

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 26TH JULY, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 26TH JULY, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.36 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Ratu Tevita N. Niumataiwalu.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 16th July, 2021 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. 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 - those attending in-person and those attending virtually. I also welcome all those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Business Committee Decisions

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to advise all Honourable Members that the Business Committee, in due consideration of ongoing practice has unanimously approved the following:

- (1) The Shadow Minister for Economy in delivering the response to the Budget Address will speak for the same time as the Honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy.
- (2) Exempt the Honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy from the ordinary speaking time limitations during his Right of Reply to the Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill.
- (3) Parliament will sit for extended hours and into the late night.
- (4) Limited breaks, including lunch at the discretion of the Speaker.
- (5) In the event business for any given day is concluded earlier, that business be brought forward accordingly.

Vacancy of Seat in Parliament

Honourable Members, for your information, I received a letter from the Supervisor of Elections on 20th July, 2021. The letter serves as official notice to Parliament that the Honourable Niko Nawaikula has been removed from the Register of Voters, pursuant to section 12 of the Electoral (Registration of Voters) Act 2012.

Honourable Members, Section 63(1)(d) of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji expressly provides that the seat of a Member of Parliament becomes vacant if the Member ceases to have the right to be nominated as a candidate for election to Parliament under Section 56 of the Constitution. Furthermore, Section 56(2)(b) of the Constitution provides that a person may be a candidate for election to Parliament only if the person is registered on the Register of Voters.

These provisions essentially provide that a seat in Parliament becomes vacant if the Honourable Member who holds that seat, ceases to have the right to be nominated as a candidate to Parliament, and the Honourable Member ceases to have that right when he or she is *inter alia*, not registered on the Register.

Honourable Members, as a result of the removal of his name by the Supervisor of Elections from the Register of Voters, Honourable Nawaikula ceases to have the right to be nominated as a candidate for election to Parliament. Therefore, his seat in Parliament has become vacant under Section 63(1)(d) of the Constitution, and a written notification of this was provided to him on Friday, 23rd July, 2021.

Honourable Members, pursuant to Section 63(5) of the Constitution, the Honourable Nawaikula has seven days from Friday, 23rd July, 2021 to make an application to the Court of Disputed Returns should he seek to question or challenge the validity of his seat becoming vacant.

We will move on to the next item on the Order Paper.

DEBATE ON THE 2021-2022 APPROPRIATION BILL 2021

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my apologies, I have some small issues, but I hope you can hear me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That a Bill for an Act to appropriate a sum of Three Billion, Two Hundred and Sixty Six Million, Six Hundred and Ninety Nine Thousand, Seven Hundred and Twenty Seven Dollars for the ordinary services of Government for the year ending 31 July, 2022 be read a second time.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for his second reading speech, if he has any.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as per convention, I will not make any contribution for the second reading but reserve my right to make contributions in my right of reply.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. We will first hear the response from the Shadow Minister for Economy, after which we will continue with the order of

speakers as listed on the Batting Order.

I now call upon the Shadow Minister for Economy and Leader of the Opposition to deliver his response to the National Budget. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before I make my response, the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Cabinet Ministers, Honourable Members of this august House, I rise to deliver the Opposition's response to the National Budget as presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy on 16th July, 2021. I understand, Sir, that the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party will also be giving his response.

Sir, before doing so, I also wish to express our sincere condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones to the pandemic. I ask that we also think of those currently battling the virus and all our citizens facing hardship today.

On a lighter note, I also wish our Olympians, Sir, out there in Tokyo the very best in the games, particularly, to our Sevens heroes who will be playing later this morning. To our Team Fiji, our blessings and best wishes are with you all.

Sir, at the outset, I also wish to share and reiterate in this august House and to the people of Fiji my personal gratitude and a heartfelt *vinaka vakalevu* to our frontline workers who are our heroes during these trying times, as we are now experiencing the second wave. The Delta variant is, unfortunately, a more highly transmissible and very deadly virus. Our frontline workers, who are first respondents have sacrificed and continued to take on the risk, putting the nation first above their own personal and family interests.

Many have also paid the ultimate sacrifice contracting the virus as well, while a few have lost their lives. The people of Fiji salute you for your dedication, commitment and courage which deserve the nation's deepest gratitude and administration. Our frontline workers include the Permanent Secretary for Health, Doctor James Fong and his medical team, the Police, Military, Navy, Corrections Officers, Civil Servants, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and volunteers and all those who are considered frontline workers even including drivers and other support services, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Your collective effort dedication and resolve is our nation's pride. I know that there has been numerous criticism against our frontline workers from some quarters of the public, Sir, but despite these negative comments they continue to put the nation first in carrying out their duties diligently. We can be rest assured that the majority of our people acknowledge and recognise your patriotism and dedication to the nation. We cannot just put the blame on our frontline workers when things go wrong.

The Government of the day should take responsibility and be accountable rather than continuing to play the blame game as usual. More so, I also express our heartfelt thanks for our generous donors and helping hands from thousands of community workers and individuals who have contributed in one way or another, Sir.

We would like to acknowledge the timely assistance from Australia, New Zealand, European Union (EU) and other countries that have provided direct cash grant during this national emergency. In addition we are thankful to our friends such as India, People's Republic of China, France, Japan, South Korea, United States of America and Taiwan for their generous donations either in kind or cash. Furthermore, I also wish to express my thanks to our Multilateral Development Partners for their understanding of our circumstances and for giving us timely assistance that we need.

Sir, I now turn to the National Budget Announcement. These announcements are serious statements made by the Government in every 12 months to inform the country and the people of Fiji of its intention and plans for the next financial year and the future. The people of Fiji take the National Budget Announcement very seriously and often wait for hours to listen to it. This year, it was more urgent due to the pandemic where thousands of affected people were expecting something for them and especially on support for their daily survival.

The impact of COVID-19 restrictions and loss of jobs has brought misery and pain to virtually all households and more than half of them are in dreadful circumstances. People are looking to the Government for direct support survival and hope.

I will turn to COVID-19 pandemic, Sir. The learned Attorney-General and Minister for Economy spent a quite a fair share of time in his Budget Address as usual boasting and justifying that the major cost of our problem today is due to the pandemic, to the lives of our people and the economy as a whole. This is so wrong, Sir, and I will deliberate on the subject later in my response to show that our economy was also already in crisis long before the virus hit our shores.

As usual it is a norm for the FijiFirst leadership to always put the blame on someone else rather than taking the full responsibility for their failure. The Honourable Minister for Economy has gone to the extent of blaming members of the public for the spread and accusing them of double-dipping.

Sir, it is the responsibility of Government to put into place check and balances to minimise the risks associated with the spread and double-dipping rather than ridiculing members of the public. In fact, his Ministry should assess why is it happening? Why people need more support rather than continuously blame the people when the situation is of the Government's own making.

Sir, the problem lies squarely with the Government in trying to find more and more ways to reinvent the wheel and totally ignoring existing processes and procedures that have worked so well in the past particularly in the distribution of rations.

The DISMAC machinery with the whole public service approach supported by NGOs worked very well, Sir, and for no good reason the distribution modality has been changed to suit the Honourable Minister for Economy's ego. There is a saying that applies here, Sir, "If it ain't broke, do not fix it". The Honourable Minister for Economy spent a lot of time in marketing the vaccine as the only solution to the current crisis facing the nation.

He said that at least 80 percent of the target group of about 587,000 Fijians make up the target population to be fully vaccinated by 31st October, 2021. The question Sir, is how realistic is this target taking into account the current trends. In addition, we continue to compare ourselves with other developed countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom, Israel and Europe and the rest of the first world where the vaccine has allowed people to move around to justify Government's decision not to have a full lockdown.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can we compare ourselves with developed countries with different social structure who have resources readily available at their disposal? Also the capacity and other services such as health that could be easily mobilised when compared to Fiji.

Today, our limited resources are over stretched and our health facilities are overwhelmed due to the limited capacity in terms of staffing, equipment such as ventilators and our mortuaries which are not adequate to deal with the higher daily death rate of both from COVID-19 and those who have pre-existing conditions, Sir. The truth is that in allowing movement and businesses to re-open, the Government is saying that the vulnerable population - the aged and the sick - are dispensable.

As Dr. Fong has reiterated on many occasions when you move, the virus moves with you. The Government should have taken heed of this very simple message. Since April, Dr. Fong advised us all to stay home and leave home only for essential reasons, but then the Government decided to open containment borders and allow non-essential businesses to open. There is so much talk and emphasis on the people to be vaccinated.

So far Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to rely on our development partners to provide us with the necessary vaccines. You may recall Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Honourable Minister for Economy announced five months ago that is on 28th February, 2021 that Government has made available \$60 million for the purchase of vaccines. Today, we still rely heavily on the kindness of our development partners for the required vaccine especially from India, Australia, New Zealand and now the United States of America.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to echo the sentiment usually expressed by our former colleague as was explained earlier, the Honourable Nawaikula or Mr. Nawaikula in this august House and on many occasions, that this Government has no money. The claim that Government has provided our frontline workers with all the tools they need to defend our people's lives and livelihood against the second wave of the COVID-19 virus, is far from the truth.

It is common knowledge, Sir, and the reality of the matter is that due to the lack of proper training, awareness programme, limited tools including the personal protective equipment and enforcement of poor proper protocols, have led to the situation where some of our frontline workers have become the spreaders of the virus.

It is unfortunate that the Honourable Minister for Economy continues to focus on how the vaccine will help the nation in his eloquent deliberations but shies away from highlighting key statistics from the second wave of the virus and its current trend. The statistics to-date, Sir, states over 21,000 of our people have been infected in the second wave alone and there have been over 179 deaths since 10th April. These are not merely statistics, Sir. They were people with families, who have been devastated in the untimely and preventable passing of their loved ones and again, I express my deepest condolences to their families. With the current trend and very little or proactive and decisive action taken by Government, Sir, the numbers will surely continue to rise.

The Honourable Minister for Economy has failed to carry out a comparative analysis with countries such as India and the United States of America and others because the result will surely show that the spread of the virus in Fiji is now uncontrollable. Our infection rate per capita has exceeded India's infection rate at the height of their recent second wave of the pandemic. There is a lot of anxiety in the public domain regarding the Delta variant, Sir.

Questions have been raised on how the variant reached our shores when our borders were closed. In addition, Sir, the public is anxious to know as to why special preferences are given to a selected few who are allowed to fly out and return to the country, bypassing proper protocols. Very little effort has been made to facilitate the return of our citizens after completing their tour of duty especially for those in the Middle East and Africa who remit funds regularly to Fiji to support their families.

We urge the Government to consider special measures to support and facilitate their return, if something could be done in reducing the cost of being in isolation for 14 days at the airport when they return. This is simply due to the fact because of the high remittances we are now getting from our people, from abroad. Due to the anxiety of the people and questions raised, we are of the view that there should be a Commission of Inquiry, Sir, to investigate these pertinent issues. We need to get to the roots of why things suddenly changed from 14th April, Sir.

The Government should, at least, strike a balance between the people's lives and the opening of borders. The general sentiment of our people is that the FijiFirst Government has lost the plot and is interested only in the welfare of big businesses who are supporters and major contributors to the FijiFirst Party's elections coffers. Another major concern raised by the public is a lack of targeted strategy in the containment and mitigating measures. The general perception is that the Government continues to take a reactionary approach with limited dissemination of accurate and timely information to the public.

Sir, the public has lost confidence and trust in the Government leadership and are relying very much on the grey media such as the social media and coconut wireless for information. In time of adversity and crisis, the Government should be more transparent in providing accurate and timely information to minimise confusion and reassurance to the people. Unfortunately, this is not happening on a regular basis.

Sir, the most important question that has been raised by the public is whether the Government has any plan to stop the spread of COVID-19 and the health nightmare that our people are living through right now. This is not acceptable. Fiji has stayed in the top most place on the incidence of Non-Communicable Disease, Sir. We are close to number one in the world on cases of diabetes and are almost near the top end of heart-related diseases, Sir.

The Our World in Data website which collates data from WHO and other reputable resources clearly reports that Fiji is now counted in the same league with countries such as Haiti, Afghanistan, Solomon Islands and Somalia in terms of NCDs. As a country, we do not want to be counted in such a negative list.

It is a shame that the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy make public statements, bragging about their achievements and asking countries such as Australia and New Zealand to learn from Fiji. What a faux pas! It is time we stop embarrassing ourselves in the community of nations. Our sincere plea to the Government is to stop the spread of the virus and urgently put in place measures to save lives of our people from the suffering they are going through right now, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after a review of the Budget announcement, I realised that the rationale behind the Honourable Minister for Economy spending his first share of this time in his address highlighting the importance of vaccination is simply because, it has a very strong correlation with key measures to allow people to access assistance that has been announced in the budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are of the strong view that it is unethical and morally wrong for Government to use vaccination as a pre-condition for our citizens to have access to any assistance. The Government has the responsibility to provide the necessary support and assistance across the board rather than making vaccination a pre-condition. Most of the direct financial support or assistance to those who need them are subject to vaccination, first no job, no unemployment benefit. Having said that, for my part as a traditional leader, I have called on the people of Cakaudrove and urged all of our citizens to be vaccinated. Again, we plead with the members of the public to consider vaccination very seriously. However, I would like to reiterate the point made earlier that vaccination should not be a prerequisite or condition for any assistance to be provided by the Government.

I now turn to the Budget Estimates for the 2021-2022 Financial Year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to share my views on the proposed Budget. It is the responsibility of the loyal Opposition to review and strategically and objectively analyse the proposed budget based on facts from previous budget trends and the reality on the ground. More importantly to make suggestions and recommendations and provide practical alternatives to make the budget more realistic and responsive

to the needs of our people. We are not here just to give a political rhetoric or criticise the proposed Government for political gain, but the interest of our nation, particularly at this critical time must always be paramount.

There is no doubt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we in Fiji and every other country are living through extraordinary time. Hard decisions have to be taken and necessary adjustments have to be made to cushion and minimise the impact of the pandemic to the economy and the citizens alike, particularly the poor and the most vulnerable in our society. However, we should remind ourselves that making the necessary adjustments must be based on the needs of our people and our internal capacity and its relevance, rather than trying to copy other countries. I call it, Sir, adjustment with a human face.

Having said that, there are lessons to learn from other countries' experience and adjustments tailor-made to suit our environment rather than the wholesale copying which is a recipe for failure. This is the very reason our economy has been in crisis since 2017 because when we want to leapfrog and be on par with Singapore, Australia and New Zealand, we cannot compare ourselves with those developed countries because of the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) gap between these countries and Fiji are so high, and it is not realistic to make any comparison.

While the minimum wage of Fiji is only \$2.96 an hour, in Australia it is about FJ\$20 an hour, which basically means that an Australian worker will spend less than half an hour of work to be able to buy a Big Mac burger while a Fijian will have to work for four hours to buy the same burger.

I now turn to the proposed Budget Estimates, Sir. The Budget Estimates for 2021-2022 Financial Year include:

- Revenue of \$2.1 billion;
- Expenditure of \$3.7 billion;
- Gross deficit of \$1.87 billion; and
- Net deficit of 16.2 percent of GDP.

Out of the total revenue of \$2.1 billion, Sir, it is estimated that \$357.2 million will be derived from direct taxes and \$1.4 billion from indirect taxes, \$330.3 million will be derived from other sources and the balance of \$157 million will be from investment receipts.

Taking into account the current status of the economy and based on previous revenue trends, the target is too high and unrealistic, Sir. Given the increased unemployment and depressed demand, it is unlikely that the target of \$357.2 million direct taxes will be realised at all, Sir.

With regard to indirect taxes, the target is too high, since aggregate demand for goods and services continue to decline, particularly in the VAT collection. It is anticipated that we will receive \$116.3 million in direct aid. How realistic is this in terms of the direct budget support from our development partners? This is a big question, Sir.

It is also estimated that revenue of around \$210.5 million will be generated from the sale of fixed assets. How realistic is this figure, Sir? The major reason why the deficit continued to increase in the last five years is because sales anticipated from our assets were not realised. I only hope that the sale figures are not there just to reflect a lower budget deficit.

On the revenue, Sir, this Budget carries a deficit of 16.2 percent of GDP. This, indeed, is unprecedented since the 2020-2021 deficit is said to be only 11.2 percent. This deficit will only escalate the debt burden for our future generations. This is because our economy is not functional enough to generate revenues by taxes.

Sir, the prospect of revenue collection remains weak. Even the projections of revenues indicated in the Budget documents of \$2.08 billion seem to be optimistic. I wish to bring the attention of this august House to some of the inconsistencies projected in this Budget.

Sir, as per the data presented in the Estimates, the revenues projected for 2021-2022 is expected at 77 percent of the amount realised in the 2019-2020 Financial Year. The amount of \$2.08 billion includes \$150 million from sales of assets and an external grant of around \$116 million. Sir, while the grant is free money, sales of assets to raise funds is a bad strategy.

Another doubtful aspect of the projected revenue is the expected tax collection of \$1.6 billion which, in my opinion, is least likely. This amount is 113 percent of the tax realised in the 2020-2021 Financial Year. Sir, this is virtually impossible. The question is, how this tax revenue can be collected when the Fijian economy has further contracted this year and is likely to remain subdued throughout this financial year?

Some strange figures for revenues exist, Sir. For instance, in the 2019-2020 Financial Year, the total Capital Gains Tax collected was around \$19 million. The projected revenue for 2021-2022 is stated to be \$25 million, or 131 percent of the 2019-2020 Financial Year. Sir, I find this projection very strange when the real estate market remains extremely subdued.

As per the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF), data on real estate activities declined substantially up to March 2021. It stated that in the year up to March 2021, commercial banks' new lending investment purposes declined by 25.8 percent and lending to both, the real estate and building sectors declined by 31.3 percent and 11.5 percent respectively. Similarly, in 2020, the value of work put in place fell by 24.8 percent.

Sir, with such declines observed in construction activities and significant loss in economic confidence in the last three years, how can the projected Capital Gains Tax of \$25 million be realised? I am certain, Sir, this will only add to the shortfall in revenues, leading to further escalation of our national deficit.

Sir, even the collection of VAT of \$544 million is too optimistic. This figure is approximately 87 percent higher than the actuals for the 2019-2020 Financial Year. With more than 20 percent contraction of the economy since 2019 to 2020, how can this VAT collection be possible? Sir, we have serious reservations about this tax revenue projection.

I now turn to deficit and the national public debt, Sir. Now, we will come to the core of the issues. The expenditures as against the revenues. The figures are right here in front of me, Sir, and this scares me to the bone. Last year, the deficit was shown to be around 20.2 percent. It was huge, Sir, but we had some consolation of our minds that it was probably one-of and we would soon be back on the economic track towards recovery.

Sir, the projected budget deficit of 16.2 percent, combined with the domestic debt of \$5.2 billion, an external debt of \$1.7 billion and the Government Contingent Liabilities of \$1.6 billion is a nightmarish scenario. Simply, it is a nightmare for our future generations.

Our calculation of the actual debt as a ratio of GDP stands at 70 percent. This figure, Sir, is a conservative estimate of the debt to GDP ratio since the stated nominal GDP in the budget supplements seems to be inflated. Our hunch, Sir, is that this over-stated nominal GDP is inflated at least by 10 to 15 percent? If that is true, Sir, then the real GDP to GDP ratio stands at around 82 percent of the GDP.

If the contingent liabilities are taken into consideration, Sir, then maybe the national public debt stands at 100 percent of GDP. That is frightening, Sir. The most frightening prospect of this debt situation is that, if the revenue projections are not realised, as I have said earlier, the debt would reach a very worrying level and we could spiral into a financial crisis, Sir, even worse than the experience in Greece, Italy, Ireland and Argentina.

Sir, if we take into consideration the Government Contingent Liabilities debt to GDP ratio, it stands at 86 percent. This level of debt for a developing country like Fiji is very risky and is potentially a threat to Government's liability to perform in the future. What this means is that, our debt level in 2021 is matching that of advanced economies such as United Kingdom and the United States of America. It is unsustainable, Sir. Our debt to GDP ratio is already very close to twice (almost 200 percent) that of the average of the Emerging Markets, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Sir, we need to be forewarned that the country is decisively moving towards chaos and absolute disaster. In terms of expenditure mix, around 65 percent is for operating cost and 32 percent for capital expenditure. The increased percentage in capital expenditure has been inflated because most of the operating grants have been placed into the capital grant classification, so the capital grant figure has been artificially inflated. A fair share of the capital expenditure allocation is really for capital grants to entities like the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) among others, and very little for Government Ministries' capital works.

It is interesting to note that a total of \$713 million has been parked under Head 50, this is an increase of \$171 million compared to the 2020-2021 Budget. Head 50 alone comprises roughly 19 percent of the total budget. This allocation is totally under the control of the Honourable Minister for Economy. Most of these expenditure allocations should be easily reflected in the Head for each responsible agency or ministry. If the implementation processes and procedures are not ready, they could have been placed under requisition (R).

This is a clear indication that the Honourable Minister for Economy is trying to control everything or he surely knows that revenue will not be realized to finance all expenditure commitments. While reviewing the budget figures and trends in the last five years, I find the proposed budget over-optimistic, very ambitious, unrealistic and impractical. In short, the Honourable Minister for Economy has been gambling with the management of public finances for the last seven years and is misleading the people of Fiji.

This is a clear sign of lack of transparency, accountability and very, very poor leadership. As usual, the FijiFirst Government always looks good on paper, sounds very convincing and full of hope and promises when it is presented, but the truth of the matter is that there is very little to show for, or achieved, Sir.

As I have said earlier, for the ordinary citizen of this country, the budget expenditure has a caveat or pre-condition and that they must be vaccinated before they can access any type of assistance. Sir, the estimated revenue for the 2021-2022 financial year of \$2.1 billion is overly optimistic compared to the average actual revenue collection in the last five years, which hovers around \$1.6 billion annually.

Average actual expenditure for the last five years hovers around \$3.1 billion rather than the \$3.7 billion as proposed in the 2021-2022 Budget. There is always a common trend that both revenue and expenditure are always being overestimated. The shortfall in revenue collection is so substantial and on average the shortfall in the last five years amounts to \$457 million annually and under-expenditure of \$645 million annually.

The fact of the matter, Sir, is that the estimated revenue and expenditure is over-optimistic and unrealistic because of the high variation in estimates against actuals. Whilst we agree that there will be some variation in budgeted and actuals, it is too high and unacceptable. This is a clear indication of the lack of transparency, accountability in the management of public finance and poor budgeting. The Budget Address was pure drama, Sir, yet again, the people of Fiji are being given another matinee.

I now turn to the economic performance, especially on growth rate. Sir, to be able to critically assess the relevance and practicality of the proposed budget for the 2021-2022 Financial Year, it is critical to highlight some of the key fundamentals of our economy and the reality on the ground.

The Government continues to mislead this House and most importantly the people of Fiji with the false claim of “more than 10 years of unprecedented economic growth”. The latest claim made by my colleague, the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport in the March sitting where he said, and I quote:

“Ten straight years of economic growth that has not been surpassed, unchallenged and no one has ever done it, so take that to bed”.

The Government should stop these false claims and wake up to reality. The people of Fiji know the truth and they cannot be misled anymore. It is imperative for the FijiFirst Members of Parliament to at least take some time and review figures published by the Bureau of Statistics and the Reserve Bank of Fiji on a regular basis rather than taking the word of the Honourable Minister for Economy as gospel truth. Figures speak volumes of the misinformation and deception by the Government in painting a rosy picture that everything is hunky-dory.

In reviewing growth figures for every 10-year period from the early 1970s, the highest growth rate that was experienced in the country was between 1971 and 1980 which shows we had an average growth rate of 4.35 percent whilst the average growth rate between 2011 and 2019 period was just 3.24 percent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. If you look at the average growth rate between 2011 to 2020, it is only 0.75 percent which is much lower than the average growth rate between 1981 to 1990 and 1991 to 2000 which was 2.46 percent and 2.44 percent respectively. I urge the Government to stop being boastful and tell the people of Fiji the truth and perhaps take that to bed.

Sir, key indicators clearly reflect the low growth rate over the last 10-year period that the FijiFirst Government boasts about include the following.

We have been experiencing a declining trend in investment. For Fiji to at least achieve an annual growth rate of 5 percent, which is necessary to support employment and increase in economic activity, we will need investment at a rate of at least 25 percent of GDP. However, the total average annual investments rate for the 10-year period (2010-2019) for all sectors of the economy is only 17.7 percent of GDP and, Sir, this is far below the minimum requirement to achieve at least a 5 percent growth rate annually. Sir, this is a clear indication that there is no truth in the claim that there was unprecedented growth in the last 10 years.

Another clear indicator of our low investment as highlighted earlier is to look at the nation's ranking in the World Bank Ease of Doing Business Report. Our ranking fell from 34 in 2006 to 58 in 2012 and currently we are around 110 out of the 190 economies that are ranked, Sir. Basically this means that the confidence of investors to invest in our country continues to decline.

The decline in investor-confidence in Fiji is basically due to poor governance and lack of transparency by the FijiFirst Government in areas such as human rights violations, as highlighted in

the latest annual US State Department Report which clearly indicate human rights violation.

The latest credit rating by Moody's clearly suggests that investors will play a wait-and-see game rather than invest in the country particularly at this critical time when we need investments to create employment opportunities.

Law and order situation in the country continues to deteriorate due to the lack of employment opportunities which has led to the increase in violence against women and children.

Another clear indication of low economic growth is the increased incidence of poverty. The latest Bureau of Statistics Household and Income Expenditure Survey (HIES), Sir, conducted just before the pandemic hit the nation, it revealed that 30 percent (or approximately well over 258,000 people) of our citizens were living below the poverty line. Sir, 20 percent of the 30 percent or 97,000 people live in urban areas and the balance of 41.5 percent (well over 160,000 people) reside in the rural areas.

In addition to the 30 percent of our total population living in poverty, another 20 percent on the margins and facing daily hardships. It is known fact that at least more than 120,000 people have lost their jobs, due to the direct impact of the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic. More job losses are experienced in this second wave and this will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the figures available today, we can confidently say that almost 60 percent of our total population of well over 530,000 people or 132,000 families with an average size of a family of four are having great difficulty in putting food on the table.

It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there is a lot of anxiety and uncertainty amongst investors and the people because of the inconsistency of policy mix and ad hoc decisions taken by the Government with limited or no consultation at all, which led to the inconsistency of decisions.

Despite the claims of unprecedented economic growth in the last 10 years, there is no improvement in our unemployment rate. Our average unemployment rate continues to hover around 4.8 percent and has increased to 6.0 percent due to COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since early 2017, this side of the House continues to remind Government on advice given by our local experts and development partners that our nation is facing headwinds and is of the urgency to consolidate government finance to create the necessary fiscal space to cushion against future shocks. This advice continued to fall on deaf ears. This is the very reason the nation is facing economic crisis since 2017. In addition, the contribution of key sectors of the economy has been on the declining trend since 2014.

On the sectoral performance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the contribution of key sectors of the economy has been on a declining trend in the last five years, and it will surely continue to decline. Our agricultural sector contribution to GDP declined from 15 percent in 2006 to 6.3 percent in 2015. (The Honourable Minister is laughing.) For the 2020-2021 financial year, it further declined to 3 percent. Based on the current trends, it will continue to decline. I have noticed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that he has taken yoga may be to cushion the impact of this decline.

On fisheries and agriculture's contribution to GDP, it has been fluctuating in the last 10 years. On average, the sector's contribution to GDP is hovering around 2.5 percent, despite the opportunities available in the fisheries and agriculture sector, as a nation surrounded by sea resources, we consider this sector critical for food security, employment and opportunities for export.

The contribution of the mining and quarrying sector's contribution to GDP picked up in 2016 to 16.4 percent of the GDP, however, it declined to 0.4 percent in 2020 and 2021. There are a lot of lessons to be learnt from the mining sector, especially our experience with the Nawailevu Bauxite in terms of returns to landowners and impact on the environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, mining is a non-renewable resource. Once it is extracted, it is gone forever. It is also classified as a wasting asset, so the Government must ensure that the necessary legislation is in place to protect the interests of landowners and our environment. The legislative changes in this sector have been put on the back burner compared to other laws that have been fast-tracked in the interests of the selected few.

The manufacturing contribution to GDP was around 16.5 percent in 2015 and it declined to -4 percent in 2020 and was around 4.7 percent in 2021. It is unlikely that the manufacturing sector will pick up any time soon because of the lack of aggregate demand. More resources should be directed to this sector to provide employment opportunities and improve the capacity within the sector to meet future demands. Despite the injection of substantial amount of resources, the contribution of the social sector to GDP continue to be flat, hovering around 4 percent of GDP.

Sir, taking into account the depressed status of our economic sectors, I would have thought that more resources should be directed to these sectors, particularly our natural resource-based sectors because we cannot rely on tourism alone, so we have to look internally for a comparative advantage within our own economy.

On Budget trend, Sir, to have a better understanding of how realistic the 2021-2022 Budget is, it is critical to carry out a thorough review of the Government's budgets in the last six financial years or so. The review will give us a better understanding of the true status of Government finance and could easily determine how realistic and practical the Government budget is to implement its development agenda and its real impact on the livelihoods of the people.

There is no doubt, Sir, and we all agree that there are unknown factors that are beyond our control and may affect our budget annually. As a small vulnerable nation, we face natural disasters such as regular cyclones which are more frequent and with very high intensity. Changes in the global trading environment have also played a major impact on our small economy.

It is unfortunate that the FijiFirst Government fails to take heed of these challenges and continues on a spending spree without consideration to these predictable but unforeseen events since 2015. Today, we are facing the unprecedented crisis due to the uncontrolled spread of the Delta variant in this country. The consequence, as we all know, is devastating, and we have very little room to move despite warnings by local experts and our development partners since 2017, that our nation is facing headwind, Sir.

The Government should have made the necessary adjustments so that we can have the fiscal space to cushion against future extraordinary events. Again, I would like to reiterate that warnings and advice given by experts to the Government that fell on deaf ears or was just totally ignored. In response, the Honourable Minister for Economy said those urging cautions were small-minded and fearful.

The Government continues to ignore sound and practical advice from experts with regard to minimising the risk in the spread of the virus. Human lives have been placed on the backburner at the cost of opening up the economy rather than instituting a targeted lockdown or a clear action plan to minimise the risk associated with the Delta Virus.

Having said that, Sir, I will now review the Budget trends in the last seven or so years. In terms of revenue, Sir, the variance or the gap in budgeted revenue and actual revenue collection continues to increase. In 2014, there was a shortfall in revenue collection of \$352 million. In the 2019-2020 Financial Year, the shortfall increased by \$853 million. In the 2019-2020 Financial Year, the shortfall increased to \$1 billion and in the 2021-2022 Budget, it is further increased to \$2 billion. In the 2021-2022 Estimate, the deficit is \$1.6 billion since revenue has, once again, been inflated.

On the expenditure side, in 2014, the variance under-expenditure was around \$160 million, Sir, and it increased to \$383 million in the 2016-2017 Financial Year.

In the 2020-2021 Budget, the shortfall is around \$1.5 billion. Basically, the variation in both the shortfall in revenue collection and under-expenditure are so substantial that we can confidently say that it is poor budgeting, poor planning and the lack of vision by the Government of the day.

On the increasing shortfall in revenue collection, it clearly shows that the revenue forecast has been manipulated, unrealistic and basically deceptive. One could also argue that inflating the figures means that the deficit will be much lower than what is shown in the Budget Estimates.

Today the manipulation of figures has led to net deficit as a percentage increase from 2.0 percent to 20.2 percent in the GDP or GDP in the 2020-2021 Budget and despite the reduction in the 2021-2022 Budget, the revenue forecast is still unrealistic and inflated.

On the expenditure side, the continuing trend of under expenditure from \$1.6 billion in the 2018-2019 Budget and at the same level in the 2021-2022 Budget. Sir, this indicates a lack of capacity, poor planning, total control and shortage of revenue collection and preparedness of Government in the implementation of its development agenda.

I recall, Sir, before the previous governments used to have an annual Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) which clearly outlined and articulates projects to be implemented. These projects have gone through a rigorous process of evaluation and at the same time executing agencies are already well prepared to implement projects in a particular financial year.

Sir, today we can see the lack of planning and capacity in the implementation of key public sector projects. In most case projects are not implemented because either funds are held up under RIE or not released in a timely manner to the executing agency.

On public finance, Sir, on many occasions when this side of the House raised its concern on the precarious state of the public finance or made alternative suggestions in particular on expenditure, revenue and debt, we were always ridiculed by the Honourable Minister for Economy and accused of lacking understanding of public finance. This is despite the fact that some of us on this side of the House have been in the public sector, particularly in the Public Service, managing Government finance and were fully versed with the Financial Management Act and its associated regulation such as the Finance Instructions.

We normally followed processes and procedures set out to ensure transparency and accountability. They are fortunate in the last six or so years that the Auditor-General has regularly highlighted the lack of transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.

One of the major challenges in Government finance in 2015 is the cooking up or manipulation of figures which has led to the precarious state of Government finances today. Since 2015 figures have been manipulated to show a much lower deficit in the budget but the reality of the matter is that the revenue shortfall is much greater than the expenditure due to the unrealistic and bullish

forecasting and manipulation of figures by the Honourable Minister for Economy. The variation in the shortfall of revenue versus expenditure continues to increase substantially and it is unacceptable. This is a clear indication of poor budgeting.

Sir, the level of shortfall, at least in the last four financial years since 2017 is unacceptable and it clearly shows that the figures were manipulated to paint a rosy picture, but the reality of the matter or the truth is that this august House and the people of Fiji have been deceived with manipulated figures. The shortfall is primarily due to the non-realisation of the anticipated sale of assets. The Government knows only too well that revenue from the sale of assets will not be forthcoming.

In addition, Sir, despite the bullish budget by the FijiFirst Government, most of the funds allocated were not spent since their fair share of the budget allocation were still held under RIE. On the average at least 40 percent of the total expenditure are normally held under RIE requiring the approval of the Honourable Minister for Economy before funds are released despite the fact that provisions were already made available.

Again, in the 2021-2022 Budget, at least, \$730 million is allocated under Head 50 and the release and utilisation of funds will be very much at the mercy of the Honourable Minister for Economy. Therefore, this implies that very little of this allocation will be released at all. Ministries are at the mercy of the Honourable Minister for Economy, who is very keen to be in control of everything.

On reform agenda, there has been a lot of claims, boastfulness and self-praise by the FijiFirst Government that they alone are the agents of change and have successfully implemented their reform agenda particularly in the public sector.

Successive Governments since the late 1980s have been implementing public sector reforms to re-align and integrate Fiji's economy to the global trading environment supported by international best practices and to bring efficiency to the public sector as a whole.

The key initiative of the Public Sector reforms is to improve efficiency and the effectiveness of delivery of goods and services by the Public Service. In addition, commercialisation of government statutory entities and deregulation of financial and labour markets.

One of the major components of Public Service Reform is for government to concentrate on its core functions and outsource other activities that can be easily undertaken more efficiently and effectively by the private sector.

The cautious approach adopted by the successive governments in the past based on a number of key fundamental principles which include the phasing, the sequencing, harmonizing and prioritizing processes and procedures, taking into account the capacity within the public sector and the private sector, and its impact on the labor market.

Through this process Sir, successive governments continued to stream line the public service through right sizing but not at the expense of employees losing their jobs. Today there is a lot of confusion because the reforms are undertaken on an ad-hoc basis. Through reactionary and ad-hoc arrangements employees are either displaced or placed on short term contracts with no job security.

Sir, in the last sitting of Parliament, the Acting Minister for Economy, again, my colleague, the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport claimed that the success of the Civil Service Reform agenda has led to the increase in the wages and salary allocation from \$600

million in 2006 to over \$1 billion today. The number of civil servants has also increased from 28,000 employees in 2006 to 37,000 today. These are not figures to boast about, Sir. The Honourable Minister and the FijiFirst Government should be ashamed of these increases. Such increase contradicts and defeats the purpose of the reform agenda in streamlining government activities and to reduce costs.

Sir, it is unfortunate to note that a bulk of the increase in operating expenditure continues to be for salary and wages. In 2006 total wages and salary was around \$593 million and today it is over \$1.1 billion. This is despite the continuing increase in capital and operating grants for purchase of goods and services have also increased substantially (more than double in the last ten years) and outsourced.

The point I am trying to make is that the reform agenda in streamlining government services to reduce the operating cost through outsourcing Sir, has failed. The generous remuneration packages given to a selected few has distorted the salary structure in the public sector as whole, including the hiring of expatriates.

Sir, I would like to assure this august House that we are not against the engagement of expatriates in specialized technical areas, especially in areas where local expertise are not available. It is unfortunate, that FijiFirst Government fails to recognize and appoint locals who are well qualified to take up the key positions in the public sector. The sad reality is that most of the expatriates do not last long and they resign before completing their contract.

Most of them resign because of government interference, that is, the Minister for Economy in the operations of public sector entities, and the civil service. To make it worse there is no succession plan for grooming and training of locals to take over positions when expatriates resign or complete their terms which is a rare occurrence.

In addition, the outsourcing of services to the private sector has not worked well and has proved very expensive, when there is no or limited competition from service providers, which has led to nepotism and cronyism. A clear example is the outsourcing of the Laundry, Security and Cleaning services for our major hospitals. It would be interesting for the Minister for Economy to tell us the current cost of outsourcing these services to the private sector compared to when services were carried out internally by the Ministry of Health.

Another interesting observation Sir, is the outsourcing of laundry services in the Central Division to a company based in Lautoka. The cost of transport alone is quite enormous, taking into account the distance between Lautoka and the different health facilities in the Central Division. In addition, despite the reduction of compulsory retirement age and the people terminated after their contracts expires without good reasons or allowed to appeal, the cost of maintaining the public service continues to substantially increase, defeating the very purpose of the reform agenda.

Sir, I now turn to the stimulus package. The Honourable Minister for Economy reaffirmed that the implementation of the stimulus package that was first announced during the COVID-19 Supplementary Budget in March, 2020 and those announced in the 2020-2021 Budget will be continued and enhanced in the 2021-2022 Financial Year. Sir, I am sorry to say that the stimulus package has had limited or no impact at all in addressing the urgent needs of our people.

I say this, Sir, because the stimulus package presented was very broad in nature and lacked vision to target key sectors to ensure that it makes real impact to the need of ordinary citizens. A thorough review of the stimulus package against specific targeted sectors will reveal the truth. In the tourism sector, all the incentives and budget support failed miserably because of unrealistic

anticipation that things will get better soon. This has been a common trend on many occasions, even before the pandemic hit our shores.

The key initiatives to support the tourism sector which failed include the:

- (1) Bula Bubble;
- (2) Blue Lane Initiative;
- (3) Eliminating the 6 percent Service Turnover Tax;
- (4) Reduction of the Environment & Climate Adaptation Levy (ECAL) from 10 percent to 5 percent across the board;
- (5) Reducing \$100 off the Departure Tax;
- (6) Zero ECAL for mid-sized tourism operators and other businesses like restaurants, rental car companies and cafes - ECAL is dropping to zero now;
- (7) First 150,000 visitors to receive \$400 per passenger to go towards tourism packages including flights, hotels and meals and beverages; and
- (8) Alcohol Tax was reduced by 50 percent. Tariffs were cut across the board to zero or 5 percent on over 2,000 tariff lines.

Sir, apart from the large reduction in tourism sector taxes, the 2021-2022 Budget provides additional incentives for more operators. These include Short Life Investment Package (SLIP), new hotel investment package offered a five year income tax holiday for capital investment over \$250,000 to \$1million; a seven-year tax holiday for investments from \$1million to \$2 million; and a 13-year tax holiday for capital investment exceeding \$2 million.

In addition, to incentivising new investment in hotels, a 20-year tax holiday will be offered for investments above \$40 million. All these initiatives are quite sensible for the long-term but it will not work in the immediate or short-term. Therefore, Government should be practical in providing support to the tourism sector just to keep them afloat during these hard times rather than making a pie in the sky promises.

In addition to this, Sir, the Government has varied the guarantee of \$455 million to Fiji Airways to sustain itself following the closure of borders which has been approved by Parliament. The guarantee now has no time limitation which means the risk will be carried by Government as a contingency liability and could be a real problem in the near future. Basically, Fiji Airways has now put the nation to ransom in perpetuity in terms of risk and this has been confirmed by Moody's latest rating.

Sir, the removal of both financial and custom duties of more than 1,600 items has failed. This is due to the lack of well thought out and much better targeted approach. Most of the goods and services under this arrangement are white goods and motor vehicles and very little given to basic food items to meet the needs of the poor.

Although some basic food items and necessities were included generally, the impact was marginal because the price of these items continued to increase and ordinary Fijians could not afford them. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the importation of liquid milk. Due to the monopoly by CJ Patel and Rewa Dairy and the limited supply, we are now importing liquid milk directly from Australia and New Zealand. Despite the reduction in duty, the price of imported liquid milk has increased from \$2.20 to \$2.80 a litre in the last six months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the allocation of the sectoral classification. Under the General Administration, major increases are in the Office of the Attorney-General for about \$300,000 additional allocation for the review of existing law such as Financial Management Act; \$600,000 to

the Ministry of Defence to spearhead the development of a national human trafficking strategy and a national action plan.

Whilst we recognise the importance that the laws have to be updated, this could be easily deferred so that more resources are targeted to more priority areas, particularly at this time. I am pretty sure that this work will be given out to outside consultants to carry out, which means, a drain of our already limited resources at this difficult time.

The Ministry of Communication has been allocated an additional \$7.2 million for the upgrading of the IT infrastructure. I believe, the focus should be limited to extending the national connectivity rather than acquiring new gadgets which our people cannot access due to lack of connectivity and do not prioritise at this time of hardships and emergency.

The Fijian Elections Office allocation has increased from \$22 million. Although it is a normal allocation, the allocation has been increased only by \$12.4 million and additional \$14.8 million is provided under Head 50 for elections. We recognise the important work the Fijian Elections Office in our preparation for the next election. We must be realistic and re-prioritise expenditure so that some of these funds could be diverted to the priority areas, particularly in the resource based sector to generate employment opportunities and economic growth and food security for our people who have lost their jobs.

I now turn to the social sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is unfortunate that only the Ministry of Health has been given an additional \$9 million, whilst there is an increase of \$153.1 million in the education sector which has been placed in Head 50 to fund TELS and Toppers. There is no increase in the Ministry of Education's budget, but a reduction of \$7.7 million.

It is interesting to note that an additional \$9 million has been allocated to the Ministry of Health, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Out of this increase, 78 percent or \$7 million has been allocated to the construction of the new Maternity Unit, \$2.5 million for the upgrading of the Labasa Hospital and \$6 million for the upgrading and maintenance of medical facilities. I believe this is not adequate to address the out of control community spread of the Delta variant and which is overwhelming and put a lot of stress on our existing health facilities and staff, in particular, in the Central Division.

The Ministry has been allocated \$7 million for the construction of the new Maternity Unit. The construction of this new Maternity Unit will take at least two and a half years to complete and will not help at all in the immediate short term, taking into account that hospitals in the Central Division are totally overwhelmed. Since our health system is based on a well-established de-centralised referrals system, it is only practical to have a targeted approach in upgrading existing facilities to meet the current demand, rather than building a new one, which will take at least two and a half years to complete.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the existing facilities must be sufficiently equipped to meet the current urgent demand due to COVID-19 outbreak. I have heard many stories about the dilapidated state of the CWM Hospital where pregnant women ready to give birth have to wait outside on benches, rather than in the pre-natal ward as usual.

The condition and services in both Divisional and Sub-Divisional Hospitals have deteriorated so much that people are thinking twice about going to the hospital, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A common refrain and advice now is not to get sick because hospitals cannot even deal with COVID-19, let alone non-COVID-19 cases. People are saying that our hospitals are now no longer a *valenibula* but rather a *valenimate*, or to paraphrase, death-causing rather than life-giving.

With regard to Public-Private Partnership (PPP) for the Ba Hospital, we were informed earlier that it should have been operational two years ago. In his Budget announcement, the Honourable Minister for Economy said that the new Ba Hospital will start operations in December 2021. I have some doubt that the new Ba Hospital will open by the end of this year, Sir.

The Honourable Minister for Economy should explain to the people of Fiji the reasons why the previous PPP partner, Aspen Medical, has left Fiji. What will be the cost implications of the PPP arrangement to the public? Basically, it means that the people of Ba will have to pay more for health services subsidised by Government.

On education, Sir, despite the reduction of \$7.7 million for the Ministry of Education, the Honourable Minister for Economy in his Budget Address said on Friday, 16th July, 2021, and I quote from page 1932:

“I wish to remind everyone that there was no national commitment in this country for the education of all young Fijians, girls and boys until we made it so. We began the education revolution with the introduction of free education for primary and secondary schools, subsidised transportation and other assistance to students and gave unprecedented access to tertiary education with the Tertiary Loan Scheme and National Toppers Scheme.”

The Honourable Minister should stop fooling himself and misleading the nation.

Free education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was initiated by the SVT Government led by Major-General (Ret'd) Sitiveni Rabuka, and continued by successive Governments through a phased approach. More so, tertiary education was provided through a scholarship scheme based on the needs of the nation and ensuring equality of access.

A number of different modalities were in place to ensure that the disadvantaged groups also have access to higher education. The Tertiary Loans Scheme introduced by the FFP is a failure because recipients are already in debt, even before they start work.

On the economic sector, Sir, it is unfortunate that the only increase in the economically productive sector is the sugar industry, whose allocation increased from \$53.6 million to \$72.2 million, an increase of \$18.6 million and the Ministry of Local Government's allocation has increased by \$2.2 million to cater for small market fees and municipal fees.

Whilst other key sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries, forests and manufacturing have no increase at all, these sectors are critical in the short-term to support the livelihood and food security of our people. Sir, on page 13 of today's *Fiji Times*, it confirms the importance of agriculture for export.

I will now turn to the sugar industry, Sir. The sugar industry's allocation increased from \$53.6 million to \$72.2 million in the next financial year, an increase of \$18 million to subsidise the low price of sugar on the international market. We have no major problem with the increase in the allocation.

Despite the substantial increase, there is no improvement in productivity, especially in the Tonnes of Sugar to Tonnes of Cane (TCTS) ratio, which continues to decline, and the reduction in the number of active growers. The Government continues to subsidise the industry heavily. The sad part is that, the allocation for non-sugar agriculture continues to decline.

According to the 2020 Agricultural Census, there are more than 83,000 farmers representing 70,000 households that relied on non-sugar sector for employment, income and export. Non-sugar agriculture is a major source of food security for 90 percent of our population, but there is no increased allocation to this sector.

I now turn to the infrastructure sector. Sir, the establishment of the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) is part of the overall FijiFirst Government's reform agenda on the premise that it would bring about efficiency, cost-effectiveness and the overall improvement of our roading and associated infrastructure, such as bridges, jetties and proper drainage, among others. Since its establishment, the FRA funding continued to increase substantially from the average allocation of just over \$200 million prior to 2013.

The allocation increased to as high as \$635 million in 2016 and hovered around \$550 million annually until it was further reduced to \$349 million in the 2020-2021 Budget. In the 2021-2022 Budget, the allocation is reduced slightly to \$272.4 million.

Sir, despite the substantial allocation to FRA from 2013 to 2019, there is very little to show for it. I say that, Sir, because the conditions of our roads continue to deteriorate further with more *lovo*-pits rather than just potholes due to poor and irregular maintenance.

In addition to the dilapidated state of our roads both, in the urban and rural areas around the nation, there is very little change or no change at all in the number of sealed roads and newly constructed roads.

In terms of sealed roads it is around 1,700 kilometres since 2015 without any further improvements. To make it worse one just has to look at the exponentials increase in the number of vehicles on our roads today.

The reduction of duty for both new and second-hand vehicles since the 2019-2020 Budget has given rise to the increased imports of all types of vehicles. We fail to see why Government is encouraging the import of vehicles particularly during a period of national crisis. In the last six months, new second-hand vehicles are offloaded at our port of entry almost on a weekly basis.

A review of figures from the Bureau of Statistics shows that in December 2018 more than 120,000 vehicles were registered nationally compared to 81,926, an increase of 68.3 percent, despite little improvement in our roads infrastructure.

With the current trend of vehicle imports, we can confidently assume that there are more than 130,000 registered vehicles in the country today, an increase of 70 percent compared to 2010, despite little improvement in our roading infrastructure.

Another interesting observation, Sir, is the increase of both private cars and Government vehicles respectively. In 2010, there were only around 53,819 private cars and in 2018, it is around 85,842 which is an increase of 63 percent, whilst government vehicles increased from 1,335 in 2010 to 1,988 in 2018, an increase of 68 percent.

Again, Sir, there are a number of fundamental questions that arise, given the substantial increase in the number of private and government vehicles on our roads. First, why is there a substantial increase in the number of private vehicles?

The truth, Sir, is that today civil servants and those in the public sector can only invest in vehicles because of the short term nature of their employment contract, just only three years. They

cannot invest in homes because banks are reluctant to give loans to those with only three-year contracts. Therefore the reform agenda of the Government has failed miserably to allow workers to acquire their own homes.

With regards to the increase in Government vehicles, this means an increase in operating expenditure and additional operational costs, particularly for fuel, oil and maintenance and topped up by \$27 million annual allocation for vehicle leasing costs. Despite the increase in government vehicles, service delivery and services provided by the government to the public generally continue to decline.

On Miscellaneous Services, Sir, as I have said earlier, Head 50 allocation for the 2021-2022 financial year is \$713.4 million from \$527.2 million, an increase of \$186.2 million. The amount allocated in Head 50 includes:

- Unemployment Benefit - about \$200 million;
- Financial Relief Support - \$8.5 million;
- Stronger Job Support Scheme - about \$5.0 million;
- Job for Nature - \$4.0 million;
- COVID-19 Credit guarantee facility - \$13 million;
- Fiji Recovery Rebate Package - \$40 million;
- Electricity Subsidy - \$18 million;
- Funding for TELS and Toppers - \$15.1 million;
- Funding for capital construction - \$6.1 million;
- Capital Purchases - \$28.9 million; and
- Capital Grants and Transfers - \$508.6 million.

Sir, the total expenditure in Head 50 is \$713.4 million. When you add the additional capital expenditure of \$543.6 million, the total amount comes to \$985.2 million. Can the Honourable Minister, please, shed some light on the variation of figures?

On the Consequential Bills, Sir, the Honourable Attorney-General has tabled quite a few Consequential Bills for the 2021-2022 Budget. There are a number of Bills which are necessary as usual to facilitate the implementation of the Budget. However, most of us on this side of the House have reservations on the two Bills viz-a-viz the Bill No. 17 and the Financial Management Amendment Bill.

Sir, the tabling of Bill No. 17 to amend the iTaukei Land Trust Act without consultation, even with the members of the iTaukei Land Trust Board, much less with the landowning units, and their members, is of grave concern, Sir. We understand fully, Sir, that the board of the iTLTB already has powers to administer native land outside native reserve without seeking the landowners' consent. We fully understand that, Sir, but it is on the premise of having these encumbrances registered against the lease that we are so concerned about because it does not allow the beneficiaries especially of which the board has a fiduciary care and duty for, to look after their interest in ensuring that they are kept at par with what is happening on their land.

Times have changed, Sir. The very young people in the landowning units now are more educated, they have travelled and learned a lot. So, the Honourable Prime Minister, we plead if you could take back to the drawing board and ensure genuine consultations with all relevant stakeholders are carried out.

With regard to the amendment to the Financial Management Act, in particular the amendments that will also amend the Electoral Act, I also express my plea for this Bill to be withdrawn. The requirement that political parties must now meet a subjective test for their proposals, to be reviewed by a civil servant, on the efficacy of their electoral campaign promises, is ridiculous.

Politics is primarily a competition of ideas. That is why we have debate, and the people decide ultimately who is to govern them. It is not for civil servants or the courts to punish the politicians. This is a draconian proposal and makes a mockery of the “true democracy” that the nation was promised. My fellow colleagues in the Opposition will deliberate in detail on the consequential Bills.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate the following pertinent points. First is that, this is not a bold Budget, as claimed by some, but as usual, it is a deceiving, overoptimistic and a very ambitious Party. It looks good on paper, full of hope and unfulfilled promises and theatrical in its presentation. It does not take into account the reality on the ground and the need of our people.

I am making this statement with sincerity because the revenue forecasts are overoptimistic which will lead to further increase in debt level which will be unsustainable and at the cost of our future generations.

Second, on the revenue side, the most frightening prospect of this Budget is the debt situation. If the revenue projections are not realized, the debt will reach a very worrying level and could spiral into a financial crisis even worse than experienced by Greece, Italy, Ireland and Argentina since we are already facing an economic crisis. Therefore, the country is decisively moving forward towards chaos and absolute disaster.

Third, Sir, it seems that the Honourable Minister for Economy has been gambling with the management of our public funds over at least the last seven years and misleading the people. This is the very reason we are now in a debt-trap.

Fourth, on the expenditure side, very little attention has been given to agencies that need them to boost their response to the pandemic such as health, education, agriculture, among others. Most importantly, very little attention has been given to the key sectors that will quickly kick-start or rejuvenate the economy.

Fifth, Sir, there is no clear plan of action to give the people of Fiji the confidence, comfort and hope in the middle of a crisis.

Sixth, Sir, despite our poor economic growth performance, the Government continues to mislead this august House and the people of Fiji with the false claim of more than 10 years of unprecedented growth. I believe the Government should stop their false claims and wake up to reality.

Seventh is that, based on key indicators of our sectors, they are now on a downward trend due to low investment, due to the lack of confidence by investors, human rights violations, poor credit rating and deterioration of law and order in the country are clear indications that this Government has lost the trust and the hope of the people of Fiji.

Eighth is that, our poverty rate continues to increase due to the slow economic growth which has been further exacerbated by the uncontrolled spread of the virus and today we already have more than 21,000 (as I stated above) infections and over 179 deaths as of Saturday, 24th July, 2021. A more targeted approach in helping those in need should be given priority rather than pouring money into non-essential priorities.

Nineth, Sir, on many occasions, we have suggested in this august House that they should seriously consider the implementation of Cash for Work programme. This programme will involve large scale implementation of public sector programmes such as improvement of infrastructure and the construction of affordable housing to provide employment opportunities for those who have lost their jobs rather than the small token and ad-hoc arrangements with minimum impact. Despite the suggestion that it has been proven that such arrangements have been implemented successfully during the crises, and very little attention has been given by Government on this proposal.

Tenth is that, Government continues with its hand-out attitude which does not empower our people to fend for themselves. This has led to the dependency syndrome which keeps people in the vicious cycle of generational poverty. It reminds me of the old Chinese saying that ‘it is better to teach a man to fish rather than giving him fish’.

Eleventh, Sir, on the Consequential Bills, again, I would like to stress that whilst we agree that by convention, there are certain amendments to be made to implement the changes in the Budget but the inclusion of the amendments that affect the Elections and native land is unprecedented. I say this because the two Bills require further consultation and should not be rushed because its impact to the people of Fiji is far-reaching.

Twelfth and last but not the least, I am concerned about the statement made by the Honourable Minister for Economy that the Budget will be reviewed in the next six months - this is unprecedented. This shows that the Government is not certain about its own plans for the next 12 months or the next six months. This, we know, Sir, that the Government lacks fiscal space to handle the current situation. This is the reason why the Government should worry about its debt level.

Sir, the Honourable Minister for Economy stated, and I quote:

“... the assistance and support that the Government is announcing in this Budget is contingent on reaching our vaccine target by October 31. If we fail or fall short, we will have to revise the Budget to cut back on assistance (that is very important), cut back on assistance including social welfare, announce major cuts in the Civil Service salaries and reduce our funding commitments across every arm of Government and every sector of the economy”.

This is a damning indictment of the Government’s lack of confidence in its own plans. The national budget announcement is supposed to provide confidence to the people. It should mirror the determination of the Government and provide the people a sense of protection. Sir, the Government should stop blaming the people and shift the responsibility on the shoulders of others.

I wish to bring to the attention of this House to another statement made by the Honourable Minister for Economy, and I quote:

“We are acting to protect everyone, not to please everyone and we cannot rely on fence sitters, lawyers or otherwise, nor can we tolerate the lies of anti-vaxers, most of whom reside overseas and can hide away behind the comfort of wealth and privilege. We will not hold our future hostage to their foolishness, opportunism and utter lack of decisive leadership.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst we fully support the vaccination wholeheartedly, we should also understand that the people have their individual rights. We must respect the rights of the people who do not wish to get jabs. These are the same rights that are experienced by some who do not wish to vote, even though vote is compulsory. Whether it is their faith, superstitious, doubt or fear, we the leaders of this country, must respect the individual freedom not to vaccinate. Individual freedom is

an integral part of democracy, so let us not retract from this inalienable aspect of our freedom, free society and democracy.

I thank you for giving me this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to present the loyal Opposition's response to the Budget. May God bless us all and may God bless Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

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

Honourable Members, on that note, we will take a break for half-an-hour, then we will continue from the Batting Order. You all already know your positions on the Batting Order, so be ready when I call upon you. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.22 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 12.25 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate, and I now call upon the next speaker, the Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir, I am at home in isolation, after coming into contact with a positive case. I speak to you today in support of our people's Budget – a budget fit for the purpose of guiding us to the end of the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin my response, I would like to congratulate our Team Fiji for the first win in the Tokyo Olympics. It is still a long way away and it will be a tough week for them and also for us who are watching. We are counting on our Olympians to fight hard and show the world what our small country can do. We are all with them in spirit.

Mr. Speaker, after a full year without the virus, we are in a fight of our own against a variant of COVID-19 that exploits every opportunity it is given, to spread.

We are making great sacrifices to protect ourselves and we are racing to administer life-saving vaccines. I am vaccinated as you are, Mr. Speaker. In other words, we both have received the two doses, and more than 70 percent of adults in Fiji have received one or both doses.

Our mission is to fully vaccinate 80 percent of the adults in Fiji by the end of October. Our people's health and our economy's recovery depend on meeting that goal, and we are acting decisively to reach it, or even exceed it. Anyone keeping a close eye on our daily COVID-19 updates knows that the worst effects of this virus, severe diseases and death, are among unvaccinated Fijians.

The story, Mr. Speaker, is the same around the world. Overseas, in countries where vaccines have been available for months, people who refuse the vaccines are dying in hospitals. The stories are heartbreaking. Moments before they succumb to the virus, these former anti-vaxers are begging doctors to vaccinate them but by then, it was too late.

We will not meekly accept preventable death in Fiji by needlessly stalling our vaccine campaign. We have worked with our development partners, like Australia and New Zealand, India and the United States, to bring these vaccines to Fiji and we will not squander the protection they provide. We have the chance to save lives, and we will be fools not to take it. That is why employers, employees and all those receiving Government assistance in Fiji must be vaccinated.

To the bush lawyers who want to litigate that mandate, I ask; do you want us to remain an island of disease and thus relation in the world that is moving on from the virus? Do you want to let lies, misinformation and unholy insanity lead people into early days? Do you want to continue to overload our health care system making it more difficult for people who suffer conditions that are not preventable to get treatment? Do you want to continue to put our frontline health workers at risk? How about our children and the elderly?

The people who are refusing to accept the vaccines threatening to use up the people's resources and make their fellow citizens pay for their foolishness. When they become sick, they will beg for help in an eleventh hour conversion to sanity and sobriety. They will call for an ambulance and cry to be saved from the virus they dismissed as insignificant and we will do our best for them because our humanity will outweigh their smart ignorance.

Protection through vaccine is our duty to ourselves. It is our duty to each other. It is our duty

to the world. When we reach our vaccine goal, our lives can return to normal at least some form of normal that feels much more familiar than today.

This Budget meets the once in a century challenge upon us with creativity. It lifts the burden cost for Fijians across every sector of the economy. It keeps taxes low on businesses. It prepares us for a long awaited recovery. It is the most resourceful Budget we have ever announced and I thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for leading the formulation of the budget and the economic framework it provides for the new normal. I also wish to thank the members of his team, several of whom I understand tested positive for the virus, yet they continued to work from home to help to finalise the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget did not shy away from tough decisions. Across my portfolios, total of budgetary allocations have been reduced. The same goes across Government and these cuts to expenditure come as no surprise. We have to do more with less.

It is said that necessities the mother of all invention. It should also be called the father of efficiency. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Sugar Industry that I lead, are ready to show by example how fiscal diligence and efficient service delivery can coexist.

I believe we will be a better government supported by a better and more efficient Civil Service who are having endured disorderly. I for one think we could all do with less cake and other unnecessary indulgences at government events. That is one cut to my Ministry's Budget that I am happy to make permanent. Even small cuts are important because we are in a situation that simply cannot tolerate excesses.

Mr. Speaker, our strong friendships around the world have paid off in many important ways including vaccines and direct budgetary support into our international trust on social safety net. This did not happen overnight. The support we received builds on years of effective diplomacy to strengthen our ties and win the respect of the country that are most important to us. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will continue our international engagement mainly virtually to uphold Fiji's proud place in global affairs.

Our leadership for climate action will continue as we allow advocacy for the ocean, nutrition security, gender equality, and for the many noble aims that we have fought for years to achieve at home and for humanity as a whole. Throughout our global engagement we are delivering a simple message - an unequal recovery from COVID-19 will leave us all more vulnerable to the forces we fought before this pandemic, like climate change and ocean degradation. By addressing matters at home on climate, oceans and the environment we are creating good green and blue jobs for our people through the new jobs for nature and the Fijian stewardship of TIRES Programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is Fiji the way the world should be, a nation that walks the talk about sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs will continue its mission to empower the *iTaukei* people through the next financial year. We are continuing our assistance to the landowners to make productive use of their land, so that they can turn their assets into cash-generating vehicles and build generational wealth for their communities.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our efforts on behalf of all *iTaukei* landowners have been aligned and internationally represented. They have been distorted beyond all recognition by Opposition politicians who wish to create resentment and ethnic division that they can ride to power. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are riding an old nag, a sway-backed horse that they found in the darkest corner of Fiji's history.

We prefer progress and economic opportunity for all Fijians and that means helping *iTaukei* landowners to use their assets to improve their lives and livelihoods and become more prosperous. Here is a problem that the Bill fixes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though someone may have a registered lease on *iTaukei* land which means that iTLTB has obtained consent from the landowning unit, the premium and lease terms and conditions have all been met. They still have an appeal struggle with bureaucracy to carryout development on that land.

Even if it clearly falls within the terms and conditions of the lease, say you leased three acres of *iTaukei* land for your retirement home, but to build your home on that leased land, you will want to connect the land to water supply or get a better financier to construct the bigger home. Doing so does not violate the terms of your lease still you have to get approval from the iTLTB. You want electricity to the land, you have to get approval from the iTLTB. You want to add a new road on the land or you want to change your financier guess what, it is back to the iTLTB for approval and these approvals can take months or even years depending on where the land is and which officer you are dealing with for something as simple as making sure that there is water running when you turn on the tap.

It is such a bureaucratic legal requirement that has not only made *iTaukei* land unattractive in particular for individuals that it gave opportunity to corruption which we cannot tolerate. So, we proposed an amendment to the *iTaukei* Land Trust Act that make a simple administrative change, to remove the iTLTB studios approval process for development on lease land. Cutting these red tapes make *iTaukei* lease land more attractive to potential lessees that makes the land more valuable and that increase in market value will directly increase the incoming landowning units will receive from lease land, as they are entitled to receive under our Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what this Amendment does. It helps landowners generate more income. Unfortunately, we are up against an Opposition that thinks income is a dirty word. They think development is a dirty word, they think access to water and electricity should be held up by time-wasting approvals.

Everyday since the Budget Announcement, they have been super-spreaders of lies about the Amendment. They have been lying to the ordinary *iTaukei* people. It is pathetic, it is political and it is a waste of the nation's time. We should not be focused on beating the pandemic and reviving the economy through this Budget but their entire Party is built on scarring the *iTaukei* people into submission. They cannot stand the idea of masses of well-informed, financially stable and prosperous *iTaukei* people because that means an end to their political careers.

Honourable Gavoka is going on about guardianship of the iTLTB. Is that what he calls months of delays for even the most basic of approvals? There is no need for the iTLTB to weigh into grant approval for every development-related decision which a bona fide lessee operating under a registered lease that has the terms and conditions of lease which the landowning unit has agreed to, is making.

Mr. Speaker, all of these is confirmed by the CEO of iTLTB, Mr. Tevita Kuruvakadua yesterday. I urge everyone, watching and listening. Please, read what the CEO of iTLTB has stated or I suspect, Mr. Speaker, Honourable Gavoka and merry men and women, who are hanging on tenuously to this self-implosion party called SODELPA, will not back off from their opposition. They have put themselves in a corner and they do not want, they do not have the humility to admit the merits of this amendment.

But, no one Mr. Speaker, no one has had the gall to lie more boldly or more often than Honourable Tabuya about this amendment. Just this morning, Mr. Speaker, someone sent me part

of her statement last night to say that because the FijiFirst has a majority in Parliament, we can change the Constitution. I think she should spend more time reading the Constitution than doing *TikTok*. I think she was a bit embarrassed after proposing that the Government print more money to put in people's FNPF accounts. That is an option that has been tried and discredited time and again, because it has led to hyperinflation and economic ruin. It has destroyed people's lives, people's savings and stifled productive investment.

I guess she got the message. Maybe someone bought her a history book. Maybe someone from *TikTok* Zimbabwe reached out and asked her if she was crazy enough to repeat Zimbabwe's experience. Now, instead of advocating these loony ideas that would destroy the Fijian dollar, she has run back to more familiar turf, lying to the people of Fiji. I fear, Mr. Speaker, that we have a compulsive liar in our midst. I have some easy to follow advise for those on the front end of all lies about the Bill. Read it! Read the Bill, read the Constitution, it is on the Parliament website. Read it! When you read it, you will see how simple it really is.

With this amendment, the landowners still set the terms and conditions on the basis on which they will lease their land, as is their right. It is their land and it is their decision and this amendment does not change the process, nor does it in any way disenfranchise the landowners. It simply does away with needless approvals from the iTLTB. By doing so, investors would be more interested in *iTaukei* land. That raises the value of all *iTaukei* land in Fiji. As a direct result, our landowners will have more money in their pockets, not because we are printing it as Honourable Tabuya suggested but because we are taking practical administrative measures to bring the value of the land up and increase lease income.

Mr. Speaker, we the *iTaukei* people own 91 percent of the land in Fiji. We are the biggest landlords in Fiji. We should act like it. We should act with economic foresight by making our land attractive and available with secure market tenure. We should stop listening to politicians who want us to live in fear, who want us to be caught in a time warp and not realise our true potential because when more *iTaukei* land is developed, the economy grows. When the economy grows, of course more jobs are created, that is more money in circulation, and Fiji overall becomes more prosperous.

Honourable Ratu Naiqama said that time has changed. Time has certainly changed. It was the Bainimarama-led Government that substantially removed and administered the bridge that iTLTB used to deduct from leased monies. The iTLTB used to clear 25 percent of lease income of administrative cost. Now, that figure is down to 10 percent - less waste, less bureaucracy, more money for landowners. Time has certainly changed. Thanks to the Bainimarama-led Government and now FijiFirst Government commitment to equality the money from lease payment is distributed equally amongst the members of the landowning unit.

We even have trust account set up for children from landowning units, in some instances, they will be extremely wealthy, I understand, be millionaires by the time they access their funds at the age of 18. Time has certainly changed, Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. I want the *iTaukei* who are young, the women, those who are about to turn 18 and the too often marginalised members of the landowning units to remember, that the equal share your are currently enjoying or about to access, was all opposed by the SODELPA leadership and Members and the NFP which never opened and supported equal distribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do these things because we are a Government that looks out for the economic well-being of the *iTaukei* and all other Fijians. We do not lie to people, we serve the people. Past governments gave away *iTaukei* land under the justification of economic development. We have never struck that bad deal and we never will, because we believe community held land has

an intrinsic and inter-generational value that must be protected. We believe we can have economic development without giving up *iTaukei* land permanently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work of the Ministry of the Sugar Industry has protected cane farmers from the pandemic price rift for cane because we have maintained a stable guaranteed price floor of \$85 per tonne. That promise from Government has kept food on the table in cane farmers' homes. As announced in the Budget, we are guaranteeing \$85 a tonne for two seasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir you may recall that there was an effort to organise a protest by cane farmers against the Government. It fell flat on its face and why? It failed because cane farmers know manure when they smell it. Our Government has been straight to the cane farmers. We have worked in their interest, they know that, and they trust this Government to do what we say we will do. We always have and we always will, and we thank them for delivering cane that is being crushed as we gather here today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine if cane farmers had listened to the politicians who wanted them to protest and withhold their cane; imagine that the mills had sat quite; imagine that no cane was exported and no money was paid and imagine that our cane growers had to endure this crisis with no money in their pockets at all. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir shows a quality of the selfish, power obsessed people we are up against, wannabe politicians who are desperate for power and so bereft of ideas that they are willing to leave the cane farmers destitute, just to elevate themselves.

I want to thank our farmers for choosing their livelihoods over the lies being told by these demo gods. You will always find your Government in your corner. Through the next year, with the election on the horizon, we will see the same so called leaders go to great lengths, yet again, to use you to help themselves. In the same way, you will see SODELPA and those political parties allied with them create fear about losing ownership of land, even knowing that the law guarantees the *iTaukei* land ownership. These cheap politicians will always try to use you, do not let them. Cast them aside and let us work together freely and harmoniously to prosper together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is unlike others because the health of our people and the health of our economy have never before been intertwined. Within six months, our economy has a chance to begin its recovery in earnest, as we go about our normal business at home and open our borders to welcome back visitors from abroad. That future depends on more of us being vaccinated.

We are very, very, very close to our goal. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 75 percent of our target population – all of the eligible adults in Fiji have received at least one dose of the vaccine. We need to get to 80 percent with both doses, at least. I want to get 100 percent. That means, all of us will be protected, and that is the goal I want us to set for ourselves, but 80 percent is the threshold that will bring our economic recovery in reach.

Mr. Speaker, it became quite clear immediately after the Budget, the last thing the Opposition Members wanted to talk about was the actual Budget itself, and that is because it is a good Budget. They are clamouring for any distraction they can create, and I had to spend much of this statement addressing the lies they have been telling, and they will not shake our focus on passing the Budget the nation need, and we will pass it because it is the Budget our people deserve at this time.

Mr. Speaker, as our healthcare team continues going on every imaginable length to treat those most vulnerable to the virus, I also want to take this opportunity to urge every Fijian to follow the advice we have heard countless times from Dr. Fong and his teams – Wear your mask, keep your distance from others, install careFIJI App on your phones and stay home if you feel unwell or have

been in contact with someone who is COVID positive. Do not wait to be tested if you feel sick. Stay home where it is safe, rather than risk the health of others and, please, be vaccinated.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate. I now call upon the next speaker, the Honourable Bulanauca. You have the floor.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just to clarify, Sir, that my OB, the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources misunderstood me, that I said, “Science is evil.” But I had said in this House on Monday, 7th December, 2020, as reflected on page 26 of the Uncorrected Copy of the *Daily Hansard*, and I quote; “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 now witnessing...” This does not mean that science is evil, Mr. Speaker, Sir. No, but that science in evil hands, is evil.

Further down on page 27 of the *Daily Hansard*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I mentioned; “We turn to science only to prove the word of God ...” The science’s purpose, therefore, Sir, is to prove the absolute truth in the *Bible*. Some will misuse it for evil motives, in evil hands - yes, it would be misused anyway because the evil people’s purpose is to provoke evil lies to be true and the truth to be lies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on COVID-19, my contribution on this is my own research, knowledge and belief. Nothing whatsoever comes from my own family. One of my children is a medical practitioner, a surgeon who we may differ on that but I respect his view as an adult in his professional field, and nothing also from my friends or acquaintances.

Sir, COVID-19 is invented and manufactured. Let me repeat – there is a small group of clever people but not wise, and very wealthy and strong, who are behind all these so-called COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic. These are the likes of Gates, Soros, Rothschild, Rockefellas, et cetera, and have financial links to funding of the UN and its agents, such as WHO, UNICEF, CDC, NIH, FDA, et cetera, together with scientists, such as Dr. Fauci, Dr. Craig Venter, et cetera, and rich business owners in the world. Those people are behind all these so-called COVID-19 pandemic which is, indeed, a plan-demic - it is a worldwide scam.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they want to be God, to reset the world with one-world government and one-world order, a new order from the old order. But no, we do not want a new order from the old order because it is evil, devilish and satanic. We want a better world order, a heavenly of Godly order that will only be brought about by none other than the Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus. Part of it will be spearheaded here in Fiji with the spiritual revival that the world will commend Fiji for. At the moment, the world looks down on Fiji with this shameful high rate of COVID-19 infections, deaths and economic counts.

One Dr. Graig Venter says himself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a leading scientist said in one of the world’s business meeting, “God the creator creates”, and we can create too. So, with this small wealthy clever group become God, that is the very motive and foundation of what we are going through now, it is a reality. By various means, it is to depopulate the world, control the people of whole nations, control the economy and social behaviour without any social obligation. They are being selfish with lust and lies, luciferous is in place to control or depopulate through killing, murder, infertility. These people are ruthless. You wait and see, mark my word. Mr. Speaker, Sir. A strong wealthy group that wants to control the world, suppress middle income earners and below. They are in control of the world through control of all governments through a one world government, UN under one world order, COVID-19 and what follows after that together with its military backing, they abide by the military.

People no longer trust the formal government mainstream media, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because only Government's propagandas there - the lies, false promises, et cetera. Truth is more prevalent and seen in social media now. There are many equally well known scientists and medical doctors giving out the truth through social media. For example, a vaccine scientist and medical practitioner Dr. Carrie Madej of USA, Dr. Geert Vanden Bossche, PhD of Germany, a former Melinda Gates Foundation Scientist, former Pfizer Chief Scientist Professor Mike Yeadon, United Kingdom, Doctor Liu Wang, Hong Kong, et cetera, to name a few. They have been barred from formal media outlets. That is why people go through social media. They do not listen to lies with FBC, Fiji Television, BBC, CNN, et cetera. People now look for the truth but the truth, Honourable Members, are in the Bible. It is written as Jesus Christ confirmed the word of God and God allows such things to happen. We merely enjoy our lives and glorify Him.

The Wuhan Variant as allowed in from USA by FijiFirst Government Party by not immediately closing the borders, COVID-21 or Indian Delta variant was allowed into Fiji by FijiFirst Government Party through the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications' plane via Singapore on 10th April 2020, that is why Fiji now suffers. The COVID-19 was created by man as a biological weapon by USA to use it, if need be.

Since 1999, about \$191 billion taxpayers' money had been used by Dr. Fauci for the foolish, irresponsible research found now to be detriment, not only to USA but to the world as a whole. The failure to quickly stop the spread of the biological weapon continued to open flights from Wuhan to the world while prohibiting domestic flights from Wuhan within China. At the same time ordered everyone in China to turn to herbs that work as natural effective medicine, with hot water drinking and steam inhalation. Had China done effective control measures on COVID-19, only a small number of people would have been affected, compared to Fiji, Fiji should be ashamed of its failure to arresting Corona COVID-19 and COVID-21 early. Why? Because of the indecision, the usurping of decision by the FijiFirst Government Party of the Minister and the Permanent Secretary for Health.

What we should have seen is the declaring of the national COVID-19 crisis and invoking of the Public Health Order Act. By doing that we will let the Minister of Health, Permanent Secretary for Health and all health workers to manage, control and address the COVID-19 once and for all.

The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Minister for Economy and the rest, including the public merely to support and co-operate - done. The people or the public who have trusted the Honourable Minister for Health, Permanent Secretary for Health and health workers because they are qualified and know what to do, they could have done that much earlier and control or limit to Nadi, instead the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Minister for Economy overruled all and wrongly prioritised on the economy rather than the health first.

The people and the public do not trust those two - the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy. They are part of the Illuminati - a small wealthy luciferous group and that is why people do not want the vaccination jab. The COVID-19 plan-demic is in conjunction with 5G just around the corner for controlled predictive policing, micro-chips and 666. It is coming, the Bible indicates and the signs are here, just be aware and be prepared.

The vaccination, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to protect one from virus or sickness - we accept that for polio, ebola, measles, et cetera, but these vaccines were researched on animals and other living organisms, 10 years to 15 years before approval for use on human beings in accordance with Nuremburg Code, Helsinki Declaration & world medical ethics. But all these current vaccinations are less than 12 months - untested vaccines. It has an experiment on human beings without absolute proof or evidence of ability of vaccine, it is a crime on humanity Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Fauci, Scientist Dr. Craig Venter and the play God group no longer can be trusted. A lot of questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, need to be answered. Can our vaccination tests be trusted? According to the Honourable Prime Minister of New Zealand, it is flu test. After vaccination, you still can catch COVID-19 and still can spread it, then what is the purpose?

One is injected only if sick, why inject when one is healthy and their immune system is strong? Why not first test its innate immune system (natural immune system) before injecting? That test result becomes the reference point for future explanation of condition or state of health. These are the questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that need to be answered.

Can a vaccine destroy or stop many variants or antibodies like our innate natural immune system? These are the questions that need to be properly answered. Why solar globes light? Why magnetic spoons stick? Why more than a third already vaccinated still die? Many more have side effects, many permanently suffered stroke, mouth palsy, et cetera. Why force vaccination on those who work and travel?

Why is the Ministry of Health or WHO do not encourage taking of Hydroxychloroquine chlorine, aspirin, herb, *vevedu*, it is working but in the end you are spraying them in the various villages, that is evil, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Hot water is good, inhaling of steam which works all over the world, including Fiji, *kuvui* both doctors for Jogi Hospital from India testified to that, also Dr. Baladina Kavoa, Lautoka, Fiji.

The Prime Minister himself said that there is no beast number, do not be so gullible, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is only the door - Coronavirus, COVID-19 merely introduces it to the world. It creates the door and linking it with G5. Fiji will open its door by November or after, issue of national identification for tracking, tracing and controlling.

While we may not have the chips and the number of the beast yet, we are already being forced to buy, force to travel, force to not work, not have access to education, et cetera, the use of mask, careFIJI App., and the vaccination certificate.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You should get the Chinese swab.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- All included to the actual beast number - 666.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Tell them!

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- It is written in Revelation 13:16-18, go and read it and understand it.

Do not be fools to support the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Minister for Economy. What about the rest of you over there? Where do you stand? Where is the truth? The Methodist Church of Fiji and Christians of the Fiji Council of Church's role is to advise the Fiji First Party on Biblical values and principles rather than listening to a secular government and becoming secular voice to the congregation. Church and faith are not about forcing, but about practising and applying them voluntarily.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- The Church must not be seen to be part of a secular government focusing on forcing vaccination. It is the role of the Church, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to point out to the secular government, the Prime Minister and the Minister for Economy of the Fiji First government

the Biblical and Godly personal right of freedom of choice. The choice needs to hear the voice of God rather than the voice of the secular government such as the FijiFirst Government or Party.

On the rights, Mr. Speaker, Sir, rights given under ILO 169 are protected under the Fijian 2013 Constitution have been violated by the Fiji First government by its order of “no jab, no job” - the freedom of choice is now taken away. Dr. Jone Hawea explains the following very well indeed, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Employers are to give options where, when and how to work, be accommodative but no forced jabs. This is most unethical as a person and unethical as a medical practitioner.

The FijiFirst Government, firstly, taking over each individual right of autonomy to make decision. Each individual only has the right to make any decision particularly of any medical intervention to be carried out to one’s body and life but only after being fully informed by doctors or medical professionals. This has not been done as this arrogant Government has not fully informed the public on what corona is, what COVID-19 is, what vaccination is, benefits and purposes, dangers and effects, side effects et cetera. Not only has the Government taken over the right of autonomy of the individual, it has also taken over the right of autonomy of the doctors or medical practitioners. What medical qualifications do you have Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Minister for Economy? You only have qualifications as witch doctors - one that announces COVID-19 news at midnight, the witching hours, that is a witch doctor.

Secondly, on this most unethical medical decision of no jab, no job business, the arrogant FijiFirst Government have been manipulative has interfered with each individual’s mind by threatening to cut off his or her rights to source of income or their rights to live. How can a government be so cruel? No heart, shame!

Sadly, this arrogant FijiFirst Government has violated the third medical practitioners’ ethics as to who gets to benefit. To attain 100 percent immune system, just increase their share of vitamins to achieve our maximum natural system. Why force to vaccinate? What about side effects if something goes wrong? Are they or each individual entitled to compensation? No! So, there are no benefits at all. So, these forced vaccinations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is merely to benefit the few rich in this country and also those few evil, selfish, wealthy rich people of the world, then it is most unethical. Voters remember that, do not make the same mistake you did in 2014 and 2018 again. The FijiFirst Party Government you chose does not respect your right of choice. Shame!

Fourthly, the forced vaccination order is most unfair as it forces the weak, the poor, the illiterate, the small people, the vulnerable. There is no justice at all by not meeting these four criteria of medical ethics. The Prime Minister or the FijiFirst Government is breaking every rule of medical ethics. Do you have any sense of ethics at all, Mr. Speaker, Sir? The order for no jab, no job shows that this FijiFirst Government is arrogant, *viavialevu, dokadoka*, most selfish, no sense of purpose, evil agents of the beast here in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to say the least. Why do you need the false prophets here in Fiji?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Really! Who wrote that for you?

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- No, the beast is here. We need the Lord, God, Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit here in Fiji.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You talk so much about the devil, you must be related to the devil.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, it is related to the Budget. This Budget is about COVID-19. While we may rely and be dependent on many things we can produce

on our own, whether it is for life, health, engineering, education, technology, information et cetera, you name it, we can produce our own. We are independent with our sovereignty and decide for our self, what is good, beneficial for us here in Fiji as a nation. We do not need to be likened to Singapore, China or USA. We are Fiji under God, the Creator. That will be the difference and it is a lot of difference, Fiji the way the world should be, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Budget 2021 is a fool's budget, full of freebies. Most of these will benefit the rich or wealthy, top level. Freebies ...

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- No, read it!

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- But you can only fool some people some of the time but you cannot fool all the people all the time. You are full of lies, full of talk, ideas ...

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- He has not read the Budget! He has not read the Budget!

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- ... making yourselves a laughing stock.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- You need to get the Chinese swab.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- People no longer trust you. The 42 sheets of paper that the Budget is written on are just full of sheets, 42 sheets. It only serves the rich and the cronies of FijiFirst Government, who will greatly benefit - the rich will get richer.

These poor Fijians will continue to be ridden upon. Long-term response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to maximise development of our domestic products through our natural resources. Revolutionise the agriculture sector to improve in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, minerals, oil, manufacturing and engineering et cetera. Fiji needs to maximise its comparative advantage in certain domestic commodities over other island nations and countries.

We must increase exports and reduce imports whatever it takes, Mr. Speaker, Sir. For agriculture there is drop in their budget from \$65.7 million to about \$62 million. This shows the low priority that the FijiFirst Government or Party gives to agriculture.

The Police have \$184 million and RFMF \$80 million. Fiji is basically an agricultural-based economy, but note the lesser emphasis by the Budget. To help increase production here, I propose a few areas where the Ministry of Agriculture can focus their attention on:

- (1) Create growth centres in every district or province or *tikina* by providing land security of tenure, open up land for agriculture developments and extensions, provide roads and transport systems to these farms, infrastructure, power, electricity, hydro, solar, water processing yards, store houses and cooling facilities, transport, logistics and technology, appropriate signs requires, technology appropriate to equipment and machines for maximum use and benefits, and empowerment by the private sector structure through appropriate staff to manage these growth centres.
- (2) Converting the subsistence farmers to commercial farmers, in conjunction with the above, focus should be made towards educating and training. These subsistence level of farmers to become commercial ones, appropriate sector technology and staffing is required to be financially supported for increased and quality products here.

- (3) Further encouraging and supporting village and settlements of farmers' cooperatives to support both the two and endeavours mentioned above. These cooperatives need to be fully operational to serve the villages and farmers on a day-to-day basis, short, medium and long term benefits, there are many. The cooperative business need to operate on best business practices at all time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.
- (4) Organic food production- Fiji needs to focus as people are more health conscious today and we must provide what they want, particularly, when tourist industry revives again in one or two years' time. First we need an organic law in Fiji to ensure quality and export competition products we produce and open up markets;
- (5) Continue to support educational and training vocational and technical schools and institutions like Tutu Rural Training Centre in Taveuni and Navuso, Naitasiri. Perhaps, an institution can be replicated in other parts of Fiji, Nadroga, Ba, Ra, Kadavu, Lakeba and in Vanuabalavu.

Imports continue to increase at a higher rate than exports. The future should be the other way round, Mr. Speaker, Sir, increasing exports and decreasing imports. On imports, the Ministry of Agriculture needs to reduce meat imports by increasing local meat production at all levels, cattle, sheep, goats, chicken, ducks et cetera. Where has the incentives for import substitution gone to? It seems lost along the way.

People are being discouraged by the inaction by the Ministry not encouraging and not motivating landowners and farmers to produce the quality products or local demand that markets offer. Why can we not practice cattle feedlots? The increased meat import shows the demand and market Fiji offers, yet, our own Ministry cannot meet. What a shame! The abattoir in Nakasi and Vuda continues to have a a short supply of animals to be slaughtered. What else can we do?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have gone over your time.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- My apologies. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I just conclude ...

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- There is no jab no job, not no job no jab.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- I am already jabbed and I am at home now.

May I just conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This Government has failed, no sets of law for Fiji, no separation of powers – failure; failed democracy, socialistic, communistic dictatorial, economy has failed in 2018 and 2019 before COVID-19. Failed in arresting coronavirus or COVID-19, money management control a failure, \$10,000 billion debt and 45 percent GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just summarise in five sentences. The FijiFirst Government is lining the pockets of the rich; the FijiFirst Government does not care about the poor; the FijiFirst Government is wasting hard earned money, the FijiFirst Government is not credible and the FijiFirst Government is irresponsible and not fit to govern.

My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir I have gone passed my time. Thank you very much indeed. God bless.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- That is alright, you can catch the next spacecraft.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- To heaven!

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Bulanauca for his contribution to the debate. On that note, we will adjourn for an hour for lunch and then continue with the debate.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.15 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.16 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate. I now call on the Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs. You have the floor.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- I rise today to show my support for the 2021-2022 Fijian National Budget. This Budget gives many Fijians hope in this time of disaster. It is a bold Budget that puts the needs of the people first. It is a smart budget planned for the future. It is a budget that serves the needs of Fijians from all backgrounds. It is a budget that shows compassion and cares for human life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are hard times. COVID-19 is no joke. Every country in the world has felt the COVID-19. It is every government's duty to protect its people and right now all leaders have to make hard decisions to ensure that there is a future. The strain that you are seeing on our health care system, economy, jobs, and education is not only happening in Fiji. It is happening all over the world. The way to end this and go back to normal is to get vaccinated. Every Fijian should get vaccinated as their responsibility and do their part to protect their country.

I would like to thank everyone who has been vaccinated and all those who came out and encouraged others to do so. Like our front-line workers, you are also heroes. The COVID-19 vaccine does not turn you into a magnet it protects you and all those you love. We need every Fijian to do their part so that we can get back to normal.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has received \$13.8 million for its operations. This will allow us to provide services to Fijians who need them. In times like this, we owe it to our nation to use resources wisely and make the most of what we have. We must do more with less.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the decision to not cut Civil Servant salaries. This shows the FijiFirst Government's faith in the Civil Servants to carry out their duties and serve the Fijian people. You must repay this faith by working to the best of your ability during a time when your country needs you the most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Fijian National Budget provides assistance to Fijians of all backgrounds. The FijiFirst Government always looks to help people from all backgrounds so that we can build a stronger and united Fiji. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many Opposition Members spread lies they have got the first division among our people. The main lies that we are somehow victimising the *iTaukei*. This is a dangerous and irresponsible lie that Members like Honourable Gavoka, Honourable Tabuya and Honourable Professor Prasad continue to spread. The truth Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the FijiFirst Government has done more for old people including the *iTaukei* than any other government for us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the touch times \$4 million have been allocated for the *iTaukei* Land Development Programme. This programme helps the development of the *iTaukei* land and currently, there are nine projects being carried out under this Programme. It shows that even now this government thinks about the welfare of the landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget provide relief, relief to thousands of market vendors all around the country, \$2.6 million allocated to pay the full market stall fees from 1st August, 2021 until 31st July, 2022; 8,000 market vendors will benefit from this, most of them from villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians who wish to be seafarers will have training and certification paid for, \$500,000 have been allocated as a 50 percent partnership contribution for government for the

purchase of a boat and engine by individuals and community groups. We are people of the sea and these benefits will keep many dreams alive during these tough times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 is causing a lot of damage to our communities and Fiji needed a budget that kept our people afloat. The 2021-2022 National Budget does exactly that. The FijiFirst Government is giving \$200 million in unemployment income support to Fijians affected by COVID-19.

Free Water and Electricity Subsidy will continue. The budget aims to keep basic services accessible to our people wherever possible and that is very important. Many benefits in the Budget target and help Fijians directly, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Free education will continue for all our lovely little boys and girls. I am a parent and I know every parent wants to see their child educated. FijiFirst has educated more children, including *iTaukei* than any government before us. Education is the key to success and we want to see all Fijians succeed.

Mr. Speaker Sir, when the budget was announced by the Honourable Attorney-General, our people were so happy. People took to social media to express their happiness. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- ...the Opposition did not like the people being happy. For the Opposition, the people are not allowed to be happy because it was FijiFirst that made them happy.

Mr. Speaker Sir, when they realized that their lies about the budget would not work, they went back to their usual racist politics. I was in shock when I saw Honourable Tabuya's video about Bill No. 17. She said lie after lie and divided our people during this time where unity is so important. Right after that, I was shocked that members of SODELPA and NFP joined Honourable Tabuya to spread lies. I was shocked to see Honourable Professor Prasad spreading lies on this matter.

There were thousands of our Fijian brothers and sisters on social media giving threats of violence and racist attacks to each other. You would think Honourable Professor Prasad would put the values of the old NFP ahead of his personal agenda but he did not and decided to add to the tension between our brothers and sisters.

All this, just to distract from this great national budget because they were scared it might cost them votes. I wonder Mr. Speaker, Sir, if they feel any shame at the division they have caused through their lies. Ironically, yesterday, Honourable Gavoka and Honourable Tikoduadua went to the media and called for calm when they were the ones who started the unrest.

Not a single member of the Opposition has presented us with an alternative Budget or done any work towards nation-building. All they have done is lie and divide our people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said time and time again that the Opposition has something personal against the Honourable Attorney-General. They are jealous of his intelligence. I have never seen any one of them come up with good ideas and smart ways to implement them.

The Honourable Professor Prasad is an economist, but he has never written a national budget in his life. You would think he would be leading them to make an alternate budget to present to the people. Honourable Tabuya in her video said she did not understand a part of the Bill and decided to cause unrest in our country because she was not able to understand. Maybe this is why they

continue to target the Honourable Attorney-General because they have bush lawyers who cannot understand simple things on their side.

My message to SODELPA and NFP, is to work hard instead of spending time on *Facebook*, then maybe they can achieve something like this Budget. Proverbs 25:18 says, and I quote:

“Telling lies about others is as harmful as hitting them with an axe, wounding them with a sword or shooting them with a sharp arrow”.

Honourable Members of the Opposition, I ask you to stop hitting our people with an axe because in the process, you are injuring all of us including yourselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all those who are sacrificing to help the country during this time. Our frontline workers, health professionals, civil servants and security forces deserve the highest praise. I thank our civil society organisations, who work so hard in partnership with the Government to reach the people, however, some of these groups have become too political, are looking like fool..

During COVID-19 violence against women has sadly increased. Should I call for Shamima Ali to resign? I will not do that because I have common sense. It would be better to do my job, assist people instead of jumping for attention in the media as Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC) is doing. It is very worrying for a nation when non-governmental organisations and charity groups start to get into politics and I question the motive of their donors. It seems that Shamima Ali and the NGO Alliance has joined the Opposition and started attacking Honourable Attorney-General instead of doing their job. If you want to play politics then run for elections. Do not operate in such an underhanded manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a great Budget, well and truly serves the needs of the people. This Budget will ensure that children continue to go to school and get an education. It provides assistance to our healthcare workers, who will help us get through this. It helps Fijians, Fijian workers and everyday Fijian to stay up on their feet. Right now, we must all prepare ourselves for the battle that lies ahead. COVID-19 is here and it wants to kill us. It wants to defeat us in body and spirit but we will not let it. My humble request to all Fijians is to help us fight COVID-19. We have the power to end this and all we have to do is get vaccinated.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Adimaitoga for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Bulitavu. You have the floor.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise today to give my contribution to the Appropriation Bill or the 2021-2022 National Budget. I would like to begin with Psalms 133:1 which teaches us that where there is unity, God commands his blessings and in my maiden speech in Parliament back in 2014, I had emphasised this fact that the solution for the country to move forward is when we agree on things that should move our country forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 is the backdrop and it is a pandemic which the whole world is facing right now and no country is spared and I have said that too last year in my response to the COVID-19 (Response) Budget. Countries and governments need to put measures in place and also funding are supported by policies that need to provide relief to its citizens and my measurement for any budget during the crisis would always be in two-pronged. One will be whether the budget has met the requirement of sustaining us during the crisis or its citizens and secondly, has the budget got measures in place that will assist the country move forward post-COVID-19, whether those two big links are present in the budget. From my own assessment, in the Budget and also viewing plenty,

receiving the views of the voters around here in Macuata, you know according to some of the budget announcements that has been made. But again, it is a difficult time and the idea is that, the Budget needs to provide certain kind of relief. That is the bottom line in all these that there are twofold; one is to sustain us and the other one is to move forward.

For the 2021-2022 Budget, I see a decisive plan probably in three folds. Firstly, sustainable measures providing cushions for those who are affected or suffering from the effects of COVID-19, at the same time, trying to create that demand of people's spending through the various assistance to create the economic spin and the much needed growth as we are trying to recover from this pandemic. Secondly, there are vital policies in the Budget which will assist in our effort to revive the economy post-COVID-19, as I have already said, and that is something that all governments should be preparing for in looking forward to the future after COVID-19.

Thirdly, I see in the Budget that there needs to be a national consolidated effort trying to get our head immunity or population immunity which is in line with the WHO goal to support vaccination to secure immunised population. In Fiji, we have a target of 80 percent. The Honourable Prime Minister this morning had said that we have already gone through our 75 percent for the first dose and moving towards trying to get the 100 percent. That is the target and once we get that and the segment of the population are immunised, it will reduce unnecessary death and the spread. Not only that, it gives us more chances of getting back to the new norm more quickly.

The other thing I see is the added \$9 million in our Ministry of Health, which will be also helping those who are combatting COVID-19 at the frontline and those who are managing the general operation of our response from the Permanent Secretary and his team out there. On that note, I would like to thank all those frontline workers who have committed and given their lives for the country trying to keep everyone safe, spending most of their time away from their families and even some have contracted the virus. Even my younger sister is a biomedical engineer and in her line of duty, she also contracted the virus which she had recovered from, given that she has two small children and was also pregnant, but she is back at work now. That shows the calling and the commitment to the nation in fighting this together which is very important at this particular time.

I also wish our Olympians after the first game with Japan Team, the hosts. We are happy, but they still have a big task ahead, given that they are also in pool with Great Britain, a Team that is a silver medallist in the last Olympics.

I also urge people to pray for those patients of COVID-19 and those who are affected through socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. We should keep them in our prayers as Fijians, living no one behind. But I will go back to the plan that is in the Budget and the condition of a 'no jab, no job' condition on assistance. We have to view this from a perspective that we are in a war. Once we are in a war and in a strategy to combat the war, and COVID-19 is our enemy and to regain normalcy faster, so that our economy can be back up running again enabling Fijians who have lost jobs to regain employment and our very key industries to be revived, I think is very important that decisive leadership and those kind of policies should be in place so that we can attain our immunity as I have said. The quicker we attend that population immunity the quicker we got back to normalcy and I think these conditions that are in place will help us assist, especially in the strategies to combat COVID-19 at the moment in Fiji given the rate at which we are moving on ahead. There could be many interpretations on human rights and other freedoms of choice of people but again, I remind you, we are in a war against COVID-19 and we need measures in place to attain that, if not, we will not survive, and in order to win the war, these are some of the things that need to be implemented.

Our borders, hotels will reopen, as I have said, as well as industries, airlines with all our travelling tourists, our children going back to school, trade is normal again and all things that we

used to celebrate before, promote “Fiji the way the world should be” and that should be our view as national leaders - what is the way forward from where we are now? That is what I would like to say on the Budget, also to say that living with the grassroots community, there is assistance in the agricultural sector, fisheries sector and also the forestry sector. I think those assistance will be very helpful to alleviate the difficulties that our citizens are facing right now, not only that but building themselves in order to create more income-generating avenues and alternate things that they are able to go through.

Some of the announcements are welcome. In terms of the removal of fees on boat licence and also boat masters licence, birth certificates, sometimes are difficult in getting those assistance but those requirements have been waived which is welcomed by the agriculture sector, fisheries sector and also the forestry sector in the rural community.

Also on NDPs and Small Micro Enterprises (SMEs) it is good that we have allocations. So, this will help to become spring boards in our economy and also provide those necessary spins where people can trade amongst themselves and money can circulate and also things can be normal or at least be normal in their various capacity and status.

On *iTaukei* land, I think there is assistance in terms of *iTaukei* Land Development for landowners. I think there are a few projects that are ongoing now and we welcome that because landowners moving into land development which is very important now given the use of their resources. Those are the big things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I would like to say that it is very, very important that we have a Budget that has in place a plan that will assist our citizens in this difficult time.

The various incentives that are there in terms of the payment for the unemployed due to COVID-19 that will provide relief to those affected. It might help them and also could help them, you know moving into other small ventures that they want to create, small businesses but the thing that there is a plan and people will be assisted and we hope and pray that we move forward again normal but this is the kind of things that needs to be there at this particular time.

I will go now into Bill No. 17, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because there has been a lot of talk on Bill No. 17, but my contribution this afternoon will be from a landowner’s perspective, who is moving into business and entrepreneurship.

I think I really do not support the idea of using land as a political tool to manipulate support but the idea of land being secured under the law, I think there is no question on that because Section 28 of the 2013 Constitution talks about that, also Section 29 plus the Fair Returns of Royalty in Section 30.

Section 4 of the Native Land Trust Act where the control of native land is vested on the Board, it is already there and if you go into section 9 on the Renewal of Lease, I think there is a duty of the Board as trustee to also consult the landowners to give in those terms and conditions.

However, for Bill No. 17, it talks about the consent not given to mortgage, charge, pledge and caveat. I think to me, as a landowner, we own about 12,000 acres of *mataqali* land. *Mataqali* Namako in Dogotuki, Macuata. In our land, we have got about 2,000 hectares for Fiji Hardwood. We have got a conservation lease under the REDD+ which is about 5,000 hectares and also moving into our Ridge to Reef Project.

The other benefit of climate change and also carbon trading which we are part of that initiative and also workshops training us to preserve and conserve our forests and the eco-systems within it.

The other thing that we have is a stone crusher where we are partnering for the last five years with Bula Earthworks, one of the FRA contractors improving the roads from Qelemumumu right to the Natewa Crossroad where the gravel or the rocks are extracted is from my *mataqali*.

In our partnership between a few tenants and us just last month on our terms and conditions, we were able to agree and they bought a portable sawmill for us from New Zealand which will empower us more to add value to our resources and also move into our various community projects in housing and other things that need to be done to improve our landowners' status.

On the business side, we have got a real estate property in Labasa Town. The only *mataqali* who has a real estate property now at Rosawa Street, Labasa Town are the big *iTaukei* companies like the Macuata Provincial, Namuka and the Labasa Tikina but again we have moved from being landowners to become entrepreneurs and from there going into the banks and the various requirements. It is a big thing because we *iTaukei* are not used to that but again it is time for us to use our resources.

I agree with the Amendment given the need to move that way. We do not only look at this from the view that this is for the indo-Fijian tenants because some sitting *iTaukei* tenants who want to venture into business will also benefit from this, and that is my argument. Given that sometimes the processing at the bank takes a while, this quickens the approval processes much faster and also the disbursement of loans.

On the other hand, I see the no-consent issue as not a problem because even after it goes to the bank, the bank still makes those assessment and if there are breaches within that, it will always contact back to iTLTB and iTLTB will do their internal inspection and the administrative role that they play. So, there should not be any fear around that from my view because there are sufficient measures in place in the current mechanism within iTLTB that handles all that.

I am speaking from my perspective as I have said as a landowner moving into entrepreneurship for the last 20 years, we are encouraging everyone, for all landowners to use their resources and use the policies in place to get the funding so that we can accelerate into the business sector - that is where the ball game is and where we can lift our status.

The view of Native Land from a protectionist view, that should be removed because we have to think about native land as in innovation, empowerment and how we put in measures in place assisted by government so that we can be empowered through the various assistance we have. We can do that in developing ourselves because those inheritances are just a small part and we hold it for our future generation and what do we do as the now generation in developing that and also enabling those that will come later after us to have a legacy on themselves too, a better legacy. That is our legacy, that we should leave behind and again, Mr. Speaker, those are the things that I see that Bill No. 17 is very important, especially moving into entrepreneurship and encouraging development.

Also, the likelihood of the assessment of rentals will increase and the value of land could be increasing as we go into valuation plus other things that iTLTB has in the pipeline to move into land innovation and other partnership that will increase the value of land and also more returns to the landowners, enabling them to set up more development and also other businesses that could channel and improve their livelihood.

Those generally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, are my views on Bill No. 17 and what we are going through, but again it comes back to the idea of rebuilding. The Budget needs to rebuild our nation in a pandemic. Are we focusing on rebuilding our nation or are we focusing on trying to create more division? This is a very important time that we have, that we need unity, as I started in Psalms

133:1, we need unity as we move forward and unity in things that national leaders should balance, one is empowering *iTaukei* through their resources so that they be able to be in self-entrepreneurship, and also at the same time, build our national relations so that we build a non-racial, cultural and vibrant, united, well-governed, fully democratic nation which is very progressive and at the same time, we maintain that peace and it is a duty of all national leaders in this august House. I would say that we need to strike the balance all the time and see that when we are propagating anything that should not affect or move into racial lines or anything like that but for the betterment of others and to strike a win-win situation between the tenants and the landlords.

I am also thankful that the Budget too has also increased that \$85 per tonne in the cane. From Labasa and the rural cane belt area, the farmers are very happy because there will be now more lease returns to the landowners in terms of paying their rates and also our village boys are also cane-cutters who will be able to earn more from the increase and that is a big relief and also I talk around a lot with the Indian community around here in Labasa and this is something that actually boosts the economy around here.

Those are a few things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from my view, this is not the time to play politics, this is not the time to use land as a political tool to manipulate things that are better off for the nation in terms of development of the *iTaukei* and also something that is very important now as we move forward, especially the amendment of Bill No. 17 will enable that \$200 million assistance at Fiji Development Bank where many small businesses and many farmers will be assisted when they apply for that grant and they will have a lift in their business, especially in the difficult times now when they are going through COVID-19.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would say that the Budget to me is something that is very bold, there are decisive decisions that have been made by the Government and this to me is a Budget that will rebuild our nation and with those words, Sir, I would say that I support this Budget.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear! *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Bulitavu for his contribution to the debate and I now give the floor to the Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts. You have the floor.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Attorney-General, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, *as-salaam walekum, ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I speak to support the 2021-2022 Fijian National Budget. Before I move to do that, I would like to thank the Honourable Bulitavu for his address and support for the Bill. Indeed, Honourable Bulitavu, you have said things that not only soothes the ears of us here as national leaders, but something that is going to give comfort to all those fellow Fijians who have anticipated and waited for this Budget to be presented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are going through what will be remembered by generations to come, as one of the toughest moments in the history of our beloved nation. The actions that we take today, the decisions that we make today will determine the future of our country and our children for decades to come.

We cannot afford to play political football with COVID-19 as some politicians are currently doing, and God forbid they continue to do, we could be lost for us. The FijiFirst Government will not let that come to our people, and I urge all who truly care about Fiji and Fijians to quickly realise that we have a common enemy in COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 does not care about politics; COVID-19 does not care about ethnicity nor gender; COVID-19 does not care about socio-economic status; and COVID-19 has only one goal, that is to infect and to kill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are in the middle of the largest and the toughest disasters that any government has ever faced, and the Fijian Government, under the leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister, is currently mounting the biggest response effort in the Fijian history. We need to put our people first. We need to ensure that all Fijians are provided with the tools to weather and survive this astronomical storm and the 2021-2022 Budget does that all.

When we are in times of national crisis, when we are under attack, there is a code, the humanity code and that is the code we must all abide by in these tough times. This code calls for putting aside of politics and self-serving agendas and instead, standing united to fight a common enemy. Now more than ever, we need this humanity code, unity, love and to spread the message of hope amongst our people. Because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, hope, will enable us Fijians to channel our spirits and fight COVID-19 for the sake of our beloved nation.

Sir, COVID-19 is a global calamity that spread across the world at an extraordinary rate and has affected, in total over 119 million people and claimed the lives of over four million. Fiji has not been spared. In Fiji, over 22,000 Fijians have been affected with the disease since March 19th, 2020, and thousands of Fijians have had their lives turned upside down, including deaths and hospitalisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to commend the hard work done by the Honourable Minister for Economy, and his team who have come up with a budget that widely caters for the needs of our people. The Budget that is bold, economical, accommodative and focused on addressing the needs of our people in these challenging times.

The 2021-2022 Budget was developed after consultation with everyday Fijians from all walks of life and this is clearly reflected through the numerous policies that are designed to keep us going through these difficult times. During this critical time, the FijiFirst Government sees the need to empower and uplift everyday Fijians and this is exactly what the innovative and forward-looking Budget will do.

We are doing everything in our powers to protect our fellow Fijians - our Fijian workers, Fijian businesses and families, all while protecting Fijian lives from this deadly virus. The National Budget has been received very well by most people and they understand that we have a fight on our hands and that we must face head-on as a united country. The loss of life is always tragic and we must do whatever it takes to protect every single one. I would like to give my sincere condolences to those families who have lost their loved ones due to this pandemic, and my prayers, are with those who are currently battling this deadly disease.

Mr. Speaker, Sir every single eligible Fijian must get vaccinated and they must also urge their friends and families to do the same. My Ministry is the largest civil service employer in Fiji and out of our 13,823 employees, to date, we have 11,066 who have received their first dose of the vaccine. I strongly urge all our Head Office staff, all teachers, and all our ancillary staff to get vaccinated not only for themselves but for all fellow Fijians. Vaccination is the best strategy to defeat COVID-19. Complying with advice and restriction, is paramount.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Fijian must abide by the health restrictions and measures set by authorities. Sadly, some Fijians are not complying, they are breaching protocol, and this will only prolong the situation. We have seen how countries around the world have been devastated by

COVID-19 and based on the data and expert advice, vaccination is the only long-term strategy to win against this virus. We as Fijians have the power to end this and go back to our normal life.

The Ministry of Health advises that we get 80 percent targeted population vaccinated, we will be able to go back to the way things were, pre-COVID. We need to get fully vaccinated. We need two doses of the vaccine if we want to keep our loved ones safe.

Mr. Speaker, let me say this, no one is safe until everyone is safe. Our frontliners are doing their part. Our doctors, nurses, and medical professionals are stretched to the limit working 24/7 to treat those with COVID-19.

Our security forces, police force, distribution teams, and service providers are risking their lives every single moment, every single day to assist those families in isolation in locked-down areas. These are the realities that our teams are facing on the ground right now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recall the Honourable Leader of Opposition talking about things been rosy, rosy, yes, not everything is rosy, rosy, we know that. I am glad you used my name Honourable Leader of Opposition.

We have to understand the realities at the ground level. And I would like to record my sincere appreciation to all those frontliners who have put the needs of all Fijians before theirs, and have worked tirelessly to ensure that we remain safe and protected. All we have to do is to help them to put an end to this so Fiji get vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many irresponsible people. Some already mentioned by previous speakers involving some politicians spreading misinformation not only on the COVID-19 vaccines but Bill No. 17 that is before the House and they are making a lot of people scared right now. I urge everyone not to be misled by this information, whether it is on the media, social media or just by word of mouth. As elected Members of Parliament, we are seen by Fijians as leaders and thousands rely on us to give them accurate information.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as leaders we have the responsibility for all our people because they have trusted us. It is deeply saddening for me to see what is happening to our people right now because of irresponsible comments and misinformation and outright lies that were spread by some of our Members at a time like this when we are battling against COVID-19.

Here is an agenda to rip us Fijians apart. Honourable Tabuya, Honourable Gavoka, Honourable Tikoduadua, Honourable Qionibaravi and others should have known better than spreading lies that have led to a lot of unrest amongst our people. They completely misunderstood Bill No. 17 and because of their inability to understand, in my view, this has created unrest in our beloved nation and possibility of racial division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am going to quote a comment from the social media regarding conversations about Bill No. 17. One comment said and I quote: "Did you know that you belong to nowhere in this world, you go to India, you do not belong here". Many comments like that followed. Comments like that, including threats of violence, are now spreading to groups on social media like fire. I have my teenage daughter waking me last night after reading these comments and she said to me, and I quote: "Mummy are we safe? I looked at her and I asked, why? She said, "I am glad we have dogs to protect our house." I asked, why is that? She said, "Are we going to be attacked?"

Mr. Speaker, Sir, misinformation about Bill No. 17 is definitely creating fear amongst our people and we need to stop that. I like generations many generations of Fijians have grown up in Fiji

and I love this country. The majority of Fijians are decent people and do not want to see a division. So, I urge our politicians to stop this nonsense. To stop the old style politics which seek to divide and conquer. You are hurting us. You are hurting our country and you are hurting our people. Our actions have consequences. This is not a game. Not a game you are playing with the lives of our people and the future of our country. The false information is spread by sad individuals, whose only goal in life is to mayhem and destruction. Please, stop that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us come back to the vaccination. Vaccinations have been formulated by professionals who have years of experience and are backed up by science and research. Diseases such as polio, smallpox, tetanus used to cause many deaths around the world and we beat them through vaccines, so why the resistance now. Mr. Speaker, Sir, vaccines have been effective as I have said, in eradicating diseases throughout history and this vaccination programme that we are targeting will definitely help our nation come back to normal situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Fijian National Budget is a testament of the FijiFirst Government's commitment to investing in our country's future through the education of our brave young Fijian boys and girls. A total of \$704.6 million has been allocated to the education sector, \$442.9 million to the Ministry of Education for all its operational needs, \$71.4 million in operation grants to higher education including our three universities and seven TVET institutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$159.6 million for TELS and National Toppers Scheme has been allocated in this financial year. The FijiFirst Government recognizes that opportunities for tertiary education exists through our TELS and National Toppers Scheme. Sir, 43,604 students have so far benefited from TELS and this has allowed them not only to obtain important skills but also to contribute to the capabilities of the Fijian workforce.

Mr. Speaker Sir, due to the current conditions, some changes have been made to TELS to ensure that those who truly need assistance are prioritized. There are many initiatives under this Programme that the Honourable Minister for Economy has shared with us during the National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TELS will now be provided to students from families who have a household income of less than \$100,000. We are increasing the number of TELS for TVET Programme at FNU to 5,000 students in the next academic year. These students will not be able to make the cut-off mark for TELS are offered Degree Programmes or have an interest in TVET education will be able to join this Scheme including our Year 12 students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all MBBS students that privately joined in 2021 with a minimum Year 13 marks of 340 and first-year GPA of 3.0 and family income below \$100,000 will be eligible for a one-off payment of \$10,000 by this Government grant towards their MBBS education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$20 million from this Budget and \$8 million from DFAT has been allocated for the re-construction of schools. Even during this pandemic Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government had thought of our students in trying to build conducive facilities for our students. A number of schools that sustained their damage through *TC Winston*, *TC Gita*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* will be assisted by this \$20 million. Rehabilitation works in six other schools damaged in *TC Winston* will also continue and the \$8 million that we have allocated for this year under DFAT will also help in the re-construction of three schools in the Northern Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this year's Budget, we will continue with the re-construction work and from 2017 the Government through the Ministry of Education and the Construction Implementation Unit has already spent \$218 million in the rebuild of new schools and this work will continue in the next financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the provision of good quality education is a partnership between the Ministry, the civil society, business communities, and development partners. Australia continues to be a very important partner in education in this financial year and we will continue with many curriculum revision programmes. We are looking at improving business processes and the revision of our primary school English and Math curriculum, which is scheduled to be trialed in 2022.

Work has also begun on the revision of our secondary school English and Math curriculum. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank UNICEF who is another important partner with the Ministry of Education and they have supported various WASH programmes within our schools and I would like to record my appreciation to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2.7 million to support all our Year 13 and all Fijian University students with a data bundle of \$20 per month which will greatly assist them for their online learning. Mr. Speaker Sir, a number of secondary schools across the nation are offering online classes for Year 13 students and this is conducted via zoom. Out of the 169 Secondary Schools, we have 64 schools conducting zoom classes and this assistance in terms of the data bundle will greatly assist families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to inform that all our three Universities have been offering online education during this pandemic and students will also be able to get assistance of this \$20 a month data bundle. A survey has been conducted and the results are very pleasing for those students who are engaged in home learning and we have asked the Fiji Higher Education Commission to continue with ongoing surveys to see that our students are assisted during the school closure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$60 million has been provided to cater for over 220,000 primary and secondary schools under the Free Education Grant (FEG). This means that the students will continue to receive the FEG under this Government. Also, \$17 million has again been allocated for transport assistance which will ensure 90,000 students will be able to travel to and from school under this assistance.

Mr. Speaker Sir, COVID-19 has had unprecedented impacts on sectors around the globe. A recent survey by UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows that globally since April 2021, 1.5 billion learners have been affected due to COVID-19. The list of countries that have had to have complete school closure includes many more.

Closer to home, children in New South Wales and South Australia are facing disruptions to their classes like our own students here in Fiji. I am pleased to say that the Ministry of Education, despite the difficult times has continued to provide access to learning resources through multiple mediums. The Ministry has been providing supplementary materials to students in the form of worksheets, radio broadcasts, videos on our *Walesi* Channel and more recently, the LearningHUB which is proving to be a popular choice of online resource access. We continue to engage our students in learning and teachers are continuously engaging with students and parents. The teachers are preparing and providing weekly home study packages to ensure home learning continues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I need to emphasise that parental engagement in their children's learning at this juncture is equally important. I wish to commend our parents and guardians, and I wish to remind them that it is very important that they assist the Ministry in terms of continuity of learning even if learning is happening in informal environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget will allow the Ministry to re-open face-to-face mode of communication if our targeted population is vaccinated and clearance is given to us by the Ministry of Health. Our current plan is to stagger the re-opening based on the Ministry of Health's approval

beginning from Year 12 and 13. Currently the Ministry's curriculum advisory team is realigning the curriculum to ensure it suits the current need when the schools do re-open.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government for the first time will provide sanitary pads to all female students from late primary to Year 13 through an allocation of \$1.5 million. About 50,000 female students from primary school to Year 13 are expected to be assisted through this initiative, the first of its kind.

Mr Speaker, Sir, while COVID-19 is our current focus, we cannot forget other threats that lie in wait. Stronger and more intense tropical cyclones are becoming a more common occurrence due to climate change and we are prepared under this Budget to continue with our reconstruction and rehabilitation programme of all schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our civil servants can breathe a sigh of relief knowing that they will not face any cuts in salary yet. Our school ancillary staff continue to receive their full wages during these unprecedented times. Mr Speaker, Sir, here is a government that looks after its people. Wherever possible we need to show compassion to our people especially our civil servants but at the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we expect our civil servants to rise to the call of the nation. The country needs you and you must rise in a joint national effort to provide your support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though the country's revenue has come down, the Government has not forgotten its civil servants and to all the civil servants out there, we have thought of you and therefore, your salaries have not been touched but I urge you to repay this by serving the nation because like I said, now more than ever Fiji needs you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to conclude by quoting the WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus on his keynote address during the 138th International Olympic Committee Session. He says, I quote:

“The people of the world are sick and tired. Sick of the virus. Sick of the lives and livelihoods it has taken. Sick of the sufferings it has caused. Sick of the restrictions and disruptions to their lives. Sick of the turmoil it has caused to economies and societies, and sick of the dark clouds it has cast over our futures”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can get out of this situation if we work in solidarity. We must be positive and we must support every effort of the Fijian Government to ensure that we are able to get out of these challenges in the near future for the sake of our people. I also take this time to wish our Fijian athletes all the very best for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics Game.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you and I would also like to reiterate my final statement, no one is safe until everyone is safe, so get vaccinated Fiji. That is the way forward for us. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her contribution to the debate. I now call upon the Honourable Gavoka, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me make my contribution on the debate on the 2021-2022 Budget.

At the outset, for the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, we do not want anyone to be living in fear and we are sorry that your children had the sense of apprehension about your safety in this country. What really comes down to Honourable Akbar is that, we need to consult

with each other when it comes to sensitive issues so that our people do not live in fear. So, please you may wish to pass that on to the hierarchy or your Party to ensure that we do not live in fear.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is not business friendly. Investments have been lacking these many years and we have been highlighting this all along and stressing the points that we cannot be relying solely on public spending to drive the economy. We have always said that the Bainimarama boom is a house built on sand as public spending can only go so far. It is the private sectors, the investors that will need to drive the economy.

The Government has mismanaged the private sector and Fiji is now paying for that mismanagement. Our ranking in ease of doing business has dropped considerably. We were at 102 in 2019 and we are now at 110 in 2020-2021. This is out of 190 countries and a far cry from where we were in 2006 when we were at 34, in 2012 when we were at 58 and this is quite inexcusable and the blame should be laid squarely in the feed of the FijiFirst Government.

In this Budget, Government is trying to make us business friendly. There are many indicators on how a country can improve environment of doing business. International benchmarks are procedures of starting a business, dealing with construction permits, getting electricity, registering property, getting credit, protecting minority investors, taxes, trading across borders, enforcing contracts and resolving insolvency.

Those are trend indicators, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Unwisely, the FijiFirst Government has decided that land should feature prominently in this effort for ease of doing business and grossly, unwisely by doing without consultations. At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Bulitavu is an aberration, he is different from everyone else, and if indeed you have a spare ticket out there FijiFirst, give it to him in 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is well known that 91 percent of the land is indigenous land. It is well known that for us the indigenous Fijians, land is generally seen as an ancestral trust, which the present generation has to pass over to future generations - *neimamu kawa mai muri* (our future generations). It is something that we use quite often. We maintain a very strong cultural link with the land, which is our most valuable heritage. To sneak in a Bill that alters the *iTaukei* land system as a Consequential Bill at a time when COVID-19 is ravaging in the country is the height of irresponsibility.

There is disbelief within the *iTaukei* community that this is happening. Petitions are being signed across the country, petitioning His Excellency the President, the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Speaker not to do this. We are a people who believe in dialogue. Our Honourable Prime Minister talks about *talanoa* as a way of doing things. Why did he not carry out *talanoa* on this Bill No. 17? The petitions with pleas from the heart have come from the chiefs.

I have been copied letters from the Tui Tavua, people of the Tui Ba, Tui Vuda, Tui Vitogo, Tui Sabeto, Tui Nadi, Tui Nawaka, the Turaga Na Ka Levu and the chiefs of Nadroga/Navosa. I know there are many out there still making their way to Parliament.

As alluded to by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, our chiefs are now of a new generation, well educated, well-travelled and should be engaged on issues with meaningful dialogue. They should not be treated in the cavalier manner that we see with Bill No. 17.

The online petition, Mr. Speaker, is 15,000 and growing. Together with those collected physically, we could be reaching some 20,000 signatures; all this since Thursday, in a matter of five

days. No petition has galvanized the people as this one, simply to ask the FijiFirst Government to withdraw Bill No. 17. That is all we are asking, to withdraw Bill No. 17.

There are ways of improving iTLTB. Destroying a fundamental principle of law that of the property owners' right is not the way to improve administrative issues. Bill No. 17, has become so caustic that some of my colleagues were taken by Police yesterday – the Honourable Professor Prasad, Honourable Qionibaravi, Honourable Tabuya, Honourable Tuisawau, Honourable Tikoduadua and the leader of Unity Fiji, Mr. Savenaca Narube. It should not be this way, Mr. Speaker. We are a free people. We should conduct public discourse without fear. This is what SODELPA believes. This is the reason why SODELPA says it is time for change. After 15 years of FijiFirst, of the Bainimarama and his style of leadership, the people are saying enough is enough. It is time to change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No.17 will lead to the erosion of goodwill between the communities in Fiji. The Bill should be withdrawn. If the Honourable Prime Minister refuses to withdraw the Bill and the Act is amended, let it be known today that the SODELPA government will make corrections by restoring Section 12 and that the fundamentals of property rights are protected. Make known today that SODELPA will change its back to what was restoring this Section 12.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Lying.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- For us, largely Christian people, the sacredness of land is Biblical. The Bible teaches us to be very careful about land and there is fear that you do not treat land issues casually. A directive from the Almighty is in Deuteronomy and I quote: 19:14– “Do not move your neighbour’s boundaries stone, set up by your predecessors.” This is in the Bible, do not move any boundaries.

Making these amendments to the Act of 1940 with the blessings of the Council of Chiefs to compromise the Native Land System is similar to moving boundary stones which the Almighty prohibits. You are moving the boundaries here. You are moving the stones here.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- I think in this Bill ...

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know about the motion by Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna to the Council of Chiefs. No. 1, that it will be in the best interest that may be raised, that all lands, the present laying idle will be put to use. That the amount of land needed for proper development for the native owners be determined, this step would indicate the amount left over and that all land not so required be handed over to Government to lease on our behalf.

The passage of this Bill in the Council of Chiefs in 1936 was one of the most significant decision that the Council of Chiefs ever made, it took some four years of meticulous work before a Bill was tabled at the Legislative Council by the Secretary of the Fijian Affairs for the establishment of the then Native Land Trust Board whose function was to lease land on behalf of native owners for whom the land was held in trust. It incorporated all the agreed principles approved by the Council of Chiefs in Nadi in 1936. This was the origin of the current Native Land Trust Act Cap 134 and first appeared as Ordinance No. 12 in 1940 dated 7th June.

I reiterate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that land is sacred and Bill No. 17 is similar to moving boundary stones where the elders have put in place and runs against the Word of God. The sentiments being expressed against Bill No. 17 are unprecedented as indicated by the support for the petition and, of course, a day will change. There are some of my colleagues, Honourable Members of Parliament and other leaders of Fiji who were taken in for interrogation by the Police.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me look at the legal perspectives of the Bill. I will ask three questions:

- (1) What is the problem that the Bill is intended to correct?
- (2) What is the solution that the Bill proposes?
- (3) Is the intended solution appropriate?

On the first question Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problem as outlined by the Government is the administrative delay on iTLTB's part. The problem is a problem of administration. We are talking about a problem of administration with iTLTB, this is where it is all coming from.

The second question; what is the solution that the Bill proposes? The solution as proposed under the Bill is in summary:

- (1) iTLTB's consent is no longer required under section 12 for any mortgage, any charge, any pledge, any caveat or any such lease dealt by or under the processes of any court of law.
- (2) iTLTB can only refuse consent to any application if, in other words, iTLTB must give consent, unless there is a breach of a lease condition of the application being made is not in accordance with the law.

If you understand the Government's version, you will note that the solution is that, not only does a tenant not need any consent for a charge, a mortgage, a pledge, a caveat of any dealing under a court of law, but also iTLTB must give consent to a tenant applying to sell, transfer, sub-divide, sub-lease reason, et cetera, land under lease so long as there is no breach of the lease agreement of the law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these changes, the entire intent and effect of Section 12 and I would argue, the entire intended effect of the native land trust system itself. The Bill will effectively remove and disempower both, the iTLTB and the landowners from the processes and the decision-making regarding the land because the landowners own and which iTLTB is charged to administer and protect the rights and interests of the landowners in relation to that. The Bill will effectively take the tenant. This is interesting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill will effectively take the tenant and put him or her in the position of an owner, with all the powers and the discretion of an owner, so long as they do not breach the terms of the lease or the loan.

Mr. Speaker, the entire Westminster legal system recognises and protects the principle of ownership and protection of property, whether it be tangible property or intangible property, all our laws are designed to recognise and protect ownership and the wishes of the owner in relation thereto, even to the point of protecting property owners' property and wishes after his or her death through a State law. This Bill, Mr. Speaker, goes against the fundamental principle of protection of property ownership and the rights and wishes of the owner in relation thereto. It is not only unconscionable but also unjustifiable.

Many of my friends in the legal fraternity are not aware of any law that removes an owner's rights and wishes in relation to her rights property because of the administrative shortcoming of a

third party. Just because a third party has got administration problem, does not mean you remove the rights of the owner. This is what is happening here, Mr Speaker.

The third question; is the solution appropriate? The answer is, 'no'. The Bill removes the fundamental rights of ownership and discretion in relation to one's property and attempts to justify it based on the administrative shortcoming of a third party. That is it, Mr. Speaker, administrative.

The Bill destroys a fundamental principle of ownership in order to solve an administrative problem. An administrative problem should have an administrative solution. You do not go and change the basic fundamentals of law to provide an administrative solution. Improve iTLTB, Mr. Speaker. They have many areas that we can improve.

You do not go and change this fundamental law, Mr. Speaker. It is not reasonable to the fundamental principle of law. If we take this approach, the administrative problem solving, we end up with anarchy. If we do this across the country, as soon as there is an administrative problem, you change the law, we will have anarchy, Mr. Speaker.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- That is what will affect the rights of the landowners.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, what I mean is this. If we use the same logic as proposed under this Bill, then every time a government department or statutory authority delays its administrative process, we should solve this by making away the need to apply for any consent at all. That is what we are saying here. For instance, if the town councils are slow to provide building consent, just remove the need for building consent - that is all you are saying here. If you are slow in doing it, just remove the need for a consent. This is administrative.

If the Department of Environment is slow to provide EIA approval, just remove the need for EIA. If RBF is slow to provide consents to transfer of funds, just remove the need for RBF consent. That is basically what you are saying here, Mr. Speaker. If you apply this process across this country, there will be anarchy.

The logic behind the Bill is an absurdity and it can only lead to chaos. It is not the logic on which a modern society should be built. The Bill is legally-flawed, Mr. Speaker, and it is tragic that the landowners, a people known for their generosity are victims of this flaw. They should not be treated in this manner, a manner that is disrespectful and not the Fijian way.

As usual, Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister says SODELPA is taking this line because the Honourable Attorney-General is a *kai Idia*. SODELPA says this, "We do not care if the Attorney-General is a *kai Idia*, *kai Viti*, *kai Jaina*, *kai Loma* or *kai Vavalagi*, if you treat landowners in this manner, SODELPA will scream. Mr. Speaker, SODELPA will scream!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are here to debate the Budget and I would have loved to spend my time on the figures and the rationale, but I will not allow this amendment of such magnitude to sneak through, hence the time spent on this. Others are saying that it is being sneaked through to distract people from COVID-19. Whichever way, it is clear and this is now coming through quite clearly, with the support of the petition and the letters being written that FijiFirst has been weighed on the scale and found wanting. It should go, FijiFirst should go. After 15 years, people are fatigued. The FijiFirst type of governance is bewildering and exasperating - it is time for change. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the Budget.

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

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order! I now call upon the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports. You have the floor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I join my fellow colleagues and Opposition Member, Honourable Bulitavu, in support of the 2021-2022 National Budget, as delivered by the Honourable Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the very beginning of this current COVID-19 pandemic, our visionary leader, the Honourable Prime Minister, has committed to put in the wellbeing of all Fijians first and foremost. This has been done on the basis of the best available scientific advice, every method tried and tested globally and with local adaptation, have been made to counter the terrible impact of this virus. This Budget is another solid indicator that at the heart of the Honourable Prime Minister's leadership, is the commitment that we all should stand united as one people just as this Government has done in standing by all Fijians during this crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Budget is an inventive and innovative Budget that provides focused pathways out of this crisis. We welcome the vision shown by the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team for coming up with a pro-active and the people focused budget during these difficult times. It is to the credit of the Honourable Attorney-General who has once again delivered for the betterment for the Fijian people he has done so as he has done many times before in providing budgets and policies that have generally changed the lives of all Fijians and made positive changes to government and how we conduct our service. His critics can keep on spreading false news and fake stories, but the Honourable Attorney-General keeps on delivering for all Fijians and we would like to thank him for his work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a forward-looking Budget with the key aim on vaccination, income support for unemployed, business revival, economic diversification and micro fiscal stability, with focus in lives and livelihoods for all Fijians, it provides pathways to better prepare us for the new normal under the COVID-19 now and for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the core of Government's commitment towards economic recovery, is the stated aim of achieving herd immunity through the vaccination of 80 percent of our target population over 18 years of age. This will have a huge impact for our economic recovery efforts. This is our key aim and we must try to achieve this without any doubt or fear. I urge every eligible Fijian to get vaccinated. This is the only way you can be safe, your families and the economy. This is not the time to play flip-flop politics on vaccination. All medical and health advise points to the help and remedial benefit of vaccination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point I wish to speak on the Budget Implication on the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations.

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1996 and recent amendment to the Health and Safety at Work, General Workplace Conditions (Amendment) Regulation 2021, protects the Health and Safety of all the employers, workers or non-workers in the form of wider community in and around workplaces, from any risk that arises at the workplace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry through the National Occupational Health and Safety Services has commenced its awareness campaign on the new amendment to employers, workers, workplaces, OHS Committees and OHS representatives through virtual workplace face to face awareness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent comments by the National Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) that no consultation on this amendment was done by the tripartite board, is a total lie. The National OHS Advisory Board including FTUC five members were consulted on 6th July 2021 on the proposal to have this workplace vaccination mandated. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the five FTUC members voted against the proposed changes that will help save lives and livelihood for Fijian workers. The rest of the board members voted for the proposed amendment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me remind the union leaders. If they were serious about the lives of their members and their families then they should be encouraging their members to be vaccinated. They should take their cue from the global labour and union movements, who have all come out in support of universal vaccination to ensure safety and economic wellbeing of their workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to repeat what our Honourable Prime Minister said in relation to the need for vaccination on the no job no job policy in place. I wish to reiterate that this also applies to all Fijians wishing to be part of our Labour Mobility Programme, no job no employment opportunity in programmes like the Pacific Mobility Scheme for those who remain unvaccinated.

All Fijians should be aware that our neighbours in Australia and New Zealand are facing a crisis of sourcing labour for areas such as seasonal farm work and in the meat industry that Fiji can easily fill and we no doubt will play a leading role in years to come. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my message to the workers that have been registered under this programme please take out your time and get vaccinated. No ifs and buts - get a job, get a job will be the premise for potential opportunities under this scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's Labour Mobility Programme already plays a very important role in our economy recovery effort through remittances from our Fijian workers. With personal remittances standing at \$652.7 million in 2020 and expected to grow about 8.7 percent to \$709.3 million this year, this growth is expected to further increase by 3 percent in 2022 as reported in the supplementary notes in the 2021-2022 Budget Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this people-centred budget is designed to cushion the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure that all Fijians and their families are given relief in equal measures during these testing times.

The Stronger Together Job Support Scheme that will assist employers in the payment of the \$2.68 wage subsidy is indeed an important assistance for job creation during these difficult times. This is the courage and vision of a strong government and a leader that believes in the interest of its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the commitment by the FijiFirst Government showcased by the \$200 million available for businesses as a start-up capital and \$200 million unemployment income supports Fijians whose employment have been affected by COVID-19. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in FPNP contribution by the employers and workers indicate the long term vision of this government to secure workers fund for sustainability and to ensure security is provided.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now speak on the 2021-2022 National Budget in relation to its enabling provision that will help us to provide better service under the Ministry of Youth and Sports portfolio. Mr. Speaker, Sir, young Fijians in the youth group of 15 years to 35 years of age will greatly benefit from the integrated approach, the innovation and self-help embedded in the budget in its general provisions. Issues affecting our Fijian youths are crosscutting and therefore in this budget it is addressed across multiple ministries and programmes.

Turning to budget allocation for our youth Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will provide the platform to further strengthen our community-based programme. This will provide youths with opportunities to develop employment pathways, provide opportunities for job creation and innovation and imparting life skills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, our elite Fijian sports people are flying our flag proudly at the Tokyo Olympics and I would like to congratulate our Sevens Team for their first win this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to provide capacity building and empowerment based training programmes across the youth and sports arenas in Fiji. We will be enabled, under the budget allocation, to work smarter and harder to ensure that the funds are used in sustainable ways. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget allocation will enable us to further work on programmes such as the first ever National Youth Climate Action Summit which took place in mid-March this year.

In addition the allocation to our four training centres around Fiji will enable programmes upgrades and increase training activity Mr. Speaker, Sir. Likewise the allocation for sports infrastructure upgrades are also important to provide fit for purpose facilities to train the future sports stars of Fiji. I welcome government's continued commitment to sports training and the relevant budgetary allocation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget provides a solid pathway to our government economic plan to secure Fiji's recovery. It creates jobs, guarantees essential services and builds a more resilient, secure and united Fiji for today and for our future generation, unlike what the Opposition wishes and comes out with their old game to divide our people even during these difficult times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition is full of hot-air when it comes to government, yet they do not have any new or practical ideas. Their so-called contributions fall far short of this strong economic recovery budget that the Honourable Minister for Economy has presented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it comes as no surprise to see that the Leader of the Fiji Labour Party adding to the Opposition hot-air by his old tricks and asking farmers to boycott the cane harvesting and now we see Mr. Chaudhry being joined by the NFP leader and SODELPA leader in opposing Bill No. 17. Sir, these leaders individually and collectively have lit the fire inciting people along their old tricks of appealing to race.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these leaders do not care about the potential harm to all Fijians whether it be COVID-19 or sugarcane boycotts or inciting tensions by misrepresenting Bill No. 17. They do not care if ordinary Fijians are harmed or their livelihoods are taken from them. All they care about is their selfish political gains. I call on Fijians to think about their selfish call and act in the interest of a united and secure Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a similar vein I urge all farmers to remember that this Government has done more to the sugar sector than any other government and FijiFirst Government will continue to assist our cane farmers. The guaranteed minimum price of \$85 per tonne of cane is of great assistance to our farmers. Mr. Chaudhry is now making noises because he can stand in the next election. The people of Fiji including cane farmers know this man inside out and they will no longer fall for his cheap tricks. Like the rest of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FLP Leader wishes only harm, doom and gloom for the country in order to convince people to vote for them as an alternative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget like those of the past FijiFirst budgets, has gone through a thorough consultation process even when the face-to-face meetings were not possible. The Honourable Minister for Economy and his team switched it to virtual mode to ensure that our people

are heard. This is only possible when we have a government that truly believes in the voice of its people and their voices are represented in this Budget that will ensure that the lives and livelihoods of all Fijians are given sustainable pathways towards recovery and beyond, under the new normal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this \$3.69 billion people-centred Budget by the FijiFirst Government will ensure that people and their rights, needs and aspiration are at the heart of the economy and social policies now and into the future. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank this august House for the privilege to speak and I fully support the motion to approve the 2021-2022 National Budget. Thank you.

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

HON. A. JALE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Government's Budget estimates for the period 2021-2022. Before I speak on the Budget Estimates, I wish to express my personal outrage at the manner in which a SODELPA Member of Parliament, Honourable Nawaikula, has been unceremoniously removed from Parliament. This technicality could have been easily resolved and it questions the motivation for such action by the Supervisor of Elections and, no doubt, the Minister responsible for Elections. Our prayers and support are with Honourable Nawaikula and we look forward to having him join us back in Parliament soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this sugar-coated funded Budget hinges on one major assumption, that herd immunity will be achieved with 80 percent vaccination coverage before the end of the year. As expressed by a commentator on the Budget as reported in the news, and I quote:

“This is a flawed assumption which is not informed by the prevailing scientific opinion on COVID-herd immunity from first generation vaccines.”

In his Budget Address, the Honourable Minister for Economy acknowledged that the arrival of the Delta variant has sent its devastating toll to painful new heights. Did the deadly Delta variant arrive on the same plane with the Honourable Minister for Economy on his return from Singapore on 10th April this year? So, how did the virus come on the plane from India? Who brought the virus? There should be an enquiry into the circumstances of how the virus was transmitted and what penalty should be meted out.

After all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, within days of the fateful arrival of the Delta variant, it immediately found its way out in to the community. Within the past 15 weeks' period, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services reported that as of 8.00 a.m. yesterday, on Sunday, 25th July, there have been 184 COVID-19 deaths. There have been a total of 23,069 cases during the outbreak that started in April. So, while over 5,000 have recovered, there are still 16,931 active cases. There is nothing specific in this Budget for those who have lost loved ones and nothing for those who have been directly infected and affected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had been assured by the Government that the virus was under control. Clearly, that has not been the case. The failure of this Government to control the spread of the virus and to provide the necessary compassionate and caring leadership is to be remembered along with the hide and seek manner, in which the Honourable Prime Minister made the midnight announcement to open up the containment borders that led up to a steep hike in positive cases.

Furthermore, the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport opened up retail outlets, causing a further steep hike in positive cases. We are in this mess because of the Government's lack of visions, lack of consultation, poor planning and miscalculations. The Budget,

Mr. Speaker, Sir is entirely dependent on the goodwill of our neighbours to continue to supply the vaccines, the dedication of frontline workers and the cooperation of the public.

At this juncture, I would like to commend the care and the commitment of the Australian and New Zealand Governments to come to Fiji's aid with the provision of vaccines and their medical teams. It is good that the Ministry of Economy acknowledged them as indispensable allies. After all, these were the very true governments that the Honourable Prime Minister had previously treated with contempt.

Other governments and the United Nations have also come to our aid. We also acknowledge the Government of India with the initial consignment of vaccines, UNICEF Pacific through the COVAX facility provided the second batch of vaccines and China donating hospital beds and medical supplies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to commend the Ministry of Health Officials, the frontline health workers in various health facilities and hundreds of Civil Servants and members of the disciplinary forces, I salute and pay tribute to their selfless and tireless response to the call of duty under very challenging circumstances.

It is heartening that there will be no cuts to Civil Service salaries, at least, not for the next six months. However, the suspension of rural and remote allowance is unfair. This is unfair on civil servants, who had volunteered to serve in rural and remote areas in Fiji. The allowance was meant to attract skilled civil servants to rural and remote areas and to compensate them for the hardship they face in terms of isolation, lack of transportation, minimal access to medical and health service and health education for their children. Although the suspension will be reviewed in the future, this drastic action must be reconsidered as allowances are part of emoluments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar-coated Budget, full of election hand-outs has a bitter pill to be swallowed - no jab, no benefit. This just continues the dictatorial manner in which this Government has ushered in a new regime of no jab, no nothing.

The Honourable Minister for Health told the media as reported in the *Fiji Times* of 12th June, and I quote: "No Civil Servant or any individual can be forced to be vaccinated." This was refuted by the No Jab, No Job announcement by the Honourable Prime Minister on 8th July.

In this regard, I note with concern the deliberate action by the Government to sideline trade unions and ignoring their umbrella bodies in matters concerning their welfare and interest of workers in Fiji, even though the Government had ratified Convention No. 144 - Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standard) Convention 1976.

The introduction of Health and Safety at Work, General Workplace Conditions (Amendment) Regulation 2021 restrict a worker from entering his/her workplace unless the worker has received at least the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine on or after the 1st August or the second dose on or after 1st November, 2021. A worker may be dismissed if he/she has not received at least the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine on or before 15th August, 2021 or the second dose before the 1st November, 2021.

Although the said regulation stated that it was only brought about after the recommendation from the Permanent Secretary responsible for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations after consulting the National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Board, it is evident from the strong opposition expressed by so many people in Fiji that the workers representatives in the board were not in agreement to the introduction of the regulation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I question the reason why the Government chose to use the Health and Safety at Work Act when there are other Acts under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services or any other Ministry of the Government that it can use to introduce the regulation. It is obvious that the Government and the Minister responsible for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations are not aware of the initial intent of the Health and Safety at Work Act and the negative implication of the new regulation will have on employer/employee work relationships now and in the future.

The ultimate intent of the Health and Safety at Work Act was to shift the responsibility for Health and Safety at Work from being the sole responsibility of the employer to a shared responsibility of the employer and the employees. The Act was meant to promote the cooperation between the employers and the employees through the Health and Safety Committees in addressing health and safety at work and to regulate their own processes. The regulation is re-positioned by Government or an act of pollution by the Government and the employers which is directly against the intent of the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a good number of Fijians have concerned about the status of the Fiji National Provident Fund. The Minister of Economy, the responsible Minister for FNPF seems to be dictating what FNPF ought to do. He has been announcing in Parliament the measures that FNPF will take to assist its members who have lost their jobs or working in reduced hours as a consequence of COVID-19 pandemic rather than the Board announcing the measures.

As the Board responsible, it show the members of FNPF that it is independent of government and is capable of delivering its fiduciary responsibility under the FNPF Act. The FNPF is being used by the Government as a case-cover for too long. The primary intent of FNPF to provide a timely benefit to members has been sidelined. We all enjoyed in the past the provident fund. For Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, they were declared bankrupt because of Government interference, and we should learn from that and take preventative measures.

It is time to bring back tri-partisan in the Fiji National Provident Fund Board. The Board should be representatives of government, employers and workers. The employers and workers care much about the success of the FNPF because the money paid to the Fund has enormous contributions that run from their own pockets. With the tripartite, the FNPF Boards have proven themselves and put the Fund in strong financial position, as compared to the unfortunate position that the current Board and Government through the Minister for Economy has dragged the Fund into.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my observation and summary of the Budget Estimate for the period August 2021 to July 2022 is set as new government replaces the FijiFirst Government. We will be so disgusted and overwhelmed by the state of indebtedness that Fiji has got itself into. The government tax will be 91.6 percent of GDP by the end of the 2021-2022 financial year. We have been led further into a debt trap, the debt is a special agreement with Exim Bank, which means that the government is shifting the responsibility for the repayment to the Exim bank to the Fiji Government.

The amendment to the loan agreement with the World Bank Group, the Asian Development Bank and the London Interbank will bring about the same burden of debt. The divestment of State-owned entities it is also a matter of concern. This Government has given away 20 percent of EFL and it is now planning to diverse shares in ATH Limited and Airports Fiji Limited.

The Government has already divested shares in the Ports Authority of Fiji. The fact is that, this Government is selling the people's assets that previous Governments, through their wisdom and foresight, founded and established to benefit the people of Fiji. The question is, when will this madness stop?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Budget Address, the Honourable Minister of Economy had referred to three objectives. Under the second objective, he referred to many new matrix, including removing costly, inefficient, outdated, bureaucratic processes and regulations. It now transpires that it is the reason for sneaking in Bill No. 17 of 2021 as a Consequential Bill to the Budget, which has outraged landowners and indigenous people in Fiji.

The Honourable Minister referred to the Budget as bold which I quote, "... must always be held in close consultation with members of the public it is meant to serve". Can the Honourable Minister for Economy explain what consultations were held with the landowners about Bill No. 17 of 2021? Also, can the Honourable Prime Minister as Minister for iTaukei Affairs explain as to what extent were the iTLTB and its Officials consulted? Can the Honourable Prime Minister also confirm that the landowners had given their free, prior and informed consent in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples? If not then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No. 17 of 2021 should not be brought in as a Consequential Bill to Parliament and should be withdrawn.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have, on numerous occasions, heard the Honourable Minister for Economy boasting about unprecedented growth. The question is, was there a real growth? The COVID-19 pandemic has been conveniently blamed for the Government's past failures. The mismanagement of the economy and the mismanagement of COVID-19 crisis has led the majority of Fijians into despair with economic standstill and the perils of a killer virus. Yet again, this Government has resorted to its default, dictatorial style of leadership.

The Fiji Government has showed that it cannot be trusted with the welfare and the future of the people of Fiji. It is time for change. That is the only option available to the people of Fiji to bring back its lost glory. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Jale for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Thank you, Mr Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all. I rise with much humbleness to deliver my response to this august House on the 2021–2022 National Budget announced by the Honourable Attorney-General on Friday, 16th July, 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic change in human life worldwide as well as presented an unprecedented challenge not only to the public health sector but to life as we know it. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating. It has changed all aspects of our lives, be it health, economics, social logistics, politics or education, our lives are not the same anymore.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the spread of COVID-19 is nothing short of a wild fire in a drought and, unfortunately, we have experienced just that as Fiji deals with its second wave of Coronavirus. Within an unimaginable period of time, our flat curve rose to levels we all never imagined. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with faith, reasonable leadership and sustainable decisions, we will overcome this period of uncertainty and fear with a hope for a better tomorrow.

Speaking of hope, Mr. Speaker Sir, the Budget announcement on Friday, 16th July, by the Honourable Attorney-General is the epitome of hope for many Fijians. I sincerely thank the Honourable Attorney-General and his team at the Ministry of Economy for steering Fiji in a direction of opportunities, hope and sustainability. The FijiFirst Government has once again proven that we

put its people first and foremost. The 2021-2022 Budget is not only a tool to stabilise our today, but also to secure our tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they say, “opportunities do not happen, you create them”, and once again, our Government has given all Fijians many opportunities through prospects in all sectors of our economy; be it the formal or the informal sector, no one has been left behind, a very well thought-out and an inclusive Budget I must say. At this juncture, I must also say that if anyone from the Opposition Member so far had understood the Budget very well, it is Honourable Bulitavu. Thank you, Honourable Bulitavu. And if anyone has understood the Bill No. 17, it is Honourable Bulitavu. Thank you once again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the spectrum of assistance, initiatives and incentives announced is, indeed, exceptional and the Government has made sure that ordinary Fijians do not have to dig deep into their pockets to sustain their lives. The Government will pay for:

- (1) Market stall fees for our market vendors;
- (2) PSV licence renewals for our taxi drivers;
- (3) Subsidised electricity bills for SMEs;
- (4) Birth registration fees;
- (5) Police reports to ensure ordinary Fijians do not miss out on employment opportunities;
- (6) Subsidise the agriculture loan interest;
- (7) Despite the low world price of sugar - the Government will continue to pay \$85.00 per tonne cane price to sugarcane farmers; and
- (8) Will provide \$20 worth of data top-up for Fijian students in Year 13 and in universities, to ensure that students do not miss out on online studies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are, but just a few, for there are many other such initiatives and incentives in this Budget which instil courage in every Fijian to turn opportunities into successes. It encourages every Fijian to fight their battles and make us stronger in our bid to economic recovery.

Very simply put, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 National Budget is a lifeline to all Fijians. It is, indeed, a helping hand. The Fijian Government does not wish to fail our people today and certainly not our coming generations at any cost. The progressive ideologies, proactive and sustainable measures as well as the forward thinking applied in the 2021-2022 Budget, is indeed extraordinary.

The Budget not only addresses the challenges of the people, but also provides a platform to revive the economy. This new Budget continues to prioritise what matters to our people: free education, free medicines, housing benefits, social protection for the vulnerable members of the society, ease of doing business and opportunities for existing businesses to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is unequivocal and prudent with the core aim of helping not only Fijian families, but also Fijian businesses to deal with the impacts of COVID-19. We are continuing to pay ordinary Fijians in the Civil Service. Through this, we are not only supporting them, but also their families and their dependents.

We are not abandoning Government’s ongoing incentives to the most vulnerable segments of the Fijian population as we continue to assist welfare recipients under all of our social protection programmes and we are in a position to do all this today because of the visionary and people-oriented leadership that our Honourable Prime Minister continues to champion.

Vinaka, Honourable Prime Minister, Sir. I salute your genuine desire and efforts to understand the thoughts and feelings of the people you lead, creating an atmosphere of certainty and trust even in the most difficult times. Once again, *vinaka vakalevu*, Honourable Prime Minister, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, worldwide, disasters and emergencies often disproportionately impact the disability community, and this pandemic is no exception. However, the FijiFirst Government has not overlooked our most vulnerable. In my capacity as the Honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, I am glad to say that the Ministry has seen one of the highest increases in the new budget allowance for Disabled Persons, \$10.78 million has been allocated to this programme in the new fiscal year which is an increase of almost \$1.432 million from the current fiscal year.

This is in addition to other disability related budget lines such as the grants to Disability Organizations, Grants to the National Council for Disabled Persons, and the Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities. This increment in the Allowance for Disabled Persons allocation will mean we will be able to assist Fijians living with disabilities better in these tough times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge and wholeheartedly welcome the great initiative of sanitary pads distribution to our young girls in schools. This is a great stride in our bid to empower young girls around the country.

The Government's commitment to provide free sanitary pads in schools will provide relief to female students of the stigma, anxiety and discomfort associated with menstrual hygiene management, allowing them to focus on their studies and most importantly this move will ease the cost of living for families.

Sanitary items are a necessity, not a luxury, and our Government's commitment to put menstrual hygiene in the forefront is a huge win for girls all around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another such initiative that warms my heart is that of the kidney dialysis assistance which comes as a beacon of light in the very dark tunnel of dialysis treatment costs, ordinary Fijians have had to dig deep into their pockets for treatment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$150 per treatment is, indeed, a very generous contribution by the Government towards dialysis and this will certainly ease the financial burden and bring huge relief to many families. The Budget is, indeed, one of compassion and care. I sincerely applaud this initiative by our Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I must say to my dear fellow Fijians, that this budget reflects care and compassion for your wellbeing in every sense, but you will have to honour the efforts of your Government by getting your jabs. Currently nothing seems more deadly than the coronavirus. The only way to win the fight against this virus is to get vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I mentioned earlier, life as we know is not the same. We cannot hug the ones we love. We cannot spend time with our family and friends or even share a good laugh with our colleagues over lunch. We cannot farewell our loved ones.

Mr. Speaker Sir, how more painful could it be to see children not being able to pay their last respects to their deceased parents. Who would have ever imagined that a day as such would be upon us? My deepest and sincere condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones to COVID-19 and prayers for all those in hospitals in isolation fighting the battle to win over COVID-19.

I know this is a time of fear, frustration, pain, sufferings, anxiety and most of all uncertainty but my dear fellow Fijians, we have the power to change this. Your one decision to get vaccinated today will help save lives and begin our journey or rather I would say 'return journey to normalcy'.

We are immensely fortunate that we have vaccines available. Do not deny yourself the opportunity many around the world are desperately waiting for. Do not deny yourself the right to life. Do not wait till it is too late. Do the right thing, get vaccinated and do not get carried away with the anti-vaccination theories. You do not want to wish that you have had the jab when you had the time and the opportunity both. Do not make it too late, get vaccinated.

Do your part in our fight against COVID-19 and get jabbed today. Get jabbed for yourself. Get jabbed for your families and your loved ones. Get jabbed for opportunities. Get jabbed for our nation! Get jabbed for the frontliners! Do not let their sacrifices go in vain.

My fellow Fijians, we can fight this crisis but not alone. We can overcome this but not alone. Let go the misleadings, misunderstandings and the discriminations. Let us unite in our bid to defeat this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being a woman, I must commend our mothers' contributions in our fight against COVID-19. Our mothers play a critical role in ensuring that our families practice good hygiene and ensure that our children are safe in our homes. We must take care of the mental health of our loved ones as stress and depression in these times will only harm our ability to recover. I encourage the women listening to make use of the opportunities that the Government has provided with this Budget, especially in terms of entrepreneurial incentives. You are gifted and you have the ability to translate your gift into income.

At this juncture, may I add, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are immensely proud that women are leading the battle against COVID-19 from the frontline and I take this time to thank Dr. Alisha Sahu Khan, Head of Health Protection at the Ministry of Health; as well as Dr. Rachel Pillay, Head of Family Health at the Ministry of Health and her team for their tremendous efforts and enthusiasm in the national COVID-19 vaccination drive. Of course, under the exceptional leadership of our Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, Dr. James Fong.

My heartfelt gratitude to the hundreds of nurses, doctors, Disciplined Forces and staff for the commitment and diligence they show in protecting our lives. You all are our heroes. I salute each one of you and, of course, your families for the sacrifices you all have made. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also hold much gratitude to the Australian, New Zealand and the Indian Governments for their aid in these times of difficulty. We are rather fortunate that we have been given such generous aid, especially in terms of vaccines. We also thank the Australian and the New Zealand Governments for sharing their instrumental expertise and invaluable supplies in such times of crisis.

To conclude Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all Fijians to appreciate the opportunities given to you through the 2021-2022 National Budget and make the most of it. We have overcome great challenges together and we will defeat this too with our resilience, our humanity and our unity. We are stronger than this virus, we will not succumb to it but we will overcome this together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appeal to all Fijians to please practice COVID-19 safety measures. Wear a mask every time you leave home, make sure you wash your hands with soap and water regularly. Sanitise your hands frequently when you are out for shopping et cetera, be sure to practice social distancing whenever in public spaces and most importantly get vaccinated if you still have not. Your

life is your responsibility. Be responsible and make the right decision for yourself and for your nation.

Before I take my seat Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate the Sevens team for their winning start at the Tokyo Olympics and wish Team Fiji the very, very best. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Bill.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. Honourable Members we will suspend proceedings and we will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.23 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.53 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and I call on the next speaker, the Honourable Kepa. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. RO T.V. KEPa.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Before I begin, can I wish you a belated happy birthday and many more to come.

In an uncertain world where there is doubt, unpredictability, unreliability, risk and fear, there is an environment which COVID-19 has helped create for us - where no one has any idea what the next day will bring. How many deaths will be announced over the air, in this air of uncertainty?

I think of children, Mr. Speaker and why they love stories, myths, legends, fables and fairy tales. It is because children are social beings, they love stories. They love fairy tales, especially which they find comforting, reassuring, inspiring and assuring where the plot is predictable. It will always have a happy ending. Even though there are bad guys around, plotting and scheming the hero's downfall, the good guys will triumph over bad and the characters at the end of the story will live happily ever after.

These stories, Mr. Speaker, often have a plot structure based on three elements. For example, in one of the children's stories, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and I am sure parents and grandparents are familiar with this story. Similarly with the *iTaukei* or indigenous Fijians, the most common and often quoted three elements made famous by Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna is the three-legged stool or *vanua*, *lotu* and *matanitu*.

At this stage when I am mentioning the *vanua*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my sympathy goes to Niko Nawaikula, who has the *vanua* very much at heart, is suspended from Parliament. Had Supervisor of Elections done his job better, this case would have been nipped in the bud and we hope to see Niko back with us soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *vanua* or the indigenous or *iTaukei* was the first on the scene in Fiji and this is supported by radio carbon dating of *lapita* pottery which dates the early Fijians arriving here 3,500 years ago. The *lotu* arrived much later in the early 1800s and the *matanitu* in the late 1800s.

Education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or rather home schooling began with the *iTaukei* or the indigenous where young girls were taught by their mothers, aunts and grandmothers and the boys by their fathers, uncles, et cetera. Formal education was first introduced by the *lotu*, who also had the three elements in their religious teachings - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. With the first school set up in the 1800s by the Methodist Missionaries, it was followed by the Catholics and other denominations. Today, in Fiji, over 90 percent of schools are owned and administered by either committees or faith based organisations, which means that less than 10 percent are government owned.

In terms of government schools, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the big issue with them is bullying and often highlighted in the media, bullying by senior students against teachers and the junior students. These senior students often model themselves on their old boys or former students they admire, for example, MPs and Ministers whom they often see on television during parliamentary debates, where these impressionable young minds start thinking that "might is right" and act out against those they deem weaker than themselves. Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, bullying is going to continue when school starts again, if this is not properly addressed.

In Fiji, the Honourable Prime Minister has been voted into power twice with very large or majorities, many people look up to him as evidenced by the votes in 2014 and in 2018. They regard him as a benevolent father figure - kind, generous, trustworthy, respectful and genuine. Sadly, however, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past 14 years, unbeknown to many people, the Bainimarama Government has given little consideration or respect to the *vanua* or the *lotu*. Had he taken the time or factored some wisdom into his policies, he would have woven together the individual strands of *vanua*, *lotu* of *matanitu* and without a doubt, Fiji would indeed be a better place and a real force to be reckoned with.

Instead, from 2007 onwards, besides telling chiefs to go and drink home brew under the mango tree, he has been systematically stripping the *vanua* of their rights and privileges as indigenous of this country from over 3,500 years ago, centuries before any other group set foot on this land. Stripping the indigenous of their rights and privileges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over their land and mineral resources with no free prior and informed consent, meaning, there was no consultation (*Warai sara ga na talanoa.*) This must be the worst type of bullying where laws were sneaked in to justify the daylight robbery on the indigenous.

Approximately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 20 decrees were enacted from 2007 and are now in the 2013 Constitution. Decrees are supposed to be passed through Parliament before gazetted and declared an Act, but somehow it was done and these 20 decrees now, from the Bainimarama 2006 *coup* to the 2014 Elections, are included in the 2013 Constitution, which no one knew about as there was no consultation.

When Parliament opened in 2014 for those of us who came into Parliament then, the 2013 Constitution, which was the first time for many of us to set eyes on, was sitting on our tables with the Standing Orders, another document that had no consultation tied to it. So, can we blame senior boys in government schools when they continue to bully as they can see what the Government is doing to indigenous people?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Fijian Affairs (Great Council of Chiefs) (Suspension) Regulations, 2007 to the Consequential Bill No. 17 of 2021, a Bill to amend the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940. Again, this Bill is typical of Bills on iTaukei assets. No consultation with the iTLTB, no consultation with any landowner. The CEO of iTLTB speaking on video says that there was consultation but, Mr. Speaker, he is an employee, so will say anything but the board members are saying there was no consultation. We only knew about it when the opposition video went up.

Mr. Speaker, the Government continues to work all over *iTaukei* interests and assets. How are the next generation of *iTaukei* children going to fair, when you are stripping them of their rights? What you are doing Honourable Prime Minister is not right. I am not sure whether he is there. You know it is not right. Your conscience is telling you, it is not right. You cannot do that whether you are *kai Viti*, *kai Idia*, *kai Jaina* or *kai* whatever.

Mr. Speaker, the Turaga i Taukei of Rewa, that is,, the Taukei ni Vanua and Qoliqoli, are the traditional owners of the land and marine areas of the Tikinas of Rewa, Noco, Burebasaga, Dreketi, Toga, Vutia, Raviravi, Sawau, Suva and the iTaukei Vuo of Lami have written a letter to the Honourable Prime Minister who is sitting on his table, voicing their concern on Bill No. 17 of 2021, asking him to withdraw the Bill. What they are saying is, "What we want Government to do is to treat us with respect, consult with us, but do not continue walking all over our heads.

Mr. Speaker, the second leg of the three legged stool is the *Lotu*, where the largest denomination being Methodist, Catholics and other denominations, including Hindus and Muslims. Government would attract more support if they consulted more with human resources around them.

The *vanua* and *lotu*, Mr. Speaker, are valuable assets not recognised at all by the Government. For example, on the vaccine issue, it could have become a much lesser and less painful exercise had it engaged in consultation with the *vanua* and the *lotu*, who have big numbers. Most of the anti-vexing are coming from their groups so had the Government consulted with the *vanua* and the *lotu*, I think it would have been a lot easier and less painful way of doing things.

At this point, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank all the frontline workers. The Permanent Secretary for Health, Dr. James Fong, the Ministry of Health Officials, Doctors, Nurses, Military, Police, drivers and those in the rural areas, the *Mata ni Tikina*, *Turaga ni Koro*, *Nasi ni Koro* and all the frontliners all over Fiji. Mr. Speaker, my sympathy and condolences go out to those who have lost their loved ones and those who are sick in hospitals.

On education, post COVID-19 children who are affected by disruption to the academic year are approximately 250,000 or a quarter million and that is a big number, Mr. Speaker. Some Year 13 students discussed on webinar, they never dreamt their final year would be like it has been and wondered whether they would be back in their classroom at all this year. So, children are really feeling the loneliness, sadness, alienation, disconnection and disruption.

All the negativity experienced by students need to be taken into consideration by the Ministry when children return to school. The Ministry of Education should, by now, have a plan or programme in place with guidance counsellors providing students with the necessary assistance required during these extraordinary times.

The Budget Address, Mr. Speaker, on Free Education Initiative as was alluded to by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, is not an initiative of FijiFirst, as it was started by the SVT Government, continued by the SDL Government and now continued further by the FijiFirst Government.

The \$60 million in this year's Budget, Mr. Speaker, Free Bus Fare at \$17 million, Operational Grant for Higher Education at \$71.4 million, TELS and Toppers at \$159.6 million. I hope the Ministry will be able to access that since a lot of that is in Head 50, Mr. Speaker. But it will be easier it could be wiser and more far-reaching for Government to be gathering data, Mr. Speaker, on how exactly COVID-19 issues affecting students and how this can be coped. What coping mechanism could be best suited for them, besides that the Ministry of Education has to gather data on how many students have access to the internet; Smart phones; Tablets; Laptops or desktop computers and other technologies absolutely necessary for online classes?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, had the government programme continued with one laptop per child, many students would be in a better position for online classes. Global studies indicating that students from disadvantage backgrounds during COVID-19 would be the worst affected and with poverty levels in Fiji, you are looking at 50 percent of the school roll which is approximately 125,000 students, that is a big number also, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Therefore, I would urge the Ministry of Education to get data on all students as studies are showing that the ones most affected by COVID-19 are the disadvantaged students and they are affected by truancy, absenteeism, basic needs not met and other abuses that may happen around them. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is at least 50 percent of the school roll which is approximately, I will give the figure again, 125,000 students and we hope that when the Minister of Education brings all these into line and students are adequately assisted, hopefully these children will go home with a stories and will conclude with "and the children live happily ever after" as their stories that they like to read, tells them right at the end of the story.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution towards the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Dr. Govind. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon to you all.

I rise to contribute towards the debate on the National Budget 2021-2022, delivered to this august House on 16th July 2021 by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications. Firstly, I would like to sincerely thank the Honourable Minister for Economy, the Acting Permanent Secretary and the senior staff of the Ministry of Economy for their efforts in developing the 2021-2022 National Budget and presenting to Parliament in a timely manner and especially in these critical times of our country upon the sudden arrival of COVID-19.

Despite the enormous challenges faced due to the current pandemic, the Ministry was able to have a wide consultation with individuals, business community and other stakeholders through virtual meetings and written submissions. These submissions were taken into account while preparing the budget. This is a laudable effort and represents government's enduring concern for all citizens in Fiji.

It is pleasing to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the positive reactions and endorsement of the budget from wide-ranging individuals, organizations and the general public as reported in the daily media. The 2021-2022 Budget is well thought-out and will contribute to be an effective response to the impact of current COVID-19 pandemic and its now pervasive effects in every aspect of economy and society in the nation. With its broad-based approach informed by the consultations, the 2021-2022 National Budget underscores FijiFirst party's philosophy of not leaving any one behind.

It has targeted families, households, small and the larger businesses that are affected, in different ways by the pandemic it has provided some relief either in the form of cash grants, tax and duty relief or soft and particularly, maintained the Government's social protection programmes as a commitment to those in dire need. And, indeed, in education it has maintained its commitment to the FNU to continue its work in building skills and capacities for the next generation.

The National Budget has been presented with three main objectives which are highly relevant at this time. These are:

- (1) Protection from the virus by expanding vaccination to achieve herd immunity by October, 2021;
- (2) Continue to support those that are hardest hit; and
- (3) Immunity of Fiji against future pandemics and effects of climate change and diversify the economic base beyond tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under each of the objectives, there are several key strategies and activities to minimise the impact of the pandemic and funds are allocated for their implementation. These strategies are very broad-based and proven to be effective in other countries as well. These include; direct financial support to those that are unemployed due to COVID, lowering of taxes and other charges, support to small, medium and large businesses in terms of soft loans with deferment of interest payments, continuation of welfare allowances for poor and needy and many others.

Some specific allocations that are budgeted for include:

- Information communication and technology/ Business process outsourcing incentives;

- Tourism incentives for new and existing properties;
- Agriculture incentives including sugar price guarantees;
- Micro, small and medium enterprise incentives;
- Tax amnesty on penalties; and
- Recycling sector incentives and a new scheme to provide jobs for unemployed Fijians under a jobs for nature initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 National Budget has provisions to ensure that people in most needs and disadvantaged such as our children, youth, elderly, pregnant mothers and people with disability are not left behind and the social welfare benefits they are currently receiving continue in the current budgetary cycle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the severe challenges to our health sector cannot be overemphasised. It has provided services for citizens over the years and has stood the test of time. However, the elusive nature of COVID-19 and its relentless spread, now above 15,000 cases and slowly creeping to 20,000 cases presents an enormous challenge, especially our public health system.

On this note, I congratulate the public health team for its dedication and commitment but also acknowledge the enormous pressure on them as they strive to respond to public demands, intransigent individuals reluctant to abide by prescribed regulations and the pain of loss of loved ones by families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our health system has shown some resilience, however, we can also use this existential challenge to identify its weaker points towards strengthening it for the future. Pandemics are a fact of human life and this one will not be the last.

On social welfare, Fiji has programmes of different kinds that together provides assistance to families, single parents in distress and especially our older generation without means of livelihood. Indeed, there are over 40,000 of them for now and with each year the number will increase.

Most will not access to FNPF, or if they do it, will not be sufficient for their health and livelihood maintenance. It will certainly add to the duty of care for government. The challenges of education has no doubt opened up and expanded a new frontier for learning and teaching, and that is the online services.

The Government's allocation to the FNU and careful consideration given to the free education of younger ones cannot be overemphasised. These are good, indeed excellent policies in a time of acute national crises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the country feels the havoc of COVID-19, we should still keep our heads up and have the courage to withstand the crisis, learn relevant lessons for the future and continue to build a resilient country. In the midst of COVID-19 we are still reminded that there are also effects of climate change and climate-induced effects which also tax our resources. It is apparent, therefore, that the challenge ahead of us are overbearing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to WHO, the COVID-19 situation globally is very dangerous with high level of transmission driven by four major factors. Fiji is also experiencing the same at this point in time. These factors are namely:

- (1) Virus variants, currently the Delta variant is very rapidly transmissible;
- (2) Increased social mixing and mobility of people;

- (3) Inappropriate use of public health and social measures, such as wearing masks, physical distancing, avoid overcrowding, and washing hands and maintaining good personal hygiene; and
- (4) Vaccine inequity faced especially in developing countries around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the tools that are proven to be effective and safe. This has to be implemented and the responsibility rests on us as individuals, families, communities and the nation as a whole. Together we can make a difference. Without fulfilling our responsibility in a timely manner, we will not be able to avert the pandemic. Now is the time to ask ourselves, in rephrasing the instructive words of the famous American President, “What we can do for the country and not what the country can do for us”.

The Government is doing its best within the resources it has, and it is time that we all join our hands together to support the efforts of our Government. This is the time for collective action as a nation, to harness all our resources, to prevent further spread of the pandemic and avoid premature deaths.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to give a small example of a community which has taken action on their own to support the efforts of the Government in mitigating the effects of the pandemic. The Olosara Crime Prevention Committee, in collaboration with the Sigatoka Police Department went to about 500 households in their settlements and distributed simple educational materials, highlighting the need to follow the COVID-safety protocols, set by the Ministry of Health. They also distributed face masks to every household and encouraged all eligible members of the family to have the vaccines urgently.

During their visits they also assessed the need for food and other household items that the needy families required. The committee then mobilised their own resources and provided food packages for 50 households in the settlement who were in urgent need. Now that the settlement has its first positive case, volunteers are now assisting police to maintain checkpoints so that no unnecessary movement of people from different areas of the village take place. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a living example of what other communities should do rather than await for hand-outs from Government and NGOs to arrive.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the chairperson of the Olosara Crime Prevention Committee, Mr. Vijay Narayan, all members of the committee and the Officer in Charge of Sigatoka Police Station, Mr. Haris Prasad, for undertaking such a humanitarian initiative during this time of need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to acknowledge and sincerely thank many Non-Governmental organizations, individuals and private sector organizations who continuously support the needy in the communities around Fiji.

I would like to express my gratitude and say “thank you” to all those health care workers, especially in frontlines, including doctors, general practitioners, nurses, paramedics and housekeeping staff, who are sacrificing their lives and their families lives to save the lives of others in these trying times. They all deserve a special ‘thank you’ and may God bless them and their families.

The Officers of the Fiji Police Force and the Fiji Military Forces cannot be forgotten as they continue to maintain law and order and support in the COVID mitigation plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the midst of this crises, I would like to extend the sincerest gratitude to the

Governments of Australia, New Zealand, India and the United States for providing us with the volumes of vaccines that are so essential for us now in our time of greatest need. I encourage all those who are eligible to get their vaccines without fear. These vaccines are scientifically proven and they are effective.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute towards the Budget debate. With those words, I fully support the 2021-2022 National Budget.

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

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members of this House and our fellow Fijians listening in from all over the world and here in Fiji, *mutu cola vina*. I would also like to acknowledge all our courageous, hardworking and dedicated healthcare workers, who battle the COVID-19 frontline every day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that the 2021-2022 Budget presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy last Friday on July 16th, is entirely about COVID-19 and the importance of getting vaccinated and adhering to COVID-19 safety measures as the way forward to revitalizing our economy.

The Minister's constant emphasis on tackling the Coronavirus to save our economy, is as if the pandemic caused the economy to struggle when in fact it is common knowledge even to the laymen that this economy has been struggling way before the onset of the Coronavirus and it is also common knowledge that this Government is only hanging onto dear life through the injection of foreign aids which the government has been conveniently using to manipulate the Fijian people.

Since the Honourable Minister for Economy focused so much on COVID-19 during his budget presentation, I would like to request this Government to pay our health workers a Special COVID-19 Risk Allowance from the COVID-19 Overseas Grant Funds Assistance. It is the least that this Government can do considering the lack of protective gears, lack of appropriate medical equipment, poor conditions of our hospitals and Health Centres and an overworked and tired workforce, due to this government's lack of vision, poor planning, and poor policies, in their response against COVID-19 that our nation can beat this pandemic, *cola vina* to you all and thank you for your sacrifice; *vina valevu dina*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite yet another grandstanding lecture on this Budget from the Honourable Minister for Economy boasting about what the FijiFirst Government is going to do to revitalize the economy and address the pandemic, the fact remains that his well-articulated presentation makes for a "look good" budget only in theory but in reality, it is a deceptive budget. It is a budget that is irresponsible and lacks direction because yet again the Minister has failed to allocate adequate resources to the critical sectors of the economy. All his years of experience in that portfolio, he still fails the Fijian people; just take a glance at the last 10 years budget, there was no significant improvement noted and our economic indicators continue to slump or suffer a prolonged economic fall.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his Budget Address the Minister for Economy stated that the contraction of the Fijian Economy was due to the halt of tourism businesses resulting from our closed borders. Unfortunately, this is a lie because our records showed otherwise;

- (1) Real GDP average growth is 2.9 percent against the 4.85 percent for the previous decades.
- (2) We recorded the lowest GDP average growth rate for the last 5 years (at -2.32 percent).

- (3) Comparing average GDP growth rate by past Prime Ministers during their terms.

In the era of the Late Ratu Kamisese Mara, a growth rate of 3.4 percent was achieved, former Prime Minister Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka achieved 3.6 percent, the late Mr. Laisenia Qarase achieved 2.0 percent and the Bainimarama Government was 2.4 percent. This confirmed that the current government was lying about the economic boom they have always claimed. The previous government at least did better than them:

- (4) The total percentage debt of GDP for the last decade (2010–2020) has increased from 54.7 percent to almost 66.0 percent.
- (5) Ease of doing business rankings, Fiji is ranked 102 among the 190 economies on ease of doing business according to the latest World Bank annual ratings.
- (6) If we look at Total Government Revenue for the last 3 years from 2018, there is a big difference between the estimated revenue and the actual collected, a difference of 20 percent in 2018, 25 percent in 2019, and 23 percent in 2020, which is more than \$800million.
- (7) Total Revenue against Expenditure: We have been spending more than what we can afford, a variance of 20 percent in 2018, 12 percent in 2019, and 24 percent in 2020. We have not been living within our means.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the figures that I have just shared confirm what I had stated earlier on, that this is a deceptive budget and the Minister of Economy has been deceiving this nation for the last decade. Under his watch, Fiji was the 4th lowest country in economic growth in pre-COVID-19 era compared to our neighbouring regional countries. Under his watch, poverty has increased to 40 percent with another 10 percent facing hardship. Under his watch, they have not honoured their promise to review the minimum wage rate and it remains at \$2.36/hour. Where is the economic boom, where is the unprecedented economic growth?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said it and will be saying it again that the Minister for Economy has been lying to the nation for the last decade, and it is time that he is removed because we are tired of deceptive budgets, sugar-coated to deceive the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during a time of crisis and uncertainties such as this COVID-19 pandemic, delivering facts and truths to the people matters most. The deception and sense of false hope that entails this 2021-2022 Budget is similar to the last 14 years of the Bainimarama Leadership. It is characterized by misinformation, manipulation and distortions of the truth and far from reaching the harsh reality on the ground. No wonder, we continually witness on the news the constant arrest of people by Police for sending misinformation or falsifying information, the people are simply projecting the type of leadership they witness every day.

Let us look at Agriculture, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am saddened to note the total negligence on the non-Sugar Agriculture Sector in this Budget. There is a lack of logic in the budget where one makes comparison to the previous year's budget. A continuous drop from \$78.7 million (in 2019-2020 Budget) to \$65.3 million in the 2020-2021 Budget and now to \$61.9 million in this current Budget (2021-2022). It confirms that the Minister for Agriculture does not fully understand the landscape of the agriculture sector in Fiji or has other sinister motives to deprive the non-sugar agriculture and its small subsistence farmers who are the largest contributors to the industry in Fiji. The agriculture sector is one of the key economic sectors and needs to be fully supported especially during a downturn in our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to enlighten the House on some general findings that nullify whatever production figures that the Minister for Agriculture will try and hoodwink us with this week. If there is a rise in production figures in non-sugar agriculture then why does the Ministry

continue to have a reduction in its allocation? Is it to do with the utilisation percentage? Then the system and process is both long winding and too cumbersome to follow, resulting in backlogs. I urge the Honourable Minister to immediately address this – sit-down-in -office syndrome and resolve this as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, production data is credible when it is documented in an annual report, something that has not been produced by the Ministry over the past five years, so how reliable are the figures that the Honourable Minister of Agriculture will be telling us this week. We want to see a trend that is well-documented in a public document and not some cooked up figures that is filed somewhere in Raiwaqa. After a session it is all forgotten and waits for the next sitting with a new set of figures. Honourable Speaker, Sir, it is glaringly clear that one of the few sectors that plays a very pivotal role during the current pandemic since March, 2020 is the non-sugar agriculture. When people started to lose their jobs due to the pandemic, I would say approximately 90 percent of those people reverted to the agriculture sector, either backyard gardening, subsistence agriculture, market vendors, middlemen, owned farm machineries or even commercial agriculture.

The non-sugar agriculture sector continues to influence other sectors and generate business activities through fuel/oil for farm machines, transport of produce, just go and witness these at the borders - seeds and seedlings, spare parts, agro inputs like fertilizers and poultry manure, municipal markets, roadside markets and eatery places are all key sources of employment. I am shocked to note that yet the Ministry is only allowed \$61.9 million over the next financial year.

To address poverty, food security and malnutrition issues in Fiji, Government must address the key issues in the agriculture sector. What are the key allocations on export promotion and commodity programmes such as pineapples which were totally slashed, cocoa, ginger, rice, *dalo*, coconuts, vanilla and even *yaqona* - all reduced. Why are their allocation all reduced given the key role that they play in our rural economy? Cassava with all the developments that is happening in the commodity has zero allocation. Why the Government cannot fund a cassava flour mill that is mooted by the some key stakeholders in the private sector? Government must support these players and cassava farmers in general.

The Minister should not be too proud of any increase in the export figures because it has nothing to do with the Government's intervention but through the hard working farmers, other key stakeholders, exporters, middlemen in the marketplace, Government's intervention is really minimal. Imagine if government has its own pool of machines to address land preparation and farm road issues throughout Fiji. We would be opening up new agricultural lands and clear a lot of bushland, dug more drains and cultivated unutilised shrubs throughout the country. We have not reached Fiji's potential because Government does not consider non-sugar agriculture as a key economic driver of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if Fiji is really relying on exports then why the Government totally slashed the allocations for the cold storage construction and the agro processors infrastructure support that was budgeted over the past three years. Is the support really genuine or is it just talk to soothe emotions of farmers in Kavanagasau on the Valley Road and Nukuloa. These two allocations were boasted about by the Honourable Minister for Agriculture but it has just disappeared in this year's Budget.

It appears that the Honourable Minister just does not have the skills to materialise projects that he was tasked to implement and in turn, clearly let the farmers in those areas down. The farmers in Nadroga and in Ba need those facilities so that their produce is catered for before it reaches its final destination. Exporters look forward for support under the agro-processes infrastructure support so that they can cut down the unnecessary costs, given that our tourism market will take time to recover.

Why can non-sugar agriculture not create a body, such as Sugar Cane Growers Fund, who are offering small loans to the farmers on per hectare basis? There is too much concentration on sugar, a bankrupt industry. No sugar agriculture needs attention more than ever, as the sugar industry is no longer viable on its own after the preferential price expired in 2017

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us have a look at the Ministry's policy direction. The Ministry of Agriculture has a Strategic Development Plan for the years 2019 to 2023. Has the Ministry done an evaluation of the Strategic Development Plan, or are they deviating from the Plan, based on the Ministers emotion and outside pressure? Can the Honourable Minister explain how we measure in achieving the National Development Plan that links to the Sustainable Development Goals, 2030? Has the Ministry implemented the vision of the strategic plan through the following strategic priorities - improve food and nutrition security, when budget for food security has drastically reduced? How has he measured the supposed increased farmer household income when a lot of farmers in Naitasiri spend hours at the border to sell their produce? What is Agriculture Marketing Authority's (AMA) role in this? Initially after the pandemic hit our nation AMA was involved in buying at the borders, but when the second outbreak happened, they were nowhere to be seen. Are they still in existence? We cannot wait to have a look at their most recent financial statements?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, the farmers of Fiji are no longer gullible or illiterate as he may have thought them to be. They are watching and hearing all his promises -farmers are asking; where are the free poultry manure he assured in 2018-2019? When is the cultivation program with AMA starting and when will AMA buy all the produce, supply free planting materials? What has happened to the livestock sector in terms of the distribution of sheep, goats and the new beef breeds? Yes, farmers are asking these many promises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are some very interesting allocations that is in the Ministry of Agriculture kit that was supposed to be in the Ministry of Economy, which does not benefit the farmers at all. Why are these allocations of statutory bodies such as FMIB –construction of abattoirs and Copra Stabilization Fund, induced in the non-agriculture allocations? He just cut out the non-sugar agriculture. The statutory bodies report to other Ministries, why can it not move to the relevant Ministry?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I ask - is the Ministry's decision making process that ensures timely administration and financial management, a reality or is it just a wishful dream? Has the restructure finally resulted in the removal of all the *iTaukei* senior officers from the Ministry, either through resignations or non-renewal of contracts? The morale of those that remain has never been so low at the Ministry with constant policing by the Honourable Minister and his boys.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate the Ministry for finally releasing the long-awaited National Agriculture Census of 2020, after nearly 16 months of its completion. It is common knowledge that a lot has happened since the Census was completed. We all know that a delayed report and findings are either useless or irrelevant, given the change in the sector after the pandemic hit our nation. I would safely say that it was a waste of government funding of \$4.5million as well as resources from our development partners, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation. There was a lot of hype given in the House last year of this exercise but, unfortunately, the delay in reporting is a sad reflection of the Ministry's ability to provide important reports on time, not surprising given that the Ministry still cannot produce its annual reports over the last five years.

On Animal and Production Commodity Development Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all livestock commodities dairy, sheep, goat, pigs, poultry and honey have received funding for development but all have reduced allocation except beef. This is the best time to concentrate in

building for the future when the demand by the tourist industry is low. The Government should concentrate in building infrastructure, improve nutrition and build capacity for farmers.

What has happened to the new bridge that you boasted about a few years ago? Has this business started yet? The sheep programme is supposed to be well-established by now given the support given to it by Government and development partners. What is the production record? Goats have some interesting allocations especially funding on the goat partnership to establish the Goat Meat Industry Board. Who are all the players in this partnership? They were allocated \$800,000 in the last budget and another \$600,000 for this Budget. This has raised some concerns considering that a small percentage of the population consume goat meat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Crop and Livestock Research Programmes play a crucial role in support and transformation of the sector however it has not been fully supported over the years. I trust the Koronivia Research Station for the crops and livestock have been fully accredited if not I wonder what is the current Minister and his predecessor have been doing over the last ten years. The full accreditation of our research station is important so that the findings are regionally and internationally recognised.

Mr. Speaker, I welcome Government's continued support for the Tutu and Navuso Agricultural Training Programme with a total combined funding of over \$1.3 million but I believe more can be done after the students graduate so that eventually become real farmers rather than struggle when they reach their villages.

Mr. Speaker, let me conclude by saying that Government plays a lot of lip service to the Non-Sugar Agriculture. Lot of lands remain idle because the Ministry fails to contact the rural farmers but concentrates on those few farmers who are already well off - it has a top down approach and farmers commodity associations contribution are never sought during Budget consultation.

Government ought to support Non-Sugar Agriculture and concentrate on an alternative to replace the dwindling sugar industry. Let me quickly look at the sugar budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not talk much on the sugar budget because we all know its insolvency situation. I want to quote from the Honourable Minister for Economy's Budget Address on Friday, 16th July, 2021, and I quote from page 1908 of the Uncorrected *Daily Hansard*:

“We have a good captain, Fiji. The principles and vision of our Honourable Prime Minister have never shifted with the winds. We have shown the flexibility and the creativity to navigate storms and traverse rough waters but our compass remains fixed on our destination - An Inclusive Fiji, a fair Fiji, a financially strong and stable Fiji, a resilient Fiji - a Fiji where anyone anywhere can rise as far as their ability and ambition can carry them.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I almost laughed when I heard this. The captain and his boson (if I may called them that) who the Honourable Minister for Economy do not realise that the compass is made a complete turnaround and has arrived at a wrong destination. May be their compass was pointing to Singapore, Australia or New Zealand but little did they know that the waves of reality has turned them back to their actual destination to realise the mess that they have created, a destination:

- where corruption, cronyism and nepotism thrived;
- where poverty and hardship is around 50 percent;
- that has weak financial position;
- of an irresponsible Government;
- that lacks transparency and accountability;
- where indigenous rights and human rights are violated and suppressed;

- where the judicial system and institutions are being compromised;
- where law enforcement is biased and discriminatory;
- that has poor health system;
- where there is poor roadings and infrastructure;
- that tops the world with high rate of COVID infection and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs);
- of dictatorship and political instability; and
- where the economy has been suffering a prolonged fall.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have done your time and you are repeating - destination, destination!

We will move on and I call on the Honourable Kirpal for his contribution.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and people watching via social media. A very good evening to you all.

I rise this evening to contribute my wholehearted support to the Budget of 2021-2022. Before I start my Budget Speech, I would like to say a few things which I observed from this morning. Mr. Speaker, Sir, listening to the Opposition this morning, I can only make the following conclusions. When we raise expenditure, they say you are spending too much and when we reduce expenditure, you need to depend more. The Opposition is confused.

The Honourable Bulanauca talked about vaccination. Can he inform this House if he or his children got the vaccination for tetanus, polio, et cetera? Why now the reluctance? Is it because of this Government? Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend Honourable Bulitavu for his honest feedback on the Budget and Bill No. 17 and I will advise Honourable Gavoka to learn from him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I need to start through pronouncing how proud I am to be a part of a Government that is successfully going through certainly one of the largest crises and catastrophes that has faced this country, and indeed the entire world. However, Government with all its effort trying their best to get the people aged 18 and above vaccinated, as soon as possible to get rid of this COVID-19 pandemic and bring our nation's economy back on track.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to commend the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team for a budget that embraces all Fijians of our nation. Furthermore, the Government's vision for progressive development and ensuring a safe and secure Fiji is expressively addressed in this Budget during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker Sir this is a Budget that says we are prepared to commit and take the action of \$3.69 billion to get the recovery going. As the Minister of Economy said on the First Reading of his Budget last week, the commentary is already changing. There is already confidence returning to the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Governments impact mitigation of COVID-19 and continuation of the stimulus package such as supporting the unemployment benefit for three months, EFL and Water bills to be paid by Government whose household income is below \$30,000. Affordable housing brings stability, economic diversity and improves the physical quality of the neighborhood, hence the FijiFirst Government's initiative towards adequate Housing Benefits to help more Fijian families own a decent housing is meritorious.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sugarcane farmers has been the ball game in the Fijian political history. It is our leader, the Honourable Prime Minister, who has come out clean as a whistle for the plight of the poor farmers who have been suffering before 2006.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition has been always politicising the Sugar Industry for their own gain for decades, however during this Pandemic, Government's Initiative towards the sugar sector, giving a guaranteed price of \$85 per ton for two years, though the forecast price is \$54.36 per ton for this year and even anticipated loss of the higher priced European Union Market.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Agriculture can help reduce poverty, raise incomes and improve food security for 80 percent of the world's poor who live in rural areas and work mainly in farming hence FijiFirst Government has not left any stone unturned by promoting vigorously for agricultural sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by providing the long term leases to agricultural farmers has enhanced the productivity as before due to the short term lease and non-renewal of leases under the SDL administration has done a great damage to our agricultural sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the late George Washington, first USA President, said and I quote: "Agriculture is the most healthful, most useful and most noble employment of man". The country can prosper if it has a good agricultural budget with right thinking leaders who encourages the people of our nation. The budget for agricultural sector is \$61.9 million which is commendable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Opposition were making noises for the Government to cut salary of our hard working civil servants, not realizing how these civil servants work day and night, especially frontiers like Health workers, Fiji Police Forces, Fiji Military Forces to keep our nation safe from this new virus Delta variant, not compromising with their health and by staying away from their loved ones for weeks and months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget 2021-2022 is welcomed by a vast majority of stakeholders, including our people except for the Opposition who forgets the initiatives given in this 2021-2022 Budget by our Government that no citizens are left behind. Giving tax concessions, free education, free medicine, unemployment benefit, free motor vehicle levy, free taxi and bus base fees, free market fee and many more are in the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the FijiFirst Government, every child is given equal opportunity to be educated, free education until Form Seven (Year 13) which reduces the burden of poor parents. The late Mahatma Gandhi said and I quote, "If we want to reach real peace in this world, we should start educating children". This FijiFirst Government has been instrumental in the education of every child so that we have a literate society and literate society means a healthier and wealthier Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget 2021-2022 is a well-executed Budget for all ministries and with this Budget, Fiji will prosper. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition has no criticism of the Budget. They cannot find anything wrong with the Budget, that is why they put all their energy to misinformation about Bill No. 17.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I must say that this is a country that is on its way on the journey of recovery. We are not there yet and it will take time but this is a country that can look back on the last few weeks and the last few months and say, we had a hell of a challenge but we met that challenge and we supported each other. We supported each other through the health crisis and now it is time to support each other through the financial crisis and the monetary rebuild and we will do that. This is a country that has proven that. When it is a hard up against it, we pull collectively, we work together, we cooperate, we collaborate and we make the difference and be thankful for the leadership that we

have had, to be thankful for the investment that has been put in through this Budget as we recover and get back on our feet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly urge the Opposition to support this Budget and take our beloved nation to a greater height. With these sentiments, once again, I thank our Honourable Prime Minister, the Minister for Economy and his team for its effort in putting a wonderful Budget which can be called the people's budget and I support the 2021-20212 Budget.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now call upon the Honourable Dr. Lalabalavu. You have the floor.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, fellow colleagues of this august House, I rise to give my contribution to the 2020-2021 Budget. With your permission, Sir, before I deliver my response to the Budget announcement, please allow me to echo our big *vinaka vakalevu* to our frontliners, to whom the nation owes a debt of gratitude. I acknowledge all healthcare workers, members of the Fiji Police Force, Republic of Fiji Military Forces, health volunteers, non-governmental organisations and allied agencies.

May I also express a special appreciation to our development and multilateral partners for their timely assistance and generosity in terms of direct budget support and essential equipment, personal protective equipment and support in this health emergency. In particular, we thank the Government and people of Australia, India, New Zealand and the United States of America for their generous donations of vaccines that will help the nation to come out of this crisis.

Our frontliners have sacrificed for the nation in this deadly second wave of the pandemic. They have worked long hours, been away from their loved ones for months and every day, they put themselves at risks of containing the virus and some have sadly made the ultimate sacrifice. This includes some family members of our brave frontliners. To our frontliners, I say a big *vinaka vakalevu* and I call on Government to prioritise their safety and wellbeing.

Sir, turning to the proposed Budget, may I fully endorse the contribution of the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and my fellow Opposition Members. In doing so, we continue to perform our constitutional duty to suggest alternatives to the Budget and to be the voice of the people to Government in this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a deceptive Budget. It is formulated to save faces at all costs. As stated by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Fiji is now in a debt trap. Theoretically, the Budget makes many promises, but it is based on assumptions whose basis is not sound, as had been clearly stated by Members from this side of the House.

The Honourable Minister for Economy has found a good story, the one that makes me and all the people of Fiji want to believe in the promise of this Budget. However, we all had the time of fairy tales and we can no longer believe in your unprecedented fairy tales, because we are living in a reality that is far from the tales we had been told in the previous budget announcements.

The reality of the matter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a bolus Budget with an overestimated revenue and overestimated expenditure. There is now uncontrolled community spread of the COVID-19 virus. There appears no hand insight, as cases continue to rise daily and we are unable to flatten the curve. The Honourable Minister for Economy spent quite a bit of this Budget Address on COVID-19, since much of the Budget is contingent on how and whether we can contain the second wave of this pandemic.

Speaking on the COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the virus is now raging like a wildfire in the Central Division, which has taken a toll on health care delivery and stretched thin our limited health resources. With an out of control spread, the health system as a whole is trying its best to cope. However, infections and COVID-19 deaths continue to increase.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight some of the concerns of our frontline workers. They are dangerously overworked; some are pulling more than 12 hour shifts, with not enough time for rest. There is insufficient supply of PPE for protection at their work in the high risk environment to save lives. There continues to be improper use of PPEs; poor planning and coordination have led to an increase in frontline clusters.

Some commentators feel that frontliners should bear some of the blames for the spread of the virus, because they are the only once who are crossing the containment zones. However, it is important to remember that frontliners are often not in the position to determine their own testing arrangement, for educational process or shifty make up. Even if in the future, it is found that improper use of PPE by front liners contributed to the spread of the virus, it would appear to be more of the management issue than that of those tasks.

While acknowledging the statement of the Permanent Secretary yesterday, 25th July, that more PPE would be made available as well as more support and guidance for frontliners, I wish to make the following recommendations:

- (1) There is an urgent need for rigorous monitoring on the SOPs for our frontliners so as to avoid being spreaders of COVID-19.
- (2) COVID-19 cases have grown rapidly in a growing number of countries, triggering bold policy responses.
- (3) An OACD paper studied on the effectiveness of non-medical prevention policies to this global health threat concludes that four interconnected factors have contributed to the rapid rise in COVID-19 cases, namely: a high reproduction number; the large number of a symptomatic or mild symptom cases; relative long probation period, whereby most symptomatic infected individuals experience symptoms by the 11th or 12th day.
- (4) The capacity of the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 to last on surfaces up to three days in the case of plastics and steel.
- (5) The response to a new pandemic, such as COVID-19 is typically based on four key pillars:
 - (a) Surveillance;
 - (b) Detection to its clinical management of cases;
 - (c) Prevention of the spread in the community; and
 - (d) Maintaining essential services.

The action across the four pillars complement and closely interact and support one another. For example, containment measures based on identification of cases and contact tracing heavily dependent on excellence surveillance and detection infrastructures. In the absence of effective drugs, or no vaccines or reduced vaccination numbers, containment and mitigation measures are the key public health interventions, currently available to minimise the dramatic health consequences caused by COVID-19.

Most specifically, containment strategies aim to minimise the risks of transmissions from infected to non-infected individuals in order to stop their breed. This may include actions to detect it as early on the trace and infected individuals contacts, or confinement of the affected persons.

The mitigation strategies aim to slow the disease and to reduce the peak in health care demand. This may include policy actions such as social distancing, include a full society lockdown and

improved personal and environmental hygiene. We are in a current situation of uncontrolled spread because of the failure of policies adopted and the blame should be shouldered by those that made those bold decisions.

Basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nation cannot afford a Government continuing with COVID policies which fail to control and contain the spread of the virus. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the House says it is not too late to redeploy resources to an effective lockdown.

The way that the argument has been presented publically is that it is either the economy or containing COVID. The truth is that, we always can rebuild because the economy is a human-made construct. The difference is, that the lives of our loved ones cannot be replaced, and the economy is dependent on the people in any case. What we are seeing is that both, essential and non-essential businesses are closing anyway because almost every workplace opened has become an infectious cluster.

If I may now turn to discuss the COVID-19 vaccines, Mr. Speaker. One of our best chances of reducing the number of deaths related to COVID is vaccination and I urge every citizen of this country to make use of the free vaccination program. A lockdown to stop the spread while we try to vaccinate the population is the best option to save lives as I have stated above.

Sir, now allow me to turn to the economy. The basic question, Sir, is what is Government's plan B? This Budget's projected revenue, expenditure hinge almost entirely on vaccination. That is the hope of achieving herd immunity and opening borders and resuming our tourism. I truly hope that this scenario plays out. However, given that much of the Budget projections depend on assumptions that may not materialise, it would be more prudent of the Government to have a plan B?

Tourism is dependent on external factors. We may open up borders but tourists may not want to come to Fiji if testing is not rigorous and there is no reassurance that authorities have resumed control to contain or eliminate the virus.

Extensive incentives and stimulus have been announced but investor's confidence has been nose-diving since 2007. This means even with extensive incentives, domestic or foreign investors will not invest.

A plan B rather than no back-up plan might actually boost overall confidence. Reviewing the Budget in six months' time might be too short a timeframe.

We note the Government's need to take on more debt to emerge from this crisis. One of the key questions for taxpayers is, what is Government going to do about our national debt levels? At the same time, we are not convinced of the Government's medium term fiscal target announcement. I am not an economist but I know that to achieve these goals, first and foremost, there needs to be the political will to achieve a plan.

The nation has been told that it is better for Government to borrow now so that future generations will not have to borrow. This statement does not reassure the nation because borrowing now does not guarantee lower borrowing in future.

Please, allow me to turn to the allocation for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. Our health system was failing even before the pandemic and now it has gone from bad to worse. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought our health system to its knees with stretched limited resources and ailing infrastructures. The continuing rise of new COVID-19 cases and deaths is only part of the result.

Sir, we must remember that the burden of other diseases and infection continue to affect us. Non-Communicable Disease make up 84 percent of Fiji's mortality rate annually. Infectious diseases, cancer, circulatory and respiratory illnesses, et cetera, continue to contribute to morbidity and mortality.

The allocation of \$403.3 million to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in the 2021-2022 Budget is to be commended. It is necessary that more resources should be directed to the health sector to address the unprecedented outbreak.

In addition, resources should be directed to improving health infrastructure, ensuring sufficient supplies of medicine and necessary health equipment and provision of support services for the health sector. I note the following:

- The operating grant has been increased by \$15.12 million;
- Capital grant has been reduced by \$6.6 million with most allocation going to ongoing capital construction from last three years;
- I would have also liked to upgrade and refurbish the Tamavua Rehab Building and nearby structures and use it as a COVID facility; and
- The land stabilisation and refurbishment of Savusavu Hospital is to be commended as it has been in the pipeline for some time now.

The continuation of partnership between Government and General Practitioners (GPs) for service delivery is also commendable as it would lighten the load of work for our public doctors and health facilities. I would have moved it further to all GPs to be given subsidy to see public patients close to their home. This will reduce the burden on government doctors who are already overwhelmed.

To aid in achieving herd immunity from COVID-19, GPs should be allowed to carry out vaccination at no cost but as a service to the community and the country during this time of heart need. While it is commended that allocation for specialist studies will provide especially in the tertiary care, it is also suggested that allocation for primary health care be considered.

In terms of outsourcing of health care services such as radiology and maybe laboratory testing, the COVID-19 pandemic has re-established the importance of laboratory testing and radiology in the diagnosis of disease. However, this has also highlighted the need for a regulatory body overseen by specialist laboratory and radiology scientist to regulate testing and imaging facilities. It is critical that tests being administered maintains a consistent platform in the public and private health facilities. The focus being on testing algorithms, testing validations, quality assurance, most importantly setting and maintaining a standard of duty of care.

With regards to the new Ba Hospital, I am glad to hear the announcement that it will be open later this year. May I echo the concerns raised by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition as to the whereabouts of the Private Public Partnerships with Aspen Medical, and the implications on the people of Ba. Will they be required to pay more for medical services under this arrangement?

To conclude Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is in the fine print, far away from the bells and whistles of the announcements, that the truth of a Budget is revealed. As I have said this is a deceptive and over-ambitious Budget. It promises much, but the assistance to the people is conditional which a breach of social contract, that is why, Sir, I am afraid I cannot support this Budget.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now call upon the Minister for Fisheries. You have the floor.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Can you hear me now, Sir?

HON. SPEAKER.- Yes, now I can see you as well.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji and all other countries continue to be devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be amiss if we do not pay tribute to the many lives that have been lost, displaced or have been left worse off due to the baffling impacts of this pandemic. My sincere thoughts and prayers to those who have been affected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset I would like to state that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human lives worldwide and represented an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and employment.

The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating. Tonnes of millions of people are at risk or falling into extreme poverty while the number of undernourished people currently estimated at nearly 811 million could increase by the end of the year. The pandemic has impacted our entire food system and has laid bare yet fragility.

Border closures, trying restrictions and confinement measures have been preventing farmers from accessing markets, selling their produce and agricultural workers from harvesting crops plus disrupting domestic and international food supply chains and reducing access to healthy, safe and diverse diets. The pandemic has decimated jobs and placed millions of livelihoods at risk.

As breadwinners lose, Mr. Speaker, Fiji like many other nations have worked tirelessly in addressing the ever-changing impacts of this pandemic. I must acknowledge the Fijian Government for its efforts to ensure that all Fijians are catered for while we move towards economic recovery. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts put in by our frontline workers, including medical officers, Disciplined Services and the broader Civil Service workforce, including members of the Fisheries family that continue to devote their time in our collective efforts to mitigate COVID-19. This has come through vaccination and we are thankful to our development partners in helping expedite our access to free vaccines for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our continued efforts to ensure the protection of all Fijians have also warranted changes to our legislations. As a result, those in low income countries are marginalised, populations including small scale farmers and settlements are the ones that are affected the most.

Mr. Speaker, now more than ever we need an enabling environment of Government's mechanisms and institutions to make the transformations to improve recovery possible. Now is the time for global solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in our societies. Together we can overcome the intertwined health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. We can prevent its escalation into a longer humanitarian and food security catastrophe with the potential loss of already achieved development gains through robust Government's mechanisms and institutions. Changes can create and maintain safe workplace environments and ensure that vulnerable members of our society are protected. We have acted to protect everyone.

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I would like to support and applaud the Government for its foresight in the support of the resource-based sectors and with the allocation for the Ministry of Fisheries Budget for this 2021-2022 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been allocated \$13.1 million with the provision of \$9.7 million for operations and \$2.8 million for capital expenditure. This is a reduction of \$2.2 million or 14 percent compared to the Ministry's 2020-2021 Budget of \$15.3 million. Like most other

Government agencies, the Ministry will endeavour to make the most out of this Budget. This includes facilitating sustainable economic growth that economically empowers our people and national economy.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry recognises the important role that Fisheries play in cushioning the impacts of this pandemic on our people and country. As Minister, I must re-emphasise that we are determined to put in considerable effort to ensure that the Fijian people continue to benefit from the fisheries sector. This, Mr. Speaker, will be undertaken through innovative, smart and holistic approaches which support sustainable development goals and address the current pandemic needs for all Fijians. What is the Ministry's goal in mitigating pandemic?

Our support for our coastal fishers and also our fishing industry has never come at a better time than this. Healing the wounds of this pandemic really begins with supporting our Fijians in doing what they do best and that is providing for them and contributing towards the growth of our economy. This Budget has provided this relief by decreasing the cost burden to our stakeholders, so as to give them more financial breathing space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to reaffirm this august House that regardless of the current pandemic implications, the Ministry of Fisheries key objective for 2021-2022 has not wavered. These key objectives include; fostering food security and economic growth. These objectives underpin the broad context of focusing on our efforts in advanced research and aquaculture, increasing the value of fisheries products through value adding and diversifying fisheries products targeted at niche markets. It also involves the understanding the fishing industry and considering the options to support them. Government's renewed efforts with facilitating a landing facility for companies that are keen to change their engine vessels into more energy efficient and with adequate storage capacity, is a step in the right direction.

The second objective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is mitigating the challenges through innovative approaches. This an important role for the Ministry of Fisheries, given the growing issue in our national, regional and global context, coupled with the ever increasing impact of COVID-19. Being innovative will allow the Ministry of Fisheries to identify problems, formulate solutions and adapt promptly through cost effective methods. This includes our ongoing efforts to invest in technology and help with the scientific research and with monitoring and compliance, including reduced illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Additionally, the third objective is building resilience through partnership and collaboration. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the saying goes, "No man is an island", and as the Ministry we believe that to be truly self-sufficient, we rely on the companies and the comfort of others in order to thrive. While putting this into context, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us just that. In order for us to succeed, we need to collaborate in all areas to achieve our standard goals. Especially, these includes strengthening our relationship with the fishing communities, the industry, academia, civil society organisations and development partners, to name a few.

Our partnership is not only focused on food security and economic growth, but importantly also on the protection and conservation of the marine resources, including the establishment of marine protected areas. The last but not the least, key objective is optimising services delivered through our 32 Fisheries Service Centres nationwide. Under this objective, the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to maximise the utilisation and outcome realised from the reduced allocated budgetary provision to efficiently address short, medium and long term sustainable fisheries goals. Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 fiscal envelope will support the Ministry's work of increasing the fisheries sector's contribution in COVID-mitigation and help nurse our economy back to healthy levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am optimistic that with the 2021-2022 fiscal Budget and our collective efforts and commitment, we will be able to do much more. This includes meeting our national, regional and international goals. Goals that will address poverty, ensure health and well-being, promote gender equality, achieve decent work and economic growth, promote industry innovation, ensure responsible consumption and production, address climate actions and more importantly, sustain lives on land and below water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to highlight the Fisheries sectoral budget. For aquaculture, there is an allocation of \$2.6 million for research and development; \$1.5 million for coastal fisheries; \$2.3 million for offshore fisheries, with \$2.3 million for technical services.

Mr. Speaker, I commend the Government for its commitment in allocating the needed fiscal envelope and I would like to reaffirm this august House that we are determined to make every dollar count for the Fijian people and the economy.

Mr. Speaker, with the allocated budget for aquaculture of \$2.3 million we will be geared towards achieving rapid growth and increase productivity in the sector. Through a collective effort geared towards partnership, the Ministry hinges on mobilising the private sector with a clear focus on food security for rural communities.

Hatchery Production advance partnerships, farmer training, research and development as well as targeted financial assistance will support the Ministry's activity in the 2021-2022 fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, under aquaculture Caboni Multispecies Hatchery is allocated almost \$500,000. These funds have been earmarked for construction and upgrade works for the multispecies hatchery. It will also include accommodation facilities to house Hatchery Staff to maintain breeding and nursing cycles and also for training to opportunities on farm development and hatchery operations.

While we are determined to fully utilise these funds other critical areas of hatchery production, feeding development and breeding of high valued multispecies of marine and brackish water culture mediums this will be realised under the existing bilateral partnership with technical support from our bilateral partners. We are fortunate enough to have develop these partnerships in 2019 and with the limitations of COVID-19 pandemic we are able to fully utilised existing arrangements.

We will be able to achieve a positive ecological economic and wellbeing that assures the long term benefit of Fijians and also achieve self-efficiency in this sustainable management if our coasts and also in fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, the allocated Budget for Caboni will also support the consistent supply of at least 2 million shrimp larvae to farmers in Fiji within the financial year. The production of 2 million shrimp larvae produces around 48 tonnes of shrimp at an estimated value of around about \$1.4 million.

Mr. Speaker, as we continue to mitigate through this pandemic support towards aquaculture in turn provides alternative livelihood sources, reduces fishing pressure on wild stock and energises the local economy driving growth. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the Budget allocation for \$175,000 to assist in brackish water farmers.

Apart from the project funds allocated to Caboni Multispecies Hatchery, Mr. Speaker, work will continue through our research centres and hatcheries in Naduruloulou, Galoa, Ba, Dreketi and the production of tilapia, prawns, sandfish and grass carp, as well as undertaking research in the culture of high value species such as rabbit fish and gropers.

Through this continued commitment and through bilateral partners such as those run by the Government of Japan through treatment and technical assistance, we are determined to reach our targets. These targets include the attraction both foreign and locally investors to invest in aquaculture farming which could boost the production locally and contribute to import substitution. Secondly, it can enhance full security through provision of nutritious protein sources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our bid to increase and stabilise food security amidst COVID-19, the Ministry of Fisheries welcomes the allocation of \$500,000 for Food Security Programme. The \$0.5 million budget for Food Security Programme is to increase farm productivity through the provision of farming inputs to new famers and supporting existing farmers in expanding their fish farming businesses.

Mr. Speaker, capacity building is critical to ensure that our farmers are sustainable, dedicated training programme, our best practice, farming anthologist, finance literacy will continue to be delivered in the next financial year. As we adapt to the new norms, we are determined to also engage in new innovative ways in which farmers trade and are supported using online platforms. Additionally, through a governance structure of cluster based farming associations, farmers will benefit from the economies of scale and a path to market initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the aquaculture sector will be a game changer as the benefits realised from it are multifaceted from ensuring food security providing an income based for those who have been displaced by pandemic, import substitution, climate change adaptation, nutritionally beneficial, fish and prawns and enable economic growth. Therefore the Ministry supports the Budget Allocation for this Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 fiscal envelope for coastal fisheries is also provided for initiatives and programmes to sustain and diversify our support to coastal fisheries support. As the impact of COVID-19 continues to affect us, our focus in supporting coastal fisheries have not wavered as we welcome the allocated provisioning of over \$500,000 for coastal fisheries development.

The urban to rural drift continues to increase. We are determined to meet our 850 coastal maritime communities that need assistance through the allocated funds. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries provides district communities with ice through 24 ice plants throughout Fiji. This initiative supports a longer shelf-life for marine commodities and allows for proper fish handling and we explore means to adapt to the impacts of COVID-19 and push for self-sufficiency. The government's budget allocation will also look at supporting rural communities to maximise the commercial value of fish sold.

This is done by ensuring that the maritime communities are able to access markets through the provision of effective and efficient support services and through strengthened collaboration with key partner agencies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as such the ministry also welcomes the budget allocation for preparatory work for Wainigadru and Koro Ice Plants. Additionally, the allocation of \$2.3 million for extension and advisory services will foster the ministry's work in sustaining and diversifying every opportunity for our 850 coastal communities.

Through the footprint of our nationwide fisheries service centres, the ministry is determined to continue providing licenses and advisory services for fishing communities and establishment fishing associations, technical capacity building programmes, equipment maintenance and activities of monitoring, control and surveillance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to commend the government for the announcement with the waiver of licence fee for the \$3,000 fees nationwide and the MSAF survey and fees. As many individuals continue to make adjustments for sustenance, this initiative will ensure that coastal communities are given swift operating environments to make use of previously allocated cash for licensing and MSAF fees on essential needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries is mandated to lead the whole nation's approach towards sustainably managing Fiji's fisheries resources. Additionally, through tools of monitoring, compliance and enforcement, I would like to reaffirm this august House that we will work diligently to balance the economic significance of fishing and the economic development of the fisheries sector. This will be done while ensuring that Fiji meets its national, regional and international obligation in protecting marine resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the support rendered through inter-ministerial bi-lateral partners by far and we look forward to its effective execution of our ministry's goals. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in job loss due to the global pandemic and the financial support rendered for the seaweed programme for 2021-2022 is supported. Seaweed provide quick economic opportunities to our rural community...

HON. SPEAKER.- You are going over time, Honourable Minister.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you Sir.

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

Honourable Members we will suspend proceedings for an hour. Supper will be served in the Big Committee Room. We suspend proceedings.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.30 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.33 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please be seated. We will continue with the debate and I now call upon the Honourable Mikaele Leawere, you have the floor.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians, I rise to make my contributions to the Budget Estimates presented to Parliament and to all Members of this House. I thank the Honourable Minister for Economy for the composition of this Budget. Allow me to thank the Honourable Leader of the Opposition for his words of wisdom which I fully agree with and I wholeheartedly endorse the sentiments offered to salvage the economy and manage the affairs of the State prudently.

Mr. Speaker, let me also commend the Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder and his team in putting up these estimates during this abnormal period we are facing. It is no mean feat and their tireless efforts bear fruition which allow us, all Members to contribute positively and make recommendations wherever possible.

Mr. Speaker, budgeting is no mean feat whether it is for our households, our community or our society as it is about raising revenue for service and supplies, however, there was no plan in the Budget to get the economy going and firing. We would like to see a Budget that proposes measures that will generate step changes in our economic performance and turn this once a generation pandemic into opportunity that some business have been able to make. It is a broken budget, Mr. Speaker, with no clear direction for getting the country back on track to prosperity.

Believe me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this nation and these people are more bewildered and frustrated than ever at the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government, in not being inspirational for Fiji. We do not want to live on benefits all the time, but we want our people to have jobs, to prosper and to have a future. On the health sector, everyone knows that the health sector is in crisis. With the increase in budget totalling \$403.3 million, the Ministry is to ensure that the delivery of health services is effective and efficient, according to the budget. The allocated funding for COVID-19 response should provide the support needed for its operations.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is deplorable and sickening to see sick people living in shocking hospital conditions and the families are looking for the bodies of the loved ones to bury. We have the dead lying on the floor for lack of space and it is heart wrenching, and the Ministry staff on the other hand are overstretched and overworked. We will not forget the sacrifice and contributions of frontline health workers, paramedics, nurses, care givers, security officers, volunteers, civil society organisations and the discipline forces who continue to wage war against this monstrous pandemic. They deserve our unwavering support. I believe it is the duty of the Government to set aside resources to cater for the wealth of these front line workers and their families. They leave their homes and are away from their families for weeks and their only contact is by mobile phones, unlike you and me. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to think of them and pay them well.

On unemployment support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, using taxpayers' money to pay unemployed benefits to poor and vulnerable households conditional on vaccination is cruel. So far the Honourable Prime Minister has shown no remorse for the number of COVID-19 related deaths, nor has he offered condolences to the family of the deceased.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the allocation for unemployment benefits, \$200 million has been allocated. I ask; is this enough? The Government expects that 300,000 unemployed workers will be assisted. How did the Government work this out? Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$200 million divided by \$720

is 278,000. Leave alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other major shortcomings, the budget has been unable to make some basic calculations correct.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the component of corporate taxes is low because we have a low corporate taxing structure due to being manipulated and influenced by elite interests, be that as the local, international or multinational. The corporate taxes should be increased instead of taxing the poor necessarily and unfairly and the Government should develop the courage to come out of the pockets of these corporate giants and act on its own for once for the people of this nation.

Let me talk further about raising revenue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the core component of revenue raising is the continued acquisition of a bloated public debt portfolio to the tune of \$7.2 billion, which was only \$1.2 billion at the time of the Military *coup* in 2006. This means, under the leadership of this Government, the public debt increased by \$6 billion in the last one and a half decade. As if that was not enough, this year alone, we are on record to be adding, if I may, the so often used phrase by the Honourable Minister for Economy, “unprecedented”, deficit of more than \$2 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we look at indirect taxes, with just composed of VAT, including fees, fines, levies, which is in excess of \$2 billion, bringing me to assert that the notion of this Government is overtaxing the lives of the ordinary people of this country, as exposed by the statistics.

Honourable Professor Prasad said this Budget is based on assumption and I totally agree with him. Given the exemptions granted in terms of fees, levies and it leads us to wonder with the reduced economy which is illustrated by the \$9.8 billion GDP, our Government will be able to reach this more than \$2 billion of indirect taxes. With a bloated side of the Government, and topping it up with the heavy debt burden, the effects of a large government system is surely taking its toll and is worsened by the increase in pandemic cases.

The Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a farce, a joke and an insult to our people, a distant dream and full of hot air aimed at raising false hopes, meting our band aid solutions and hardly being able to keep the Government afloat, and pushing our economy into further catastrophic situation. It is a mockery of good governance and an aberration of matter of truth and shamelessly an extravagance aimed at the general elections rather than healing the wounds caused by this pandemic and the eminent pile of economic disaster.

On data, Mr. Speaker, it is difficult to acquire it in any Government Departments, usually we come up with the brick wall whenever we want to access information. The productivity growth to improve ability to work smarter is difficult to access and unfortunately, this lack of reliable data measure our national productivity is a cause for concern.

Government, Mr. Speaker, needs to raise the output per worker and this can only materialise if relevant data is available publically. It is fair to say any hope to salvage our economy, Mr. Speaker, has been dashed through the lack of consultation by engaging the USP, FNU and the University of Fiji and other relevant stakeholders. These are capable institutions with capable people who are all willing to help but this is what this Government lacks in their inability to quick to listen, failure to consult relevant stakeholders to steer the economy and take us out from this crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decrease in allocation of Higher Education Budget, does this mean that the Government is swaying away from its responsibility to cater for higher education? Does it also mean, it will increase its fees to recover arrears in institutions for higher education?

Mr. Speaker, on the issue of the University of the South Pacific grant of \$23 million; when will Government pay this amount? Is the Government going to pay its dues and to do so, by all means

immediately and do not hold USP to ransom? Without Fiji's obligatory contribution, it will put USP in a critical financial situation jeopardising delivery of education to students. About 80 percent are from Fiji and the employment of staff which is about 80 percent are Fijians. I am calling on the Honourable Minister for Economy to try and resolve that issue and not to be childish regarding USP's contribution. This Government talks about regional solidarity and cooperation but they should practice it.

With regards to Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, Mr. Speaker, expenditure has been reduced by \$7.7 million. More than this, Mr. Speaker, during the pandemic, what is the innovative strategy in the budget for continuation of teaching and learning for our school students?

Like this Government, the Ministry of Education, Mr. Speaker, is also lost for ideas on how to support our students in the teaching and learning. What is the Ministry of Education's plan for Year 13 students who will require assessment outcomes for tertiary education admission? Is the Ministry of Education, Mr. Speaker, consulting various stakeholders to discuss the way forward for our Year 13 students?

On FPNF measures, Mr. Speaker, the provision of withdrawing fund for FPNF members who have balances up to \$10,000 and are affected due to COVID-19 is commendable. However those eligible should have the necessary support from the Ministry's concern in how their funds are to be utilised well. What type of business to set up? Advisory service can these members sources to help them out and support their livelihood by giving fund straight out is like giving candies to a young boy or a young girl. Government cannot expect to inject \$30 million in the economy from this assistance, there are logistics to take care of first.

In highlighting the Budget, Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister made references to the provision of sanitary pads which are intended to be given to female students. How is this going to be managed? What Government should be concerned about is making a difference in people's lives.

As I have mentioned, Government needs to realise, Mr. Speaker, that the unemployment assistance provided by FPNF for those in the 50 years old to 54 years old and to be effective by 1st August should have the necessary support infrastructure in terms of advisory services for those that want to start their business. Here, we are talking about \$1,000. How about those with \$9,500 less, will they also qualify, Mr. Speaker?

On employment productivity, according to the Budget Estimates, the Ministry will continue to review the National Minimum Wage, to ensure decent living standards and conditions for every Fijian. I will not be surprised that this again will be announced next year and it has taken a long time to review this item.

The failure, Mr. Speaker, of the Ministry to engage unions, public sector unions, teacher unions, ILO employees has led to the delay and the increase in unemployment and poverty in this country. Engage our relevant stakeholders and complete this exercise.

Let us, Mr. Speaker, not to play lip service in this Budget. We need actions to be taken and to listen to the people for once, especially the Opposition. Your problem is not your problem alone, it is also our problem, so let us talk and get this country ticking, especially in reviving our failing economy. Since the *coup* of 2006, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this government has recklessly spent billions of dollars with little to show for it.

All this Government had done is, it increased our public debt from \$2 billion during the late Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase's time to more than \$9 billion now and it is still increasing. The

burden of the public debt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would be paid by those who pay taxes minus the big corporate organisations whose taxes have been reduced by government. Therefore the debt burden recovery will fall on the poor and the middle classes, our future generations and the general workers of this country.

Corporate companies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must be made to pay their taxes and they should not be protected as after all, it is the hard-earned cash of the ordinary workers of this country which is contributing to their profits. We hope that the allocation of \$9.6 million in the 2021-2022 Budget compared to the \$10.7 million in 2020 is sufficient to complete the minimum wage review.

The effective implementation of the National Productive Master Plan 2021 to 2036 the School Employment Exposure Programmes (SEEP) world in tourism and workplace main programmes, we ask the Ministry to work in collaboration with the Opposition to ensure that all the activities are carried out fully. However, when it comes to governing, SODELPA will ensure that we work with the FijiFirst Opposition members after the 2022 General Elections. On a manageable note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we encourage more dialogue with all the unions of this country.

On community development, Honourable Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said in this House about community development and we can agree that fire services is one of the most important utility service in a town area or locality needs. I am perplexed as to why the Fire Station at Navua is located to Pacific Harbour and ask government to relook at its strategies quickly with regards to firefighting facilities and their appropriate remuneration to take on this big task. This will avoid loss of homes, heritage sites, work places, places of worship and the recent fire in Calia, Navua is a classic example of a fire destroying a temple.

The reduced allocation of the Ministry of Waterways, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will this mean for areas like Serua will their waterways development be compromised? How about low laying areas where people dread at the prospect of facing flash flooding, hope the Ministry will accommodate those that need assistance.

On public utilities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget allocation of \$23.8 million for the Ministry of Infrastructure compared to \$30.60 million in 2020 will improve the network of roads, bridges, ports, jetties and service development. There are villages seeking street lights all over Fiji, we have villages in Serua like Vunaniu, Nakorovou, Saniveiuto in Deuba. We hope this Budget will also accommodate the request from all over Fiji.

On the Department of Energy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Namaqumaqua, Lapanoni and Culanuku are still waiting for their supply of electricity. Waibogi Village, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have long requested the wiring of their homes and repairs for their Generators but nothing has been done and they requested this in 2019.

On rural development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I question the wisdom of this government in reducing the budget of these economic sectors like fisheries and forests. The Forestry sector Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the Fisheries are two important sectors in our economy as they add value to our baskets, however, the government owes an explanation as to why the terms and conditions to obtain a fishing licence has been amended to make it difficult for the resource owners to obtain a licence to fish.

The fishing sector employs thousands of people, yet, the lip service meted out by this government is deplorable to say the least. Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to urge the government to wake up and pay heed to the alternative strategies suggested by the Opposition, the civil society organisations and other stakeholders and the ordinary people of Fiji and get to the task of governing our country and not over-regulating or unnecessarily taxing our lives.

It is time to put aside our differences and let us work together and let us put this country back on the path to normalcy. It is one and a half decade from 2006 and still no change. It is time for a change, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am sure other Members are saying the same, especially from the Opposition benches. As a budget based on assumption, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see this Bill falling short of achieving these things for a nation leading me to register my opposition to the motion before the House. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leawere for his contribution to the debate. I now call on the Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, you have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians; thank you for allowing me to take the floor to deliver my statement in support of the 2021-2022 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, right at the outset, even in such difficult times, the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy has actually delivered an excellent Budget. This is a budget that is actually focused on recovery, it is focused on reclaiming and rebuilding stronger and better. There is something for every Fijian in the Budget, whether you are in the formal or informal sector, micro, small, medium or large business, transport, student, market vendor, elder or person with disability. This Budget has actually got you covered.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we have continued to deliver for Fijians because of the strong leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister. His leadership and guidance has kept the country afloat despite the adversity caused by natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. And this Budget, yet again, carries on the vision that 'no Fijian has left behind'.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now more than ever, the nation needs the House to unite and support the Budget. Why? It is because it gives us hope and continued direction. Sadly, the other side of the House opposes and condemns the Budget and spreads lies. All except for our Honourable Bulitavu who I want to commend, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Opposition response from Honourable Bulanauca and others clearly show they have nothing to critique. The Opposition have been caught off guard with an excellent Budget. That is why the digression to unrelated issues. Honourable Bulanauca claims Bill Gates is behind COVID-19. What preposterous ideas, Sir.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the revenue projection in the Budget is conservative rather than optimistic which Honourable Lalabalavu claimed. For example, the current fiscal year, revenue collections were 26 percent higher than forecast, an over collection of \$438 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say 'thank you' to Honourable Bulitavu, as I mentioned earlier, for understanding the vision of the Fijian Government and supporting the Budget. Honourable Bulitavu, you have shown the leadership that Fijians look for from the Opposition. This is definitely missing from the Leader of Opposition and other Members. The Leader of the Opposition claims that economic growth during the Rabuka and SDL governments was higher.

During the two decades prior to 2007, the average growth rate was 2.2 percent, compared to 2.6 percent in the decade from 2007 to 2016, an average growth of 3.7 percent for the past nine years (2010-2018 or so), despite the Global Financial Crisis, series of natural disasters and category five cyclones, and the COVID-19 pandemic that led to global shutdown. This is a feat never achieved by any government. The previous governments did not face any of these global phenomena - so it is simply, Mr. Speaker, incomparable.

What the Opposition also fails to tell the public is the economic base in the period prior to 2007 relied on sugar and tourism. Today, we have a diversified economic base which includes manufacturing, it includes food, it includes building materials, it includes services, ICT/BPO and non-sugar agriculture, to name a few. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we diversify into new economic sectors, the contribution of traditional sectors will reduce. But that does not mean there is no growth in that sector. Growth in agriculture and agriculture's share of GDP are two different things. Falling share of the GDP does not mean there is a decline in agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Leader of Opposition further claimed that the Honourable Minister for Economy wants to control the Budget by placing allocations under Head 50. Firstly, legally the permanent secretaries are responsible for these appropriations. Secondly, out of the \$713 million in Head 50, \$200 million is for unemployment payment, over \$50 million in assistance such as electricity subsidies and other relief, over \$165 million is for TELS and NTS and \$40 million is for Fiji Airways rebate.

Insofar as the Moody's rating is concerned, Mr. Speaker Sir, the Honourable Leader of Opposition spoke of the downgrading of Fiji's long-term issues and senior unsecured ratings to B1 from BA3 and maintained a negative outlook. Again, they failed to identify the rationale. Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I quote Moody's statement on the rationale:

“Ongoing border restrictions limiting the arrival of international tourists to Fiji will weigh on GDP and tax revenue, of which the tourism sector's direct contribution is approximately 20 percent and 30 percent, respectively. With a return of tourism activity, at an uncertain date, and likely staged over a period of time, Moody's expects Fiji to carry a much higher government debt burden than before the pandemic for the foreseeable future”.

Please, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, do not quote and use information that you do understand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Government, we have kept the interest of all Fijians. We have not changed or swayed our direction based on what certain people on social media say. It has been these decisive actions that have lifted our nation out of the dark ages of racial divide and favouritism based on political allegiance or “who you know”. My message to all Fijians listening today, serving a nation is not always about political point-scoring. It is actually about securing a future for the generations to come.

Your Government, the FijiFirst Government, has done that and will continue doing that. We have listened to you, whether you are a young scholar, or an entrepreneur in the making, or amongst the most vulnerable contrary to what the Opposition may believe. We have gone about and listened to everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have progressively and safely opened up businesses, including retail, because this is not the time to shut more businesses down. In doing that, we are putting thousands of Fijians out of work costing families' years of hard-earned income. Is that what Honourable Jale wants?

However, this is not a decision that the Government has taken at the spur of the moment. There was proper planning and detailed consultations with the business community and the Ministry of Health. I re-emphasise that health and safety have been our priority. That is why the approval for any permit is given jointly by the Ministry and the Ministry of Health. We have strict COVID-safe protocols and monitoring mechanisms in partnership with the Ministry of Health.

There will always be risks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we have minimised those risks. What matters most is how we follow and adhere to the protocols of operations set by the Ministry, and that is the most important and critical component of everything - how we follow and how we adhere, as a populous we must adhere. We have established COVID-safe Ambassadors to monitor compliance by businesses to the protocols.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary, the 2021-2022 National Budget is designed to empower Fijians and businesses, so there is some normalcy and we are able to enhance and create some economic activities. Whether unemployment benefits, fees and fines, or providing comfort to focus on getting businesses off the ground, or not having to worry about loan repayments for at least two years - we are here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$200 million for unemployment support; over \$50 million in other reliefs like free electricity, food distribution, et cetera; over \$120 million in social welfare; free education and support to tertiary students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is support for businesses, which includes \$200 million worth of financing support for businesses. Guaranteeing loans between 80 percent to 90 percent for MSMEs, and paying interest for two years will free up their minds to think bigger and better. I wish the Opposition would free up its mind. Sir, \$1.2 million for monthly and upfront costs to get MSMEs on to the VitiKart platform. The Ministry, RBF and Vodafone, our very own company, will have as many MSMEs, especially, those licensed under the Fijian Made-Buy Fijian campaign.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I stood before this august House last budget, I shared the struggles of our tourism industry as they fought for survival. I shared new pathways for international travel, re-establishing confidence, protecting businesses and jobs and ensuring that the benefits of revival are felt beyond the industry itself. With the global crisis far from over and survival still at the top of the mind, we now find hope with vaccines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen the pandemic's uneven impact on global economies and its people. Despite living through the same pandemic with almost the same restrictions, our recovery remains uneven. Close to \$4 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered globally. But for many, vaccines remain out of reach. Despite efforts to enhance access, there is still a whole swathe of countries who may not achieve substantial levels of vaccination at least until 2023. While this essentially means that these countries will remain isolated owing to lack of visitor confidence, we cannot have that for the Fijian tourism industry and we most certainly cannot afford it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the good news, the great news is that we have enough vaccines for our entire eligible population. If we fail to vaccinate 80 percent of the target population by November 2021, we will be amongst those shut to the world. The Fijian tourism industry has been one of our greatest supporters from offering accommodation for quarantine, to vehicles and personnel, to reach out to communities as part of our vaccine drive and we are grateful and thankful to them for doing so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why through this Budget, we are delivering initiatives that are absolutely critical for the revival of the industry initiatives that will help us restart. The budget is contrary to what the Honourable Ratu Naiqamu claims. The strategies are built on the pillars of survival and long term continuity. Utility subsidies, regulatory relief, maintaining tax reductions, waiver of arrears, unemployment benefits, loans to meet operational costs. Looking long term is what will build resilience and ensure that our recovery is sustainable.

As we did with the Fijian COVID Safe Economic Recovery Framework, Sir, we have mapped out a three-tiered approach to safely re-opening the tourism industry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with vaccine

passports and Tourist Insurance Scheme, we have now put ourselves on par with our markets. The \$40 million Fiji Recovery Rebate Package and travel stipend will serve its purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with pent up demand and only a handful of destinations accepting tourists, competition will be stronger than ever. Our best hope for tourism resumption or any resumption really is vaccines. The longer we take to reach our vaccine target, the longer our borders remain closed, the longer businesses struggle, and the longer Fijians remain without jobs. Now doing business, I want to ask the Honourable Leader of Opposition and Honourable Gavoka, where are you coming up with a misleading ranking of 110 when we have been in touch and working with the World Bank Group (WBG). Fiji has never been ranked 110.

I wish to enlighten them that the WBG has been recognising the reforms we have undertaken thus far. In fact, they have been working with the Ministry on different levels of doing business processes. Since 2017, we have been working on reforms to reduce time and cost of doing business. I have been saying this in this House time and time again but they do not listen.

In the 2021 assessment, for the first time, Fiji has been acknowledged for “positive” reforms in three indicators - Starting a Business; Obtaining Construction Permits; and Getting Credit. Every Parliament sitting the Opposition takes a dig at our ranking from the past. Not once have they bothered at the very least to acknowledge the good. That’ is not healthy debate. That is plain unconstructive criticism.

I ask the Opposition to see the changes on the ground, ranking is not the only measure for our progress in improving business procedures and processes. By eliminating the consent issue requirement from the Lands Department or TLTB for water and electricity connections or mortgage, charge, pledge or caveat, it removes long wait for developers, Sir. I see they will harp on about TLTB but they will not say anything about the Lands Department, it is the same process.

But the Opposition has again created misinformation and they are inciting Fijians and it is all wrong, Sir. The amendment to the TLTB Act is not taking away any landowner rights. The amendments will simply make service delivery faster. Everyone in Opposition should listen to Honourable Bulitavu. Maybe, they should also listen to Tupou Draunidalo, Sir, who has actually said these things out in public.

This amendment will not alienate land from landowners. Ownership of all *iTaukei* land is actually protected, it is enshrined in Section 28 of the Constitution and it can never be taken away. It can never ever, ever, be taken away from the customary owners. Even if the Government uses the land for public purposes, and pays compensation, when the land is no longer required for the original purpose, it must be returned to the landowners. This protection was introduced in the 2013 Constitution, never before was it in any other Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, section 5 of the *iTaukei* Land Trust Act also ensures that *iTaukei* land shall not be alienated by sale, grant, transfer or exchange except to the State. No one can sell, transfer, rezone or sublease, amongst others, without the consent of the landowners.

Mr Speaker Sir, I want to quote the extract from the budget address, which actually reconfirms that the amendment will not alienate land from landowners. I ask the Opposition to listen very carefully

“Consent is still required for dealings such as sale, transfer, subleasing, assignment, subletting, building, rezoning and so forth. However, with these amendments, consent

can only be refused where there is a breach of any lease condition or the application is not in accordance with law”.

What is so hard to understand? Even the iTLTB is telling you the same thing. The Budget Address and the amendments to the iTLTB Act are public documents. It is readily available for people to read but the Opposition picks and chooses and twists information they think is relevant for their particular cause. The SODELPA members need to be reminded that during the leadership of Mr. Rabuka, the Denarau and Momi issues. We have said it time and time again the landowners permanently lost their land. But they conveniently forget about saying things about that, need I say more.

The Opposition needs to stop polluting the minds of Fijians and stop the politics of the old. If you have nothing useful to contribute, do not contribute, do not start twisting people's minds, it is actually causing mayhem for no reason whatsoever. I see the Honourable Gavoka was so flippant about something that seriously raised by the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts.

It is actually quite sad in terms of transport Mr. Speaker, Sir. Transport is a critical cross-cutting sector for the economy. Whether land or sea, it is the link to development. The transport sector has been allocated a budget of over \$30 million. This is for the continuation of shipping services to the maritime islands. The domestic vessel operators are supported in sustaining their businesses.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the budget provides more than 20 transport related initiatives across all sectors and some of these include Social Welfare assistance on Bus Fare Support for the elderly, for the disabled; transport assistance for primary and secondary students. Removal of LTA alteration-of-records fee, payment of driving license, defensive driving fees for all taxi drivers, bus driver, mini-bus drivers and carrier drivers, who will need renewal in the next financial year. Strengthening powers of LTA against vehicles illegally operating as taxis or minibuses. Open ranking systems for taxis and so on. All of these and many other initiatives are assisting those that have been affected the most.

Your taxis, minibus, bus and carrier operators. The shipping industry has been heavily impacted with reduction in cargo. To ease the burden, the coasting-trade has been removed for foreign cargo ship. This allows for faster movement in and out of our ports. Given our geographical dispersion, interisland sea transportation is essential for our livelihood, for our trade and for our commerce. Therefore, the continued support for the Government Shipping Franchise for more than \$2 million will keep maritime islands connected. Mr Speaker Sir, to provide safe, efficient, reliable, affordable shipping services, the Government Shipping Services is yearly given a budget for the maintenance and operations of the twelve government vessels.

In conclusion Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to achieve the targets set, to put us on better footing for economic recovery and to give back to our citizens the ability to earn a livelihood. In fact, we will achieve much more, with the opportunities and new industries emerging from this whole adversity.

I wholeheartedly support the 2021-2022 National Budget and look forward to the new financial year, with a reinvigorated look. I urge the Opposition members to, please, do not twist the facts. Please, do not try and influence the public by telling lies or not telling the truth and just keeping mum about stuff they should be honest about. The best policy with this country to move forward and not have racial division is to be honest, to be honest with each other and let us not be dishonest in this particular House, Sir. While I am on the floor, I support the Budget, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I now call on the Honourable Matanitobua. You have the floor.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute to the debate on the Bill before the House. At the outset of my speech, allow me to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy and his staff for the composition of this Budget though it is based on assumptions and beyond our capacity to sustain.

Also allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to thank and fully endorse the sentiments shared by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition in his response to this Budget. I am hopeful the Government will pay heed to his words of wisdom and the alternative strategies suggested by this side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget session will surely go down in the history of Fiji as one divorced from the matter of truth which is devoid of seeking to fight this pandemic, sustain livelihoods of our people and salvage our economy. The best description I found for this case of misplaced priorities is Nero fiddled while Rome burned. While the Government perspective is totally divorced from seeking to heal and rebuild the nation, the voters who voted them in now feel that this Budget is betrayal of the mandate given to this Government. Almost everyone can see the real design of this Budget and the speech by the Honourable Minister for Economy is nothing but electioneering. What a shame!

Sir, just look at how ruthless they are having stopped COVID-19 tests, forcing people to stay home, starving people in and outside the containment zone without food and water and not willing to lockdown to curb and control this monstrous pandemic. However more will get infected and how many more will die before this Government comes out of the pocket of the rich to become the custodian of public interest. The manner in which the Government has and is seeking to evade its duty and responsibility can be summed by nothing but one of the maxims it is known for using a lot, that no Fijian would be left behind. I ask from what - starvation, infection or death or all. I think that skins the cat to the bone.

For instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us examine the plight of the people of Serua and Namosi on the west of containment zone and Tailevu, Naitasiri and Rewa on the north/east of the containment zone. Thousands of them who earn a living by working in the containment zone are without jobs and weekly income. They are struggling, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with their families to find food but yet again they remember the famous quote by none other than the Honourable Prime Minister not long ago and I quote, 'who gives a damn'?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your indulgence, I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude and heartfelt thanks to all the people of Navua in Fiji and overseas, the non-state stakeholders and the business and cultural community of Navua to come to the help of the suffering Navuans - your generous efforts and selfless service is highly valued. Against the backdrop of that, Mr. Speaker, what perplexes me like thousands of other people here in Navua is the lacklustre or rather step child treatment that has been meted out to the people of Navua by the Government, of the living and stranded.

While it is absolutely undesirable to open up the containment zone border at Wainadoi, the authorities must pay heed to the plight of those stranded here in Navua without jobs, without food and money, pondering what the future holds for them - leaderless and directionless suffering in silence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having exhausted whatever savings they had and the funds at the disposal of those who are helping the people either from Fiji or overseas, and the raging pandemic showing no signs of ebbing away, it now becomes important for the Government to take responsibility of caring and providing for our people without conditional discrimination. Not every one of these affected lot who were earning a living by working from the Lami to Nausori zone is a permanent employee with job security. Mr. Speaker, Sir, many are just ordinary people with ordinary jobs whose plight is the worst. They have pushed to the bottom of our economic ladder earning to live by fishing, hunting and gardening.

Worse still, Mr. Speaker, Sir, those who work in the Wainadoi to Galoa zone, who have either lost jobs or are being placed on part times or jobs with reduced pay, another lot of people suffering in Navua as in Tailevu and Naitasiri areas. While many people are suffering from this hardship there are those stranded without jobs in Serua, Namosi, Tailevu and Naitasiri areas. That did not come about much like Santa arriving at Christmas time without presents in this Budget.

Having their hopes dashed by the Budget, and with no major NGO funding here in this region, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people are left stranded to an uncertain fate in these areas. As if that was not enough the red tape bureaucracy involved in obtaining state assistance for many poor and illiterate people in the region had kept them deprived of any assistance for relief purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is deplorable by any standards and demands remedial action with immediate attention and intervention. As far as my reading of the 2013 Constitution goes, the Government is obliged to act in such cases failing which the matter tantamount to breach of one of fundamental human rights. I hope those in Government and those who are always heaping praise on this Government and those who are in any way part of the state machinery watching me tonight, relay this message of call for help to the authorities as soon as practicable, the sooner, the better.

Fiji's health and medical services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, simply need an overhaul. The tragic consequences under which people are suffering and dying, the unavailability of basic medical supplies and lack of facilities, pushing people to recover without aid and supervision at home and the despicable manner in which the dead are kept in our morgues, paint a picture of a sick Government suffering from strategic paralysis unable to care for our people.

A glaring example of this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Chinese Government funded Navua Hospital where regular patient services have been affected by keeping infected persons there. When we, the people of Navua opposed this move last year in March, the Government is on record to deny that Navua Hospital will be a quarantine centre, but what about now? Shall I say another case of being caught red handed in deceiving our people?

The outpatients are facing problems to be served and to obtain pharmaceutical services at the Hospital. I am told by reliable sources that basic medicines such as painkillers and antibiotics are rationed. What else does one need to say that this how pathetic our health services are right now? Luckily, the mortuary is working well at the moment but the other issue that has now come about as critical one, is the process and time taken to decontaminate the Hospital and normalise the services.

Whilst welcoming a significant increase in the allocation for Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services takes note of these matters and seeks to redress them at the earliest.

The next issue that I want to speak on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the basic utility services; roads, water and electricity. Government will note that Namosi Provincial Council has made submissions with regards to road construction and maintenance in Namosi and power connection. My concern

is, whether they will be continued from where they have been left or will be put on hold, given the decrease in the budgetary allocations?

My doubts and fears with regard to withholding projects even in the normal circumstances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, arise from the fact how the Wainadoti Water Project has been allowed to be on the agenda of this Government, leaving close to 6,000 people there right beside the Queens National Highway suffering without piped water. Is this not denial of a basic necessity to them?

The other two areas of development in respect of the Namosi/ Navua zone is the threat by flooding and tsunami and coastline, as well as river erosion. This is pushing communities living within the vicinity of sea and river to the much dreaded prospect of either resettlement or getting washed away.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the much talked about climate funds are going to be used to develop seawalls to save villages like Veivatuloa, Lobau, Nabukavesi, Namelimeli and settlements like Togoru, Wainivedio and others, as well as the dumping of rubbish along the West Bank of Navua River will help save the communities of Waidova, Vunibau, Sadro and Deuba.

The dredging of Navua River, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is yet another important matter given the amount of low value minerals and silt deposit from the Navua Bridge downwards to the river mouth to avoid a mega flood. The Honourable Minister for Waterways who is a regular visitor to the area has seen the danger himself and will make every effort to see this problem solved.

Sir, while I thank the Government for doing away with the Navua Rural Local Authority and bringing the administration of the area under Lami Town Council, let me express our heartfelt thanks to the administrator and staff of Lami Town Council for resolving some long standing disputes, monitoring business and building development, waste management and fast tracking permits.

But that is not the end of the issue. Sir, Navua is still in need of further development and some of the very basic issues that is required for development of Navua are:

- a master plan for consolidated and planned development of Navua into a town;
- relocation of Navua Market and bus stand;
- providing or making space for extension;
- recall of fire brigade services from Pacific Harbour back to Navua; and
- thinking along the lines of developing agricultural estates opposite the Grace field to resettle evicted tenant farmers from the other areas in Navua to boost our local economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Shadow Minister for Youth and Sports, allow me to join this House in wishing the Fiji Team all the best of luck at the Tokyo Olympics.

On the same note, we must acknowledge the choice of Brisbane in Australia to host the Paralympics in 2032 and perhaps, that could be an opportunity for us to produce another Ilesia Delana to shine and add a star to the name of Fiji in the sports abroad.

With the raging pandemic wreaking havoc at home and abroad bringing sporting activities to a halt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government and all the stakeholders in the sporting fraternity are now reeling under the paucity of sports medicine. This House will recall that for more than once I had continued to impress the need for the same to keep our athletes fit and safe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, making reference to the Youth Training Program by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, I wish to rise two points:

- (1) The Honourable Minister for Youth and Sports to inform this House on the status of the implementation of the National Youth Development Plan; and
- (2) The status of aligning and upgrading youth training programs using the achievements of Tutu Youth Centre in Cakaudrove as a benchmark.

Once we are able to get answers on these two important matters, I think we can create a meaningful discussion on future development in Fiji.

Before I sum up, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I seek your indulgence to pray and share my good wishes to the victims of this pandemic for a speedy recovery. Let us note again those who have passed and joined together with their departed soul as we send our condolences through their family members. Now, and if we get the sacrifice from our frontline workers, I want to salute and support them.

In summing up my speech, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge and recognise the importance and implement the key ideals and principles of budget public finance. It fails to offer a way out of the debt trap and so much spare under the debt burden compromising the future of this nation while government tells itself to over regulate and overtax, our lives continue. It is a term of engineering, electioneering and Honourable Minister for Economy has taken a nip which I will hasten to add.

These are the most important points, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which makes our Party to oppose this Budget. I wish each and every one good health and God bless Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now call upon the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development. You have the floor.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker Sir, Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to speak in favour of the 2021-2022 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the world, as we know, has been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Economies world over have suffered and Small Island economies such as ours have not been spared. We have suffered immensely in all aspects of our lives. It is the largest health and economic challenge faced by the nations in living memory.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the budget leaves no one behind and provides a comprehensive and effective stimulus to our ailing economy. We need to remember that the speed and extent of transmission of the Delta strain has been unprecedented. The danger of further mutations make the disease even more unpredictable. This has made the budget preparation extremely challenging with high volatility in revenues and uncertain expenditure needs. Recognising this, the Honourable Minister for Economy has prepared a bold, practical and responsive budget that supports our economy, businesses, and households.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the 2021-2022 National Budget is based on three objectives; protection from the virus through herd immunity; support for those hardest hit and future-proofing Fiji from future pandemics, effects of climate change and diversification of our economy beyond tourism. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pinnacle of this budget is the national objectives to fully vaccinate our people by 31st October.

The only way we can open our borders, ensure mobility and economic recovery is through mass vaccination of our people. Vaccination will not only save lives but also save our livelihoods. We know from the information released by the Ministry of Health that people have lost their lives mainly because they were not vaccinated or had their first jab. WHO, based on global data, has stated that nearly all serious cases and death can only be prevented if one is fully vaccinated? Science has proven that even the vulnerable like the sick or the elderly can be protected through vaccines. What else do we want as a proof for the efficacy of the vaccine?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we took the 'No Jab, No Job' step to protect Fijians from this highly infectious, deadly new Delta variant. Fiji has joined 15 other countries that imposed some form of compulsory vaccination for certain groups of people. These countries include Vatican City, Australia, Greece, Italy, France, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, to name a few. Other countries are also contemplating this as well, for example, Canada. They are discussing at the moment whether they should be introducing this for the federal workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Leader of Opposition said, 'No Jab, No Job' policy is unfair to those relying on Government assistance and they are exercising their right not to get vaccinated. What about the rights of our children and teens who are at high risk if we are not vaccinated. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these assistance depends on the revenue collection which in turn depends on the opening of the economy and the opening of the economy rests on mass vaccination. So, how will the Government assist those who are not assisting in the opening of the economy that generates revenue for this assistance, it is as simple as that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the weekend, I read an article by the learned principal of Pacific Theological College, who articulated on vaccination and human rights. He said that human rights must be inclusive and life-affirming. Explaining further he said that human rights came with the responsibility for life for oneself and others or else it was just a platform to promote selfishness and arrogance. He further said that human rights must include the rights of another human being who wants to live but are at high risk. This is the message we have been consistently giving that vaccination is the only way to protect everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those who refuse to get vaccinated will be the cause for extending the pandemic. We certainly do not want a pandemic of unvaccinated when masking and social distancing restrictions are lifted for fully vaccinated Fijians. I also like to thank thousands of Fijians who took the jab to assist Fiji return to some normalcy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Budget has catered for all citizens and I really want Honourable Bulanauca to listen to this because he said in his statement that this Budget is for the rich. But let me reiterate, it is for everyone. It caters for all citizens. Social welfare payments, utilities such as water and electricity, pension payments for elderly, bus fare subsidy, subsidy for kidney dialysis, medical fee payment, waiver of fines, assistance to farmers both planting assistance and guaranteed price for sugar, MSME grants and soft loans with government guarantee, market stall fee waiver, taxi base fee and bus levy waiver, removal of fishing fee and levies, removal of birth certificate and police report fees, continuation of Toppers, TELS, restoring 1 percent employer and employee contribution to FNPF and many more.

It is inevitable the Government has to borrow to finance COVID-19 health and safety programmes for social protection initiatives and providing boost to our businesses. It has also meant that economic indicators like foreign reserves remain healthy, further providing multilateral institutions like IMF, World Bank, ADB as well as other development partners' confidence in the Fijian recovery efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on one hand, the Opposition criticises the Government for borrowing, yet in the same breath they want us to give out assistance beyond our sustainable capacity. But this has been their modus operandi - criticise everything - without any option or credible alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have noticed a peculiar, predictable stance of the Opposition Members, whenever they are confronted with excellent policies and initiatives from Fiji First Government and in this particular case, the Budget announcement, they get completely stressed out and they start spreading false information to drive fear in the minds of our most vulnerable or to divert the attention of the public. Be it the sugar industry, education sector, informal settlements, vaccines, land issues, economy, printing of money or you cannot vote if not vaccinated, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most recent act of misinformation is related to the iTLTB Amendment Bill. The Opposition acted recklessly to poison the minds of our landowners. The Honourable Minister for Economy had clearly stated from the Legislation that consent is still required for dealings such as sale, transfer, subleasing, assignment, subletting, building rezoning, et cetera. How will this take away the land from the landowners or reduce the value of the land? Like I said, this is an Opposition void of ideas, thus they spread fear, misinformation and lies.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Bulitavu for his support to the Budget, especially, Bill No. 17. He has shown courage, integrity and rose above race and politics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now speak on the two Ministries. Despite hard times, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development is allocated a sum of \$10.94 million to provide housing support to low and middle-income earners. Providing policy direction to the Housing Sector is our key priority.

The review of the National Housing Policy funded by the New Zealand Government is in the last phase. The revised National Housing Policy will create an enabling environment for all stakeholders in the housing sector to collectively perform more effectively under the improved operational and legal frameworks. Numerous other housing programmes and policies are being reviewed. The assistance for Fire Victims Policy was reviewed and extended to cover all the rural and maritime areas from this financial year. A 19-year old Informal Settlement Lot Allocation Policy is being finalised after public consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a 16 year old Rural Housing Assistance Policy, targeted towards assisting Rural and Maritime areas, is also under review for significant improvement. It will cover the assistance for the construction of cyclone certified safe homes, upgrade of the existing homes to meet the cyclone standards and also include micro finance and micro insurance assistance. This review is expected to bring a significant shift in the rural and maritime housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cyclones are becoming more fierce and frequent, causing extreme hardship when homes are destroyed. Keeping this in mind, the Ministry has developed Category 5 certified two bedroom and three bedroom house plans with complete construction drawings for free with material list. These plans are endorsed by the Municipal Councils ready for construction, thus saving time and money for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government is the first to treat Fijians living in informal settlements with dignity. A number of informal settlements have roads for their vehicles, footpaths and even streetlights to make their quality of life better, while waiting for the formalisation of lease after settlement upgrade. The settlers also have access to temporary water and electricity connections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this financial year, we have completed three capital projects. The Ministry also completed scheme plans, geo-technical reports, EIA consultations and engineering plans for six settlements, namely Sakoca, Tore, Tavela, Wakanisila, Caubati and Field Four. Topographical survey and Scheme Plans were completed for further four other projects: Nabare, Vunika, Lovu Sea Side and Tauvegavega.

To encourage home ownership and to drive economic activities, the first home grant assistance was increased to \$30,000 per household for those earning below \$50,000. A total of 435 households were assisted under this programme and another 62 households under the first land purchase programme. These applicants secured bank loans in excess of \$60 million, resulting in almost tenfold impact on total economic activities in construction and mortgage sectors. Another 190 households are expected to benefit from the first home programme in the new financial year, while up to 100 households will benefit from the first land grant programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, budget allocation for PRB and HART Homes is reduced and I want to again say this. Budget allocation for PRB and HART Home is reduced because I am very worried sometimes little knowledge can be very dangerous. I want to say that even though the Budget has been reduced it will not affect the tenants. PRB and HART Homes will be using their cash reserves built over time with government assistance. PRB has cash reserve in excess of \$8 million and HART Homes with over \$0.5 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also important to note that the allocations for Assistance for Fire Victims, and Assistance for Koroipita Housing Programme have been increased in this budget. The allocation for assistance for people with special needs remains unchanged demonstrating our commitment towards the most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Ministry of Local Government, \$12.7 million has been allocated for urban and rural planning, collection of solid wastes, municipal council activities and overseeing the planning and development of growth centres into new towns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Municipal Councils, as the administrators of our towns and cities play a critical role in bringing balance to the operations of the municipalities and in maintaining the safety of the public during this pandemic. Since experiencing the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Municipal Councils implemented a number of safety measures for all Fijians. Councils supported the Ministry of Health in the awareness programme, decontamination of sites and in the vaccination campaigns. Drive-through sites were set up for vaccination and swabbing making it safer for the people to stay within their bubbles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Fire Authority (NFA) has worked tirelessly to disinfect and decontaminate vehicles and cargo at the borders. I want to thank the NFA team for doing a wonderful job in containing this virus.

In addition, the NFA provides ambulance service to communities in Suva, Nasinu, Nausori, Sigatoka, Ba, Labasa, Rakiraki, Lautoka, Savusavu, Navua, Korolevu and Korovou. This service is a critical need at this point in time. Hence, the funding of \$1.64 million will help the continuation of this service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our market vendors around the country will be assisted with the waiver of stall fees providing relief to vendors around Fiji. An allocation of \$2.6 million will reduce the operational cost and put more money in their pockets.

The Ministry also welcomes the waiver of base fees for public service vehicles (PSV), such as taxis, buses and mini-vans. Through this initiative the cost burden has been removed providing much needed relief to the operators. The removal of the “taxi base” system and implementation of “open taxi ranks” will provide all taxi operators equal opportunity to serve the public within their zones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the new financial year, the Ministry will continue with the preparatory work for key capital projects, such as Rakiraki Bus Station, new markets in Savusavu, Levuka, Dreketi, Lami and Nakasi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, critics have said that the budget does not provide confidence to investors but on the contrary the investors, international economists, banks and other business community have all said that the budget provides confidence to both local and foreign investment. Latest example is the start of the new building project by Asco Motors in Legalega, Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the start of the second wave, the Department of Town and Country Planning approved six major building applications. There are many other but I just picked up six because these projects were over \$1 million, and the total value of these projects is \$37.1 million. These local investors are: Mangrove Jacks PTE, Rups Investment PTE Limited, Interior Designs PTE Limited, Ganga PTE Limited, Fiji Ports Authority and Aquarius Tours PTE Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as announced by the Hon. Minister for Economy, amendments have been made to the Town Planning General Provisions. These amendments will reduce plot ratios, building setbacks and site utilisation, you will be surprised to know, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Currently, only 20 percent of the plot can be developed on an unsewered lot.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the minimum lot sizes for unsewered Residential B lots will be reduced from 800 square meters to 600 square meters. This will allow for more lots to be created, considering shortage of land in urban areas.

Mr. Speaker Sir, now let me turn to the comments made by the Opposition. The Leader of the Opposition said the economy was declining before COVID-19 and my answer to that is yes. The economy contracted marginally in 2019, however, the contraction in the economy in 2019 does not mean that the economy would have contracted in 2020. In fact a positive growth was forecast for 2020.

The Leader of the Opposition needs to know that almost every country on the planet recorded negative economic growth in 2020. Regarding Head 50, I would like to reiterate my colleague in terms of Head 50 it is incorrect to say that the Minister for Economy controls Head 50. Legally, it is the Permanent Secretary who is responsible officer for this appropriation. Let us not misconstrue the facts. I know the conspiracy theory continues in this House but this is the reality.

In conclusion Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to express my deepest sympathy to the families whose loved ones have succumbed to the deadly virus. Our front liners have put in great efforts to ensure our health and safety. They deserve our appreciation for the excellent work they are doing. It is my humble request to Fijians to get vaccinated who have not done so. I also wish speedy recovery to those who are COVID-19 positive.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I support the 2021-2022 National Budget.

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

Honourable Members, the Honourable Ratu Navurelevu is playing hard to get today. Normally, we can pick him up so tomorrow he is going to move from wherever he is in Vanua Levu to Labasa Town. So, I will fit him into tomorrow's schedule. Those of you who are in tomorrow's schedule, be warned that I will be fitting him in so that he can come in, do his business and go back.

On that note, I will give the floor to the next speaker and I call on the Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports. You have the floor.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; *bula, ramram, salaam* and good evening to all. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge all those who are joining us at this hour, and showing interest in our Parliament and debate on the National Budget.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise to support the magnificent 2021-2022 National Budget delivered by the Honourable Minister for Economy and thank his team for the tremendous work shown towards the preparation of the Nation Budget. Once again a people's focused budget. A Government that places its peoples need before anything else.

Mr. Speaker Sir, year in, year out we have been hearing from the Opposition that our budget is an elections budget, our budget does not have the depth, our budget is this, our budget is that and this budget has been tagged to be formulated on assumption.

What the Opposition do not seem to understand or what they do not want to see is the biggest beneficiary of our national budget, each and every individual known as Fijians. Fijians know when we present a budget, we ensure that we deliver because service delivery is paramount for the FijiFirst Government. Now, after seven years we are tired of calling the Opposition to bring constructive debates to Parliament so I will just leave it there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, back in 2015, I did state in one of the national budget debates that I had a classmate whose mind was polluted by some politicians and that is why I was sitting on the Government side and he was on the Opposition side. It is good to see that after seven years my old classmate and friend finally has a clear mind and the vision to see what is best for the Fijians. I thank you my classmate, Honourable Bulitavu for clearly speaking your mind. I just wish, Mr. Speaker, that others in the Opposition start to put Fiji and Fijians before their political agendas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the vigorous work done in consultation and devising the Budget by the Honourable Minister for Economy during this trying time and alternative means of having consultations through the virtual platform to hear first-hand explanations and requests from our people on their needs and this is courageous. It only shows that our Government led by Honourable Prime Minister is a people-centred government that cares and will always ensure to meet expectation of our people even during these difficult times.

We are all together in this and we need to work together to bring Fiji out of the current situation we are all in at the moment. God has given all of us this opportune time to get back on our feet, get our health back, get our economy back on track and get our Fiji back on track as well. While other countries are still struggling to get back in shape after the devastation that COVID-19 has caused around the globe, one way to do so is to get vaccinated. We all need to get vaccinated. We should encourage everyone to get vaccinated. We can turn to normalcy very soon if we are able to gain herd immunity. If we all get vaccinated, borders will open, flights will resume, job opportunities will be created once again, people will go back to normal life, school can resume and Fiji can be the same heaven once again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has sent shockwaves to our colleagues from the Opposition and many are still trying to come to terms on how the FijiFirst Government has formulated its plan when we have massive reduction in revenue, when our borders are closed for more than a year and when we have to deal with this global pandemic crisis never experienced before in our history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is the result of prudent financial management and effective control on our operations to prevent wastage and ensure that we are able to sustain even the biggest economic downturn this country has ever seen. Sir, the 2021-2022 National Budget has been hailed by the members of communities as a brave and bold Budget. The \$3.7 billion Budget is a people-centred Budget and it is focused on ensuring that our grassroots people are not left behind and we clearly see the beneficiaries are our local people or people who are suffering as a result of pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the expenditure front, the Government has a strong focus on social protection. This is appropriate and necessary given the magnitude and duration of the economic impact of COVID-19. A total of \$120 million for the Poverty Benefit Scheme, Child Protection Allowance Programme, Disability Allowance Programme, Social Pension Scheme, Bus Fare Subsidies for the Elderly and Disabled to assist more than 130,000 vulnerable Fijians. Apart from Government spending, personal remittance which are expected to surpass \$700 million in 2021 should play a key role in boosting consumer domestic demands and economic activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as reiterated by Honourable Minister for Economy and the Attorney-General, the 2021-2022 Budget will empower Fiji to achieve its vaccine target and join other nations that are regularly innovating their way out of COVID-19 crisis. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is wrong in learning from other countries that the best way out of COVID-19 crisis is through vaccination and that is what we, as a nation, should work on. While lockdown is a temporary solution, permanent solution to COVID-19 situation is vaccination and that is exactly what FijiFirst Government is encouraging.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$200 million support by the Fijian Government to people who are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic shows the concern of the current Government for its people and the nation at large. This will not only help people get food on the table, but will also contribute immensely towards economic recovery with the amount of spending by our people and its multiplier effect in the economy. The \$120 per month unemployment benefit scheme by the Government in this Budget is really appreciated and acknowledged, basically, during this crisis when people are out of jobs and struggle to support their families to put food on the table.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, starting on 1st August, 2021, every affected Fijian will be entitled to a monthly allowance of \$120 for six months, which will be paid in two lump sum payments. The first lump sum payment of \$360 per person will be done in August, 2021 to cater for three months from August to October with the total estimate pay-out of around \$100 million. The second payment of \$360 in November to eligible Fijians provided they are fully vaccinated by 31st October, with a total estimated pay-out of additional \$100 million. All those who have exhausted their general account balance or do not want to access their general account balance will be eligible for a \$720 per person pay-out under this new initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Stronger Together Job Support Scheme, which has been allocated an additional \$5million in 2021-2022 National Budget, will provide employment opportunities for people in the informal sector, including those who have lost their jobs. The employers will be granted a wage subsidy equivalent to the national minimum wage rate of \$2.68 per hour to employ eligible Fijians for a period of three months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted during the Budget announcement, 831 new jobs have been created since the scheme started after the pandemic hit our shores last year. This, indeed, is a big

achievement and we are optimistic to see new employment opportunities in the economy. While we need to support employees, while they do not have jobs and have hardships in feeding their families, we need to focus on the employers as well. COVID-19 has impacted hard on the business sector, while businesses were still trying to come out from the impact of the first wave, the second wave came our way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir certain companies continued to pay their workers, even though staff had gone into isolation. Keeping that in mind, employers who continue to pay their employees who have tested positive for the virus and are in isolation, will be eligible for 300 percent tax deduction. A letter from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is required to confirm the positive test and isolation order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir the Budget has brought much relief to the business owners – providing working capital support of \$200 million in the form of loan to help Fijian businesses meet their operational needs. The Government will fully subsidise borrowers interest cost on these loans for the first two years with a total funding allocation of \$8 million in 2021-2022 Budget; an additional funding of \$8 million in the following Budget.

Existing micro businesses with \$10,000 to over less than \$50,000 will be eligible for a maximum loan funding of \$10,000. Small businesses with an annual turnover of \$50,000 to \$300,000 will be eligible for a maximum loan funding of \$20,000, while medium sized businesses with annual turnover of \$300,000 to \$1.25 million, are eligible for a maximum loan of \$50,000. Large businesses with the turnover of more than \$1.25 million can access up to \$100,000 in loans. The RBF will provide special funding of \$200million at a rate of 0.25 percent that can be accessed by the commercial banks, FDB and other licensed credit institutions. These financial institutions will lend these funds at the maximum rate of 3.99 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will allow Fiji's bank to make these interest only loans for the first two years. For the comfort of the financial institution, Government will guarantee 90 percent of the loan for the micro business to the RBF; 85 percent for the small business; 80 percent for the medium sized business and 75 percent for the large business. Sir, \$5 million has been allocated in the 2021-2022 Budget for RBF to manage the guarantee,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to reduce the expense for the business effective from 1st August for the period of six months, MSMEs with a turnover of less than \$1.25 million that are paying commercial electricity rates will now pay residential rates with the Government subsidising the difference of \$7 million has been allocated.

Sir, for the transport industry, all arrears for vehicles that have been off the road and have accumulated fees charges will be waived. From 1st August, 2021 to 31st July, 2022, the owners of these vehicles will be able to come forward and register their vehicles without having to pay the accumulated fees and charges. Mr. Speaker, this will see owner having more fleet to commence business post COVID and in return will generate more income. This will also create employment as all these vehicles that get registered will need drivers, thus encouraging employment.

In order to decrease the burden on exporters, the Government will pay Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) fees on all exports for 12 months effective from 1st August, 2021 with a total funding of \$1.1 million. Along with this, the Export Income Deduction incentive will be extended for an additional three years and will now expire at the end of December 2024.

The Export Income Deduction is increased to 90 percent which means that 90 percent of their export income will not be taxed. This should encourage more export which will bring in more foreign

exchange and shaping our economy to thrive again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for all the employees, FNPF is a saving that is to be used at retirement age but no one on earth had ever thought that there will come a time a virus which will make us think outside the box. We need to allow member to access their funds but in a very sustainable manner. Sir, FNPF members between the ages of 50 and 54 with balance up to \$10,000 will now be able to withdraw all remaining funds from their FNPF account. Also, FNPF members affected by COVID-19 will also be able to withdraw up to \$10,000 for business related purposes. This is expected to inject up to \$30 million in the economy.

While we allow the member to withdraw the funds, we need to ensure that members have money in their account for their retirement, therefore an increase in the FNPF employer and employee contribution from five percent to six percent from 1st January, 2022 through 31st December, 2022. In order to reduce this burden on business, any employer who chooses to contribute more than the six percent statutory mandatory contribution, up to 10 percent will be allowed to deduct 300 percent of that contribution from their taxes and that additional income in the pockets of the employee will be exempt from income tax.

Along with this, an increase in tax deduction of 200 percent from the current 100 percent will be available to landlords for the amount of commercial rent reduced. This applies to reduction of rent payable from 1st August, 2021 to 31st July, 2022. This will help the tenants and landlord.

Mr. Speaker, for business with outstanding tax arrears, a tax amnesty will be granted to taxpayers with arrears, waiving all penalties upon payment of real taxes. To qualify for the amnesty, taxpayers must make payment arrangements within three months from 1st August, 2021 and make payment before 30th June, 2022. This saving can be utilized by business owners to inject the capital back into their business and having faster recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally the free water and EFL Rebate Scheme to people earning less than \$30,000 was much needed by our people who live below the poverty line and are much affected by the COVID pandemic. This shows the care and concerns by our Government to our people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the waiver of birth certificate fees, free medical program, continuation of bus fare support for elderly and education assistance shows the concerns of the Government to its people. Taking into consideration the current situation and economic crisis, it is a bold decision undertaken by the Government for its people.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the allocation of \$1.5 million for the distribution of sanitary pads to female students is commendable. This is the first time any government has come up with assistance like this to assist female students of our country. This shows the strength and innovative ideas and concerns of this government for its people.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the students' initiative of \$20 monthly data for University students to do research work and studies are astonishing by the Fijian Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally I would like to touch on slightly on the sugarcane industry. We will extend this minimum guarantee price of \$85 dollars per tonne for the 2021 season, making this the fourth year of guaranteed cane price support. We understand the plight of our farmers, and the government stands behind them, and we very well know that farmers have faith in the government, and they know we will do what is in the best interest of farmers.

The Ministry of Sugar Industry is provided funding of \$72 million in the 2021-2022 Budget. This includes a funding allocation of around \$47 million for the sugar cane price support. This includes around \$22.9 million for the additional top-up payment required for the 2020 season and \$24.1 million to pay for the minimum guaranteed price of \$85 dollars per tonne for the 2021 season.

The remaining funding requirement of \$8 million dollars, dependent on the cane harvest for the 2021 season, will be provided in the 2022-2023 National Budget to meet the final payment for the 2021 season. Government will continue to provide the fertilizer subsidy to farmers at a rate of \$25.59 per bag with a total funding allocation of \$15.6 million, \$3.8 million is provided for the cane cartage subsidy from Penang to Rarawai Mill and \$3.3 million is provided for cane access roads, sugarcane development farmer assistance, weedicide subsidy and new farmer assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are standing by our farmers, I believe it is high time that we need to support the sugarcane farmers venture into alternative crops. Let us leave politics aside and help these farmers into a better livelihood. Those farmers who have ventured into other crops have seen the benefit in terms of income. I have met many farmers who are into cash crop, having switched from sugarcane farming, and all of them they are saying the same thing. Why did not we switch into cash crop much earlier? We do understand for farmers, they have sugarcane very much to their heart, and it becomes difficult at times to let it go, therefore FijiFirst Government will support you to venture into other alternative crop.

Fijian Government will start with a new scheme to get sugarcane farmers into alternative livelihood programmes. We have allocated \$1 million dollars for lease facilitation of sugar and agriculture farmers so our farmers can choose and get into high yield and more productive ventures

Finally, Mr. Speaker Sir, the path towards short to medium-term recovery will depend on these type of domestic policies. We understand more work will be needed to rebuild business and investor confidence and that is what exactly this government is aiming to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has aptly deviated from the path of fiscal contraction to support people's livelihood and economic growth in the shadows of a once-in-a-century crisis. The budget ensures all Fijians improve their standard of living and gradually, get back to normalcy. With those words, Mr. Speaker, I fully support the Budget.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Assistant Minister for his contribution and I now give the floor to the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Last night I was questioned by the Police on the statement issued on Friday about changes to Bill No. 17 – iTaukei Land Trust Act. The NFP President, Honourable Tikoduadua, former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, colleagues from SODELPA and Leader of the Unity Party were all detained for questioning.

In my case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all I said was it was arrogant and disrespectful of the Government not to have consulted landowners about the changes. In the case of Honourable Tikoduadua, all he did was a video calling for calm. Yet earlier today, the Honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs accused me of spreading lies. It is a complete joke when one behaves like a puppet of her masters, reading something written for her. She also said that I did not follow the old values of NFP. In fact, Mr. Speaker, if she had read my statement, it clearly stated that since its inception in 1963, the NFP has always respected the right of the indigenous people to their land. How can that be construed as malicious, spreading lies or creating disunity?

And then, Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports said in relation to the NFP's strong stand on the plight of sugarcane growers that I was doing it for personal political interest. All I want to say to the Honourable Minister that this is coming from a person who jumped from a party that actually provided him political tutelage to become a FijiFirst candidate. Everyone knows the reasons for that, Honourable Minister, so get real. Mr. Speaker, I wish I had more time.

HON. P.K. BALA.- And now you are sleeping with Chaudhry.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- That is your dream. That is your dream.

Mr. Speaker, I wish I had more time to respond to some of the sycophantic praise about the leadership of the Government from some of the Government Members and also the lies that they are also perpetuating because they accuse the Opposition of lies but there are so many lies that they perpetuate in their speeches but unfortunately, I do not have time.

In the last few years I have risen to contribute to the Budget speech, I have focused every year on the same thing. It was the same before the coronavirus and Mr. Speaker, it is the same now. This is a Government with no ideas and no money. And this year, Mr. Speaker, I want to add more to this. This is a Government with no courage and no compassion. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, I would say that this is a gutless Government. It is the invisible Government. It is the missing in action Government. It is a "don't give a damn" Government.

Mr. Speaker, I listened to more than two hours to the Budget speech and I waited to hear the Honourable Minister for Economy talk about the crisis we are facing in Fiji right here, right now. We are in the worst health, social and economic crisis Fiji has ever had since Independence. Thousands of people are infected with a deadly virus. Our health system is in a state of collapse and 186 people have died. Our hospital morgues cannot even give dignity to the dead. This is when the people look to the leaders for a plan. They need information. They need reassurance. They need support. And instead, Mr Speaker, I could not believe what I heard. The people got nothing of that assurance. The Honourable Minister for Economy does not want to talk about the crisis. He only wants to talk about when we are vaccinated and every Government Minister seems to be talking about that.

Mr. Speaker, I would say that this is gutless, it is cowardly. The Government does not want to face the reality of what is happening on the ground in terms of the virus. The Honourable Minister likes to talk about the reality of the matter but the reality of the matter on the ground is very different. Mr. Speaker, if the Honourable Minister will not tell our people about this crisis, let me do it. Let me tell the people of Fiji the truth. First point, Mr. Speaker, the assumption that the crisis will end in October. The crisis is not going to end in October. It will continue at least to the end of the year. Even if we reach vaccination targets, we will still have people sick and dying.

The second point, Mr. Speaker, it is likely because all the modellings are saying that more than 50,000 people will be infected with this virus. In fact, some say that we may already have reached that number, why? Because the Ministry of Health is no longer testing people showing symptoms. People are told, "Just stay at home and look after yourselves". What does this mean? It means that the Ministry of Health is too busy treating people to get information on the virus. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they know that the virus is completely out of control. No one knows how many cases are out there. So, we are now in fact powerless against the virus. We do not know where it is and how many cases are out there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister of Health must honestly tell the people and we do not forget what he said two months ago. He told us that the virus was under control. Now, he must tell the people the truth. The Ministry is now reporting fewer than 1,000 cases per day. Of course, Government propaganda machines or mouthpiece, the *Fiji Sun* and Government supporters are saying that the numbers are going down, but it is actually fake news, and it is dangerous. Doctor Fong has actually warned us about this. Sir, Dr. Fong has told us to be careful about the numbers. So the Honourable Minister for Health must speak up and tell people the truth. What is the truth? The truth is, we are reporting few new cases only because we are not testing all the suspected cases.

The Government must tell the people the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If not, it will lose even more trust with the people. When Government loses the trust of the people, it loses authority over them, it loses credibility with them. Maybe this is why we cannot see Government Ministers on social media, on talkback or on zoom. We do not see them talking about vaccination and distancing. In fact, the Opposition Leaders have talked more about vaccination contrary to what the Government Members say. Have they given up, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or do they know that they will only make things worse because really no one trusts them?

Third point, Sir, more than a thousand people could die from this crisis. Right now as I said, the death toll is 186, but the mathematics, the modelling tell us, we have a long sad way to go. This is a small country, we are a close community, we all know families who have lost loved ones, we all have friends across all ages and ethnic groups with desperately sick relatives, yet, the worst is still to come. It is not just the virus that is killing people, people with other illnesses cannot get attention in collapsed health systems. I get calls every day and every night from heart patients, diabetics who need surgery, kidney patients - these people, too, will die in this crisis because the virus now dominates everything. People cannot get treatment and they cannot even get into hospitals.

Fourthly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will be long term damage to our people's health. No one is talking about this long COVID-19, even when the infection leaves them, the illness will not. We are now seeing the reports from overseas. Maybe 20 percent of all COVID-19 victims suffer long-term effects, things like organ damage, loss of senses and other severe consequences. This is also affecting young people, thousands of our fellow citizens will be left permanently damaged by this disease. They will add to the burden of health care in the future. The burden just does not fall on the hospitals and health centres, it falls on families. It will cause long-term diseases, pain and expenses. These are the facts that people need to know about this crisis, and is the Government telling them? No, they are not telling them.

Is the Honourable Minister telling us how long there will be a curfew? No. Is he telling us how long we cannot go back to our shops and workplaces? No. We do not seem to be modelling. I am sure the planning office can do some of those. The Government is not saying about this. All it is saying is "no jab, no job", "no jab, no unemployment benefit".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me make this very clear, this is the Government's fault and I say to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy, "This is your fault, this is not the people's fault, you failed to protect the people, you refused to lockdown when the problem was small and you opened up the containment zone instead of closing them. You failed at the first and the most important job of the Government is to protect the people."

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- You have no idea what you're talking about.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Now, you do not have the courage to talk about it. You do not have the courage to tell the people the truth.

Mr. Speaker, why I am spending my time on this when I could be talking about economics because this Government at this time in this crisis, economic is second to leadership and public health, control of the virus, without the control of the virus we cannot fix the economy. In fact, we are doing more damage to the economy.

You can throw money around here and there in this Budget. You can talk about freebies even though you know your record is very poor in delivering some of those. Nothing will change, Mr. Speaker, if the arrogant, stubbornness and the ego remain a problem with this Government, and I say to the Government, “until you are honest, until you are ready to work with others in humility and in good faith, until that happens, nothing in Fiji will change”.

The past, Mr. Speaker, they say is the best guide to the future and for next year, pain and disaster is our future. The Honourable Minister told us he had three objectives:

- (1) Government must protect people from the virus;
- (2) Government must support the economy; and
- (3) Government must rebuild the economy.

So, the whole world knows the Government has failed on the first objective, it has failed to protect the people from the virus, it has failed to control the spread of the virus.

Now let us talk about our economic measures. The big numbers sound good - \$200 million for Unemployment Assistance, right focus; \$200 million for Business Recovery another right focus, one can say. You will give people relief on their electricity bills, these all sounds great, but the key, Mr. Speaker, is delivery. The talk must be turned into action.

Now look at how fully the Government has delivered during the crisis. Look at all the big talk that we hear from the Government Members. A big talk about the \$50 grant to lockdown affected people. We know the implementation of it was a disaster – Telephone number 161 crashed, people could not get through, some people got money, some did not. What about the delivery of food rations?

Again, this was all haphazard, all over the place. All we were seeing on Government *Facebook* is the numbers that they have delivered. Yet on the same platform, people were saying that they did not get the rations and some people said they got it when they should not have got it.

Mr. Speaker, people have been struggling for months and only now when there is big budget announcement, is the Government doing anything? Why? So that the Honourable Members can come here and talk about it and say you are doing everything right.

As Honourable Maharaj said, I want to ask him, how long will it take to design these schemes? What is your delivery mechanism? Whether it is going to be efficient or not and we know some of the record of broken promises, Mr. Speaker, of this Government. There is a litany of broken promises but some I can say, you know, free milk and Weet-Bix initiative.

What happened to the Ba and Lautoka Aspen Public-Private Partnership with FNPF? How much did FNPF lose in this? How much money did Aspen make? Now we find that there is another allocation, Mr. Speaker, under the Ministry of Health, Head 50 of a new Public-Private Partnership to manage Lautoka and Ba Hospitals. How has that been done? Is there a new company? Who is involved in this? What happened to the \$10 million first home buyers’ grant, quietly reduced to \$4 million? What about the Free Medical Scheme for families to visit the doctors announced during the 2018 Elections campaign? It never happened. What happened to the goal set in the sugar industry

strategic plan for 2.5 million tonnes of sugarcane to be harvested, every season for a few years? It disappeared completely, Mr. Speaker. What happened to the dairy industry that we were promised that duty free for 10 years for a company is going to get that company to increase dairy production? The milk supplier has virtually dried up and the industry has all but disappeared, Mr. Speaker, so we see in this Budget, they talk big numbers of money but they do not know how they will spend it and we need to hear about that.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, for this Government, contrary to what they accused the Opposition, it is always about politics. Why is the Government making this big song and dance about paying the stall fees for market vendors, because they cannot even afford that? The town and city councils do not have the revenue. They are running out of money, so basically, they need the Government to bail them out and Government makes a big political deal out of it. They say they will pay their stall fees, \$1 million for free surveys, what does that mean - \$4 million for so-called jobs for nature? There is no detailed plan for this.

Mr. Speaker, I consider this as crowd-pleasing talk, throwing figures around, it will never be delivered. Time and again, we have seen what has happened, big talk during the Budget, one year later, no action. This is the point we have been in this COVID crisis for a year.

The Honourable Minister, despite having all his advisors, all his thousands of civil servants for that year, and yet he could only come up with these ideas now in July 2021. The question is, what have you been doing all this while? Does the Government listen to its qualified civil servants? Do we have a proper planning unit? People may say, Mr. Speaker, that I am complaining about the past. This Government always blames past governments, because the past is the best guide to the future. This Government can throw money around and talk about it, this is what they are good at but they cannot deliver effective long-term solutions. All they want to do is look good for the next General Elections, and it is always the same.

What is the vision for the future? Zero. This is big talk about alternative livelihoods, Honourable Maharaj talked about this for cane farmers. Where have they been for 15 years now and, of course, the farmers remember the European Union had given \$350 million for alternative livelihood in 2007? This was lost because of the *coup* in 2006.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- That is how you enjoy the Constitution.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Talk about alternative livelihoods, now the farmers know from all that time that it is meaningless.

What is the plan for sugar? I just read the FSC sugar price submission to the Commerce Commission. The FSC tells the Commerce Commission that in the future, it will only need one sugar mill in Viti Levu, it will decommission two mills. When is the Honourable Minister for Economy going to tell us about this? We found this from the submission.

A long term economic future depends on modernising our education system. What is the Government's plan for this? We had a lot of promises: one laptop for every child and many others. There is talk about starting aged care homes, there is talk about starting industrial land, it is just that talk, why now, Mr. Speaker? After 15 years, what has the Government with all the civil servants, all the billions of dollars, what have you done? Yes, I know what the Government is doing, borrowing and spending, Mr. Speaker, Sir, like nobody's business.

Mr. Speaker, as I said in the previous session of Parliament, talking about Government spending, our estimate showed that under this Government in the last six years (between 2015 and

2020), an average of \$500 million per year, amounting to a total of about \$3 billion in six years or about 5 percent of our GDP per year, in my view, Mr. Speaker, has been stolen from the taxpayers of this country through wastage, pilferage, inflated projects costs and mismanagement. That is, if someday, someone does a proper analysis - imagine if we did not waste that \$3 billion, we would have the fiscal space today. We could have borrowed that \$3 billion to look after our people, to do the lockdown, to look after the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Government must be honest. You must admit it. If you do not admit that you were wrong, that you mismanaged it, that you messed it up, we cannot move into the future. This is why I say, Mr. Speaker, the best guide to the future is what this Government has done in the past and look at its failures in the past. It is important for us to look at the failures of the past.

Mr. Speaker, I now return to the question of leadership. Where has the Government been all this while? Why are the Government Ministers not talking to people about vaccination and its benefits? When the Honourable Economy Minister goes on talkback, all he can do is attack other people. This pettiness, this narrow-mindedness is what defines this Government. He does not want to work with people. He only wants to threaten them and punish them. This is the modus operandi of this Government. You do not like their views, threaten them and punish them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Time!

HON. SPEAKER.- Your time is up, Honourable Prasad.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- This is your modus operandi and this is its biggest failure.

HON. SPEAKER.- Your time is up.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Its failure to lead with courage, failure to

HON. J. USAMATE.- Too much hot air.

HON. SPEAKER.- Your time is up, Honourable Prasad. I thank the Honourable Prasad for his contribution and I now give the floor to the Honourable Naiqamu. You have the floor.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Honourable Prime Minister and Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa bula vinaka* and good evening to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to affirm my fullest support for the 2021-2022 Budget that was presented on Friday, 16th July. In doing so, I wish to commend the Minister for Economy for a well thought-out and bold Budget. Looking at the Budget allocations for the Ministry of Agriculture, with an allocation of \$61.9 million, Ministry of Fisheries with \$13.1 million and Ministry of Forestry with an allocation of \$13.2 million, I can clearly see that this Budget is nature-focused where a total of \$88.2 million has been allocated to these three primary industries.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, as a result of the pandemic COVID-19, the tourism dependent sectors have come to a standstill and this year also culminated to the spike in unemployment for Fijians as many businesses have scaled back or shut down operations. In the wake of unemployment and job losses, Fijians have turned to nature and realised that access to nature is crucial for wellbeing. Through this Budget, Government is staying true to its word of leaving no one behind as many unemployed Fijians, who have turned to nature-based solutions will be economically empowered and greatly benefit from this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to just briefly mention what these three Ministries will focus on with their budget allocations and be rest assured that embedded in the various Ministry programmes and projects to economically empower Fijians. Suffice to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not so much the amount that a Ministry receives, but how it uses the allocated funds to secure maximum returns is what matters the most.

On agriculture, the Ministry of Agriculture, with its \$61.9 million allocation will address the impact of COVID-19 and pursue opportunities to ensure food and income security and a sustainable livelihood for all Fijians focusing on community resilience. The Ministry of Agriculture is committed to its strategic priorities of improving food and nutrition security for all Fijians through their programmes that include delivering improved production and access to safe and nutritious local foods for rural and urban communities, and increase adoption of local food gardens and pro-trees cultivation.

On fisheries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries, with an allocation of \$13.1 million is mandated to lead the whole of nation approach towards sustainably managing Fiji's fisheries resources. It does this through increasing collaboration with the various stakeholders from the subsistence fisher in the remote islands, rural villages and informal settlements through the inshore and offshore commercial fishers amongst others. Given this setting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries will review and implement its strategies in three key fishery areas: offshore fisheries, coastal fisheries and aquaculture, taking into account the unprecedented challenges, brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the ongoing challenges caused by climate change, both of which are compelled to operate under a new normal.

On Forestry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry with an allocation of \$13.2 million continues to reposition itself to promote the sustainable management in Fiji's forest. The 30 million trees in 15 years initiative, for instance, is part of Fiji's green recovery. This programme and many other initiatives, including supporting economic growth at the community and national wellness are at the heart of the Ministry's strategic direction. Understanding the national imperatives and supporting the forestry sector, which in turn provides economic empowerment to Fijians, are vitally important.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Members of the Opposition and so called economists have criticised the 2021-2022 fiscal year Budget, but they have not provided other alternatives that will help create realistic opportunities to reposition the Fijian economy to operate under this new normal. While virtually launching the United Nations "Making Peace With Nature" report in February this year, the UN Secretary General, Mr. Antonio Guterres said, and I quote:

"There is no choice but to transform how economies and societies value nature. ... Although more than half of the global GDP depends on nature, the world's capital bound up in nature, has declined 40 percent in just over two decades, sparking the World Economic Forum to list biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse as one of the top five threats humanity will face over the next decade. ... The urgency for action has never been clearer, Mr. Guterres said, urging the meeting to generate a global will for action - a transformation of our relationship with nature".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without nature's help we will not thrive or survive. This Budget indicates Government's needs to transform how we view and value nature. The rewards will be immense and with the new consciousness we can direct investment into policies and activities that protect and restore nature. The global pandemic has led Fijians to reset their relationship with nature and with Government support through the 2021-2022 fiscal year budget, I urge the Opposition, the so-called

economists and all Fijians to support Government's visionary plans which are aimed at providing a sound recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to comment briefly on Bill No.17 of 2021. At the outset I strongly condemn the manner in which the so-called Honourable Opposition Members are spreading the lies and arousing fear to our ordinary Fijians especially *iTaukei* landowners. I plead in this august House that these Members be taken to task for inciting racial division in our beloved nation, Fiji.

The *Bible* is crystal clear – love your neighbours as you love yourself and stop politicising the land issue. I also call Honourable Gavoka not to mislead the chiefs in the Western Division. Enough is enough. Stop your racial rhetoric because we, the westerners value and cherish the contribution and sacrifices rendered by our Indo-Fijian brothers not only in the Western Division but to the whole of Fiji. Such comment is unwarranted and uncalled for. Therefore, Mr, Speaker, I support the 2021-2022 fiscal year Budget.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Members for his contribution to the debate,. I now give the floor to the Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports, the Honourable Alipate Nagata. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.T. NAGATA.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, I take this opportunity to make a brief statement in support of the motion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I proceed, I wish to thank the God Almighty for his great love and protection and for watching over us through these trying times. I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his great leadership. I would also like to commend our hard working health workers and our committed civil servants and frontliners for their dedication and sacrifices in their fight against COVID-19 to make our country a safe place to be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second wave has affected our economy and people were dragged into it. Despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, many individuals and families have become resilient. Youth and families many have relied on the government assistance for survival. I want to make mention and commend those individuals and families who have been very resilient. Youths and families are turning to farming and gardening. Sons and daughters in urban centres have assisted their families from rural villages and maritime areas by picking up their produce from the borders to sell. Youth groups have cleared vacant blocks of land to plant root crops and vegetables. These are some positive outcome of the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to commend and congratulate the Honourable Minister for Economy, Public Enterprises, Civil Service and Communications, the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Economy and their hard working team for a faithful and forward-looking budget. A well thought and inclusive budget that will address the crisis that is currently faced by the global economies. A budget that proves that the FijiFirst Government is committed to being responsible, not just physically but socially and environmentally.

The 2021-2022 Budget continues to lay the foundations for Fijians to have better lives and assist them through the crisis. This budget will make sure that all Fijians continue to have access to the high quality public services they need and deserve such as health, education, housing, etc.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Ministry, we thank the government for the budgetary allocation and would like to state in this House that we will ensure our mandated duties are carried out within our means and with that, we will rise above all expectations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports are centred on two (2) core programmes, namely the provision of assistance to youths through advisory, empowerment and capacity building including specific skills training and the development of sports and its infrastructures nationwide through the provision of grants to the Fiji National Sports Commission and National Sporting Organizations, as well as the provision of basic sports equipment and the development of rural playing fields. These are two developments that the Ministry focuses on to ensure that our youths are empowered and have access to good sporting infrastructures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Budget has again included new initiatives and areas that the allocations will be utilized to further its work and fulfil its mandated duties. The allocation will allow our ministry to continue and further the work that has impacted the lives of our young population.

The initiatives and areas are:

- (1) Supporting community-based capacity building
- (2) Promoting Youth Leadership
- (3) Promoting the development of sports at all level
- (4) Expanding access to sporting infrastructure for the Fijian people to encourage healthier living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will focus my speech on the third initiative, that is, Promoting The Development Of Sports At All Level, which involves the sports development amongst our youths and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this initiative, we have allocations provisions for the following:

- Annual Subscription for National Anti-Doping Organisation;
- Implementation of National Sports Policy;
- Sports Equipment;
- Sports and Wellness Champion Programme;
- Overseas Sporting Tours;
- Engagement of Sports Coaches;
- Hosting of International Tournaments;
- Fiji National Commission;
- Fiji Sports Council;
- Short-Term Experts;
- Sports Grant for Person with Disability;
- Boxing Commission of Fiji; and
- Construction of Hard Courts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth & Sports view sports development as an integral component of developing and empowering young people and the country as a whole. This perception has been established from the fact that young people closely associate themselves with participation in sports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the technical assistance offered by the Fiji National Sports Commission and other sporting bodies in terms of Sports Outreach programme, we as a Ministry are actively engaging with communities and sports stakeholders around the country to promote sports.

Mr. Speaker, we are also reaching into our minority groups and red zone areas, through the Fiji Community Policing, to ensure that they too participate in our programmes and register youth and

sports clubs. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a true reflection of the commitment of the Fijian Government to develop sports in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the pandemic, our Ministry together with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and Fiji National Sports Commission successfully put together a Safe Sports Fiji Protocol Framework Compliance Certification System. This has enabled our National Sporting Organisations to return to training and competition. The collaboration was a success whereby all NSOs were in compliance and were allowed to hold training and competition.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to elaborate more on the sports programmes that had been allocated with funding in the 2021-2022 Budget. These are grants allocated to sports and wellness champion programme and sports grounds for persons with disability. Mr. Speaker, under the sports and wellness champion programme, it is an initiative by the Ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and other sporting agencies. Mr. Speaker, sports and wellness champion programme is a pilot programme where youths and sports people will be trained through capacity-building programmes on the national and global fight against NCDs and other health-related issues.

Mr. Speaker, in March, 2021 leaders from all over Fiji gathered for this year's National Sports Conference to meet and collaborate with their NSO and strategising on community projects and programmes with the aim to have more Fijians being physically active. Mr. Speaker, in June, 2021, the Ministry together with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services conducted a one week webinar on NCDs and its risk factors in Fiji. Over 40 champions participated in this one week webinar and were also encouraged to develop projects and programmes for their respective communities through the guidance of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and WHO.

Mr. Speaker, in this current pandemic, it has been noted through surveys by WHO that more time is spent on gadgets than there is on personal physical activities within the safety of people's lawn. Mr. Speaker, during the pandemic, our Ministry, together with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, and the Fiji National Sports Commission, successfully put together a safe sports Fiji protocol framework compliance certification system. This has enabled our National Sporting organisations to return to training and competition. The collaboration was a success whereby all national sporting organisations were in compliance and were allowed to hold training and competition.

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Mr. Speaker, in this current pandemic, it has been noted through surveys by WHO that more time is spent on gadgets than there is on personal physical activity within the safety of people's homes.

Mr. Speaker, it is through this feedback that the Ministry, together with the FNCS is currently working with WHO in the development of physical activity videos that will be made available to all Fijians to follow and implement in their own bubbles.

Mr. Speaker, this current Budget will enhance and also assist the sports and wellness champions to implement projects that are applicable to their respective communities. These projects will range from awareness to changing personal behaviour, to improving healthy lifestyles and as a result contribute to one's quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, the second programme that I would like to speak on is the sports ground provided for persons with disability. This ground is specifically allocated to our sports people with disabilities. It is being strategically given to foster and strengthen participation as we look at the best way forward for these sporting organisations. In working with the various disability groups funding this year, we will provide for the payment of wages to their new sports development officers who will then be able to go to the communities and work with the FNCS on developing sports for those with disabilities at all ages thus we are paying the sports development officers for special Olympics, Fiji Deaf Sports Association, Disability and Special Needs School sports and Fiji Paralympic Organisation.

We believe that this is the best use of available funding as it will grow and develop sports specifically to cater for their special needs. Mr. Speaker, a kind reminder that in the next week or so, our Fiji Paralympic Team will be departing for Tokyo and through the funding that Government has provided, we have three athletes qualified so I thank the Government for the special allocations made by Government which allows our people with disabilities to compete on the bigger stage. We must not forget that a previous Member of the House and Assistant Minister for Youth and Sports received the first gold medal for Fiji at the London Paralympics.

Mr. Speaker, before I take my seat, I too would like to congratulate our men's sevens rugby team for winning their first and second matches in Tokyo Olympics. I wish them the very best in their bid to defend their title and thank all our sports gladiators flying our Fiji flag at the Olympic Games in Japan.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the privilege and I have the full confidence with no hesitation in supporting the 2021-2022 National Budget.

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

Honourable Members, that brings to an end the numbers who are listed for today's debate. On that note, we will conclude proceedings for today and we will continue tomorrow with the remaining speakers. I thank you for your contributions and cooperation so we adjourn until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.55 p.m.