

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 7TH DECEMBER, 2020

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 7TH DECEMBER, 2020

The Parliament resumed at 9.32 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present except the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and the Honourable Vijendra Prakash.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 4th September, 2020 and Monday, 30th November, 2020 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

HON. SPEAKER.- I welcome all Honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament. I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of their homes, offices and mobile phones. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Honourable Members, as I had alluded to last week, the Parliament would proceed with the Motion to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Speech. Honourable Members would have further noted that all will have an opportunity to contribute to the debate, in that regard we will follow the batting order accordingly.

Time Limit on Debate

Honourable Members, I remind Honourable Members that each Member will be allowed to speak for 20 minutes. The first bell will be rung at 18 minutes and the final bell will be rung when 20 minutes is due.

Absence of Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts

Honourable Members, on that note regarding speaking orders, it has been communicated to me that the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts is unwell and is not able to speak this morning. If she is present tomorrow and is able to speak, I will slot her in but I am giving notice now to those of you who speak after her that you should have the opportunity to be prepared. Thank you, Honourable Members.

DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Prime Minister, Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Honourable Speaker, I move that Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious speech. Thank you.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the Prime Minister, Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs to speak on his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I thank His Excellency for his gracious address of opening the 2020-2021 Session of Parliament.

Before I speak on His Excellency's address, Mr. Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to my friend, the *Taukei* Sawaieke, Ratu Tevita Momoedonu. Thank you to all who joined us in Viseisei Village this past Friday as we paid our final respects to Ratu Tevita who we remember as a proud son of Fiji. All his life, he put his communities and his country before himself, particularly in some defining moments of Fijian history; twice in May 2000. In March 2001, he was appointed Prime Minister, at both times, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he stepped aside to allow for a peaceful transition of power. In mourning his passing, we must all strive to honour his legacy of peace and patriotism he has left behind. God bless his good soul and God bless his family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to update the nation on the two potential border quarantine cases identified over the weekend. Both of these cases were aboard a freighter vessel delivering cargo to Fiji from New Zealand. We are in the process of confirming these test results which have returned, what are called "weak positive results", most likely indicative of an older infection

which has not been contagious for some time. The indicators all point to a low risk situation. Our infection protocols were well enforced and none of the crew on board ever disembarked. But because we would always rather be safe than sorry, we will be taking some additional precautions until we are sure there is zero risk of public transmission. Anyone who had any chance of contracting the virus has been entered into quarantine and we have reduced patient loads at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital and the Lautoka Hospital as a standard precautionary measure until we confirm the exact nature of these cases.

Mr. Speaker, if anyone was wondering why our COVID-safe restrictions have remained in place - these potential cases are why. This situation has driven home the urgency of His Excellency's opening address for this session of Parliament in which he highlighted the serious threat we still face from this pandemic. To drive the point home further, in the seven days since His Excellency addressed this august Parliament, more than 4 million more COVID-19 infections have been recorded around the world. More than 100,000 lives have been cut short by this plague in US alone and 1.6 million lives have been cut short world-wide. In the United States of America, it is reported that nearly two more people are dying from the virus every minute. Most everywhere on earth, every day this pandemic breaks its own terrifying records.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian people placed their votes and their trust with this Government because they knew what they were getting. They wanted strong, sensible and decisive leadership in good times and bad. They wanted leadership whose energy was dedicated to them, the people, not to pettiness or party politics. Through this pandemic, that is the leadership we have supplied, that is the leadership that has kept Fijians safe. Ironically the proof is not in what happened, but in what did not happen - in lives that were not lost, in families that were not destroyed, in communities that were not wholly consumed by sickness.

Months into this national effort, my message to every Member in this House and to every Fijian watching these proceedings is, "do not forget the stakes of this fight, do not downplay this life or death threat, do not retreat from reality. This pandemic is not over, nor will it be for some time. The virus may be the killer but complacency is its unwitting accomplice."

Mr. Speaker, let us remember the spirit that guided the Fijian people through those difficult months. As His Excellency aptly described it, that truly patriotic whole-of-nation effort was why Fiji is succeeding, even when so many larger, wealthier and more developed nations are not. It is why we are a COVID-contained country for more than 240 days and why we have remained a COVID-contained country even as border quarantine cases have emerged. The fact is that, the system we have established to keep us safe, is doing its job, and the record that we, the Government and the people have achieved gives me great confidence that we can realise our ambition for this session of Parliament and we will strive to keep Fiji COVID-contained and trusting the same science based approach that has saved so many Fijian's lives this year. We will chart an inclusive economic recovery; one that upholds every Fijian civil, political and socio economic rights and even in the midst of this pandemic, we will not ignore Fiji's duty to confront the climate, ocean and biodiversity crisis that threatens humanity's very survival on the planet.

When it comes to keeping Fiji COVID-contained, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Fijian has a role to play. We will rely on doctors, nurses and the members of our Discipline Forces to enforce our infection control protocols on our borders. And we will rely on ordinary citizens to cement the changes that we have made in the ways we live our lives and to respect the health

protection measures which remain in place, so as to keep us COVID ready at all times. For the foreseeable future, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 11 pm until 4 am nationwide curfew will remain, as will the capacity restrictions on sporting events and large public gatherings. Those former night clubs which have been granted approval to operate as venues where people can eat and share drinks with their friends, must play by the rules, no dancing and no loud music. Break those rules and you will be shutdown.

We anticipate heavy travel during this month due to the Christmas holidays, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Everyone who plans to travel to Fiji, must test negative for the virus prior to boarding a flight, spend the full 14 day-period in quarantine and then test negative again before engaging with the public, no exceptions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should be proud of Fiji's exceptional record in containing COVID-19 today, but I say that knowing fully well, the job is not done. I say that knowing that Fijians have not been spared from suffering, we are still enduring the worse global economic recessions since the great depression, Fiji's initial economic contraction now stands at just over 19 percent, still the single worst drop in our history. We should be grateful that we have our lives, but the task now before us is to fight for our people's livelihoods. We must work just as hard and we must lead just as decisively, if we are to bring our economy back from the brink.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again it will take the same truly patriotic whole of national effort to contain the virus itself. Since April, as soon as we were safe to do so, I have held *Talanoa* sessions in over 40 communities from across Vanua Levu to the Lomaiviti Group, Kadavu to other outer island communities in Lau to the deep rural pockets of Viti Levu and to our urban settlements. I have toured the isolation ward, I have visited our fever clinics and the hospitals. I have spoken to women and men on front lines of this effort, I have been on the ground in communities affected by *Cyclone Harold*, that is how and where I chose to consult with the nation. I know in a very personal way how hard this has been on our people because I have listened to their experiences and felt the determination, not to be forgotten and not be overlooked in the struggles before us. I have also joined my fellow leaders at the forefront of the global response to this challenge, most recently, last week, at a special United Nation Summit in the Global COVID19 Response. Frankly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I felt that meeting was long overdue but slowly and surely we are building a genuinely multilateral response, not only to stop the spread, but to ensure all nations are part of a vaccine-protected world and an inclusive economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must consider both the global and the local, if we are to emerge from this crisis whole. We cannot be short-sighted nor narrow-minded about where Fiji fits in this great multi-lateral equation. We must see the forest from the trees by strategically positioning Fiji for the opportunities we expect to gradually come to us through the course of next year, including the safe re-opening of our borders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now, as His Excellency noted, Governments are fuelling their response and recoveries through an unprecedented physical effort. Governments are borrowing and spending trillions of dollars to stimulate their economies and support their most vulnerable citizens. As a direct result, global debt has risen by 11 percent. In advanced economies, Governments are maxing out the fiscal tools at their disposal. Their collective debt has risen to nearly \$200 trillion equivalent to more than 431 percent of GDP. That is up 50 percentage point since 2019.

An American Senator, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Mitt Romney, put the urgency of the moment quite well saying "I do not like borrowing money, I do not like spending money we do not have,

but the time to borrow money maybe the only time to borrow money is when there is a crisis like now, and this is a crisis”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, borrowing maybe a bitter pill for the governments of these larger countries, but it is the only treatment keeping the global economy afloat. In this new era of flexible, fiscal policy, Fiji has two choices; fall behind or keep pace. The cost of hesitation are just as high as they were on the 19th March; the day Fiji recorded its first case of the Coronavirus. While we have tightened our belt when it comes to expenditure, we must continue funding support for our businesses, especially our Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) along with our people's well-being. We will never regain the full strength of our economy and 10, 20 and 30 years from now, we will find ourselves lagging behind from the rest of the world. We will not let that be the legacy of this session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we set up early in this government to erase the inequalities in Fijian societies, including between rural and urban areas, as much as we can and to bring greater opportunity and prosperity to all Fijians. We cannot stop now, especially when their need is greatest, we must continue our development in every way we can. In Tavuki Village, Kadavu, women like Ranadi Waqanitavuki, used to have to carry water in buckets when it was delivered to their village by boat. Much water was lost along the way spilling from the water tanks or splashing out from the buckets, but no more, because we continued our development programmes and completed a system to pipe water to the islands and store it safely. There are countless similar stories I could tell this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those kinds of projects cannot be put off. Our recovery must be inclusive and it must be even and equitable. We cannot overlook any Fijian because this party belongs to all Fijians. All Fijians are making a sacrifice, all Fijians have faced the risk of falling ill to COVID-19 and all Fijians must have a share in the recovery and a chance to recover what they have lost. If we are to have an inclusive and equal recovery, we must continue our support MSMEs. We have supported these businesses, including those who may have been laid off but have particular skills to start their own businesses with nearly \$15 million as of last month, but talking about the programme as a whole does not tell the human story, Mr. Speaker, and I think we need to hear what it means from the Fijians it has supported.

One of those Fijians was Ms. Sunita Kumar, who received a concessional loan worth \$14,000 to sustain her kava business in Nadi. She, like many, felt the crunch of this economic slowdown, but thanks to those funds, she can keep her stall running, she can keep two Fijians she has employed in their jobs, and she has continued buying from the *yaqona* farmers from whom she sources her product.

As we weather this storm together, support for hardworking women like Ms. Kumar and other business owners across the country must continue and we must set the stage for domestic investment and job-creation.

We must support domestic industries, including the cane industry, to remain sources of prosperity for those who depend on them. We must encourage those with assets, like our landowning communities, to make productive use of them, creating economic activities that benefit their communities and the nation. Now, is the time for all those who can make such investments to make them. The day will come when our borders reopen. We will become the economically prosperous nation we were, but only if we prepare for that opportunity now.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, we come to the third great challenge His Excellency set before us - the changing climate, our threatening oceans and the need to preserve biodiversity on this planet. In the eyes of the rest of the world, Fiji is no longer a small exotic land in the middle of the Pacific. That may have been true 15 years ago, it was certainly true under past Governments but we are no longer just a place for a vacation or a destination wedding.

We are no longer just a romanticised island paradise. We are a leader. We count for something. What we say and what we do matters. We have earned a place in the world, and it is this Government's aim to keep it and strengthen it. I need not recite here the stakes because we all know them and we know them all too well. We see them in villages that must be relocated, in farmland that must be protected against salinization from the rising seas, in schools and roads and homes and water systems that need to be strengthened.

Mr. Speaker, some challenges are meant to be overcome in a known period of time. We will defeat COVID-19 and relatively soon, and our economy will recover but some challenges are meant to be managed over the long term. Climate change and ocean health, are among those. We will be adapting to climate change for many years to come. The work of protecting this country against a changing climate will never end and the need to reduce our carbon emissions and transform our economy to one that is carbon neutral and completely sustainable with energy that is completely renewable is a long term project that will help us manage this crisis.

This session will make history through the passage of our Climate Change Bill and legislate our commitment to lead by example towards a net-zero future. Fiji will lead by doing, but we will also continue to raise our voice in the international arena, to encourage, to demand, to shame if necessary but to move all the nations in the world to a position of responsibility and solidarity.

I believe we are finally seeing some significant movement among the larger industrialised and emerging economies. The renewed American commitment to the Paris Agreement is a very hopeful sign but it is not the only one. It will be Fiji's job to acknowledge those efforts and then insist on more.

Mr. Speaker, we owe that to our children and grandchildren, to our fellow vulnerable nations, we owe it to all of humanity. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, I now have pleasure of giving the floor to the Leader of the Opposition. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the motion that this House thanks His Excellency the President for his gracious speech. Before proceeding with my contribution, I would like to also add my condolences and my tribute to the *vanua* of Vuda, *Yavusa Sawaieke* on the passing of *Na Momo Taukei Sawaieke*, Ratu Tevita Momoedonu.

Ratu Tevita was one year ahead of me at Queen Victoria School and we were both members of Bau House. He came into Form Three when you were Head Prefect, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He was always quiet and humble, and although we did not know then, he always had a chiefly bearing, we did not know he was a chief but he acted and behaved like a chief. We had very different and opposing political views in later life but he was always ready to talk to me on matters of national and *vanua* importance. We worked together in the then Ministry of Fijian Affairs when

I was Minister and he was appointed *Roko Tui* Ba on the recommendation of his fellow chiefs of Ba whom he served diligently.

I thank the Government for the national honours accorded to the late Ratu Tevita with a State funeral, although during his chiefly leadership, he had always advocated for a simple, non-expensive rituals for the departed.

I join the *vanua* of Vuda, the chiefs of Ba and his friends in sending out my condolences to the *Yavusa* Sawaieke, Vuda and to the *vanua* of Vuda, and in particular Adi Kolora and the children, grandchildren on the sad loss of a chief, husband, father, grandfather and friend, the late Ratu Tevita Momoedonu, *Taukei* Sawaieke. May he rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a brighter note, I congratulate the Honourable Bainimarama, Prime Minister and President of the Fiji Rugby Union on the fine 38-24 win our Fiji National Rugby Fifteen Side scored over Georgia in the weekend. I am sure the whole of Fiji ...

(Acclamation)

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- ... rejoiced in the victory after the abandoned games due to COVID-19 positive test results recorded on some of our national players, forcing those games to be cancelled and awarding the opposing teams maximum competition points.

The win yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, put Fiji in seventh place, Georgia lies in eighth place. I am sure that if the games that had been cancelled were allowed to have gone ahead, we would have finished on a much higher position. But that is how the disappointment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that can be brought about by pandemics and other global tragic events, and in pandemics, they highlight the need to be very vigilant in order to avoid infections and the spread of the disease. It also highlights the importance of the work done by our frontline workers who contained the spread and prevent any of the vulnerable members of Fiji population from getting infected. And as His Excellency stressed in his Parliamentary opening address, 'let us remain vigilant and not relax our preventative measures too early'.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a number of occasions, I have reiterated in this august House, in public and in my social media postings that our President is a symbol and a beacon of hope for the nation. His Excellency, The President does not only represent the Government of the day, he represents the *vanua*, our chiefs, the different religious denominations and the different communities that call Fiji "home". Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is a symbol and a fount of authority, strong leadership, hope, unity, prosperity, honour and mercy.

All of our citizens and countrymen, at home and abroad, always look forward to when His Excellency, the President addresses the nation. His address is always expected to bring hope and unity, particularly at times when our nation is facing an unprecedented crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic we are struggling through now with the rest of the world. During October, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nation saw our President bestowed the 50th anniversary of Independence medals on many Fijians from all walks of life. He acted as the Head of State and fount of honour in our country. I had recommended my fellow Rugby Team players surviving from the 1970 Team that toured the United Kingdom and Wales, especially our Captain, Ratu Sela Toga of the great Toga Rugby brothers of the *vanua* of Naua in Saunaka, Nadi to the Fiji Rugby Union CEO, Mr. O'Connor, to be also put forward for the commemorative medal. I believe that Atonio Racika of Naitasiri who lives in Caubati, Ratu Ilaitia Tuisese has been awarded, one, for his services to Fiji,

Inoke Buadromo lives in Melbourne, Australia, George Barley and Isimeli Batibasaga of Nadroga live in Brisbane, and Ambassador Pio Bosco Tikoisuva who has already received his for services to the Fiji Government as a former civil servant.

Last month, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also saw the Honourable Attorney-General receive the insignia of our country's highest honour that of Companion of the Order of Fiji (CF), Civil Division and I congratulate him. As a fellow companion of the Order, with two other Companions in this House; yourself, Mr. Speaker, Sir; and the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Admiral Voreqe Bainimarama, I congratulate the Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum and welcome him to the honourable Order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to fully appreciate the effectiveness and the importance of the message from His Excellency the President, I have taken time to review his message in this august House over the last three years since he opened Parliament in November, 2018.

Basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, his message has been consistent throughout in the last three years. He continues to remind us all of the importance of democracy and democratic values and processes embodied under the 2013 Constitution. This is despite the fact that a number of our population have reservations about the Constitution because of the lack of consultation prior to its promulgation by Decree. We must have hope and we must be united for national prosperity. His Excellency the President's messages have been consistent, his vision has always been crystal clear and his development agenda relevant to the needs and aspirations of the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Government is willing, a jointly re-engineered Constitution, incorporating the positive aspect in the provisions of both the 1997 and 2013 Constitutions can be enacted by this august House in the time available before the next Elections which can then be conducted accordingly.

In a similar fashion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with dignity in his address on Monday, 30th November, 2020, he reminded the nation that we must be united in our effort to contain COVID-19 and prevent its spread, and the nation must be united in our efforts for economic recovery and we must continue to pay due attention to climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the citizens of Fiji are capable of making their own objective, rational assessments and judgments on how well the government of the day has taken heed of His Excellency's directive and how well policies have been implemented, based on their own individual, family and group experiences.

My contribution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be set against this backdrop. My Opposition colleagues will speak on the specific concerns in their allocated portfolios. I will focus my intervention on broad key issues highlighted by His Excellency the President in his address.

Government intentions have been good, but it is unfortunate that there has been a lack or visible lack of cohesion nor consistency of policy in the implementation of government development agenda. In view of the inconsistency, reactionary and ad hoc arrangements, very little progress or achievements have been made by the government in the last three years. Instead, our development has either stagnated or caught in a downward spiral which I will deliberate on later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that we are living in extraordinary times in the midst of the impact of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every citizen's life in one way or another.

We must recognise and be thankful to our frontline workers who have sacrificed family time and comfort to ensure that the pandemic is contained through initiatives put in place by the Government based on scientific and international standards laid down by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Although we are considered a COVID-contained country, we must not be complacent or take things for granted that everything is going well.

Although, there have been some breakthrough in the discovery of vaccines, it may still take time before it is readily available to us. I urge the Government to take a more cautious and phased approach rather than trying to fast track the opening of our borders to allow tourists, et cetera, to come in. The lives of our citizens matter more than trying to bring in those tourists.

We can now see clearly that despite the losses in our tourism industries, the load could easily be taken over by other resource based sectors such as agriculture, as the Honourable Prime Minister has mentioned.

The point is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should not be putting all our eggs in one basket. We have very little control or no control at all of processes, procedures, standards and protocols in different jurisdictions. Therefore, we must always be conscious and vigilant now in our efforts to contain the pandemic.

We should learn from the experiences of other countries that have relaxed recommended protocol too early and are now experiencing the second, and in some cases, worse waves of the attacks.

In Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do not have a capacity in terms of facilities and resources to be able to cope effectively with the second wave. I believe our ability to cope if there is another outbreak due to the laxity will be disasters from our already overstressed health system and personnel and the lack of our support infrastructure.

The latest study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) clearly state that:

- (1) more than half of Fiji's population are living below the poverty line (these are social indicators), with more than 400,000 people living on \$25 per week.
- (2) in addition to the regular water cuts experienced in some major urban centres around the nation, more than 12 percent of our population or 220,000 people lack regular access to safe drinking water and are subject to high risk of contracting waterborne diseases.
- (3) in terms of health, nutrition-related diseases such as Ischemic heart disease, diabetes and stroke are now leading causes of death in our country.
- (4) unemployment continues to increase and people are turning to the informal sector and subsistence activities for survival.
- (5) crime rates continue to increase and the common type of crime today are domestic violence, burglary and theft due to the hardship faced by the people because of the lack of employment opportunities.

The economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the latest report issued by the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) at the end of November, 2020 clearly indicate that the global economic conditions remain fragile due to the daily increase in COVID-19 cases in many parts of the world, particularly in some of Fiji's major creating partners.

Although, our domestic growth forecast is envisaged to contract by 19 percent or negative 19 percent in 2020 compared to the earlier estimate of negative 21.7 percent, it is still a much bigger challenge for a small narrow based economy like ours. I say this because the performance of key sectors within our economy continues to decline.

Our visitor arrivals have declined by 87 percent, electricity fell by 10.4 percent, cement - minus 4.1 percent, gold production - minus 10.5 percent, sawn timber - negative 11.4 percent, mahogany - negative 22.5 percent. The only sector that is expected to grow is the agriculture sector. I will further elaborate on agriculture later on in the deliberation. There is also a decline in consumption spending which has led to the reduction in VAT collections by 41.1 percent. Commercial banks, new lending also fell by minus 26.8 percent and the lending for construction purposes declined also by 24.9 percent.

Mr. Speaker, I have taken time to highlight sector performances - the decline in performance in these key sectors have implications on employment opportunities and government finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today more than 120,000 people have lost their sources of livelihood mostly in the tourism sector. Since 2017, I continued to remind government that the economy is in recession. My observations were based on analysis by reputable international organisations, local experts and organisations also. It is unfortunate that the Government continue to turn a blind eye on sound advice that necessary adjustments and structural change must be taken to cushion the impact of the recession. COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst to the economy that was already in recession and it sort of speeded up the decline. It is unfortunate that the government did not take heed of evidence-based advice but continued to be reckless in untargeted bullish spending.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the sake of our nation and its people, I call on the government again to take a more bipartisan approach so that we can all work together for the common goal to rejuvenate our economy. With strong leadership and commitment from government in the mobilisation of all stakeholders vis-a-vis political parties, private sector, Civil Society Organisations and the Trade Unions, are necessary that we can all come together and be united with the common purpose to rejuvenate our economy. Therefore, I reiterate my call for bipartisan approaches to national problems and that call still remains in order to save our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir the government finance is in a precarious state today. Government debt has increased four-fold from \$2.5 billion in 2006 to almost \$9 billion today. Instead of consolidating finance the government, has continued spending on the consumption and continued borrowing to finance consumption-driven economy rather than encourage capital formation. This debt has to be paid Mr. Speaker, Sir - we are currently in a debt trap which will continue to spiral downwards. As a layman I cannot comprehend the rationale for government to continue borrowing. The Honourable Prime Minister has just justified the need to borrow in times such as this but I believe we should not be borrowing blindly when our revenue collection continues to decline.

On climate change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt and we all agree that concerted effort must be made in addressing climate change through the implementation of adaptation and

mitigation measures. At this point I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment for the work done in Drekeniwai Village, my village. Thank you very much. If the projection that the sea level will rise by 17 centimetres to 35 centimetres by 2065, my house will not be there, it will be gone and I would not be there probably.

Mr. Speaker, 30 percent of our population will be living underwater in the next 40 years. Those that will be affected will be mostly Fijian villages in the coastal areas of our main islands and those living in the maritime areas. Despite our shared concern and commitment to climate change, Mr. Speaker, the Bainimarama Government continues to provide, I believe, lip service (except for the case from Drekeniwai) to the phenomenon but does not practice what they preach. There are many glaring examples where the impact of climate change has been placed on the back burner for some reason or rather and it is proven the development on Malolo Island, Mawi Island in Savusavu, the extraction of resources and construction of infrastructure without due diligence and environment impact assessment carried out under the laws of Fiji.

The way forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the true spirit of His Excellency's address, I believe and I urge the Bainimarama Government to urgently consider new norms and make the necessary shift or structural adjustments rather than continuing business as usual. The current state of the economy, particularly job losses, Mr. Speaker, the precarious state of Government finances, and the declining trend in key social indicators, warrants an urgent shift in paradigm and national approach to the nation's problems. To kick start these structural changes, we need strong commitment, genuine partnership and confidence from our people.

I would like to reiterate my offer, to work with Government through a bi-partisan approach whereby all Members of this august House must collectively work together and have consensus on how best to revitalise our economy. We have built confidence among the drivers of the economy; the Government should consider convening a national economic forum or summit and allow key players from different sectors of the economy including Civil Society Organisations and prominent figures representing our different communities to consider and collectively map out the way forward for nation building and prosperity for all our people.

The Government should prioritise its programmes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support those who are unemployed. Cash for work programmes should be considered in different sectors of the economy. The excessive draw down from the workers' superannuation fund (FNPF) should not be encouraged to protect the Members contributions and retirement benefits. The Government should consider consolidating Government finances, cut unnecessary expenditure and re-direct resources to sectors that will have the quickest impact to the nation and provide employment opportunities.

As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the latest report from the RBF, the only domestic sector stemming from higher than expected growth is the agriculture sector. I believe that Government should consider increasing funds to non-sugar agriculture, to ensure food security and export for foreign exchange earnings. It is interesting to note in the *Fiji Times* report on Monday last week that business communities in Labasa are purchasing land for commercial farming to supply the domestic market, and at the same time, look at niche markets for export. Despite opportunities in the non-sugar agriculture, very little attention is given to the sector. It is common knowledge that the contribution of agriculture to GDP continues to decline. It is time now that we should focus more on non-sugar agriculture to provide employment opportunities, support food security, reduce poverty and also to increase exports to our major trading partners, particularly Australia and New Zealand.

Our approach to law and order must change. The Government should focus on directly involving the communities, most importantly relevant institutions must be allowed to operate independently without political interference which has been the norm for too long.

On climate change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must work together and walk the talk of practice what we preach. We must all work with Government in creating awareness, develop and implement adaptation and mitigation policies and measures to protect our small and vulnerable nation from the impact of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg His Excellency to exercise his fount of mercy role and release those prisoners who have served the awarded imprisonment period and are now qualified to be released on parole. I ask the Government and our community to forgive them and accept them back into our midst. To encourage the Government to extend a hand of co-operation to the Opposition, particularly with SODELPA's new line-up of leaders and to stop identifying everything SODELPA wants to do as schemes by me, the former party leader whom the Prime Minister cannot trust or could not trust.

I hereby, Mr. Speaker, Sir, tender my resignation as a Member of this House representing the people of Fiji, to make way for His Excellency the President to ask the Prime Minister to work with the new Leader of the Opposition and the Members of the Opposition and take us forward to the future which can be equated to what we had before when the Pope said, "The way the world should be." He blamed me for spoiling that and I will make way for him to get us back to that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you very much for the opportunity to serve in this august House. I will no longer be an obstacle to the bipartisan approach to be taken by the leaders of Fiji to create harmony, progress and unity in this nation of Fiji. I, with respect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, tender my resignation from Parliament. Thank you, Sir.

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

Honourable Members, on that note we will adjourn for refreshments in the Big Committee Room. When we resume, the Honourable Assistant Minister will be the next one on the Batting Order. We adjourn for refreshments.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.26 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.01 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Cabinet colleagues and the Honourable Members of Parliament: a very good morning to you all. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konrote, and respond to his encouraging and inspirational opening address of 2020 to 2021 session of Parliament. His Excellency made some very important points which we, as Fijians must take seriously if we are to beat COVID-19 and overcome the challenges of climate change. It has been a year since the world first heard about COVID-19 and at that time nobody predicted the global damage that this virus would cause.

Till date, over 66 million people have been infected and sadly 1.5 million have passed away - may they rest in peace. Mr. Speaker, Sir, countries much larger and better equipped than Fiji have been crippled by the virus. 2020 has been a tough year, filled with many lessons for us. I, like many other Fijians, take comfort in knowing that we are facing COVID-19 under the strong leadership of our Prime Minister, Honourable Bainimarama. It is when disaster hits that true leaders reveal themselves. It is very easy to let pressure get to you and to let things crumble and to start fighting amongst each other. Thankfully, our Honourable Prime Minister, as usual, stands as a beacon of hope and has managed to keep us all united to tackle this global threat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very earlier on, we closed our borders and implemented a curfew - we knew we needed to act fast. This played a large part in keeping Fijian people safe. Screening at our borders is very strict and most of our cases have been contained at the border. This did not happen by accident. This was a carefully-planned strategy to prevent this intruder from entering our nation. While our teams are doing their part, we must also remember to do ours. Every single Fijian is part of the COVID-Response effort, what most of you have already seen and known, what precautions need to be taken from the Fijian Government Facebook page and other Fijian Government social media. We all have responsibilities to protect our fellow Fijians. Please, do not break the curfew or take unnecessary risks that endanger you and others. Please, ensure that children are aware of what they need to do to remain safe. Do not take risks and do not take this lightly because your life and the lives of your family and friends are at stake.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, health risks are not the only concern that COVID-19 brings. The economic fallout from COVID-19 has been huge as His Excellency has said, "Economic recovery is a key priority that we must focus on to ensure our future is protected."

The 2020 to 2021 Fijian National Budget introduced a wide range of economic strategies and protection for Fijians across the many sectors. We are seeing many positive results already. Civil servants, for example, are still able to pay off their loans and have savings without having to go through pay cuts.

The FijiFirst Government takes into account the people when making policies. Some suggested that we cut civil servant salaries, but did not. We put Fiji and Fijians first. Fijians are still enjoying water and electricity subsidies. Did you know that we have one of the cheapest water rates in the entire world at less than one cent per litre. Please, do not use this as an excuse to waste water because due to this drought season, there will be shortages.

Many Fijians who have been affected by COVID-19 are able to withdraw from their general account at FNPF. Meanwhile, the savings for retirement are safe in their preserved account which is not touched.

Our hardworking Minister for Economy has been working tirelessly negotiating with financial institutions, including FNPF, to provide relief to Fijians in need. The National Budget gives protection to SME's which are the backbone of our economy. They provide employment to Fijians and we must ensure that COVID-19 does not destroy our SMEs.

I would like to comment on our Education Ministry, who have done such great work in ensuring our children get back to school. I understand final exams are on and I wish every student the very best. As His Excellency highlighted, graduating students are a precious resource. We must protect our vulnerable during this time, but the most important thing is to ensure that we keep evolving to meet the new challenges that COVID-19 constantly creates. We cannot afford to be tunnel-visioned and must be proactive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thankfully the term of our Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Minister of Economy and FijiFirst have proven once again that we come through for Fijians during the crisis. But make no mistake, this is far from over. The effects of COVID-19 on the economy, will be around for many years after the virus is gone. Times are hard and may get harder.

Fijians can trust that the FijiFirst Government will always look out for them and protect them.

Time and time again, we have shown that our united approach in putting Fijians first has produced the best results for our beautiful nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must rethink the future of our environment and tackle climate change and pollution with urgency. His Excellency quite rightly pointed out that climate change is not sitting around and waiting for COVID-19 to end. It is very important to follow the signs. Cyclones like *Tropical Cyclone Winston* which wiped out much of our country in 2016 was a result of climate change.

We will see more cyclones and stronger cyclones due to climate change. Sadly, it is the larger countries who are not as vulnerable as us, who contribute largely to this. This is why our Prime Minister's global leadership on climate change is so important in ensuring that Fiji and other island nations are not left behind.

As our Prime Minister said and I quote, "We are all in the same canoe when it comes to climate change. But currently, that canoe is taking on water and there are too few of us trying to patch the holes".

We must continue leading the fight and also teach our children the importance of fighting climate change. Let us all get behind our Prime Minister and support this cause because our future literally depends on it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2013 Fijian Constitution ensures that all Fijians have the right to practice their religion without discrimination. Fiji is a secular State. I cannot imagine a Fiji without occasions like Christmas, Easter, Diwali and Eid. Can anyone here imagine Fiji without her unique people? It just would not be the same. Everyone prays and every religion teaches us

to be good people and to do what is right. We must never discriminate against another person because of their religion, because we are good people and that is not what good people do.

If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that our differences mean nothing. We are all Fijians, we are all good people and we all love our country. If we work together, we can do anything, we can overcome any challenge. I urge everyone to remember this and do good in society for everyone of our fellow citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 can be a very scary time for many people. We must be vigilant. There is plenty of fake news in the media and on social media. I urge Fijians to join the hundreds and thousands of Fijians who get their news from Fijian Government social media pages. This is where the most accurate news and facts are first released. Ninety-three percent of our population are online and a vast majority rely on the Fijian Government's pages for information.

Be very careful of the sources that make bold claims. Recently, our Honourable Prime Minister had to correct misinformation that claimed when iTaukei land was in danger. I can assure all iTaukei that our land and resources are more protected now under the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji than ever before in our history.

The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, like any other Ministry, within the Fiji Government strategically aligns itself to international goals, one of which is the Sustainable Development Plans have been centred on the Ministry of iTaukei to protect, preserve and manage Fiji's cultural and natural heritage through its programmes.

Do not let people take advantage of your worries about COVID-19 to make you believe fake news. We must be strong and think critically. We must not allow people to use rumours such as these, to take advantage of us. In fact, we should be angry that during this time of need, people are doing these things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is not enough gratitude in the world to give to our frontline workers. I want to take this opportunity provided to me by the Fijian people, who have allowed me to speak here, to thank all our frontline workers.

Thank you to our:

- doctors, nurses and medical professionals, who risk themselves every single day for the sake of Fijians.
- strong and hardworking Military men and women for keeping us safe and secure.
- teachers, police and civil servants for working so hard to keep Government services, including the education of our children, as normal as possible in these times.

There has never been a time greater than this in which the people of this nation are called to work together. His Excellency's statement to press ahead in our work to drive – bluer greener more inclusive and more sustainable through the Government's three focussed areas in the containment of COVID-19 – economy, recovery and responses to the climate oceans and biodiversity crisis. It is timely and it is the responsibility of every citizen of this country through the sound leadership of this Government to achieve this for the betterment of this nation.

Thank you to the thousands and thousands of amazing Fijians who have done good deeds for their fellow citizens all through COVID-19. And, of course, thank you to every single Fijian who followed the precautions to prevent COVID-19. Again, I say, COVID-19 has taught us that

we cannot let our differences divide us but instead use them to succeed while working together and being each other's strength in different ways.

We must protect the health, livelihoods and food security of all Fijians to ensure that the new normal is a better one. Hard times are ahead. I would like to quote from Psalms 23:4 that states, and I quote:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

Let us pray for our beloved nation and continue to work hard, have hope and faith.

I, once again, thank His Excellency the President for his opening address and urge all Fijians to take a united approach, moving forward. Thank you and God bless Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Assistant Minister for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Bulanauca. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious address, the shortest one on COVID-19. In my reply, I will briefly touch on the rule of law, economic recovery - focussing on agriculture and mahogany, and COVID-19.

On the rule of law, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respect the Honourable Leader of the Opposition for his courage and good heart for confessing all his evil-spirited and sinful deeds, as required of a Christian and a human being. I ask and invite of the same confession from the Honourable Attorney-General and the Honourable Prime Minister for any evilness they each harbour - the Honourable Attorney-General for his alleged involvement in bomb blasting and Honourable Prime Minister for the coup, mutiny and aftermath of 2000. Honourable Prime Minister knew and was in support of the 2000 coup, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The proofs are as follows - vehicles, food and cattle, camp in the Veitu Parliament, personnel seen there, also Military Commission of Inquiry, which he refused to appear before, found him guilty, in support, knew of the 2000 coup but the buck stops at the top, the commander, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Where is the rule of law there? He should be taken to task on that.

I cannot say anything about the Honourable Attorney-General as there is already a reported court case on the issue. However, the Honourable Prime Minister needs to confess his spirit of evilness in ordering killings and alleged self-killing of Kalounivale at the Navy Boat Building Factory in Walu Bay by himself, in his own hands by a concrete block smashing his head not only once but many times that his wife could not recognise and identify him at CWM Hospital. If that is true then he should confess his evil satanic spirit, manifested in an illegal act of murder, without any investigation to date. Where is the rule of law there? No one is above the law, not even the Honourable Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Matthew 15:19 says and I quote:

“For out of the heart came evil thoughts, murders,” et cetera. It is written, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Romans 10:10 says, and I quote:

“For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”

It is written. That is an offer to all, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I have nothing against the Honourable Prime Minister as a beautiful creation of the Lord, God but I hate the evil satanic spirit in it all as I do hate evil spirit, even in me, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I John 1:9 says, and I quote:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

It is written. That is an offer and invitation to the Honourable Prime Minister and all of us in this room to do just that. Confess! I rest my case, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On economic recovery, GDP growth had declined. COVID-19 is resulting in finance, travel, development disruptions and substantial increase in unemployment in all areas. Therefore, Fiji must do whatever it takes to minimise the effect of the socio-economic fallout.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the long-term response is to maximise development of our domestic products, of our natural resources. Revolutionise infrastructure to improve production in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, minerals, oil, manufacturing, engineering, et cetera. Fiji needs to maximise its comparative advantage in certain domestic commodities. Tourism may bounce back but Fiji should not keep its eggs in the tourism basket only but in natural resources as well, things that we can control, that is basic economy.

Shift from uneconomic sectors to economic sectors. Shift funding and resources from uneconomic heads like military and police to focus on economic sectors. Why try to build a \$7 million office for the Prime Minister at this difficult time? Police office construction is a massive proof of Fiji becoming a police state, dictatorial, to protect the rich only and the poor get poorer.

On real GDP, agriculture contribution to the GDP is a constant drop from eight percent to seven percent from 2011 to 2020, must be made to increase production, must spend now for future rewards. We need to increase budget rather than reducing it, where we should be increasing budget, the FijiFirst Government is going in opposite direction.

Revolutionise agriculture by supporting commercial farmers. Educate, train and motivate ordinary subsistence farmers to become commercial farmers. Increase quality products through use of appropriate technology, to be competitive for increased export and therefore increased foreign income. Farmers need education, training, encouragement, motivation and financial support to use technologies such as tractors, diggers, rotovater, chainsaws, portable sawmills, organic manure, advanced farming techniques, et cetera. Then we also need power, water, cooling storage facilities in various *tikina* or districts for agricultural products for collection, processing, storage and transportation to various identified markets locally and for export, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Forestry and logging, from 2.27 percent contribution to GDP, a dismal 0.57 percent GDP contribution, now reducing to 0.26 percent in 2020. What a shame! Why is it that such a lucrative commodity can only contribute such meagre contribution? Whatever it takes, revolutionise production and export in various products. To some detail, I use the mahogany industry as an example. Mahogany is one of the natural resource areas with increased production, export and

foreign exchange revenues in Fiji. Why are we continuing to fail in this industry? The Sleeping Giant? Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the coming into effect of the Mahogany Act 2003 followed by the draconian Mahogany Industry Development Decree 2010 and 2011 (now Act) to reform it, our production and export keeps dipping. Why?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do have here in Fiji the largest, mature and best quality mahogany plantation in the world, yet, we continue to fail. We fail to get the maximum benefits from such a ready available resource. The previous Governments established them just for FijiFirst Government to freely harvest – *kana loto*. Yet, still fail to unravel and properly share out the benefits of the Pine Industry and the Mahogany Industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of sustainable harvest production of 150,000 annually the first Log Purchase Licensing of nine licensees through the Fiji Hardwood Corporation and the Mahogany Industry Council, quotas allocated was only 112,000 cubic metres. The second Log Purchase Licensing in 2017, the annual log production harvest quota was further reduced to 80,000 cubic metres with 13 licensees, again only two of the licenses were issued to mahogany landowners. Why only two?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Rentals, Stumpage, Timber Sales Proceeds: Lease rentals are not paid to date, stumpages are very late, no payment of timber sales proceeds as promised under the Mahogany Decree/Act. This industry has failed the resource owners and also failed the Nation as a whole. Let me tell you why it has badly failed. Here are some of the proofs - facts and figures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, log production. The FHCL has never been profitable but ended up incurring losses close to \$30 million as Government guaranteed debt to FHCL and they are still paying now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actual production dropped substantially from 96,000 cubic meters in 2010 under an open market, to 2,005 cubic meters in 2017, and has since hovered around 15,000 cubic meters only in 2019. The FHCL estimates only 28,000 cubic meters in 2020. Certainly, a lot is going wrong. Usual reasons given for reducing production figures are unfavourable weather, harvesting capability and economic factors. These can be managed to improve production, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This has been known since 2006, yet, failing to resolve, an improved and effective structure and management for increased production. What is MIC and FHCL doing or rather failing to do? They cannot profitably manage it. The MIC meets only once every two years and there have been no meetings since 2018. The FHCL continues to change its Chairman and Board Members many times since 2006 and a new acting CEO is now in, yet, no improvements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, MIC and FHCL after 14 years, still cannot turn FHCL or MIC to a profitable entity. Why? Meanwhile Fiji suffers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on export performance - from the year 2011, mahogany export volume has dropped substantially. The figures show a very discouraging trend downwards, it is quite evident by the steep dip from 25,410 cubic meters in 2011 to 3,200 cubic meters in 2018 and 10,000 cubic meters in 2019.

Mahogany export revenue similarly shows a steep drop from \$30 million in 2011 to only \$6 million in 2018 but for 2019, it was above \$10 million - why? What happened? What can be done to improve export and foreign revenue? There is capacity and opportunities, yet, the FijiFirst Government pays very uninterested attention to it. Again a low priority because of the likely benefits to the *iTaukei* resource owners? Another Sayed-Khaiyum Sunset Clause strategy? Why

is there no immediate attention to improve wood supply production, milling, processing, value-adding and export?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other questions that need to be answered are as follows:

- Replanting is very slow, why?
- Plantations and products are not certified, why?
- Why has the industry not served the interests of resource owners and the nation at large?
- Has MIC and FHCL achieved objectives under MIDD/A 2010 and MILBD/A 2011?
- Are MIC and FHCL aware of key challenges in the industry?
- Do they know what the solutions are?
- Do MIC and FHCL know what they are doing? It has proven itself incapable.

These are many questions asked but no answers. I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the FijiFirst Government, MIC and FHCL do not know what to do here and they need help. Only this Parliament can help them by instituting a Parliamentary Select Committee to inquire into the industry and to report back to us with answers. That Report with recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be in three separate parts:

- (1) Parliament - on anything suggesting amendments to Acts and Regulations made thereunder; this is a matter for this Parliament to decide on. The Speaker of this House will then direct the FijiFirst Government to look into the recommendations, make necessary Bills for amendments to laws or new laws and submit back to Parliament for debate and passing if need be, otherwise regulations are affected by the Minister concerned;
- (2) Executive - any recommendations from the Committee in relation to a need for improved organizational structure, performance, processes and systems to MIC, Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL), responsible or affected Government Departments, local authorities and even private enterprise for efficient and effective performances are to be directed by the Hon. Speaker with the approval of this Parliament, to them to resolve or to reset; and
- (3) Judiciary - any recommendations of the Committee where breach of law, civil or criminal is concerned, be directed to the police for further investigations then to Direct of Public Prosecution (DPP) for court decision to ensure justice prevails.

This is how such inquiry committees of Parliaments honour separation of powers, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the mahogany industry. We let the process go and within the process we identify what should be referred to each power.

There is a need to reform and restructure the mahogany industry for the purpose of maximising benefits for the resource owners and foreign earnings to Fiji and increase contribution to GDP to reduce import and export deficit and reduce debt, more money for Fiji. Whatever it takes, revolutionize the mahogany industry and the other economic sectors. This is just an example.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will speak on COVID-19. I thank our doctors, nurses and health workers for all they have done. COVID-19 is science and satanic in nature invented by a group of rich people around the world who are acting as God, creating chaos as we are witnessing - paving the path to a one world government and one world order through controlling and tracing people on

the forehead by artificial intelligence or insemination for Satan's number 666 to determine whether one is allowed to buy and sell. For it is written in the *Bible*, Revelation 13:11-18 - you go and read this.

Some COVID-19 rules apart from basic health requirements have no real purpose. It is beyond the need for safe health, for example, social distancing and masking. But to reinforce evolution to look like monkeys by maskin and to exercise dictatorial rule as a police state, watch out for vaccines, they will turn our children, our future generations into weak, sick, useless human beings to manipulate at will. That is their evil satanic vision. This is communism. FijiFirst Government is now a Marxist socialist communist government so we must be careful with what we are doing here.

COVID is satanic and we should deal with it accordingly rather than turning to people and science. We need to turn to God first, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, we would do what we need to do. Washing of hands, coughing with handkerchiefs, et cetera. We need to turn to God first and foremost for health safety and social economic recovery.

Jesus is the greatest physician, father of all the right thinking doctors, prolife in this world. So herbal medicine is all around us, pure, free and cheap. Our Health Ministry should be focussing more on preventative care rather than curative care which is not pure and expensive.

While many prayed and fasted at their own volition and which also helped in the COVID control here in Fiji the Government needs to take a lead role in initiating nationwide prayers and fasting to the Lord of God the creator and saviour for help. It would have a different and much better effect, but there is nothing stopping us from doing that now. It is Government recognitions that God is in control - refer things to him. We turn to science only to prove the word of God not against the word of God and turn to people in the implementation part of resolving COVID019, walking the talk.

Turn to God first should be the Government utmost prior response and prerogative. Individuals, churches and denominations also to vigorously continue with their part in praying for the nation as a whole.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you very much for the opportunity.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Bulanauca for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Moses Bulitavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. I rise to give my response to His Excellency the President's most gracious Speech delivered on 30th November, 2020. It is indeed a speech that reminded the nation of what we are battling with. There is no doubt and we cannot deny that the world is under a pandemic and that all the nations around the world are not spared and needed to put in measures to contain the virus so that the health of its citizens are protected.

To me, I will quote a famous line by the former British and late Prime Minister, Sir, Winston Churchill and I quote,

“... To every person there comes in their lifetime that special moment when you are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to you and your talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds you unprepared or unqualified for work which could have been your finest hour.”

It was the world's finest hour, it is Fiji's finest hour, where our talents and everything that God wired in us had to come up on what we call benefits of any crisis where every human race only has one priority and that is, to survive. COVID-19 as you have seen and the measures that government has put in place, and yesterday we had a few other border cases. We thank the Permanent Secretary for Health, Dr. Fong, also a son of Macuata, for the hard work put in by their staff and also the frontline workers, and members of the security forces.

During the crisis I reminded my younger sister who is also the Chief Bio-medical Engineer for the Ministry of Health who was later recognised by the Honourable Minister for Health as one who played a leading role in the installation of those ventilators and equipment, especially personal protection equipment coming from overseas donors.

We thank your overseas donors who also lent a hand to our small nation, given the immense impact of this global pandemic that we have. What came out clearly in this crisis was our patriotism, our Fijian resilience and our spirit to overcome things together as a team.

I really like the way the government had put it through “Team Fiji” because it needed everyone to put away their political differences and see the issues that were before us and to see that no Fijian was left behind. I am reminded of the conference that we attended last year for the IPU second round Parliament Implementation on SDGs and my area of focus Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been Goal No. 13 on Climate Action, Goal No. 14 Life below Water and Goal No. 15 Life on Land.

With that COVID-19 upon us and also we do not know when a cure will be found, it is our duty as fellow Fijians as part of the Fijian family that we really need to work together and see that we are not endangered and the threat that is before us can be contained if we worked together. I thank the members of the security forces too for the restrictions in place. It has changed social behaviour in villages. I live in a village in Labasa and I have seen how curfews has helped in the productivity of the villages in terms of time management, farming and also seeing the various things that will benefit them as a group.

On economic recovery Sir, on the area which His Excellency the President has touched in the rural community, I see that people have now turned to alternative livelihoods and those are some of the benefits of any crisis. We appreciate what the Government has provided so far in terms of equipments and other things that benefit the rural community. I, for one, live in the rural community and see that even canteens and other sources of income now benefit by many due to the no fees on licence and other things that were part of those stimulus in that COVID-19 Response Budget, it is benefitting the community.

We see other business too flourishing. As a farmer living in the area, *vinaka vakalevu* for the farm roads and also the various projects that have taken place that has assisted farmers in the area to transport their produce to the market which is something very important so that the economy and economic activity in the rural areas continue without any hindrance. Talk about vegetable products and also short-term crops that area provided by the Ministry of Agriculture like yams. It is helping, changing and empowering people in the grassroot level and in the villages, especially when they are up against COVID-19 and other social problems that come with it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the MSME grant that has been offered. I think a few applicants in the North had been following up with the Honourable Minister for Trade and Investment (who is not here today), but I thank them because grant provided that springboard to some of our new ventures, especially in this time when fellow Fijians need to be economical sustainable.

In regards to other activities, we also appreciate the opening of restriction in terms of sports events. I work with our village and *tikina* sports rugby team and also netball team of Wailevu and also the chairman of the club. Just last Friday and Saturday, I was in Wairiki, Taveuni where we met up with Pacific Privileges and Fiji Bitter who are now coming on board in terms of our club's sponsorship for next year for a first-ever Fiji Bitter Wailevu Sevens in Labasa. To me, it was a great achievement, given something like Marist Sevens can happen in Labasa, which will generate more economic activity in the area, especially those who live in the rural areas.

Just finishing a while ago, last weekend the Fiji FACT Tournament also brought more joy to the northern economy and also activities in the area, especially those who had benefitted. Those are some of the things when you see economic recovery on how we are recovering as an individual. We may think, "I am not an economist" and I cannot explain economic policies, et cetera. What I can only observe is what I am affected with on what I hear, given that I am a representative of our people and what I hear from them around me during grog session, during *vanua* discussions in the village, I see them trying to survive and also benefitting in some of the things that have been provided by the Government.

Onto climate change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, oceans, biodiversity and crisis, I currently spearhead our village catchment project which is the \$30 million in 15 years project by the Ministry of Forestry. I thank you too, Mr. Speaker, that you had participated in that event in this year's 50th Anniversary in the aim of planting trees which will benefit our future generation. Two months ago, during the visit of the Permanent Secretary for Forestry, Acting Permanent Secretary for Fisheries at my residence in Labasa, I had welcomed the officials and also telling them that the door is always open for community development and other activities that will enhance the status of our rural people and climate change is a big challenge. Living in a river bank area where coastal erosion and also river bank erosion is vulnerable to those communities living there, these are some of the real challenges that we face as a nation, on top of that, then we will have COVID-19 and other problems that they face.

The *vanua* of Caumatalevu, especially the chiefs around the coastline have been participating on this climate mitigation and adaptation programmes. I also thank the *itaukei ni qoliqoli* for their responsibility for Macuata, Cakaudrove and in Bua and also participating in all those messes to see that their coastal lines are protected, and not only limited to that, our participation also ventures into the "R2R" (Ridge to Reef) Project, where we are also conserving and preserving our forest and looking into areas where our catchment and our conserved forests are protected.

I come from the biggest landowning unit in Vanua Levu. We own about 14,000 hectares of land in the *Mataqali* Namako in the *Tikina* of Dogotuki and also one of the biggest catchment area in Fiji, the Vunivea catchment, which is shared by five *mataqali* and we have been in the process of REDD+ programme. But one thing that people in those communities and the resource owners have come to learn is on how to reduce deforestation, see that there are more reforestation to reduce logging and moving to greener solutions that are natural. These are some of the areas of focus and I thank the donors, the European Union and other donors coming in on board that

empower our rural communities in terms of improving their economic status going into greener solutions.

Going into the 30 million tree for 15 years project, I think one of the greatest benefit that the community has benefitted from is not only the natural trees such as vesi, yasi, damanu and other natural trees, but the seedlings for fruit trees that come with it like, pear and cocoa, becomes an economic opportunity for ladies in the villages, especially in the long term for our forest. Also the benefits that come with it are through nurseries where rural community provides seedlings for the Ministry of Forest, so that this tree programme initiative continues given forest as a mitigating factor and also as a response to climate change.

On to the oceans, in terms of our coral reefs suffering from coral bleaching and also to restore them to go bluer, and the benefits that come in terms of the basic actions that we can take, in terms of planting *vativa* grass or other coral projects, planting and restoring, not only making our natural beauty beneath water, but also it is an economic source for those living along the coastline areas who benefit from those kind of projects. I am encouraged to see some of the coastline areas in Naqumu and Raviravi in Macuata known for their crabs and the various techniques that now come in terms of crab fattening and other activities, now funded under the sea tree programme which probably the Honourable Minister for Fisheries knows that on how those programmes benefit and increase not only preservations but also sustainability, managing the resources well, getting something in return and saving some for the future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the various help that has been given in terms of sea wall for climate change mitigation for the Village of Raviravi in Macuata. I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for that and also protecting the biggest coral reef in the region; the Great Reef or the Cakaulevu that runs from Udu Point right to the Yasawas and the eco-system that is beneath the bio-diversity that needs to be protected because it contributes to Fiji's resilience to climate change and other changing weather patterns that will come in the future that is yet to come.

Those are, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am bringing up all that just to highlight and also share to the House what we can do as a community, and also, we as leaders, to view this nation as leaders .and see things from a perspective of a leader and also see that those that are following us know that we are agents of change. We take the lead role and we lead by example in terms of these key areas and see and tell them, teach them and guide them on how to survive, on how to overcome things that are barriers that are affecting them and affecting all of us. Planting mangroves has been an area of focus in our area, because it is a carbon dioxide storage offsets and carbon emissions and also our goal. Probably I was not here in the morning when the Honourable Prime Minister had delivered his speech, but there is a goal in 2050 where there needs to be a zero average on carbon dioxide emissions which is a global goal and that global goal needs to be implemented locally.

As I have said, and that various actions that needs to take place, that needs the partnership of the government and the communities and also our rural areas on getting informed and awareness on various workshops and programmes, so that they know what to do in this lifetime.

Just last week, we had a workshop at my residence in Labasa conducted by the Ministry of Forest and the South Pacific Commission (SPC) in terms of climate change and also deforestation and other things in terms of land use and also how to use resources wisely. Those are some of the partnership that we built and the message is very clear. Going through our *bose vakoro*, going through our *bose vanua*, going through our *bose ni lotu*. Whenever I take the stand to speak in the *bose vakoro* or the *bose vanua* and also at the church, I was ensured that climate change issues are also being transmitted to the people so that they know the areas of focus that

they need to focus on. Even if it can also be economically benefit to them sustainably as they move into the future.

Those are a few things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to remind us that we now, I can say that praise ourselves to the duty. If we bare ourselves, that if the Fijian nation last for another thousand years, those that will come after us; our future generation, they will continue to say that this our finest.

It is our finest hour and this is not the time to play politics. This is the time to work together as a nation and see that no one is left behind. All Fijians depend on us on our decision. We thank all Honourable Members from both sides of the House. We have contributed also in terms of cutting our salaries towards COVID-19; that is a start and there is more to come and that can only be built by genuine relationship and I also like to end by quoting from Ephesians 3:20 and I quote:

“Now, unto him that is able to exceedingly abundantly all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh within us.”

I think the power is within us. Fellow Fijians listening on television and also around Fiji, you have the power wired in you. God created you to be something special and we are here as your leaders depend on you, and you depend on us. We will make sure that you are not left behind and you find prosperity and also blessing in your community that we rise from glory to glory and also make Fiji great again.

Also, we thank God for his providence and sustenance that has provided us the wisdom and understanding. The difficulty that we go through, with God, nothing is impossible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Bulitavu for his contribution to the debate. I now call on the Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I am privileged to deliver my opening speech in this august House to begin this 2020-2021 session of Parliament. I stand in support of the Honourable Prime Minister and my colleagues in extending my appreciation to His Excellency for his timely and thought-provoking address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his address rightfully said, and I quote: The “The work for the next 50 years begins with this session ...”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government proudly begins our first session with our honourable Prime Minister as our leader into the next 50 years of our independence. Our honourable Prime Minister as a leader and a statesman of global repute, whose leadership reached new heights in 2020, as we marked this historical occasion. His leadership showed courage and foresight as he led Fiji through COVID-19 and its impact.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency's speech at the opening of the 2020-2021 session of Parliament, as has been the case with his previous opening addresses, was full of wisdom, practicalities and pathways for this House and for all Fijians.

I would like to affirm that my role and that of my Ministries, namely; Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports, is in the service of all Fijians, like other Government Ministries. This aligns the FijiFirst Government's principle of all Fijians first, when it comes to service and its delivery. That is our mandate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is our mantra - our continuous commitment to the betterment of all Fijians. The FijiFirst Government is built on this platform, as it has been from day one in Government. It is a platform that His Excellency the President reminded us, that is enshrined in the Bill of Rights embedded in our Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency added that these rights to protect every Fijian and the Government was demonstrated in the well thought-out course of action by the FijiFirst Government when it took bold steps in closing our borders to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. I express, again, our gratitude to our frontline personnel at our borders, in hospitals and wherever deployed in conducting their roles with commitment and at times, risking their lives and that of their loved ones. As we look forward to medical development to control COVID-19, we must abide by the words of His Excellency the President, that we must maintain our discipline and leadership to safeguard the health and wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker Sir, it is on this note of not letting our guards down, I would like to move on to reiterate what I said in the last Parliament sitting that a healthy and safe workplace is a more productive workplace.

My Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations in collaboration with the Ministry of Health will continue our workplace OHS awareness, inspections and audits to ensure the health and safety of our Fijian workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nationwide workplace survey that we undertook between May to June, 2020 was to determine the impact of COVID-19 at the workplace. I have in the past gone through these figures and in summary it showed that 43 percent of the total workers surveyed, were affected out of the workplaces sample size.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 53 percent of the affected workers are from the Western Division, 39 percent are from the Central Division and 8 percent from the Northern Division. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the top five most affected industries were Wholesale & retail; Accommodation, food & tourism; Manufacturing; Construction, Transport and Storage industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were and are concerned with those many workers and their families that were affected directly in terms of job losses. At the same time, I acknowledge the resilience and character displayed by many of these affected workers and employers in finding alternative livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given that COVID-19 and its impact, even post vaccine is projected to last for some time, we will conduct another workplace survey in the new year on the continuing impact of COVID-19 in workplaces. This is to enable us to monitor and ensure that we have relevant interventions to contain the impact of COVID-19 on employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at our workplaces, I wish to commend the understanding and good faith relationship by the employers and workers in resorting to practical means to minimise the negative impacts of COVID-19 and their support and understanding during the initial nationwide survey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue to be on guard against the impact of COVID-19 and at the same time, rebuilding our economy – it is a very challenging balancing act indeed, as alluded to by His Excellency, the President.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government did not step back from taking responsibility. We have put in place fiscal measures to assist in our economic recovery. The Government has moved quickly and in relevant ways with various legislative reforms to facilitate our resilience and quick recovery. His Excellency, the President had indicated in his speech these specific legislations that we will debate later in this session, as a means of moving Fiji towards recovery and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in an uncertain and complex environment, the FijiFirst Government has shown its ability to provide decisive leadership in responding to changes in the internal and external environments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world will be a different place post COVID-19 and we will have to rethink crucial areas in employment, productivity and industrial relations. The key to economic recovery that is sustainable and moves beyond the impact of COVID-19, must be increased productivity across the board. There are no shortcuts or easy road to recovery.

Many times, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we hear of Singapore being the gold standard as an example of productivity and economic activity. What we do not often hear about is the road to achieving this gold standard. Singapore quickly realised that imitating quality circles or productivity manuals were not enough. It required a culture change; a change of mindset; a change of attitude; a change towards raising our level of national productivity. This must be done across the board, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and in every sector of the economy.

Mr. Speaker Sir, with technical assistance from the Asian Productivity Organisation, we now have in place a 15-year Fiji National Productivity Master Plan, that is aligned to our 20-year Development Plan as well as with global capstones on development.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Master Plan may have the keys and methods, but determining the factor in productivity must be both – our employers and employees. Productivity will need this injection of innovation and commitment to raising standards at the workplaces so that we can do more with less.

We need Fijian businesses to raise the bar when it comes to providing a workplace so that productivity can increase. We need to provide the right tools to increase productivity. We cannot build multi-story buildings with wheelbarrows and shovels alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Technology, tools and equipment are needed, along with local innovations on productivity.

These are the areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that my Ministry will work with both employer and employee as we map towards realising the key goals of increased productivity as the foundation for a better Fiji. We continue to make good progress together to achieve better employment relationship through advocating the Good Faith Approach embedded within the Employment Relations Act 2007.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Labour Mobility Programme established under the National Employment Centre Act 2009 is an avenue that is contributing towards fulfilling the Fijian Government's COVID Safe Economic Recovery Framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 25th November we witnessed the first lot of 172 Fijian workers departing to work in Australia on a three year work visa in the Meat Industry under the Pacific Labour Scheme. It is encouraging to see the smiles and excitement by these workers on their way to three years of sustained work and skills development. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will send an additional 186 workers in January, 2021 followed by a similar number in either March or April, 2021. In total we anticipate to send around 500 workers to Australia under the Pacific Labour Scheme in the next four months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the positive multiplier effect of Fijians under the Pacific Labour Scheme going on a three year work visa is very significant towards our economic recovery. The spin-offs include, among others, remittances inflow, family income, growth of new small and micro enterprises, new skills and experiences. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other mobility programme are already in the pipeline notably between the Fijian Government and the New Zealand Government and that is in regards to seasonal workers.

On the local front, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is assisting our local employers in providing attaches' and volunteers as part of the National Employment Centre (NEC) services. In addition, my Ministry introduced an Open Market day in Suva where the unemployed and workers affected by COVID-19 sold their products. This initiative including the Cash for Work Programme will be replicated in other parts of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that our Fijians understand their skills and how important their employment experience equips them to work in new jobs. My Ministry had advertised an Expression of Interest (EOI) for a number of short courses a few weeks back. The response was very positive, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with over 400 unemployed Fijians registered to attend these short trainings such as Baking, Beauty Therapy, Green Plumbing, Tile Laying and Basic Meat Work. These short courses, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be delivered through the National Training and Productivity Centre (NTPC) through our current collaboration with Fiji National University (FNU). A total of 179 unemployed Fijians are expected to attend, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first phase of the training this month with majority of participants based in the Western Division.

The second phase of the training will be undertaken early next year to ensure that all those expressed their interest to be reskilled or up-skilled are provided the opportunity, to ensure that they are able to start their own small businesses or find meaningful employment to support their families, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Mediation Service of my Ministry, in its 10 years, has never faced the most challenging times as it did during this pandemic period, and immediately found itself in the forefront having to mediate the influx of employment grievances cases as a result of loss of jobs.

As the first port of call, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for seeking redress to employment grievances and the employment disputes, the Mediation Services will continue with its mandated responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through our Mediation Services, we will continue to support the building of productivity employment relationships based on the values of good faith between workers and employers, especially during these challenging times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government has rolled out a number of initiatives. Last month, a new scheme was launched namely; Stronger Together Job Support Scheme. Under this Scheme, the Government will pay the minimum wage of \$2.68 while the employer will be paying the difference to make up the sectoral minimum wage. I am happy to inform, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that already 600 jobs have been created.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his address points out the need for young Fijians with new ideas to come to the fore and for their ideas and innovations to be empowered by all stakeholders.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports has included in its mandate through its Action Plan and the newly developed National Youth Policy with the assistance of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), a set of sustainable and green and blue economy-focussed set of initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, youth training, many based within their communities, have been greatly expanded with a focus on new ideas and innovation that promotes local area solutions to youth issues. These includes economic empowerment through agriculture-based initiatives, to civics and ethics and training on Sexual Reproductive Health and Human Rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the aim of these trainings are to empower and capacity build youth to become responsible leaders and members of their communities. These trainings also provide relevant knowledge and upskilling of youth for income generation and improvement of livelihoods. Since August, 2020, 1,080 youth have benefitted from our trainings across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a new initiative under the "Youth Farm" label, empowers youths through training and providing seedling assistance to sustainable programmes. The programme assists youth in the utilisation of land agreed by the landowning units for agriculture farming purposes.

Given that this is an agro based initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, around 322 acres of unused land is provided to the respective groups. It was launched in August 2020, as a response to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on unemployment and the need to increase food security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, so far, we have assisted 71 youth clubs with 1,893 youths to benefit across the country. We anticipate an increase in the youth participation, given the impact of these programmes on the ground, and we hope that we will be able to provide them with a ray of hope through these programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has continued to promote sports and wellness programmes under the COVID safe protocols and I am pleased to report that Fiji, unlike many countries globally, has managed to sustain its community local and national sports competitions.

I congratulate all sporting bodies at all levels, especially at the national level, for continuing and ensuring that the show must go on, despite the difficulties imposed by COVID-19. This has not been easy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I also warmly thank and document my appreciation to all the stakeholders and in particular, the sponsors and officials for continuing to work together to keep our tradition as a small but great sporting nation.

My Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under its sports department, recognises that continued value of professional sports and remittances from it. This has continued, despite the impact of COVID-

19 and we will continue to work closely with national organisations to promote professional sports as a viable employment route for our youths. In this regard, the Ministry will work towards more girls and women being offered pathways in this area to address the gender imbalance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President in his opening statement, indicated that we are opening this session of Parliament during a global crisis - COVID-19. Since then, there is a light at the end of the tunnel with some Government approving the first line of COVID-19 vaccines.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the FijiFirst Government is taking the necessary reforms to ensure we cushion and minimise the negative impact of this pandemic to our people, as it has from day one and as it will continue to do so until this pandemic is firmly under our control. We must continue to remain vigilant and as His Excellency the President stated in his address, we must also plan for our recovery and bounce back into a new normal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you and I look forward to the upcoming 2020-2021 parliamentary session, as we continue to put FijiFirst in serving all Fijians. *Vinaka* and thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Gavoka. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the outset, let me just say that I am, like most of us, are in a state of shock that our Honourable Leader of the Opposition has decided to call it a day in Parliament. It is known that I regard him as an icon, a giant in our country, and that it is my hope that he will continue to play his part in the public life of our country.

I am from the west and from the private sector. I knew him from a distance but for the two years that I got to know him as a member of his team, I saw a very contrite and generous heart. Many things had been said about him but I can say today that for me who got to know him over the last two years, he was a gentleman with a heart of gold.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to make my contribution to His Excellency's most gracious address. In so doing, I acknowledge that we are in the ninth month of COVID-19 and the devastating impact that this global pandemic have on our people and economy.

I acknowledge and thank all our frontline and first responders and all those working tirelessly to make sure that we all stay safe.

To the families of those whose lives were lost, I offer my sympathies. For those that have recovered, I thank the Lord for watching over you and guiding you to renewed good health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency covered a wide range of issues in his address, including Government's three key priorities of COVID-19 containment, economic recovery and climate change. He spoke about the Constitution and the array of civil, political and socio-economic rights, and he said his Government must make every effort to realise and defend. He made specific reference to our rights to equality and freedom from discrimination. He spoke of the need for Government to continue its support to all those who need it.

But, Mr. Speaker, nowhere was there any mention of the 177,000 affected workers reliant on the FNPF - Government COVID-19 Withdrawal Scheme. According to the FNPF update today

in the *Fiji Times*, the sum of \$159.7 million has been paid out over a seven-month period with Government's contribution being \$61.4 million.

Mr. Speaker, the majority of those affected are from the tourism belt, primarily the West where I come from. I would like to focus my contribution today on the fate of the 177,000 unemployed and under-employed citizens. The allocation of the unemployment benefits is unsatisfactory, their suffering is happening right now.

Mr. Speaker, when we debate COVID-19 in this Chamber, we speak mainly about the current effects of the pandemic. We ignore totally the fact that the impact on our people was made all the more severe because our economy in 2019 was in freefall. We were told that the economy was being managed prudently and responsibly, yet we failed to avoid the ultimate negative growth of 1.3 percent and we are headed for 9.8 percent negative growth in 2020.

So when COVID-19 arrived in February this year, the state of our economy was dire. This explains why the roll-out of the FNPF-Government COVID-19 Response, the COVID-19 Unemployment Assistance to those laid off, as well as workers on reduced hours was erratic, confusing and inadequate.

His Excellency made several references to the 2013 Constitution and called on his Government to make every effort to realise and defend the rights enshrined in the Constitution for all Fijians. Some of those rights he referred to were rights to:

- common and equal citizenry;
- respect for human rights, freedoms and the rule of law;
- equality for all and care for the less fortunate; and
- human dignity, respect for the individual and personal integrity.

Then he went on to say that his Government has led by example within the Fijian Civil Service where there had been no pay cuts below the rank of Permanent Secretary. It is only natural that you expect a commensurate rise in efficiency, professionalism, customer-centred service and innovative out-of-the-box thinking from every civil servant.

Mr. Speaker, there are 31,319 civil servants and as the Honourable Minister for Economy and His Excellency the President have both stated, they have not made any cuts and salaries are still at an all-time high, and I commend that.

My problem, Mr. Speaker, is that, a payout of \$61.4 million over the last seven months to 177,000 unemployed workers comes down to \$12.38 a week. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how is this fair and just? Where is the equality for all and care for the less fortunate that His Excellency spoke of? Where is the dignity, respect and integrity for the individual and the rights of our employed citizens not be discriminated against who lost their jobs through no fault of their own?

To be clear, Mr. Speaker, I am not suggesting that the 177,000 unemployed should receive the same salaries as civil servants, of course, not. But for the duration of this pandemic, we must be fair and just with the distribution of funds to affected citizens and \$12.38 a week is not fair or reasonable, or just, especially when Government holds a balance of \$133.6 million of the allocated funds. For a family of five, Mr. Speaker, that is 35 cents per person per day.

Mr. Speaker, I put it to you that as a responsible and prudent Government, it will work diligently to contain costs and improve efficiencies. A careless and reckless government does not

know how to do this because it does not feel accountable to anyone but itself and they do not respect our people enough to care about what they think.

His Excellency's expectation that a commensurate rise in efficiency and exchange of forgoing cutbacks that the whole country is forced to undertake, is respectively delusional and misguided. After all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, his Government has had 13 years in which to implement efficiencies through the countless reforms it has introduced as part of its "prudent and responsible management", so let us examine the results todate, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

- The Operating Costs of Government (excluding Capital): When the Honourable Prime Minister, Bainimarama took control in 2007, of course not through the normal pathway, the operating cost of Government at that time was \$1.2 billion. Today it is \$2.4 billion. This is a \$1.2 billion or 101 percent increase in the costs, yet, we see no sign of increased efficiency.
- Debt Servicing: The interest cost of our borrowing in 2007 was \$183.4 million. In 2018-2019, it was \$326.7 million, an increase of \$143.3 million or 78 percent for debt servicing. In 2020 it is \$430.2 million.
- Civil Service Salaries and Wages: In 2007 the total wage bill was \$584.6 million for 29,864 civil servants. In 2020, the cost is \$1.016 billion for 31,319 civil servants. The cost of the civil service has increased by \$432.2 million or 74 percent. Why do we see a demoralised civil service?

It is being said that taxpayers have to fork out \$2.4 billion a year before it can deliver \$1's worth of goods to our people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in delivering his 2020-2021 National Budget, the Minister for Economy said, I quote:

"Government has made \$100 million available to make sure every unemployed Fijian is able to access their full relief payments."

Of the \$100 million allocated, \$5 million was for upskilling and reskilling. So when you add the \$95 million from 2020-2021 National Budget to the \$100 million from the COVID-19 Response Budget, there should be \$195 million to cover the cost of unemployment allowances. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this would be tabled in Head 50, SEG 10, the details of these provisions. According to the update today in the *Fiji Times*, a total of \$159.7 million has been paid out over the past seven months to a total of 177,000 affected workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in essence, the Government has contributed 38 percent of this leaving the 177,000 people to pick up 62 percent of the cost by withdrawing \$98.3 million from the pensions fund. The victims, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are being forced to pay the most. Yet, the net allocation of \$195 million after deducting the \$5 million for upskilling is more than enough to cover 100 percent of the cost without the need for workers to draw from their retirement funds. Given that Government has only paid out only \$61.4 million to date, where is the balance of \$133.6 million? Why have we not utilised it yet?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the first time this Government has attacked the FNPF pensioners fund. The first time was in 2012 when still an illegal regime, they ripped off about 3500 pensioners by breaking their contracts and slashing up to 50 percent of their pensions illegally and then introducing a Bill to deny them their right to seek redress through the courts. The second time they raided the pensioners fund was when they orchestrated things so that

members withdrew \$275 million from their pensions after *TC Winston*. This means that members essentially paid for a large part of the national recovery from their pension funds to pay for their own recovery after *TC Winston*. And today, we are witnessing the third raid on pensioners disguised as Government's COVID-19 Unemployment Relief package using the FNPF as its delivery vehicle to the affected workers by getting them to withdraw 62 percent of the cost of their own survival from the pension funds.

I do not have specifics on the quantum of the slashing of up to 50 percent of the funds of the 3500 members back in 2012, but if you just add the *TC Winston* and COVID-19 allowance rates and pensioner's funds, we arrive at a total of \$367.3 million that has been withdrawn by the members. Someone has called it 'The Great Pension Rip Off', I call it 'Outrageous'.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FNPF's 2019 Annual Report shows that 61,284 members had zero balances; 185,125 had less than \$5,000; and 57,445 had balances under \$10,000. This means, as of last year, 303,854 members or 69 percent of the FNPF total membership or 441,663 had pension balances of zero to under \$10,000. So, it should not be hard to work, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on how bad things will become when the current workforce with under \$5,000 begin retiring.

The government would have created an entire generation of destitute pensioners if they have not been too worried about their FNPF. And if you have not been too worried about the FNPF, you should be now. This is not fear mongering, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is truth telling. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, where is the FNPF Board? They are conspicuous by their absence and silence. With the imminent departure of the CEO, why has the Chairman not explained the succession arrangement to its members? Who will be in charge when the CEO leaves?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say this - come 2022, a SODELPA led government will pay every last dollar that FNPF members have lost through being forced to withdraw to pay for their own survival in the three attacks on members funds that I have referred to since 2012. That is SODELPA's undertaking to the people of Fiji.

If we put aside the member's contribution of the COVID-19 and focus for a moment on government's contribution, the \$61.4 million from government is equal to \$346.80 for each affected person over the seven months. This is equal to \$49.54 a month or \$12.38 a week. I repeat Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$12.38 a week or \$1.76 per day, and if we assume that it is a family of four, the government's contributions to unemployed citizen's survival is \$0.35 per person per day. Can you believe that? That is exactly what is happening today Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We need to be realistic about the level of this financial support we give our unemployed workers. I would like to propose, we immediately increase the weekly pay out to our unemployed workers to \$155.20 per worker per week for a 12 month period and this will be done in co-operation between the employers and government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know that according to the FNPF, they had paid out funds to 177,000 unemployed or under employed workers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we trade the average 2018 hourly rate of pay for the 21 major industries in Fiji which is \$3.88 per hour and base it on a 40-hour week, this comes to \$155.20 a week per worker. For 177,000 workers, this amounts to \$27.4 million a week or \$1.4 billion per annum. Working through employers we can develop a subsidised income table as follows:-

- Each employer is encouraged to re-employ their workers at \$3.88 per hour based on a 40-hour week which is \$31.04 a day.

- For every worker employed for more than two days, the company receives a tax rebate and related incentives.

In the table that I have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, employer pays one day of \$31.04, government pays four days \$124.16 to make the \$155.20. Employer pays two days, government pays three days, employer pays three days, government pays two days. Employer pays four days, government pays one day for the magic figure \$155.20 for all unemployed in Fiji. The idea is that Government supplements the daily income of every worker, who is re-engaged by the employer. The objective, Mr. Speaker, is to get every re-engaged employee back on a five-day week and receiving \$155.20, which is equal to \$8,070 per annum, and for a single worker per household or \$16,140.80 for two workers and it is at a level that will allow our citizens to survive on.

To encourage employers to increase their days of work and thereby reduce Government's supplement, a percentage rebate on the annual tax return is offered for every additional day of employment above two to a maximum of five. Through this simple method, the benefits to the worker, the company and the government are as follows:

- increase in pay;
- FNPF is not involved in the process but members will continue to contribute;
- the uncertainty, stress and trauma of not knowing how they will survive will be removed; and
- the economic activity will improve at least \$1.1 billion per annum, as workers utilise their funds to pay for living costs.

Mr. Speaker, making a suggestion is one thing, paying for it is quite another. This Government has opted to borrow to pay for Government's operation and they opted to operate on full capacity and full cost, despite the fact that all around them, things remain depressed and uncertain. It might be cliché, but it is an irresponsible Government to adopt a business-as-usual stance in the middle of a crisis, such as this global pandemic.

To pay for the savings, Mr. Speaker, we need to raise about \$852.8 million. There are areas where we can save. We can sharpen the pencils and go through the books, item by item. Programme budgeting as we do today has lots of facts and areas that could be considered are:

- Stop peacekeeping and redeploy troops to border control gives us \$45.3 million;
- Terminate public service broadcast to FBC - \$11.2 million;
- Terminate vehicle leasing and purchase all leased vehicles - \$24 million;
- Postpone PM's new office until after elections - \$7 million;
- Terminate QORVIS - \$1 million;
- Re-direct Fiji Airways funds and replace with industry rebates - \$60 million; and
- Reduce capital expenditures by \$501 million.

We can find this \$852 million, Mr. Speaker, it just needs the political will and the collective support of all Members of this House to succeed.

Mr. Speaker, here we are again in 2020 and we hear yet again, another call for unity and co-operation, so in the true spirit of Christmas and to give hope, good cheer, goodwill and relief to all our people, I extend an invitation to the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications and any of the Honourable Ministers who they may wish to bring along, to join me and a group of my colleagues on this side of the House before

we end this current parliamentary session, for a *talanoa* over coffee or tea and share ideas about how we can create a fully bipartisan effort in developing a meaningful plan that will help our people during COVID-19. We, on this side, are ready, willing and able. Mr. Speaker, are they? Are you willing to sit with us in a bipartisan manner and come to solutions for the betterment of our country?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the end of my contribution and I thank His Excellency for his most gracious address.

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

Honourable Members, at this point, we will suspend proceedings for lunch and Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.31 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, be seated. Honourable Members, we will now continue with the debate and I call on the Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor, Madam. .

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, Honourable Members of the Parliament and my fellow Fijians, *ni sa bula vinaka, namaste, as-salaam-alaikum* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly rise to thank His Excellency, The President for his most gracious Speech on 30th November, 2020, in formally opening the 2020/2021 session of the Fijian Parliament. A speech of hope and motivation in these trying times. First and foremost, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to render my profound veneration to His Excellency for his eloquent, earnest and stimulating address in delineating our resilience and our trump as a nation as we contain the novel coronavirus. It is indeed a matter of utmost pride as we continue counting our days as a COVID-19-contained nation.

The former president of the USA, Thomas Jefferson once said, “The care of human life, their happiness and not their destruction, is the first and only object of a good government,” and I agree completely. This belief has come to fruition in Fiji through the bold leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister in many aspects. The greatest example is how we have managed to achieve what countries around the world can only dream of and attested that our Government put Fijian lives first, come hell or high waters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his brave and people-oriented leadership which has manifested into the country's stability over the years. Thank you, Sir, for being a true leader who never backs from addressing issues that really matter and always prioritising the lives of Fijians.

We, over the past few years, have strengthen our ability to overcome any crisis through developments, modernisation and consistent investments into crucial sectors such as our health system through maintaining good diplomatic relations and most importantly, through maintaining policy and governance stability. We were consistent and committed, thus we came out stronger.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the helm of our efforts to contain COVID-19, where our frontline workers, our discipline forcers, our nurses and our doctors. I would be failing as a Fijian citizen first and foremost and then as a parliamentarian, if I do not pay my utmost appreciation to their sacrifice, their passion, their compassion and their bravery. You are all my heroes and I salute you and your families for executing your duty with such zeal, enthusiasm and heart. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my capacity as the Assistant Minister for Women I must also acknowledge the vital role our women have played in this fight against COVID-19 and also dealing with the devastation of a Category 5 tropical cyclone. Our mothers play a critical role in ensuring that our families practice good hygiene and ensure that our children are safe in our homes. As we dealt with, recover from and steer ahead of the novel coronavirus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge fellow Fijians to take care of their health in these times as this will only harm our ability to recover and grow.

I urge our families to continue being on the frontline and to keep our families healthy, safe and grounded in these trying times, your duty of care is very much appreciated and we salute you for your contribution towards building a stronger nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the gender impact of climate change and COVID-19 on Fijian women has obviously demanded a more gender responsive action and policies. The COVID situation would have also been particularly challenging for the most vulnerable groups in our society and the demand for their best interest to be prioritised in Government's response was clear. This Government ensured that the most marginalised and vulnerable groups continue to be looked after.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 3rd December, 2020, Fiji joined the rest of the world to celebrate the International Day for Persons with Disabilities with the theme "Building Back Better: toward a disability inclusive, accessible and sustainable post COVID-19 World". This was done in partnership with organisations for persons with disabilities, donor organisations, government, civil society and faith-based organisations. Programmes around Fiji were organised to commemorate the lives of persons living with disabilities to acknowledge partnership with our stakeholders which has existed pre and post-COVID and to renew our pledge to ensure a disability inclusive response to COVID-19 and its aftermath.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to particularly thank all our stakeholders for supporting the Fijian Government's vision and taking this opportunity to create awareness and dialogue about inclusivity and eliminating stigma related to disability. On this day, the Disability Sector saw new partners like Fiji TV, NZ Aid, FBC and UNFPA working together in realising the rights of persons with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an output of the implementation plan aligned to the Disability Act 2018 was the launch of the National Disability Website compliant with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) which allows any visually impaired person using the JAWS Programme to access information. This website was made possible by funding from the New Zealand Government and was launched on the occasion of International Day for Persons with Disabilities (IDPD). In addition Mr, Speaker, Sir, there was a launch on the National Disability Directory that provides information on disability service providers with their contacts and the services available for them. New Dignity Kits for women and girls with disabilities was also launched on this day which was funded by UNFPA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the partnership grows in strength Fiji moves from recognition to realisation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Now, that we are in the cyclone season, the disability sector has begun preparation in stocking and lobbying for resources that Fijians with disabilities need.

This proactive venture is as per lessons learned from the tough situations of crisis in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were able to assist 521 persons with disabilities affected by *TC Harold* from areas like Kadavu, Southern Lau, Coastal Sigatoka and the Central Division.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what make this possible were strong partnerships and we are thankful that these partnerships continue and grow. We will continue to also work closely with the Pacific Disability Forum, to ensure programmes for persons living with disabilities are delivered with efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, inclusion begins with individuals, societies, communities, work spaces and the surroundings. We need to understand that unless we try to make room for persons with disabilities, we cannot move forward. Inclusion does not mean we make decisions for persons with disabilities but instead decisions are made in consultation with them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at persons with disabilities as a charity case needs to change, if we are to recognise their capabilities. These are the groups that can do the same way that we do, if given the opportunity. What we need to include is accessibility and a chance to actively participate as economically productive Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the specific disability government budget lines which has grown steadily over the last few years and was not compromised post COVID. The areas of focus for the Government includes Social Protections Schemes for Persons with Disabilities, for example Bus Fare Subsidies and Disability Allowance Scheme, Grants for Special Education and Grants to Organisation for Persons with Disabilities.

In addition, the Accessibility Scheme under the Ministry of Housing and a Community Rehab Programme under the Ministry of Health, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, persons with disabilities have never been more visible as they have been in the past five years. For instance, the inclusion of sign language interpretation during the post COVID announcements, has ensured that the general public including the minority Fijians are kept informed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having mentioned in the recognition and inclusion of persons living with disabilities, I, on behalf of the disability sector, wish to acknowledge champions like Mr. Frank Hilton, Mr. Hari Kisun, Mr. Serevi Rokotuibau and Doctor Sitiven Yanuyanutawa who committed their lives to the disability sector development. While they are no longer amongst us, we are very thankful for the legacy that they all left behind in their individual capacities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Environmentalist and Founder of the Earth Day – Gaylord Nelson once said, “The fate of the living planet is the most important issue facing mankind.” And I could not agree more. Climate Change is a crucial issue of present times and we are at a defining moment, as the world deals with this issue. From shifting weather patterns that threaten food production, to rising sea levels that increase the risk of catastrophic flooding, the impacts of climate change are global in scope and unprecedented in scale. Without drastic action today, adapting to these impacts in the future will be more difficult and costly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to share the Honourable Prime Minister’s vision and I was fortunate to be present alongside our climate champions as Fiji became the first country in the world to launch the high level panel for a sustainable ocean economy.

I concur with the statement made by the Honourable Prime Minister at the panel launch last week and I quote:

“Communities are being lost to the seas; species being wiped out forever; coral reefs facing mass extinction. Our ocean simply cannot be cured with a shot in the arm; the seas that we pass to our children and grandchildren are at risk of damage beyond repair.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must take responsibility of our environment and our actions. I urge all Fijians to join our fight against climate change and lend us a hand to build back better and build back bluer like our Honourable Prime Minister says.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2020 is a special year for Fiji. It has been 50 magnificent years since we first raised our noble banner blue. Today Fiji stands united by patriotism, our journey of struggles and our triumphs has emerged us as a powerful Pacific Island nation that is a force to reckon with. Our success as a nation is not owed to destiny. It has come because our people, with their diverse strength and skillsets have together propelled Fiji forward. Together we have done great things and together we will do more great things in the next 50 years.

I salute every Fijian, for your perseverance, resilience, humanity, sense of compassion and your belief in unity that has persisted us through trying times. The character of our determination and our will to fight has empowered us to deal with many ordeals over the years and emerge stronger every time because our greatest strength lies in our unity. Together we are strong, together we conquer and together we fight back stronger.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been a challenging year for many of us to say the least but our will to persevere through challenges makes the upcoming festive season even more exciting, we are thankful for our journey as we embrace the new normal.

I urge all Fijians all over the country to keep taking heed of necessary COVID-19 precautionary measures. Let us not become complacent, do not forget to keep your careFIJI App operational as we begin Christmas festivities. Let us continue to spread kindness and look after each other. With these words Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish everyone a very Merry Christmas and a prosperous New Year. *Vinaka vakalevu* and God bless Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Jale. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. JALE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's address at the opening of the 2020-2021 session of Parliament and I thank you, Sir, for allowing me the opportunity.

His Excellency's address identified three key priority areas of focus for this Parliamentary session:

- (1) COVID-19 containment;
- (2) Economic recovery; and
- (3) Response to climate, ocean and biodiversity crises.

I will expand on these issues in my speech since they are related to the security and welfare of Fijians now and in the future.

Sir, on COVID-19 containment, I would like to pay tribute to the exemplary performance and sacrifice of the front line workers fighting against COVID-19 and keeping the people of this country safe and protected. I salute the health workers, members of the security forces, immigration and customs officers, the airline and airport workers and workers who work in designated quarantine centres.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the government in the successful containment of the virus in curtailing community transmission. I also wish to thank development partners for the development assistance received especially to the Ministry of Health contributing to our success in containing the virus. I also acknowledge the role of NGOs, faith-based organisations and civil society groups in reaching out to needy families and in raising awareness about COVID-19.

There is no doubt about it, the coronavirus will be around for a longer period than expected. According to the report from the Centre for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota in the United States of America, the COVID-19 outbreak will not end until 60 percent to 70 percent of the population is immune to the virus which may take 18 months to 24 months. This means that while we have been successful in our ongoing containment efforts focused on border control, we are still vulnerable to those coming in from COVID-19 affected countries. The sooner the world can access an effective vaccine, the sooner we can breathe a sigh of relief. It is pleasing to note the breakthrough that has been taken in respect of development of COVID-19 vaccines. The United Kingdom has become the first country in the western world to approve the Pfizer and BioNTech coronavirus vaccine for widespread use.

It is reported that Australia will receive its COVID-19 vaccines by early 2021 and that they are on track to roll out their first vaccinations in March as part of the Australian Government's COVID-19 Vaccine and Treatment Strategy. New Zealand is reported to be getting ready and getting geared up so that when vaccines arrive in New Zealand, they are pre-approved. Both Australia and New Zealand are taking a strategic approach to their vaccination programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Australia and New Zealand are our primary tourism markets and we should be preparing ourselves accordingly. The much talked about Bula Bubble should not just focus on VIP lanes at the airport, testing and pushing the COVID-contained status that does not warrant quarantine on the return home.

The two new COVID-19 border cases show how the virus is entrenched. According to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the two passengers tested negative in Auckland and negative on day two of arrival, however, their positive test results occurred on day 12 of border quarantine.

My question to the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what specific action has it taken to acquire vaccines for the people of Fiji? How soon and how will it ensure that it is accessible and affordable? We need to be working on that, preparing, securing and setting up equipment such as ultra-cold freezers for when the vaccines become available. I am proposing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Government should develop a COVID-19 Vaccine Treatment Strategy, if not already.

On economic recovery, according to the Asian Development Bank, the economic damage caused by COVID-19 will continue to affect Fiji's economy in 2021. The ADB said that Fiji's tourism industry is projected to return to pre-COVID- levels only by 2023, provided a vaccine is identified or borders reopened this year. The availability of an approved vaccine and the reopening of borders are key strategies to the recovery of the economy, which also comes with risks and the Government must weigh very carefully.

With the downturn of the tourism industry and other economic sectors, the Government need to be more innovative and responsive to the plight of the people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note in His Excellency's address, the reference to tens of millions of dollars on concessional loans granted in support of micro, small and medium enterprises. The focus is on the private sectors and

businesses, but there is a need for programmes that directly support individuals and community driven efforts. A great number of people who are facing problems today have no FNPF money to withdraw from or have depleted their savings in the Fund and cannot ask for further assistance. The Government needs to be more responsive to ease the suffering that people are facing due to job losses and lack of income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was in the Solomon Islands, I used to see in the early hours of the morning, groups of people, including women and youth in the main streets of Honiara, the capital city, weeding, sweeping and cleaning the roads. I learned that it was a joint project between the World Bank and the Solomon Islands Government to utilise the services of members of the communities mainly unemployed, to earn money to assist in meeting their daily needs. Why cannot the Government do something like that in Fiji? A few dollars a week at this time will be a great relief to a lot of people.

Apart from income generation, such schemes, which can be run by Municipal Councils provide a social safety net for the vulnerable especially women and young people. The rise in family problems and social ills are far outweighing economic progress, so we cannot just focus on economic recovery without addressing the social impacts of the pandemic. We have seen a lot of Government incentives to businesses and foreign investment, but I am emphasising the approach to work directly with families and communities for both economic and social stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of climate change is seen and felt over the country and in our Pacific region. Our commitment to net-zero carbon emission by 2050 and also our commitment to the 100 percent sustainable management of our ocean, in my view, a “no other option” for Fiji. Whilst COVID-19 could be arrested soon with the production of vaccines, the impact of climate change is more profound and costly to the people and the government. Land will be lost into the sea and rivers posing threats to both food security and livelihoods creating serious lasting consequences to the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me touch on Fiji's commitment to the 100 percent sustainable management of our oceans and bring to the attention of this august House what the province of Lau, in conjunction with the government and other stakeholders is doing to work towards the attainment of that commitment through what is known as the “Lau Seascape Initiative”. The Lau Seascape Initiative aims to build a coalition amongst the government, the private sector, civil societies and local communities to improve natural resource governance in the province of Lau and its surrounding waters. It focuses on both terrestrial and marine resource management and highlights the importance of achieving effective governance across all sectors and at all levels: local, national and regional. It also provides a platform to apply integrated natural resource management across 335,895 square kilometres or 26 percent of Fiji's exclusive economic zone from ridge to reef to ocean on small island systems with high climate vulnerability. That means that the Lau Seascape Initiative encompasses the whole of Lau.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2013, Conservation International has been working with the *Masi ni Vanua o Lau* to lay the foundation for a successful intervention across the province. Grounded in a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the Lau Seascape is now a multi-partner initiative comprising of community and indigenous representatives, the Government of Fiji, private sector and non-governmental organisation stakeholders.

The key strength of this initiative is coalition building, forming partnership and alliances to achieve sustainable management of our oceans. Lau, as we know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a vast

area of oceans with many islands. It is only through the joint partnerships that such an initiative is possible and importantly, the involvement of the custodians of the *i qoliqoli*.

At a global level, the Lau Seascape Initiative is listed as one of Fiji's voluntary commitments to the inter-agency mechanism - UN Ocean, under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 – Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vision of the *vanua* of Lau is that Lau to be prosperous and grounded in values of respect and collaborative participation to achieve sustainable regenerative resources by 2030 for the current and future generations and to overcome challenges with the guidance of the Almighty God.

The people of Lau are committed to the protection of their land and marine resources. Recently, the *Yavusa* Nauluvatu of Vanuavatu Island have formally declared the Navatu Reef a Marine Protected Area (MPA) within the Lau Seascape and also recently, the people of *Yavusa* Qalitu, Mavana, Vanuabalavu, have declared the Duff Reef or *Cakau Galu* as an MPA dedicated as a turtle sanctuary.

Lau needs the support of everyone in Fiji, in particular the Government, in the implementation and realisation of the vision of the Lau Seascape Initiative. It is a model that can be replicated to other areas in Fiji to achieve the Government's commitment of 100 percent sustainable management of our oceans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government assistance is needed in the enforcement of the MPAs and the training of fish wardens and to see that relevant laws are put in place to support the initiative.

Lau, like other island groups in the maritime areas, have limited land and the only resources that they have and hold dear to their hearts is the sea or their *i qoliqoli*. Our forefathers navigated vast sea areas to settle in the islands which we now call home. All the *i qoliqoli* in Fiji, as you are aware, Mr. Speaker, was ceded to the British Queen Victoria and that has not been returned to the *i Taukei* by the Government until today, despite the resolution of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga that the *i qoliqoli* be returned to their indigenous owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to refer to Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which states that indigenous people have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally-owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters, coastal seas and other resources, and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the province of Lau and other provinces in Fiji have shown that they can look after and manage their *i qoliqoli* in a sustainable way to cater for their owners, now and for the future generation and I now call upon the Government, in recognition of UNDRIP, to return the *i qoliqoli* in Fiji to the indigenous owners without further delay.

I wish you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and all Honourable Members of this august House a blessed Christmas and happy 2021. *Vinaka saka vakalevu*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Jale for his contribution to the debate and I now call on the Honourable Dr. Govind. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Honourable Speaker of Parliament, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to speak on the constructive and realistic overview of the country and its present circumstances provided by His Excellency the President.

Firstly, I would like to sincerely thank His Excellency, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konrote, for the realistic overview of the country he has provided for us. This, indeed, at a time when the global community is challenged to find realistic solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic. The news recently that a vaccine has been developed must be a relief for all, although it is yet to be universally available. We hope this happens sooner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be touching briefly on some of the issues raised by His Excellency the President in his opening address. These include:

- (1) Government commitment to COVID-19 response;
- (2) Recovery of our economy; and
- (3) Response to the climate, oceans and biodiversity.

There is no doubt that Fiji, at the moment, is facing a threat of existential dimensions.

In the midst of climate change and its enduring effects on the national economy, households and families and, indeed, recovering also from the social and economic wounds of *TC Winston*, Fiji now faces the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The devastating effects of these, together underlines the existential threat the country faces.

In all these, however, and indeed in the middle of such crisis of unprecedented magnitude, the Government under the able leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister has stood firm, faced up to the challenges, provided assistance, support and encouragement where needed and, indeed, gone to the level of communities to provide assurance and hope. This is what a Government of the people should do.

Most importantly, the Honourable Prime Minister has remained truthful with the state of the nation when he observed candidly and very recently that things will get worse before they get better. This, may I remind this august Parliament, is not a shirking of responsibility but rather accepting it as a leader and remaining honest with citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been said that the qualities of a good leader emerge only in crisis situations, and these times of uncertainty has demonstrated the leadership qualities of the Honourable Prime Minister.

On COVID-19 and Response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 remains a challenge to the health and wellbeing of the nation and to our health system as a whole. It is obvious, however, that the judicious use of the Public Health Regulations, combined with other relevant measures and backed by our health system, allowed the FijiFirst Government to stem the tide of what could have been a national disaster, including the loss of lives and devastation of the economy.

The robust measures with the accompaniment of an effective strategy yielded good results. Most importantly, however, is the regular presence of the Honourable Prime Minister to speak to the nation and present a picture of where the pandemic is in the country.

Together with this were the recovery and social protection measures that were immediately put in place to stem the tide of a potential economic collapse. From small businesses to households, the protection packages contributed in maintaining livelihood in the context of reduced employment and productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that the challenge was enormous but equally significant lessons have been learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to lead to further strengthening of the health system to withstand another crisis of the health and wellbeing of the nation.

Indeed, COVID-19 has had and continue to have negative effects. However, it has, at the same time, provided a context in which we have tested our health system, public health regulations and the fortitude of citizens to respond to crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has also, as a challenging circumstance, provided opportunity towards innovation, especially in the area of vaccines and other preventive methods and, indeed, quite rightly in our work patterns.

These days, we are either staying up late or rising early by 3.00 a.m. to have a zoom conference. While a vaccine has just been developed, experiments continue with an overriding objective of finding new vaccines. This has included, in other countries, a recourse to traditional flora and fauna and herbal treatments to explore the abundance and yet to be discovered remedies that they contain.

In this context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I note the breadth of Fiji's flora and fauna, traditional medicines and herbal treatment. This is time for us to revisit and explore what we have and what the country could possibly gain from them, and it is not to replace contemporary medicine but to add to it, to provide Fiji with an expansive health prevention and disease treatment resource. We are yet to commit to it and undertake a wider research on what we have as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally on COVID-19, may I also say that in medium term, the vaccine will arrive in Fiji and will have to be rolled out. There is thus a window of opportunity within which to design a strategy for rolling it across the breadth of the country. This, I suppose, will again require the dedication of our hardworking health staff, the frontline nurses, doctors, technicians and other ancillary staff, including our general practitioners, who sacrificed their lives and that of their family members in providing healthcare to our people during the time of this crisis. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge their hard work and extend a sincerest gratitude to them.

Climate Change, as the Honourable Prime Minister noted in his address to the German Agency for International Corporation (GIZ)/Pacific Community (SPC) events on "Coping with Climate Change in the Pacific Island Region", is a threat with a difference. This is because of its enduring impact on the economy, society and, indeed, communities and families.

The Honourable Prime Minister responding to it effectively within the broad economic development agenda of Government, say it requires and needs cooperation with partner countries and agencies. This, however, has not made the FijiFirst Government complacent. There has been continuing dialogue with key national stakeholders and this has led to the development of relevant policies to address specific issues.

There is the overall Climate Change Policy which underlines a whole of Government approach and more recently, there is the Oceans Policy which addresses specific issues relating to the ocean as a resource and the imperative need to guard and protect the ocean.

On economic recovery, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenging social and economic situation created by these threats cannot be overemphasised. Yet, the economy has to be sustained with critical measures and recovery plans put in place and the FijiFirst Government has, again, demonstrated its resilience in the face of crisis. Indeed, the tourism sector, which contributes about 40 percent towards our GDP has faced the most crisis as visitor arrivals particularly, stopped overnight.

The Fiji economy, in context of the global crisis and the economic contraction of our immediate partners did have an overall effect to an extent that by mid-2020, Fiji's economy has contracted by over 20 percent. This real impact of that decline continues to be on families, lives and livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this, notwithstanding the FijiFirst Government under the leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister, stood up to the challenge. The bold efforts of sustaining the economy and livelihood, and laying the groundwork for recovery are shown in the COVID-19 Stimulus Package. There is no need to go into detail but some aspects of it included:

- (1) Tax reforms and deductions to bolster business.
- (2) Tax reduction for employers up to 300 percent.
- (3) The \$60 million dollar loan available to businesses with just 1 percent interest at extreme concessional rates.
- (4) Unemployment benefits allocation of over \$100 million dollars.

Altogether, these have laid the platform for recovery with assistance where necessary from our development partners and with them, candid dialogue and discussions on the realities of the pandemic and the enduring threat of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I thank His Excellency the President for his address and the Honourable Prime Minister for his able and continuing dedicated leadership, as he takes us through these very difficult times. Thank you and wish you all a Merry Christmas.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Dr. Govind for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Kepa. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. RO T.V. KEP A.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before I give my response to His Excellency's address, I would like to pay a very brief tribute to the former Leader of Opposition and my Parliamentary Leader, the Honourable Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka.

No one in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, does not know the former Leader of Opposition, Mr. Rabuka, as he is commonly and widely known. For him to do what he did today in this House and to announce his resignation as Leader of the Opposition and Member of Parliament, I think this was done after a lot of soul searching and in my view, takes a lot of guts and courage to do it the way he did this morning.

I also thank the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General for coming across and acknowledging him, and also to you, Mr. Speaker, for giving him extra time in the batting order to complete what was unknown to us was to be his last speech here in this Parliamentary term.

Mr. Speaker, he departs the Opposition and Parliament with a clean heart and a clear conscience and he is a happy man, believing that what he has done was the right thing to do. Luckily, Mr. Speaker, at the SODELPA Annual General Meeting 10 days ago just before our new Party Leader, Honourable Gavoka, and our Deputy Party Leader, Mr. Filimoni Vosarogo, were introduced to the members, a *tabua* or *kamunaga* was offered to him which he graciously accepted. This was presented to thank him for his contribution to the party and for bringing in 77,040 votes in the 2018 Elections, which was almost 17 percent of the total number of votes cast in that Election and also to thank him for his work as Party Leader for SODELPA.

His shoes, Mr. Speaker, would be very big and very difficult to fill. I wish Mr. Rabuka all the best in his future endeavours and pray that the Lord will protect and guide him in whatever he chooses to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make my contribution to the debate on His Excellency's address in the opening of the 2020-2021 session of Parliament. We are, indeed, at a critical point in our history as we mark the 50th anniversary of Independence referred to by His Excellency.

Despite all the complex difficulties our islands have faced, Fiji has made good progress since 1970 in some areas of nation building. Think of the bold visionary Monasavu Scheme, construction of the Suva/Nadi Highway, other major roads and infrastructure, port developments, big new hospitals, the expansion of Nadi International Airport, construction of airstrips and improvements to rural areas. Think of all the general commercial growth and development, the early expansion of the sugar industry, establishment of the Pine Scheme, the advances in education and multimillion dollar tourism projects. Think too of the new jobs and career openings created and the inflow of millions of dollars in cash from remittances which in 2019, according to the Reserve Bank of Fiji, was almost \$600 million and this year, it is predicted to be even higher.

These and more, are creditable achievements, but they are enough, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are no way near where we should be. We have fallen far short of our potential. There is still too much severe poverty and crime, shameful violence against women and children, corruption, repression and fear, abuse of human rights, discrimination, increasing ill health and social and ethnic division.

If they are in touch with reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone in this House knows why there is so much national division. The stress and separation between us, a product of our history, is complex and fraught, but we can take comfort from the reservoirs of goodwill and the spirit of co-existence that do exist and dedicate ourselves to nurturing them.

I am committed to this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, especially through the *Luvudra na Ratu* movement in cooperation with descendants of settlers from India, who are integral to our nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank you for honouring us at the Holiday Inn Fiji Day celebration where we are looking at our movement, bringing in a new and inspiring dimension to unity. It comes from the wreckage of a ship at night, the loss of life, the rescue of passengers and the birth of a unique vision of belonging which became real. From the original tragedy, this great and emotional drama, have become new lessons. They are about inclusion, shared hopes, destinies and landmarks in unity. I am proud, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be part of it.

Fiji's broader success in achieving true national togetherness at all levels of our society will determine the future of the nation. Let me remind the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that you cannot create unity by the stroke of a dictator's pen. Real life is not like that.

We must not forget that Fiji is a very young country, it is a work in progress. The last 14 years have been very difficult. We have watched the nation going backwards at times. Dictatorship enforced by the army, followed by the Honourable Attorney- General's imposed version of democracy, is not a good recipe for progress.

His Excellency spoke of the Government's commitment to realising the mandates of the current 2013 Constitution, relating to progressing many socio-economic issues, civil and political rights and sustainable development. May I remind the House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in view of many people, the 2013 Constitution does not have a popular mandate.

A distinguished public servant and legal authority, Jioji Kotobalavu, reminded us of a constitutional reality in his narrative in the *Fiji Times*' 50th anniversary Supplement. He pointed out that the Bainimarama military regime in 2009 unilaterally abrogated the 1997 Constitution and that is a fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It was tailored for Fiji's needs at the stage of our development.

In his Judgement, Justice Gates had declared, and I quote:

“It is not possible for any man to tear up that constitution. He has no authority to do so. The Constitution remains in place until amended by Parliament. Even in the extreme case, where a usurper leaves behind nothing of the past, the original Constitution remains submerged. When the usurper withdraws, it will re-emerge.”

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at what point will it re-emerge? Can anyone see another national crisis arising from that? What action will the architects of the 2013 Constitution then take? Of course, the democratic will of the people must always prevail.

I mention all these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the interest of public awareness and debate on a crucial matter. I was interested in His Excellency's references to the sustainable development of the oceans and the climate crisis. This is connected directly to stopping the rapidly deteriorating state of our environment.

Last week, the Honourable Prime Minister took part in a virtual meeting on a new ocean action agenda. He described the climate crisis as an oceanic emergency and spoke of Fiji's National Ocean Policy. This would involve sustainable management and action within our shores.

Recently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were public disclosures about the toxic nature of and the dumping of plastic into the Suva coastal areas, including Suva Harbour, which is part of the *qoliqoli* area belonging to Tui Suva and the people of Nadonumai.

I was horrified to discover that 68 percent of fish in the area had some form of micro-plastic in them. In fact, the researcher, Andrew Paris, is quoted as saying that micro-plastic is found in all bodies of water in Fiji. It is then ingested by sea life. This creates a health risk from consumption of seafood.

People have to be educated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about their environment, about the food both from the land and the sea, which ends up on their dinner table which could be very toxic and poisonous to their well-being in terms of all the waste materials being dumped haphazardly.

In terms of education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and COVID-19 which is the new norm, which has made 2020 a particularly difficult year, perhaps the best group to start with are the teachers. They

are the very important persons in the education sector because they are the ones who drive the engine in the education area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, had Government consulted with teachers and teacher unions from the beginning of their tenure in 2007, education would not be in the mess that it is in today. All kinds of policies in the name of reform were introduced, sometimes at a whim. Have exams or no exams! School-based assessment, that is not working so well, maybe we bring back exams.

An Education Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, actually had a brilliant idea in 2015 about setting up an Education Commission. But then his Government decided to throw away the policies related to the Education Commission Report in 2000, which was set up to track and tackle the way forward for education up to 2020. This brilliant idea of an Education Commission did not make it past Cabinet, resulting in a mishmash of ideas under the name of reforms from 2007 to 2020, which were like props appearing on the education stage, sometimes disappearing before even appearing. So poorly thought out, it became unsustainable.

We already mentioned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, exams, free milk and weet-bix, the infamous and long-promised One Laptop Per Child, all kinds of complaints on free Bus Fare Subsidy, up until today is still having problems. So for teachers, having to deal with a dictatorial environment, changing working conditions, rural location allowance, unclear recruitment and promotion under the OMRS policies, schools cannot fundraise for their essential equipment, life has become very difficult for teachers.

We go on to Technical Colleges which were established in 2015 where 13 established Colleges and 39 Technical Centres operated from high schools. These were vocational subjects offering the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme where they were teaching much needed trade skills. So, students who were paying ordinary affordable school fees were suddenly told that the Technical Colleges would replace most of the school-based programmes with Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) accessible to most students to pay the \$3,000 fees for the two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TELS was so well-marketed that even students themselves were referring to it as TELS scholarship rather than Tertiary Education Loans Scheme. The operative word here, Mr. Speaker, being loan which has to be repaid. Many students happily unaware and attending technical colleges where they will be repaying this loan for many years to come and that was in 2015, Honourable Speaker, and lo and behold, to be told officially by the Government in November, 2020 which was just last month, the Honourable Attorney-General in Vanua Levu told them that some technical colleges would close and some teachers would come under scrutiny as they did not have relevant qualifications to teach certain courses.

HON. A. SAIYED-KHAIYUM.- No, no, no. You read the *Fiji Times*?

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Yes, that is from the *Fiji Times* and quoting you, Honourable Attorney-General, to teach certain courses ...

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- *Areh!* Honourable Attorney-General; you are supposed to do a feasibility study, look at civil service reforms to prepare the teachers, OMRS (open, merit, recruitment, selection) is supposed to sort all these out so that there is sustainability, there is no wastage of resources, manpower, time, taxpayers money, et cetera - this, before such major

education reforms are set up in 2015, to be closed in 2020 - only for five years. If, as Honourable Attorney-General is stating, a review of all programmes offered in technical colleges is being conducted, why are 370 teachers at technical colleges being informed that their employment contracts would end on 31st December, 2020 which is the end of this month and in two weeks' time. Other teachers are also concerned about their contracts especially those on short-term contracts, their working conditions, their retirement age, rural location allowance and their limited chances of promotion.

For students, Mr. Speaker, Sir, literacy and numeracy remains an issue that needs urgent attention. We hear of students, even in year eight, who can hardly read. That is shocking and quite frightening in terms of who will forge ahead and who will be left far behind.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with students attached to their gadgets, this literacy and numeracy area will remain an issue, Mr. Speaker. During the holidays which is just around the corner, gadgets will be going into overtime so the parents and grandparents who are here, make sure that the children are not on their gadgets 24/7.

Safety during the school holidays has to be vigilantly addressed. This year, Mr. Speaker, more than 32 cases of drownings happened, in 2020. In September alone, there were nine cases reported to the police. Most of these drownings, Mr. Speaker, were during the school holidays, on rainy days and on weekends. Many times, these occur because there is no supervision and worst still, the child does not know how to swim.

Road accidents, Mr. Speaker, many children were included in the 36 fatal road accidents this year so we are asking parents, teachers and guardians to take care of their children during the school holidays where drownings, road accidents, violence against women and children are also occurring. We know that Fiji now has one of the highest rates of cases of violence against women and children in the world. Two in three women experience physical sexual violence, one in three women experience violence from a man who is not their sexual partner and one in five experience sexual harassment in the workplace.

In 2019, 10 women were killed by their intimate partners so for the women and for the children especially during the school holidays, we ask the stakeholders to be very aware so that the numbers do not increase over this school holiday.

That is my speech for today, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year and also to all members of Parliament. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa. Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for afternoon tea. We are adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.05 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, be seated. We will now continue with the debate and I give the floor to the Honourable Kirpal. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, I rise this afternoon to contribute my sincere support to His Excellency the President's Speech for the Opening of the 2020-2021 Session of Parliament and being honoured to contribute to the Right of Reply.

Greetings and a very good afternoon to each and every one of you present here today, at home and those listening via other mediums.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I speak on the Right of Reply to His Excellency the President's Opening Speech, I would like to congratulate the Jet Set Rugby Team for their tremendous effort, by retaining the most precious Farebrother Trophy in Nadi and giving the most treasurable Christmas gift to the people of Nadi and wish them a jump start for the 2021 season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me take this opportunity to congratulate our people in our beloved country of Fiji a happy 50th Independence Anniversary this year. I acknowledge that some of our people were not able to join us in our celebrations in October for various reasons, largely because of COVID-19 pandemic and our citizens abroad, our prayers and thoughts are with you. As we celebrated the important milestone in our history, let us not forget those who started the process that brought us independence 50 years ago - the forefathers and mothers of our nation. These men and women negotiated our independence from the British, who ruled us for 96 years. On 10th October, 1970, our pioneers declared with the world our choice and determination to champion our own destiny. On that day, we started the process of governing ourselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to commend the Honourable Prime Minister for his wholehearted effort in maintaining the most deadly disease COVID-19, by taking early precautions while some bigger countries were waiting. Also I commend the doctors, nurses, Fiji Police Force, Fiji Military Forces and all other organisations and individuals who have helped in one way or the other, in keeping our people safe and secure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture, fisheries and forestry have been the mainstay of our economy during the crisis and wasted no time in promoting and providing help in agriculture sector much effected under previous Government to make sure that every citizens of this nation has food on its table. We will continue to drive production in agriculture sector while also focusing on how our farmers, fishermen and many other producers get the best returns of their produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all have a collective responsibility to our beloved nation. It is my hope that we can work together for the common good of current and future generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a nation where our traditions, cultures and values that are accepted and respected; a nation where governance is paramount; a nation where our young girls and boys, women and men are empowered culturally, socially, economically, spiritually and politically; a nation where our youths are gainfully employed and engaged in leadership, decision making and economic entrepreneurship activities; a nation where the role and the place of our women and children is recognised and supported; a nation where its people stand to be counted for their individual and collective contributions are our target and will make Fiji ever greater.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to guide us we must be united with a vision that portrays a strong, secure, peaceful and prosperous Fiji whose people are educated, healthy and manage their resources in an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable way. Our aim is to decrease poverty, promote equal opportunity, promote prosperity and enhance peace and stability to help Fiji achieve its long term development vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue our journey we must always stop to give thanks for the many blessings that God has bestowed on us. We must show gratitude for what we have. Despite our challenges we are abundantly blessed. Never take anything for granted. Give thanks for each breath of life, each sunrise and each sunset for we are able to smile, sing and laugh and not to be persecuted for our religious beliefs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that together we can take our nation to new heights. We will be united and we will have a nation that will stand forever more. May God Bless this nation and all of us. Thank you and *vinaka vakalevu*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Kirpal for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, I now give the floor to the Honourable Kuridrani. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- The Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members of this House and Fijians in Fiji and around the world listening in through television broadcasting and live stream, *Muju cola vina, namaste and noaia 'e mauri* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the motion to thank His Excellency the President on his address to open the new parliamentary session.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to urgently share with you and the Members of this august House the concerns of the people of Navosa-i-wai which I represent, as to why the Honourable Minister for Economy who is also the Minister for Climate Change, Minister for Election, FICAC and Civil Aviation and the Attorney-General cannot resign from Cabinet due to the allegations against him in his involvement in a bombing incident in 1987 that resulted in the death of a woman and injured others; that was reported to police in July, 2020, six months ago.

Mr. Speaker, to apply the same yardstick, other FijiFirst Cabinet members stood aside from their ministerial positions and portfolios while they were under police or FICAC investigation. Yet here, the second most senior FijiFirst Party Minister who is responsible for the custody of law and for the protection of the citizen of this country, is alleged to be involved in this terrorist activity considered the most serious crime of all, still sitting here in Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the name of fairness, equality and justice and to protect the integrity, respect and tradition of this august House, I ask the Honourable Minister to do the honourable thing to step down and step aside from his Attorney-General and justice portfolios and to step out of Cabinet. His refusal, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to step down will only enhance doubts on the government's already tainted integrity, accountability, transparency and good governance. It will also confirm that some are more equal than others and are above the law and Fiji is fast becoming a mafia country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I now turn to His Excellency's address.

I am sorry to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I am again disappointed with His Excellency the President's speech because it was biased and intentionally focused only on Government's effort in controlling the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji.

The Government's COVID-19 control efforts have been over promoted and bragged about so many times that it almost seems like the only thing that this Government was able to achieve in 2020 was to control the spread of coronavirus in Fiji. Whether the Ministry of Health's efforts have genuinely achieved this goal or not remains questionable?

Firstly, one only has to look at the standards of our public health facilities to understand the quality of health care that our citizens are subjected to under this Government's 14 years of leadership and claim economic growth. The poor state of our hospitals never gets highlighted in the mainstream media, despite the fact that members of the public and even members of this House have exposed and shared about the repulsive and inhumane conditions of most of our public hospitals. But of course that is the irony of this Government and true to its styles of leadership.

This Government will continuously harp on about the one thing they have done right, to divert the attention from the many things that they have done wrong. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a high tempo and positive address by His Excellency the President to pat the Government on the back cannot hide the more pressing issues of this pandemic and that is the loss of income for thousands of tourism industry workers and the multiplier-effects it has had on the workers from other industries.

Apart from the FNPF stimulus package, which lacks longevity especially for the workers who do not have transferable skills to other industries or are limited in setting up their own business. What have you actually done to support the livelihoods of these laid-off workers and their families? What programmes are in place to support these people in attaining a secure source of income? What has been done to ensure those skillsets are not lost but they are transferable to other industries as avenues for earning an income?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since mitigation and adaptation efforts to control the impacts of climate change is one of the next big topics that this Government brings about, I also want to ask the question, what has the Ministry of Agriculture done to address the issue of food security, especially amongst the over 115,000 workers laid-off as a result of this pandemic?

In His Excellency the President's address, he did not mention any of these, but these are pressing bread and butter issues of our time that need to be urgently addressed. I ask this question because my constituency of Navosa-i-wai hosts many of the most highly sought-after tourist destinations in Fiji, that is the coral coast and a lot of our people....

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mine, my constituency....

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- A lot of people have lost their jobs in the nearby hotels as a direct result of this pandemic. A majority of our laid-off workers have received no assistance whatsoever from Government. Even those who have considered commercial farming are finding it challenging to acquire the many licenses required and to make matters worse, not having a source of income making acquiring all these licenses too expensive and unaffordable. I have said it before

and I will say it again, this Government needs to focus and improve the agriculture industry and more importantly now with high stake of job losses as a result of this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us look at agriculture and I believe, so as everyone understand that tourism will not be fully operational in the next three years to five years. Therefore, agriculture is our only hope to revitalise the economy but this time it is crucial to implement the right approach to avoid any wastage of resources and get immediate results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recommend to the Minister for Agriculture that we need to implement the evidence-based intervention approach. We need to ensure that practices, programmes, policies, strategies, activities and services whose effectiveness has proved beyond reasonable doubt through research and evaluation.

We need accurate and updated data and information in order to successfully engage the evidence based intervention approach. Can I ask the Minister for Agriculture, where is the National Agriculture Census Report that cost the taxpayers \$4 million which was conducted in February 2020? Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is now 11 months and still no sign of the report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also cannot rely on the Agriculture Annual Report 2015 since it is outdated. We need the National Agriculture Census 2020 Report and the Ministry of Agriculture Annual Report 2019 to be able to successfully implement the evidence based intervention approach. The Ministry needs to refocus its funding and resources for the development and expansion of high value and low volume products such as *yaqona*, *dalo*, ginger, cocoa and vanilla to revitalise the economy. We need to do away with the budgetary allocation and programmes that are not having an impact to improve agriculture production like the Committee on Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) which was allocated \$6.9 million in the last budget.

We need to move away from “what I think is the right approach” and change to “evidence based intervention approach.” Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some of the evidence of the “what I think is the right approach.” *Yaqona* which has been doing well, exports have tripled since 2015 from \$8.9 million to \$32.5 million in 2019. It has a proven record, yet the Honourable Minister has decided to reduce the allocation for *yaqona* farming programme to \$250,000 in the 2020-2021 Budget, compared to \$300,000 in 2019 and \$500,000 in 2018. I cannot see the logic in this. This could be considered as racist since the *iTaukei* are heavily involved in this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us look at the funds allocated for goat farming extension programme. It was budgeted for \$180,000; partnership to establish goat meat industry \$850,000 and the total is \$1,030 million, only for an industry that is farmed and consumed by a little portion of our population. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the extension services for livestock has an allocation of \$300,000 and the extension services for each livestock, we need to put piggery, beef, sheep et cetera. This is very contradicting and this is “what I think is the right approach”.

Where is the cold storage for Nukuloa, Ba and Kavanagasau in Sigatoka? This was approved in the 2018 budget and is still not constructed to date. This confirms that they have been lying to the people of Ba and Nadroga/Navosa since 2018, and it seems that the Honourable Minister must have diverted the funds somewhere else, the “what I think is right syndrome.” Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture should urgently review its budget allocation, its five-year strategic plan and put more focus on the increase of allocation for high value and low volume crops such as vanilla, cocoa, ginger, *yaqona* and *dalo*. We need to increase allocation for milk production, beef production and poultry production.

Development of infrastructure: Another important thing is the improvement and capacity building in monitoring and evaluation. We need more qualified extension officers, field officers and supervisors to be recruited. Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture is our hope and I agree with the former Leader of the Opposition as he stated this morning that agriculture is the only sector that is expected to grow in this time of economic crisis.

Let us look at sugar, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The industry that was once the backbone of our economy, earning the most foreign exchange earnings for our country, the industry that more than 200,000 families lived and relied on for their social and economic survival. I believe the problem with the sugar industry is not the lack of funds but the lack of capacity by the Ministry of Sugar, Fiji Sugar Corporation and other stakeholders to provide a co-ordinated, monitoring and evaluation programme. The Ministry of Sugar's budget has increased from \$11.7 million in 2015 to \$70.4 million in 2019. But the Fiji Sugar Corporation continued to suffer massive losses from \$24.6 million in 2018 to \$80.1 million in 2019. In 2016, yield per hectare was only 44.7 tonnes and this has slightly increased to 46 tonnes per hectare in 2019. The tonnes of cane to tonnes of sugar has deteriorated from 9.0 in 2018 to 10.6 in 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above data confirmed that it is not the funding that will turn around the FSC to regain its position as the main commodity export earner in Fiji. As I said, the missing link is the absence of a co-ordinated monitoring and evaluation programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to establish this missing link that will allow the collection and tabulation of accurate data and information for the design and implementation of the evidence base intervention approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude we need to act quickly to review our funds allocation in the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Sugar to readjust and redesign programmes, policies and practices based on the evidence base intervention approach rather than relying on their traditional, "What I think is right" syndrome. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Kuridrani for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members we will continue with the next speaker tomorrow morning. We will now proceed to the next item in today's Order Paper.

CONSIDERATION OF BILLS

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for Consideration today.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting for today. As I had alluded to earlier, we will continue with the next speaker on the Batting Order tomorrow morning.

Honourable Members, I thank you for your contributions today. We adjourn until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.27 p.m.