

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 7TH FEBRUARY, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Administration of Oath/Affirmation of Allegiance	289-293
Minutes	293-294
Communications from the Speaker	294
Speaker’s Rulings	294-295
Presentation of Papers & Certain Documents	296
Review Report-Performance Audit on the Access of Persons with Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport... ..	296-323
Review of the FDB 2019 Annual Report	324-342
Suspension of Standing Orders	342
Consolidated Review Report – MLMR August 2016-July 2017 and August 2017-July 2018 Annual Reports	343-359
Review Report–Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report 2017-2018	359-371
Questions	371-382

Oral Questions

- (1) (Q/No. 01/2022 - Withdrawn)
- (2) Relief Efforts in Tonga (Q/No. 02/2022)
- (3) COVID-19 Recovery Guarantee Scheme (Q/No. 03/2022)
- (4) Tongan Volcanic Eruption (Q/No. 04/2022)
- (5) Cold Storage for Farmers - Sigatoka Valley (Q/No. 05/2022)
- (6) River De-Silting and Dredging Works (Q/No. 06/2022)
- (7) Exemption of Audit – Energy Fiji Limited (Q/No. 07/2022)
- (8) COVID-19 Vaccination Efforts (Q/No. 08/2022)

Written Questions

- (1) Total Assistance Provided for COVID-19 Pandemic (Q/No. 09/2022)
- (2) Rehabilitation Measures – Central Division Farmers (Q/No. 10/2022)

MONDAY, 7TH FEBRUARY, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.52 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister of Economy, Civil Service, Communications and Housing and Community Development
Hon. Lt. Col. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala, Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports
Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment
Hon. Cdr. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau, Minister for Fisheries
Hon. Jone Usamate, Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources
Hon. Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete, Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Premila Devi Kumar, Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government
Hon. Alexander David O'Connor, Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Veena Kumar Bhatnagar, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
Hon. Vijay Nath, Assistant Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services
Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports
Hon. Alipate Tuicolo Nagata, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports
Hon. Jale Sigarara, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Maritime Development
Hon. Viam Pillay, Assistant Minister for Environment and Rural Development
Hon. George Vegnathan, Assistant Minister for Sugar Industry
Hon. Selai Adimaitoga, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs
Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu
Hon. Mitieli Bulanauca
Hon. Mosese Dreca Bulitavu
Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka
Hon. Dr. Salik Ram Govind
Hon. Anare Jale
Hon. Ro Teimumu Vuikaba Kepa
Hon. Inosi Kuridrani
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu
Hon. Mikaele Rokosova Leawere
Hon. Ratu Suliano Matanitobua
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Sachida Nand
Hon. Niko Nawaikula
Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
 Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro
 Hon. Salote Vuibureta Radrodro
 Hon. Simione Rokomalo Rasova
 Hon. Jese Saukuru
 Hon. Rohit Ritesh Sharma
 Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua
 Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
 Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
 Hon. Tanya Waqanika
 Hon. Jone Atonio Rabici Seniloli
 Hon. Howard Robert Thomas Politini

Absent

Hon. Josai Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry, Foreign Affairs and Forestry
 Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
 Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi

ADMINISTRATION OF OATH/AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

The following Members subscribed to the Administration of Oath/Affirmation of Allegiance and took their seats in the Chamber:

Hon. Jone Atonio Rabici Seniloli
 Hon. Howard Robert Thomas Politini

MR. SPEAKER.- Congratulations honourable Members and I welcome you to Parliament and wish you well in the remainder of this parliamentary session.

Honourable Members, I now invite the honourable Jone Seniloli to deliver his maiden speech.

Delivery of Maiden Speech

HON. J.A.R. SENILOLI.- The honourable Speaker, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of this august House and ladies and gentlemen. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here exceedingly humbled by the people of Tailevu South who some three years ago chose me as their representative in Parliament and I promise that I will serve them to the best of my ability.

Mr. Speaker, firstly I would like to wish our honourable Prime Minister a quick recovery so he can return healthier and stronger to continue to lead our beloved country. Let us continue to pray to our Lord to bestow His healing on our Prime Minister and restore him to full health. Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the *vanua* of Tailevu South who supported me, thus allowing me to briefly serve in this august House. I will state the *vanua* and I quote:

- *“Vanua o Kubuna na Tui Kaba na Turaga na Vunivalu;*
- *Rara o Nakelo, Turaga na Tui Nakelo;*
- *Vanua o NaiBati na Turaga Na Tora ni Bati;*
- *Koroikalou na Turaga na Roko Tui Cautata;*

- *Naivitomi vua na Turaga Na TuDrau;*
- *Naceruku vua na Turaga Na ToraDreketi;*
- *Vunivivi na Turaga na Ratu na Komai Nausori;*
- *Nacobua vua na Turaga na Roko Tui Namata;*
- *Nayaumunu vua na Turaga Na Roko Tui Viwa;*
- *Natena na Turaga na Roko Tui Kiuva.”*

Mr. Speaker, in addition I would also like to acknowledge the members of my dedicated campaign team:

- Ratu Tanoa Visawaqa Cakobau;
- *Rauraga* Alipate Qetaki;
- Viliame Nagia;
- Usaia Pita Waqatairewa and the brotherhood *vaka* Matakibau – Matakibau Peni Sokia, Matakibau Emosi Molo, Matakibau Manasa and Matakibau Sekove.

Mr. Speaker, furthermore I would like to thank all the members of the Tailevu South branches and all their respective committee members. I would also like to thank the party agents, observers, poll agents and all those that volunteered to assist the team during the day of voting. To all the families and relatives who stood and backed me all the way in 2018, I appreciate and thank you all. My maternal family, the Kaloumaira from Uluibau, I thank them for always being there for me. To my Seniloli family of Naua, Bau, thank you for the unwavering support and encouragement.

Mr. Speaker, I have always been fascinated by this august House and all that it entails. The fascination began when I was an undergraduate student in the early 90s. At that time my late father was Fiji's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. I, at times listened to the speeches of the representative at the UN. My interest was further enhanced when my late father again was elected into Fiji's Parliament after his stint in New York. These lifted my aspirations to follow in my late father's footsteps - to serve the people, to work hard, to believe in myself, to be financially prudent and not to be wasteful.

Mr. Speaker, my parents were hardworking and committed secondary school teachers and taught in a number of secondary schools in Fiji, and contributed to the building of human capital in Fiji. Building human capital is very important for our country today.

Our education system needs to respond to the challenges of the 21st century, especially now with COVID. We need to improve online learning at all levels of education. Teachers and students need training this year in this area and online learning must have the supporting infrastructure. Today and with COVID work is rapidly moving to online services, automation and digitisation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the new normal we must keep up.

Mr. Speaker, in addition we must continue to empower people with continuing education such as that provided by the universities and Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC). This system of education of giving people a second opportunity must be supported.

Mr. Speaker, today I have put up my hand as part of SODELPA Party and the Opposition. I put my hand up to do what we are here for and that is to ask questions and to hold the Government accountable. Mr. Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor, honourable Lynda Tabuya, a respected lawyer and an advocate for youth issues and labour rights. This august House will remember her oratory skills as she defends the rule of law, scrutinising of new Bills and most

importantly as a representative of the people by asking the pertinent questions. I do sincerely wish Ms. Lynda Tabuya my *marama naita* all the best in her new endeavour.

Mr. Speaker, in 2018, my inspiration to stand in the election was an opportunity to serve the communities and villagers whereby I can make a difference in trying to breach the disparity between urban and rural development. Urban bias exist. Urban bias as the development of urban areas at the expense of rural areas thus the rural communities are at times deprived for much needed development as it is being in the urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, urban bias has now contributed to a deeper and disturbing economic divide where people in the rural areas are getting poorer compared to people in the urban areas. The urban rural economic gap is real. It is real and it is growing.

The 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey is a testament to this whereby reported that 42 per cent of the rural communities are poor and with 62 per cent of the total poor population. Therefore there is a real need to invest in our rural communities to ensure an equitable provisioning of resources so that all the people of Fiji can have equal access to much needed human basic rights services regardless of where they might live. This includes clean water for all, quality education for all, regular supply of electricity to all, quality health services for all, reliable transport and communication services for all. These can be achieved when we have a strong broad based economy.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak on COVID which is still around and here. Firstly may I express my heartfelt condolences to all those who have lost their loved ones during the COVID and the Omicron variant pandemic. To all the families of Fiji please do know that we feel and grieve with you.

Sir, I would also like to recognise and acknowledge the enormous work and sacrifice of our first responders in protecting our borders, attending to the sick, resolving contact tracing, conducting screening and vaccination and securing our border containment areas. I praise and am grateful to the members of the medical profession, Fiji Police Force, Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Fiji Corrections Service, civil servants with the volunteers and NGOs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have acknowledged the enormous effort by our frontliners. Let us lighten their work by being vaccinated. I salute the many people who are being fully vaccinated and I encourage those who have not had their booster shots to have it, for their own safety. To those who have not been inoculated at all, to do this for yourselves, for your loved ones and for your country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I would like to thank the people of Tailevu South, again, for putting me here, and I will strive to serve you and all the people of Fiji to the best of my ability.

It is at this juncture, I wish to highlight the importance of having an electoral system with multiple constituencies instead of the one which we have. Constituencies connect us, the elected representatives, directly to members of the constituency. We know their needs, we know their strength, their struggles, and it allows us to be accountable to the people who have elected us. In addition, the election battle would be easier to manage and more relatable to the people.

This current system is unfair as it allows the candidates with small number of votes to be elected to Parliament, riding on very few popular candidates and making the decisions for our country. This needs to change. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Acclamation)

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Member for his maiden speech. I now invite the honourable Howard Politini to deliver his maiden speech.

HON. H.R.T. POLITINI.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public who are watching this live telecast; good morning to you all.

It is, indeed, a great honour and privilege to take my place in this august Parliament as a Member. First and foremost, I thank our Sovereign God for this favour.

With these few months ahead before the National Election, I am still in a position to serve my fellow Fijians and to be able to assist and to lead them to more fruitful and satisfying lives in carrying out what the Government has done for the past seven years of leadership. As a philosopher Richard J. Daley said, and I quote, “Good government is good politics.”

On this note, I wish to convey to the honourable Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama strength and positive thoughts on his recovery, and wishing his wife Mary, children and grandchildren our thoughts and prayers.

To the island Kingdom of Tonga, to my families, friends and loved ones, our thoughts and prayers are with you during this trying time on the recent tragedy of the volcanic eruption.

My congratulations to the *Turaga i Taukei Bolatagane, na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere as he ascends the high office as the youngest President of our beloved island of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to also thank my family; my wife, Unaisi, and her family; my sister; Lani, and her family; my parents, especially my dad, Kamoe, watching this live telecast in Rotuma; to my good friends, Lawrence, Alrick and Shalini; and to Googan, Max, Myron, Manav and Monica in Auckland, New Zealand.

To the *vanua* of Namata, Nadroga; Malamala, Yako, Namulomulo, Tovatova, Pakistan in the high reaches of the Nausori Highlands and Bangladesh in Navakai; *vinaka*. In the Yasawa, na *Turaga na Tui Drola* of Nacula Village, *vinaka saka vakalevu na veiciqomi*; the village of Vuaki, Naisisili, Matacawalevu, and the Doughty family of Tavewa Island and Navotua. In Tavua, villages of Nadelei and Nasomo; the settlement of Lomalagi in Vatukoula, Nabuna and Korovou. *Ena yasana of Ra, na koro o* (In the Province of Ra, the village of) Naseyani, Nananu, Togovere and Barotu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on COP26, I thank the honourable Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, the honourable Attorney-General and Minister responsible for climate change, honourable Aiyaz-Sayed Khaiyum, and the team of our Fijian delegation for their successful negotiation in voicing our concern to the world on climate change.

On COVID-19, the people of Fiji suffered in this pandemic in every way, from families, our children’s education, business and, yes, all over the world. With the good leadership of the FijiFirst Government to vaccinate, it has now come up to over 90 per cent of the adult population from 18 years and above, who are fully vaccinated, whilst ages 12 years to 18 years’ vaccination campaign is underway by our Ministry of Health Team.

Fiji stands united by patriotism. A journey of struggles and of triumphs has emerged us as a powerful Pacific Island Nation. Together, we have done great things. It has been a challenging two years for many of us but we will persevere through challenges - our journey to embrace the new norm

and to take heed of necessary COVID-19 precautionary measures. We continue to spread kindness and look after each other. Our voters deserve better, a continuation of the FijiFirst Government.

On education, Mr. Speaker, during my boarding school days in Tailevu in the early 1990s under the leadership of the Rabuka Government, there was no such thing as ‘free education’, as we hear Rabuka ranting in the media today that he started free education. I remember back then, busloads of mostly my fellow students who were sadly sent home because they could not afford their school fees. This could have been Rabuka’s interpretation of so-called ‘free school fees’.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on infrastructure, I would like to highlight my involvement for the past three years in civil construction works on bridges, roads, low level crossings, footpaths and industrial subdivisions. On behalf of all civil contractors, crews on the ground from our labourers, surveyors, site engineers and project managers, I would like to convey a big *vinaka vakalevu* to the honourable Minister for the Economy and Acting Prime Minister, and the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources, that despite capital projects slowing down by the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), maintenance projects were ongoing, even during the onset of COVID-19 from 2020 till to date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the commercial front, we have noted the Australian Giant communication network – Telstra, buying Digicel Pacific. This only shows a positive indicator of foreign investor’s confidence in our local economy, as the Australian High Commissioner quoted as saying, “Telstra will be here in a big way”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji as a regional hub in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), a website has been launched for many global companies as Fiji is reliable and has low-cost communications services, along with its geographic proximity to two major cities in Australia. All this has only been possible because of the vision of the FijiFirst Government in putting in place the building blocks of a sophisticated and attractive ITC sector. This has meant economic diversification and 100,000 jobs in the next decade. Our young Fijians will benefit from the FijiFirst Government’s sound and consistent policy making.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, I wish to, again, thank all those who have supported and trusted me to enter this august Parliament. I must make special mention of our honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for giving me the opportunity to be part of the 2014 and 2018 General Elections under FijiFirst.

May our Sovereign God continue to journey with the FijiFirst Government for the remainder of this parliamentary term and beyond. *Vinaka vakalevu*.

(Acclamation)

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 3rd December, 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 SPEAKER

I welcome all honourable Members to the first Parliament sitting this year, those present in person and those joining virtually, and I look forward to working with you all in the course of this final session of this Parliamentary term.

I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of their home, offices and electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

SPEAKER'S RULING

NFP's Recent Press Releases

Honourable Members, the honourable Speaker has not stifled debate on health or any other issues that political parties wish to bring to Parliament for debate. The National Federation Party (NFP) should not be making such baseless claims which purport to bring disrepute to the Office of the Speaker and to Parliament.

Special Committee to Analyse, Assess and Report on the Effectiveness of the Ministry of Health's Response to COVID-19

On honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua's motion for Parliament to set up a special committee under Standing Order 129 to analyse, assess and report on the effectiveness of the Ministry of Health's response to COVID-19, this is the response given to the NFP during the vetting of Questions and Motions:

“These matters can be dealt with by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. There is no need to have a separate committee, given that there is already an existing mechanism in place. There is no need for duplication.

In the course of the Standing Committee's inquiries, members of the Committee can ask questions and make inquiries of this nature. This is very broad and is the same kind of tasks that Committees undertake when scrutinising these issues.

Furthermore, when the Business Committee rules out Questions and Motions, the Secretariat duly takes note and thereafter, implements these Rulings, in similar Questions and Motions that are submitted, such as this motion. Therefore, this motion is out of order.

Honourable Members should take note that the Parliament Secretariat does not dictate what Members of Parliament can bring to the floor of Parliament. The Parliament Secretariat's role is to implement the provisions of the Standing Orders, as well as the decisions of the Business Committee.”

The honourable Speaker has, on many occasions, ruled out of order such motions that propose to set up a special committee on particular issues because these issues can be dealt with by existing

Standing Committees of Parliament under their respective areas of remit, as provided for under Standing Order 109.

For this particular motion, the honourable Speaker had advised that the matters be scrutinised by the proposed Special Standing Committee can be covered by the existing Standing Committee on Social Affairs, whose mandate include matters related to health, education, social services, labour, culture and media under Standing Order 109(2)(b). The Special Committee proposed by the honourable Qereqeretabua would be a duplication of this Committee's remit and work. Honourable Members are welcome to move motions proposing that these matters be looked into by a particular Standing Committee under whose remit these matters come under.

Motion on the Late Professor Brij Vilash Lal

On the matter of the motion of the late Professor Brij Vilash Lal, the Speaker's Ruling is as follows:

“The honourable Speaker has ruled on numerous occasions that under the doctrine of separation of powers, Parliament is supposed to make laws and Government is supposed to uphold the law to make it work. As such Parliament cannot interfere with policy implementation by the Government and its statutory bodies.

On that basis, this motion is out of order as it will create rise to debate which would purportedly interfere with the mandate of the Government.”

To clarify, the matter is one for the Immigration Department and which Parliament cannot interfere with. It is for the late Professor Lal's family to pursue the matter with the Department through the process of application and appeals that are provided like other such cases under the Department's jurisdiction. If they feel that they have been unfairly treated, there are avenues for redress available which they should pursue. It is not for Parliament to interfere in such matters at this level. Honourable Members, I hope that, that is clear to all inside Parliament and those outside of Parliament.

Honourable Members, at this juncture, we will now suspend proceedings for refreshments and we will resume in half an hour's time. We will proceed to the next item on the Agenda paper then.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.28 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 10.59 a.m.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Reports were tabled by the honourable Ministers responsible in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

1. Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

Office of the Prime Minister and Department of Immigration Annual Report – 2018-2019 Annual Report

2. Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Office of the Auditor-General – 2021 Annual Report

3. Standing Committee on Social Affairs

- (i) Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Environment – 2015-2018 Annual Reports;
- (ii) Labasa Town Council – 2005, 2013 and 2017 Annual Reports;
- (iii) Sigatoka Town Council – 2019 Annual Report;
- (iv) Levuka Town Council – 2011 Annual Report; and
- (v) National Fire Authority – 2015 Annual Report.

REVIEW REPORT - PERFORMANCE AUDIT ON THE ACCESS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES TO PUBLIC OFFICES AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

The Parliament debates the Review of the Performance Audit on the Access of Persons with Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport, which was tabled in Parliament on 16th August, 2021.

HON. J.N. NAND.- I beg to second the motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I, as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts who moved the motion take this opportunity to speak on the motion on the Review of the Performance Audit Report on Access for Persons with Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was signed by Fiji on 2nd June, 2010 and ratified in 2017. Further, the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji clearly outlines the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It establishes the right to equality and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of an individual act or supposed personal characteristics or circumstances including disability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, provisions in the Constitution even stipulates under Section 26(5) and (6) that the proprietor of a place or service to shops, hotels, lodging-house, public restaurants, place of public entertainment, clubs, education institutions, public transportation services, taxis and public places, must facilitate reasonable access for persons with disabilities to the extent that is prescribed by law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Performance Audit Report carried out was based on the release made by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics on the 2017 Population and Housing Census dated 5th January, 2018, which recorded a total enumerated population of 884,887. Out of this number, 829,907 were reported as being at the age of three years and above of which a total of 113,595 persons were reported to have had at least one functioning challenge. The number equates to a rate of 13.7 per cent which is close to the international benchmark of 15 per cent.

The main objective of the audit that was conducted by the Office of the Auditor-General was to assess on whether the strategies, action plans and processes for the provision of access for persons with disabilities are effectively and efficiently administered by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) and relevant stakeholders in order to ensure ease of accessibility to public offices and public transport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the audit also covered the roles of the NCPD in working with the relevant stakeholders including the Department of Transport, Land Transport Authority, Fiji Roads Authority, Department of Civil Aviation, Department of Buildings of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services, Municipal Councils, Department of Town and Country Planning, Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) of the Ministry of Economy and other stakeholders, such as, NGOs, CSOs and Disabled Person's Organisations to successfully plan, implement and monitor the provision of accessibility for persons with disabilities.

This Committee scrutinised the five main key focused areas of the audit that includes:

1. Legislation and Policy Framework;
2. Stakeholders Arrangements and Engagements;
3. Policy Implementation on Access for Disabilities;
4. Disabled Accessibility to Public Transport; and
5. Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting.

Fiji, in recognising its international and regional commitments, the Government had developed a 10-year National Disability Policy (2008 to 2018) which was also required under the Fiji National Council for Persons with Disabilities Act of 1994. The audit also pointed out the need for a review of the Fiji National Council for Persons with Disabilities Act 1994, as the current version of the legislation was an administrative one and discussions for a review was underway for the purpose of determining its continuing relevance to the local, regional and international best practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission has been educating the public about the rights and freedom, as well as receiving and investigating alleged violations of human rights. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act has been developed and aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The Act seeks to provide for, uphold and enforce the rights of persons with disabilities in Fiji, as provided for under the Articles of the Convention and Section 42 of Fiji's 2013 Constitution. The Act captures bulk of the salient features of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and is envisaged to empower persons with disabilities in Fiji.

It is pleasing to note that while all rights of persons with disabilities are embedded into the newly enacted Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018, the rights of persons with disabilities specific to reasonable access to public transportation at the national level are ensued through the following legislative frameworks, namely; the 2013 Constitution, the Land Transport Act 1998 and its Regulations.

The Committee noted that some work was undertaken after the amendments with regards to priority sitting in public service vehicles and line markings for disabled persons.

The National Building Code is included in the Public Health Regulations 2004 in the Public Health Act 1935. The basic objective of the Code is to ensure that acceptable standards of structural sufficiency, fire safety, health and amenity are maintained for the benefit of the community now and in the future.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee noted that the requirements of the law have not been effectively enforced by the officers responsible for public health on those buildings that have been built without access for people with disabilities. The Office of the Auditor-General's meeting with the Public Health Officials mentioned the transfer of functions and powers of local authorities in rural districts and boards.

On stakeholder arrangements and engagements, Mr. Speaker, the Committee has noted that sharing of information is still an issue with Ministries, especially if their legislation limits the sharing of individual information with outside parties, including the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBoS). However, to mitigate those challenges, FBoS has been signing Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with some key Government stakeholders and other line agencies, and plans to partner with the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in the near future due to the significant importance of consolidating and sharing the consistent disability statistics for necessary policy decisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee was informed that the lack of awareness and initiatives for everyone to be mindful of the plight of accessibility faced by persons with disabilities are the basic reasons why there has been slow progress in improving accessibility to public spaces. Generally, most people lack knowledge on the type of disabilities in Fiji and consequently are not aware of what is required in order to cater for people with disabilities.

The Committee was further informed that the Construction Industry Council (CIC) Board members expressed that on the very initial stages of planning, the drafters of building plans generally lack this knowledge and in most cases, work is based on their experiences and may not be up to standards with new developments and best practices. This lack of awareness and initiatives may also be present with engineers. The other factor highlighted by CIC was the high cost of implementing these considerations for disabilities in the building plans. Collaboration and engagement with the NCPD by the Department of Town and Country Planning and Municipal Councils is also lacking, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities are provided and protected in Part 6 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018 (Act No. 4 of 2018). It is important to note that the Act came into force in 2018 and the audit was conducted in 2019, while agencies were still working on the Action Plan with relevant agencies to implement the Act.

The Committee noted that the Act clearly states that a person may apply to the High Court if a person feels that they are being deprived from their rights under the Act. Section 29(6) of the Act clearly states that under the law, if a person with disabilities feels deprived of their rights, then the person is in a position to raise the matter in the High Court.

The Committee was also informed that NCPD also has a complaints register which deals only with mobility issues, while the rest of the complaints are referred to the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission for their action. The Commission has clearly stated that any person has the right to lodge their complaint to the Commission in regards to alleged human rights violation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted the audit findings and it requires serious consideration by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) with relevant stakeholders to expedite the implementation and facilitation of access for persons with disabilities in public offices and public transport respectively. In this regard, the Committee recommends that the NCPD:

1. honours its international and regional commitments through national policies and action plans that are recognised and acknowledged by its stakeholders, adequately resourced, implemented in a timely manner and using reliable, comparable and current and relevant disability data to support its policies;
2. carry out periodic reviews of such commitments for the purpose of determining their continued relevance to local, regional and international realities on disability issues;
3. work more closely with LTA and Department of Transport to have a better working knowledge and understanding of the 2015 legislative amendments to the LTA Regulations on PSV issues on access for persons with disabilities;
4. ensures that the Housing Transport & Environment Advisory Committee (HTEADCOM) have more regular meetings to expedite the timely execution and monitoring of the Implementation Plan to minimise delays to disabled access inclusion in legislation and policies;
5. considers some of the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as those were reflected in the Government's Budget and 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plans:
 - (i) SDG 1 - End Poverty;
 - (ii) SDG 4 - Quality Education;
 - (iii) SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth;
 - (iv) SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities;
 - (v) SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities; and
 - (vi) SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals.

With the view to improving access and mobility which are two important factors in reducing poverty, and can facilitate the participation of people with disabilities in economic, social and political processes;

6. be adequately resourced for a more conducive environment to co-ordinate and consult with stakeholders; and;
7. considers the schedule of meetings of the Advisory Committee to minimise delays and to ensure timely implementation of its policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee acknowledges the progressive work done by the NCPD in consultation with relevant stakeholders to ensure that access for disability in public offices and transport is facilitated. However, more resources, commitment and engagement is required by all stakeholders so that Fiji could fully comply with the international, regional and local commitments which are mandated under the Convention and the relevant legislations that are currently in place.

The Government has passed the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018, which sets the platform in ensuring no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words and as the Member moving the motion, I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is open for debate.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to contribute to this motion on the Performance Audit on the Access of Persons with Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the Report by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in highlighting this great need by a great number of our population living with disabilities and their need. It is good that they have highlighted that because it brings to fore, again, the importance of the work done by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics rather than the honourable Minister for Economy sacking the Chief Executive Officer. This tantamount to the great work that has been carried out by Fiji Bureau of Statistics, and we acknowledge the laws that are in place to look after the needs of our people living with disabilities.

I recalled, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when that piece of legislation was brought into the House for debate, we, on this House, highlighted the need for the legislation to be resourced accordingly in regards to its implementation.

Also, it is interesting how this Committee has highlighted in their recommendations the role of the National Council for Persons living with Disabilities (NCPD). And I must remind the Committee, the Chairman and the members that Fiji, through the Government, ratified the legislation, not NCPD. Therefore, the responsibility for the implementation or the lack of implementation or the ineffectiveness of the implementation of this legislation rests with the Government, not with the NCPD.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will recall that during the Budget debates, we, on this side of the House, have always requested that the NCPD be given an appropriate portion of our National Budget so that they will be able to undertake their mandatory work. As we have heard from the Chairman, that the implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018 includes the wider scope of our society or in regards to the Government infrastructure. It involves Ministry of Works, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, and in here particularly, we are talking about infrastructure on the building and also on land and sea transport.

We will see, Mr. Speaker, that after the approval of that legislation that was brought into the House, very little resources were allocated to the Ministry responsible and also to NCPD, to be able to carry out the work they have been mandated to do under the Act. Also, we will see that it is beyond NCPD's area of responsibility to be working with those responsible for buildings, particularly those that are privately owned, or for those owning ships.

I recalled seeing someone having to travel from Natovi to Nabouwalu, who has had great difficulty in having to get up the steps which is very steep. The relatives actually had to carry the gentleman up the steep steps, Mr. Speaker, and that tantamount that there is not really any progress being done in regards to the owners of businesses, particularly those who own land transport and sea transport, to be able to improve on their infrastructure to accommodate those people living with disabilities.

Also, Mr. Speaker, you hardly see them travel in public transport in regards to bus. Even though they may be given transport or bus cards, most of them travel in taxis which is very expensive. They do that because only the taxi will be able to accommodate their wheelchair and their crutches, and also their helper to be able to get them to their destination.

I am highlighting those because I believe the recommendation, emphasising that the National Council for Persons Living with Disabilities be responsible for all those seven recommendations is a bit misaligned. The recommendation should have been targeted to the Government of the day because as the keeper of the instruments with regards to the legislation, it is also responsible for submitting a periodic report in regards to the implementation of the Convention on the people living with disabilities.

Of course, the National Council for Persons with Disabilities will contribute but I believe there will also be the organisation responsible for providing a shadow report which is tabled to the meeting in New York. Therefore, in my view, having to hold the National Council's for Persons with Disabilities responsible for those recommendations are unfair and also misaligned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because those recommendations lies flatly on the shoulders of the FijiFirst Government.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to contribute to the motion of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts Report on the Review of the Performance Audit on the Access for Persons with Disabilities to Public Officers and Public Transport. Before I do that, I would like to wish our two honourable Members this morning, who just have been sworn in a successful tenure in the House as well as wishing the honourable Prime Minister a speedy recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was signed by Fiji on 2nd June, 2010 and ratified in 2017. Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji clearly outlines the rights of persons with disabilities. It establishes the right to quality and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of individual act or suppose personal characteristic or circumstances including disability. The provision, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Constitution as stipulated under Section 26(6) where the proprietor of a place or service referred to in subsection (5), "... to shops, hotels, lodging-houses, public restaurants, places of public entertainment, clubs, education institutions, public transportation services, taxis and public places" must facilitate reasonable access to persons with disabilities to the extent as prescribed by law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also noted in its review the inaccessibility to build environments and is still a major barrier which prevents persons with disabilities from actively participating in social and economic activities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to highlight some of the gaps identified which include:

1. The need for review of the FNCDP Act 1994 as the current version of the legislation was an administrative one and discussions for a review was underway for the purpose of determining its continuing relevance to local, regional and international best practices.
2. Inquiries made by the Office of the Auditor-General into the achievements of the Fiji Human Rights Disability Action Plan developed by the Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission were not facilitated as the current Commission was not in office at the time the plan was developed.

However, the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been educating the public about rights and freedom, receiving and investigating alleged violations of human rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 42 of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji captures the rights of persons with disabilities to reasonable access to all public transport. Prior to the enactment over the Rights of Persons with Disability Act which came into effect on 21st March, 2018 through the Act No. 4 of 2018, the only legislation relating directly to persons with disabilities in Fiji was a 24-year old Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons Act of 1994.

In 2015, Mr. Speaker, Sir, amendments to LTA Regulations relating to public service vehicles saw a promising outcome with specific requirements to include disability friendly features in Public Service Vehicles. It was noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir that the lack of an effective environment enforcement of the legislation had aimed to address barriers for disabled accessibility to public service vehicles is too weak. Lack of collaboration and awareness and inclusion of disabled accessibility in legislation and policies governing sea and air transportation are yet to be formulated and we urge the Government to seriously look into this area.

On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that in the audit that Professor Rob McCallum, who made a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs during the consultation process on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill suggested that clause 29 of the Bill which deals with accessibility for disabled persons correlates with Section 42 of the 2013 Constitution. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Professor further stated that it would be better if clause 29 could be redrafted in order to align it with Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as it does not cover just access to transport and buildings but also to communications and recreational areas.

Similar sentiments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were presented through written submissions of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Regional Office of the Pacific and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) to the Standing Committee. The submission noted that clause 29 of the Bill falls short of Article 9 of the CRPD in particular by limiting the rights of persons with disabilities to reasonable access to physical spaces, transport and information, and not including communications.

Information Communications Technology (ICT) and public services - while acknowledging that accessibility is critical to persons with disabilities, enjoyment of practically all rights under CRPD and other treaties saw lack or denial of accessibility could be considered discriminatory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted in the Audit Report that the current management of LTA did not have knowledge of the 2015 legislative amendments. Similarly, the Department of Transport was also not aware of the 2015 amendments made to the LTA regulations, however, the Committee noted that some work was undertaken but after the amendments with regards to priority seating in PSVs and line markings for disabled persons. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, indicate the lack of knowledge of the responsible agencies of the 2015 regulatory amendments relating to user-friendly PSVs for persons with physical disabilities thus compromising the implementation and enforcement of the land transport or Public Service Vehicle Regulations which came into effect in 2015.

On maritime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and transportation, the maritime and air transportation are governed by the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji Act 2009 and Maritime Transport Act 2013, Maritime Regulation (Ship Registration) Act 2013. The Committee noted from the report that the inclusion of disabled accessible provisions in the governing legislations and regulation for sea and air transportation has not been effective.

We urge the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to take this on board immediately as people travel daily either by sea, air or on land. It was also noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Maritime Transport Policy of 2015 recognises the constitutional rights of disabled persons to reasonable access to public transport with the implications of the design of transport systems. Unfortunately this is not happening in Fiji because there is lack of implementation and also legislations to ensure that these practices are enforced for the greater public of Fiji. Again, there is a need to collaborate with FNCDP and the Government as their input is needed as far as inclusion is concerned.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Mr. Speaker, according to the World Report on Disability 2020, 15 per cent of the world's population lived with some form of disability and if we were to apply that figure to Fiji's population of 884,887 according to the 2017 Census, 15 per cent would be approximately 133,000 people. So roughly, 133,000 of the total population live with some form of disability in Fiji, and not just physical disability.

People with disabilities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are told, have generally poorer health, lower educational achievements, fewer economic opportunities and higher rates of poverty than people without disability. This is largely due to the lack of services available to them and the many obstacles they face in their daily lives. Mr. Speaker, Sir, here I declare my interest being a Member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, who looked at this review. So, looking at the review of the Performance Audit which includes the five-year implementation plan from 2019 to 2023 of the NCPD and its 10 objectives, capturing international, regional and local commitments in terms of accessibility to the Council public offices and public transport for people with disabilities, we know right away that the Council was faced with many challenges which included the following:

1. Restriction of movements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, delaying the implementation of activities;
2. Funding implications within the plan; and
3. Commitment from stakeholders in the implementation process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this really is a big humongous job for the stakeholders, especially with the Government's commitment articulated in the National Development Plan on transforming Fiji and their pledge in leaving no one behind. In this regard, although the annual reports, audited reports and review reports are sometimes printed in glossy and glamorous ways, the truth when we get behind the shiny sleek facade is something that needs to be tackled.

In that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, international conventions, for example, which Fiji has ratified and complied with and for Government to appreciate that when you sign those important commitments, proper and adequate funding is provided, and just not to make Government look good with little happening behind the gleaming frontage. In this instance, the stakeholders, as we have heard are the Municipal Councils, Department of Town and Country Planning, Department of Buildings, OHS Department, Public Health Department, Construction Implementation Unit of the Ministry of Economy, Department of Transport, LTA, Fiji Roads Authority, Fiji Bus Association, Fiji Taxi Association and Construction Industry Council. A coordinated multi-stakeholder engagement approach is therefore fundamental for the harmonious provision of accessibility to public offices and public transport for the disabled population of Fiji, particularly in regard to sea, air and land transport.

Disharmony occurs when the main players are not coordinated and gaps start opening up as we see when we take a closer look at how the supposedly ease of access for people with disability becomes difficult to access. In this instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the technical working groups of the NCPD, which is an essential tool or vehicle in the implementation of activities, need to have more regular meetings that are formalised with each technical working group incorporating a person with disability into their working groups, as people with no disability have little idea of the difficulties people with disability have. For example, when I went to the Nausori Bus Stand, very familiar to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I heard, as I had heard from a friend how difficult it was for a person with disability to get into a bus, and trying to get into the Tebara Bus was like trying to get to heaven. It was high off the ground with the steps so far apart, and if the bus is moving, as sometimes happens with impatient bus drivers, just imagine how precarious this experience is. So, for the abled bodied section of the population or 85 per cent of the people, what is easy for you and what you take for granted can be quite intimidating for a person with disability, particularly for those relying on public transport, like the Tebara bus.

On the other hand, whilst boarding the boats at Nasali Landing, had previously been a nightmare for people with disability. I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Defence for improving the river bank access for commuters and in the process, providing a ramp that when completed, will enhance not only the lives of people with disability but also the women, some of whom have ended up in the river and they have asked me to relay their appreciation to the Honourable Minister. So, thank you, honourable Minister.

In conclusion, the review emphasises that the NCPD honours international and regional commitments through national policies, and that Action Plans are adequately resourced to be implemented in a timely manner using reliable, comparable and up to date disability data to support evidence-based policy-making to improve the lives of the 15 per cent of the population for whom this review was made.

MR. SPEAKER.- All these years I have been trying to get on to the Tebara bus, but the steps are bit high, even for me.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure you could jump on to the second step of the bus so I would be very happy to see you do that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; a very good morning to all of you.

I wish to contribute to the Performance Report and I thank the Standing Committee for the work undertaken to reach the recommendations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has made comprehensive contributions to the Review of the Performance Audit Report on the Access for Persons with Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport.

As described, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the United Nations in 2007, accessibility is about giving equal access to everyone and without being able to access the facilities and services, persons with disabilities will never be fully included. The inefficiency of accessibility to public transport has led towards inconvenience and prohibits many disabled persons from moving around freely. I am sure we will all agree to those particular statements.

This again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not a local issue but it is actually a global issue. Access to public transportation is one of the biggest issues for people with disabilities. Without accessible transportation, many people with disabilities simply cannot go to a school or to a workplace or hindering their full participation in society, as echoed in those sentiments earlier expressed. We understand that this was a performance audit undertaken by the Office of the Auditor-General, which is the type of audit that understands the current activities and suggests improvements to the processes and systems in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Performance Audit Report reveals that according to the 2017 Population and Housing Census by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in 2018, 13.7 per cent of the total population were reported to have had, at least, one functioning challenge. This means that 113,595 people out of the population of 884,887 have some form of disability.

However, Sir, what the Report fails to specify is whether all the functioning challenges restrict a person from using public transportation, or having access to public information. In order for the Ministry responsible for transportation to develop better policies, it is important that data is available

on how many people with disabilities access public transport and how many are actually finding it impossible to access public transport because of their disability, and that the public transport is actually not conducive to their specific conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such Performance Reports by the OAG lack objectivity, and many times, a purpose. The OAG did not undertake a performance assessment with an open and objective mind. Their mindset, as in all their audits, is always that the organisation is doing wrong, and that they are going to go in there to find problems and not to acknowledge the good work that has been done.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, I know there are supposed to be independent, but they are not acting like that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018 enshrines the right for a person to be able to access public transport, public office and information. What needs to be said is that, there is no use coming here and making it a flavour of the month and come and speak loudly about it now, but before this Government came along, nothing was done.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Absolutely nothing was done! People with disabilities were just put by the wayside, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Never before were persons with even a hearing impairment able to access information that was made available to the general public. This Government did so, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Today, Parliament Sessions are televised and made online with experts conveying the information through sign language. Who did that? We did that! We did that!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is no use jumping on the bandwagon now and nag about it because when you were on this side of the House, you never did anything. Disability has been around since time immemorial, no one did anything about it then, and it has been done now by this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir. All important announcements relating to COVID-19 were broadcasted on all forms of media, not just in written form.

The Report fails to acknowledge such steps by the Government to have information readily available to all citizens of Fiji. The Report identifies gaps in terms of coverage of Section 29 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 29 provides broad coverage in terms of accessibility and it is not prescriptive as that the Act would limit the application of the legislation.

There are certain recommendations within the Report of the Standing Committee that we acknowledge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and as the Ministry responsible for transport, we have taken on board and we are addressing and we will continue to address those issues.

I am personally working with the Land Transport Authority (LTA) and Maritime and Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) to ensure that the appropriate changes are made to the respective legislations to mirror the accessibility provisions of the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2018.

It is being done as we speak. It is a large task, but it is being done, Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reiterate that disability is a human rights issue and as highlighted in the Report that the people with disabilities have the same absolute rights to life and welfare, education, work, access to all community facilities, self-determination, independent living and active participation in all aspects of society as all other human beings.

This little statement only became prominent because of this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The findings on the accessibility of disabled persons to public transport and noting that the Land Transport (Public Service Vehicles) Regulations 2000 was amended in 2015, to accommodate for access of persons with disabilities to public transport, and I wish to specifically focus on the requirements of this particular provision.

A driver of a PSV cannot refuse to carry a person with disabilities. The driver of a PSV must assist persons with disabilities when boarding or disembarking a vehicle. The owner of a PSV has the obligation to ensure that the vehicle is user-friendly for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities must sit in the first two rows of seats in the bus or seats closest to the driver of the PSV, and signage needs to be made available to indicate the priority seats. As we can see, there are provisions that are already there but we continue to better them.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, the quality assurance maintenance systems and the household travel surveys are two crucial mechanisms that can actually be used to get the private sector to move towards user-friendly buses. I am sure that the honourable Minister for Economy in his wisdom is actually thinking about these things as we speak, maybe Budget time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the HCS would also determine the travel partners and persons using public transport. The Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, criticises the lack of public buildings, having accessibility for persons with disability.

Whilst it is considered that over a decade ago, proper considerations were not being given by the approving authorities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the inclusion of disability provisions in the building developments, greater efforts have been made and are continuing to be made by the Department of Town and Country Planning, especially since 2019, to impose conditions and to enforce the appropriate legislative requirement on disability provisions under the Town and Planning general provisions. This effectively requires proponents of all commercial, civic and high-rise residential apartment developments to have disability provisions as part of their outlined and detailed building plans in compliance with the requirements of Schedule G of the Town Planning general provisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noted that most of the public and private sector building developments that have been newly constructed are displaying disability provisions, such as ramps, designated carpark and access to lifts. Those are thoroughly checked by the Municipal Councils before Completion Certificates for the buildings are actually issued. So, quite a considerable amount of work has been done and accepted. We continue to do so, Sir.

It is also important to acknowledge that some of the recent building developments have disability provisions, like the Damodar City Complex, the Rups Mega Complex, Tappoos City Buildings in Suva and Lautoka. Mr. Speaker, Sir, whether it is the Office of the Prime Minister or the Office of the Attorney-General or the Ministry of Economy or the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport or the Ministry of Health and Medical Services or the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, access for all Fijians is provided. Our staff are also available to

clients and customers who are not comfortable in entering elevators. We take our services to our people, no matter what we are required to do.

To conclude, Sir, the findings of the Report have identified some important areas of improvement, and it is acknowledged. But at the same time, we do say that the Report has failed to acknowledge the reforms and the changes that have been undertaken by the Fijian Government over the years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has worked on improving the standards of living for all Fijians. We will never deny anyone their rights.

Fiji, today is at a much better place than it was in over a decade ago. We will continue to work on the policies, regulations and initiatives that will enhance accessibility to public transport, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. N. NAIWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me this opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was very concerned by the contribution from the previous speaker, the honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, criticising the work of the Office of the Auditor-General, and it reflects badly on that side of the House. That is possibly the reason also that they want this independent body to be reviewed because this is the only truly independent body in this country that reveals the neglect and the bad management of that side of the House. And I think I know the reason why the honourable Minister has criticised the Report because he is one of the culprits identified in this Report.

The honourable Minister said that the inability of access to public transport is international and local. That is not the point raised by the Auditor-General's Report. The point is, he is asking why have you not as Minister for Transport legislated or if he has found that you have legislated, why have you not implemented that? He is the culprit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this reason, because I can tell you.

Today I caught the bus from 10 miles, unlike you Ministers who ride in your tinted vehicles and I was expecting as I climbed into the bus the facility for disabled people to put their walking sticks and I was expecting that the first three rows as he has stated or as he has legislated would have signage. It does not have that and that is the whole reason and the whole point that is raised by this Report. Why have you done nothing given that in 2010 you acknowledged this Convention and you ratified it in 2017; five years; or if you include 2010, ten years - done nothing. That is the whole point.

He also says that for improvement of legislation, you need to have data, but the Auditor-General is asking, why have you not gathered this data? Why has it taken you five to ten years to be looking for that data? This is what we are debating today, it gives a very bad and sad indictment on the Government side especially on its Minister and Prime Minister on the neglect of those 113,000 people correctly indicated in the report who constitute the disability. It is asking the Minister why have you not made the legislation? There are policies that are there, why have not this gone down to the legislation? Why in relation to the Land Transport Authority amendment is it not being implemented? Why is it that the requirements to look after the people with disabilities are not reflected in our building plans? Why is it that public houses and it cited Sigatoka very badly. Why are we not looking after those people?

It also cited the shipping services, why not have facilities to look after the people with disabilities in relation to the people who do shipping? These are the questions that the Auditor-

General is asking and is setting us, you signed that Convention in 2010, you ratified it in 2017 and you are still sitting on your backs; very unfortunate, because these people do not have any voice and it is reflected too in their budget.

The budget to look after people with disabilities, in 2017 was \$200,000, then in 2018 it was \$1.1 million and in 2019 to reflect your commitment to that, went back again to the old figures. So you should admit the irresponsibility and bad management. If I can refer now to the Chairman. He says, "These things, it is pleasing to note these, what the Government has done and these are in line with a committed and articulated development plan and the Government's pledge of leaving no one behind." But here it is, we have left them behind and he admits that in his Report on page 2 which states and I quote: "The Committee noted the audit findings and it requires serious considerations". It is admitting that the Government has done nothing here.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolute hogwash!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Government has done nothing as pointed out by the Auditor-General's Report.

(Chorus of interjections)

Let me tell you this, this is what he has found and after this I am hoping that the Minister responsible for Social Welfare will have her time to answer all these questions. In relation to legislation and policy framework, you know what it found?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- What?

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- One international and regional obligation incorporated in National Policy and Action Plans, several opportunities exist to improve but not done. Sir, 2010 - what is relevant about 2010?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- When was it ratified?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- You look at your legislation.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- When was it ratified?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Ratified in 2017. What have you done? Have you co-ordinated the legislation?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Have you amended the Tax Act to give incentive to those who employ people with disabilities? No.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Have you amended the Employment Regulation? No, you have done nothing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Sure, I tell that side, they have amended the Public Transport but implemented - no. It is pointed out here and as admitted by the Minister for Transport....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- There is no signage. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you go to any bus, you see the first three seats, you look for the sign, no sign there. Maybe because he does not catch the bus. So, what does he recommend in relation to the legislative framework? This is what he says and I quote, "... to ensure international and regional commitments captured in national policy and action plans are implemented on a timely manner, ensure that full assessment of achievement and policy document is carried out to allow improvement on disabilities" - this has not being done.

Secondly, enabling legislation on policies to access public transport. This is where the honourable Minister for Transport was talking from. Acknowledging that there were amendments made in the LTA Regulations 2015, this is what they said, "Nonetheless, lack of effective enforcement of legislation that aim to address barriers for disabled accessibilities." So yes, you made those amendments in 2015 but for what use because you have not enforced it. This is what the Auditor-General is saying and if I can go to the next point, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On LTA, its recommendation and it should work closely in relation to the implementation of this legislation and it goes on and on and on.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Honourable Premila Kumar said, "Goes on and on and on like me."

(Laughter)

But I am talking sense, I am teaching them, I am telling them you have not done anything.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- You passed this Convention in 2010 then 2017, five years now and it is still sitting down.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Nothing done.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- This is another question that should be asked to the honourable Minister for Social Welfare in relation to enabling legislation and possibility for accessibility to public offices. Here, it gave some very bad examples in the Sigatoka area. Its recommendation is, it should coordinate with stakeholders to ensure that timely review of legislation is carried out. And here again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is another problem in relation to the Report because it is only recommending this to NCPD. It should be recommending this to the Minister responsible because the legislation is the responsibility of the Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can go on to the next one, is the shareholder arrangement on engagements. The situation found while disability mainstreaming policies are in place at the national level, limitations at the implementation level is the problem because implementing agencies are not involved during initial consultation and formulation of policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will end there but to stress the point that the whole message here is that you have done nothing. Let me just add, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before coming here I contacted a lot...

(Chorus of interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, do not laugh because this is a serious matter. People with disability do not have a voice and unless people like me stand up here to speak for them, they will continue to do nothing. They only were interested in getting donations from the United Nations, UNDP and that is the reason why they formulated that, so that when they go to Geneva, they will say, "we are now implementing this Convention and we have been reviewed on it." Just because of the money because they do not have the money but if you come here, you will see that they have done absolutely nothing.

Mr. Speaker, these are the views of a few people with disabilities that I contacted before coming here. Their first concern is the reduction of government allocation and as I said in 2017, it was \$200,000 which then increased to \$1.1 million in 2017/2018 then after that, it went right down again to where it was before and that is a reflection of the commitment from that side of the House to people with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, in relation to the bus fare concessions, it used to be free before, it was much better. Now, with this Government ...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Who made it free?

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- It was \$40

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Who made it free?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Who made it free?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Then, without notice to them ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- ... it came down to \$20 then \$10. What use is that?

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Very poor!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- I last gave the example, for a person with disability from my village, it takes \$8 to come to Savusavu; you can only reach Savusavu, cannot go back with \$10. Shame, shame on you! They are asking, what has the Government done in relation to tax incentives for employers to employ people with disabilities? What have you done? Maybe the honourable Minister for Social Welfare will answer after this.

Then there is a need to review the laws to harmonise with the Disability Act, so honourable Minister for Social Welfare, why have you not reviewed the Disability Act of 2018. Why have you not looked at sections 77 and 84 of the Employment Relations Act to synergise it? Can the honourable Minister for Social Welfare tell the House why the National Building Code has not made infrastructures accessible? Why has it not been implemented into that?

HON. J. USAMATE.- They are being reviewed right now.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, happening now, we are now at the last lap.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Time! It takes time.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- In three months' time, they will be out.

It should have been done before and that is the whole point that I am saying. You acknowledged this in 2010, you ratified in 2018 and five years later in 2022, it is happening right now. Very soon they will be out and you go and complete that outside. So with that, Mr. Speaker, I urge that side of the House, do not give lip service to the plight of the people with disability.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee for their comprehensive Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be in compliance with the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2018 and the National Building Code, the new buildings and infrastructure built by municipal councils are disabled-friendly, despite honourable Niko Nawaikula with his favourite line that Government has done nothing.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Very poor!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2018 establish the requirements not to discriminate individuals with disabilities. As such, the municipal councils around the country have been collaborating with the NCPD in the area of awareness programmes and trainings. All NCPD organised programmes are fully supported by the municipal councils and council officers are part of the organised programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our towns and cities have grown rapidly in the last 10 years in terms of development. Our municipal councils have been involved in the construction of new facilities and infrastructure upgrades. These venues are focused to provide accessibilities and amenities for people with impairments. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are disability accesses in the municipal markets, the car parks and other public spaces owned by the municipal councils within the towns and cities and we do recognise more needs to be done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, considering that Government signed the Convention in 2010 and ratified it in 2017, in the short time, the Municipal Councils are recognising the rights of people with disabilities and it can be seen in some of the work they have already done.

The Councils are putting ramps and lifts in new municipal markets. Mr. Speaker, Sir, most municipal markets have provision for wheelchair ramps to allow appropriate disability access which are either inside the market or outside the market, connecting to the footpaths. You will find wheelchair ramps at Suva Market, Lami Market, Nausori Market, Namaka Market, Nadi Market, Rakiraki Market and Tavua Market.

Lifts in municipal markets, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the existing Namaka Market has a lift, the first one for a municipal market, and the proposed Savusavu Market and Levuka Market will have lifts to provide convenience to the users of the Markets. Municipal Council Buildings provide lifts as well, for example, Albert Park, Civic House, Civic Tower and Civic Auditorium.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are Council structures buildings that have provision for the wheelchair ramps, as I had mentioned earlier on, and these are at My Suva Park, Suva Civic House, Suva Civic Tower, Suva Civic Auditorium, Suva Olympic Pool, E-Hub Building in Ba, Labasa Civic Centre and Levuka Town Hall.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most washroom facilities owned by Municipal Councils are disabled-friendly and has access to wheelchairs as well. These facilities can be found at the following locations, in:

- Suva - Albert Park, Civic Tower, Civic House, Civic Auditorium, Sukuna Park, Olympic Pool, Suva City Library, Ram Laxhan Park, Samabula Public Convenience and Sukhu Park.
- Lami - Tika Ram Park.
- Nasinu - Laqere Market.
- Nausori - Nausori Main Market.
- Korovou - Restroom which was built recently.
- Sigatoka – Sigatoka Public Convenience;
- Nadi - Namaka Market and Nadi Market, Nadi Bus Station and Civic Centre.
- Lautoka - all public convenience, including the main market and Tavakubu Market.
- Rakiraki - Disabled-friendly wash facilities.
- Ba - Disabled-friendly wash facilities.
- Levuka - Disabled-friendly wash facilities.
- Labasa - Disabled-friendly wash facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you can see that a lot has been done in this area and I also want to now talk about the car parks. There are car parking spaces specifically marked for people with disabilities. Disabled car parking spaces are available at Laqere Market, Valelevu Market, Sigatoka Town, Namaka Market, Levuka Town Hall, Labasa Market, Labasa Civic Centre, MPI Car Park, Market Car Park, Foreshore Car Park, Central Car Park behind old Regal, and Civic Car Park.

In addition to these facilities, proper road markings and disabled signage have been placed on the footpaths around Suva, Lami and Sigatoka. This has been possible through consultations between Municipal Councils and FRA. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Municipal Councils and FRA are further collaborating to improve walkways in the town centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reiterate that all new Municipal Council projects undertaken are designed to be disabled-friendly. Municipal Councils have been tasked to provide simple access and facilities for people with disability, in accordance with the legislative requirements and the standard that we have.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to, once again, remind honourable Niko Nawaikula that he needs to move away from his favourite line, that ‘the Government is doing nothing and absolutely nothing’. I hope the list that I have presented will convince him that a lot has happened in a very short time, considering that the Government signed the Convention and ratified in 2017, and during that period we have achieved quite a bit.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a contribution, as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee, in support of the motion before this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I comment on the recommendations of the Committee in this Report, I would like to take this time to acknowledge the great support and guidance provided to me by the late *Turaga na Roko Tui Waimaro*, Ratu Peceli Ro Seru Tuisese, whose vision and leadership for his people span decades which included his service to Governments from the colonial era to post-Independent, especially in the Province of Naitasiri. The late Ro Seru is also known as someone who wore the Fijian Rugby Jersey when representing Fiji in the sport of rugby here in Fiji and abroad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the late Ro Seru Tuisese’s dedication to the *vanua* and the *lotu* will be remembered, and I will remain deeply indebted for it was under his solid leadership as the Chairman of the *Bose Vanua o Naitasiri* that my political career was endorsed and supported in the last eight years. His words of wisdom will continue to inspire me as I continue to serve our people of Naitasiri and this great nation of Fiji. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na Gone Turaga na Roko Tui Waimaro.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the recommendations of the Report that is debated before this House today. Sir, this Report was compiled by the Committee when there were COVID-19 safety restrictions in place and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts explored Standing Order 112(1)(b) to gather responses through the use of written responses from stakeholders, limiting the Committee to carry out its role fully in exploring this Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank the Government that the lifting of the curfew and some restrictions will allow the Committee to meet more than the normal current three days, to allow for proper deliberations with the stakeholders highlighted in the Office of the Auditor-General’s Report and, therefore, allows the Committee to properly scrutinise the Office of the Auditor-General’s Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as already been alluded to by previous speakers on both sides of the House, the rights of persons with disabilities is provided for under Section 42 of the 2013 Constitution. Fiji became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on 2nd June, 2010, and ratified it in 2017.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Performance Audit conducted by the Office of the Auditor-General is warranted to make an assessment on the progress made on the ground against the commitment by Government regarding the provision of accessing of mobility for persons with disability. On Recommendation No.1, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which states, and I quote:

“The National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) as a Government place entity, has been recommended to honour its international commitment through national policies, action plans, reliable data and adequate resources with its other national stakeholders.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report by the Office of the Auditor-General has highlighted that Fiji has been a signatory to a number of international and regional framework like the Beijing Proclamation and Agenda for Action, the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, the Biwako

Framework, the Incheon Strategy, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Office of the Auditor-General in its assessment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has noted that whilst there are international and regional obligations in place, there is not enough enforcement in place due to lack of institutional knowledge from staff within the enforcement and policy-making area, competing interests of implementing agencies, lack of resources, et cetera.

Perhaps, the Honourable Minister responsible for transport would take note of this, but the Committee noted that inquiries made by the Office of the Auditor-General into the achievements of the Fiji Human Rights Disability Action Plan developed by the Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission were not being facilitated as the Plan has been developed during the period the current Commission was not serving in office. Thus, the Plan according to the Commission, belonged to their predecessors, thus limiting their institutional memory and knowledge. So, there you go, Mr. Speaker, maybe the honourable Minister could be made aware by now that commitments to the disability had started way back before this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the comments by the Commission and perhaps, the honourable Attorney-General would come up with a commitment on the work of the Commission, is very worrying. The principle in any government setting is that, the retention of crucial knowledge emphasises the need for good documentation in data collection, to allow for those who will enter the institution at a later stage to not put to waste all the hard work done before them.

Whilst they may scoff at the work of those who preceded them in that office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to emphasise that the call made by their predecessors are Government endorsed policies of the time and must be respected for the time and resources spent to achieve those plans, Sir. Anything less is a waste of taxpayers' funds and an assault on the process of democracy and its governance principles that point to an abhorrent of the role of public policy and development.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current status of the Commission and their responses also highlights the need to ensure that staff retention is emphasised, and this is what this side of the House has always been voicing in this Parliament over the years. The short-term contracts in place by Government is a classic example of the poor institutional memory that will be experienced, not only for the Commission but also to other institutions of Government, and this has to be improved as institutions has been highlighted in the OAG's Report.

It also raises the question on whether the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS) recruited by this FijiFirst Government is achieving its intended purposes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I think there is a lot of improvement needed in this area.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Yes, very much.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- On Recommendation No. 2, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it states that the NCPD is also tasked to carryout periodic reviews of such commitments for the purpose of determining their continued relevance of local, regional and international realities on disability issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OAG has highlighted that it has noted the challenges in the actual execution and implementation of the disability policies which points to the lack of adequate and proper consultations undertaken with the relevant stakeholders, Ministries and Departments, NGOs, CSOs and, sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this trend seems to be continuing.

The OAG also emphasised the need to report on the achievements and progress over the period concerned on specific areas, such as the review of the National Building Code, formulation of the Code in Practice for Disabled Access to Buildings, et cetera. These accessibility audit will benchmark on the status of disability access in Fiji, which can reflect and include a review of public regulations, such as the Land Transport Authority (LTA) Public Service Vehicles Regulations 2015, which requires public service vehicle owners to ensure that their vehicle is user-friendly for persons with physical disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OAG has noted that whilst the amendment to the Land Transport Authority (PSV) Regulations was made in July 2015 through Legal Notice No. 66, the LTA and Department of Transport Management did not have the knowledge of these amendments, despite them knowing that some work was undertaken with regards to priority sitting in public service vehicles and line markings for disabled persons, as has already been alluded to by my colleague.

If what is said is indeed correct, Mr. Speaker, Sir, then someone again is sleeping on the job at the Land Transport Authority. It is the role of the Legal Unit to educate its board and at all times of any changes in the law that are being made that will impact them and I expect better from the Land Transport Authority. The same implementation audit can be done for airports and airlines which can determine their status on the accessibility structures in place for disabled people for their mobility, safety and travel in comfort.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reviews must be done in a timely manner and emphasis must be given to ensure compliance to the necessary infrastructure provisions. For maritime and air transportation, inclusion of disable accessible provisions is yet to be effected as already been alluded by my colleagues and consistent compliance to international commitments must be done to allow for the recognition of actual implementation to cater for this crucial sector of our domestic society as well as to external.

I would like to refer the Members of this side of the House to page 27 of the Report which significantly highlights the commitment and the work that has been done in terms of percentage for the respective areas in the Land Transport Authority and the Maritime Safety Authority and the airports and airlines which shows a minimal commitment in terms of percentage achievements for the respective institution, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what this Performance Audit is being recommended will achieve, is also the need for timely and effective consultation that are identified and already being highlighted by my colleagues to bridge the social gaps in our communities. The importance of the contribution of our people with disabilities must be appreciated and it is my firm opinion that when they are offered the proper facilities and amenities to assist them in their mobility, they will have much more to offer our nation in terms of economic, social and political contributions, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is thus incumbent for all necessary stakeholders especially our government supported institutions to do justice to the various policies that our people with disabilities deserve for today.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Report of the Auditor-General on the Performance Audit on the Access for Persons Living with Disabilities to public offices and public transport. I would also like to acknowledge the Standing Committee on Public Accounts Report on the review of the Performance Audit and the Access of Persons Living with Disabilities to public offices and public transport.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it should be noted that the Bill was passed in 2018 and the Performance Audit Report done by the Auditor-General's Office was done in 2019 so obviously this was a rushed

report. From the time this Report was published, a lot of progressive work has been done and it has been highlighted by the Members on this side.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- We must acknowledge work that is being done. No government, I must say, has made a budgetary line in the budget report on disability. I must also acknowledge the work done by the National Council of Persons Living with Disability, it is a statutory body, it has a budget on its own and it works closely with my Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have close to 113,000 people who fall within the disability group. While it is not possible to reach everyone, there are some unreported cases, the Ministry does reach out to the persons living with disability in many other forms. These two reports have highlighted the accessibility issues that organisations for persons with disability have been advocating for. The Report gives the Government a baseline on what is in existence. Of course, we must note what is in existence and the areas to be strengthened to ensure that the inclusion of persons with disability to fully participate without prejudice or discrimination as well as their ability to easily access public services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that you mentioned, it is very difficult to climb the steps of the buses. Most of the buses in the country are old and the new buses obviously have some provisions. I must say honourable Nawaikula you are not the only one who travels by bus. I have heard you say that so many times, I took the bus from here, we do that too. We have done it and we still do it. So let us not say that the Opposition takes the bus and the Government takes the vehicle. Let us not go there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since Fiji ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2017, the Government has been approaching disability on a twin-track approach. While we provide grants to make homes and immediate living spaces more accessible to persons as mentioned by the Minister for Local Government and other relevant ministries, we work in trying to get more comfort to our disabled persons. We provide disability grants, we have transport assistance, we provide economic empowerment to persons living with disability, school grants and a number of things that the Government has put in place. So to come here and say that nothing has been done to look after our disabled persons, let me say is hogwash. I learnt that from my honourable colleague.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NCPD had discussed with the auditors the gaps that existed in the Policy of 2008 and 2018. This was raised at the district level during the consultations on the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2018 and on the lack of awareness on the policy and implementation process. In order to bridge that, a five- year implementation plan was endorsed to help the NCPD with the stakeholders and other organisations that look after persons with disability to address these issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to address the recommendations in the Report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts 2021. Fiji has an accessibility policy that exists throughout relevant Government institutions. Again as mentioned by my colleagues from this side, however, as mentioned on Page 9 of the Auditor's Report, and I quote:

“While international and regional obligations are incorporated in national policy and action plan, several opportunities exist to improve efforts to implement them.”

The audit further elaborates on weak enforcement. This is due to lack of institutional knowledge within the enforcement and policy arm. I wish to inform this august House that objective

1.2 of the Implementation Plan for rights of persons living with disability reflect the need for institutional strengthening which includes:

1. Training on the Act - capacity building for the eight Disability Advisory Committees. We have 18 District Disability Committees and Council Members. This includes resourcing of activities through decentralising of disability services that are predominantly located in Suva and in no other district.
2. The reconstruction, operations and the opening of the Western Disability Centre, a couple of months back is going to decentralise the work in relation to disability in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the Fijian Government has agreed to these principles of Convention. These principles are further amplified on the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2018. In strengthening the recognition on the rights of persons with disability, Fiji has also began revising its policy to ensure our compliance to the ratified UN Convention. In addition, the budgetary processes which were included for organisations with persons with disability is part of that.

In 2017, the Fijian Government introduced an accessibility budget in all relevant ministries. For example, through the special schools which are now accessible as inclusive schools are slowly complying with that. But at present, reasonable accommodation is being practiced. For example, we have special schools and special schools have special grants. Special schools have a set of buildings which are accessible, and special schools have special grant. Special schools have certain buildings which are accessible to the students and these grants are more than what the normal school would have and this is used to buy assistive devices for the children. For example, if a class has a child with disability, he or she is supposed to be located at the bottom floor of the building.

These things are being progressively done and in 2017, representative organisations for persons with disabilities, for the first time, were invited to be part of the budget consultations. Reasonable accommodation was provided in which the honourable Minister for Economy with this team consulted with these organisations at the NCDP Complex. This ensured that people with disabilities, their voices were heard. We are happy to report that in the same year, as I mentioned earlier on, specific disability budget lines appeared in the national budget and that goes to show Fiji's commitment to Recommendation 3.1.

I wish to inform the august House, there is so much talk about public transport. The LTA has carried out awareness to respective public transport associations in relation to access to public transport for people with disabilities. Furthermore, LTA is conducting consultations including the industry impact assessment which was delayed due to the second wave of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a current requirement under the quality assurance maintenance system for buses indicates the allocation of priority seating in the first two rows dedicated to people with disabilities. You do not need a sign board, you do not need a sign, if you see a person on a wheel chair, with crutches or with some sort of supportive walking device entering the bus, I am sure we Fijians can do our part. Let us not look the other way because you have to give up your seat. Some of us do that, we look the other way. Let us provide all the assistance that we can do to these people.

I remember in 2015, I stand to be corrected, we started an initiative – *Show You Care Initiative* by the Ministry of Women. I think it is time to go back to that but again, as Fijians, I appeal to people, whenever you see a person with some form of disability and I think disabilities are quite conspicuous, we can give up our seat but I would encourage the buses to have those seats located.

The bus companies have been requested to adhere to this quality assurance maintenance system. However, there could be non-compliance issues but we can work with that to ensure that if we need to put the sign, well there has to be a sign, if it is not there, well we need to put it there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I can assure the august House that since tabling the Report of the Office of the Auditor-General, the Fijian Government, NCDP machinery, partners like Pacific Disability Forum, ESCAP, International Disability Alliance and all donor partners are all working together to improve accessibility issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry with our budgetary allocations and work with our partners is also helping out with wheelchairs and other assistive devices. I understand wheelchair is a very expensive commodity but we try to assist people when requests come to us and we will continue to do so. That is again a commitment by the Government through its budgetary allocation. Let me finish with the universal motto - Nothing About Us Without Us – symbolises the principle of participation and it has been by organisations of persons with disabilities in Fiji throughout the years to achieve the full participation and equalisation of opportunities for and by and with persons with disability.

Government, since ratification, has delivered on its promises to persons with disabilities. This includes the introduction of disability allowance, social and economic empowerment of persons with disabilities, grants to organisations for persons with disability, housing assistance for persons with disability, early childhood intervention funding to Frank Hilton organisation, sporting grants, grants to special organisations, special education and disability scholarships of higher education.

The Fijian Government is fully committed and we will continue to enable our public spaces and transport fully accessible in order to fulfil its commitment to an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based society for persons with disability. It is not right to come here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and talk all negative that the Government has not done this, not done that. We have a Government that is fully committed. In some areas, of course, where structures have already been built, getting owners to make sure that buildings are disability friendly, is going to take some time. But we are doing all that is in our capacity to make sure that we honour the international and local commitments that we have, and the rights of all persons is protected.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to say, “thank you very much” to the Committee for the Report, with just a few brief comments. Yes, absolutely, we all know that our Constitution protects the rights of people living with disabilities and we have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. We have heard today about the stakeholder involvement, stakeholder engagement, the consultations and the many, many meetings that have happened, both with the public and private sectors.

Having said that though, I would like to touch on very quickly on the question of access, and I would like to start right here in Parliament, Mr. Speaker. The access for people using wheelchairs up the stairs at the front of Parliament is not available, and there is no notice there for people who might like to come to their Parliament that access can be gained from going around the back, past the front door to the honourable Prime Minister’s Office. So, that might be something we could think about.

However, something close to my heart as well is rural access and maybe I will start from where I am from in Naitasiri, where a lot of us are forced to get on carriers. Buses are difficult enough and carriers are even worse. And to go to the maritime zone, I think one of the problems is that the second-hand vessels that are being brought in by ship-owners to be used as passenger vessels,

are just not disability friendly and to make them so, would mean a huge outlay for the ship-owners. So, this is just something perhaps, for MSAF to think about.

Please, indulge me, Mr. Speaker, I just want to digress very briefly and reply to honourable Koya and honourable Akbar, they might not remember that in the 2020-2021 National Budget, the Ministry of Housing's budget was cut and that resulted in Habitat for Humanity losing their \$0.5 million dollar grant. It meant at that time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it is still meaning that now, that people living with disabilities will continue to be prisoners in their own homes because of that lack of funding to NGOs, like Habitat for Humanity, because the simple changes cannot be made to their homes to allow them to have things such as, widened doors and levelling of floors so that wheelchairs can roll out. They also built purpose-built bathrooms. This brought dignity to people who are living with disabilities because they could take themselves to the bathroom and toilet.

Providing this assistance to families who live with disabilities also focusses on their carers and as we all know, they are mostly the women and young adults who are not able to live their lives normally because inevitably, the job of being a caregiver would fall on the shoulders of the women and older girls.

At that point in time, that NGO came across people living disabilities who had not even been out of their home for months but as I have said, Mr. Speaker, I would digress very briefly into the lives at home of people living with disabilities.

But, coming back, what is missing? I have heard enforcement is missing, information is missing, resourcing, finances, again, and I think very importantly, empathy is also missing. I would like to invite all honourable Members, if you have not been to the FNCDP Complex at 3 Brown Street in Suva, please, make an appointment and go and visit them. At this juncture, I would like to say thank you very much to the honourable Members of the Committee and those who made public submissions, and especially to the people at 3 Brown Street in Suva for all the work that they continue to do and, in fact, also to all members of the disability community around Fiji. *Vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a few points in respect of the comments in particular that have been made both, in the Report itself and those people who have contributed to this debate which is actually quite healthy in respect of picking out some of the matters pertaining to persons with disability.

I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to set the whole framework and actually for the first time, we have a Constitution that specifically recognises the rights of persons with disability. A specific provision in the Constitution - Section 42 and Honourable Leawere read that particular provision, I thank him for relying on the Constitution and also Section 26 which is the non-discriminatory provision in the Constitution.

I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from that actually then stems the whole ethos, the whole policy drive about what we should do in the disability space. So, we have seen, as highlighted by honourable Members on this side of Parliament, that we now have sign language interpreters for Parliamentary session, we see some of the new stations now having sign language and it has become more the norm than the exception, which never happened previously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just also remind honourable Members of Parliament that for the first time and one of the very few countries in the world where the Constitution actually is translated into the braille language - the English language and the iTaukei language is in the braille language. So, any person with disability, in particular, who cannot read and does not have eyesight can read the

Constitution itself. I think that in itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is very empowering and does send a very strong message.

A lot of the issues have, in fact, been highlighted but I fail to grasp the logic. Honourable Radrodro is very, sort of, lying focussed on one particular budget line item. As we have seen, for example, with women or youth groups, when we look at budgetary allocation, we need to look at it holistically. It not only rests with the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, it is the entire budget, and I would like to read that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the allocation for disability is, in fact, spread throughout a number of Ministries.

I will read the actuals for last year's Budget. We spent \$9 million through Allowance for Persons with Disability, and again, let me reiterate, never before in Fiji that persons with disability actually receive a monthly allowance - \$90. It is a modest sum. We would like to, of course, increase it but the fact is, it has been introduced for the first time and she knows that it was never done before.

Grants to Organisations for Persons with Disability - \$379,428.35 (I am talking about 2020-2021); Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities - \$4,000; Implementation on Rights of Person with Disabilities under the Disability Act - \$10,755; Fiji Council for Disabled Persons - \$416,567.57; Bus Fare Programme for Old/Disabled Persons (or Elderly Persons) - \$3.45 million; Western Disability Centre - did not exist in the West and a new one has been built and the completion for the last round was \$237,000. Overall cost is \$800,000.

Grant to Hilton Special School - Early Intervention - \$652,000. We have been giving them this grant since 2017-2018 and, in fact, more than \$652,000. Scholarship Schemes for Special Children or Special Need Students - \$194,000. We now have disabled blind students, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who actually are now graduates at university level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Grant to Special Schools - Special Education -\$772,930; Mental Health Awareness - \$17,331; Prosthetic Unit - \$46,579; Crutches - \$9,905; Fiji Albinism Awareness Programme -\$9,139. This was the actual spend which is \$15.15 million last year alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2016-2017 financial year, a total of \$62 million has been expended in this particular space. This year's Budget, we have \$18.9 million allocated for these respective areas. So, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it is very short-sightedness on the part of the Opposition to just look at one-line item. They need to look at it holistically as to what the spend is.

More specifically regarding this particular audit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point has been made that when you actually have a new law in place and then within one year, you want to look at your ability to perform under the law, in particular if you are going to address decades and decades, in fact, a hundred years of neglect of that particular sector, then obviously the audit does not carry much merit, so that is the point.

In the same way the Auditor-General, Mr. Speaker, Sir, did so with the SDG performance. Within one year of the announcement of the SDG, then they simply then said, "Alright, let us do an audit as to how we are performing under this", that is the point.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Nawaikula said that the Office of the Auditor-General is the only independent office. He does not actually acknowledge the fact that honourable Members of this Parliament, particularly from the other side, have attacked other independent organisations, including the Judiciary. So, suddenly it now suits them to say, "The OAG is the only independent body." This level of hypocrisy really should not exist, we would not have a good healthy debate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I wish to also make is that, with persons with disability and the honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport (I think) mentioned that when you look at disability, it is also about their ability to access income. Their ability to be mainstreamed into society.

In 2016, we started a 300 per cent tax deduction for any organisation or employer that employs a disabled person. If they employ them, they are able to claim a 300 per cent tax deduction on the salary that they paid them for the year. In 2019-2020, we increased it to 400 per cent, so we are encouraging employers to actually employ persons with disability. We need to look all of these holistically.

The honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation also highlighted the buses. Some of them are fairly old. We have reduced the duty, in fact, zero-rated duty so that bus companies can import newer buses with newer technology. In fact, most of the buses in Fiji are fairly high, as we all know, Sir, so now we have to do a retrofitting of those buses. The question is, someone needs to bear the cost and let me bring you a point.

Honourable Nawaikula said, “Disabled persons used to get the free bus fare.” He actually failed to mention, again, being disingenuous that in roundabout 2008-2009, when the world price of fuel escalated to about US\$145 a barrel, the bus companies which are all privately-owned in Fiji were clamouring for bus fare increase. At that time the Government then struck a deal with them, “Alright, we will increase the bus fare but you must make persons with disability to travel for free.” Even taxi companies or taxi owners agreed to carry them with a particular level of discount. That is how free bus fare started.

After a few years, the bus companies came back and said, “We no longer want to carry them for free.” That is when we started the bus fare voucher system. Then, of course, we have the e-ticketing cards for them. That is how we started so, again, he is not giving full information. That is how it started, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Then, of course, we had also asked them to carry people over the age of 65 years for free. They said, “No, we are not going to do that anymore”, so then we started the Bus Fare Subsidy for all the pensioners. That is what we did.

Yes, there has been some reduction in the transportation allowance that was given because of COVID-19. We were asked this in the Wainunu area, honourable Nawaikula, where you come from in that area. People actually asked, “Why has the bus fare allowance been reduced?” We explained to them why, and they actually understood more than you, honourable Nawaikula. They understood that, they appreciated the fact.

What they were also very complimentary about was the fact that now, disabled people and ordinary people can take advantage of the fact that through Fiji Roads Authority and the Ministry of Rural Development and the Commissioner’s Office, a number of crossings have not been only retrofitted but, in fact, completely replaced with new ones and they can now have better access to Savusavu and various other places.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I wish to also make is that, we have talked a lot about the Fiji Human Rights Commission, honourable Radrodro. Of course, Commissioners change and of course that knowledge transfer needs to be there and knowledge transfer does take place. And we have, if you see the Human Rights Commission used to be known only as the Human Rights Commission but it is now called as the Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission precisely for these reasons because we have seen tremendously throughout our history that persons

with disability have also been discriminated as have been women and other groups that have been on the margins.

We have allowed the Rapporteur on Albinism to come to Fiji, look at our policies, they have visited Fiji and looked at how we can improve our particular policies. The last point I wanted to make is that this specific report, I do not think the report actually makes a mention of the fact that public transportation in Fiji is privately owned. It is all privately owned. Government does not run those bus services, it is privately owned. We have seen in the past, particular bus companies take the latitude because they are the only bus operator in their particular area, decide not to run their bus service. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the hard core realities we have to deal with.

We are currently looking at, for example, how we can encourage more private sector players to in fact participate in our objective to ensure that we have access to transportation. We have announced that we are building a bus terminal for what we call the suburban terminal services in Valelevu. Work has already been tendered out. As we are talking to LTA, one of the requirements will be that the buses that will run in this area will be smaller buses but they must have the ability to have disabled persons board and off-board in a friendly manner, which requires that, the lower buses in fact it is a lot easier for them to lower the steps down so people with disability or people with wheelchairs can actually get on the buses because that is one of the requirements now, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, a lot of work in fact has been done behind the scenes and a lot of work is currently being done. I am sure if the Auditor-General wanted to look at performance, if the Auditor-General actually looked at the performance from the perspective of how much money has been allocated, we would have got a different report altogether. They know that within one year you cannot retrofit all the buses in Fiji - everybody knows that.

In the same way, they have not acknowledged the fact that now FRA has been doing it for the past few years, if you go down Suva now, a lot of the footpaths actually have a ramp. Before, they never had ramps, so if I am on a wheelchair, if I want to cross the road, I have to go with this bump. Now, most of them actually have a ramp. Of course, lot more needs to be done but there was a specific funding allocation as honourable Bala will tell you and Minister for Infrastructure where we said break down the cement, put a ramp. So, that is all being done because there is no point getting on the bus, when we get off the bus then you cannot access the footpath. A lot work in fact has been done and unfortunately the OAG once again has very miserably failed to take a holistic view of it. And also carried out an audit in a specific area where they know even beforehand your ability to comply with these standards will be very difficult to meet within one year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think we need to see the wood from the trees and that is, we need to look at the big picture. Of course lot more needs to be done and of course I am sure that maybe the LTA at certain times are not necessarily enforcing that but that in itself bags a moral question - here we are in Fiji, through the Minister for Transport put in place regulations to tell bus companies to make sure they carry disabled persons and make sure they reserve seats for them.

In many countries, the corporates themselves, the bus companies themselves will come up with their own policy. They will do it themselves but here we have to handhold every single thing. We have to tell them, make sure your bus driver stops otherwise it is an offence, make sure you keep the first two rows of the seats otherwise it is an offence, make sure you put a signage. So, we need to look at overall our attitude. Our attitude towards people with disabilities. Is it just here for us grandstand in this Parliament or is it about actual moral values in how we actually value these people and give them a particular right in the society. Honourable Minister Akbar said that. I think quite succinctly. That we ourselves need to change our attitudes too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Committee for its report and we hope that this not going to be a political football and the reality of the matter is that we need to address this area and there is progressive realisation of these rights and we have expended that much money and we indeed hope to do more so in the future. And by the way, many of us have actually been to Brown Street for many decades actually and we have been down to the Frank Hilton School too, so please let us not patronise us by saying, “Go down to Brown Street”, just because one person may have done one or two visits, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Chairperson for his right of reply.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all those who have actually contributed in a positive manner, it is a sensitive issue and we need to take it positively.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Chairperson. Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, we will now take our lunch break and resume at 3.00 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.01 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 3.05 p.m.

REVIEW REPORT - FIJI DEVELOPMENT BANK 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That the Parliament debates the Review of the Fiji Development Bank 2019 Annual Report which was tabled on 17th August, 2021.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs tabled its Review of the Fiji Development Bank 2019 Annual Report in August 2021 and commended the overall performance of the Fiji Development Bank (FDB), as well as acknowledged their contribution towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The FDB plays a pivotal role towards Fiji's economic development. This was evident in its 2019 Report as the bank's lending portfolio grew from \$539.75 million at the end of the financial year with the loan portfolio representing a customer base of 5,149 accounts. The Committee welcomed and commended recent initiatives and services, namely:

- Yaubula Term Deposit Facility;
- FDB Agriculture Loan Facility;
- Strategic Partnership in FDB;
- Ministry of Agriculture and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); and
- Matching Grant Support Scheme for SMEs, to promote market-oriented agriculture production for farmers in remote and rural areas.

The Committee extended its appreciation to the team at FDB for successfully executing its accreditation with the Green Climate Fund. This milestone brings potential for the bank to increase foreign investment in local climate change mitigation and adaptation projects.

Furthermore, the Committee was very pleased to note that the FDB dedicated a section of its report to include its progress towards achieving the SDG relevant to them. Such initiatives strongly reaffirms the bank's commitment towards fulfilling its goal. The Bnk also plays an important role towards increasing financial knowledge through the financial literacy initiatives as well as its community-based expositions and roadshows. This was evident through the outreach programme conducted during the period under review.

The Committee had concluded its report by stating the bank must continue to enhance its service delivery and must vigorously invest in research and development initiatives to maintain the competitive edge in the banking sector.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope you can see me from there.

MR. SPEAKER.- Very clearly, I can hear you as well.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I was kind of surprised when I walked in this morning to find that we were relegated from the front seat to the back seat. I was kind of wondering, Mr. Speaker, that probably you and the Government want to hide us away from the front but I can tell you Mr. Speaker, you will still be able to hear me and the Government will still be able to hear me.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- The Leader of the Opposition decides who sits where.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The Leader of the Opposition did not make the decision. Get your facts right!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the only thing they have, to discuss that. Let me, Mr. Speaker, also say that this morning there was this despicable, shameful attack by honourable Koya and honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum on the Auditor-General. Let me tell them, let me tell them ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No amount, no amount of attack on the Auditor-General ...

HON. V. NATH.- Point of Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my motion for debate was that the Parliament debates the Review of Fiji Development Bank 2019 Annual Report. Please!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Member should not waste Parliament's time, Mr. Speaker.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, I was saying that no amount of attack by both the honourable Members on the Auditor-General is going to hide the fact about their poor and disastrous economic and financial management in this country.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Coming back on the Report, Mr. Speaker, I see that honourable Vijay Nath talked about the Bank's lending portfolio growing to \$539.75 million at the end of the financial year with the loan portfolio representing a customer base of 5,149 accounts.

On page 6 of the 2019 Annual Report, Mr. Speaker, it shows a breakdown of this portfolio figure which talks about the non-focus sector and the value is listed as \$305.75 million and the focus sector is \$234 million. So, Mr. Speaker, the increase from 2018 to 2019 for the non-focus sector was \$39.68 million whereas the difference for the focus sector was only \$13.02 million. So, indeed the Bank's portfolio grew but not for the sectors that FDB should be focusing on.

The Committee does not highlight that because when you turn to page 39, the report highlights that there is 2008 realignment classified sectors into focus and non-focus sectors meant that most closely aligned with the bank's mission and vision is the focus sector. The sector that FDB

should be focusing on but is only doing so by a number of loans not the actual value. The non-focus sector comprises investment opportunities that are essentially commercial, corporate and essential for the long-term sustainability of the bank.

Now, Mr. Speaker, it is important to look at that particular information and relate that to the overall Government policy in terms of growing the economy. And what we have seen is a complete opposite of what has been happening in terms of the economic management in this country. And I want to highlight this, Mr. Speaker and this recent report which came out in November 2021, Fiji country classification by the Asian Development Bank should be a sober reading for all the honourable Members on the Government side because what this Report shows, Mr. Speaker, that well before COVID-19 we had forgotten about the real direction of the economy.

We did not focus on the real sectors of the economy and FDB's statistics shows that the Bank did not concentrate on the focus sector. So, we had poor economic management, poor economic policies, poor debt management, modest foreign direct investments and narrow base of the economy. The Report talks about the narrow base of the economy and this is what we have been saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this Parliament for the last seven years. Here is a Government which spent seven years borrowing and spending on sectors which did not allow us to grow as the real economy. Look at the sugar industry, look at the dairy industry, look at the forestry industry and look at the overall agriculture sector.

The honourable Minister for Agriculture is trying very hard these days, and I would like to commend him, at least he has brought back the focus. But imagine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the FDB had focused where their priority should have been, if Government had focused on the agriculture sector, if it had not destroyed the sugar industry, if we were still producing three million tonnes of cane, if we were still having the dairy industry that we used to have, Mr. Speaker, today, after the onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic on this country, we would not be in this kind of economic rummage that we have seen before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let me just read one or two paragraphs in this Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In fact, the FDB figures show that the growth rate between 2010 and 2020 average only 3.5 per cent. We used to hear this big song and dance about unprecedented growth and then we had this Bainimarama boom. Look at 2015, let me give you another statistics. From 2015 to 2019, the average growth rate was only 3.1 per cent, the so called Bainimarama boom that they were talking about. So, it is a modest growth based on unrelented borrowing and

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Hogwash.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Well, that is the only word he knows, Mr. Speaker, Sir, "hogwash", and I remember in the last session, while hogwashing, he meandered to Rwanda and Solomon Islands.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Hogwash.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, the fact is a bitter truth for them. The fact of the matter is that between 2015 and 2019, we had a modest growth of 3.1 per cent, a modest foreign investment, poverty rate increased slightly before COVID-19 and the Bank says it very clearly. Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir we have been downgraded from C to B. It is not like an economic grade where from C to B is an improvement. This shows that we are now a blended country classification, and in fact the Bank points out in this Report, they should all read this, that we were at the risk of debt distress

before the COVID-19 pandemic onslaught on this country. The reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why we are in this situation today is the type of example that you see coming from the FDB.

Let me talk about this \$200 million FDB COVID-19 Recovery Credit Guarantee Scheme, and I want to raise some questions here. I hope that honourable Koya, I am sure he will speak on this, should be able to answer. This \$200 million COVID-19 Recovery Guarantee Scheme, in my view, given FDB's mandate should have been on the focus sector. The question I want to ask because there are so many people who have come to us and sent us the letters from the FDB which gives them no reason why their loans were declined, and people are also telling me that those who applied in the first instance, they have all got whatever they applied for.

I am also told, Mr. Speaker, and I stand to be corrected and I want the honourable Minister to answer this question, that many of those who applied for that loan in the first instance were companies, businesses which had arrears with the bank even before the COVID pandemic. Now what does that mean? My question is, did the bank use this opportunity in dishing out these loans to those who had arrears before the COVID pandemic to actually clear its book on arrears? I have had so many calls and letters like this have been sent to me about why the bank is not giving the reason. It is absolutely important, in fact, Mr. Speaker, I would say to the Government, have an immediate audit, ask for an immediate audit of what transpired. What were the kind of businesses who got the support? Why did so many who were affected by the pandemic?

I had this young businessman from Lautoka (I do not want to name him here), he has been writing. He wrote to the honourable Attorney-General, I do not know whether he wrote to honourable Koya because he has not been given any reason why his loan was declined and his business was only affected after COVID-19. There were many other examples, Mr. Speaker, so maybe we should have an immediate audit because it is important for us to keep the bank focussed on the real sectors of the economy.

I know recently the honourable Minister for Agriculture in the press conference the other day emphasised about another scheme with the FDB is going to implement but it is important that they remain on the focus sector. It begs a bigger question, Mr. Speaker, and this is what I have said before that there are some good initiatives that Government comes up with. I can understand the objective and the idea but whether the implementation of those schemes are properly scrutinised and dealt with. This has been a problem with this Government that they have engaged in reckless borrowing and spending without making sure that we get the value for money.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Old record.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We must ask for value for money.

Mr. Speaker, may I repeat this again in this Parliament, my estimate of the wastage under this Government from 2015-2020 which I have followed in terms of the budget and projects, many of them remain uncompleted like the FNU Campus, Lautoka Swimming Pool, et cetera. My estimate is that on average about \$500 million per year from 2015-2020 had been wastage through pilferage, mismanagement and lack of value for money that has been given to build infrastructure.

If you put that together, it amounts to about \$3 billion in six years. If this Government has any shame, any sense of accountability and transparency, let us have an audit, an independent inquiry into the expenditure from 2015 to 2020 because it is absolutely important. According to this Report, we are going to go through a very, very difficult time in this country even if we get back to normalcy in terms of tourism, it is going to take us years before we get back to pre-pandemic level, economic situation and economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, we must make sure that the accountability that is required from the Government on everything possible is adhered to and made in a transparent and accountable manner. This loud mouthing of hogwash from the other side is not going to take away the truth of the matter. This is a constant threat.

Mr. Speaker, I remember the same Minister who is talking about hogwash was trying to threaten the people of this country with Rwanda and Solomon Islands. He must get his facts right and there are people out there who are only talking about Rabuka. These are people who do not talk about people who were sitting with them from 1987.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They were sitting with them from 1987, they were part of the game. So, instead of talking about the real issues which is where FDB should be going, where we should be going in terms of our policies for real economic sectors, these guys are trying to “hogwash” to use his term to frighten the people. They are already going, Mr. Speaker, Sir. One Minister in Ba, I am told went to a temple and said, “Do not leave this Government because if you leave this government you will be in trouble.” They are threatening people.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are threatening people, instead of talking about economic issues.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, instead of getting hold of a copy of this Report and reading about their Minister’s economic management, their Government’s economic management and all the cheer leaders from the other side must read this Report. They must read this Report because then, they will find what the state of the economic mismanagement in this country is.

Let me conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by saying that we need an immediate audit of the \$200 million COVID-19 Recovery Credit Grant Scheme to ensure that our future schemes by the Fiji Development Bank remains focused on those priority sectors. The honourable Minister for Agriculture is correct that the commercial banks are not willing to give loans to the farmers easily, those in the agriculture sector. Let us refocus FDB back to the real sector of the agriculture sector and put our money where our mouth is instead of bragging about how good our economic policies have been.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in contrast to honourable Prof. Biman Prasad, I join the Committee members - honourable Vijay Nath, honourable Veena Bhatnagar, honourable George Vegnathan, honourable Inosi Kuridrani and honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau in commending the overall performance of the Fiji Development Bank.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was the FDB which dealt with the issue in a financial market of what we call “Loan Pushing”. Loan Pushing is a phenomenon which refers to when a small group of financial institutions with substantial market power use their lending to raise

interest rates in a particular sector. Had it not been for the FDB, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would have had great problem in financially resourcing investors, commercial entrepreneurs in the agriculture sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, numbers testify to that. Of the overall lending to the agriculture sector in 2019, \$7 billion, one per cent went to agriculture sector from the commercial banks; only one per cent. It is the FDB which has been the hope for investors in the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of all the formal institutions and informal institutions which we can list down which has contributed to the growth and development of the agriculture sector, FDB stands tall. Majority of FDB's lending is to the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over time, FDB has looked at the agriculture sector and re-tweaked its products to meet the requirements of the agriculture investors. When one talks about the volume of lending in the Agriculture Sector and uses that to say that lending should have been more, my question is, what should be the benchmark? First of all, it is easy to say that lending by FDB of \$107 million in 2019 was not sufficient, there should have been more lending. My first question is, what should be the amount then that they should have lent? My second question is do they have an estimate of the demand for financial resources?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you go and read any financial lending literature, they talk about a borrowings ladder where in small developing countries in agrarian societies, when people need finance, first of all, they will use their finance. Then they will move to their close family members. Then they will move to relatives. So, getting loan from a financial institution (bank) is the last resort they tend to go. They generally tend to shy away from borrowing from the financial sector. In any developing country, any agrarian society, you will see that farmers and small and medium enterprises, generally tend to shy away from borrowing from a financial institution.

In Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a problem of farmers moving towards borrowing for their financial requirement from commercial banks or lending financial institutions. For that, Sir, this year the Ministry of Economy has allocated \$0.5 million for a first time ever special programme called, Commercial Farmers Equity where any farmer who would want to borrow from the FDB, Government through the Ministry of Agriculture will provide them 20 per cent equity contribution as grant. I must commend the leadership of the new CEO, Mr. Saud Minam, who is working very closely with them and a lot of activities are now happening. Wherever the Ministry of Agriculture is organising meetings and consultations with farmers, we have now and FDB Official also presenting their products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, we now have over time, looking at the needs of the farmers. The FDB has come up with new products to meet the status of the farmer. There are farmers in this country who do not have a formal title, but they are undertaking agriculture and no commercial bank would want to lend to them, but FDB is lending to them. New products have come up over time, and one of them is the Agriculture Family Loan Facility Mr. Speaker, Sir.

There are farmers who would want to borrow but they do not have any equity contribution. The FDB is loaning to them, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So under the Agriculture Family Loan facility, FDB is supporting family farms. There is agriculture value chain financing from the farm to the market in the component of the agriculture value chain. They could get finance for them from FDB.

We have got the FDB Development Loan Programme that supports farmers who have demonstrated experience in farming. There is a package that they offer only for land purchase, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Sometimes, commercial banks will say, "Look, if you purchase a land, we want to see immediately your returns", but it takes time for returns, particularly when you are into livestock or tree crop farming. So, there is a special loan package for that.

There are packages designed for specific commodities, for example, rice farming and bee farming, because these are different kinds of enterprises. Their financial in-flow would be different and, therefore, normal commercial banks would not want to lend to them because they would not want their repayment to get stuck. So, for development banks which is totally focussed on really partnering and developing the agriculture sector, these are the kind of products that we would want to see.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, I joined the Committee in saying that we must motivate the FDB for the enormous amount of work that they are doing. It is this partnership that have resulted in agriculture, for the first time ever in 2020, surpassing sugar exports by \$5 million. In 2020, sugar export earnings was \$100 million, non-sugar agricultural exports was \$106 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Initially, Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture was seen only in terms of feeding the entire country. Now, we have dual focus of the agriculture sector where:

1. we feed the entire country, service the requirements of demand from the tourism sector and other hospitality component; and
2. equally, we are putting emphasis on investing on those areas which are totally marketed towards export markets.

Now, in the Ministry, we are establishing these key high-value export commodities, appointing team leaders of this and totally targeting how we could assist them, ring-fence them and also get them to work with FDB so that we can develop and take advantage of this export market and have a good brand imagine of our products, for example, kava, ginger, turmeric, *duruka*, assorted vegetables in Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still are not able to fulfil the demand for most of these commodities. We need to be positive and optimistic and we need to support the institutions that are supporting agriculture rather than running them down without any factual evidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I want to commend the Committee for their Report and I want to commend the work that FDB is doing, particularly now, and the Ministry looks forward to work with them. Thank you.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to make a short contribution on the motion before the House. First, I want to thank the Committee for tabling its Report.

We have just heard the honourable Minister for Agriculture mention that we were satisfied with the overall performance of the FDB.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- The Report says.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Yes, that is right. We were satisfied with the overall performance of FDB, but that does not mean that FDB did very well - exceptionally well in their role as an autonomous institution to provide finance in the agriculture sector, commercial sector and industrial sector. It does not mean that they did well. No, there are areas that need to be rectified by FDB.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for too long, we have taken for granted that FDB was doing well on its role as clarified in the Fiji Development Bank Act. I just want to read the information that confirms FDB's role and its position in the development of our economy, and I quote:

“The Fiji Development Bank works with the mission, in accordance with FDB Act, to provide finance, financial and advisory services to assist in the economic development of Fiji, and in particular in the development of Agriculture, Commerce and Industry. It is an autonomous statutory body, the operations of which are controlled by the Board of Directors appointed by the Minister of Economy.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the position of FDB. Its role is to provide financial assistance for agriculture development, industry and commercial development. That is fine.

I just want to draw your attention to Recommendation No. 2 of the Report, and it says:

“The Committee acknowledges that the focussed sector portfolio is more closely aligned to the Bank’s Mission and Vision. The focused sector accounts comprise 79.55% of the FDB portfolio worth \$234m which represents an increase of \$13.02m whilst the non-focussed sector comprised 20.45% of the FDB portfolio worth \$305.75m. The Committee recommends that the Bank continues to enhance improvements to the focussed sectors contribution in value to the Bank’s total portfolio.”

So the Committee recommends to enhance and to do more, meaning that the Bank was not performing.

I will share with you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how I measure the performance of FDB. Let us look at the market share of agriculture. In 2015, agriculture represented 47 per cent of the market share; in 2017, it still remained at 47 per cent.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The portfolio, not a market share.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Market share of 47 per cent, you check your facts.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Who lend the other 53 per cent?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- It is here, which is the market share in the Annual Report. It is here.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- But, who lend the other 53 per cent?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Well, that is my question. That is what I am trying to drive at. A bank that gets the support of the Government ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Do not carry out the conversation between you two. Address the Chair.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- He is interrupting.

The agriculture market share remains stagnant over the years. Look at 2018, it is 58 per cent, although it has a slight increase. Back in 2019, look at the agriculture market share. It reduced to 53 per cent, he has not even read that report. So, what is he doing?

This also applies to all the resource-based Ministries, like the Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Fisheries and the Ministry of Forestry. They all are the same. There is not enough growth to impact our economy.

The honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport just mentioned that they managed to improve the standard of living. Look at this ADB Report, Fiji country classification. In 2017, the trend started to go down until 2019. So what are they talking about? Where is the growth? Where is that economic boom they are talking about? How can we improve the standard of living when the economy is going down? They cannot even increase the \$2.68 an hour minimum wage rate, which they promised to do in 2018, and that is the measure that we need to see to confirm whether we are having an economic growth or economic boom.

Look at our hospitals, it is right beside the honourable Minister for Health. He knows very well that our hospitals and health centres are in a mess.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Talk about FDB.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- This is the impact of FDB, the development of economic sectors, because there is no development and no improvement in the performance of providing finance to the relevant Ministry, and that is why we are all having these.

Look at the road conditions, it is the worst since Independence. You go down the Queen's Highway, you pass Korolevu, go down to Sigatoka, potholes are everywhere. You go to Nadi, you go past Namotomoto Village, Navoci Village, Nakavu Village and Saunaka Village, and that is the impact of FDB that it is supposed to be doing. That is what I am saying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though the FDB was doing well, it was not enough. All those honourable Ministers are not doing their jobs. I do not believe any of them has analysed this to know that they are not doing their jobs. If I was the Prime Minister, Sir, I would have sacked the Honourable Minister for Economy for appointing Boards that are not doing their jobs, I would sack the honourable Minister for Agriculture, I would sack the honourable Minister for Trade, and sorry, my senior old boy, I will have to sack you too for non-performance, Sir. They have been sleeping on the job with a high salary and doing nothing.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to say something and I think you might appreciate this. What comes across from the other side of the House, especially from the last two speakers from the Opposition and I am saying firstly the honourable Professor Prasad and honourable Kuridrani, I think they have this philosophy in their head which is called the scattergun philosophy. They have a whole load of bullets and you shoot anywhere you want and maybe, just maybe, Sir, just maybe it might stick but for them what happens is, it does not stick, Sir, and that philosophy does not work.

Just for a moment, Sir, I am not even sure if honourable Professor Prasad actually read the 2019 Annual Report. I am sure he did not because there is so much good stuff in here that it was not just this side of the House that signed off and then said it was a good thing, it was the other side of the House and then suddenly he has done a turncoat and decided to say something else. It is always the case, Sir, as I have said, scattergun philosophy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am actually flabbergasted at the comments made by honourable Professor Prasad. He spoke a little while ago and he said there is no growth, there is no stability in our economy, there is no literally everything. And I want to point something out to him, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I am sure the honourable Minister for Economy

HON. J. USAMATE.- Listen, listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You see this is what happens. When you start talking, it hurts him. I have not even said anything yet. It already hurts him. Sir, all they do is they have this doom and gloom prediction. Let me ask him a very pertinent question, Sir. Seven-and-a-half years, I have been in this House, Mr. Speaker, not one budget did this man ever come up with an alternative budget. Not once! Not once! Somebody outside of this House who has not even been in this House, he has ... well kudos to him but this gentleman who has been here eight years, Sir, has never come up with one iota of document to say this is an alternative budget. Never! Never and he still comes here, prophesises about all of these things and all he ever says is doom and gloom but what he fails to forget and these are simple things that the people of Fiji will realise, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He talks about economic problems that we are facing. He says, where is the growth? There is no growth. Let me remind him and I am not going to say this in the way the Minister for Economy will because that is his portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we all see in Fiji is we have actually had growth. We have had unprecedented growth which is actually nine years and because of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are a small country that lives in the Pacific Ocean, we have become one of the most respected countries in the Pacific Ocean because of our sound economic policies and because of that we have had people falling at the economy door wanting to lend money to us. I am sure they would not do it if our economic policies were bad, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is the whole reality of it, Sir.

We have had direct budget funding which we have never had, Mr. Speaker, Sir. All of this is because we have got sound economic policies. We have had growth right up to the pandemic and even during the pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have not run the economy into the ground. We have actually managed it really well. We have continued to pay our civil servants in full. Nobody in Fiji is suffering the way they make it out to suffer. It is not the truth. That is definitely not the truth and he knows that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I just wanted to say one small thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he said, “Oh we have forgotten about the sugar industry, FDB has done nothing.” The FDB gave the sugar industry an uplift in the tune of \$20 million in 2019. Go and read this and read it carefully. Do not ever come back and say that I should and go and question something because I read this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Committee on Economic Affairs for its assessment on the 2019 Report and I want to thank the Opposition Members who have actually supported it. Basically and I want to also congratulate the FDB board and management for producing an unqualified audit report for 2019.

Basically, in a nutshell, what he fails to realise again is that, this means that FDB’s financial statements were prepared in a true and fair manner according to the accounting principles and standards and from my perspective, Sir, from the Ministry’s perspective, being the bank for micro, small and medium enterprises and grassroots community, it actually gives me great pride and joy to know that a Fijian institution, our bank is financially sound Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wanted to comment also, specifically on recommendation five on the Standing Committee’s Report and that recommendation five states that the Committee is aware of the important role played by SMEs towards Fiji’s economic growth and

recommends the FDB to work with stakeholders such as MCTTT to develop lucrative packages to attract more youth to invest in modern agriculture through initiatives and YES. And I just wanted to also point out something else too honourable Professor Prasad and this is with respect to MSMEs and he says, ‘oh, what are we doing, somebody called him and said I have not received my loan,’ Mr. Speaker, and he is talking about somebody from Lautoka. Maybe, maybe, just maybe he should actually check.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of people, their loans were rejected just like any other loan in any other bank was rejected because they had bad loans in other institutions, so not everybody was going to get it. I think everybody understands that. That is a simple banking principle. The one that he is talking about, the one that he quotes from Lautoka, my home city, that applicant had loan in arrears in another institution, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is he saying? What is he saying? Is he saying that we should lend it to bad applicants? Banks do not do that, Sir. It is actually quite simple. Is he trying to say that we should turn the FDB into National Bank of Fiji (NBF) and turn it into a national disaster? That is what he is trying to say, is not it? And let me remind the people of Fiji, do not be fooled, do not be fooled, absolutely do not be fooled.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They know better.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, from the Ministry’s perspective, I can confirm that the Ministry has and will continue to partner with the FDB on the various programmes with respect to MSMEs and one another important part of our economy is the co-operatives and FDB in partnership with the Department of Co-operatives has actually provided support to sugarcane farmers unlike what he just said, who have actually formed co-operatives and financing to mechanise and modernise their farms. So, I do not where, he says get your facts correct. Your facts are incorrect. This is the correct facts.

The co-operatives have used the funding and purchased cane harvesters and other machinery for these farms and this actual model has worked well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. These farmers are able to harvest their sugarcane and also give it on hire to other farmers. There is additional income for these particular co-operatives and our co-operatives, they are doing extremely well. We have also partnered them with the FDB in terms of our micro and small grants for disbursements.

After that particular disbursement Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB now has 40,000 Micro and Small Business Grant (MSBG) people on the FDB database. That is a phenomenal database and what has happened since is some of those or quite a few of those MSBG recipients have been able to access further finance through the FDB after becoming part of the database and this is an indication of MSMEs graduating their business and thinking of a long-term sustainable future.

We have also partnered on our Northern Development Programme and FDB provides the equity funding to successful applicants who were then able to obtain loans through FDB and there have been major beneficiaries in this particular programme. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2019 we supported close to 120 recipients in paying out more than \$0.5 million and this has been another successful programme for MSMEs in the North. We have included FDB through the CEO in all our activities. They form a part of our Board and our grant programmes, the:

- Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES) Programme,
- National Export Strategy (NES) Programme,
- Integrated Human Resource Development Programme (IHRB), and
- Northern Development Programme (NDP) programmes.

As you can see, Mr. Speaker, the FDB has and is an integral part of our continual work including the Ministry of Agriculture particularly in providing access to finance for MSMEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want this august House to realise that many of these recipients, who were part of the Recovery Credit Guarantee Scheme, who were adversely affected by a natural disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic and the FijiFirst Government was not oblivious to this and this is why the Ministry through several other programmes is working closely with FDB to find avenues to assist Fijians to get back on their feet. We are going to FDB also, as we all know, Sir, is going through a transformational stage where they are redefining their strategies and it is focused on two main segments, that is agriculture and MSMEs which are the core to FDB.

It has been said time and time again, Sir, by the Opposition that by moving Government, we are actually moving Government services to a digital platform, we are leaving those in the regional maritime areas and MSMEs behind. We are not, Sir. It is interesting to know that FDB only provides their services through digital channels and their customers being the MSMEs mainly from the regional and maritime areas. So, they have embraced it well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The FDB like the FijiFirst Government continues to challenge the status quo and remain ahead of its time. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the time to contribute.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion on the FDB. Firstly, we would like to clarify that yes we are Members of the Committee and we do have an understanding of how the Committee works. We work together within. But at the same time, there is nothing in the Standing Committee which prevents us from also contributing at this stage when the report comes to the House. We do contribute in various ways and raise issues as we see from our perspective as Opposition Members.

The Report itself, Sir, I would like to reiterate the issue raised by the honourable Professor Prasad regarding the focal and non-focal sectors that is clearly pointed out on page 39. And let me read out the FDB Act, section 5 – ‘The functions of the Bank shall be to facilitate and stimulate development, promotion of natural resources, et cetera, transportation. In the discharge of its functions, the Bank shall give special consideration and priority to the economic development of the rural and agricultural sectors of the economy of Fiji’.

That is why if you look at the recommendations, that is what we are pointing out in recommendation two - the focal and non-focal sectors and the need for the focus sectors to be improved or enhanced and if you look at page 39 there, as mentioned by one of the previous speakers, let me just read it out - ‘The focus sector accounts comprise 79.55 per cent of the FDB portfolio and 43.35 per cent by value of the 4,096 accounts worth \$234.00 million as compared to the non-focus sector which is on the same page, 20.45 per cent of portfolio but 56.65 per cent of the value’, so that is the fundamental crux of the matter which we are raising and which is also pointed out there in recommendation two and in line with FDB Act, section 5 which is why the recommendation is there.

One of the concerns, as you note there, notable contributions in the non-focus sector are in wholesale, retail and hotels. And I raise at this point, Sir, the Pullman Resort, one of the reports from August, 2020 regarding the collapse of the Pullman Nadi Bay Resort. It states that it was a bold venture from the developers, Travel World Resorts Limited, a subsidiary of Gokal Group of Companies in support of Government’s drive for tourism. Gokals started with good intentions, the Pullman brand belongs to Accor Hotels and they manage the resort for Gokals, but inside are suggesting three contributing factors to the current situations:

1. Location – Pullman Nadi Bay Resort and Spa, five star hotel was built in the budget accommodation hub, Wailoaloa Beach area. There are a number of well-established such

operations as Aquarius, Smugglers Cove, Blue Water Lodge, Beachside Resort, et cetera which are also operating there and Pullman Nadi Bay guests were able to stroll there to eat and drink at budget established prices. It is good for tourists but bad for investors in expensive facilities in that area.

2. Cost overruns regarding this Resort – they had a lot of complications in the construction which led to cost overruns. It was a big development with quite a significant budget of initial \$80 million but had cost overruns in the construction that caused financial pain. Of course, the downturn in the economy - COVID-19. The primary financiers were FDB and HFC Bank and FDB advertised the mortgage and sale on this and I suppose the good news on this was that there is a report from November 2021 which indicates that there is a buyer or a buyer has been identified and bought already. That is the good thing about it.

In terms of whether FDB lost out, that is something which is not available but some questions which we can raise regarding this is, was the assessment done properly in terms of net cash flow, net operating income and revenue per available room. I mentioned the location, capitalisation rate, debt yield, total cost basis, business plan including various projections and of course risk analysis and mitigation.

Again, that is related to the issue raised on the focus and non-focal. I am pleased to say that the CEO has indicated that they might not be funding big projects like this currently or in the near future. There is also a major development which occurred during the period of this Report that is highlighted in page 70 titled “Green Banking” and this was regarding the approval of FDB, not only as an accredited Green Climate Fund (GCF) institution, but they also approve the US \$5million Fiji Agrophotovoltaic Project in Ovalau. Again this is a major development and unfortunately, maybe it has been affected by COVID-19 and it would be interesting to determine the status of this project to date.

One of the issues I would like to raise from here Sir, is one of the key offices in the accreditation of FDB has accredited institution of the Green Climate Fund was one of the key offices in that development in the compliance processes and development was Mr. Cakacaka. Unfortunately, he is not with the Bank now, he has been Acting CEO for quite a number of years, a senior officer there and I was wondering what the succession planning is within the Bank. That is an area of concern which we had raised not questioning the abilities or the experience of the current CEO, but the succession planning within where they could identify and nurture our local staff to reach the CEO level. Maybe that is another area which we need to focus on.

Another issue which had been raised during this period was the management of Micro Enterprises Grant by FDB. I think this a one-off but the feedback from the Bank was it took up a bit of their time in terms of space, et cetera. It is indicated there in page 114 as at 30th June, 2019, \$1.538 million were yet to be disbursed and thus payable to Government. These funds are payable at call as it is only provided by the Government to be distributed by way of grant to Small Micro Enterprises meeting certain criteria. I understand that this has been fully distributed, some of the questions we could raise, the monitoring and evaluation in place, who is monitoring these SMEs, how effective was this, how many successes or failures and what is the status of these projects from 2020 to 2022?

The other issue just to raise again today is from the Audit Report on Government Commercial Companies, again mentioning FDB. One of this relates to conflict of interest, so, if you look at Page 122, loans amounting to \$2.7 million, it states and I quote, “... were advanced to a company where a Director had a related party interest and are included in loans and advances. The loans were provided under normal terms and conditions.” So there is a case of conflict of interest mentioned there. This again is mentioned in the Audit Report 2019 but under FDB Nominees Limited, it states

and I quote: “The Directors of the Nominees who were employees of FDB agreed to invest \$279,000 in term deposits offered by FDB. We note that the Directors did not abstain from participating in the decision making to invest in FDB. In addition, conflict of interest was not declared and documented.”

The recommendation there was to strengthen good governance. Directors must declare any conflict of interest that arise in the course of business operations and exclude themselves from decisions relating to the conflict of interest. It also raises the issue of independent Board Member, stating that for good governance, it is imperative that Board composition should be balanced with at least 30 per cent to be independent and non-executive Directors; the company agreed with the recommendation.

Finally, on governance and oversight function, the Bank is governed by a Board appointed by the Minister under the Fiji Development Bank Act. It is not required to comply with the provisions of the Public Enterprise Act 2019 and Companies Act 2015. In addition there are no formal arrangements for the banks to be supervised by the Reserve Bank of Fiji. So, there is an agreement to work towards aligning the bank operations with the requirements of RBF, probably that has been progressed.

Those are the issues I thought I would raise today, Sir, and again I reiterate regarding the role of FDB. We do understand the importance of FDB to the economy and the role it plays and I would like to raise some of the issues which had been raised by this side of the House regarding the ADB Report. There has been a long debate about the economy and the honourable Attorney-General has mentioned that this side of the House has been spreading *lasulasu* and *jhooth*. It is interesting because we also think that you are *lasulasu* and *jhooth*. But I think when we are arguing that way, it would be good to look at independent reports as mentioned by honourable Professor Prasad which has clearly stated some of the issues on public debt, the national income, the poverty rate and it is clearly stated there the status we are in. I am not sure what the honourable Minister for Economy is basing his assessment on including that this year we will have about 11 per cent growth.

Just on the debt, if you look at the average debt to GDP under Rabuka from 1992 to 1998 it was 24 per cent, Qarase was 29 per cent, Bainimarama from 2006 to 2019 was 44 per cent and Bainimarama, again, from 2020 to 2021 was 78 per cent, and it is going onto 90 per cent.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- So again, Sir, what I would like to reiterate is, sure you can call us *jhooth* and *lasulasu* and we will call you that, but the only ratification for that are international reports and this is provided by ADB for the population to make their conclusion.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution to the motion on the floor. First of all, I wish to commend the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) as they continue to introduce innovative products to empower Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2019, farmers who had previously lacked access to finance due to the absence of a formal land title to put forth as collateral to obtain loans from banks can now take advantage of the one of its kind FDB - agriculture family loan facility. The facility is an innovative and tailor made financial solution that provides access to finance to those farming for 10 years or more and who do not have a formal land title.

In breaking the barrier to accessing finance, this facility focuses on the growth of farming families by providing finance for land development on the farm, construction of farm house and infrastructure such as farming roads, water supply and irrigation or renewable energy to support the

farm. This product has benefitted many farming families, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and FDB is commended for their great work in empowering our farmers. I urge farmers to take opportunities created for them and progress in their ventures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the honourable Minister for Agriculture's genuine contribution and assistance towards our farmers. The honourable Minister and his Ministry have been at the forefront of empowering our farmers, their valuable support and successful partnerships with industry stakeholders, such as FDB, indeed is commendable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a statement made last month by the honourable Acting Prime Minister, we learnt that, I quote:

“Despite everything the pandemic threw at our farmers, we exported more in agriculture produce in 2020 than any year of Fijian history, crossing the hundred million mark in fresh and cheap produce for the first time in history.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a remarkable testimony of not only the resilience of our farmers, but this also speaks volumes about the successful mechanisms put in place by the Government and relevant stakeholders in providing a strong and stable support system for our farmers, of which the FDB is a major partner. I congratulate all farmers and industry stakeholders for this splendid achievement.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir it was also pleasing to note that the Bank significantly expanded its portfolio through extensive outreach programmes to its customers and by providing innovative business solutions and products. Financial literacy is such an important tool and the fact that it remained a key strategic focus for the Bank is very encouraging, especially through programmes such as *Money Smart* series introduced by the Bank to inculcate a savings culture in children. I would like to take this time to congratulate the Bank for executing its accreditation with the Green Climate Fund in 2018 as this major milestone will allow the Bank to increase foreign investment in local climate change mitigation and adaptation projects. Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge farmers to take opportunities created for them to progress in their ventures and I wish FDB well.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a few points to clarify, I would like to thank the Committee for the Report. A number of issues have been raised on the floor of Parliament regarding the FDB Report, but of course, as usual, there has been a digression into other areas of the economy. Let me put to rest that the figures that had been quoted by honourable Professor Prasad, I did not have the pleasure of listening to his entire speech, but some may perhaps, it was a good thing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I heard honourable Tuisawau. The reality of the matter is that the debt figures, he quoted the ADB Report - ADB did not question the economic projections that we have said it publicly; the ADB Report did not question the nine years of growth and the ADB did not question the debt figures. None of that is the Report. In fact, as we did similarly with the World Bank, we have highlighted to the ADB for a number of years that Fiji should be entitled to concessional loans because of our vulnerability to climate change. We knocked on the doors of World Bank for about three to four years and they finally gave us concessional loan. We have seen that this weather is wroughting upon us at the moment. Last week, there was flood. The FRA is telling us that there have been landslides, roads have actually been washed away, approaches to bridges have gone, crossings have gone and this is primarily because of climatic change. *TC Winston* wiped off one-third of the value of our GDP in 36 hours.

Sir, we have had 13 cyclones since 2016. Coupled with the fact that we are a developing country, we were classified as a middle-income country. Our argument with them is that, you cannot say to us, “You are not entitled to concessional financing because you are a middle-income country”, because we are the coalface of climate change, and climate change is not our doing.

Our carbon footprint is almost negligible. It is the highly industrialised countries that have caused the rise in carbon. They are the ones that have caused climate change and, therefore, we at a very least should be entitled to concessional financing. That is what the Report is about.

Honourable Professor Prasad, Mr. Wadan Narsey, Mr. Richard Naidu and Mr. Savenaca Narube have all jumped on this bandwagon and are essentially trying to say, “Well, all of these figures show that the economy is not doing well.” But none of the reports, ADB has not questioned the debt levels that we have stated. They have not questioned that. Despite the fact that we provide clarification three or four days ago, we still have the *Fiji Times* giving prominence to these people printing lies, and they are the *lasulasu*. We can back what we say with facts and figures - independently verified and published on the website, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, this is the type of shenanigan that is taking place.

Unfortunately, as we have said in the past, for political ascendancy, they will try and undermine our economy just so Government can look bad but in the process, they are undermining the economy. They are seeking to undermine confidence in investors, and a result of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to say to the ordinary Fijians, that they are also trying to stop you from getting jobs, from increasing your livelihoods, from getting people out of unemployment, from making sure that young people - graduates who are looking for jobs, do not actually get jobs. That is what they are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is quite incredulous. Honourable Kuridrani, as usual, went on his diatribe. But the fact of the matter is, they are equating and saying, “FDB is fantastic before.” I can talk about EMCOL. What happened to EMCOL? What happened to all the other loans that were given? What happened to all the write-offs by FDB? They did not talk about that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad is talking about someone in Lautoka, and as rightly pointed out earlier on, you cannot give loan just because you have this \$200 million facility - a question which I will answer later on asked by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Just because you have a \$200 million loan facility, it does not mean you give out loans willy-nilly. You do not give out loans willy-nilly, you need to be able to give it to people who you know they can pay or they need a helping hand. He used some incident from Lautoka to justify that. Completely irresponsible, Mr. Speaker, Sir! I think what he wants to do is for us to go down the NBF road. So that was what happened in the NBF.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- His piped piper who is following Rabuka, that is what he is doing. Under Rabuka’s Prime Ministership, the National Bank of Fiji lost over \$200 million. He had what we called the good bank and the bad bank. The NBF was then sold off to Colonial. I worked for Colonial, Mr. Speaker Sir, and I know what used to happen in the NBF. Crop liens were given

by NBF, then Colonial stopped giving crop liens because they want to phase it out. So, where does the burden fall on? Fiji Development Bank.

As we have said in Parliament previously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the fundamental reasons why agriculture has not reached large commercial proportions in this country is because of the laws we had previously where you can get lease terms for 99 years - tourism, commercial, residential, industrial, but not for agriculture which is 30-year lease, for political reasons. This is why no commercial bank would lend and would use the land as collateral. Honourable Kuridrani, listen, you will learn!

This is why no commercial bank would lend and use agriculture land as collateral. This is why you do not have large scale mechanisation. We have now sugarcane harvesters coming in, which the Government contributes and they get a loan from FDB.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am personally involved with this landowning unit in Nadi where there is enormous collaboration, as the honourable Minister for Agriculture had highlighted, where the Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Co-operatives, the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport and FDB are working together so that they can buy things like tractors, et cetera. That is what is happening at the grassroots level, and they are using their lease monies as their repayment, which is being used as collateral. So, these are a lot of things that are taking place. However, that is one of the fundamental reasons why we do not have investment in the agriculture sector, and FDB is left to pick up the pieces.

In here, they have the audacity to come and run-down FDB. Every year, since we have been presenting the Government Guarantee on FDB, they voted against it, and then they ask, why is FDB not doing anything good about it?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- This is the level of hypocrisy!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other thing that was quite interesting and, in fact, quite astonishing is that, they are comparing the growth in FDB's agriculture portfolio with the overall economic growth, as if agriculture is the only sector that contributes to the economy. Of course, there are other sectors - there is sugar, there is manufacturing, there is now ITC services, there is financial services, there is garment industry and there is tourism. We have people in the Opposition saying, "Well, because this is the portfolio of agriculture, therefore, the economy must be doing favourably." That is such a fundamental illogical statement. Any basic person who understands economics in high school will tell you that.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I wanted to make is that, they talked about the non-focused sectors. Again, a lack of fundamental understanding. Non-focussed sectors actually provide what we call, cross-subsidisation of interest rates. So, when private companies borrow, they pay much higher interest rates - some of them pay 12 per cent, some 11 per cent. What do the farmers pay? Some pay 3 per cent, 4 per cent, some even lower because Government subsidises it. That is how FDB funds itself with the Government Guarantee. They go out into the market and they raise funds. It is not a commercial bank, they do not accept deposits to which they can then lend on to other people. It is a fundamental basic understanding of how the banking system works, and they do not mention that at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just very quickly, one other point that was highlighted was that the Bank's total operating revenue recorded a growth of 5 per cent, while its main income stream interest income increased from \$32 million in 2018 to \$36 million in 2019. That is a growth of 10 per cent, which is largely due to the growth in the Bank's overall loan portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as at 30th June, 2021, the Bank's total operating revenue recorded a growth of 24 per cent, when compared to the 2019 financial year and its main income stream interest income increased by 26 per cent in 2021 when compared to the 2019 financial year, which also attributed to the growth of the Bank's overall loan portfolio. The total asset base was recorded at \$546 million, a 17 per cent increase from 2018 financial year, while total liabilities also increased to \$373 million, an increase of 21 per cent from the 2018 financial year. Shareholders equity also increased slightly by 9 per cent to \$172.3 million in 2019, from \$158 million in the 2018 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FDB now, of course, has embarked on this huge digital platform. We have people who borrow money of less than \$5,000 and now the funds can actually be disbursed through MPAiSA and Money Wallet. It is very easy for the farmers. Most of the applications (not all of them), in fact, are done online. A lot of the farmers can apply through that platform.

A number of initiatives have been put in place, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we would like to also acknowledge the work that has been done. As the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment has said, we have seen a breath of fresh air, a commercial (sort of) nous that has now been injected into FDB through the new CEO, and we have seen that a lot more efficiency has been gained through this new type of management style.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FDB, of course, plays a critical role, as honourable Bhatnagar also highlighted. For example, the Agrophotovoltaic Project in Bureta, Ovalau, will yield a lot for the people living in Bureta. It will not only provide electricity to the grid at Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) which has always struggled and they always use fossil fuels, but this would also provide renewable energy now, and at the same time provide agricultural opportunities for the people living in that area.

So, FDB is not only giving directly to farmers but also using the funding. It has got accreditation now by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) of up to \$10 million. The FDB is now looking at accessing up to \$50 million. There are various loops you have to jump through to be able to qualify for that, so they have qualified for the first tranche of \$10 million, and they are looking at \$50 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to urge all honourable Members to, please, take a close read of the Report itself. Of course, honourable Tuisawau highlighted some issues like Pullman, and I am happy to say that they have sold Pullman. In fact, we were quite concerned because of COVID-19, you would think that they would get what we call a 'firehouse sale', but they have almost got what they wanted. So, even in COVID times, they were able to get a good pricing for that and, of course, some of these things do go belly up sometimes. This is normal part and parcel of the banks but, of course, if it becomes a routine thing, then it is problematic.

I think we need to be able to ensure that there is a lot of prudence that is built into the system, and we can safely say that because we have got commercial experience now coming in, you will see a lot more robustness in the way that the Bank carries out its functions.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Acting Prime Minister for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to speak in Reply.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all those honourable Members who have put up a good and some solid contributions to the debate, and I do not have any further contribution, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, time moves on. For the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- I move under Standing Order 6:

That so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly under Schedule 2, we still have two Motions and on Schedule 3, we have the eight Oral Questions and two Written Questions, thus the request for Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. in order to have today's agenda completed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the Motion. Does anyone wishing to take the floor at this time?

Since no one wishes to take the floor, I call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in Reply, if any.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- On that note, we will move on to the next agenda item and before we do that, we will take a break for half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.30 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.59 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I am allowing the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, the honourable Jale Sigarara to move this motion on behalf of the Chairperson. I now call on the honourable Jale Sigarara to move the motion. You have the floor.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF LANDS AND MINERAL RESOURCES AUGUST 2016–JULY 2017 & AUGUST 2017-JULY 2018 REPORTS

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Consolidated Annual Reports for the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources August 2016-July 2017 and August 2017-July 2018, which were tabled on 17th August, 2021.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, I beg to second the motion.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I take this opportunity to speak on the motion with regards to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources Review Report of the Consolidated Annual Reports for the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources August 2016-July 2017 and August 2017-July 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Committee, I commend the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources for the satisfactory performance shown during this period. The Committee acknowledges the commitment of the former staff of the Ministry, the leadership provided during the years and their contribution towards the completion of the Ministry's achievements on the targeted output areas. The Committee noted that the backlog of the Annual Reports of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, yet, valued the consistent performance of the Ministry during the period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Members noted that the Ministry embarked on a journey that linked its activities and programmes to the Peoples Charter for Change, Peace and Progress. One of the highlights of the Ministry, it recorded a few sound achievements through the two departments on a range of activities. One of the major achievements of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources was the alignment to the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji for conducting substantial consultations on progress to the determination of the fair share of mineral royalty. Purposefully to the landowners of Nawailevu in the province of Bua, a certain percentage of royalty has been paid out to the rightful landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the right of landowners to fair share or for mineral royalties was distinguished under the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji Section 30, as the first of its kind, the fair share of the Mineral Royalties Bill was passed in Parliament on 16th May, 2018 and was gazetted on 18th May, 2021. This allowed for an 80:20 fair share that is the respective landowners are entitled to 80 per cent of royalty payments where the Government retains 20 per cent for administration costs. The beneficiaries to this will be the landowning units as well as landowners of freehold land where extraction of minerals take place.

Additionally, a few other achievements of the Ministry for the same period was facilitated around 78 prospecting licenses, drilled a total of 31 boreholes for which 20 were successful, hence accomplished a 65 per cent success rate, 11 boreholes were reticulated and the relocation of

assessment of about 28 villages which were greatly affected by *TC Winston* and was prioritised by the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO). Overall, the Department independently carried out their own responsibilities of the diverse communities they served.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also wishes to acknowledge the current leadership of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources that continues to strategize and align its key output activities and programmes towards the National Development Plan. The Committee considers necessary that the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources ensures implementing the few recommendations put forth by the Committee for improvement.

Finally, I commend the effort of the Committee Members in the completion of the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources July 2016-August 2017 and August 2017-July 2018 Annual Reports. My appreciation to the Ministry's executives for their timely contribution in the completion of this bipartisan Committee Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, as a Member moving the motion on this Report, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. I also rise to make some contributions on the motion before Parliament. At the outset, I would like to thank the Acting Chairperson, honourable Sigarara and his Committee for the Report that has been presented. At the same time, I just want to quickly focus on two particular areas of the recommendations, especially to do with recommendation one. The recommendation from the Committee is that they are of the view that it is time to review the State Lands Act and instead of pegging the rent on the Unimproved Capital Value (UCV), they prefer to go straight to market rental. I view that as a very bold recommendation, Sir, given that how rent has been assessed all these years based on UCV, now they want to go to full market rental.

It is quite a challenge but I hope they now have the capacity to deal with this quite a hectic work of analysing sales and rental or like with like and be able to come up with enough data to guide them in the way they peg rental to reflect market rental. At the same time, this is not only to do with the annual rent but I would like to remind the Government that there are other things such as the rating of municipalities. That is also based on the UCV of the land. How those would be considered together with the pegging of rental is certainly something that we on this side of the House would be looking forward to, especially when you have strata titles now and how the rent is going to be pegged on strata titles? Those are the challenges that we on this side of House feel that recommendation no. 1 is certainly a challenging one.

The second recommendation that we would like to bring to the attention of this august House, Sir, is the one on the reduction in rental arrears. If I am to refer you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to copies of the reports especially in the conclusion or to go back to recommendation no. 4, it states that the Committee would like to recommend stringent measures to be undertaken so as to reduce rental arrears which now stands at \$20 million. It is quite a huge amount.

The reporting period, as highlighted by the Deputy Chairperson, only covers 2016 to 2018. The annual rent, Sir, as indicated in the conclusion of their recommendations, the annual rent rose from within the reporting period from \$4.8 million to \$8.3 million and that is income from about 18,000 leases.

Sir, when one takes a snapshot at the \$20 million in relation to the number of leases or the annual rent that is generated by the 18,000 leases, it does not reflect well, Sir, because here we only

have \$8.3 million as the annual rent yet the arrears are \$20 million. It needs a lot of explanation from the Government on this. The reporting period should not generate that kind of arrears. When we say arrears, Sir, I have already highlighted this in this August House as to how the Ministry of Lands calculate the arrears because as we understand leases are contracts. There are conditions for the lessor to observe and as well as the lessee. For rental, the assessments, they are usually pegged on an annual basis, Sir, rental per annum. That is in the contract.

But, the mode of payment, Sir, is twice in a year, January and July. So, I feel that this \$20 million in arrears to me or for us on this side of the House is quite fictitious because it does not reflect well with the reporting period and the annual rental that the Ministry generates. It is only \$8 million a year. So, for \$20 million we on this side of the House would like to advise the Government, maybe it is time that they relook at this arrears situation again because it is too much.

There are two issues involved here, Sir, rental owing and rental arrears. So, with the mode of payment from January to July every year, each tenant is supposed to pay their full rental at the end of the year. When no rent is being received at the end of the year then that becomes arrears whereas when you missed your payment in January and then you have another payment in July, we on this side of the House term that as rental owing, so if we take away the amount owing between the two periods of the mode of payment, the rental arrears should be very low, Sir.

I find this quite interesting because when we were in Government, rental arrears in the lands used to run over \$10 million only but now it is \$20 million. The only observation that we would like to offer here, Sir, maybe if it is possible for the Ministry to relook as how the rental arrears has been calculated and is now showing a \$20 million amount. This is rent that has already been earned under contract and it looks like to service this \$20 million to recoup this \$20 million, more money will need to be used to get back this money that has already been earned contract wise.

That is the situation that the Ministry is in right now because they are trying to find ways to recover this \$20 million, maybe as a suggestion from this side of the House, they relook at what really is rent owing and what is rental areas. Maybe that should help in the reduction of the \$20 million that they are trying to address here. I thank you for the opportunity, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to speak specifically on the minerals. It is timely that we debate this Report as we emerged out of the pandemic, we need to charter our way forward especially in areas of the economy.

This Report, in my view, is very timely as we look at the resource sector and what they can contribute to the economy. I would ask, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry look at the potential for minerals in Fiji and put a dollar value to it. I say this because we know and it has been confirmed by the ADB that our economy is narrow based. We have always relied on tourism and we know what happened during the pandemic, how tourism virtually dried up and impacting on the economy of the country.

We had very little to fall back on, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is why it is incumbent upon us to start looking at other sectors of the economy and I would like to see that we look at the resources sector very very seriously. Over the last couple of days I was speaking with a friend from Australia, and he had moved from Sydney to Armidale and I asked him what is happening? He said, "oh, it is mining. I am working at a mine now in Armidale. He said that in Australia, the mines or the minerals are driving the economy of Australia.

They contribute to 10 per cent of the GDP and the exports on minerals from Australia is about \$150 billion a year. I know we are not in the same scale but we also have minerals in this country which properly developed can contribute to our GDP in a bigger way. The last I saw was that minerals contributing to our GDP is about 1.1 per cent. We should do better than that, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I have always asked that we convene an economic summit. As I said we are coming out of the pandemic. We have this ADB policy paper which is very depressing reading, but I would behove us to look into developing other sectors of the economy. I was a little confused by the honourable Minister for Economy, he appears to be suggesting that this Report should not be taken seriously by us.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Never said that.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- What it says is very clear and touching on some areas where in my view, we were misled by the Government. What it shows here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that between 2010 and 2019, the growth rate for Fiji was averaging at 3.3 per cent. You ask the question, did we not have a Banimarama boom during that period? Did we really have a boom? We always said at that time that all this boom is not true; we have always said that. And here is the ADB confirming just that.

The ADB goes on to say that the economy was driven by borrowing and public spending. I cannot understand with all that huge borrowing and public spending, the average growth was only 3.3 per cent each year; it should have been higher. So I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have been saying all along that the economy could have been managed better. We are seeing the results of that today and that is why I call again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, immediately to have an Economic Summit.

Our debt is now 91.6 per cent of GDP. That is being forecasted by the Government. We would like to see a sense of urgency on how to repay this debt. We grant it that we are coming out of COVID-19 but there must be a sense of urgency on how to repay our debt. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I call for hands across the aisle and get everyone together, an Economic Summit and chart the way forward on how to grow the economy and also repay the debts. I do a lot of visitations to the settlements and villages and it is amazing how the ordinary Fijians are saying, what is happening with our debt, as in our dialect, “*E vakacava tiko na dinau?*” They know about the dinau, they know about the debts.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you say “*lasulasu*”, you have been saying that you have had all these unprecedented growth on 3.3 per cent...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The way we were told, Mr. Speaker, it was double digit growth all these years. Now we know, they were all false and we have been saying that all along. Someone there came up, he was the CEO for the Bureau of Statistics, he highlighted the poverty in this country and he got fired. He was trying to tell us the truth, the facts which did not correlate to a boom. He was saying, “Look, a huge segment of the people are living in poverty.”

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to get serious, we need to get down to this, map out the way forward on how to recover the economy and the resource sector is a huge sector to help with the economy. I believe the time is right. The Reserve Bank of Fiji says there is a \$2 billion liquidity in the banking system. The foreign reserve is \$3 billion, it is time to sit together and map out a way forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government should not bury its head in the sand as has been known to do and face up to the facts that things are not well in the economy. That is the truth of the matter that we need to consider this as an important part of the economy and the resource sector to be an area of focus for everyone in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just from the Report, the Ministry needs to be properly resourced. A lot of professionals are leaving, they have found better opportunities elsewhere and we understand that they are demotivated, there is lack of appreciation hence the departure from the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for instance, only six technical staff are monitoring 79 gravel extractors. This is where we have a lot of public debate of the wrong type because if the people monitoring these are doing their job, properly resourced, we would not have issues where it comes out to the village council, *tikina* council and creating tension between the landowners and the investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a situation that needs to be addressed that the Ministry has to be resourced and the right people are recruited and retained. They are leaving because the system they work under is very biased and they are demotivated. We need to get our act together, this is a very important sector for Fiji, it is contributing to the economy in a bigger way and let us move away from the narrow based economy that we have, that makes us vulnerable to all the types of shocks that we have experienced over the last couple of years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would ask the Government to take note of what is being suggested from this side of the House and put its effort into improving the yield, the output and the potential from the resource sector.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; first of all, I would like to thank the Members of the Committee that came up with this Report in looking at the Annual Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources. Before going into the recommendations and addressing some of the issues that have been brought up, I would just like to start off with the last issue that was brought up by the honourable Gavoka where he makes this grand assertion that the level of people leaving the Ministry has become astronomical, that it is because people are unhappy with the way things are at the Ministry, that people are sad and unhappy with the way things are at the Ministry, and that people are sad about all these things.

There is not a glimmer of evidence, there is no data, these are things he is pulling out as a figment of his imagination, and I think that it is an absolute tragedy because it belittles the kind of work that is being done in the Ministry by the Permanent Secretary and her hardworking team. It belittles the very hard work that has been put in over the past two years that I have been there. Just to come here and to say people are living, without a glimmer of evidence, there is no data, not talking about who, have you been able to show the turnover data in terms of employment living? Nothing!

I think in this House when we stand up to make a statement it must be based on objective fact. Do not come up with a figment of your imagination or what you hear beside the grog bowl or what people whispered to you on the streets, that is not necessarily true. We are honourable Members

of this august Parliament. When we stand up to speak, we speak on the basis of fact and I say, shame on you for bringing that up. If you have any evidence, bring it to me, I will then discuss it with the Management Team. We have a very strong, hardworking team, and since I have been there I have seen the changes they have been bringing in to revolutionarise this particular Ministry.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Show us some results.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is a difference between showing results and standing up in the House and making an assertion, when you do not have any facts to back it up.

(Hon. V.R. Gavoka interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is a tragedy when we are honourable Members to say something like that.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Show us some results.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- We should not belittling the people that run our different Ministries - the Permanent Secretaries, the Deputy Secretaries, they all work hard. I have seen the work that they put in - work on the costed operational plan, the strategic plans or binding the teams together, reviewing the strategic operating processes, et cetera. I think that is the point that needs to be made.

We have hardworking civil servants in this country, a lot of very hardworking people. They spend a lot of time and effort and I think we, the Members of this House, if we are going to belittle them, bring in some facts. If you have some evidence of that, give it to me and I will address it.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- What percent?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- We should not bring hogwash into this House.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- More hogwash. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Let me refer to some of the recommendations and I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his comments on the first recommendation. The recommendation there was to review the State Lands Act, to move to a fair market rental.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the notes that have been given by my Ministry. The fair market rental represents rentals in competitive open market conditions and it is highly dependent on property market forces. But the current formula based assessment on 6 per cent of the UCV represents rentals that are constant to land values and has a fair and transparent method of assessment.

In normal economic situations, market rentals would be ideal, but now that we have COVID-19 pandemic, market conditions are affected due to the economic downturn and challenges, and we will not be recommended to implement fair market rent now. But I do take note of that suggestion, the suggestion of the Committee that may be in the future, we need to move towards this. This is something that is always also recognised in the Ministry at the moment. At the moment, the way that we assess rentals is based on what is in the State Lands Act, which talks about 6 per cent UCV.

In all Governments as a matter of policy, we constantly revise what we have in our legislations. I thank the Committee for making this suggestion, it is something that will be looked at, it is not currently being done now but it is something that needs to be considered. Also, as highlighted by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, we will need to make sure that we have the mechanisms and the people in place to do the kind of things that we need to do in order to be able to move from where we are now in terms of 6 per cent of UCV to move towards that fair market rental. For the time being, we will keep it like this while we revise and review what we are currently doing at the Ministry.

For the second recommendation, the Committee recommends for the renewal of leases to be conducted in a proactive manner and to regularise any informal housing before reviewing the head lease; yes, this is a very critical part of what the Ministry does. It is something that I am sure all the Ministers that have come into this Ministry have constantly talked about - the need to make sure that we are more proactive in the way that we renew leases. It has required digitising all of our systems which is in flow at the moment, and it also requires us to be able to address this in our Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which have been reviewed a number of times.

Now, we have processes where our Divisional Offices send out notification letters to lessees six months prior to the expiry date of leases. So, six months before the leases expire, the notices are sent so that people know well in advance and they can start making their payments and arrangements that they need to do. So, that gives lessees sufficient time to prepare all the documents that they need to provide, update their rental payments and to collate other requirements when applying for renewals accordingly.

With regards to regularising all informal settlers on existing State land, leases will be conducted on a case by case basis, depending on the nature of the existence on site, and arrangements are made with the lessee. Approvals for this will be given by the Minister as stipulated under section 10 of State Lands Act. So this regularisation of people who are on State land, that exercise continues with the SOPs that we have in place, and we have a strong focus on trying to become more and more proactive in the way that we renew the leases that are already in place in Government.

For the third recommendation, that the Ministry must adhere to the Financial Management Act and the Financial Instructions; this is something that the Ministry, in the presentation of our Financial Statements, makes sure that it aligns itself to all the guidelines and the guidance that is provided by the Ministry of Economy every now and then.

For the fourth recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the Committee recommending the stringent measures be undertaken to reduce the rental arrears which stands at more than \$20 million; the honourable Leader of the Opposition has talked about this. Yes, part of the money that we are referring to here as the rental arrears of \$20 million, is actually what he has talked about - the rental that is taking place for the first period but is still owing. So, it is not totally \$20 million that is outstanding from previous years. There is about \$7 million of that amount which will be the amount of money that is existing from the period that has just transpired, so there is a mixture of existing rental and the arrears from previous periods.

You will also notice that the arrears has accumulated over the years and it is also a reflection of the fact that over time, when there is revaluation of the rents, the amounts do go up. So, it accumulates, it is a sore thumb, and it is something that we are trying to address very strongly in the Ministry.

Every year, the Ministry has to request Budget to assist us to have people in place - project officers, whose main job is to try to verify, gather data to do research and collect arrears and provide updates to our Senior Managers on a monthly basis.

We are looking at strengthening and ensuring the execution of the re-entry process. The re-entry process is basically when someone does not pay their lease, we re-enter that land so that it can be given out to someone else, and in the mean time we try to collect the amount of money that is owed to the State. That is something that the Ministry has been working on very strongly this year. We have identified a lot of the large defaulters and we are going through a process now of pursuing those large defaulters who still owe money to the State.

We are in a process of providing a lot of advice to lessees and customers. There is a process of calling them in a timely manner and we are also strengthening our media releases, reminding lessees on their rental duties and timelines.

There is also a process of undertaking arrangements with the defaulters, having a payment plan so that they can pay off what they do over time.

We have also enhanced the number of ways in which people can pay money to the Ministry. Now they can use their bank accounts, M-PAiSA and EFTPOS. So these are further developments of making it easier for people to pay the money that they need to pay to the Ministry.

Recommendation 5 is recommending that the Ministry should regularise its established positions - Person to Post positions, and consider empowering employees through appropriate training and resources. Yes, the Ministry has made a lot of appointments. We have exceeded a lot of our targets in terms of human resources. The MQR of positions have been reviewed in accordance with the Ministry of Civil Service Job Evaluation Criteria, and over the past two years the Ministry has supported three of our staff to further their studies abroad in their specific field of work. This includes doing programmes - Bachelor Degrees, Masters Degrees and PhD Programmes. The Ministry has also worked with the Fiji National University (FNU) to implement a new Certificate Level coursework for mining.

For recommendation No. 6, the Committee recommends that the Ministry adopts and implements the relevant SDGs in all fields of work. This is noted and the SDGs are now imbedded into our National Development Plans. So, when all Ministries develop their own Strategic Plan or their Annual Business Plan, it is already directly linked to the SDGs which are embedded in the National Development Plan - the 5-Year National Development Plan and the 20-Year National Development Plan.

On Recommendation No.7, the Committee highly proposes a 10 metre buffer zone parallel to the river bank and waterways for planting and development, and this will prevent soil erosion, and silting of river and seabeds.

I note this recommendation. Currently, the Rivers and Streams Act mandates that 20 feet or six metres is deemed as public easement or access to rivers. Any change to this will require a change in the legislation and this is something that will be reviewed by the Ministry.

On Recommendation No. 8, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommends that the Department of Lands and Surveys to be conveniently housed in one location to enhance its service delivery. This is something that the Ministry totally agrees with and this is something also that Government as a whole is trying to do for all of its Ministries.

In our Ministry of Lands, we have people in different parts of Suva. So, there is now a Government push to look at individual Ministries and try to put them together in one place because that will enhance the ability to communicate and liaise with one another in the pursuit of the duties that they have.

On Recommendation No. 9, the illegal reclamation and burial of foreshore, causing depletion of mangrove growth should be totally prohibited to protect the marine ecosystem. Illegal reclamation is prohibited and anyone found carrying out such illegal activities will be penalised by the Lands Department. This is carried out through a Stop Work Note and the charging of penal rent.

For developments on foreshore, when an EIA report has not been approved, the Environment Management Act (EMA) includes a provision where upon conviction, the offender could be subject to a penalty of up to \$750,000, or 10 years in prison under Section 43 of the Environment Management Act 2005.

This particular issue is a cross-cutting issue which is been addressed by different Government Agencies, such as the Department of Lands, the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Fisheries. Also, we have civil society organisations, such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and other NGOs and they get involved in that particular area.

Recommendation No. 10 is about the Surveyors Registration Board which the Committee has recommended that the Ministry be more proactive towards encouraging more new registered surveyors.

Right now in Fiji, we have a total of 43 registered surveyors. Six of these surveyors work in Government, one works in a statutory organisation and there are about 36 that we have in the private sector.

Within the Ministry, we have a target to register two new surveyors in every financial year and the Surveyors Registration Board has registered 12 surveyors from 2016 to 2021 - three new surveyors were registered in 2017, one in 2018, four in 2019, one in 2020 and three until July 2021.

There are now 25 candidates who have been approved by the Board to do projects for registration. From the 25 approved candidates, two are females and 23 are male. So, we will continue to try to work with this process and try to make sure that we can have more registered surveyors available to do the kind of work that needs to be done to survey the land in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, I conclude by thanking the Committee and its Members for the recommendations. It has given a lot of food for thought to the Ministry, and we will be working on those recommendations as I have tried to explain.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute some remarks on the consolidated but we can say now a historical report before us as reviewed by the Standing Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me commend the Committee for its bipartisan report especially the ten recommendations set out on pages 38 and 39 and I particularly hope that the honourable Minister has noted those recommendations as he had spoken about them just a while ago.

At this juncture Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I also add that I hope that newer and emerging issues are being properly managed by the Ministry such as the ongoing tension around the Namosi Joint Venture Mining Exercise and other extractive projects such as for gravel, sand and groundwater where the concerns of the custodian landowners are being played off against others, stifled or submerged.

I am sure that we can all agree that Fiji is in no need of another globally disastrous Malolo Resort saga and the rogue elements there as labelled by the honourable Prime Minister. I note in the Report appendix that the submission by the Ministry of Lands in response to questions by the Committee lists a total of 28 challenges to its efficiency and the solution to these challenges are also tabulated by the Ministry actually are quite startling, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Many if not all of the inefficiencies identified in the appendix are those that are well within the Ministry and the civil service control. So, the question is Mr. Speaker, what are the issues? What is the issue? Is it turf wars, empire-building, dissatisfied workforce leading to high turnover of technical experts like surveyors and valuers?

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately for the honourable Minister for Lands, in the Report are key performance indicators and failed grades from that period for him and his executive management team and when these inefficiencies are raised as they are in the Report and I am sure many of them still remain today, they steal from your Ministry's effort to serve taxpayers and clients who pay the Minister and the Ministry to do their job.

We only need to go back to the robust debates that the nation had on Bill 17 to realise that many complaints about slow lease application processing were not levelled at TLTB but state land lease applications. Now, that is a valid indication that these issues are still there and are hastening.

Therefore, before recommendation one on renewing state land annual rent can ever hope to take place, I would ask please show that for money, first in terms of efficiencies to taxpayers and clients and take heed of recommendation four first which is to recover millions in rental arrears.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of rental arrears I find it quite startling too that as listed in the Report, the 2016 list of arrears by lease type is the picture that it is. Of the \$14.1 million in rental arrears, the largest arrears from 2016 are as follows:

1. Agricultural approximately \$4.65 million;
2. Residential approximately \$4.61 million;
3. Industrial approximately \$1.9 million;
4. Commercial approximately \$1.6 million;
5. Special Rental approximately \$740,000;
6. Tourism approximately \$111,000; and
7. Tenancy at will approximately \$108,000. (Then there are others with smaller amounts that are also due).

Mr. Speaker, while it may be unfair to raise these issues today especially if these issues had already been resolved already and the honourable Minister has pointed to that direction. This further questions the efficiency of this House as well and the organisation of work before us, that we are

having to ask questions today of an outdated report. This Parliament is hardly a shining example of efficiency and prudent use of taxpayers' funds that pay us to scrutinise in debates when we are debating historical records and in an election year.

Maybe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a Godsend that we are going back in time with late reports this week to get to the truth of the matter and align the *jhoot* and *lasulasu* against the facts - the Government's own facts. So, the taxpayers are reminded about the sheer disrespect and incompetence that they are paying for and thus they know and what to do on election day.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to make a short contribution to the motion and to thank our Standing Committee on Natural Resources for their findings and recommendations that could greatly enhance the Ministry's service delivery. I thank the honourable Minister for his response to the Committee's report and the recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the outset, the reports are quite outdated and should be a wake-up call to all ministries to ensure that annual reports are submitted on time to Parliament for scrutiny. The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources is made up of two Departments namely; the Department of Lands and Surveys and the Department of Mineral Resources. The Department of Lands and Surveys is responsible for administration, development and management of all state land activities. The Department of Mineral Resources oversees and facilitates development of the country's mineral and ground water resources. The annual reports did not have any information on gender. Sir, the Ministry recorded a few sound achievements through the two departments on a range of activities.

One major achievement was the alignment to the 2013 Republic of Fiji Constitution for conducting substantial consultation and progress to the determination of fair share of mineral royalty to the landowners. There were two critical challenges faced by the Ministry. One was the resignation of fully-trained and experienced staff in the Ministry along the years and two, the high rental arrears which stands at more than \$20 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to point out two recommendations from the Committee that really needs to be addressed and implemented with the recent flooding of the Western Division. I feel that it is only proper that the Government should take heed of the Committee's recommendations as well as the suggestions from this side of the House.

Recommendation seven, the Committee highly proposed a 10-metre buffer zone parallel to the river banks and waterways for planting and development. This will prevent soil erosion and silting of river and sea banks. Recommendation 9 - the illegal reclamation and burial of foreshore causing depletion of mangrove growth should be totally prohibited to protect the marine ecosystem. To complement every development that are being done on the mainland, it is only proper that routine dredging of our major rivers be closely monitored, Sir. On that same token, I thank the Government, especially the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment for the commissioning of the desilting works in the Vitogo River last week. Sir, the completion of the desilting project will bring the much-needed relief to our farmers within the Drasa and Lovu sectors as well as the increasing number of settlements within the area which are currently affected by flood waters. With those few words, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you Sir. I also support the recommendations already there particularly the royalty distribution. I think that the formula has been struck at 80 per cent and 20 per cent but maybe to improve that is to let the landowners know when they can access that money and the process of doing it. They should be properly informed on how to access it particularly for certain projects and development for their future generations.

Secondly, on the relocation of 28 villages under *TC Winston*, while I am not touching on that one, particularly on *TC Yasa*, the damage that has been done to Cogeia Village in Wainunu, Bua and maybe if I could just request if you can expedite the relocation of that village in Wainunu.

On commercial grazing in Nadala, Nadarivatu, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the 5,000 acres, what is the status on the progress of the farm now? How successful has it been? This is important. It is good because we need to increase the supply of our meat for import substitutions. On recommendation four, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on arrears more than \$20 million and again I want to reiterate the fact that the arrears keep rising at a faster rate than the increase of annual rentals. It is important that the Ministry should look at ways and means of reducing that faster rate of increase in arrears. Let me just give you the figures:

Year	Annual Rent (\$)	Annual Arrears (\$)	Ratio (\$)
2010	4.8 million	5.2 million	108
2012	5.8 million	6.9 million	
2014	6.4 million	7.1 million	
2016	6.7 million	9.1 million	
2018	8.2 million	14.9 million	
2020	10 million	23.3 million	

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rate of increase of arrears is a lot faster than the rate of increase in annual rent per year but we must congratulate the Lands Department for reduction in number of leases issued. In 2012, it went down from 18,000 to 17,400 but the annual rent kept on increasing during those years (2012 – 2014). It increased. So, we must thank the Ministry for those reduction of leases particularly when Schedule A and B were transferred to TLTB, they managed to increase the annual rent but the problem is there in trying to get the arrears down because that is the money that is supposed to be paid to Government of about \$23 million in arrears as at 2020. This rent should be in advance rather than paid in arrears, so we must find ways and means of motivating our tenants and lessees to pay their rent in advance whether twice yearly or once yearly, as long as they pay in advance. It is important that the Ministry finds ways and means of motivating the tenants and lessees to pay their rent in advance.

On surveys, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important that the titles are surveyed for registered leases but one thing that the public is finding out, it is a very expensive and slow and most uncompleted works are at hand. It is a question on who monitors the surveyors' performance, maybe the Surveyor's Board? It is a request to the Ministry to find out where the problems are in order to be more efficient in the services of the surveys and works are done.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as already mentioned, the need for education and training of surveyors, valuers and geologists so that we can employ our own people here, also stopping brain drain going overseas. Although we do not want to stop people from going overseas, our number one revenue now is remittances but as long as we continue educating and training and employing our local people for the future efficiency of our services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to reiterate on the coastline. There needs to be protection of our coastline, rivers, streams and tanks or buffer zones. It is important because these are development conditions and the Ministry of Lands and iTLTB have these as conditions of leases. We must not cut down trees to 20 feet or six metres on the other side of the riverbanks, streams and coastline.

As we see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, developments going on now, they do not leave the 20 feet buffer zone, as we see in the Vatuwaqa industrial area. Look at Nadonumai, it is all in the law, in the leases

but the institutions concerned are not putting their foot down to make sure that what is in the lease conditions are actually applied in the development of these leases. The best example is the Mai Suva Park. We must leave the coastline, mangroves are there and also on the river banks. It is important that we save our rivers from litters, et cetera by cutting down all the trees on the riverbanks. It is important that we have the laws, have the lease conditions and implement it on the ground.

On economic performance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would recommend that in future annual reports if these economic institutions give in their economic performance right in front - two pages on production, contribution to GDP, on export and import, value adding, et cetera. It is very important to capture the contribution of the economic performance of the Ministry.

Also, on financial statements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the basis of qualified opinion, there are a lot of unreconciled reports in 2016 and 2017 where 673,811 was not reconciled and also over- stated expenditure of \$157,000 in the Trust Account. It is important that the internal control within the Ministry are intact. If they do their job properly and stop these repetitive mistakes throughout the year as we have seen in the annual reports. It is important to have an internal control intact about money.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a couple of points I wish to make. Obviously, through the Ministry of Economy, we are always tracking on monies owed to Government. The Ministry of Lands, of course, has a mammoth task in trying to not only ensure that rent is collected but to be able to be cognisant of the socio economic impact of, for example, re-entry or terminating leases because we find that a number of people who are actually, whether it is tenancy at will, whether their leases, a lot of them are at the bottom in the socio economic scale. There are a lot of single mothers, there are disable persons.

Few year ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you may recall that Government had made an allocation, how to pay the rent on behalf of those people leasing land not just from the State but also from iTLTB where people who are particularly impoverished could not meet their requirements, we actually pay the lease payment on their behalf. So, the Minister for Land obviously is very sensitive to those types of issues, in not creating another socio economic issue for those individual homes. Out of the \$20 million that is owed, there is about \$30 million in arrears which also includes interest. When payments are made, interests are obviously then increased substantially - \$7 million is about rent that is owing.

We have also seen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, quite a number of State land blocks or parcels of State land that are currently being subdivided. When you subdivide the land, then the number of lessees obviously increase, therefore, the amount of rent owing does increase too, and that has had an impact obviously on that. There has also been some reassessment of rent too. In the same way, if we see provided in the Constitution now, *iTaukei* land when it is leased, people must be paid the market rate. So this is why you will see a reassessment in terms of the premium for lands where leases that are now being, for example, renewed, and also leases that are being paid and reviewed every five years, so you will see an increase in that.

We have, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, tried to make the lands lot more attractive in terms from a leasing perspective. We had Bill No. 16 which is now called the Act No. 21 of 2021, and Bill No.17 which is Act No. 22 of 2021. Both these amendments respectively to the State Lands Act and *iTaukei* Trust Act, essentially meant that leasing these lands has made being a lot more attractive. In other words, you do not have to go and get consents if you want to connect utilities to these lands. It has nothing to do with consents *per se*, of course. This is the big *lasulasu*, now we are talking about *lasulasu* that the Opposition did peddle. In fact, I was with some land owning unit in Nakovacake,

Nadi on Saturday and we actually talked about now the infamous Bill No. 17 which no longer exists, but we have Act 22 of 2021, and they fully understood the implications of it and how actually the land is now a lot more attractive in terms of, for investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of those changes have been taking place. One of the issues that we do find is that, the Opposition tends to think that the only contributing factor to the economy is what they call the primary industry, it is the agriculture, fisheries and forest. Now of course, honourable Gavoka is talking about the mining sector, it is only 1 per cent, but actually he does not talk about what it used to be previously also. We call recall in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the honourable Minister for Land and Mineral Resources had given exploration license to a mining company in the Sigatoka River mouth for iron ore, the Opposition all rushed off in their little minibus with their plastic bottles to rescue the situation.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Precisely my point. When it suits them, they are anti-mining. Today they come here to this Parliament saying, “where is the mining sector, let us increase the extractive sector.” They do not know whether they are Arthur or Martha. They do not realise what they are saying. When it suits them, they do not want mining, when it does not suit them, they want mining.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, similarly, I do not know, honourable Tikoduadua had mentioned something about leases. I think honourable Tikoduadua talked about it, but I had to leave the room for a minute. The fact of the matter is that, we now have very stringent rules around environmental compliance. There is exploration licence and there is actual mining licence itself. No licence is given willy-nilly, there has to be greater adherence to the environmental requirements as provided for in the Environment Management Act and also the requirements placed by the Ministry of Land and Mineral Resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is obviously a world of difference in respect of the surface lease where the land owners agree whether they are *iTaukei* landowners, State land owners or whether they are freehold land owners, they own the surface lease. Anything below the ground, of course, belongs to the State. But as provided for in the Constitution and as the law has actually been passed by Parliament, no royalty used to be paid to the landowners, 80 per cent of the royalty is now being paid to the landowners. A number of strides have been made in that respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I would like to also in terms of the Civil Service, I would like to re-echo the sentiments made by the honourable Minister for Land and Mineral Resources, is that again for political expediency sake, we find the Opposition time and time again whenever it suits them, they actually run down the civil servants. This is really extremely poor.

As the honourable Minister highlighted, the Ministry of Civil Service is now offering in-house scholarships for civil servants to even get PhDs, go and do Masters, upskill the existing civil servants, getting people appointed based on merit and precisely what the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources said, “Please, provide a shred of evidence as to what honourable Gavoka said.” When he said provide evidence, he kept on saying increase the mining capacity. He completely obfuscated the issue. So, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they will come to Parliament without any genuine facts, without any shred of evidence.

The other point, Mr. Speaker, that I also would like to make is, they went on about all the Bainimarama boom, et cetera. The Australian economy has grown, for example, for now 28 years at

an average growth rate of three per cent. Some years grown one per cent, some years grown 1.5 per cent, some years 0.5 per cent, average rate of three per cent. And here we have, when we have our three per cent, they said, “Oh, there is no boom” but they do not have a problem in so elevating what happens in Australia. It is a colonial mentality, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point about the boom that was being talked about was that when you have consecutive years of growth, it means that the pie is growing. Previously the economy would grow for say two years and then the third year, maybe it will go into negative growth then it may grow again then negative growth. You do not need that level of inconsistency. What is critically important obviously is the consistency in growing because when the pie keeps on growing, it creates a lot more opportunities. It is a very basic fundamental concept that has not been grasped by then.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also would like to make was that, they also talked about the debt, repay our debt, everyone knows about *dinau*, et cetera. This is the misinformation that has been spread. They do not actually talk about whenever we borrowed money, what have we used it for? We have not borrowed money to pay off an NBF scandal. We have not borrowed money, Mr. Speaker, to pay for operational cost. We have borrowed money for capital works.

If you look at the breakdown, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the budgets that have been delivered under the Bainimarama Government and the FijiFirst Government, if you look at the percentage of the budget that has actually been spent on capital expenditure as opposed to operating expenditure and then compare that to prior to 2007, you will see that with the previous governments that out of the budget, 87 per cent was actually operating expenditure; 13 per cent, 14 per cent and 12 per cent was capital expenditure. We have been spending up to 35 per cent in capital expenditure. And, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Kuridrani said that no road is being built, too many potholes. He obviously has not been to the west bank of Sigatoka River which is now tarsealed road. He has not been to Vanua Levu, Nabouwalu to Dreketi connection all tarsealed road. He has not been to Moto, Ba. He has not been to Sawani, Serea.

Obviously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by connecting people with roads, the amount of rural electrification that has taken place has been phenomenal but what it has done, it has increased the productive capacity of those people who previously were not connected. That is what good economic fundamentals about in terms of growing the economy. That is where the money has been spent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say again if we are borrowing money to increase the productive capacity of our country then we should do it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We should do it because we are actually investing in the future. We heard honourable Professor Prasad’s piped piper who he follows now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently said that there is no point building fancy roads in Nadi, a four-lane road in Nadi with underground electrical cables that is what you call building capacity. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would please urge the Opposition Members, those of them who are sensible enough and who are not prone to winning political points every minute and look at the long term views, this is precisely what we are talking about. We are talking about building capacity. They have not at one moment spoken about the other areas in the economy that are growing; light manufacturing is growing.

We were last week at Outsource Fiji launching. There are now companies that are creating new jobs even in the pandemic. One of the companies that started off with 25 seats has now got 75

seats - 75 seats meaning that if they do three shifts, that is three rounds of 75 people being employed in one day, in 24 hours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Australian Government is working with us to ensure that we build capacity, the liberalisation of the telecom sector in Fiji. The immense reduction in the telecommunications cost in Fiji, including the cost of data, has meant many companies are now interested in moving their call centres business processing from countries, like Philippines and India, closer to home in a place like Fiji. They have predicted that there is going to be a hundred thousand jobs in 10 years' time, if we get the formula right.

In the Budget last year, we have offered 20 Year tax free holidays for people who set up buildings to house Business Process Outsourcing (BPO). They simply want to come and plug and play, and the age of people who are employed in the BPO sector are between the ages of 19 years and 33 years old.

We have over 70 per cent of the population below the age of 40 years. They are interested in these jobs, so we need to create these jobs. Growing an economy is not only about the primary sector. Yes, of course, we can grow it, but as a percentage of contribution to our economy, we need to grow other services sector also and Fiji has enormous potential. The young people in Fiji have enormous potential to be able to contribute to this particular sector, and that is what we are focused on, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Sir, this is essentially, in a nutshell, what the facts are and we would like the honourable Members to, please, think about what is happening, think about the opportunities that does exist post the pandemic. We are now getting out of it. The curfew has been lifted, more opportunities are being created, so we need to take a long-term view of how to pre-position ourselves.

I agree with honourable Gavoka, a number of years ago, Fiji was simply dependent on sugar for decades. In fact, the sugar industry carried this country. When Dr. Wadan Narsey used to write good articles actually, did an analysis a number of years ago, looked at how in the early 1900s, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian sugar industry, in fact, subsidised CSR in Queensland. A very good study. That was in the days when he was not in politics and supporting people like you, honourable Professor Prasad.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The point is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were completely dependent on the sugar industry. Then we had the tourism sector that came in, so we had only sugar and tourism. Today, the economy is far more diversified and we need to continue with the diversification.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, similarly, in the tourism sector itself, we simply just cannot rely on Australia and New Zealand. That is what was happening. Actually through the Ministry of Tourism, we are trying to get different source markets - look beyond Australia and New Zealand, go to North America, go to China, go to North Asia, go to the Middle-East, go to Europe, to spread our risk. That is precisely what we are doing.

In the same way, our overall economic diversification in this country, we try to spread our risk. The Aviation Academy in Nadi that is set up by Fiji Airways is already getting queries from people who want to fly the MAXs aircraft. They want to come and do training here. We have got the simulators. That is another form of economic activity for us. So, a number of things are being

carried out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I urge all honourable Members to support what we are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, I would like to thank the Ministry of Lands and Mineral and Resources. One last point I have to make regarding the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources is that, they play a pivotal role in also digging boreholes. We go to many rural areas where they ask the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources to dig boreholes as source of water. Because of climate change, wells that used to be there are now being salinated - intrusion of saltwater and the need to go to higher ground, so they also play a pivotal role there. Many of the staff in this Ministry go into very deep rural areas and perform very hard work, and I take an exception to the fact, just for their own political gain, they want to run them down, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I would like to thank the Committee for their Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak in reply.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing further to say.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

REVIEW REPORT ON THE MINISTRY OF FISHERIES ANNUAL REPORT 2017-2018

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report 2017-2018, which was tabled on 17th August, 2021.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I take this opportunity to speak on the motion with regards to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources Review Report of the Ministry of Fisheries 2017-2018 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report contains the findings of the Committee on the administration programmes, major achievements and performance of the Ministry of Fisheries during the 2017-2018 operational year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies that promote best practices, that will ensure a prosperous and enhanced fisheries sector. The major functions of the Ministry can be seen in the 2017-2018 Annual Report.

One of the major challenges that the Ministry encountered over the years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the archaic legislation going back to 1942 for the coastal fisheries community and the absence of any legislative regulatory framework for our aquaculture operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also during the review period, the Ministry became a standalone one and despite the change, the Ministry focussed on its continued service delivery, operations and ensured that its services to the general public and its key stakeholders were not affected.

The Committee acknowledges the leadership within the Ministry and the hard work and the perseverance of the staff that enabled its operations to transit smoothly to the change as required by Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee valued the consistent performance of the Ministry during the review period and wish the same sentiments to the Ministry in the same years to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also wish to acknowledge the current leadership of the Ministry of Fisheries and staff for the commitment shown towards meeting the legislated functions of the Ministry. The Committee considers necessary that the Ministry of Fisheries ensures implementing the few recommendations put forth by the Committee for improvement.

Finally, I commend the effort of being a member of the Standing Committee on Natural Resource in the completion of this Review Report for the Ministry of Fisheries 2017-2018 Annual Report. My appreciation to the Ministry of Fisheries, the Executives for their timely contribution in the completion of this bipartisan Committee Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, as a Member moving the motion, I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is now open for debate on the motion.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before contributing to the debate on the Review Report of the Ministry of Fisheries, may I ask that we, as honourable Members of Parliament, remember and acknowledge the late honourable Osea Naiqamu, who recently passed away. His contribution as a Cabinet Minister and as a Member of this august Parliament was, indeed, valuable. May we all wish Ulukalisi Bale Naiqamu and family well with quick recovery from their time of grief. May the honourable Naiqamu rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for their review of the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report for 2017 and 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give an update or response to the five recommendations that had been highlighted by the Standing Committee in the Report itself.

The first recommendation is the formulation of Fiji's Aquaculture Bill and making it to become law. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's Aquaculture Bill 2016 was tabled as Bill No. 9 of 2016 in this august House. Due to the cautioned growth and development in aquaculture and the inclusion of new technologies, there is additional work needed within the drafting process. Once this is finalised, we will have the appropriate legal framework to support the growth within Fiji's Aquaculture Centre.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recommendation No. 2 is to increase and support the establishment of shrimp farms, to enhance family livelihood and economic growth. I am pleased to update this august House that since January 2019 and with the financial assistance provided by the Fijian Government and bilateral partners, we have been able to reconstruct the Caboni Multi-Species Hatchery which was completed in December 2021. As a result, shrimp production has increased to an annual production level of 2 million post larvae every year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the increase in post larvae within our Hatchery, there is enough to be distributed to interested farmers. As a matter of fact, at the end of last year, the Ministry of Fisheries through the development partners had an Open Day in Caboni, to showcase the viability of shrimp farms and towards the improvement of livelihood, food security and economic growth.

Additionally, to address the need to educate aquaculture farmers on new technology, including science and farming methods, the Ministry of Fisheries is currently constructing an accommodation building in Caboni in which farmers can be accommodated, while undertaking training on improved farm management.

The accommodation facility would be utilised to accommodate research students, who will be engaged to assist our technical officers in researching on high-value fisheries products. Moreover, through the development partners, the Ministry of Fisheries has secured improved farming technology which includes the setting up of a collapsible tank that has now been tested to breed shrimps and other viable commodities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are optimistic that with the support of private Hatcheries, these developments will continue to increase with an increase in shrimp production, thus providing positive results towards the livelihood of the Fijian people and national economic recovery.

Recommendation No. 3, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to increase support and establishment of tilapia farms, to enhance food and nutrition security and family livelihood. Firstly, I would like to thank the Government for its continued budgetary support to aquaculture development through the Food Security and Freshwater Aquaculture Programme.

Since 2018, the Ministry of Fisheries have received more than \$3 million to support the establishment of tilapia farms, and address the need to move from subsistence to semi-commercial and commercial development. In 2017 and 2018, the Ministry received a total of \$600,000 budget to support this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, recommendation four on the establishment of sandfish farm to enhance livelihood and economic growth through public and private partnership, I would like to inform this august House that this has been addressed through community partnership. Through the production of sandfish in Galoa, we have provided more than 10,000 juvenile sandfish to communities in Serua as part of our reef enhancement programme. In the next two months, juveniles should be ready for distribution in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, grow out is taken care of by the communities through MPAs and the construction of sandfish pens. We will continue to invest in this method of grow out as it increases community involvement and through time provide economic returns to our coastal communities. Lastly, for recommendation five -focus on being more vigilant in enforcing the law concerning undersized fish and crustacean. Noting the need to conduct more enforcement with our coastal fisheries, the Ministry of Fisheries in 2018 established the Inshore Fisheries Management Division with dedicated officers recruited for the sole purpose of enforcement. Since the establishment of this Division, the Ministry of Fisheries has been able to address enforcement needs and more importantly raise awareness on legal size limits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also strengthened its collaboration efforts with the law enforcement agencies. This has materialised through the formal establishment of MOUs in 2020-2021 with the Fiji Navy and the Fiji Police Force. With that being highlighted, I once again would like to thank the Members of the Committee and I would like to reassure this august House that the

Ministry of Fisheries is dedicated to continue to put in the needed efforts towards the growth of the fisheries sector. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make a brief contribution to the motion on the annual report for the Ministry of Fisheries. My contribution will focus on item six, that is on the SDG and 6.1 on the Gender Equality Analysis on SDG-5. Also, I will bring to the fore again the importance of having appropriate budgetary allocation to this Ministry. This is one of the ministries that I had made recommendations in the budgetary debate that it be allocated or be increased in their budgetary allocation together with the Ministry of Women and having said that, I will just backtrack a little bit to the response of the honourable Minister for Economy in my remarks regarding the budgetary allocations for the debate on the performance audit for the access on transport and public offices for the people living with disability. And Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was rather flabbergasted for that kind of comment and it is very unbecoming coming from the Minister for Economy and for the Acting Prime Minister for that matter because as he knows that the budgetary allocation or the budget of Government is the numerical expression of the Government's priorities.

And having to have that kind of allocation for a ministry like fisheries which is a big resource, like we are Small Island nations but we have big oceans and that is an area which we could tap into, given if there are adequate resources given to the Ministry, Mr. Speaker. And I note that with the gender equality analysis, that gender equality has not been mainstreamed into the Ministry's activity. That is very important as highlighted in this Report that rather than highlighting the contribution of women in terms of food security and the fisheries sector, it only highlights here the composition of women in the staffing at the Ministry but it does not say anything about the sex desegregated data in regards to women's contribution in the fisheries sector, Mr. Speaker.

And even though it is highlighted in the Report on the training that the Ministry has undertaken but it fails to highlight on the capacity of women or how women have been included in the decision making in regards to the fisheries sector and what kind of assistance has been given to women because as we know women that do fishing contribute a lot to subsistence living especially in regards to food security. If the Ministry was allocated enough resources, then that would also contribute to recommendation five in regards to the Ministry of Fisheries being resourced adequately to carry out the law enforcement aspect of the Ministry.

Also, it will be interesting to find out whether the fisheries officer accommodation in Nabouwalu has been fully repaired because from the last time I know the officer was operating from his residence, using it as an office. Also his residence was badly damaged in the cyclone, Mr. Speaker. That is why I am mentioning the importance of having adequate resources in the Ministry to be able to ensure that the officers are in a position to carry their work effectively and diligently, Mr. Speaker.

Also another aspect that I would like to highlight is for example the NGO that we have in Fiji, for example, Women in Fisheries Network. I believe it is a very good NGO and if the Ministry has enough budgetary resources in its allocation then these are the kind of organisations that the Ministry could allocate grant from their budgetary allocations to ensure that there is a lot more focus in regards to the development and empowerment of women in the fisheries sector, Mr. Speaker.

To conclude, I would like to request the honourable Minister that in future annual reports that we have a proper gender equality analysis with regards to highlighting the contribution of women in the fisheries sector and also to provide some kind of desegregated data to be able to reflect the kind of contributions that we women make to the fisheries sector. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to make a very brief contribution to the motion and to thank our Natural Resources Committee for the recommendations that would greatly assist the Ministry of Fisheries.

I thank the honourable Minister for acknowledging the findings of the Committee and the recommendations. Sir, it makes the work of the committees of Parliament more meaningful when the line ministers are responding accordingly to committee reports.

The Ministry is responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies that promote best practice, equating conservation and utilisation that will ensure a prosperous and enhanced fisheries sector.

The Aquaculture Division of the Ministry of Fisheries is responsible for the administration of the National Freshwater Species Hatchery in Naduruloulou and the satellite hatcheries in Ba, Dreketi and Caboni and marine species hatchery at Galoa. The key cultured species are marine shrimp, sandfish seaweed, freshwater prawns, tilapia, grass carp and ornamental fish. The other species of interest for research and culture include the giant clams and black-lip pearl oysters.

The Division administers three major projects namely Freshwater Aquaculture Development, Brackish Water Aquaculture Development and Food Security Programme. The main objectives being the provision of an enabling environment for the farmers and key stakeholders to address the following:

1. Food security by ensuring an easy access to fish;
2. Protein to the rural inland communities;
3. Improve livelihoods;
4. Rural development through involvement of women and youth groups into aquaculture activities;
5. Income generation and employment creation for rural and peri-urban populations; and Import substitution.

Sir, recognising the growing market demand for sustainable aquaculture produced marine fish, the Division can grow and sell high quality, competitively priced, safe and delicious fish using innovative technology while preserving the environment.

What I have just discussed at length is the potential of the aquaculture market here in Fiji to boost the fisheries sector and our economy but it saddens me Sir, that the Aquaculture Bill 2016, Bill No. 9 of 2016 has never seen the light of day. Aquaculture in Fiji, Sir, needs the legal framework to support all the efforts of the Ministry of Fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am asking my *weka*, the honourable Minister for Fisheries to reintroduce the Aquaculture Bill to this honourable House.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be brief. Again, I would thank the Committee particularly if I can request if they can improve the annual reports in having the first or after the Permanent Secretary's message, overview, you know the economic performances particularly when you have these economic institutions, they are on production, on GDP contribution, export, import, balance of trade and maybe the trend over the years. Then over 10 years, see the performance economically then we can make suggestions on ways wherever we can see weaknesses there or whatever.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Aquaculture Division, it is important that these facilities are improved. You need to improve it to be the Pacific hub here in Fiji and we totally agree that it should be financially supported with expertise so on and so forth to make it the Pacific hub not only in Naduruloulou and Galoa but elsewhere throughout Fiji. It is important to upgrade that aquaculture in order to increase production and reduce imports as there are about \$25 million to \$45 million imports that we have. We need to reduce that by increasing our aquaculture production here in Fiji. So, that also would help the Aquaculture Bill, Bill No. 9 of 2016. What is the delay here, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Is it still with the Solicitor-General to correct the draft or whatever? Is it still with the Cabinet or Parliament? It is important that this Bill is reintroduced and to help the people out there in the field to move on with their production, processes and systems for increase output for export.

Recommendation two on shrimp farms, we totally agree with that to increase contribution economically and encourage increased livelihood of the people and also to increase organic farming and organic living. That is where we should be going rather than going for processed foods Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Recommendation three on tilapia farms, to increase economic contribution, increase livelihood of the people and also increase organic farming and organic living rather than processed foods. That should be important as we go ahead.

Recommendation four - for sandfish farms, there is \$8 million to \$15 million export potential here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so we need to fully support financially and with expertise and so on and so forth in the Bill for the upgrading of the Aquaculture Division.

On the financial statements, a qualified opinion on operating fund account to an unreconciled variance of \$1.7 million. That is quite a lot of money, Mr. Speaker Sir. So the emphasis here is in the internal control as I already mentioned. It is important that the internal control of finances within the Ministry do their work well.

On the trust fund account, the Ministry did not maintain a detailed listing of beneficiaries of the trust account, consequently. So it is important to keep a proper listing.

On other matters, the Auditor-General stated that internal controls of revenue, underline accounts and expenditure generally found to be weak. As I already emphasised, it needs improvement and attention to get correct financial statements into the future. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to conclude, we need more emphasis in our primary industries- in domestic products, more funding and support to improve facilities, technology, research, expertise, economic performance to increase production, export, value adding for all the people.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Bula vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A big *vinaka vakalevu* to the Chairperson and members of the Standing Committees of Natural Resources for the public review of the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report 2017-2018 through Standing Order 110(1)(c) further to add, authorising the Standing Committee to scrutinize the governments departments with responsibility within the committees subject area including by investigating, inquiring into and making recommendations relating to any aspect of such department's administration, legislation or proposed legislative programme, budget, rationalisation, restructuring, functioning, organisations, structure and policy formulation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to speak on the Financial Management Act 2004 and 2010 to redirect proper reporting procedures. Management reporting to the Permanent Secretaries should be made within two weeks, after the end of each month or any other specific time in the management manual.

The Permanent Secretary must be provided with the management report which focuses on the following:

1. Service delivery performance, financial performance, TMA performance, the internal controls and other the significant issues of the Permanent Secretary's information or decision.
2. Reports to respective Ministers to be within two weeks after the end of each quarter. The Permanent Secretary must submit to his/her Minister a report on the financial operations of the agency as compared to the budget and the progress on implementations of the output specified in the Annual Corporate Plans.
3. Annual reporting does give persons for associated and inattentive refers to the purpose of section 80(b)(ii) of the Act, the following persons are designated as responsible for the respective Heads of appropriation shown in the Budget Estimates, the examples are, Judicial system, the Chief Registrar, Office of the Director of Public Prosecution, Police Department, the Commissioner of Police, Republic of the Fiji Military Forces, the Commander, Officer of the Auditor-General, the Auditor-General, Officer of the Solicitor-General, the Solicitor General, Elections Office, the Supervisor of the Elections and Prisons Department of the Commissioner of Prisoners.
4. The draft financial statements must be submitted to the Auditor-General by 31st March the following year when our year end was 31st December or within such time as agreed to by the Permanent Secretary with the Auditor-General.

With the above said in the Financial Management Act 2010, the Ministry of Fisheries 2017-2018 Annual Report did not conform to the Act. It did directly the opposite as it was referred to by the Permanent Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries on 9th September, 2019 which was almost one year after year end on 31st July, 2018 and presented to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources on Tuesday, 9th February, 2021 during the sitting of Parliament which was 18 months later and here we are on 7th February today, almost another year later. Given the Financial Management Act, we can calculate from the 31st July, 2018, the draft Financial Report should have been completed three months after and that is, 31st October, 2018 and the Annual Report to be presented by 31st March, 2019 to Parliament which is eight months later from 31st July, 2018 and be debated within the year 2019.

However, in this case today, 7th February, 2022 is 43 months or 3 years 7 months later. We will be debating 19 reports; 14 did not conform to the Financial Management Act. To the Acting Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, all line Ministers and Assistant Ministers, herein is no measure of accountability, nor credibility, nor transparency and on time of our procedures of our Annual Report which begs the question, how is the Open Merit Recruitment Selection working in all ministries?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight the achievement of the Standing Committee of Natural Resources on offshore fisheries management. During the current fiscal year of 2017-2018, a total of 42 long line fishing licences were issued; 7 exploratory licence, 25 authorisations to fish beyond Fiji fisheries waters were issued. In addition, 1,274 exports and 267 imports permits were issued from our Walu Bay and Lautoka offices respectively. The division also issued 119 CITES permits for the fiscal year prior to the Department of Environment becoming the sole signatory as per Fiji CITES Management Authority meeting resolutions on 10th January, 2008.

A major achievement for the Ministry was an anonymous decision in Parliament on 13th July, 2018 to sign the Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA) to prevent, deter or eliminate illegal, unreported or unregulated fishing. The PSMA is a tool aimed at eliminating illegal, unreported, unregulated fishing through the development and deployment of effective Port State Measures.

Development of the draft Offshore Pelagic Fisheries Mahimahi Management Plan. It is anticipated that the stakeholder consultations will take place in the next financial year before finalization of a draft plan. The Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) commenced on an in-country survey of economic contribution of tuna fisheries in the Fiji economy. This survey will help understand the value that this important regional resource brings to Fiji and will continue into the next fiscal year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, achievement of the Aquaculture is such. The Division activities targeted the production and distribution of freshwater and brackish water aquaculture species, together with extension advisory work, research and targeted trainings both local and overseas for both staff and farmers. Freshwater Aquaculture Hatchery Production and Distribution:

1. 488,580 tilapia fries produced and distributed from hatcheries;
2. 158,500 prawn post larvae produced and distributed from hatcheries;
3. 14 farmers assisted under the Food Security under the 2017/2018 programme breakdown being four from the Central and West while there was six in the Northern Division;

Brackishwater Hatchery Production per distribution:

1. 647,129 brackish water shrimps post larvae produced and distributed from the hatcheries;
2. 30,100 sandfish juveniles produced from Galoa Hatchery and distributed to sea ranch sites for restocking of depleted sites.

From the financial year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry produced 1.5 metric tonnes of seaweed targeted against the 100 metric tonnes that was supposed to be produced in a year. These harvests were from Naividamu Village and Nakalou Women Seaweed farms in Macuata. The Ministry continued to assist communities in the establishment of seaweed nurseries and two were established during the year in Serua and Malake Islands against the target of four for the year. In addition to this, it assisted 13 communities with materials and drying sheds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight some recommendations in the area of development of draft Offshore Pelagic Fishery Mahimahi Management Plan. What is the status? Draft Pearl Development Plan, what is the status? Its completion would meet the voluntary commitment made by Fijian Government at the United Nations Ocean Conference in New York in June, 2017. Culturing of reef fish species to increase food security, national strategic on aqua biosecurity for Fiji in collaboration with PSC, what is the status? Inshore Fishing Management Decree, what is the status? How will the new fees paid by the fishermen to *i qoliqoli* landowners be monitored? Increase issuance of offshore fisheries license, currently a quote is set at 60. Encourage increase and support establishment of tilapia to enhance food, nutrition security and family livelihood, empower and encourage farmers income generations subsistence presumption. Enforcement agencies should be more cautious concerning undersized fish. Encourage the increase and support of sandfish farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Audit opinions of the Office of the Auditor-General, the Audit of the 2018 Accounts of the Ministry of Fisheries slotted in a qualified opinion. The qualification issues were the Ministry recorded a capital construction of \$4,756,332 million and the capital purchase was \$653,185 in the statements of receipt and the expenditure for the year end 31st July, 2018, the

Ministry was unable to provide payment and the journal with the payment and the journal vouchers totalling to \$954,252 to support the above balances.

As a result, the Office of the Auditor-General was unable to verify the completeness and the accuracy of the balances and also unable to determine whether any adjustments might have been necessary in respect of the capital construction and the capital purchase at the end of the financial year. An unreconciled variance of \$1,727,360 million exists between Financial Management Information System (FMIS), general ledger and the Ministry's payroll report for both the Established staff and Government Wage Earner. In addition, internal controls of over payroll were generally found to be weak. This relates to the incorrect preparation of salary reconciliations. Consequently, the Office of the Auditor-General was not able to establish the accuracy of the Established staff and Government Wage Earners balances record in the Statement of Receipts and Expenditure for the year end at 31st July, 2018.

The Ministry did not maintain a detail listing of beneficiaries to the Trust Account. Consequently, the Office of the Auditor-General was not able to substantial prudence of the closing balance of \$261,684 were reflected in the statement of receipts and payments of the Trust Account. Other matter, internal records were over revenue underline accounts and expenditure were generally found to be weaken if not addressed properly may result in materials mis-statements. This relate to the delay in banking of revenue collected and delay in preparation of online accounts reconciliation. Payments were also made without Local Purchase Orders being raised. Three competitive quotations were not being obtained, misallocation of expenditures and payments were made without payment vouchers being certified.

Statements of receipts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry allocated a revenue of \$2,197,079 million and incurred expenditure of \$15,134,295 million of the year ending 31st July, 2018. Revenue collected as of 31st July, 2018 were from the vessel registration which was \$19,468, fishing license was \$9,471, fish and off sale an ice was \$266,028, off sea license was \$1,838,670 million other fees were \$63,442 making the total revenue of fisheries in 2018 year ending was \$2,197,079 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Appropriation Statement, the Ministry had incurred expenditure of \$15.1 million in 2017 and 2018 against a revised budget of \$18.8 million, resulting in a savings of \$3.7 million, resulting that you cannot do everything in the budget. Anomalies in the payroll, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a review of the Ministry payroll records reveal the following:

- Salaries reconciliation prepared in August 2017 to July 2018 were not dated.
- An opening balance in reconciliation for some pay periods did not agree with the closing balance of the previous pay reconciliation.
- The Ministry recommends it should improve its reconciliation by including dates of preparation, checking and signing by the supervisor or officer to ensure the accountability of the reconciliation.

You are the Assistant Minister, you listen, ensure the closing and opening balances are accurately reflected.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order! Mr. Speaker, the honourable Member is just reading out the pages. There is no recommendation neither is he giving an alternative. He is just reading.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I had been following what you said but you are just repeating what is already in the Report and if you are going to make a contribution, make an original contribution. Refer to the Report but do not quote the Report holus-bolus.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was from the Auditor-General's Report. It was not in the annual report.

Given the above anomalies, the natural resource-based sectors like fisheries and agriculture had a poor GDP growth in 2017 with 6.9 per cent and in 2018, a minus 14.7 per cent and in 2019, it was minus 4 per cent. The agriculture sector's GDP growth in 2017 was minus 12.7 per cent. I was just trying to compare all the natural resources, how they were performing in 2017 and 2018 which reflect that the economy was not even performing. This is taken from the Bureau of Statistics, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Committee for the review of the annual report on the Ministry of Fisheries and I would like to support the motion before the House. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Committee Report regarding the review of the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report, 2017 – 2018 and I commend the Committee for their bipartisan efforts and the five recommendations they have put before us to consider. I further note that my *kai*, the honourable Minister can be quite efficient when he chooses to be but I want to thank him in advance for the planned temporary lifting of the ban on beche-de-mer.

However, while beche-de-mer is a high value marine species product, I hope that the Ministry's Marine Resource Inventory Survey (MRIS) Project, as highlighted in this Annual Report, has actually given him firm and qualitative scientific guidance for harvesting limits during the temporary lifting of the ban on *dri*. I can appreciate the balancing act that the honourable Minister needs to weigh up.

On one hand, rural communities want to harvest these marine species because it is a high value commodity particularly for Chinese cultural cuisine but on the other hand, his own Ministry's scientists should be guiding and monitoring the harvesting limits of beche-de-mer given the very fragile nature of these species from spawning to maturity and the integral biological role that beche-de-mer plays in cleaning our oceans and if the Government wants to keep our oceans blue and our reefs alive, beche-de-mer are an essential link in that food chain.

However, Mr. Speaker, how the Ministry manages this temporary lifting of the ban, I will speak to recommendation one in this Report. The Annual Report stated an intention, "that the aquaculture law will support overseas smart partners". But that is only as good as the regular and independent scientific national assessments of beche-de-mer stock in addition to the Ministry's impartial and robust monitoring control surveillance (MCS) system because if the Ministry cannot police it, then it should not be promoting it.

Mr. Speaker, speaking of the Ministry own monitoring control and surveillance system, I am reminded of a newer and imaging issue apart from the issues in this Report and that is the horrific beheading of the Fijian national on board the doomed Fishing Vessel (FV Tiro II) while in Fiji waters. Now there seems to have been a convenient blanket of suppression of that incident and it is almost now as if it never happened.

And that brings me to the numbers of offshore fishing licences detailed in the Annual Report and I have to wonder if these offshore fishing licences are being guided by scientific stock assessments for highly migratory fish stocks that come near Fiji's EEZ or whether the Ministry is content to continually abdicate its national responsibilities to the SPC's Fishery Science Division in Noumea.

For example, Mr. Speaker, the Annual Report says that the total of 42 longline fishing licences, seven exploratory licenses and 25 authorisations to fish beyond Fiji fisheries waters were

issued in this period. Of all these offshore fishery licenses, how many are Chinese? How many are Taiwanese, New Zealand, USA, European, Tuvalu or indeed local licences? There are no records of Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) cases of either Fiji flag vessels or vessels licenced to fish here in the Annual Report.

Neither is there any data detailing Fiji recruited independent observers within the regional Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) Programme and the horrific issues that they face on board fishing vessels, chief among them the possibility of murder and extortion, not to mention the lack of fair compensation and holistic insurance cover for our independent observers. Issues that NFP has raised in this House before, Mr. Speaker.

There are also details that taxpayers should know, Mr. Speaker. These are all details that taxpayers should know and the Ministry cannot afford to offload the key responsibility to the Ministry of Labour or the Fiji Navy or the FFA regional monitoring control and surveillance efforts because all this is merely at the back end of the incentives for fishing vessels permitted by the Ministry to be here in Fiji in the first place. I am quite certain that the incoming U.S Secretary of State will also be very interested in this, given the thematic issues that are set to be discussed with us and the Pacific this weekend.

The 2017-2018 Annual Report also states that Inshore Fisheries Licences - 942 were issued of which 226 licence were issued in the Central Division, 54 licences were issued in the Eastern Division, 486 were issued in the Western Division and the 176 licences were issued in the Northern Division. But, Mr. Speaker, I cannot help but be more than a little bit worried about whether Fiji's ocean-based protein sources have outflows greater than our inflows right now.

Almost similar to the national *dinau* situation that we have been talking about, taking in more *dinau* than we can actually pay for. The worry here, Mr. Speaker, is unlike our economic *dinau* situation, we cannot *dinau* fish or marine species living in our waters from the World Bank or ADB if we overfish what we are custodians of now.

That is why while I commend the Ministry's efforts as listed in the Annual Report to diversify and expand projects such as ice plants and hatcheries, aluminium boats, prawns, shrimps, tilapia, sandfish, seaweed and pearl oyster farming, I would suggest that the Ministry's priority still remain on the science.

I urge the Ministry to place more funds toward biological and socio-economic surveys for offshore and customary and state fishing grounds as well as more fisheries impact assessments especially as our reef and ocean ecosystem is under immense pressure in this present day situation from unemployment due to COVID-19 and forced vaccinations.

And equally, more funds towards protecting our fisheries through more monitoring, control and surveillance and urgently amending laws for tougher penalties as solid deterrents against the stealing of fish or marine species that belong to us, the people of Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, I will be very brief, Sir. Just in respect to what the honourable Minister for Fisheries had mentioned and the previous honourable Member, last week when we were in Vanua Levu, there are two villages, Koroinasolo and Dawara where those villages depend solely in particular Koroinasolo, on beche-de-mer fishing and one of their greatest gripes was that there was a ban and they said it had a huge economic impact on them and so I am glad honourable Qereqeretabua had said that she did appreciate the balancing act that the Ministry of Fisheries does actually have to engage in and endure because here some villages actually completely depend on

beche-de-mer fishing and beche-de-mer of course is a very lucrative market because there is a huge demand for it in Asia.

And so the lure of that can also of course ensure that we completely deplete our stocks and that is why of course the Ministry of Fisheries has put in place the bans. So, there is a lot of pressure on the Ministry of Fisheries to lift up the bans. On a wider perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have talked about the blue bonds and one of the objectives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the blue bonds is to ensure that we get the right amount of funding to be able to assist the Ministry of Fisheries and indeed those fishers whether men or women and those communities that actually depend on the marine life for their livelihoods.

The idea would be to have hatcheries where then the Ministry of Fisheries can actually transfer those small baby beche-de-mer for want of a better word, where they can then go and put that in the wild within the area where for example in Koroinasolo, people would then sort of make sure it grows in the environment and then harvest that as opposed to going and getting it from the wild and that has been the problem.

I mean, we will see so many times the Ministry of Fisheries cannot be everywhere when people get catch, even lobsters, you know we love the fact a lot of people in Fiji love the fact that these lobsters have actually eggs in them and this is very tasty but just a few days ago, I was watching a documentary. In Australia where these people go around fishing, the moment they catch a lobster that has got eggs in them, they throw it back in. In fact, they would put it back in the wild, so attitude of course needs to change. I mean we have seen so many people, if you drive along the highway where people actually catch crabs, lobsters even they are this about this small, they will still sell it and people still buy it.

And the Ministry of Fisheries of course is trying to build a team, honourable Salote Radrodoro fixated obviously always on amounts of money. We have to work within the balancing act of making sure for example in the past couple of years the restriction on government's ability to spend because of COVID-19 but as the economy while it opens up and there is more funds available, of course more funds will be made available.

But I think just to inform the House that is why we are raising the blue bonds. It is to have sustainable fishing and give Ministry of Fisheries the access to expertise and funding to be able to carry out those types of exercises so we have people who do not actually go and fish from the wild but are actually able to grow those fishes, those beche-de-mer et cetera in their own backyard so to speak, in their *qoliqoli* areas and then be able to then harvest that. That is the whole objective of it.

And also to have, you know for example encourage women to get into various other areas of fishing whether if it is even mariculture, aquaculture et cetera and it also includes things like aspects and projects like growing mangroves include seawall et cetera.

Again, honourable Qereqeretabua is talking about a subject matter which she is probably not very familiar with about *dinau*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if anyone looks at the debt situation in Fiji prior to *TC Winston*, the GDP per capita was on a downward trajectory and everyone knows that. Those figures are available and obviously we had to spend over \$500 million in order to rebuild schools, rebuild infrastructure and of course then COVID-19 came along, and as we have said, it is good expenditure if you are able to ensure that the funds that you do borrow goes towards socio-economic development and productive capacities. Nowhere has anyone said that Fiji has the inability to repay its debt. Fiji has never under any government defaulted on its debts and we most certainly do not intend to do so and honourable Qereqeretabua does not have that level of nuanced approach to debts.

If you look at some of the debts, we have been lent money by the Japanese Government at 0.01 per cent. Effectively Mr. Speaker, Sir, that debt amount is in fact a grant of 60 per cent. They are not looking at the interest rates that we are paying, concessional rates over a 30-40 year period, in fact end up paying less than what you actually borrowed. They are not looking at that aspect. They are simply looking at the nominal figure as opposed to the repayment period and the cost of the fund itself. So please if we are going to discuss debt, you need to take a more sophisticated, more nuance and indeed a more informative approach when you actually talk about this particular aspect.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the Deputy Chairperson on the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak in reply.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing further to say, but thank the Members for their contribution.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

(Question No. 01/2022 withdrawn)

Relief Efforts in Tonga
(Question No. 02/2022)

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the relief efforts by the Fijian Government and the RFMF in Tonga?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Member for the question.

The eruption in Tonga was on Saturday, 15th January, 2022 and immediately after the eruption, particularly the week after on Sunday, 23rd January, 2022, we were inundated with a lot of calls, questions, queries as to how will Fiji respond to the disaster that has hit the Kingdom of Tonga.

On the same Sunday as well, the honourable Acting Prime Minister managed to speak to the honourable Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Tonga but unfortunately, it was just for only a few seconds because of the disruption in communication in Tonga. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, planning continued, particularly by the RFMF and, of course, in the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management Office, as to how we will respond.

Following consultations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were two components of the assistance to the Kingdom of Tonga. One was the assistance through RFMF troops that were to deploy to Tonga through Australia. Fifty troops left on Saturday, 29th January, 2022, for Brisbane in Australia. The

plan of the deployment was similar to the one that we had very recently in the Solomon Islands where we are embedded into the Australian Contingent and we would deploy together. The planning was for the *HMAS Adelaide* to leave on Friday, 28th January, 2022 for the Kingdom of Tonga and then later on, for the troops to come across and marry up with the Australian component who are already in the ship.

As we speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the team, together with the joint taskforce command element are still in Australia. What it has developed into is, we still have the team in Brisbane and, of course, no troops has set foot on Tonga for now. We still have the French, British, Australians and the New Zealanders. The team are still consolidated, particularly the planning team that had caught steam in Brisbane, which will look like an international component that will be deployed into Tonga once the approval from the Kingdom is received.

As we speak, there are notes being exchanged with the Kingdom of Tonga authorities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and also the Commander of the RFMF and General Campbell and their counterparts in Tonga, Lord Tui Lepa, who is the Commander of the Armed Forces at the Kingdom, on the details. All these are awaiting approval, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and as I have stated, we will be part of the Australian component. The Fiji troops will be embedded into that component and we will be deployed together. This is for obvious reasons, they are providing the strategic lift, they are providing the sustainment requirements and the equipment and other necessities for the deployment as well.

The other component, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the deployment of relief supplies to the Kingdom of Tonga. I did mention that there was limited communication with Tonga post the eruption on 15th January, 2022. Sir, NDMO Fiji was able to have contact with National Emergency Management Office (NEMO) in Tonga on Tuesday after the eruption and NEMO Tonga was able to send us some of the critical items that they would need. Based on that and with Cabinet's approval, NDMO together with the Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinated the response here in Fiji.

What happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was an expression of interest put out so that all our stakeholders and agencies can indicate how they can assist according to the list that was put out as given to us by NEMO Tonga. Let me highlight and acknowledge our partners that made the Tongan deployment possible.

The New Zealand Government (MFAT) were also responsible, particularly with the bulk of the funding and for the cost of the boat that was chartered. We have UNICEF, UNFPA and the Tongan community in Fiji. We are, indeed, thankful to Mr. Kitone Tuapati and the Taholo's for arranging the Api Tonga community here in Fiji, and mostly the USP students who helped us a lot with manpower requirements; Swire Shipping and Goundar Shipping, World Central Kitchen, Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the Department of Information, Republic of Fiji Military Forces, Fiji Immigration Department, Fiji Revenue and Customs Services and the Fiji Procurement Service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly, after the Expression of Interest was closed, we started the packing of items and the stakeholders that I have mentioned brought in their respective contributions. We are thankful to the Fiji Sports Council for providing the Vodafone Arena Car Park for the logistics, particularly for the packaging for Tonga. That saw 11 x 40 foot containers, three by the Api Tonga communities and the rest by the stakeholders, so altogether 11 40 foot containers were deployed to Tonga.

It was a five days' deployment - one and a half day's sailing time to Tonga and return, and two days at the port in Nuku'alofa. It was a contact-less deployment because of COVID-19 protocols. We took everything from here, dumped them at the port in Nuku'alofa, sprayed the trucks, sprayed

the goods and then left them there and came back to Suva. So, that very briefly is the assistance involving by the RFMF and the supplies that were shipped across from Suva to Tonga. Again, I am indeed thankful to all the stakeholders who made this possible.

COVID-19 Recovery Guarantee Scheme
(Question No. 03/2022)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the status of implementation of the \$200 million in loans for COVID-19 Recovery Guarantee Scheme to micro, small and medium and large enterprises?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for this question.

Just by way of background, before I give the details as to how much money has been disbursed through this particular, what we call, the COVID-19 Recovery Credit Guarantee Scheme. The \$200 million was essentially allocated for the micro, small, medium and large businesses to access this funding to help them meet their day-to-day cash flow needs, including the payment of wages, salaries, rental costs, utility costs, purchasing stocks and other working capital expenses.

Sir, as announced in the Budget last year, the \$200 million is, in fact, made available through the Reserve Bank of Fiji at a very low interest rate of 0.25 per cent to the financial institutions, who then on lend these funds to eligible businesses whereby they need to meet the criteria of financial institutions at no more than 3.99 per cent. That is the maximum rate they can charge.

Government also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, negotiated with financial institutions that were going to lend that there will not be any principal payments for the first two years on the basis that Government would pay the interest rate for these companies or these businesses on their behalf for the first two years. So, there has been a budgetary allocation made to that effect, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, essentially, therefore, these businesses for the first two years, get access to the loan but they do not have to make any repayments. Given the COVID-19 situation, that period is essential for them to actually get back on their feet because we do not want these businesses to close down.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the criteria is that we also then try to ensure that financial institutions will lend to these businesses. We said that for the 90 per cent of the loans to micro businesses with turnover of less than \$50,000, Government will guarantee 85 per cent for small business with the turnover \$50,000 to \$300,000; 60 per cent for medium sized businesses with turnover of \$300,000 to \$1.25 million; and 75 per cent for large businesses with turnover above \$1.25 million. So, the amount that one can actually get by way of loan for micro enterprises, the maximum they can get is \$10,000; small can get \$20,000; medium is \$50,000 and large businesses - \$100,000.

In the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members will also see that we have actually set aside \$5 million in terms of managing the loan guarantees. Obviously there will not be a call on those guarantees because no one has to make a repayment in the first two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by way of an update, the Reserve Bank of Fiji has already received and approved 5,244 loan applications with the total value of \$106.9 million. In addition to this, Mr.

Speaker, Sir, financial institutions are currently processing another 64 applications with a total value of around \$3.4 million. To date, Government has paid a total interest cost of around \$1.3 million on the \$107 million already disbursed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the applications disbursed, for micro enterprises there were 2,509 applications, small businesses - 1,648, medium - 652 and large - 435 businesses have received funding from that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the value of the loans disbursed, around 17 per cent of the total loan value is for micro businesses, 21 per cent for small businesses, 26 per cent for medium sized businesses and 36 per cent for large businesses. I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that gives an update. I could, of course, give further clarifications should they require any.

Tongan Volcanic Eruption
(Question No. 04/2022)

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources inform Parliament as to what transpired on Saturday, 15th January, 2022, during the Tongan volcanic eruption in terms of providing warnings to the public in Fiji?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question.

Saturday, 15th January, 2022 was the date for the volcano that we had in Tonga, the Hunga Tonga - Hunga Ha'apai volcano. The initial statistics suggest that this violent explosion is probably the largest volcanic blast we have had in the world since Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines 30 years ago. That is according to the Volcanologist, Professor Shane Cronin, whom we referred to.

However, here in Fiji under the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, we have the Seismology Observatory Unit that monitors earthquakes and tsunami activities on a 24/7 basis but the tsunamis that are being normally monitored because we monitor earthquakes, it is designed to monitor tsunamis that come out of earthquakes.

In Fiji, we have a lot of earthquakes. In the month of February alone, looking at the statistics that was given to me by the Department, we have had 70 earthquake events. Most of them we do not feel, 13 of those were local and about 57 of them were regional. So, you can see that it is quite frequent and most of the tsunamis that we do get come out of earthquakes and already in the month of February, we have already had 20 earthquake type events in our area. One of these is local and about 19 regional.

The whole tsunami warning system is geared towards earthquakes. It monitors the parameters that determine when an earthquake takes place, whether that earthquake will lead to a tsunami or not, and these parameters are largely around the depths at which the earthquake takes place and the strength of the earthquake and depending on those parameters, it feeds into the warning system which is then fed into the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre which comes out of Honolulu in Hawaii. That is the organisation that is the official tsunami service provider for the Pacific Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System that delivers tsunami threats and advisories to countries in the Southwest Pacific Region.

The issue that we had there was that the whole system is geared towards earthquakes and the vast majority of tsunamis that we have come out of earthquakes. This one that we had came out of a volcano and you know in Fiji, we have Vanuatu to our west and we have Tonga to our east and we

are in the middle, and both of these two, Vanuatu and Tonga, they have a lot of volcanic activities. There is always volcanic activity taking place in Vanuatu, a major event back in 2017-2018 and we have this one here but all of our focus and the history of tsunamis has always been largely focused towards tsunamis that come out of earthquakes, so because the whole system was oriented towards earthquakes, when they had this volcanic activity that might lead to a tsunami, they did not have the parameters to measure, which would indicate that this volcano leads to a tsunami.

We have had other volcanoes in our region, I think in this Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai we have had the volcanic eruptions there in 2009, 2014, others in Vanuatu area but it did not lead to tsunamis and the only parameters that they could work on was the tidal gauges. We have gauges around the country that can measure if the water goes up or down. Those were the only things that they (Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre) had to feed that into their own calculations which they had to do manually and then they issued the warnings which came out on the particular Saturday. The tsunami advisory was issued at 6.35 p.m. on the Saturday and it was cancelled at 9.00 on Sunday morning. So, that was the issue that we had but since then there has been a lot of work that has been undertaken by MRD and also with the local agencies including the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre. There have been discussions and what is happening now is they are relooking at the way they try to give advisories to see if they can take in some parameters that arise out of volcanoes.

I say again that volcanoes are quite rare in terms of leading to tsunamis. This one was a very rare incident but now the whole system, the experts, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre are looking at bringing in those volcano parameters into their system so that in the future, I think they are developing an SOP, they are working on an Interim Tsunami Volcano SOP so this can advise us into the future.

Cold Storage for Farmers - Sigatoka Valley
(Question No. 05/2022)

HON. J. SAUKURU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment inform Parliament on the Ministry's plans to build a cold storage facility for farmers in the Sigatoka Valley?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question raised by the honourable Member and I thank the honourable member for asking this question. Unfortunately, Sir, this is the same question that was raised in the August Parliament sitting last year and I had responded to it. But anyway, this always happens. They do not listen to our responses carefully and they ask again and again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of cold storage facility is basically to delay the deterioration in case where farmers are not able to take the produce to the market. So, the farmers in the area concerned in Sigatoka Valley either take their produce to the market which is, most of them can reach the market within 20 minutes, 15 minutes of the time due to the good road, the tarsealed road that some of you have been criticising.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, or then the other category of farmers and entrepreneurs are the exporters, who collect the produce from the farmers. They get the required volume and then process it and export it. So, for these exporters, we have assisted in establishing cold storage facility. There are four cold storage facility for exporters at Sigatoka Valley. Shalen Export, Navosa Export, DKAY Export and Mahen Export. All of them, Ministry was assisted on a one-third two-third basis because these are all our exporters. They do collect from farmers, they are the ones who need cold storage

facilities because they cannot immediately get into the market. They need to collect the required volume.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to this, we also have cold storage facility at our research station right there in Sigatoka Valley which is available to farmers if they want to keep their produce in case if they are not able to get it to the exporter or to the market. Some of the farmers have used it, but most of the farmers are using that cold storage facility to keep their seeds for the next season at no charge to them. So Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have cold storage facilities at a number of research stations – the Koronivia Research Station, Seaqaqa Research Station, Legalega Research Station and Sigatoka Research Station. All these facilities are available to the farmers at no cost. They can keep their produce if they want to and they are using, some of them are using it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, establishing a cold storage facility is one thing but to utilise it fully is another. We have got a cold storage facility that was constructed some time back at Keyasi, at the cost of \$45,000 funded by Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) and also the Ministry but the cold storage facility is not at all utilised now. When we raised the issue with the farmers, then now they are saying that we need assistance to grow crops to supply. Initially, they said that we are not growing because there is no cold storage facility. When we have the cold storage facility, they are saying that we need assistance to grow, so Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a white elephant there now- not utilised, so we do not want to establish cold storage facility when there is no supply, so basically we want to ensure that when we make an investment, it should be fully utilised. So, in Sigatoka Valley, there is no need for any other cold storage facility because there is a cold storage facility at the Sigatoka Research Station.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Thank you, honourable Minister. I raised that question because we listed them just recently after the workshop at Marriot and they raised the issue with the Committee on Natural Resources because of the road facility that during rainy days it is not accessible and they cannot even access the cold storage facility. That is why I asked that question, honourable Minister. It is coming from the farmers. The question is, since they cannot access the cold storage facility that you mentioned, how else can they because they are hampered now with the road, they cannot get their produce to the cold storage facility that you have?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, no farmer wants to keep their produce. Basically, they want to get rid of their produce immediately, get to the market, so the only reason you want to have a cold storage facility is either you are collecting the produce to make up the required volume or you are far away from the market. In the question, he is talking about Valley Road. It is very close to the market and in the second question, he mentioned Nabitu which is not on Valley Road. It is on the other side of the river.

River De-Silting and Dredging Works
(Question No. 06/2022)

HON. A.T. NAGATA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the progress of the Ministry of Waterways' river de-silting and dredging works?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for asking this question. Climate change has and will continue to affect the intensity and frequency of precipitation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our oceans are getting warmer. A recent study by the World Meteorological Organisation showed that last seven years has been the warmest. The year 2021 is the seventh consecutive year (2015-2021) where global temperatures has been above one degree Celsius, above the pre-industrial levels. With warmer atmosphere, it increases the amount of water that evaporates into the air, converging and resulting in strong storm systems, and further intensifying the events and rainfall.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, heavier rain means washing away of the sediments and seals. If you look at the data in Fiji, the annual average rainfall in 2013 was 1,306 millimetres. In 2020, the last data that we have, from 1,306 average annual rainfall in 2013 and now to 2020 is 2,612; nearly doubled. If you look at monthly average rainfall data, in 2013 it was 108 millimetres, now it is 270. Let us look at *TC Cody* data, for three days, Ba had the highest – 566 millimetres. When the monthly average now is 270 and the monthly average in 2013 was 108, those three days only during *TC Cody* was 566 millimetres in Ba, 453 millimetres in Tavua and 459 millimetres in Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these massive amount of rainfall in a very short period and when you have a lot of developments, it causes a lot of runoff water. No amount of drainage, desilting will assist because these are mitigating factors; these are not preventing measures. We have gone beyond prevention, we need to mitigate, and those are mitigating measures.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment, we are undertaking de-silting and dredging in about 29 creeks and rivers throughout Fiji. Two creeks in the Central Division, 11 in the Western Division and 16 in the Northern Division, as we speak. Most of those are undertaken in partnership with private sector companies in a Public Private Partnership model.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the larger ones in the Northern Division, we have got Nubu, Naduru, Nasealevu, Wavuwavu, Nagigi, Naividamu, Nakama, Wailevu, Vatudova, Waitakala, Buceisau, Naiyalayala, Vunivutu, Tabia, Nakelikoso and Korotari. In the Ra District, Nakorotubu, Upper Wainibuka, Drauniivi (about to start), Narewa and the Ba District Saru in Lautoka, Solovi in Nadi, Malakua in Nadi, Nadele, Ba River (just started), Namosau, Vitogo (just started), Nawaka retention dam.

We constructed five retention dams to deal with flooding in Nadi. Apart from dredging that is happening in Nadi and Malakua River, we have got five retention dams, the primary purpose of these retention dams is to collect the water that comes down, store it then gradually release it. So, three of them were constructed much earlier (about three years ago), those were filled with silt. Last year, before this rainy season we de-silted retention dams one and two. We completely de-silted it so that it regained its retention capacity.

In the Central Division, we have Namosi, Wainibuabua and Wainadoi undertaking de-silting works as we speak. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this weekend, we are targeting to advertise the other 120 rivers and creeks that we have on our list to seek expressions of interest from potential companies who would want to partner with us and clear this material so that we can get back to their original discharge capacity.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. We all understand that this de-silting process and dredging process has not been working, considering the recent flood that we have been seeing. Can the honourable Minister enlighten the House, what is the next plan to try and control this flooding because all these rivers that you have been dredging are still flooding? What is the next plan?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just explained that this is mitigation strategies. I think you should *Google* and check-up the difference between mitigation and prevention.

1. We cannot prevent the volume of rain that is coming in the short to medium term. What we can do is to ensure that we quickly get this water discharged; that is what we want to do.
2. The bigger plan for the Nadi River is to build dykes around the river so that it does not spill over.

This is what we are doing, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Also at the same time, not only about dredging but we also are looking at some of the rivers where we can increase the discharge capacity by widening them. For example in the Ba River, we did one kilometre work during river bank production last year which allowed the water to move out quickly faster. So these are some of the works we are doing to ensure that we:

1. restore the discharge capacity;
2. increase the discharge capacity;
3. collect water upstream so that less water comes down (downstream) in a short period of time by constructing five retention dams at Nawaka and Nadi River.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking at doing that in Ba as well as Rakiraki. In Rakiraki, three years ago, the Government spent \$1.3 million to clear Nakauvadra River. For the last two years, there was no flooding in town, first time ever water entered town this weekend. Why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for two reasons:

1. the massive volume of rain which went beyond the discharge capacity of the existing Nakauvadra River; and
2. over the last year, again, the silt material entered the Nakauvadra River and so we needed to clear it.

Exemption of Audit - Energy Fiji Limited
(Question No. 07/2022)

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the reasons for exempting the Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) from being audited by the Office of the Auditor-General?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the law actually allows for the exemption firstly to take place, and it does say quite specifically that the exemption should be what we call "Off Budget State Entities". In other words, Government does not give the State entities any money, EFL of course being one of them, including Fiji Ports Corporation Limited (FPCL). By way of background, EFL now is owned 51 per cent by the Fijian Government; 44 per cent by a company called Sevens Pacific Pte Limited which is owned by Chugoku, which is a private Japanese company, and the other shareholder is Japanese Bank for International Corporation (JBIC) which is owned by the Japanese Government; and the balance of the 5 per cent is owned by ordinary Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I could go into a lot of details, but essentially what has been happening, the Office of the Auditor-General has been outsourcing a lot of its own functions. I have got a list of companies here that the Office of the Auditor-General actually outsources the auditing work to. The EFL, since 2006 they have been outsourcing it, the last audit was done by Ernst & Young; the Fiji

Hardwood Corporation has been outsourced to KPMG, this is all by the Office of the Auditor-General; Food Processors Limited 2009 will be audited by the Office of the Auditor-General, moving forward, the back log will be outsourced; Biosecurity Authority of Fiji 2014 and 2016 has been outsourced to HLB accounting firm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have seen also is that, the Office of the Auditor-General takes at least four months, even though it has outsourced, then they carry out their own what we call the “operational audit”. They will not release any of these, even though it is outsourced, until after four months. There is a requirement under the Companies Act for the company to actually lodge their accounts within three months into the company’s office. And, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the EFL will soon be listed on the South Pacific Stock Exchange. Again, the SPX requires the submission of its annual financial statements to the SPX no later than three months after the end of its financial period. So, there is absolutely no truth and I have got a whole list of very dramatic headlines by *Fijivillage* and *Fiji Times* et cetera, where honourable Professor Prasad talks about no more accountability and transparency, his pied piper talks about why there has been exemption. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Narube says this is protecting corruption and some other people made all sorts of comments.

In fact, what really interesting is, the honourable Members from the other side to-date has never raised an issue about FPCL. The FPCL is not actually audited by the Office of the Auditor-General. Their annual report is done by external sources and comes directly into Parliament; they missed that point. So what is the difference between that? No one is saying that the accounts will not be tabled in Parliament, the accounts will be tabled in Parliament as they have been doing with FPCL. So, there is nothing untoward about it. It also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as allowed under the law, the audit must be carried out by an organisation that is actually certified to do so. As we have seen, PwC, Ernst & Young, KPMG and HLB are all certified accounting firms that can carry out the audit work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if they are saying that the Office of the Auditor-General, because it has not audited it, and therefore, somehow or the other, it is untoward behaviour, Office of the Auditor-General does not audit the Red Cross, FRIENDS is not audited by the Office of the Auditor-General, Fiji Public Service Association is not done by the Office of the Auditor-General, the Fiji Teacher’s Union and the Women’s Crisis Centre are not audited by the Office of the Auditor-General. But, no one says, therefore, that there is no transparency, they all claim to be transparent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is illogical. They have been caught out and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the unfortunate thing about this Opposition. They look for some scams, some kind of untoward behaviour to score political points and get to the front page of *Fijivillage* or *Fiji Times*.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That is what they are doing. They forget the fact that FPCL, all these years has not been using the OAG yet they do not have a problem with that. It is tabled in Parliament and you called them in and they come and answer to you.

The same thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is done by EFL. Similarly, other organisations are also done by outsourced companies. There is nothing fishy about it. It is about efficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact one of the financiers a few years back did not want to rely on the OAG assessment. They said we want to go back to the private company that did the audit because they thought the OAG was somehow or the other compromised. One of the financiers that was actually lending money to EFL, so Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is, the law allows for it, their reasons have been given as to why has been done. The annual report will be tabled in Parliament

and the honourable Members are quiet happy, they can quite happily question EFL on that. Thank you, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Sir, a supplementary question. Could the honourable Minister explain the reasons for the sale of FNPF shares to the investor?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, I have already addressed that in previous occasions but in fact FNPF made lots of money from it actually by selling those shares. They made a huge windfall in selling those shares.

COVID-19 Vaccination Efforts
(Question No. 08/2022)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the COVID-19 vaccination efforts?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for the question.

Sir, the vaccination efforts are going very well and I would like to begin by thanking all the Ministry of Health staff, the frontliners and also the support teams that have been supporting the vaccination programme. It has not been easy as we are all aware at the beginnings of the vaccination campaign the challenges that were faced beginning in this honourable House and also in social media even in mainstream media, the challenges around the virtues of the vaccination. We have gone past and beyond that.

As we speak, we have had two phases. The first phase was initially targeted towards the frontliners and also those who are above 60 and those who above 50 with comorbid illnesses and those who are below 50 with other significance illnesses and also above 18.

After the first phase, we then progressed with the second phase which is vaccinating everyone 18 and above and included in that second phase is the vaccination of our children initially beginning with those 16, 17 and 18 and then as we all are aware, we now vaccinating 12 to 14 with Pfizer.

Sir, we have had more than 761,000 doses of vaccines that have been provided by our partners and I would like to thank them beginning with the Government of Australia, Government of New Zealand, Government of United States of America, the Government of India and also the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility (COVAX), United Kingdom through COVAX and the other multilateral partners.

Our experts work hand in hand with COVAX and also with UNICEF and WHO. They look at the data that comes and also the evidence that comes from around the world but also we are looking at what is happening with our COVID-19 epidemiology locally and based on that is the advice given on the vaccination. Sir, at this moment in time there is 98 per cent of our population that have received the first dose and 93 per cent have received the second dose. To be actually exact about 11,700 individuals in Fiji have yet to receive their first dose and I know that most of us in this House who know someone who have not had their first dose and I encourage all of us to keep on encouraging them to have their first dose.

On a personal experience about two weeks ago, we celebrated my grandmother's 100th birthday and she was a lady who was at home with us during the midst of the COVID-19. She was exposed. I was isolated quite a few times. She was isolated with us, she received both her doses and also a booster dose. A personal family testament that COVID-19 vaccination does work and protects the vulnerable in our community.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. Can the honourable Minister update Parliament on the booster doses being administrated?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- I thank the honourable Member for that question. Mr. Speaker, the booster doses we have identified that there are about 240,000 individuals at the moment who are eligible for their booster doses and we are inviting them to come forth for their booster doses. Majority of all of us who have had their first doses was predominantly AstraZeneca. We are using Moderna as a booster dose. Last week we received the first 175,000 doses of Pfizer from the Government of Australia and it is our intention to also use Pfizer as a booster dose.

As I have said and have alluded to 80,000 have received their booster dose. I thank the honourable Member for that question because it brings something that is very pertinent at this moment. Yesterday, I was quite amazed and really irritated when I saw an article by Dr. Ram Raju in which he says that the booster dose had no use. We know for sure Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the booster dose just increases the level of immunity and prevents severe sickness, hospitalisation and death.

We also know that the policies that have been formulated by this Government, the Government of the honourable Prime Minister and his decisive leadership including the mandatory vaccination that happened for places of work with the No Jab, No Job policy have allowed planes to arrive back in this country, have allowed hotels to open, have allowed businesses to work, have allowed our people to go back overseas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had people coming to our office, young men and women wanting to join the British Army and one thing that is being asked of them is to be vaccinated. We have been able to do this because of the strong leadership of our Prime Minister and the vaccination came in and they are doing well. And to actually say, that it is of no use, is to actually be careless and I actually think Dr. Ram Raju was careless in saying those words which were published in the *Fiji Times*.

I want to make it very clear today that we are able to ease the restrictions that we have had, the ease of restrictions of the curfew, the ease of the restrictions of meeting, the informal meetings, the ability to be able to come together when somebody passes away because of the high vaccination coverage that we have. And we are able to sit here in Parliament because of the high vaccination coverage. I thank the honourable Member for that question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. That is the end of the Oral Questions.

Written Questions

Total Assistance Provided for COVID-19 Pandemic
(Question No. 09/2022)

HON. A. JALE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the total assistance provided by development partners in response to the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, in particular the following details itemised by year, donor and purpose –

- (a) aid-in-kind; and
- (b) grants?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Member for this question and the answer to that will be provided under the Standing Orders. Thank you Sir.

Rehabilitation Measures – Central Division Farmers
(Question No. 10/2022)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the rehabilitation measures to assist farmers in the Central Division, whose crops were either damaged or destroyed by floods since 2018, in particular the:

- (a) total number of affected farmers who have been assisted by the Ministry annually since 2018; and
- (b) broad categories of crops and value of assistance for each broad category of assistance to farmers annually since 2018.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3). Thank you

MR. SPEAKER.- Question time is now over.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you all for your cooperation and for your forbearance. We have had a long day but we have achieved what we intended to achieve at the beginning. We now adjourn Parliament until 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.12 p.m.