved to the people what we already know, that there is no plan.

The Government is simply, in my view, Mr. Speaker, hoping and praying that the crisis will not get worse. But everyday, even a 10 year old, Mr. Speaker, can tell them that, of course, it could get worse. And Then what, Mr. Speaker? So, let us now go through what is in this Budget. Let me point out some of it, not all.

On FNPF, Mr. Speaker, in fact, this is the first Government in the history of this country which has always run to the FNPF. Always! First, what the Government will do in response to this crisis and what it has done in other crisis, it will open up the FNPF so that people can spend their own savings. Just as it has done every other time, it will give people a thousand dollar payment.

The Government says that this is worth \$150 million out of the billion dollar stimulus budget, and we all know that this is not Government money, this is the people's own money. The unions and some political parties have already told the Government not to use the workers' own money. We are

writing off the retirement savings by doing so because people need cash in their hands as their income dry up and the Government has no money so really, we have no option. But the Government has learned nothing from the past.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Member is misleading Parliament by saying that if we allow members of FNPF to withdraw up to \$1,000, we are reducing their pension. No, we are not! If he understood how superannuation works, there is what you call a reserved fund for pension and then the other amount of money can actually be taken out for home mortgages and other withdrawals, for example, redundancies, and he knows that.

He should not be misleading Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What we have also said is, those people who do not have the money, we will be topping it up. He is misleading Parliament!
(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not misleading.

Mr. Speaker, I think that is a ridiculous Point of Order and interjection because I never used the word, 'pension'. All I am saying is, if you keep allowing people to withdraw their own money at times of crisis, the balance for their retirement, and that was what I was saying.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Understand that! Understand that!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I did not use the word, 'pension'.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Do not try and mislead!

But the Government has learned nothing from the past, as usual. It will just hand out \$1,000 and as usual, it will say that it will monitor abuse and as usual, it will not do that.

Mr. Speaker, we had suggested that the Government use the banking system to deliver money to people in smaller amounts to spread the savings over the next three to six months when people will be affected by the crisis. This is because once people have their money, they will spend it too quickly. You cannot blame them for that, Mr. Speaker.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- These are certain times, we will make their decisions with our money and then there will be nothing.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And then what will the Government do?

We support the Government's \$60 million top up of people's FPNF balances. What choice do we have? Very soon the people of Fiji will have no choice but to take whatever they can get.

Additional allocation to the Ministry of Health: Of course, Mr. Speaker, the health services in this country has been in a real mess for a long time and we have pointed this out many times in this Parliament. We had called for an inquiry into the health services in this country.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, obviously the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General probably do not understand the meaning of bipartisanship, so we do not expect them to engage in that.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So the Ministry of Health will need more money and, of course, we will support the \$40 million additional allocation to the Ministry of Health. Again, we have no choice on that because we were not prepared.

At this stage, Mr; Speaker, I want to sincerely thank everyone in the Ministry of Health for the work they are doing all around the country, in particular the doctors.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They do not want me to even thank the staff in the Ministry of Health.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are yelling! They are yelling!

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In particular, the doctors and nurses and hospital administrators, they are all putting themselves into harm's way for the rest of us. What are we doing for them?

Mr. Speaker, if you follow the social media, you will see a post from a medical staff at the Nadi Isolation Ward. They posed for a photo with a sign that says, "We stay at work for you, please stay home for us." Mr. Speaker, is that what we are doing for our health workers? Are we staying home for our health workers? No!

The Government is not making us stay at home for our health workers. That is very clear, except for Lautoka, the Government is telling us to carry on as if nothing is happening and even inside Lautoka which is in lockdown, all the people there are free to talk, socialise with each other, interact with each other or possibly spread the virus in that particular way. In other countries, Mr. Speaker, workers are being paid to stay home because there is a national lockdown. We do not have a national lockdown yet. In Fiji, we cannot afford that, so there is no lockdown. So we say, "Wash your hands, practise physical distancing but keep going to work."

We are pretending that we will not have lockdown in the future and the longer we continue, Mr. Speaker, with this pretence, the bigger the problem could become because we know from the experience of other countries that this does not work. The disease spreads fast and then thousands of people become infected.

The Government says there are five confirmed coronavirus cases and these people are all in isolation and Lautoka is locked down. Is it seriously telling us that this is what it believes? All over the world, countries talk about confirmed cases, but how many cases can you test? If you are not testing, of course, you cannot confirm cases, it depends on the number of cases you test.

It is the same all over the world, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not enough testing is being done, and Fiji is no exception. We do not blame the health professionals for that because these tests are expensive and scarce. We do not blame the Government for the fact that we cannot test enough people, but what we want to say to the Government is to be honest and tell the people what is coming. Tell the people that there are probably other cases out there and this disease will spread. Tell them that this problem will get much worse.

The Government is telling us that 25,000 tourism workers have lost their jobs because the tourists have stopped coming. The Government seems to be saying that the problem is somewhere else and only the tourism industry will suffer in Fiji. When is the Government going to face up and admit what we all know that sooner or later, we all will be confronted and confined with the prospect of being in our homes? At that time, there will only be a small group of office workers who can keep working, people who have internet at home and own computers. The rest of us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will not be able to work. Then what is the plan? How far will that \$60 million go? This is what I talked about when we said we need a plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at that point, we know what will happen. We will have to open the FNPF again. Workers will have to, again, draw down their money. But those whose monies have gone, what will they do then?

Mr. Speaker, for everything else in this Budget and what this Budget does, again, the Honourable Minister should be honest. Most of the tax measures and tax incentives he is proposing have nothing to do with the Coronavirus. They are things, in my view, that he was planning for his next Budget, anyway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no one cares about zero stamp duty on mortgages right now. No one cares about 60 percent export incentive reduction right now or who is investing in a property right now. Very few. The Police will not even let exporters bring their goods to Lautoka Wharf. These were incentives that the Honourable Minister was planning for his next Budget, it was very clear. They have nothing to do with the Coronavirus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, who cares about getting tax deductions right now. Tax deductions are only useful...

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Professor Prasad, how many minutes were you allocated on this debate? You have gone over 10 minutes now.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I thought I had 20 minutes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- No, no! Honourable Members, I made it very clear that the Whips have made the allocation of timings for each of the side and as I saw it, it is about seven minutes. I hope you take that into account.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will finish it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. My understanding was that I have 20 minutes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me finish this. As I have said, these were some of the incentives...

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are not the Speaker!

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, who cares about tax deductions right now, as I have said. Tax deductions are only useful if you make a profit and there is no business, in my view, looking at being in profit right now.

The Honourable Minister says that Government will pay 21 days sick leave for an employee who was tested for Coronavirus. He says that \$1,000 will be paid to anyone in the informal sector, who is confirmed to have the Coronavirus but so far, the Government has done less than 200 tests. So this is an easy promise because the Government will never have to pay.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- A Point of order. Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Member is misleading Parliament. We have done more than 200 tests. He is saying that we have done less than 200 tests, we have done more than 200 tests. He is misleading Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Member, you have the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what are the Banks doing?

It is pleasing to see that Banks come to the table with help for borrowers by deferring loan payments for up to six months. We thank the Banks for this help. The Honourable Minister says that this help is worth \$400 million. This is also part of the so-called billion-dollar stimulus budget. Of course, that money is not coming from the Government, it is coming from the Banks.

Reduction in FNPF contributions: Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister has announced reductions in FNPF contributions for employers and employees. Now, instead of 10 percent and eight percent, the contributions will be eight percent and five percent. These deductions are made when people are being paid their wages, when people are losing their jobs or are being put on leave without pay. These contributions are eight percent of zero and five percent of zero. They may help employers for a little while but it will also help the Government to reduce its employment cost. But this does not put money into the hands of ordinary people, and it is the ordinary people who are going to need this money.

Mr. Speaker, it is important that we make this point because as we know we have limited time, and I want to just add one more thing. The Honourable Attorney-General accused me of suggesting a pay cut for the Civil Service, based on a small mistake in the article that I wrote in the *Fiji Times*.

(Laughter)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...But, Mr. Speaker, if he had listened ...

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... to what I said in response to the *Fiji Sun*, it is very clear. I said, “Do not touch the salaries of the Civil Servants.” I said that very clearly.

Let me say this to all the Civil Servants in this country, do not believe the Honourable Attorney-General. Do not believe him! He was misleading you.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- To the people of Fiji, I want to say, “We, in the Opposition, will be doing our best to help in the coming months.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No amount of favours will help the Civil Servants. This is the time for care and action. We must save our cash and our resources, Mr. Speaker, for the hard times ahead. We must drastically change our lifestyle, if not for our sake but for the sake of our loved ones.

I know, Mr. Speaker, the cheerleader and all the others will continue to disrupt because they know, Mr. Speaker, that this is a dishonest budget. The Government does not have the money. Years of mismanagement has put us in a situation that when we are faced with the rainy day, when we are faced with a crisis, we do not have the money, and this is the point that we are trying to make, so let us tell the people of Fiji.

Let me remind this Government, do not brag about the stimulus package because it is not a stimulus package. You are not putting money into the pockets of the people and businesses, so stop bragging about the stimulus package. The people of this country know this, they understand what is in the Budget and they will never forget.

(Hon. A. Sayed-Khaiyum interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They will never forget this Budget and this Government, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, your time is up.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I remind all Honourable Members, the time allocated to each of the speaker, apart from some, is seven minutes. The Whips have agreed to that before the session, and I have pointed that out. Only the Honourable Leader of the Opposition’s time is equivalent to the mover of the motion, so all the other Members, stick to the time.

I call on the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services to have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think after this, we will do a collection to buy Honourable Professor Prasad a watch so that he knows how long seven minutes is. I think we

have just had the opportunity of listening to someone who emphatically stated in this House that he did not say that and today, he said it after all. I have heard that before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this afternoon, I stand up here to support the COVID-19 Response Budget 2020 and also the legislation that goes with it. And I congratulate the Honourable Attorney-General and his team at the Ministry of Economy for the hard work that they have put in, to put into place the particular suggestions that we are discussing today.

I would like to make known that everyone had an opportunity to pass on their ideas to the Ministry of Economy Team, and we did. If any Honourable Member of the House on that side or this side, have any ideas they had the freedom to pass on their ideas. You had the freedom, you do not have to come and do it in Parliament. If you really feel for this country and you have got that particular idea or bits and pieces of information that you wanted to pass on to the Honourable Minister, you could have freely done it. There was no limitation to that, so there was an opportunity to pass on the ideas that we had to the Honourable Minister.

The Honourable Minister responsible for the economy has also talked to us about the scale of the disaster that faces us. The COVID-19 Pandemic has the potential to be one of the biggest problems that we have ever faced. The impacts now are much more stronger than the crisis that the world faced back in 2008.

I was just looking at some of the statistics this morning. Looking at Italy, for instance, as we had stated yesterday, they had five cases at the beginning of the month and at the end of the month, they had up to 60,000 cases. Today, they have 80,000 cases and 800 deaths. So, they are running at about 136 deaths for every million of population.

If we translate the severity of that problem to Fiji, for Fiji that will be an equivalent of around 120 deaths for Fiji. Fiji cannot afford 120 deaths from COVID-19. It is a worst case scenario and something that we have to fight hard to make sure that we can address this. How this needs to be addressed is to isolate, to control our borders as we are doing now and also to contain the problems that we have. Where we have COVID-19, we have to contain it, we have to identify it, we have to isolate and treat it to make sure that we have no mortality from this virus and this is what we are aiming for.

Wherever the virus is already in the country, we need to control and contain it, to make sure that it does not spread. And if we can do this well enough, we will not have to lock-down this country. This is the growth that we have, lock-down the threats so we do not have to reach the stage that Italy has reached where they have to lock-down the country. We lock-down the threat, that is why the curfews are being put in place and the quarantine is being put in place.

All of us in this Parliament have a part to play in making sure that we can get the rest of the population of this country to lock-down the threat, and that must be our focus. That is the focus of this Government, and that is also the focus of the Budget that is being put before Parliament today. We must lock-down the threats in our country. I think I have to congratulate the work that is being done by the Honourable Minister for Health.

I was quite taken aback at the statements that was said by the Honourable Nawaikula, talking about the role of the Honourable Minister for Health, saying that he has not done anything. The people in that Ministry have been working very hard. They have been working very long hours, not just them but all other agencies - members of the Military, staff from my Ministry and other Ministries who are sitting there for long hours, working very hard to address this. And to say something like that in Parliament with an absence of facts, not based on any factual information, I think is ridiculous

and it is not something that we should be saying because right now, we in this House should be showing leadership to the rest of this country. We should be uttering things in this House that brings the country together so that together, we can address this.

As I will say later, one of the most important things that we can do is make sure that we can lock-down the threat. How do we lock-down the threat? We lock-down the threat by making sure that everyone in this country follows the advisories that have been given from the Ministry of Health. We have to make people do that, if they do not do it, we will not be able lock-down the threat.

That is why we are trying to reduce movements, ships going out to the outer islands, we want to stop them. We want to make sure that people wash their hands, people keep their physical distancing, people do not drink from the same *bilo* and those are simple things that we need to do. All of us are leaders in various communities, we need to make sure that people take up this message.

If we can do this, while there is no vaccine for COVID-19 as yet, but by changing the behaviour of people in this country and all of us in this Parliament, we can do this. We can change the behaviour so that they themselves start following the advisories and that will become the vaccine for us - that is a challenge for us. This is something that I call upon all Honourable Members of the House to follow.

So, for my part, I would also like to thank all the agencies that have come on board to contribute to the approach that we have. I thank Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) for making it so that families who earn less than \$30,000 will not have to pay for their electricity. I thank the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) for making sure that they will be able to provide the water that people need to wash their hands, for the stimulus package and also for the new Natural Disaster Rehabilitation Facility that will be used for small businesses in this country.

My last point: there is a story of an old man who was talking to his niece, who was a Queen of a particular country. He told his young niece whose name was Esther that perhaps for such a time as this, that she was born to be able to show leadership in the place that she was in. I think that is a message also for all of us in this House. We have to take this message, we have to get the people of this country to start following the advisories. If we do that, we will make sure that we will not go to the level where we say that we have run out of ventilators and ICUs as they are facing now in Italy.

I call upon all Honourable Members of this House and all the people of this country that are listening to me to follow the advisories. If you follow the advisories, we will not have to lock down Fiji. If you follow the advisories, you will save lives. This is very critical and I appreciate all the work that has been done by the Divisional Commissioners all across Fiji.

As I am talking now, there are teams from the Civil Service who are going from village to village, settlement to settlement, telling people to follow the advisories - that is something that we must do. At the moment, these advisories are sinking in people's minds, it is knowledge that they have that needs to be converted to something that they actually do.

Fiji needs behavioural change. Everything in this Budget will help us to achieve that and also to look after the things that will happen after COVID-19. So I look to all of us in this House, also to the Honourable Members of the opposite side, whatever you say here, please, say things that will encourage people to do the right thing. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Jone Usamate for his contribution to the debate and I now give the floor to the Honourable Niko Nawaikula for your seven minutes.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. Let me start by referring to some of the rubbish that is coming from that side.

(Laughter)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The Honourable Prime Minister said that we are like an old television set that needs to be smacked on the side before we wake up. But that is them, that is the description of them.

(Laughter)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- We have been smacking you on the side, twisting your ears to listen and close the borders. They did not listen, they brought the Coronavirus here then they start to wake up. It is a perfect description of them.

Honourable Speaker, 15 years we have been telling them, “You are ruining the economy.” They cannot see it, they still think everything is good.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- They are in self-denial, that is the problem with them.

Yesterday, I asked them, “Look, take on the responsibility. You brought this virus here, accept it!” But they did not agree with that, they cannot accept responsibility. Here, they have produced the Budget for the nation to respond to. In my view, this Budget is very, very poor.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- It is incompetent, it is a monkey’s Budget! It is not enough! We need more and more and more....

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Honourable Speaker, for a budget such as this, in my view, it should have addressed three things; first being the health issue, and the question is, is \$40 million enough? \$40 million is not enough.

Secondly, the consequences of that - unemployment and loss of income, is that enough? Not enough!

The third important thing that the Budget must address is to make us more buoyant to recover the economy. It does not address that, it is a very poor monkey’s Budget.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, you’re creating it for yourself.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- That is the problem.

Now, take a look at the measures that they have to address now. Honourable Speaker, \$40 million is not enough. Honourable Usamate criticised me for calling up on the Honourable Minister for Health to resign. I say again, “Resign!”

HON. J. USAMATE.- Why?

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Because he is not being properly empowered.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Here, we have an infectious disease, but he does not have the army. He has removed the Public Health Sector from the Ministry of Health. How can you police and monitor quarantine? How can you police and monitor lockdowns without expertise. Now, they are relying on the police. So, I expected the budget for the Ministry of Health to be much, much more than \$40 million.

I expected the Honourable Minister or the Government to re-establish the Public Health part of the Ministry because this is public health problem. He has not been empowered. He has not done enough, maybe because he knows his fault but because of the Government. They have not given him enough money to do his job, and he is suffering because of that, so he is responsible.

Now, we look at the other measures that the Government has set aside. I will now look at Page 10 that outlines the number of measures, which raises more questions than answers. If you go to the first one, it says, “To support all employees in Fiji, the statutory FNPF Employer Contribution is halved from 10 percent to 5 percent effective from 1st April, 2020. This will provide \$130 million released to employees.” Now, the question we ask is, how many companies will still be operating with workers employed, with all the restrictions being applied, do you think will benefit from this? What about the companies that have already closed down and laid off workers? This \$100 million is surely just a book entry, so it raises more questions.

If you go to the next one, “Employees’ contribution is reduced from 8 percent to 5 percent effective from 1st April, 2020.” Honourable Speaker, in their view, this will put \$18 million back in the pockets of Fijian employees for the next nine months. An absolute hogwash! And we ask the question, again, as with the first measure, what use is this measure to all the workers that have already been laid off and have no income to benefit from this and, no doubt, many thousands more who will join them? This is another book entry, it will not happen.

There is more there but I will not cover them all, but let me take the last one, Honourable Speaker.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Time is up.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Let me skip that.

So, not enough, Honourable Speaker, \$5.6 million to the tourism industry, not enough. The tourism industry is not the only industry where its people are suffering. As of today, Inter-Island Shipping will be closed down during weekend. Where do they get their money from? So they are just the same as the tourism industry, no difference, but you are allocating more on that side.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- No, you sit down!

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The Honourable Member is misleading the House. Inter-Island Shipping will not be closed, it will be open but people will not move, the cargo will move. So that statement is wrong, that needs to be withdrawn.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Listen to the statement.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Now, let me go to salary deduction. Salary deduction, not enough. Twenty percent, not enough!

The Honourable Prime Minister receives \$328,000 per year, which is more than a quarter million. The Honourable Minister for Economy receives \$235,000. All those Honourable Ministers sitting at the back there receive over \$200,000, and Assistant Ministers - \$150,000.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No, no!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- 20 percent, 20 percent!

HON. J. USAMATE.- A Point of Order. The Honourable Member has stated that all Honourable Ministers here are making more than \$200,000. That is, once again, a blatant lie. And this is happening again and again, Honourable Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have the floor.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Too childish, you should just go out.

And you compare that with a person receiving a quarter million a year or \$200,000 a year or \$150,000 a year, only 20 percent cut, compared to us....

It is totally unfair to the common workers out there. They should not be deducted more. It should be on a sliding scale.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Honourable Speaker, let me look at what the Budget is doing to stimulate our future growth. None! What is the allocation for the agriculture which will be our backbone, which we should put emphasis on instead of tourism? \$1 million. Not enough! What will you do with that?

Have you heard about cocoa? Have you heard about vanilla? These are the things we are going to depend on in the future. We expected more on the fisheries. More allocation for PAFCO. There is no incentive for the country to spring back debt to a good economic growth, so a monkey budget will get you peanuts.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Nawaikula and I now give the floor to the Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I thank you for the opportunity to address this august House regarding the 2019-2020 Supplementary COVID-19 Response Budget, in particular, the budget allocated to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation as per the Budget Address last night.

I am encouraged that the critical programmes relating to the Ministry's core work in relation to women, children, the elderly and those living with disabilities will continue. I also understand the reason why the budget for some of our programmes have been removed.

The National Women's Expo, Honourable Speaker, for example, will not be happening this year. Now, is normally the period when we hold divisional craft shows around the country to select Expo participants. We obviously cannot hold that now because of the COVID-19 scare. We do not know how long the COVID-19 crisis will go on for. It is for this reason that the National Women's Expo will not be held this year.

I am glad to say that the Fijian Government will never forego the interest and welfare of its people by playing petty politics, and the Budget Announcement is proof of that. While today more Fijians than usual are in need of financial support, the Government has not forgotten that the most vulnerable will be the worst affected.

The total allocation to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for this fiscal year is now \$144 million. This allocation is an increase of about \$16 million from the initial 2019-2020 Budget. The Ministry is satisfied with this allocation and we will ensure that our clientele's needs continue to be met. This is in spite of the fact that in the last Budget, the Ministry received its highest budget allocation ever.

The very fact that the budget for the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation has been increased in these trying times, speaks volumes of where the heart of this Government is. The increase in the Budget is targeted specifically at our Social Protection Programmes.

Having said that, I wish to inform that this was a result of Government's commitment towards new programmes and projects aimed to better the services provided to our people. The following are some examples of these new initiatives, the:

- Economic Empowerment of People Living with Disabilities;
- Domestic Violence Support Fund; and
- Establishment of the Barefoot College.

The largest portion of the Ministry's total budget allocation in the new fiscal year is for the administration of the nation's core Social Protection Programmes, just like in previous years. The clientele benefitting from these programmes include:

- children;
- the disadvantaged;
- persons with disability; and the elderly.

It cuts across life spectrum from the cradle to the grave. It is, therefore, important that Government continues to ensure that never at any stage in life will an individual be ostracised because of their situation or background, but everyone is given the opportunity where their well-being and welfare is considered important.

The Ministry is happy that the new Budget will help to maintain the current Social Protection Programmes, which include the:

- Social Pension Scheme;
- Poverty Benefit Scheme;
- Care Protection Allowance;
- Rural Pregnant Mothers Programme; and
- Disability Allowance.

It is also encouraging to note that this budget further increases the tax deduction on wages paid for the employment of people with disabilities for three years, from 300 percent to 400 percent.

The Ministry is happy to have received an allocation of \$25,000 for the review of the Social Protection Programme systems and processes. We are aiming to address any possible gaps in the administration of all the Social Protection Programmes to ensure:

- accurate and timely payments;
- avoidance of overpayments and double dipping;
- improvement of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs); and
- facilitation of timely reviews for graduation and termination of allowances as necessary.

As I had told this august House before, a re-certification initiative has now begun for the Social Protection recipients.

Adequate budget has also been allocated to fulfil our role as per the Ministry's legislative responsibility in the care and protection of children. I wish to emphasise that we will not let the welfare of Fijian children be compromised, and we will rake in our joint efforts with our stakeholders and through the National Coordinating Committee for Children, as Fiji fights COVID-19.

The Ministry's role through the Department of Social Welfare is not limited to Government Social Welfare Schemes and Child Protection Programmes, it also entails the rehabilitation of juveniles in conflict with the law.

As of 2016, the Ministry has been given the added responsibility of administering the three State Homes for older persons, and we continue to work on the renovation and upgrading of these Homes and in this fiscal year, we are allocated funds to do just that. The safety of the residents of all residential institutions under the Ministry has been a major priority for us in response to COVID-19, and we will continue to ensure that our children, juveniles and older persons have adequate hygiene supplies, awareness packages, best practices and caregiving at all times.

Honourable Speaker, to conclude, the rest of this fiscal year requires a most diligent, yet kind efforts as we fight the Coronavirus, and we can guarantee that the most poor and vulnerable Fijians will be taken care of by this Government. The regulated access to the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), reduced taxes, utility subsidies and ease in mortgage, loan and hire purchase repayments are some key elements of the Supplementary Budget, which will cushion the effects of the coronavirus on ordinary Fijians, assistance that is also as unprecedented in nature as COVID-19 is, and its ripple effects.

I fully support the Budget and the Bills that have been tabled in support of the Budget. I thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I now give the floor to the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

First of all, I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services, and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Officials, doctors, nurses and all those who are contributing so much to the war against COVID-19. I thank also the Police and the Military. Everyday, these people put their lives on the line in trying to stem this pandemic for which, at the moment, there is no vaccine or cure. We offer them our deepest and heartfelt appreciation and acknowledge all the commitments they are putting into this effort. We would like to reassure them and their families of our prayers and that they are not alone. Our prayer is that the Lord, who is omniscient and omnipresent will reward them for the sacrifices offered for the people of Fiji.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, onward to the Honourable Minister for Economy's address on the matter of the \$10 million TELS relief package, which means that students' repayments will be suspended till 31st December, 2020. We have to keep in mind, Sir, that other previous Governments had scholarships, such as the PSC, FAB and Multi-Ethnic Affairs. But today, there is only the Toppers which is the Government scholarship that caters for less than 5 percent of the total student population in Year 13, which means that the only other option is the TELS, which students will still have to make the repayments on.

Instead of giving a respite on the payments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, better still, why did the Honourable Minister not write it off, as many students were led to believe that TELS was actually a scholarship, as it was so nicely packaged and sold to unaware and trusting young people. Little did they realise that that is actually a loan scheme that has to be repaid and now, they are bound to it - hands and feet, and very difficult to untie themselves until old age. So it should just be written off, Honourable Speaker.

The \$20 million stimulus package for the Ministry of Education is equivalent to 10 percent of the \$200 million shortfall in the 2019-2020 Budget but the correlation between COVID-19 and the Ministry of Education is a bit confusing, Honourable Speaker. The addition, however, I am certain is welcomed by the Ministry, bearing in mind that the Honourable Minister for Economy stated that the \$20 million would be injected into the operating budget to fund salaries to support teachers in their efforts to continuously provide high quality education at all levels. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it should be \$100 million, which should be the 50 percent of the shortfall in the 2019-2020 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the 20 percent reduction in my Parliamentary salary as it is for a worthy cause. However, the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Ministers really should take a reduction of 50 percent to make it meaningful, as this will be the first time ever for them to make a cut. For *TC Winston* in 2016, they were very good in receiving and having their pictures taken with all the donors but gave nothing back to the people of Fiji.

Teachers right now, Honourable Speaker, are enjoying their hard-earned Term 1 two weeks holidays. I have to tell you, Honourable Speaker ...

(Hon. R.S. Akbar interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO T.V. KEPÄ.- ... today it is not easy being a teacher. Just in the past few years, systematically allocations for counsellors, school chaplains and boarding school allowances have been removed from the budget. And the sad thing about it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the schools that are impacted, particularly by the absence of school chaplains and boarding school allowance, are mostly schools where the indigenous are the majority ...

R.S. Akbar interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO T.V. KEPÄ.- ... and where the indigenous had been told over the years that these schools were established for them.

What type of consultations were made, Honourable Speaker, and with whom, for these allocations to be removed? No one knows! Budget consultations which are always well-covered by the media with the Honourable Minister holding centre stage, are supposed to be made to ensure that the Honourable Minister for Economy appreciates the importance of the various allocations. He cannot just make a unilateral decision to remove those payments that have, over the years, proved to be relevant and appropriate, at the expense of the students' wellbeing.

Students themselves, Honourable Speaker, highlighted to the Honourable Attorney-General last year that lack of discipline was of great concern to them. Is it any wonder then, why there is so much indiscipline in the schools when the Honourable Attorney-General does not bother to find out the root cause of this negative behaviour?

When you remove a counsellor who is a professional helper to the students, you also remove the allocation for the school chaplain who conducts spiritual activities and the boarding school allowance which is designed to ensure proper supervision and assistance for boarders after classes have ended and into the night when they are supposed to be in bed, unruly and boorish behaviour happens, because what you have done is, you have removed supporting structures that help students to model good behaviour and in turn, they themselves can become good role models to the younger students as students become dysfunctional adults if this behaviour is not professionally addressed.

Every Honourable Member in this House, Honourable Speaker, Sir, I am sure was shocked by the video that went viral a few weeks ago of a young male student being given a beating by senior boys of a prominent school using the wooden leg of a desk. We have also heard that scene is not unusual and that type of bullying is quite normal.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO T.V. KEPÄ.- I am certain that Honourable Members of Parliament who are former students of that school, and there are some in this House today, Honourable Speaker, would testify that, that type of behaviour never occurred during their school days.

In conclusion, Honourable Speaker, Sir, the \$20 million stimulus package is, no doubt, welcomed by the Honourable Minister for Education as she is just talking so much and doing nothing to fund teachers' salaries. Serious consideration must be made as a lead-up to the June Budget for the reinstatement of school counsellors, school chaplains and allowances for boarding schools, otherwise bullying and all the other disciplinary issues will continue. It will not really improve over time. It will never be properly addressed and will continue to take education backwards.

I do not support the budget, Honourable Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Agriculture.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament, greetings to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to begin by thanking the Honourable Minister for Economy for tabling a very well-thought and balanced Budget at a very challenging time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our country is going through a very difficult moment. Every individual, every household and every institution is being challenged by COVID-19.

The virus is now present in majority of nations and territories, 198, with 525,297 cases and 23,701 confirmed deaths. It is a pandemic that has brought the entire world to its knees, posing a significant threat to mankind and the economies around the Globe.

Mr. Speaker Sir, during these trying times, one of the defining binding game changing factor that is required is leadership - leadership of the country, leadership of the economy and leadership of the health sector.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I am proud and honoured to say that Fiji is blessed to have visionary leaders in all these three areas. Had it not been for these three leaders and their support teams, the country would have been in total chaos by now. However, through the proactive steps taken in Fiji by our three leaders, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Minister for Economy and Honourable Minister for Health, we are now on our way to winning our war against Coronavirus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when all this is over, as we sit down and reflect, we will then say, "I am so fortunate to be part of this leadership group during those defining times for our country." Where some of the countries are struggling with decisive and instantaneous leadership in crisis times, we missed no time in taking proactive measures in addressing the challenges of COVID-19 in Fiji.

Yesterday, was the first day since the inception of Fiji's first case last week where we did not register a new case. Whilst we are not out of the woods yet, it is a promising signal and a testament of firm, decisive and exemplary leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, history will judge us, not by how the Government has led in times of normalcy, but by how we have navigated our way through in turbulent times and come out victorious in the end. I am positive that we will ride this tide and emerge defeating Coronavirus once and for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy for providing a million dollars to support our programme on agriculture's response to COVID-19. This crisis has brought one thing to light, that Fiji's economic backbone cannot be left to sectors beyond our control. We must look within, protect, develop and build resilience into sectors which are within our control, where we have a strategic and comparative advantage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture is one of those sectors. We have pushed forward to a market-led demand-driven agriculture sector and we have started to get dividends now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my last maiden speech in this House, I had stated that for far too long, we have treated agriculture as welfare perspective. Whenever we argued for support for agriculture, we had stated that it is important for the livelihood of our rural and maritime households. But I argue that we support agriculture in the national interest.

We support agriculture because it is a strategic and economic sector of the economy which has enormous potential and is one which is within our control. I argue that we must support agriculture because for other sectors to grow, agriculture must grow because of its backward and forward linkages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say that if anything, COVID-19 reiterates our national vision for agriculture and that is, I quote, “Every Fijian has access to adequate food of acceptable quality and nutritional value.” Food is essential all year round, but in the face of a pandemic, it is critical that the shelves remain stocked and the supplies remain plentiful.

As such, I am pleased to let this House know that we, in the Ministry of Agriculture, will now scale up two of our programmes to ensure not only that we have food and nutritional security in the country, but also that we push for export of agricultural produce to take advantage of the opening of markets in our neighbouring countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is scaling up an Agriculture Response Package for COVID-19 that builds on a number of current initiatives. Firstly, we will amplify our Home Gardening Programme where over the next three months, we will aim to provide backyard gardening packages to all households in the small towns around Fiji and in the large municipalities. We will try to target, at least, 30 percent of the households within this period.

This will mean that in these large towns and cities, we will increase the number of distribution venues, together with the number of packages at each time it is distributed. This will begin in two weeks’ time and our two Assistant Ministers will play a leading role in this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there will be disruptions in international supply chains, shutdown of factories and a decrease in global agriculture production. Therefore, it becomes imperative that we implement initiatives that will boost production of local crops, which further strengthens our food and nutrition security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to announce that our new Farm Support Package aims to boost production of short-term crops, and we will be providing seeds and planting materials to farmers around the country. This includes:

- Strengthening our seed distribution system whereby free seeds for short-term crops will be distributed at no cost to the farmer.
- Specifically the distribution will be limited to a quarter acre per crop where every farmer will be assisted and these targeted crops are taro, cassava, rice, *kumala*, *duruka*, eggplant, chillies, *okra*, tomatoes, maize, bitter melon, squash, pigeon pea and cowpea.
- Seeds and planting material for these crops will be distributed by Agricultural Extension Officers beginning on 30th March, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more details will be made available on Monday when this project will get off the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to say that the Ministry understands the hurdles which people have faced in the past while trying to access vital assistance and we are streamlining the process to ensure that it will fast-track the demand-driven market signal led agricultural growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all our farmers, official partners and our people in both, rural and urban areas, to work together in the days, weeks and months ahead. We must all bear in mind that agriculture is a fundamental source of national prosperity, and agriculture is set to take up a leadership role in promoting economic growth in Fiji going forward. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Dr. Mahendra Reddy for his statement.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Salote Radrodro. You have the floor.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. Firstly, I take this opportunity to thank all those working in the frontline. *Vinaka sara vakalevu na veiqaravi, na yalo dina kei na loloma*.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you for your many sacrifices in this life-threatening situation that we are faced with right now with COVID-19. Also, our well wishes to speedy recovery to all those who have been tested positive and all those in isolation.

Honourable Speaker, it is sad that we are at war with COVID-19, but how well prepared are we? The very fact that we have come to Parliament with this Supplementary Budget is indicative of poor leadership economically and politically.

If we had a responsible Government, then they would have ensured that there is sufficient allocation under reserve in the current Budget and space to manage this COVID-19 within the current budgetary allocation, like they have done in Australia and New Zealand.

Honourable Speaker, if the Government have the people of Fiji at heart, common sense would have allowed for leadership to close our borders very earlier on to be more proactive, like Samoa and Tonga. But Honourable Speaker, the FijiFirst Government's continuous dreaming that we be like Singapore where we subsequently close our doors much too late, is our biggest mistake because Fiji does not have the leadership to drive political and economic manoeuvre to contain COVID-19.

It is very irresponsible for the Government to think and even suggest that we can have the best of both worlds. They think that GDP growth is what counts. They forget that it is hard telling people during an epidemic or pandemic that they should go about things, knowing that their activities are spreading the disease. It is disastrous for the economy. Therefore, Honourable Speaker, what we need is an extreme shutdown, monitor and evaluate the situation, and if and when things are improved or the situation is improved, then we can start re-opening back up again.

Honourable Speaker, in regards to our health system, if we visit any health centres or any health facilities, you will see the bad state that they are in. And the same has been highlighted recently in the media by Professor McCaig, when he talked about the Ministry of Health, but unfortunately the Government and the Honourable Minister for Health, are always in a denial mode. We are now stretched much thinner, Honourable Speaker, with COVID-19, which can quickly become overwhelming for our country.

Honourable Speaker, \$14 million has been injected into the Health Sector but this amount is held Under Requisition, meaning that the money is held under the Honourable Minister for Economy. If COVID-19 is a national crises, then why is the money not directly under the authority of the Honourable Minister for Health? Does he not trust the Honourable Minister for Health to manage his own budget?

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Honourable Speaker, the very fact that it remains Under Requisition tells the story that there is a delaying tactic engaged by the Honourable Minister for Economy, and also showing that there is a cashflow problem. There is simply just no money.

We also note, Honourable Speaker, that FSC is being allocated \$50 million. As I have already mentioned in this House, it is a sick industry and it is much better to give the \$50 million to the Ministry of Health to purchase adequate testing kits and ventilators, to save our people, especially the senior citizens from COVID-19 because we do not really want to be faced with the situation like in Italy where health professionals have to choose which people to treat.

Honourable Speaker, we also note that \$20 million has been directed to Social Welfare Programmes and this \$20 million must be looked at relatively with those who have lost their jobs and will be accessing their FNPF. And the very fact that the Government is telling the people to do that, is a very inhumane tragedy whereby people are being forced to use their retirement funds. It is also reflective of a Government that does not have the money and with the current high cost of living, this money will be used in a couple of months and after that, the majority of these people will fall into the Social Welfare Programme. Therefore, Honourable Speaker, that \$20 million for Social Welfare is not enough.

Let us face it, Honourable Speaker, we do not have the luxury of social distancing, or a great health system in place to handle COVID-19. Therefore, the ability to isolate when you have to go out and get food, or go to work everyday when we live very closely, especially in informal communities and villages, is very hard to do, and we can only pray and hope that a vaccine will eventually be found and very soon.

Therefore, Honourable Speaker, for such a time like this, I call upon all of us, not here in Fiji but also around the world, that we pray and petition our living God, His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, with our hope and trust that he will make COVID-19 and the spirit of death pass over us, Honourable Speaker. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Salote Radrodoro for her contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, time moves on. I intend to take the lunch break now. After lunch, we will continue with the debate in this order:

- Honourable Rosy Akbar;
- Honourable Viliame Gavoka;
- Honourable Lt. Col. Inia Seruiratu;
- Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau;
- Honourable Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete;
- Honourable Anare Jale; and
- Honourable Premila Kumar.

That is the first lot, and I will give out the next list after lunch.

We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.23 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 1.33 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and I call on the first speaker for this session, the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts. You have the floor.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Members of this august House, I rise to support this Budget before this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, who knows in the days to come whether a catastrophe awaits our beautiful island nation and how many of us will be able to gather at the aftermath of this great battle of Coronavirus versus humanity. This is a bigger crisis than anything the world has seen in a century. This is not the moment to sweet talk the nation and as our Honourable Prime Minister has said time and again, we will tell you as it is. This is not the time to push our personal agendas, this is not the time to play blame-games or mind-games.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I heard Honourable Nawaikula correctly, he referred to the Budget prepared for the people of Fiji as a 'Monkey's Budget'. Honourable Nawaikula, I do not know where you are hiding, but did you just have the audacity in the august House to insult, disrespect and demean the deserving people of Fiji by calling them monkeys? Really? Seriously?

Honourable Speaker, Sir, I strongly feel that a budget announced during a crisis of such a magnitude does not even need debating over. I express my utter disgust at the discussions which transpired in the Chambers last night and which continues to transpire in this Chambers at this very moment. Actually, it robbed me of my sleep, I love my sleep.

How can some Honourable Members on the other side stoop so low? Were you really thinking of the common Fijians who you purport to support when you wasted hours of crucial time debating last night? Some people went on spree to blame the Government, the national carrier, our airline, et cetera, for bringing the virus.

Last night, I actually discovered and I do not know where the finger was pointing but from where I was sitting, the finger was pointing at the Honourable Attorney-General. So I discovered that the national airline carrier belongs to the Honourable Attorney-General, but that was laughable. I stand to be corrected here, as I may have heard it wrong, I may have seen the finger pointing at the wrong person.

I also learned that the FijiFirst Government brought the virus to Fiji in their plane. Really? Seriously?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the speeches from the Opposition are exacerbating and I actually believe in a state of discombobulation and it is my personal view that this has left them in a state of flux. Let me spell it out for you, I said "f-l-u-x".

It seems that the Opposition wants the Fijian people to suffer. It seems that you do not want the assistance to reach them on time. What are you so bitter about that you cannot see things that the Government is doing, you cannot acknowledge what the Government is doing?

Honourable Speaker, let me put some perspective to the current situation. This is a global pandemic, it will not spare you, it will not spare me, it will not spare anyone.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- We know that.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- No, you do not, that is why you are politicising it.

This virus does not discriminate its victims and does not recognise borders.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Say something useful, Honourable Minister.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Already saying it, listen!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, even in comparison to larger financially-established nations, our response and preparedness rate has been on an all-time high. The proactive approach taken by the Fijian Government has prepared the entire situation and is highly commendable.

We hear Honourable Opposition Members blaming the Government, blaming the Honourable Minister for Health, some people acknowledging the efforts of the Ministry of Health and some are asking the Honourable Ministers, how confused are you people? How confused?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not deny that the Ministry of Education, like any other Government, at this point in time, has had to make major sacrifices in this hour of need. I am aware that every passing minute, we will be missing out on crucial formal learning time, if circumstances force our hands to extend the two weeks school break beyond the scheduled dates.

The Ministry of Education will re-adjust the budget, re-align the school terms, re-schedule examinations and re-assess the curriculum as timely content coverage.

Honourable Ro Kupa, the comments coming from you are rich, someone who once held the Office of the Minister for Education and you have lost the opportunity to make a difference. We do not have time to dwell over petty issues. It is time for humanity above all.

We have planned ahead of time and a number of processes are in place too and under no circumstances will my Ministry compromise the quality of education delivered to our children. We will try our best under whatever circumstances.

While we are trying to learn from the experiences of our neighbouring countries, going through the same ordeal and learning from them, we are mindful of our geographical and socioeconomic barriers, and any changes implemented will always be contextualised in the Fiji situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are extraordinary times. At no point in time we must undermine the knowledge-base that our parents, grandparents, guardians and babysitters have imparted to our children in such times. Honourable Ro Kupa talks about bullying, et cetera, but you cannot blame the behaviour of the children on the education system. At no point in time have I heard you talk about parental engagement. It is very important that, we, as Honourable Members of the House, talk to parents on teaching their children responsible behaviour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are extraordinary times, we need extraordinary solutions, we need to think outside the box and be decisive in our actions. These are extraordinary times, the planet is facing an extraordinary catastrophe and we need extraordinary people to find extraordinary solutions.

I would like to conclude by saying, thumbs-up, Honourable Prime Minister; thumbs-up, Honourable Attorney- General and your team; and to the Honourable Minister for Health and your team, thumbs-up for the work that you do. Thumbs-up, Commissioner of Police, for the work that you do in protecting our people and, of course, the Commander and his team; and thumbs-up to all the Fijian people for showing resilience and patience in such trying times and, of course, you know where my thumbs-down goes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in such times, I believe in this quote: “When the going gets tough, the tough gets going.” That is what we need to do. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her statement and I now give the floor to the Honourable Gavoka. You have the floor.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Honourable Speaker, I was one of the many Christians who prayed for China when Coronavirus hit it in the early part of this year. It was in the province of Hubei, the most populous province in Central China.

China, Honourable Speaker, has always been a challenge to the Christian community to evangelise. In this case, Honourable Speaker, we say that God works in mysterious ways. The young doctor who was the whistle-blower, Dr. Wenliang, aged 34, who died on his deathbed wrote a note to his family, quoting from an old Chinese poem but towards the end, he quoted from the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy, Chapter 4, Verses 7 to 8 (II Timothy 4:7-8). He told his family these verses:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid out for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

This was priceless, Honourable Speaker, that a virus like this had spread the word of God across the whole of China. Imagine being confined to your room in solitude for two months and all you read are messages such as this. We could not have asked for something better and I am grateful now, Honourable Speaker, that our prayers have been answered, that China is emerging out of the crisis.

Now, the epicentre has gone to Europe. Honourable Speaker, Europe today, like China, the cities are like those cities in solitude and, Mr. Speaker, this is the time like the Chinese, when they sought God. Today, Europe maybe epicentre of the virus, but Europe was the epicentre of the faith back in the days when Christianity was starting off in that part of the world.

I read a book by an Indian Philosopher, Vishal Mangalwadi, who wrote a book titled, “The Book that Made Your World”. In the Book, Honourable Speaker, he said, the Bible made Europe what it is today. To me, Honourable Speaker, the fact that Europe is now desolate and in solitude, the people of Europe are going back in solitude seeking God and they will find God.

Honourable Speaker, this is spreading across the world. Even in Lautoka, the solitude in Lautoka (I am from Lautoka, originally from Nadroga), Honourable Speaker, people are worshipping God. In the villages, there is no more congregational worship but families are now worshipping on their own as family units.

Honourable Speaker, the virus will pass. China has showed that to us but, Honourable Speaker, we must be ready for what will follow. Yes, the times are very, very bleak, but through faith Coronavirus will pass. The Israelis are said to be very close to start testing a vaccine. It may still take months but there is confidence that it is possible.

Honourable Speaker, in terms of tourism, there is a phenomenon known as a 'pent-up demand'. Honourable Speaker, it takes place when the demand for a specific good or service becomes uncommonly strong. Travel and tourism will see this phenomenon in ways that are unprecedented. Fiji must be prepared for this pent-up demand.

The forecast, Honourable Speaker, in the Supplement says on Page 33, that we will go back to 2015 in terms of arrivals and our earnings which, to me, is a realistic forecast. But this is the time to do what we need to do to spruce up the products.

Lots of plans are in place for upgrading and renovation. These are the times to do them. Engage the staff in these efforts and keep them employed. Await for the tourism operators to secure finance with the lenders on special concessions. After 10 years of unprecedented growth, according to FijiFirst, the balance sheets of the tourism operators must be strong now to carry out all these renovations. And, Honourable Speaker, we must obtain special concessions from lenders to enable the tourism operators to do all these.

Give incentives for training to re-train the staff. In short, we cannot let go off tourism, the demand will follow. If you say, 'six months', I believe by October, it should be back to what it is.

Let us be prepared for intense marketing, and let us give a lead on the departure tax, ECAL and other taxes to help the recovery become a reality.

The Air Bus A350 must fly into Houston and to other cities in America, like the way it was planned for the Boeing 787. Unfortunately, the *coup* put this back, but now we have the aircraft, we are still yet to fly into those cities.

Honourable Speaker, many of the tourism workers are from rural areas. Lift the ban on *bech-de-mer*. The harvest must be good. Now after the period, the value has not been in place.

We have been asking the Honourable Minister for Fisheries to take an inventory of what is there. This is a source of money for people in the industry who have been laid off. Remove the licences so that our people can harvest from the mangroves the crabs, fish from the sea, mussel (*kai*) and prawns from the rivers. These are natural resources they can use for their livelihood going forward, but there are too many licences that are inhibiting this.

Honourable Speaker, improve on the way we approve things. Too many projects are on hold. The Nadroga/Navosa wants to build a seven-room apartment in Carew Street, but because of a drainage reserve, we cannot appear to find an engineering solution. We have tried, we spoke to the Suva City Council, we have spoken to the Town and Country Planning, we wrote to the Solicitor-General, but nothing is happening. That is a \$2 million dollar project. Find ways to make this happen!

In Nadroga and Sigatoka, there is a \$30 million mall that is being held back because Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) insisted the mall must have room for a 12-metre truck. Normally, it is only a six-metre truck but now, it is being held back, it is a \$13 million mall. There are other projects, Honourable Speaker, that must be made to happen.

Lastly, Honourable Speaker, there is a state of health, our health is paramount. What is happening with Aspen in Ba and Lautoka? What happened to India's Apollo Group? What about the CWM? It is time to do it and create a new facility at the CWM, Honourable Speaker.

Honourable Speaker, in short, this will pass but we must be prepared for what comes after this and the preparation has to start today, and I would hope that the Government would take into consideration some of these points. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Gavoka for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, there has been a change in the order. The Honourable Dr. Waqainabete will now speak in place of the Honourable Lt. Col. Seruiratu. The Honourable Dr. Waqainabete has taken the speaking times of two of the other Members of his Party, who will not be speaking. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I stand to support the motion before the House and I must say that it is in the interest of the nation, not only from the health perspective but also generally from the other perspectives, that we support the motion before the House.

In terms of the Supplementary Bill that is before us for COVID-19, we are all aware of the story back in November or December last year, and how it has travelled right throughout the world. Certainly, this COVID-19 or Coronavirus was a flu-like illness that was in animals and unlike the flu-like illness that we have in man, unfortunately, it jumped into man and started in China and went around the world.

We also know that it is contagious, maybe not as much as measles but in between SARS and MERS. So it is about four to five times in the likelihood so one person can transfer it to four or five people, as opposed to measles which can transfer it to 13 people in a room.

We also know that it is not carried by winds or trade winds but it is water droplets, and that is why it has been quite dangerous in its spread.

We also know that it is very infectious. It is being alluded to in several communications, including a videotaping as many would be able to see, that one lady who returned from China back to Korea, was responsible for and now in retrospect 6,000 people in Korea who had coronavirus.

We also know as we speak now that there is 530,000 people around the world infected with the disease, with the death at about 25,000. It has a case fatality of about 4.5 percent but if you extrapolate the data, you will see that there are some countries that are doing very well, their case fatality is as low as 1 percent, and some countries that have case fatalities that has high as 6 percent or 7 percent but because when they are put altogether, it becomes 4.5 percent.

So what do we learn from the countries that are 1 percent? We learn that these countries have:

- (1) measured action;

- (2) they do not hesitate to contain a particular place if they need to contain a particular place; and
- (3) they are very strong on social distancing.

These are also the measures that we have in place.

We have been watching this space and I made a Parliamentary Ministerial Statement here in the last meeting of Parliament where I talked about Coronavirus or COVID-19 and what was happening around the world and the preparations that we are having. Certainly, Honourable Members of the Opposition and those who are here and those who are listening can actually look at the Parliament Website and be able to pick it up from the *Daily Hansard*.

What is very important to understand is what Dr. Takeshi Kasai, the Regional Director of World Health Organisation (WHO) in Manila said, and I quote: “Never before has the world has COVID-19; never before. Never before has anyone had this sickness. No country in the world can say that they are doing the right thing. What is most important is that, they do not do the wrong thing”.

So for the Opposition to say that we are not doing the right thing, then obviously the WHO Regional Director does not agree with you because what is more important is that we are not doing the wrong thing.

How do we know that we are not doing the wrong thing? It is by taking the learnings that we have from all over the world and putting in place our preparations. We were the 164th country in the world to get COVID-19, not the first, not the 10th. The way they have been talking as if we were the first in the world.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Firstly, we are the 164th in the world. Secondly, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition keeps on talking about this Government bringing the case. I have a statement here from Fiji Airways.

The first case left his hotel in San Francisco to party and did not return to the hotel. He stayed with family, despite strict instructions that they have to stay in the hotel and not venture out. He then went to a market somewhere with his family and friends when he was told to stay in the hotel until his flight departure, like the other crew did. He disregarded all instructions and Company policies. We have people who flew on the flight with him to New Zealand, who are calling us back and telling us that he was wearing a mask and coughing.

Now, Government did not bring Coronavirus into this nation. It is a person, just like the South Korean woman who went into China and came back. It is not the Government. It is the responsibility of individuals when they enter into the country, they can pick up the declaration card. Here is the declaration card. They pick up the declaration card and...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- ...then declare whether they have a fever, cough or difficulty in breathing. It is important, this is a Statutory Declaration.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- It is a Statutory Declaration.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- You must be truthful on your declaration.

We have a responsible imported case, we have a case which was irresponsible and responsible for 300 people who we have had to contact and find out where they are and whether they have been infected or not. That is how Coronavirus entered into this country, not the Government but a person who is infected. So please, please forget about all these discussions that we are talking about, let us move to the Budget.

I am very grateful that in this Budget that we have, it is \$40 million for four months, \$10 million a month. It is not for the rest of the year, not for 2021 or 2022, but for four months. What are we doing? We are paying for the Incident Management Team. We are paying for media and communication. We are making sure that we have enough incinerators, personal protective equipment, infection control, decontamination of facilities, warehousing and ICU facility set up. We are buying another 50 ventilators. If we take all the machines that we have at the moment, we need to use them because people need to be ventilated, we have 58 ventilatory devices available now. We need more, that is why we are getting another 50.

We have ICU facilities set up. We have dedicated vehicle, ambulance and driver, container freezers, human resources, logistics for testing, isolation room facility, infrared thermometers, infrared scanners, health reliable cards, isolation facilities, training, meetings, contact tracing, publication, hire of facilities, field hospitals, food feeding centres and ration because people in isolation need to be fed, wash kits, fuel, overtime, meal claims, accommodation, transport of patients, facility improvement, other drug needs, consumables, Fiji Centre for Disease Control costs, digital health needs and other Ministries who come in to support us.

Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Leader of the NFP said that the Government did not bring the virus into Fiji, completely different from what SODELPA said. They are both sitting on the same side. He said the Government did not bring the virus into Fiji. SODELPA said the Government brought the virus into Fiji, so they are sitting on the same place, saying different things. But what he did say and it is on the website and I want to quote it because he said that *Fiji Times* got it wrong:

“Take a pay cut. This is not about the money. It is about showing solidarity and sacrifice. The Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers (yes, we accept it), Assistant Ministers (yes, it is important for looking after people), Speaker and Members of Parliament...”

Did you know you were getting a pay-cut because he had actually asked that you get a pay cut.

“...Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Permanent Secretaries, all those in the Civil Service and Government-Owned Commercial Companies.”

I want the nation to know today, the Civil Servants who are watching today, they had asked for your 34 percent pay cut. You the nurse on the frontline or you the doctor on the frontline, they asked that your pay be cut by 35 percent. This responsible Government says, “No, allow the Civil Servants to do their work on the frontline, we will take a pay cut.”

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order. Mr. Speaker, I think the Government side continues to misrepresent what I said. There is a very clear video message on our website ...

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...reported which clearly said, "No pay cut for Civil Service." I said, "Don't touch." And for them to pick up one little thing in the *Fiji Times* and keep misrepresenting, it just shows how desperate they are and how desperate they have become.

I never said that we cut the pay of the civil servants. So, stop this nonsense! Stop that nonsense and do not misrepresent! Listen to what I said.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Shame!

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

I thank the Honourable Member. But no, this is not about the money. The Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, Speaker, Members of Parliament, Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Permanent Secretaries and all those in the Civil Service.

Honourable Speaker, we need our frontline staff to be focussed; they need to be focussed. They cannot be unfocussed. That is why we cannot afford for them to have a pay cut.

I have been asked this question many times over the last few weeks and I said to them, "Do not worry about what is being said." This has been all over the media, social media, *Fiji Times*. I do not know who is lying today; the Honourable Member or *Fiji Times*? One of them is. But, Honourable Speaker, this has been affecting the mind of our people on the frontline because they are thinking that they are going to get a 35 percent pay cut. And at this moment I want to ask the Honourable Members on the other side, please, do not cause fear-mongering. Please, do not propagate fake news. We need the sons and daughters of this nation to be focussed on the task at hand; the task of saving lives.

The budget allocation to the Ministry is \$40 million and Fiji has been fortunate to be one of the last countries in the world to have this. Our preparedness and responsive plan has been modified on a daily basis. That is something that the Honourable Prime Minister has alluded to.

We have had a Taskforce since January, we have had an Incident Management Team within the last month, we have also had this card up and running available at the end of January and started in the first day of February when we started the Health Declaration Card. I also want to say that we were probably one of the first countries in the world to have a Health Declaration Card for COVID-19.

We have deployed our best staff to key areas and started preparing for the oncoming COVID-19. The Budget will allow us to order the key assets for COVID-19, bring in the extra machinery, such as being discussed and also because of the foresight of this Government, the Fiji Centre for Disease Control was able to open the newly renovated molecular lab and commenced testing for COVID-19; one of the only four countries in the Pacific to do so. This has made a significant difference in our ability to act quickly and comprehensively.

We have nations in the Pacific that are not able to test their citizens because of the lockdown and because flights do not go so for us, even though there is a lockdown, even though flights are not coming, we are able to test everyday. Last night, we tested 46 Fijians and I can tell you today, Honourable Speaker, we have only five still confirmed and we have no other confirmed over the last 24 hours, so still five cases.

We have done more than 200 testing because we have the capability in-house. We have the ability to do it and I take my hat off to the Fiji Centre for Disease Control, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the people on the frontline, the Health Inspectors, the nurses and everyone for the work that they have been doing.

Honourable Speaker, we have an Incident Management Team that does its work 24/7. It is made up of stakeholders who are seconded from all Government agencies, we are working together in ensuring that it is a whole of Government effort.

We are also working with the Commissioners in the NDMO structure, but one thing is important to understand, that every individual, a single person in this nation, must do their part. We must accept social distancing, we must not have mass gatherings. We must practise hand hygiene and personal hygiene and we must preach at this time, that the betterment and the life of everyone is priceless because the Bainimarama-led Government value the lives of every Fijian as priceless.

I thank you, Honourable Speaker, for this opportunity to talk and also participate in this debate and I support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution today. I now give the floor to the Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. This morning we heard contributions from the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and also the Honourable Prime Minister and at the end of the Prime Minister's contribution, he stated that the Honourable Leader of the Opposition should be in jail.

That, Honourable Speaker, is a statement which is in breach of Standing Order 62(4)(a) which states, and I quote:

“It is out of order for a member, when speaking, to use –

(a) offensive words against Parliament or another member.”

The second point which I would like to stress is that the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, for that particular incident mentioned, has been trialled by the High Court, Appeals Court and cleared by those Courts.

Effectively, what the Honourable Prime Minister is doing is contempt of Court, so on those two grounds, he should withdraw and also apologise to the Courts.

What he had stated raised very important issues, that the Honourable Leader of the Opposition should be jailed but the fundamental question we ask is, who should be jailed in this House? For what action should they be jailed for? We have seen breaches of the law.

He has stated what the Honourable Leader of the Opposition has done, but he has not stated what he had done in 2006. We all accept that those actions are tantamount or is it treason. So that is the question we should ask, who should be in jail? So before he makes those kind of statements, he needs to reflect on it carefully before he makes it.

Going on to the Budget, on the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), Honourable Speaker, we have repeatedly emphasised today that FNPF must not be touched because it is the savings of the people. The Government's main strategy is to put their fingers into the FNPF savings of the people. In particular, let me address one or two on that.

The lump sum assistance of \$1,000 through FNPF will be provided to employees who have lost their jobs and Government will subsidise the remaining balance. The question here is; why have you not applied the standard \$2,000 unemployment benefit that FNPF gives to its members? How can you reduce it by 50 percent and call it a support measure?

The other important issue is that, we have received calls this morning from others who are not in the tourism and hospitality industry.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Who?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Why are all those employees who have been laid off in other sectors not included? So that needs to be clear and addressed by the Government, those who are not in the tourism and hospitality industry.

The other initiative - a lump sum of \$500 will be provided to employees who are affected by the lockdown travel restriction. This is only available to employees who are not able to go to work or are not able to work from home. The question is; how have you arrived at this \$500 and why is the FNPF paying, and not the Government? As you have told us that you have maintained a prudent management of the economy, so you should pay from your prudent management.

For those who are affected in the informal sector, Government will provide a relief sum of \$150. Why the difference in the amount? Workers, regardless of where they work, all pay the same price from bus fares, groceries, et cetera, and that is another issue which needs to be considered.

Just before I forget, there are also operational issues with the FNPF which I am requesting the Government to urgently address before FNPF initiatives come into operation. How do they apply? How do they manage that when people are queuing? Is there an online facility for that? So the people need to know the administrative processes which need to put in place as soon as possible.

The question of employers' 21days COVID-19 leave for employees who are tested positive and certified, the question that we raise is; why discriminate? The virus is not selective and the effect is on everyone and more so, those above 60 years.

Those are just some of the questions and before I end, I also refer to the amendments in the Customs Tariff Act, regarding the increase in duty. I am not sure why the increase in duty on fuel, which in some places for some particular products, it is 100 percent, which is a huge increase. Of course, this will be passed on to the consumers, and that is our main concern.

It does not make sense because when you increase fuel cost through duty, businesses will add that particular cartage companies to their cost and that will, of course, contribute to the increase in the cost of goods, whether it be supermarket or elsewhere. The cost of living is already high and, again, that negatively impacts on the cost of living and the people's ability to purchase.

The other comment I would like to make is on Page 233 - Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism on Cooperatives. The Honourable Minister for Agriculture has rightly stated the need for self-sufficiency (subsistence) in agriculture and food security. Cooperative business or format in terms of conducting agriculture has been proven and is useful in particular for landowner groups who are going into farming venture, so that needs to be relooked at and improved in order to fully utilise the land.

The other question I have is on Tourism Fiji's Marketing Grant which remains the same at \$29.7 million, despite the downturn in tourism as there is no marketing, et cetera. I was wondering how that was not amended.

Just below that on Page 235 - Programme 6, there was an amount of \$1 million - Micro Small Business Grant from India and it has disappeared. I am not sure why that has disappeared. Of course, Small Business Grant has been reduced drastically from \$300,000 to \$50,000. The fundamental question here is; why? Prior to the General Election, we saw that 1,000 envelopes were handed out but now, that has all been reduced and removed.

Not only that, but in terms of monitoring and evaluation of these grants, we have not seen much feedback on that and we hope not only for that but also for the overall budget for the particular programmes, how they have been implemented and how they have performed in terms of monitoring and evaluation - the success and the effectiveness of those programmes.

With that contribution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Budget debate today, I am opposing because they are not doing enough, it is not enough and they need to do more. Most importantly, they are taking from the people's savings rather than from their savings. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Defence and National Security and Foreign Affairs. You have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I rise in this august House to lend my support to the COVID-19 Response Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Of course, I wish to congratulate the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his Team for providing us with this Budget that should allow us to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, provide relief for all Fijians during these trying times and, of course, provide stimulus to the Fijian economy.

Without highlighting the areas specifically, particularly for the RFMF and for the Fiji Police Force, but as the Minister responsible for national security, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I just compliment what the Honourable Minister for Health has already stated before in this august House. Let me, again, congratulate all the Health Officials led by the Honourable Minister, for doing such an excellent work within the areas of key activities that particularly is very much health-related.

But I think in terms of where we are now and the plan that we have, let me again reassure the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party that Government has a plan and, of course,

consistent with the models that are set by the World Health Organisation (WHO). We, however, have contextualised the model that they have and, of course, this is all about working within the Emergency Management Framework that we already have in existence in the country. Of course, in the major areas of the cycle of emergency management - prevention, preparedness, response and the recovery.

Fundamental to that, Honourable Speaker, Sir, is the Risk Assessment of the threats and, of course, the corresponding levels of action that need to be undertaken by Government. We need to have a gradual or a proportionate response to the effects of COVID-19.

Let me make some comments on the issue that was raised by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and, of course, Honourable Salote Radrodro about the closure of our border and what the Honourable Leader of the Opposition referred to as our pre-emptive measures. Of course, we can come up with those decisions earlier on but as of now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not only about the economy and about employment but most importantly, one thing that we consider seriously and our responsibility as a Government is the well-being and the safety of our own people.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we have a high number of people in our diaspora communities all over the world and because of the situations in the countries that they have resided in, in whatever mode, most of them have opted to come back to the country. Of course, we have a responsibility to make sure that they are brought back into the country. Unfortunately, some countries and may I use some of the examples, have completely shut their border and even their own nationals are not allowed back into the country. We had a good number who were returning from India for medical treatment but were denied entry into Samoa, so we have to look after them.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker Sir, we are the transportation hub of the Pacific and we work very closely with Australia and New Zealand because we also have a responsibility to look after our own Pacific communities and neighbourhood. They connect to the other parts of the world through Fiji. Of course, we also have a responsibility not only during good times but as a responsible neighbour and a responsible country, being the hub of transportation in the region, we also have a responsibility to bring them back into their respective countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me assure the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and all the Honourable Members on the other side of the House that there are risks but risks can be reduced, risks can be transferred, mitigated or managed, and that is what we have been doing until we became the 164th country to have COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker Sir, levels of action, we need to take proportionate response. Let me again mention that the Ministry of Health is doing very, very well and effectively in the areas in which they are solely responsible for. Screening at the borders, the detection and the testing, of course, they have played a part in the tracing of contacts and, of course, in the isolation.

The challenge that we have now and this is the opportunity for me to plead to all Fijians, is a comprehensive approach. The comprehensive approach is the responsibilities and actions by all other stakeholders, apart from the Ministry of Health and this needs not only a whole of Government approach but the whole of society approach. I have mentioned it so many times in this honourable House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, national security is a whole of nation and whole of society approach. We all have to take responsibility. People are acting irresponsibly.

Let me say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the planning teams are there, but let me assure this honourable House that this is about containment. Containment is the keyword in our operations now and that

containment comes in two forms, the isolation and the quarantine. We do the isolation and the quarantine work, we kill COVID-19 in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no need to lock the whole of Fiji. We lock the threat through isolation and quarantine, that is the end of COVID-19 in Fiji. Of course, let me urge everyone, let us have confidence in our own processes and systems and the expertise that we already have within. We will do well if we work together in a comprehensive approach. Every community, every individual in this country must act together. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister.

I give the floor to the Honourable Anare Jale. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. JALE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker Sir, for allowing me the opportunity to respond to the COVID-19 Budget Estimate 2019-2020 presented to this august House by the Honourable Minister for Economy at its sitting yesterday evening. I wish to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy for the Budget Estimates. I know that a lot of work has been directed towards its completion.

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I wish to join other speakers before me in congratulating the work and sacrifices by the Ministry of Health workers, disciplinary forces, local authorities, public servants and airport officials, who have worked tirelessly sacrificed a lot to keep the people of Fiji from the growing danger of Coronavirus (COVID-19). Of course, to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services, I acknowledge the leadership role that you have so far conveyed in keeping Fiji citizens safe from the killer disease.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had requested the SODELPA Whip to verify from the Secretary-General to Parliament whether or not it would be safe for me, SODELPA Caucus Members and Honourable Members of this august House if I attend the Parliamentary sitting yesterday because my wife is one of those under voluntary isolation. She arrived back from New Zealand on Friday, 20th March, 2020. I did not receive a response and here I am contributing to the COVID-19 Response Budget Estimate, and I honour the opportunity.

It will be unreasonable to expect Honourable Members of this House to have gone through the Budget Estimates thoroughly in a space of hours since it was presented. However, I have noted cuts in the 2019-2020 Operational and Capital Budget Estimates for almost all Government Ministries and Departments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Coronavirus is the second dangerous virus to hit Fiji. The first which is still affecting the lives of so many people in Fiji, was the *TC Winston* virus. My concern, Mr. Speaker, is that the cries of the *TC Winston* victims will be swept under the carpet by the Government and completely forgotten.

I have recently returned from Vanuabalavu, the only island in the Lau Group that was devastated by *TC Winston*. Almost four years from the day *TC Winston* struck Vanuabalavu, a significant number of villagers are still waiting for their full list of building materials or part of the materials promised to them. This is Vanuabalavu only, what about the other areas in Fiji that were badly battered by the cyclone. What has gone wrong? Who is sleeping on the job?

A sad story was related to me in Boitaci Village where a villager lost his house during the cyclone. He came to Suva a few times to inquire about the assistance he was entitled to. He was made to run from pillar to post, seeking legal help from those concerned. He returned to the village

disappointed, depressed and died after a short illness. The *yavu* for his damaged house is still there for people to see, not rebuild and forgotten.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the constant and frequent work disruptions that have been experienced by the villagers of Lomaloma, Sawana, Narociva and Namalata are not funny anymore. They are going back to sea to bath, afterwards, they pour a few cups of freshwater from fuel containers to remove the salt from their bodies. As for the people of Narociva and Namalata, the water main has been laid, but they have not received water for years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the villagers of Daliconi and Uruone were told to prepare stands for their water tanks before the 2018 General Election. The stands have been erected but no water tanks have been delivered as promised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Avea District School has been a victim of rising sea level as a result of global warming. The school and some teachers' quarters are submerged in the sea. The new Avea School has not been completed. Soil has been washed into the newly-constructed teachers' quarters from soil erosion due to poor landscaping and drainage. There is still no sign of water that is being piped from one end of the island, and it appears that the School will not be ready to be opened until the water is provided to the School.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted with concern the use of foreign workers by the company that was being awarded the contract to build the school in Avea District School. Seven workers from Bangladesh were engaged by the company performing work that can be undertaken by Fijians. Certainly, there are people in Vanuabalavu itself who are qualified to perform the work of these foreign workers who are engaged to do what our people can do. Is the Ministry of Education aware of this?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government's National Development Plan (NDP) states that for the next five years, Government will allocate funding to upgrade and maintain domestic airports, airstrips, runways and associated facilities. Furthermore, the Government undertakes to ensure affordability of flight services. Government will continue subsidising domestic flights.

More airstrips in the islands cannot be served by domestic airlines during rainy days. The people of Vanuabalavu are still waiting for time when the airstrip will be tarsealed. I feel *madua* to again raise in this House that the flight to Ono-i-Lau has not been resumed. The Government is not adhering to its promises in the NDP.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad to know that the Ministry of Fisheries budget has not been drastically reduced, in order to allow the Honourable Minister for Fisheries to fulfil his promise of a solar freezer and a boat to the villagers in Susui, Vanuabalavu. Thank you very much, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member and I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Industry, Trade and Tourism.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, for delivering a forward-looking Budget to address the impact of COVID-19. This Budget offers relief to Fijian families, boost businesses, protect workers and fund the Ministry of Health to contain this virus and more importantly, save lives.

The core of this Budget is to keep Fijians employed and keep businesses afloat, while putting people's safety and wellbeing first. As we heard, the Fijian economy will contract by 4.3 percent, provided we successfully win our battle against COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen the manner in which COVID-19 pandemic caused upheaval in the global stock market. It disrupted supply chain, shattered businesses, closed airports and left thousands unemployed. We have never experienced anything this sudden and severe in our lifetime.

On the *Worldometer* that provides Coronavirus updates, it is frightening to see how the cases are increasing by the hour, including the number of death. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tragedy is unfolding in fast motion. It is, therefore, critical that we act swiftly to endorse this Budget as we come to terms with our new reality.

Last night, we saw an attempt by the Opposition to delay or even derail swift actions that the Government is taking on this very important Budget for all Fijians. Comments, like the Honourable Minister for Health and his very dedicated staff in the frontline have not done anything, is highly deplorable and insensitive. People who are risking their lives to save all Fijians should be appreciated, and I applaud them.

The other comment that should be denounced is that Government brought COVID-19. What can I say? I feel sorry for Honourable Nawaikula. Such irresponsible remarks will be remembered for a long time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Leader of NFP had the audacity to say that the Honourable Minister for Economy and the Honourable Minister for Industry, Trade and Tourism had nothing to offer to the private sector and that they were asking the private sector to advise. What is wrong with that? The private sector knows best what is required, and it is the responsibility of every Government to listen. Now, this does not mean that everything they request is the best possible solution at this time, but it does help the Government to think and strategize with them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning we hear from the Honourable Leader of the Opposition that we should consult. What do you think, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, we were doing over several weeks?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is very grateful to the banking sector, hire purchase sector, tourism sector, manufacturers and processors, Fiji Chamber of Commerce (FCC), Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation (FCEF) and many other organisations, such as Digicel and Vodafone, for the initiatives that they are putting on the table to address the impact of Coronavirus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from our various consultations with industry representatives, we know that businesses are suffering, working hours are reduced, salaries and wages are being cut and workers were sent home. They need help now, and that is what this Government is doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the backbone of the Fijian economy, the tourism sector, has come to a grinding halt. I want to express my gratitude and thank those employers in the tourism industry, who have continued to keep Fijians at work, which is only out of responsibility of care to their workers. I strongly support the allocation of \$60 million for workers in the tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector which contributes 18 percent of the Fijian GDP and employs approximately 60 percent of the labour force, is amongst the hardest hit. I welcome the much-needed assistance offered to the MSME sector. These incentives will keep our small businesses afloat and carry us through these testing times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is not only about businesses but consumers as well. Fijians who have taken mortgages will be able to defer their mortgage repayments in the event they are not able to repay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Professor Prasad's COVID-infected response was expected this morning. He said there were only two good things in the Budget; \$60 million for tourism workers and funds allocated to Ministry of Health. He also said, "Who cares about tax deduction?" Well, you do not, but businesses do. How can you say this Budget is not helping businesses?

Let me tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are 120 million tax sacrifices borne by the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services (FRCS), which includes:

- deferment of VMS tax holidays for investments in the tourism sector;
- waiver of penalties;
- write-off of assets;
- tax deductions applied for employment tax schemes;
- export tax deductions; and
- many more.

Just because we do not have much time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot elaborate more.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in many countries where this virus has taken over, we have seen measures taken by the respective governments. In Fiji, we have the opposite where the Opposition sits in the comfort of their home or office to give prescription that the Government's so-called 'poor economic performance' is stifling its ability to address this issue.

They are not ignorant of the fact that the Government has managed the economy. They have managed the economy well, despite the slowdown of global economy that started in late 2018 and early 2019, but it is a deliberate attempt to criticise that everything this Government has done or is doing are not success stories. They just refused to accept the good work this Government is doing for its citizens and in particular, to people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are unprecedented times and we need unprecedented approach to handle the uncertainties and realities facing us today which is time-bound.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of the Budget, a budget that has been prepared to propel us through these challenging times. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, there are some Bills being brought in to be circulated to Members. There are amendments to the substantive amendment, so it is a fine-tuning exercise and it will be explained by the Attorney-General when he moves his Right of Reply.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir.

The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, I also acknowledge the people of our beloved nation following the critical Parliament sitting via TV, radio and through livestream; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which Parliament and the Central Business District of Suva sits. I acknowledge the chiefs and people of

Suva, who have had to sacrifice and give up the best of their prime land. They have been deprived various sacred sites bestowed on them by their forefathers in the national interest.

Secondly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to healthcare workers on the frontline battle against COVID-19 - the doctors, nurses, administrators, laboratory volunteers, laboratory technicians, orderlies, support staff and volunteers, who work tirelessly for the safety of the people of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our citizens have faced terminations and this will continue, as a result of this pandemic and its drastic impact on the economy and businesses. It is the time of great national peril that our people look to us as leaders and Parliamentarians to exercise self-restraint and reach out to work together so that we face the COVID-19 pandemic united as a nation.

For the people of Fiji, it will be a boost of confidence, a boost to the national immune system to know that we are united and are able to work together for their sake. Unfortunately, Government insists that it alone knows what is best for Fiji, despite a bare 0.02 percent majority in the last Election, ignoring the 49.98 percent of voters who did not vote for them.

This Budget debate is in the favourite phrase of Government, unprecedented, being fast tracked under Standing Order 51. Last week, both Leaders of SODELPA and the National Federation Party (NFP) wrote separately to the Honourable Prime Minister, offering their hands in cooperation and unity because the time is now more than ever, to put aside their political differences and work together for the common good. The offer was put by the wayside, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am calling on Government to turn a new leaf. Let us make no mistake that COVID-19 is an existential threat to our nation and to mankind collectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of test kits is critical to the COVID-19 response. I do not see in the allocation for test kits. If there is, can the Honourable Minister elaborate where it is included? If minorities of the nation do not know the extent of the spread of COVID-19 in the community, then we cannot adequately respond and isolate those who have the virus. Countries like Taiwan, Korea and Japan have been able to flatten the curve or slow down the spread of pandemic by carrying out extensive testing.

Korea today is able to test 10,000 people per day, compare this with the four to six people or Fijians who were tested yesterday as mentioned by the Honourable Minister for Health this afternoon. Has Government reached out to the Government of Korea? I plead with Honourable Prime Minister to do so urgently for the sake of our people. We cannot be waiting two to four days for results, just because we want to boast about local testing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to substantive issues of the Supplementary Budget. I will speak on three issues, Sir. We question the often quoted-phrase, "unprecedented economic growth". It is at this time that we need to see the fruits of such unprecedented economic growth to cushion the difficulties faced by workers, who have been laid off in the downturn faced by business operators.

I plead for those who serve the citizens in our rural communities to be properly remunerated. The Turaga ni Koros received a meal allowance of \$100 a month, yet they work around the clock 24/7. In addition to the Turaga ni Koro, we have community health workers, Advisory Councillors and *Mata ni Tikina* in our communities, who carry out work for members of our communities in the rural areas, Sir. These community workers will inevitably be called upon to educate the grassroots.

This week, two people from Tailevu were arrested and produced in court for holding meetings with over 20 people in Namena, Tailevu. This could have been avoided if the Fijian Affairs

machinery had reached out to the *Mata ni Tikina* to visit the villages and inform them of the public health restrictions.

Since January, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition has constantly reminded the Government to step up its awareness efforts. Why are the people being penalised now for not knowing the restrictions?

Every statement made by the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Health are not instantaneously made in the vernacular languages. The majority of our people do not speak English. It is a second language for them. Why are they being penalised for not speaking English?

I submit the case of senior citizens who are being victimised by the unilateral reduction of FNPF pensions by the Government.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- I note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Fiji National Provident Fund Bill, Bill No. 8 of 2020, authorises the FNPF to utilise surplus funds in the retirement income fund to make payments to one or more classes of annuitants in accordance with the regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to submit the case of the senior citizens of Fiji whose FNPF pensions were, unfortunately, reduced unilaterally without their approval and consultation. I urge the Government to use the surplus fund from the retirement income fund to address the plight of our senior citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fight against COVID-19 is not Government's alone. We must work together to realise our collective dream to build Fiji to be progressive, dynamic and a united country, as we move forward during these uncharted waters of our history. It is time to work together for the sake of our people.

I regret to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I cannot support the Budget before the House. The people of Fiji deserve much more than what is proposed in the Supplementary Budget. Thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to speak on this motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member. I now give the floor to the Honourable Osea Naiqamu. You have the floor.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Members of the House, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to affirm my Ministry's support of the 2019-2020 Supplementary Budget that was presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy last night.

I wish to applaud the efforts of all our health workers in the country and the Disciplined Services during these challenging times. I thank them all for their sacrifices to save the lives of our people. In times like this, the true nobility of these professions come to the fore. *Vinaka vakalevu* and *shukriya* to all of them.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, at this very moment in our nation's history, none of us here in this august House should disagree with the fact that the Novel Coronavirus or COVID-19 has and still is

wreaking unprecedented havoc throughout the world. Even high-income countries are affected with many losing hundreds of lives on a daily basis.

Many countries have instituted strong measures, including total lockdown and announced financial incentives, at least, to keep their economies afloat. Many more are ramping up their efforts to either prevent or contain the spread of COVID-19.

One thing is for sure, life is not the same as it was before, so as we gather to discuss the Supplementary Budget on the account of COVID-19, we must keep in mind that the life of each and every Fijian is at an imminent risk.

Our top-most priority, Honourable Speaker, Sir, is to safeguard every child, youth, woman, man, irrespective of their age, gender social or economic background, or even political affiliation. It is certainly not about political grandstanding, trying to fight Parliamentary privileges, as we witnessed last night. That was a real shame on the Opposition for trying to put their rights ahead of the rights and lives of ordinary Fijians. Shame on you!

Honourable Speaker, Sir, the heart of this Supplementary Budget is that, it prioritises our immediate national needs and focuses on the well-being of all because for this Government, all Fijian families matter and we are leaving no one behind.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry is one of the key natural resource agencies that helps to grow our economy, building and expanding it for both current and future generations. Our forest resources enhance rural livelihood, while also providing vital clean air and water and related environmental services, including carbon sink.

The Ministry of Forestry was initially allocated \$16.5 million in this fiscal year's National Budget of which \$11.2 million was for operating expenses and \$4.5 million for capital expenditure. The fact that the lives of our Fijian citizens matter more, we have agreed to re-allocate \$1.7 million as part of the Government's stimulus package for COVID-19.

With the revised Budget, some of the key activities of my Ministry will include:

- (1) Continued support for community-based forest plantations. The Fiji Pine Trust, for instance, assists resource owners through the establishment of nurseries and helps with the supervision in plantation establishment, harvesting and processing, and restoration of harvested areas.
- (2) The allocation for the Reforestation of Degraded Forests (RDF) with indigenous and other species programme that will allow the Ministry to continue its replanting programmes, targeting vulnerable and degraded areas, thereby increasing Fiji's forest cover.

Those two activities will contribute immensely to Fiji's 30 Million Trees in 10 Years to 15 Years initiative.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to update this august House that Fiji has planted over 1.5 million trees and mangroves since His Excellency the President launched the National Tree-Planting Initiative in January 2019. We intend to continue this tree planting programme. Many stakeholders support this initiative because they too believe that trees are the most tangible and practical nature-based solution to addressing climate change, while simultaneously contributing to socio-economic development.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, the revised Budget will enable the Ministry to continue vital service across the entire forestry sector. The ultimate goal is to sustainably manage our forest resources, while also growing our economy as a matter of priority. Honourable Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry is confident of a stronger, more resilient forestry sector that is better able to withstand social, economic, environmental and health challenges.

I also wish to thank you, Honourable Speaker for accepting my invitation to be the guest of honour at this year's International Day of Forests, even though we eventually had to cancel the occasion due to COVID-19. With COVID-19 wreaking havoc around the world, science communities around are stressing the need to promote trees and forest as our natural pharmacy.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, as you know, trees and forests are not grown overnight, it takes years and even decades. This means that we need visionary leaders, whose plans and strategies can cater for the urgent needs but also continue to work towards sustaining the future generations, and this, Honourable Speaker, Sir, is what the Supplementary Budget is about.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, when the dust has settled, history will remember how national leaders like us took well-considered, pragmatic and timely measures to address unprecedented global events, like COVID-19. Unfortunately for the Opposition, history will also remember the antics we see from them now. This is why I am proud to be standing with the FijiFirst Government today, as it leads the nation in addressing this global pandemic.

I commend the Supplementary Budget to this august House. *Vinaka vakalevu, shukriya, bahut dhanyavaad.*

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister.

Honourable Lt. Col. Tikoduadua, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, before I commence with my intervention, firstly, may I wish patients affected with COVID-19 our best wishes for speedy recovery and, unfortunately, one of them particularly, Patient No. 1 - Soko, has been demonised in this House today and it is quite unfortunate for that matter, and I wish him a speedy recovery.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the doctors, nurses and all the health workers for their courage and dedication in containing and looking after the patients suffering from COVID-19, particularly those who are directly treating these patients in isolation centres.

May I suggest, Mr. Speaker, that Government also consider trauma counselling for our health workers, understanding that there have been cases in the world where those who are directly involved with treating these patients are blaming themselves for the spreading of the virus and subsequently, committing suicide. So I think we need to also look at their welfare and perhaps, Government should consider trauma therapy for our people.

Also, I would like to thank our Security Forces for keeping our nation safe on the spread of...

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- ...COVID-19, particularly in securing the area ...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- ...that has been reserved for quarantine.

Mr. Speaker, in June 2019 during the debate on the 2019-2020 Budget, I displayed a picture of a broken door of a washroom at CWM Hospital with an intravenous tube being used as a lock to give some privacy to patients using the washroom. I had said that the picture was the portrait of the state of our national economy.

It took the Ministry of Health 16 months to fix that door. Maybe, the intravenous tube was salvaged by the Ministry and given to the Honourable Minister for Economy in the hope that he could use it to resuscitate our economy, and that was even at that time staggering towards a decline.

Now, they say a picture is worth a thousand words and nine months later, the Government is using the global pandemic Coronavirus or COVID-19 as a smokescreen. And it has brought to Parliament a Supplementary Budget for the remainder of the financial year, four months to be exact until 31st July, 2020, seeking our approval to buy some more time at the expense of the people and in the process, bequeathing our future generation with unprecedented levels of national debt.

Mr. Speaker, I will be blunt. This rudderless, cash-trap-type Government has no shame, like someone who is an expert with theatrical and grammar skills, the Honourable Attorney-General, while delivering the Supplementary Budget, tried to arouse the emotion of other people by blaming the Opposition and blemishing pie in the sky figures of how the assistance was to stay ahead with the battle for COVID-19. In reality, Mr. Speaker, all I found in terms of direct assistance to those affected by this pandemic as a result of loss of paid employment and reduction in business activities in both, formal and informal sector, is a total sum of \$100 million under Head 50 of the Budget Estimates. And these too is under 'R' or Requisition.

The other measures announced last night as part of Government's Stimulus Package, such as deferment of loans and interest of payments, and affected members being allowed to withdraw their own funds from the FNPF, are not direct assistance or stimulus from Government. But one thing stood out, the national debt level by 31st July this year, increased to \$6.988 billion, an increase of more than \$1.3 billion in a financial year. Now, Mr. Speaker, it seems like the so-called the Bainimarama Boom of the economy is, in fact, the booming debt. It means, more than \$7,700 debt per citizen or a child just born in our beloved nation of an estimated population of 900,000 people.

Now, if this is what the Honourable Minister for Economy calls 'prudent economic and financial management', then it must be due to strategizing low hanging fruits on Level 9 of Suvavou House for 48 hours in December 2018, or in the words of the Honourable Prime Minister during a review Talkback Show, "GDP *na dinau*" (GDP means debt), because the kind of borrowing that we are asked to approve under the pretext of a stimulus package is in no way related to the direct Government assistance to our people affected by COVID-19 and the effects to the economy.

This is not a stimulus, more of a strangulation Budget, Mr. Speaker. I shudder to think what the Honourable Minister will come up with in June or July for the 2020-2021 Budget, if this pandemic does not show any sign of abating at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now faced with a catastrophe and let me list:

- the devastating state of the tourism sector;
- suffering of small and medium business enterprises that employ 70 percent of the workforce in the country;
- a public health and medical system on life support and is failing;
- national debt level rising stratospherically and dangerously, despite a decline in GDP; and
- the FNPF being milked by Government like a cash-cow by compelling it to appease its members and the general public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer lies in how the economy has been managed by the two-men rule.. The decision that this Government takes and the policies it implements will have a great bearing on whether the lifeline is originated or pronounced dead, especially after experiencing a reduction in expenditure of \$1.05 billion in the last financial year because of lack of funds due to reduction by billion dollars in revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can a struggling economy offer a stimulus, like other countries, especially neighbours New Zealand and Australia, that are aimed at helping in bringing down the cost of business, the cost of their wages, they being helped to pay the wages of workers, boosting healthcare and provide spending money, not their own money, like that of the FNPF? Mr. Speaker, we need help, and we need to reach across to our friends in the Region to help us get through this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget falls well short of what a stimulus appropriation legislation should do. In fact, less attention is being paid to direct assistance to affected workers, which has left so much to be decided upon. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Tikoduadua. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute to the Bill that was tabled by the Honourable Minister for Economy and Attorney-General.

I wish to thank the Honourable Minister and his Team for their very prompt response and putting together a mini-budget to deal with and cushion the negative impacts of the new global tsunami, COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is extraordinary times, calling for extraordinary measures to sustain our beloved nation through difficult times. Yesterday, we heard what Fiji went through in years of 1875, 1918, 2016 and I will leave it there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, let me thank all the frontline officials and workers, who have worked tirelessly and continue to work day and night as our first line against COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has been delivered at a time, like no other in our history. This Budget has laid the foundation of security and the beacon of hope for our people with a future to look forward to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with COVID-19 arriving as the invisible enemy of our shores, this virus knows no borders, knows no race or class, but what is clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that our lives have

changed. We live in a period of significant change in which this new virus has impacted on our economy, our jobs, our workers and on our employers. The situation for our workers continues to be a one-off uncertainty. We have consulted our tripartite partners and one thing we all agreed on is that, we need to weather the storm as one united force.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 crisis has also impacted badly on sports and on our Fijian sportspeople. Globally, sports are at a standstill, including the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics. This spells out to the rest of the world that there will be a time and place for sports, once this crisis is over. Sports remain a unifying force in Fiji, and I urge all Fijians to remain mobile and moving for health and wellness within the regulations in place.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the sporting organisations that have postponed contact sports and events that generate mass crowds. And I know that all of you will come out bigger and stronger for this experience, as we move Fiji forward as a sporting nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has responded in a proactive and timely manner to the crisis. It has taken the approach of a confident government with the interest of all Fijians at the forefront.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it saddens me deeply that during this hour of need for the Fijian people, the Opposition continues to play divisive politics. The Honourable Prime Minister, in his statement, has outlined facts relating to the first case in order that we can deal honestly and quickly with the spread of COVID-19. He has clearly stated that this is not the time for the blame game, yet the Honourable Leader of the Opposition continues to harp on about the first victim being victimised with no basis, in fact. We seriously need to move on, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have a global virus at our shores and we need to deal with that, and not the petty politics of the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the other hand, as a show of working together, it was also suggested by the Tripartite for the workers to utilise leave entitlements in the event where a shutdown is declared by the Government when necessary or if the need arises. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me make it very clear, that we have not taken away the leave entitlement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is carrying out workplace awareness and audit on COVID-19 on duty of care. This will enable all stakeholders to comply with OHS regulations and provide a safe workplace to combat COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicated a fall in employment globally as is the case in Fiji, and this impacts on reducing income. Therefore, we need to ensure that we have in place mechanisms to safeguard our workers and employers, and Fijians in general.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome a number of custom policy changes proposed that will provide immediate relief to the business houses. This will, no doubt, lead to a workforce and a workplace geared to move Fiji forward once we step out of this crisis.

This crisis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, hits close to our workers and to our employees. Given the job losses - current and projected, reduced working hours and a general air of uncertainty, given the COVID-19 crisis, it is crucial that this mini-Budget is passed and relief is made available to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this mini-Budget serves as a lifeline so we can breed our economy and workforce to a Fiji free of COVID-19 crisis. As explained by the Honourable Attorney-General, the

Budget strikes a very good balance between meeting immediate needs of people in terms of money and resources, and to provide a scale response towards moving Fiji forward, once this crisis is over.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind the Honourable Members of the Opposition that the whole of Government machinery is in place. We have been in consultation with our stakeholders, we have been talking to people and it is so sad to note that basically all the Honourable Members of the Opposition who are here have stated what Government has been doing. By now, after all the addresses are finished, you will know what we had actually been doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the priority right now is to stop the spread of Coronavirus, to keep Fijians healthy and together we can break the cycle. Given this priority and focus area, the mini-Budget will serve to protect our workers and our employers, to ensure that we have a workplace ready and able to fire up our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the information of this august House, our Fijian citizens currently working under the three Schemes, had been assured by both, Australia and New Zealand, that measures are in place to address workers' health and safety concerns. I am also pleased to inform the House that there is also a provision for the extension of expiry visas for our Fijian citizens in Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my colleagues from Government, and call on the full co-operation of employers, workers and all the key stakeholders to come together as we come together in the true Fijian spirit of sharing, caring and building resilience to counter this global crisis.

I urge all Fijians to stay safe and where possible, stay at home to stop transmission and like all of you, pray and look forward to the end of this COVID-19. Look after your loved ones, in particular, our elders and those at risk, and follow closely the Government guidelines for your safety and health against COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the Bill before us and look forward to its implementation so that we can work in a sustainable and manageable manner during this time of crisis. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua, you have the floor.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. The fact remains that by this morning, people had already figured out that this Budget is mostly just on paper. The people know that it was booming hot air from the other side but freezing cold on substance and meaningful impact, when it came to numbers for their pockets, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The people already know that there is really nothing in there but a shuffling about of small concessions that they, themselves, through their FNPF and others, have been coerced to pay for. But again, very little when it comes to seeing how much the Government is actually going to pitch in.

I had said earlier in this august House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that everything rises and falls on leadership. Quoting John Maxwell, he says, and I quote:

“When a crisis happens leaders must front up, but what a crisis also does is, it shows leadership up. When you are leading people in a crisis, the first priority is the people. When there is no crisis, the first priority is still the people.”

I will circle back to the subject of leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Government must absolutely have relief packages, but if we have really had these 10 years of unprecedented growth, then why has the Government not been putting aside money for the hard times?

If we look at the Appropriation Bill, all the Heads have been cut, again, with the allocations given to them. That means, the Government is forced to work with even less resources until 31st July, 2020. That means that the people who depend on Government services will have to wait longer or not get any at all.

A cursory look at the Estimates in SEG 1, allocations across all the Government Heads seem to show a trend of contraction. This Budget is supposed to be in response to the COVID-19 crisis, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yet, even the Ministry of Health will limp along with its normative functions with a slight increase from about \$334 million to \$347 million. Our people still suffer from other ailments, Mr. Speaker.

As highlighted earlier by Honourable Salote Radrodro, Dr. Eddie McCaig, backed by 40 years of public service in Fiji, has already sounded the alarm about the budgeting and management deficiencies, combined with the lack of equipment, drugs and manpower that have been impacting the number of surgeries being performed at the CWM Hospital - our largest medical facility. I see nothing for the special attention that should be given to elderly, children and patients with pre-existing medical conditions as they are the most vulnerable to the virus.

How about the NGOs? How about those suffering the mental health impacts of COVID-19? Where is the budget allocation to the Ministries' rural staff to advocate handwashing and social distancing? There are not enough fever clinics for our rural people, especially in the maritime areas and by the way, I want to say 'thank you' to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for the gracious donation of the fever clinic tests.

I want to ask as well, Mr. Speaker, what about those who actually do not work for the tourism industry, who live in a lockdown or do not live in lockdown areas, like some staff from the Sunbeam Transport in Samabula, who were sent home yesterday with one week's pay? Most of the directors of Sunbeam Transport, unfortunately, have gone overseas.

What about those who do not work directly in the tourism industry but who rely on the industry - people like entertainers, the musicians and dancers? There are thousands of other people in Fiji who will also be losing out on an income as a result.

Where is the running water in the taps of urban and rural dwellers to enable regular handwashing? Simply advocating this role of WAF and truck deliveries is a far cry from the day-to-day dry tap realities that we know is happening, Mr. Speaker.

I see that the Honourable Minister for Health does actually have \$40 million with which to respond to the COVID-19, unfortunately, it is tucked away under Head 50, SEG 10 and is Under Requisition. That means, the Honourable Minister and his staff have to jump through hoops of their own Government's red tape to even access it. We have had many debates on Head 50 Under Requisition budgetary nonsense, as you well know, Sir.

Here is where it gets confusing, we are also supposed to pass a Consequential Bill to update the Public Health Act, given that the Honourable Minister had already gazetted COVID-19 as an infectious disease on 29th January this year. Under the Public Health Act, the following is section 69(1), and I quote:

- “(1) The Minister shall have power –
- (a) to cause to be provided in such parts of Fiji as he may deem fit permanent or temporary hospitals, camps and stations for -
 - (i) the isolation, treatment and disinfection of persons suffering from an infectious disease and of persons who, as a result of contact with infected persons or otherwise, may be or become a source of infection;
 - (ii) the isolation, cleansing and disinfection of infected articles and goods...”

I just want to dive a little bit deeper into the nitty-gritty. The actual amendment to the Public Health Act that we are also asked to pass today, to give effect to the consequence of the COVID-19 Budget, only increases penalties to those who violate the law from the current fines of either \$20, \$40 or \$200 and levels them off to a blanket penalty of \$10,000 or an imprisonment term not exceeding five years or both.

Mr. Speaker, I did say that I was going to circle back to the subject of leadership and I could not believe my ears when earlier today, the Honourable Prime Minister compared the Opposition to old television sets which need a few slaps to make them work. Actually, I am not surprised because I have seen first-hand that type of violence in action right outside the parliamentary precincts as a matter of fact, and I am appalled and deeply disgusted that this is the base level of debate that the Honourable Prime Minister finds pride in.

Mr. Speaker, these are my brief responses to the paper that we got late last night. I am quite certain that we will certainly be checking all their fine words after this week with a microscope when the new budget rolls around in a few months and we will not be pushed easily into a fast-tracked budget process again. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I give

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

I give the floor to the last speaker on the Government side, the Honourable Selai Adimaitoga. You can use one of those microphones.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in full support of this COVID-19 Response Budget, presented by the Honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy. These are trying times for our nation. Now, more than ever before, we must stand together against a threat that has brought many big countries to their knees.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, firstly, I would like to thank our Honourable Prime Minister for his strong leadership throughout this crisis that many in the country who were afraid relied on his strong leadership and his assurance. Through the Honourable Prime Minister’s updates, we knew what was happening and what we needed to do.

I would also like to thank our Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy. COVID-19 has overcome so many countries that are much bigger than us but many of us can sleep easily at night, knowing that the Honourable Attorney-General and his team are there to steer the economy during such times.

The Honourable Minister for Health, nurses and doctors in Fiji have really come through for us. Mr. Speaker Sir, for the FijiFirst, it has always been about unity and teamwork.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, Fijians can see many arms of our Government working together to help move our Fiji through these rough waters. The Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) is working with the Government to provide relief to ordinary Fijians.

We are putting \$40 million into the Health System. This will make it stronger against COVID-19 and future diseases.

Mr. Speaker Sir, unfortunately some seem to be on Team COVID-19, instead of Team Fiji. If you heard right, they are on Team COVID-19. The Honourable Members of the Opposition are shamelessly happy that COVID-19 has given them a chance to attack the Government.

I wish to start with the Honourable Professor Prasad, his actions never matched his words. Yesterday, the whole country saw him for who he really is, but then he attacks the Government in his *Fiji Times* statements.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- We can never trust a person whose words and actions do not match. Unfortunately, for Honourable Professor Prasad, there is always someone above who is watching this time and his own statement in the *Fiji Times* got him caught.

In his *Fiji Times* statement, Honourable Professor Prasad was clearly quoted as saying that “all civil servants should take a pay-cut”. Yesterday, he came to this House, Sir, and he denied it and said that he had said something else in the video. Mr. Speaker, Sir, his video was on 16th March, 2020, and his comments in the *Fiji Times* was on 21st March, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, the NFP official website has the same statement, saying that “all civil servants should get a pay-cut.” The Honourable Professor Prasad misled the House and misled you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He is on Team COVID-19 and not on Team Fiji.

The Honourable Tikoduadua, I could not believe my ears when I heard him say, and I quote, “Government is lucky COVID-19 came along.” In no situation is it all right to say that everyone is lucky COVID-19 came along. COVID-19 has taken thousands of lives around the world and to call its arrival to Fiji ‘lucky’ in any situation, is sick.

Honourable Tikoduadua talked about military procedure bringing them into politics. We love our brave military, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I do not know much about military procedure but I wonder what they think about a soldier, deserting his position and joining the other side. The Honourable Tikoduadua is on Team COVID-19, not on Team Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I want to highlight this because it really shows that the Opposition has not helped the people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Niko Nawaikula has no business....

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- It's me, you listen.

(Laughter)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Calling the Ministry of Health 'useless' when you have had...
(Hon. N. Nawaikula interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- No, you listen, you've had your turn.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- ...nothing useful to Fiji in his entire political career.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, doctors, nurses and ground teams worked 24 hours a day putting their own lives at risk. How dare he call all of our strong women and men useless! It is like spitting on their hard work while the Honourable Member sits on *Facebook* in hospitals directly exposed. Imagine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how they will feel when they hear him calling their efforts "useless". Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a shame that not even one Honourable Member of the Opposition stood up to call him out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first politician in the world to attack our hardworking health workers – shame!

Honourable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we already know that Honourable Nawaikula is only good at one thing, and that is complaining. He never has any solutions.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, Honourable Nawaikula said that FijiFirst brought this virus to Fiji on a plane.

(Hon. N. Nawaikula interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You listen!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to urge all Honourable Members to remove hatred from their hearts. I would like to remind Honourable Members that "love your neighbour as you love yourself" is one of the Ten Commandments. Hatred makes you curse your own national airlines just to hurt the opponent. Hatred makes you curse innocent children of our Members.

The first HIV/AIDS case was in 1989, Honourable Nawaikula. The Ratu Mara Government brought HIV/AIDS to Fiji.

Honourable Nawaikula is blinded, that he wants to debate longer and delay this Budget. Mr. Speaker Sir, he wants to delay help reaching Fijians. The Honourable Nawaikula is on Team COVID-19 and not Team Fiji.

Honourable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, silly statements like this do not belong in this august House. They should keep it on *Facebook*, like Honourable Lynda Tabuya. Sadly, the Opposition never has any solutions. The only thing they are good at is performing drama to get *Facebook* likes.

Honourable Tabuya without knowing any facts made a *Facebook* post and I quote: “Stock up on food Viti! Have a guaranteed farm supply. It’s about to get real!”

Her posts and posts like that do not help us. What she did was, send lots of shoppers to supermarkets, increasing their risk of catching COVID-19. She also directly encouraged Fijians to start panic buying which every expert and small person in the world has already said “is a dead idea”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, her actions and so many others from the other side were irresponsible and against Fiji. Instead of aiding Fijians, SODELPA and NFP had been aiding Team COVID-19 not Team Fiji. In his speech the Honourable Attorney-General had said that Fijians would see the true colours of the Opposition and this incident has shown us all the true colours of Team COVID-19. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Point of Order. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am entitled under Standing Order 76 to clarify some of the insinuations made against me.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The first point that the Honourable Member said was that, I said they were useless. Useless in the sense that they could not catch the 82 people, useless in a sense that they could not....

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- That is the clarification!

The second point, Honourable Speaker, is that

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You said it!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The accusation is that, I said that the FijiFirst Government were responsible for bringing COVID-19 to Fiji. I said “responsible for their negligence.”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- We have been asking them to close the borders first of all, so they are responsible. And I say it again, this Government is responsible for bringing in COVID-19 to Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have explained it and I think we will leave it at that. Take your seat.

We move on to the last speaker from this side. Honourable Bulitavu, you have the floor.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir.

Sir, my response this afternoon will be short and, again, just to reiterate that this side of the House does not support the Supplementary Budget.

Sir, to begin with, what has manifested from the injection of the \$40 million in the Supplementary Budget to the Ministry of Health, has been a problem of the Government in not looking into some of the motions that the Opposition had been raising during the Committee of Supply in previous Budgets.

We had been raising motions to increase equipment, including ventilators; we have been raising motions to increase other equipment and also vaccine and I am surprised today that the Honourable Minister for Health...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ... is applauding the increase of his budget.

Sir, let me come back to that. Even civil servants who work under him, give their proposals to the Honourable Minister which is given to the Ministry of Economy, but they have been declined. Some even do not use up their budget, given the process of vetting of procurement which takes months. These are information that come from his Executives - CEOs and Managers who are responsible, who do all the procurement of equipment.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- This has been a failure.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- It took COVID-19 to expose the fact that our medical facilities were not up to-date and that is a blessing in disguise for the Honourable Minister for Economy and the Honourable Minister for Health, given the fact that this has brought up the weaknesses that the Opposition had been raising all these years on our health facilities. Those are some of the take-homes that the Honourable Minister can look into.

The other thing that the Honourable Minister for Defence had talked about on social behavioural changes on social distancing, we were very late in our awareness and public campaign in regards to COVID-19. It took the first case for them to up the awareness and campaign. We did not do anything before that. The Honourable Minister for Health was busy defending that we had no cases in Fiji or we do not have any cases in Fiji.

Now, we are moving into campaigns to try and mould our social behaviour. We had the plan but the proper messaging was not done at the right time and that is why it took us this crisis and also the lockdown and curfew that is yet to come, to change people's behaviour. Those are some of the things probably in preparedness of this kind of crisis that we should be prepared and the things that need to come in.

The other thing that the Honourable Minister was not prepared with is having a centralised quarantine. While all those flights that come into Fiji, such as from China and the rest of the countries, they go into centralised quarantine at the airport and they are not allowed to go home. The problem with the system that we have is, they are sent home and to self-isolate and if they develop any symptoms after 14 days, they have to call them. That is when the disease is already out there contacting other people.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- They did not have any centralised quarantine at the airport or kept somewhere, like Black Rock, for them to be tested and everything to be done. Those were some of the weaknesses in their operations.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- You can listen and learn!

The other thing, Sir, was the problem of contact tracing starting from the plane right to the hospital when that particular person developed symptoms. Surveillance cameras, CCTV and everywhere that that particular patient had; footprints or fingerprints. What we hear now is the statement from the victim himself, trying to trace back where he had been. These are some of the things that they did not do. Even the machines that were there at the airport to test those who have arrived, were just ordered lately but it took COVID-19 for them to update and upgrade their health facilities.

We do not really know whether our health facilities is able to sustain the situation if this thing gets worse. Do the Divisional Hospitals have the machines, do we have the manpower? You have said that if this particular Budget will bring 58 ventilators, do we have the manpower? Do you have the nurses to be there, given these ventilators are not only for theatres, these are for children, adults who suffer from respiratory diseases and some for COVID-19?

The demand that is there is so huge and it took this particular Supplementary Budget to order 58. Today, he said that they have only 50 and this Supplementary Budget will bring 58, so he was not prepared. These are some of the things that the Government can learn.

The other thing is on the rent. Honourable Attorney-General, there is nothing there in regards to tenants. We have talked about landlords on how Government will subsidise their rent but tenants too, those who have lost their jobs.

The other thing that I find discriminatory in this particular allocation, there is more focus only on locked down areas but people are affected everywhere. Even people who are not in the lockdown areas have lost their jobs and had pay cuts, so they should also qualify for this kind of assistance. Those are some of the things that they should consider.

Last but not the least, Sir, again, we all agree that we are in a very dire situation and the situation is that, we really need to unite, but the allocation is not enough. Ministry of Agriculture, you have got only \$1 million. I was wishing to hear today that the seeds and the tools would be free but I do not know. The teething problems that will be there working with the Turaga ni Koro and how to distribute these because the problem will come. We might not have enough money but we

need land to cultivate, to get the crops that we need to sustain our people. Those are the plans that we need to have.

But again, Sir, I had wished the Government, in one of their press conferences and releases, to call for national prayer and fasting. This should have been coming from the leader and I think we can end COVID-19. If the Churches and religious bodies come together and pray, that deliverance will happen to our country. However, none in the Honourable Prime Minister's press release and conference ever talked about the power of prayer, spiritual deliverance and divine intervention that could release and God has allowed this.

While there is no natural solution to a natural problem, God can give a supernatural solution to a natural problem and that is what this country wants. Even those at the frontline - our nurses and doctors, those who are in the COVID-19 operation, are asking us to pray for them. They are our relatives, families, sisters and brothers and they are asking us to pray for them. We prayed for them and proclaimed Psalm 91 to protect them. (Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Even, they are worried because they need spiritual support.

If anything that will stop COVID-19, it is how we come together as a country, not only to do the various things that we try to reduce or stop or try to slow down the virus, but also a spiritual solution to a human problem which is what Fiji needs at the moment. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Bulitavu for his contribution to the debate.

I now call on the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications to speak on his Right of Reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you had mentioned at the beginning of this three-hour allocation and as per the motion also, the Honourable Members who were to speak on the Budgetary Allocation but also on the other Bills that are before this House because this entire debate is not just on that one particular Bill. I note that most of the Honourable Members have not actually spoken about most of the Bills, except for a couple who spoke about the Public Health Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just before I do that, as you had mentioned, thank you for allowing us to table the three amendments to the three Bills and I would like to take responsibility for that. There are some challenging situations that FRCS have come back to us in respect of some of the amendments.

If I could draw it to the Honourable Members' attention, the amendments as you can see are extremely minor but also to remove any anomaly that may exist, for example, things like under the Tax Administration, qualifying persons were removed to say taxpayers, which made it a lot more simple.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in respect of the Act to amend the Income Tax Act, the years actually have been changed because FRCS, in fact, had unfortunately got the dates wrong. So it does not take away the substantive matter or the substantive substance or change that has been sought under these amendments to these three specific Acts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, generally the idea is that, as the last speaker, I do tend to summarise and respond to some of the issues. Unfortunately, many of the matters that have been raised by the Opposition, there seems to be a kind of intellectual disconnection in terms of what we are here to discuss and also the matters beforehand. Perhaps, the walkout has left them a bit disjointed in respect of how they respond to these things. However, I would just like to reiterate some of the main issues that have already been made by some Honourable Members from our side; the Honourable Ministers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been a number of contradictions but just to highlight again and to reiterate a number of consultations have taken place as highlighted by the various Ministers from this side. In fact, we had people who made submissions to us, we were surprised that a gentleman by the name of Mick Beddoes even made a submission. He did not go to the media, he did not make a song and dance but he simply sent the submission. We respect that and we actually thank him for that.

Obviously when you make submissions, it does not mean that all your submissions will be taken on board. Similarly, the letters the Honourable Minister for Labour talked about (we had a letter from FTUC) a number of things we actually agreed with them. We, in fact, had already had those ideas, for example, no rescission of any of the leave that is available to any of the employees. We have not said, but a lot of people had said, "Take away the Family Care Leave, take away the Paternity Leave", all of those things were said to be taken away. We said, "no". That needs to stay in place and this is the time when the relationship between the employer and the employee needs to be strengthened and we have, in fact, consolidated that.

Honourable Professor Prasad said, "No one cares about tax breaks." It is critically important to have those tax breaks because you need to incentivise the employers and the businesses to actually carry on with business. If they carry on with business, if they have some funds with the liquidity that is available, if they get into construction, what will happen? Jobs will be created, people will be employed.

I have had just one of the supermarkets actually got in touch with us and said, "Look, because of the fact that a lot of people are now coming into the supermarket, I need 200 people. Can you give me 200 people from the tourism sector? They can come and help us restock our shelves. People who work at the hotels." Great! This is the kind of collaboration that has been taking place behind the scenes.

The Honourable Minister for Industry and Trade had numerous meetings with the Chamber of Commerce. All of these meetings have been held. I can name individuals, I mean people from the tourism sector who have been talking to us directly.

I think some of the Honourable Members actually did not listen to the speech yesterday. We did not say, "We will only help the people from the tourism sector" or "We will only help people in lockdown areas". I also mentioned in the speech quite specifically and please go to the website and read the speech. But there will be people who are affected, for example, by the social distancing measures that have taken place, so people who work in nightclubs, gyms, all of those people will be affected and all of those people have the ability to go to FNPF. Also, all of those people actually have the ability to get assistance from the Government, if they do not have that amount of money in their FNPF accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to make was in respect of saying, "We are dipping into FNPF again." Again, they are misleading Parliament, either they do not understand or they are deliberately misleading the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, members can only withdraw from their General Account if they have eligibility and their funds in the Preserved Account will be preserved, together with what they have in the General Account after their withdrawal. As we have said all along, the reality of the matter is, they cannot touch the Preserved Account component.

The Honourable Leader of the Opposition when he was Prime Minister prior to 2006 before the reforms, there were something like 27 grounds on which people could go and withdraw funds from their FNPF. Today, there are only about three grounds on which they can withdraw funds. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they treated FNPF like a piggybank. No one is treating FNPF like a piggybank! The Preserved Account has been actually demarcated from the General Account. So, again, this is misleading the people of Fiji.

There are a number of contradictions and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so many times, we have actually responded to these. It is, kind of, really mundane now to do so but it seems like we always have to do so. When they talk about consolidation of expenditure, consolidation and spending more money and on the other hand, they are saying do not spend more money. And this is the problem when they rely on people who are no longer in the Civil Service, who actually did not do their jobs properly.

The fact of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone knows that after *TC Winston*, there was enormous rebuild programmes of \$500 million. So obviously if the rebuild programme has been completed, the level of capital expenditure will decrease. It is very simple. So to use that as a benchmark as the base year to, therefore, then say that your expenditure should be maintained at the same level, is nonsensical. It does not make sense at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point is that, they mentioned about, “In other jurisdictions, they have been able to do x, y, z.” As I have highlighted yesterday, Australia, after 29 years of straight growth, suddenly was feeling the pressure, suddenly they are going to negative growth rate, suddenly they have to put in place a fiscal stimulus package. Similarly with New Zealand with a much larger GDP and much stronger economic base for fundamentals have been there for the past 100 years, et cetera, suddenly the New Zealand Government is saying they have not done anything. The New Zealand Government had to guarantee to the New Zealand Banks about the mortgages of the individuals.

We, in Fiji, have been able to strike a deal without actually giving a guarantee to the Banks. The reality of the matter is, because there is confidence in the system. And we have also said yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are also willing to give Letters of Comfort, if need be, if the problem persists.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about fiscal stimulus package, it is not only about the dollars and cents that has been allocated in the Estimates, it is about the entire package. When you value it, for example, if we are foregoing revenue to be able to provide a particular stimulus, that obviously needs to be valued, which is the very fundamental basis of valuing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I always seem to be talking about the same old things. The Honourable Leader of the Opposition went on with the leasing of vehicles. The Honourable Minister for Health now needs to deploy a number of vehicles. If we did not have a leasing system in place, we will have to physically purchase those vehicles, so it adds to the capital expenditure. The Police will need new vehicles, we are able to at one point in time, give the Police 200 new vehicles. No Government in the past has ever done that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what it also does, and again I am going over this again, when those vehicles get off the lease in three or four years' time (normally three years), you have brand new vehicles used for three years available to ordinary Fijians to buy, so they have new technology available to them.

Market cost, market value, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he does not understand. For the first time, Government vehicles are insured, so we do not have vehicles that are parked because there is no budgetary allocation to fix up the vehicle after an accident. Again, I am going over all these things, over and over again, all the time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact that Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) will be, from its cashflow, giving up \$25 million, seems to be lost on them. The reality of the matter is, they do not do water cuts and people keep on using water at the same rate, they will lose \$25 million, which means Government has to allocate more, if WAF needs it. But we believe that water is a basic right, therefore, in these hard times, there is no disconnection.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, electricity, six months again, that obviously has a cost that is built into it, that gets built into the stimulus package.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they talked about commercial rentals, et cetera. Of course, those commercial rentals are critically important, so we are giving them tax breaks so we do not have some small, medium-sized shopkeeper being booted out because the landlord does not want to reduce the rent for them.

Those are very basic issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are putting in place. I mean, they went on and attacked the Ministry of Health, the Honourable Minister, the Permanent Secretary and all the staff indirectly.

They are quoting some article by a former doctor from the Ministry of Health. That doctor's life was actually saved through the Ministry of Health's public health system, I understand it is some foot issue.

Everyone knows COVID-19 is here, everyone is trying to work together to make sure that we all work together as a community, as a country. But what I find really quite interesting is that, the *Fiji Times* very uncannily, is printing all these articles on a daily basis and it would appear to be undermining the health system, using one man's story to undermine the health system as opposed to finding out exactly what is happening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is exactly what they are doing and they are relying on that - one man's version. I can give you many other versions of many people who have sent us many complimentary messages about what the health system is doing. I actually received a text message just two days ago about how this one particular gentleman who was very concerned about his elderly mother, actually went to the Nadi Hospital to one of the private clinics. Then they said, "You might have COVID-19."

They did a test and he sent me the entire text as to how professional the health doctors were at Nadi Hospital and how sensitive they were to the fact that people may actually be frightened if the results came out positive. These are many accolades we are receiving and these are all people working in the public health system.

If anyone were to listen to the Opposition, they would think there is nothing working in the public health system, and aided and abetted by *Fiji Times*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is what they are doing.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Professor Prasad spent nearly three quarters of his statement this morning, trying to defend his goof-up which was saying all civil servants need a pay cut when he knew it was incorrect. It is on the *Facebook* page, on the *Fiji Times*. And this is the kind of hypocrisy that we are facing.

The day he writes an article saying the Honourable Prime Minister and his team are egotistical, et cetera, that is the same day he sends this letter saying bipartisanship. This is nonsense! Absolute nonsense! I have Members of the other side standing up, questioning the constitutionality of this Parliament and everything else and then they want to work in bipartisanship.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Enough!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Exactly, you do not want to hear the truth. That is your problem. That is a fundamental problem that you have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight the Public Health Act. Someone had raised it, I cannot remember who it was, talking about the penalties. Of course, the penalties have to be increased.

They are saying, “Lock down Fiji.” Now, if we are going to lockdown Fiji, for example, and if someone breaches it, the current fines are like \$20. It is a slap on your wrist. What if you actually have it and you go and mix around with other people. So they said, “Do not increase the penalty rates.” Why not? There are some countries that are already locking up people straightaway for five years. We are not doing that! There is a penalty. You need to have deterrence.

If you are serious about it, you are going to get what you want right. That is why this amendment has been brought about. Please, wake up, smell the coffee. Do not just come here and pontificate about different issues and most of you have actually contradicted each other. They have contradicted each other.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I have 20 minutes my friend. You do not want to listen to the facts. And you are talking about if you were the Prime Minister, unfortunately you will never be a Prime Minister actually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is that, as the Honourable Selai Adimaitoga said that HIV came into Fiji in 1989 when the Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara-led Government was in power, Honourable Leader of Opposition was the Commander of the RFMF. Do we say that they brought in HIV in Fiji It is ridiculous to say that.

Then Honourable Nawaikula said that someone said demonising Fiji Airways, this is our national carrier. I can tell you as Minister for Civil Aviation that all the flight attendants at Fiji Airways were given strict instructions during this period. “When you fly overseas, you go straight to the airport, you get back into the hotel, you rest at the hotel and you get back on the plane the next day or 24 hours later. This gentleman chose to breach that. He went out, he mingled around in the marketplace, family members and then he jumped back on the plane.

Mr. Speaker Sir, he already breached that, and here we have the Honourable Minister for Health being blamed for that, the health system being blamed for that, the Government being blamed for that. You need to have some personal responsibility.

Even the Pope has issued and said that if you want to do confessions now, you can confess directly to God and do not have to go to a priest. Even the Pope has acknowledged that and here, we have the Honourable Nawaikula going on about some person being locked away. These provisions have been put in place.

In Korea, one woman infected literally hundreds of people because she went to these kinds of mass gatherings. We have to take responsibility, we have to carry out these Amendments. Mr. Speaker Sir, these Amendments to the Public Health are very, very important.

Mr. Speaker Sir, let me get back to some of the economic stuff, we have also highlighted that debt to GDP ratio has increased. Obviously, the deficit has increased Mr. Speaker Sir. When you have the entire tourism sector shutdown, when you do not get ECAL, VAT, tourists not coming in, obviously it has an enormous impact on your revenue sources.

If you look at all the Ministries, Honourable Leader of the Opposition picked out one or two different expenditure in one of the Heads but he did not talk about the overall Head Expenditure. That was what he did not do, you have got somewhere to go or line item No. 7 is the increase. No! Let us look at the wood from the trees. The reality of the matter is that, overall Expenditure has decreased.

The Honourable Minister for Women highlighted about the Expo not being held, obviously that expenditure will come down. There are various other measures we have taken to be able to cater for that. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is, you cannot have an Expo in any case, people will gather and they congregate. It is common sense.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is that, we have another Budget coming along for the new financial year. Again, we will be debating that and again, we will go through the normal processes.

They have talked about; “We are fast tracking”, yes, there is a need to do that. There are people who are already queuing up at the FNPF. We need to be able to ensure that we put those measures very quickly in place. Some of them require amendments and, again, I reiterate.

Honourable Professor Prasad misses the point. He says, “All you need to do is to deal with the situation now.” No! You have to deal with the situation now but also deal with the situation afterwards. What is going to happen after? But you see, Mr. Speaker Sir, the fact of the matter is, to be able to think about the future under crisis, you need leadership with vision, you need leadership who can actually make tough decisions, you need leadership that will make decisions not based on petty politics which is exactly what he is doing. That is exactly what he is doing, Mr. Speaker Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is, again, I want to reiterate, I just received a text message last night as we were sitting here, whilst the Opposition were going on about all the other stuff before the Budget Address, people were actually texting us messages. One particular gentleman who runs Classic Apparel said that because of the economic downturn in New Zealand and Australia, the garment requirement to make suits (the Honourable Leader of the Opposition may know them because he probably had used them much more in the past) orders for them will dry up, which means the women who worked there would not actually get any more work. They have to cut down their number of days of work from five days to two days. That is the reality and it has got nothing to do with Suva being under lockdown. It is about the supply chain, it is about demands being placed on us.

As I had highlighted in my speech yesterday, Mr. Speaker Sir, we recognise that. They are saying, “A thousand dollars is not much, five hundred dollars is not much,” we have to anticipate that the ramification of these can actually be widespread and for a longer period of time.

You do not eat all the apples in one day, you need to cut the apple in half and spread for a longer period of time. That is what you call prudent management of finances and prudent managerial systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to recommend all these Bills that are before Parliament which includes the Budget Response and the other Bills, just to reiterate:

- (i) Tax Administration (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020 (which has the amendments to it);
- (ii) Income Tax (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020 (which has a slight amendment to it which all of you have copies to);
- (iii) Value Added Tax (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
- (iv) Stamp Duties (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
- (v) Customs (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
- (vi) Customs Tariff (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020 (which has a slight amendment in it);
- (vii) Fiji National Provident Fund (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020 (we have to carry out an Act. So immediately the employers instead of paying 10 percent will pay 5 percent and employees will pay not 8 percent but actually pay 5 percent); and
- (viii) Public Health (COVID-19 Response (Amendment) Bill 2020.

Honourable Nawaikula, just for your information, the Honourable Minister for Health has put in place the COVID-19 as an infectious disease a couple of months back. So you need to understand that that has already happened. So he does have the powers and indeed he has already exercised his powers and so does the Permanent Secretary for Health, he already has.

Please, come to Parliament, these amendments and these Gazettes are available! The Library in Parliament is available. Do not come here and pontificate and going on about something that has already happened.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will give it to you afterwards but I do not know if I want to touch you directly but I will pass it on to someone else.

(Laughter)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is also that after this I intend to move a motion and the motion is about the reduction in the salaries. Again, the Honourable Members are looking at percentages, going on about how much the Honourable Prime Minister is earning, how everyone else is earning. Now we have to have a motion to amend the actual Act because the Remunerations Act allows for that where Parliament actually has to agree. And when you have a percentage decrease, obviously those who have a higher salary will get much bigger chunk being cut from their salary. They need to understand that also, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all in all, these measures have been put in place to respond to the very urgent requirements to the Ministry of Health. I just wanted to make a point, someone sent me an analysis

unfortunately I do not have the figures now. They said with the current rate of people in New Zealand the way it is actually increasing, even if 10 percent of them or 5 percent of them required ventilators, New Zealand does not have enough ventilators. That is the situation.

As highlighted by the Honourable Prime Minister in Italy, they actually had to give up on it. Initially they said, "Anyone over the age of 18 we cannot give them access to a ventilator." Now anyone over the age of 60, we cannot give you a ventilator. The Prime Minister is now saying, "The only thing we have left now is to pray to God." That is the strain that is going to be put on the public health system anywhere in the world and it is the utmost responsibility not just of the leadership of the country but also individuals to take responsibility because they can actually infect each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget, the amendments here are to try and arrest the situation, address the situation, anticipate for time that may not be necessarily be getting better. If, for example, the lockdown in our neighbours continue but also to be able to ensure that the cake or the apple that we have is being able to spread across the board and for a sustained period of time and God willing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can get out of this very, very quickly. But in the meantime, we have to be as prudent as possible, as committed as possible and as patriotic as possible, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that Fiji as a country, not SODELPA, not FijiFirst, not NFP but all of us as Fijians get along together, united in our effort to minimise the disruption caused by this phenomena that has brought the world to a halt and God willing we can get out of it and therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all Honourable Members to support all the Bills before Parliament. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications for his Right of Reply.

Honourable Members, the Parliament will now vote.

The Question is:

Pursuant to the resolution of Parliament under Standing Order 51 on Thursday, 26th March, 2020 that the COVID-19 Response Bill 2020 and Consequential Bills with the amendments to Bill No. 2 of 2020, Bill No.3 of 2020 and Bill No. 7 of 2020 as circulated earlier today be debated, voted upon and be passed.

Does any Member oppose the motion?

(Chorus of 'Ayes' and 'Noes')

HON. SPEAKER.- There being opposition, Parliament will vote on the motion.

Motion agreed to.

[The following Bills:

- (i) A Bill for an Act to appropriate the sum of \$3,136,075,345 for the ordinary services of Government for the year commencing 1st August, 2019 and ending 31st July, 2020 (Bill No. 01 of 2020);
- (ii) A Bill for an Act to amend the Tax Administration Act 2009 (Bill No. 02 of 2020);
- (iii) A Bill for an Act to amend the Income Tax Act 2015 (Bill No. 03 of 2020);
- (iv) A Bill for an Act to amend the Value Added Tax Act 1991 (Bill No. 04 of 2020);
- (v) A Bill for an Act to amend the Stamp Duties Act 1920 (Bill No. 05 of 2020);

- (vi) A Bill for an Act to amend the Customs Act 1986 (Bill No. 06 of 2020);
- (vii) A Bill for an Act to amend the Customs Tariff Act 1986 (Bill No. 07 of 2020);
- (viii) A Bill for an Act to amend the Fiji National Provident Fund Act 2011 (Bill No. 08 of 2020); and
- (ix) A Bill for an Act to amend the Public Health Act, 1935 (Bill No. 09 of 2020);

enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji]

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will adjourn for tea and then we will continue after the tea break..

The Parliament adjourned at 3.58 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.31 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed to the next item on the Order Paper, I will allow the Honourable Leader of Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion. I call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 6:

I move that so much of Standing Order 46 be suspended to allow the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy to move without notice a motion pursuant to Section 13 of the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak on his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. Very briefly, the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy in his Right of Reply had alluded to the fact that he intends to move a motion concerning the Parliamentary Remunerations Act and thus, requests to suspend Standing Order 46 which basically allows for the delivery of a motion; the notice two days in advance as per the requirement under Standing Order 46(2) and thus, this kind request.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Leader of the House.

Honourable Members, does any Honourable Member wishes to contribute to this motion?

(Chorus of 'Noes')

I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing further to add.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the Honourable Attorney-General to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

SUSPENSION OF REMUNERATION – PARLIAMENTARY REMUNERATIONS ACT 2014

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Section 13 of the Parliamentary

Remunerations Act 2014, I move:

That Parliament makes a determination to suspend the remuneration of the following positions by 20 percent of the amount set out in Part A of the Schedule to the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014 till 31st December, 2020:

- (1) Honourable Prime Minister;
- (2) Minister for Economy;
- (3) Honourable Ministers for Health, Education, Infrastructure and Transport;
- (4) All other Honourable Ministers;
- (5) All Honourable Assistant Ministers;
- (6) Honourable Leader of the Opposition; and
- (7) All the other Honourable Members of this Parliament.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the Honourable Attorney-General to speak on this motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will be very brief.

I just would like to refer Honourable Members to the actual Act in question itself, which is the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014. Under this particular Act, I should say that there are various mechanisms through which salaries of Members of Parliament, Ministers and Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, His Excellency the President and the Speaker of the House, can be reviewed with those mechanisms and we can have various Committees that set the salaries. However, under section 13 of the Act itself, it says, "Parliament may issue separate determinations at different times with different positions."

What we are proposing as part of the austerity measures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was announced yesterday and which we also discussed today, that notwithstanding the fact that the amount of money that would be saved, so to speak, by the suspension of salaries by 20 percent of all the positions that I have listed, is not that large a sum, it is nonetheless a gesture or a start to say to the people of Fiji that all elected officials are willing to take this suspension in their salaries because of the unprecedented hardship, driven by unprecedented economic and global crisis driven by a disease that is quite phenomenal in itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

You will see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the motion that it only relates to elected Members of Parliament, it does not relate to the Office of the Speaker and it does not relate to the Office of His Excellency the President. It only relates to all those Members who are the 51 Members of Parliament, and who have been elected by the Fijian population, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So in that respect, I urge you all Honourable Members and I hope that the seconding of this motion obviously is a gesture by the Opposition that they also support this particular motion, it is a suspension of the salary by 20 percent to the end of December this year. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if someone were to ask the question, that can also be reviewed by this Parliament again, which is the Chamber that determines the salaries and the terms and conditions of all these Members whom I have spoken about. So with that reminder, I urge all Honourable Members to support this particular motion. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Honourable Lt. Col. Tikoduadua.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think it goes without saying for the reasons that the Honourable Attorney-General has given to the House is quite noble and I think we all support it and as we had seconded the motion, I think I can speak on all of our behalf that it is a noble gesture and we should do it in the House as elected Members. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. There being no one wishing to take the floor, Honourable Attorney- General, you have the floor for your Right of Reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank all the Honourable Members of Parliament in support of this. Just by way of clarification, this will become applicable from the next pay date, which I understand is next week Thursday. So subsequent to this being approved, we will send out letters officially notifying the Secretary-General to Parliament, who pays the salaries of all the Members of Parliament and, of course, we will send a letter to the Permanent Secretary for Economy to suspend the salaries for the Ministers, the Prime Minister and Assistant Ministers too. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

The Question is, pursuant to Section 13 of the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014:

That Parliament makes a determination to suspend the remuneration of the following positions by 20 percent of the amount set out in Part A of the Schedule to the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014 until 31st December, 2020:

- (1) Honourable Prime Minister;
- (2) Minister for Economy;
- (3) Honourable Ministers for Health, Education, Infrastructure and Transport;
- (4) All other Honourable Ministers;
- (5) All Honourable Assistant Ministers;
- (6) Honourable Leader of the Opposition; and
- (7) All the other Honourable Members of this Parliament.

Does any Member oppose the motion?

(Chorus of 'Noes')

As no Member opposes, the motion is agreed to unanimously.

Motion agreed to.

ADJOURNMENT

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move the adjournment motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. I move:

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 27th April, 2020 at 9.30 a.m.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

The Question is:

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 27th April, 2020 at 9.30 a.m.

Does any Member oppose the motion?

(Chorus of 'Noes')

HON. SPEAKER.- Since no Member opposes, the motion is agreed to unanimously.

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, I want to thank you all for your contributions to the two days and I warmly congratulate the Government for passing the COVID-19 Response Budget.

I will reiterate that it is our national effort to contain the Coronavirus, let us continue the fight by washing our hands with soap and water, practising physical and social distancing and following any and every directive given by the authorities.

I thank you for your cooperation and for your forbearance during these last two days.

Honourable Members, Parliament now stands adjourned until Monday, 27th April, 2020 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.43 p.m.