

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 26TH MARCH, 2020

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 26TH MARCH, 2020

The Parliament met at 7.56 p.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Josia Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Sugar Industry
Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications
Hon. Lt. Col. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and Foreign Affairs
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala, Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports
Hon. Mereseini Rakuita Vuniwaqa, Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation
Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Minister for Agriculture, Rural and Maritime Development, Waterways and Environment
Hon. Rosy Sofia Akbar, Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts
Hon. Cdr. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau, Minister for Fisheries
Hon. Osea Naiqamu, Minister for Forestry
Hon. Jone Usamate, Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services
Hon. Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete, Minister for Health and Medical Services
Hon. Premila Devi Kumar, Minister for Industry, Trade, Tourism, Local Government, Housing and Community Development
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 and Youth and Sports
Hon. Jale Sigarara, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Maritime Development
Hon. Viam Pillay, Assistant Minister for Environment and Rural Development
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand, Assistant Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts
Hon. George Vegnathan, Assistant Minister for Sugar Industry
Hon. Selai Adimaitoga, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs
Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya
Hon. Dr. Salik Ram Govind
Hon. Rohit Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Vijendra Prakash
Hon. Major-General (Ret'd) Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka
Hon. Ro Teimumu Vuikaba Kepa
Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu
Hon. Niko Nawaikula
Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka
Hon. Salote Vuibureta Radrodro

Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi
Hon. Mosese Drecala Bulitavu
Hon. Anare Jale
Hon. Ratu Suliano Matanitobua
Hon. Ro Filip Tuisawau
Hon. Inosi Kuridrani
Hon. Mitieli Bulanauca
Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
Hon. Simione Rokomalo Rasova
Hon. Prof. Biman C. Prasad
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua

Absent

Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya
Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro
Hon. Mikaele Rokosova Leawere
Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu
Hon. Jese Saukuru

ADMINISTRATION OF OATH/AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE

The Honourable Faiyaz Siddiq Koya subscribed to the Administration of Oath and took his seat in the Chamber.

A Point of Order on Standing Order 27 - Seating

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise on a Point of Order. Sir, may I refer to Standing Order 27 on Seating and also on some of the restrictive instructions that we have received from the Government and seek your clarification on the definition of a “gathering”. We have received instruction from the Secretary-General to Parliament that this is a workplace, but we would like to raise our concern that there are some who have been arrested for being in their workplace in gatherings of more than 20. The Honourable Members of the Opposition are waiting in our conference room for a ruling on this Standing Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leader of the Opposition. Honourable Leader of the Opposition, this is considered a workplace not a public gathering. Employees are going to work at this time, this is a workplace and I will explain the rest of it when I make the statement on Communications from the Chair.

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, may I ask to get the Honourable Members of the Opposition in now?

HON. SPEAKER.- I do not see the reason why they should not have been here in the first place.

HON. MAJOR-GENERAL (RET'D) S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we needed a clarification.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, going back, I warmly congratulate the Honourable Faiyaz Koya and although these surroundings are familiar to the Honourable Member, I welcome you to Parliament and I wish you all the best for the remainder of this Parliamentary term.

I would like to inform all Honourable Members that the Honourable Faiyaz Koya will deliver his maiden speech in the next available sitting. Thank you, Honourable Members.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 21st February, 2020 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

HON. SPEAKER.- I welcome all Honourable Members to this evening's special sitting for the delivery of the 2019-2020 Supplementary Appropriation Bill 2020 by the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications the Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum.

I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast of tonight's proceedings from the Committee Rooms and homes and thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Sitting Arrangement in the House

Honourable Members, as alluded to by the Honourable Prime Minister yesterday, Fiji is at war with the coronavirus. We cannot see our enemy but we must act as if the enemy is in our midst at all times. In that regard, I am invoking my powers under Standing Orders 20 to allow for the following:

- (1) Alter the sitting arrangement in Parliament so as to adhere to physical/social distancing of one to two metres and in doing so, you will note that 18 Members are seated in the public gallery;
- (2) All voting will be done by acclamation whereby after putting the Question, I will ask first for all those in favour of the motion to indicate so orally with an "Aye" and then ask second all those opposed to the motion to indicate so verbally with the "Nay".
- (3) The bar which demarcates the debating Chamber from the public gallery will remain open in all Parliament sittings for as long as COVID-19 remains a pandemic; and
- (4) For the 18 Members seated in the public gallery, if you wish to speak, you will have to come forward to the microphones closest to the bar. Once you finish your speech,

you will return to your seat in the public gallery. I wish to reassure, Honourable Members that the Chamber Attendants will promptly wipe down the two microphones and lecterns after each Member has spoken.

Honourable Members, tonight's significant event draws public attention and media attention and essentially the procedure is vital for the Parliament to fulfil its constitutional obligation. In that regard the approval of finance and appropriations whether it be an Annual Budget or a Supplementary Budget as in this case is a fundamental role of any legislature. Thank you for being part of this significant event.

Honourable Members, before we proceed to the next item on the Order Paper, I will allow the Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion. You have the floor, Sir.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 6, I move that so much of the following Standing Orders be suspended:

- (a) Standing Order 68(1), to exempt the COVID-19 response Budget Address from the ordinary speaking time limitations;
- (b) Standing Orders 102, 104 to 108 to expedite the COVID-19 response Budget process through Parliament to allow the Fijian Government to urgently respond to the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- (c) Standing Orders 23(1) and 34 to allow the COVID-19 response Budget process to take place today and tomorrow.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

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

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

Very briefly, Mr. Speaker, I am moving the suspension motion so as to allow the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy to table the COVID-19 Response Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are difficult times and I do not think I have to stress how important it is for us to take urgent and decisive action. I have already outlined the part of the Standing Orders that need to be suspended. Again, Standing Order 68(1) is about the time limitation for all speeches and it is our request that the Honourable Attorney-General to speak beyond the 20 minutes allocated time. Standing Order 102 to Standing Order 104 and, of course, Standing Order 108, is about the procedures for Supplementary Estimates, Committee of Supply and includes the amendments. Of course, we hope that there will be debates without motions, so as to allow us to expedite the process.

Lastly, Standing Order 23(1) briefly talks about the sitting days and we know that Fridays is usually for Opposition, but we hope that given our current situation, that can also be suspended and of

course, the order of parliamentary business as set out in Standing Order 34 as well, so that we can just focus on the Supplementary Response Budget rather than the procedures as laid out under Standing Order 34.

The Supplementary Budget process, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, as laid out in the Standing Orders is inadequate as it sets out a lengthy process, so in the current circumstances, we simply do not have time to follow. This is why we have opted to suspend the relevant Standing Orders and tailor-make a specific process which enables Parliament to respond to the needs of our people. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. Does any other Honourable Member wishes to contribute to this motion?

Honourable Tikoduadua, you have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on behalf of my Party and also, I believe I speak on this occasion also for the rest of the Opposition because the move to suspend the Standing Orders under Standing Order 6 is something that has come as a complete surprise to us.

Mr. Speaker, I have your list here as well, I mean, the whole list of the Standing Orders, and I recognise the urgency of dealing with this matter. I know I am speaking on the substantive matter here. I know that you, Mr. Speaker, has not asked us whether we object or not, but we do object to it and I hope that you will also allow for the House to debate the reasons why, particularly this side of the House, do not agree with this proposition.

Mr. Speaker, on 12th March, the Business Committee met and you, as Chairman, had actually put to the Committee under Standing Order 102 the processes that we would follow. I know things have changed a lot and in terms of the number of cases that Fiji has got since, and I think we have got five already, however, the Honourable Prime Minister has declared a war on COVID-19. We are all fighting COVID-19 because it affects our very lives and the lives of our family and our loved ones.

However, Mr. Speaker, even in war there are rules of war. When we are in war, we follow the law. What is such the urgency about having to limit the rights of representatives of half of the people, understanding the urgency. Of course, we understand the urgency, but why waive all these rules?

We have not had the opportunity, and this is from you, Honourable Speaker, as you had informed the Business Committee on that day. Often Government, when we have written about offering assistance so we could help, at least understand your plans, of course, you would not want it but, at least, we offered, but we could have been informed. I mean, this is the whole nation going on together.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- We are not hypocrites!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 102, I am only saying here, if the very law that is enshrined here in Standing Orders is going to limit the very rights of this House to stand for what we advocate for in terms of the rule of law, then I have serious doubts about the motivation, and I am sure the Honourable Minister...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- ... can listen and he can learn something. And I have been saying that from day one in this House, however, we seriously object to that for the reasons that have been given.

Yes, we understand the urgency for it and we need to kill this disease, but it is not pushing aside the law to do it. You cannot reserve the law to do it. You need to follow the law, but do not use the law. Seriously, Mr. Speaker, using Standing Order 6 to bend the procedures, we do not agree, and we will not agree to that. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Lt. Col. Tikoduadua. Apart from the meeting on 12th March, 2020, the urgency of this is such that we need to have this debate now and we have adjusted the rules of procedure and the rules in the Standing Orders and that is within the powers of the Speaker. You will have the opportunity to debate this, you will. You are saying that you will not have the opportunity, I will be giving you the opportunity, but I hope that you will speak sense to this debate when it does take place. Is there any other Member who wishes to take the floor?

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, I think reservation in terms of speaking sense, Honourable Speaker. I mean, this is the House and we are here to speak sensibly about the interest that we, on this side of the House, is placed with to carry. So I believe that we are here really in good sense, but I do not think good sense really is prevailing here with the Government pushing this forward, at least, without notifying this side of the House before being told here today.

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- This is in opposition to the motion, Honourable Speaker. Yes, I think it is very cynical, very foolish and very cunning of the Government to be moving this motion. The public should know the extent of what the Government is trying to do here.

What the Government is trying to do here is to suspend several Standing Orders in order to push through the Supplementary Bill. We all know that the Government is entitled to know the reasons, and for that we have a special Standing Order that caters for that – Standing Order 102, and if you allow me to read that, Honourable Speaker. This is one of the Standing Orders that the Government is trying to suspend. What does Standing Order 102 say? Standing Order Standing Order 102 is based on good governance. It is based on transparency. So what does it say? Let me read it in detail.

This is what Standing Order 102 says which is what you are trying to throw away.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Yes, maybe you have it but you do not understand so let me just read it again. Standing Order 102 is specifically for a supplementary budget or a mini budget and you only have that when you do not have the money, and that is the situation now. And when you do not have that, the Government is entitled to know and know fully.

Standing Order 102 has a special heading, 'Supplementary Estimates'. Standing Order 102(1) states, and I quote:

“This Standing Order applies if the Minister responsible for Finance introduces to Parliament a Bill to provide for expenditure not already provided for by the Appropriation Bill for that 12-month period.”

So it applies when it fails, when it has run out of money. So you have a special procedure for doing that, for the purpose of good governance and transparency.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Then, what does it say further in Standing Order 102(2). It states, and I quote:

“The Bill, to be known as the Supplementary Appropriation Bill, must be accompanied by a document, to be known as the Supplementary Estimates, being the details of the appropriation amounts contained in the Bill. The Supplementary Estimates must be circulated to all members immediately after the Bill is introduced.”

If they are successful, they can do without supplementary estimates and a supplementary estimate is needed, it is required for the public to know what the extent of their problem is. So that is why I am saying, they are trying to hide something from the Government. It says, “...the details of the appropriation amounts contained in the Bill.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The Supplementary Estimates must be circulated to all members immediately after the Bill is introduced.” So, here, we are left not in the know. It has come without notice. We do not even know whether the supplementary estimates will come.

The only assurance that we have is Standing Order 102. The only assurance that the public has for accountability and transparency is Standing Order 102, and that is what they are trying to kill. They are trying to hide. They have brought the economy to its knees and even to that extent, they are still trying to hide their problems, and that is the whole reason for this motion.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Now, let me go further to Standing Order 102(3) which states, and I quote: “Parliament is then adjourned until a date and time fixed by the Speaker...” Now, that is to allow us notice. We have come here without notice. We want to understand what the extent of their problem is so that we can come back another day for the purpose of the public so that they know. We will fully ventilate what is the problem that is facing our nation.

Again, they are trying to hide that by bringing in this motion. They are trying to hide everything, they are trying to hide the inaccuracies, they are trying to hide the problem they are face with, from the public. They are using coronavirus for this. It is them, it is them, it is them! They have brought the nation to its knees.

Now, let me go to the next one. What does it say? Standing Order 102(3) states, and I quote:

“Parliament is then adjourned until a date and time fixed by the Speaker at which the Bill is read a second time and, without any question being put, the Bill and the supplementary estimates stand referred to the Committee of Supply...”

Again, transparency, accountability and good governance.

Then it continues, and I quote: "...The date and time as fixed must be at least six days..." Six days, Honourable Speaker. We are not here for our sake, we want the public to fully understand what the financial problems of the economy is.

Here is a motion that has come here without notice, and you are expecting us to debate it tomorrow. We want to go back and consult, and tell the public, "This is what we are facing." So that is why it says six days and the reason why they are doing this is to hide it. They do not want the public to know. They do not want the public to know the extent of our problem.

Let me go on. It says again that once that is finished, then it goes and reverts to the same process when we go through, as in a normal budget, where we go through each Head. Again, good governance, transparency and accountability. The very reason it is here, the very reason for democracy, and they are trying to kill that.

It is very sad. It is very sad that this is happening. Do you expect us to allow that? Do you expect us to hide your foolishness from our children? No! And that is the reason why we oppose and that is only one. I am only referring here to Standing Order 102 here. There are other sections there as well, they have read about it. So, I do not know.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Sit down.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Not "sit down", this is serious

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- This is serious

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Yes! You are incompetent, just look at how you handled *Coronavirus*, you have not even gazetted. You have your power under section 35 and have done nothing. So, we are not supporting this.

(Honourable Members interject)

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Honourable Speaker, I was not going to say anything but the Honourable Member just said that the Ministry of Health did nothing. What do you mean by "did nothing"?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Honourable Speaker, the sons and daughters of Fiji have been working very very hard in the last five months.

(Table Thumping)

HON. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- When the Year 2020 Budget was done, no one predicted that we will have COVID-19. If we knew, we would have set aside appropriations for that Budget, but no

one knew, Honourable Speaker. It came in November, December, it started in a different country, it went all over the world and every economy is struggling.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- The Ministry of Health needs the support to be able to do its work, that is why we are asking that we expedite this budget discussion that we are having today, Honourable Speaker, and here we have on the other side wanting to curtail and delay the Appropriation Bill that is before us.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- We have people in lockdown areas who are not going to work. We have medical supplies that need to be carried through and done. That is the whole aim of the Budget.

Honourable Speaker, I find this despicable and worrying. They are not concerned about COVID-19. If they were concerned about COVID-19, they will say, "Let us get through this and let us get the supplies out to the people."

Honourable Speaker, I rise in support of the motion, and I must say that I am very disappointed at their actions today. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- The Honourable Professor Biman Prasad, you have the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, there are a couple of points that I want to raise. First, I think we could have done this through a flying minute. The Opposition could have been informed about the intentions of the Government and also your Office as to how we need to get through this.

Obviously, that was not done, this is a surprise. I think the point that we are trying to make, Mr. Speaker, is the accountability of any Appropriation Bill and here I want to, first of all, read the letter that I wrote to the Honourable Prime Minister because I have to do this as this is a very genuine letter. Mysteriously, Mr. Speaker, it got leaked through a government newspaper and the so-called explanatory journalist or editor vilified me and my genuine letter to the Prime Minister. I want to read this letter because this is very important:

"Dear Prime Minister,

Bi-partisanship in Preparation and Passage of *Coronavirus* Response Supplementary Budget

We, the Parliamentary Caucus of the National Federation Party, in the genuine spirit of bi-partisanship offer our wholehearted assistance in the preparation and passage of the Coronavirus Response Supplementary Budget scheduled to be announced in Parliament on Thursday, March 26th, 2020, suggest that we have a bi-partisan agreement on the contents of the Supplementary Budget before it is presented to Parliament by the Honourable Minister for Economy on 26th March. We can then have a short debate on the Budget on Monday, it could have been Friday, if negotiated, with the few selected and agreed speakers each from Government and the Opposition, and have the third reading and bi-partisan endorsement and passage of the Budget on the same day. This will save valuable time and boost confidence of our people and the business community.

We believe that the Opposition, Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), is also writing to you. Our spirit of bi-partisanship and support is genuine. A united and cohesive political leadership at national level will undoubtedly boost the morale and confidence of all our people who are panic-stricken and naturally fearful after the global outbreak of Coronavirus or COVID-19 has reached our shores.

The impact of this pandemic will have devastated consequences for our ailing economy, resulting in massive job losses, shutdown of businesses and severely cripple the tourist industry, which is the largest contributor to our GDP.

The Honourable Prime Minister, throughout our democratic world, we have witnessed bi-partisanship between Government and Opposition in rolling out strategies and stimulus packages to protect the population as well as safeguard the livelihood of the people.

The most significant example of this is the cooperation between the Republican control of the White House and the Senate, and the Democratic control of the Congress in the United States of America. This is despite a bitter and acrimonious process and debate over the recently concluded impeachment proceedings against the President.

It is a shining example of bipartisanship where a huge package, aimed at uplifting the lives of US citizens, was put together by the democrats, approved unanimously by Congress and Senate, and accepted by the President.

Let us all unite, as you rightly said, to fight this pandemic in the 50th year of Independence that was achieved through genuine dialogue, consensus-building and in a true spirit of bipartisanship.

We, once again, reiterate our offer of wholehearted assistance in the preparation of the Coronavirus Response Budget because, collectively, we will be able to achieve sound and sensible solution in a speedy manner, ultimately resulting in safe delivery of health to all our people.”

Obviously, Mr. Speaker, as I said, we did not get any response but what I saw was an Article in a pro-Government newspaper by a so-called explanatory editor, not knowing that two Bills were already passed, and the third one was being negotiated between the White House, the Senate and the Congress. So, Mr. Speaker, we offered this genuine partnership and genuine offer to look at a Supplementary Budget. If we have done that, we would have supported the suspension of Standing Order 102. Unfortunately, and I know the Honourable Attorney-General was saying from the other side when the Honourable Lt. Col. Tikoduadua was speaking that, “Oh, that is hypocrisy”. I know we criticise, but they are very sensitive to criticism, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, we said, “Let’s be honest about what we tell the international media about our economy.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, let me say this that the impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a double tragedy to our economy, to our people because the economy was in a bad shape already. We had, Mr. Speaker, a billion dollar less spending in terms of the Actual Expenditure and the Projected Expenditure in the 2018-2019 Budget. We reduced the expenditure by another billion dollars in the last Budget so we are already struggling as an economy, and that is why, Mr. Speaker, we offered this discussion with the Government to let us look at what the response should be. We know that we need to do this quickly but, Mr. Speaker, we also need to ensure that there is accountability.

The job of the Opposition is to hold the Government to account and that is why we wanted this discussion before we come here so that we can accelerate the approval of the package or the Response of the Supplementary Budget that we are going to present today in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, that is precisely the point I was making, unfortunately, that has not been the case so we need to go through the proper process as we go for the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, we cannot support this motion and we cannot support the suspension of Standing Order 102 because it is not going to be good governance, it is not going to allow the Opposition, on behalf of the people of this country to hold the Government to account, to ask the appropriate questions. That is the point we are making, Mr. Speaker, and therefore we do not support this motion before us.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. Honourable Speaker, in support of the motion, let me read out to Honourable Prasad the letter that I was going to reply to him in response to the letter that he wrote to me:

“Dear Honourable Prasad,

In determining my response to your letter, I have to ask myself, “Which Biman Prasad am I writing to?

- Is it the Biman who divisively attacked Fiji’s workable political call for multilateral action in the financial times, undermining the need for unity in our rallying cry for small island states?
- Or is it the same Biman who divisively politicised a global economic crisis preaching that Fiji was somehow on unimproved footing as are countless other nations who face a fall-out in this pandemic?
- Or is it the same Biman who divisively condemned the life-saving protection measures enforced by the Police Officers at the borders of the Lautoka confined area?
- Or is it the same Biman who divisively labelled the Government as egotistical, then in the same breath, aberrantly demanded a 35-percent pay cut for all those in the Civil Service which would include our essential healthcare workers on the frontlines of our COVID-19 Response?”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... “Or is it the Biman Prasad who, in a stunning reversal, ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... is now asking to work with our Government in the genuine spirit of bi-partisanship?”

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order. Mr. Speaker, Sir, at no point have I called for a reduction in the salaries of civil servants. What I suggested was for all the Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, Permanent Secretaries, right up to the Director levels. I also said that anyone below the Director level should not be affected, so it is not the whole Civil Service. The Honourable Prime Minister should correct that, Mr. Speaker. He is referring to the civil servants, that is misleading, that is not what I said.

(Chorus of interjections)

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.-

“Or is it the Biman Prasad who, in a stunning reversal, is now asking to work with our Government with a genuine spirit of bi-partisanship. Whichever Biman I am speaking to, I hope you can at least settle on one thing - there is nothing genuine about hypocrisy. I assure you, we will continue to lead our COVID-19 Response with the best information on the advice of our leading experts and in line with best practices around the world. You and your two other elected Party Members that signed that letter, can support that work by consistently standing in solidarity with the Fijian people. I suggest you begin by backing the measures we put into place to ensure the health and safety of every Fijian comes first. Thank you, Your Excellency.

Respectfully,

Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama.”

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Prime Minister.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bulitavu.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just before I make my contribution to the motion, just a point of clarification that the mover of the motion can make whether we are going to debate this suspension motion only because he is proposing Standing Order 51 to be moved by the next mover of the next motion, or whether we are going to debate also for the usage of Standing Order 51 before we go and do the Substantive Budget?

HON. SPEAKER.- Just speak to this motion that is being debated now.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to object the motion which is before the House, and that is to suspend using Standing Order 6, where the Honourable Leader of the House has used to suspend many of the Standing Orders.

Standing Orders in all Parliaments, Sir, as you know, are not there for decoration. It guides the rule of how we should operate in any Parliament, and I think that outlines the roles of Members of Parliament and also you, Sir, as the Honourable Speaker and as the Head of Legislature.

I will speak specifically, Sir, on Standing Orders 102(3) in terms of the issue that we are about to deliberate on which is the Supplementary Estimates which gives you, Sir, the power to fix the date and the time on which a Bill to be read a second time in the House and that is the power that you have, Sir, in Standing Order 102(3) which this particular motion tries to suspend. Once you suspend your powers and limit your power, Sir, on fixing of those things, those powers are also in line with Standing Order 18. If you go to Standing Order 18, where you, Sir, have powers in the proper running of Parliament and in Standing Order 18 (2) (a) and (c) talks about you as the Speaker is responsible, Sir, and I quote:

- “(a) for ensuring the rights and privileges of all members;
- (c) for carrying out any other functions and duties and exercising any other powers set out in these Standing Orders.”

which includes the powers that are stipulated in Standing Order 102(3) which talks about your powers, Sir, to fix the time and dates for debate.

We know that the Honourable Lt. Col. Tikoduadua had already spoken, Sir, on the importance of the Business Committee under Standing Order 124, the powers and functions of the Business Committee in putting out the Order Paper and also the business of the House that is to be brought to the House.

Bearing in mind, Sir, with all respect of what you had alluded to, that it happened on the 12th of this month and things have changed. Today is the 26th and the development of the virus since we had our first case, after seven days, we have got five cases, the threat level has gone up, so we need to also make necessary adjustments.

I was wishing, Sir, that it would come by way of a ruling after this, not to come by way of a vote that we vote on the motion, but you, Sir, to make a ruling on this because it is very important whether you, Sir, having that power to fix the date or to give us the power or the mover of the motion. He was very silent in the way he did it, saying that the mover of the motion on the Supplementary Estimates will decide on how to use Standing Order 51. Talking about Standing Order 51, Sir, you know when the mover of the motion will decide on the passage of the Bill and the passage of the motion. The mover of the motion will then decide, we have not heard him yet, after we pass this motion, then he will be allowed to do that. We will hear of how many hours of debate that will allow.

In previous occasions, Sir, you had given only one hour to debate some very important Bills that should have gone to Committees and this is a very first time that Standing Order 6 has been used. It was only used, Sir, when we reached 12.30 p.m. and debates were still going on that we needed to suspend the Standing Orders to allow the debate to continue, or you, Sir, in times where we had reached 4.30 p.m. and we had not got to the end of business on the Order Paper and we needed to finish the items on the Order Paper. Those were some of the previous occasions and situations where Standing Order 6 was used.

For this one, Sir, they have raised the bar a little bit to limit our very important rights as Members in this House and that is one that will come later. Sir, I do not know because that was not part of the motion, whether everyone will speak or not. Will everyone have that 20 minutes or not because that is part of the rights of any Member and the privilege of any Member in this House. As you have already said while Honourable Lt. Col. Tikoduadua was giving his contribution that you will give everyone a chance to speak, but the mover of the next motion will have to move and tell us whether he is going to limit the time and whether he wants this motion that will come by through Standing Order 51 be passed by tomorrow at what time? We do not know.

These are some of the things that will limit the rights and privileges of Members in this House and we are representatives of the people, Sir, in this country and as their Members to speak on the substantive motion and a motion to allow suspension for another Member to move a motion under Standing Order 51 to limit our rights. That will affect not only our rights as Members who had witnessed today Honourable Faiyaz Koya taking oath; congratulations! That you have taken an oath to defend the rights of the people and the Constitution. What message are you sending to the people Sir, if we are going to limit those who are going to speak tomorrow by saying that the debate will only take say by 3 p.m. tomorrow the Appropriation Bill should be passed, some of the Members will not be able to speak so their rights will be limited.

That is why, Sir, I seek you to come by way of Standing Order 18 to protect the rights and privileges of the Members. This is very important, Sir. And if that you can make a ruling today not to allow a vote on this particular motion, but to make a ruling, Sir, given that you have already said that given the change of situation and the adjustments that Parliament would like make to accommodate the need that is there, I think it is proper that you make a ruling. We all understand that COVID-19 is a necessity and we are all fighting to beat coronavirus and also that we are all there to support social

distancing and all the measures that are in place and all what Government wants, but again, these are very important roles of any legislature.

We see in Standing Orders 100 and 102, when you come to Committee of Supply, Sir, that is a very important role that you play when you come down from that Chair to become the Chairman of the Committee of Supply, where we will go into detail on the Heads of the SEGs and the activities. There is a right that is given there, Sir, in the Standing Orders. We can move motions to increase or decrease a particular allocation, that is very important, and whether we should be given that opportunity to raise things that probably the Honourable Minister of Health had overlooked, that has given a figure that we know that should be increased to meet the situation that is there, or to reduce some of the areas that could be prioritised in a particular area given the situation that we have. That is that particular function of Parliament that will be removed by this suspension motion and I humbly request, Sir, for a ruling, not for this motion to proceed by law. That is my contribution to the motion, that I strongly oppose this particular motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand not to speak but just to clarify. I wish the Honourable Members had actually questioned or found out the information before jumping to conclusions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is, we have a very dire situation on our hand globally speaking.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- There are over 25,000 Fijians who have currently lost their jobs because of the tourism sector shutting down.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is not a woe.

These people have lost jobs because planes have stopped flying into Fiji. These people need to access their FNPF accounts, and these people need assistance from the Government to help them supplement, those in particular who do not have enough monies in FNPF, we are going to supplement that. They do not want to dilly dally like these people want to dilly dally.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They need to go to FNPF tomorrow, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and if they also had known, we have the supplementary documents prepared, they are all there, all they have to do, if they have the particular level of intellect, they can digest it as the name suggests, Sir. This is to take us till the end of the financial year which is for the next three to four months. They can very quickly digest that and come back.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to pre-empt, what the Honourable Leader of the Government did not say, which they actually jumped on, there is obviously an opportunity for them to contribute. They will have the opportunity to look at these documents overnight. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they talk about their rights, they are completely forgetting the rights of ordinary Fijians outside this Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That is what they are doing; they are forgetting the rights of ordinary Fijians outside this Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They talk about breaking the law, we are using the law and this is why the law is drafted in such a manner to cater for extraordinary circumstances.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- These are extraordinary circumstances.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Nawaikula, et cetera talked about the Supplementary Budget, there have been 48 Supplementary Budgets since 1984 till 2005, he does not know what he is talking about. The Honourable Prof. Biman Prasad said, “Director level”, I have got the *Fiji Times* article here, on the front, the first column, you said all civil servants.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I will *Viber* it to you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- This is the monstrosity.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I want to implore on the Honourable Attorney-General and the Honourable Prime Minister not to mislead Parliament because as a recorded statement which is on our *Facebook* where I said very clearly, if the Honourable Attorney-General is referring to the newspaper article, that is his problem.

(Honourable Member interjects)

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As far as I am concerned, I was very clear where I suggested that all the Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, Permanent Secretaries right up to the Director level should take a pay cut and I said, “anyone below that should not get a pay cut.”

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, let me remind the Honourable Attorney-General not to mislead the people of this country about what I said. Thank you.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, therefore, the Honourable Member is saying we should not believe the *Fiji Times* ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- ... and even if it is not correct because this article has your by-line on it, your name is on it and the column that says here, it says, let me read it out to you and I quote:

“Plan for three months. Government must think about how long the crisis will continue, three months is a reasonable window, the crisis may go longer but it can adjust its responses as it goes. The Government must think about how its measures can work over that period. Take the pay cut. This is not about money, this is about showing solidarity and sacrifice. The Prime Minister, Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, Speaker, Members of Parliament, Permanent Secretaries, Deputy Permanent Secretaries and all those in the Civil Service and Government-owned Commercial Companies and Statutory Organisations as well as heads and executives of independent institutions should take a 35 percent salary cut.”

That means we cannot believe *Fiji Times*. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I digress.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, please. I urge the Honourable Members, please do not make this a political football. I am going to read out a budget statement. They will be given the COVID-19 Response Budget Estimate; the whole book. They will be given the supplement, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They have the ability to digest this and we need to get this approved tomorrow. I am telling this now. I am pre-empting it now because people need to get access to funds. There are people without jobs. There are people who need access to funds. In this supplement here and I am pre-empting it, in this supplement ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- ... the Government is making available \$60 million directly in payments to those people who do not have jobs. There are people in garment factories who no longer have jobs. We want to pay them money. There are people who will go into quarantine. They will not be able to go to jobs, we want to pay for that. Their Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) and Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) considerations, we want to give.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They need it. They need it now, not the luxury of them sitting here pontificating about some finer piece in the Standing Orders which will not address the situation. They do not understand that only five days ago, the United States of America (USA) had only a few thousand people with COVID-19, today they have 65,000 people. They do not understand that. For them, it is more political gangrene, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are serious. Please, I urge you to support what the Honourable Leader of the Government is doing, let us get on the budget, let me announce it, you can criticise it, you can go through the figures, let us sought it out by tomorrow because the Fijian public want to know what they are going to get and how we will prepare ourselves. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Leader of the Government in Parliament, your Right of Reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLAIMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. May I just say a few things very quickly. Mr. Speaker, Sir, time is of the essence. Every day counts.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Why did you not call us in the morning to do this?

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Let me say this again, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Everyday counts. Italy had five patients initially.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Within a month they have 60,000 COVID-19 positive patients. They have the second best in terms of facilities around the world but now, they have taken the hard decision to come down to those who are 60 years old not to be given ventilators. They left it too late.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the Honourable Bilitavu talked about human rights. Right now, the most important rights is the right to live. People have the right to live. Of course, we have the Parliamentary processes. It is a choice between the rock and the hard surface, we go parliamentary processes or we take immediate action now because the lives of people is involved.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can be debating here for the whole of next week but everyday counts. Mr. Speaker Sir, unfortunately, we cannot allow a lot of our people to be COVID-19 positive because of the limited facilities that we have, that is a reality. So, if we want to be successful, we have to contain it now and, of course, allocate all the resources. Honourable Tikoduadua, you know what the main efforts are, we need to focus our main efforts, giving them the right allocation of resources and get all the support because everyday in the delaying of our decision, we will have serious cost implications in the future.

It is not only about the loss of lives, it is about the social and economic implications. Let us take responsibility, short-circuit the process and the most important thing is to serve our people so that they can have and enjoy the right to life and, of course, as I have stated earlier, this is not ordinary times. So, Mr. Speaker Sir, I urge other Honourable Members of the House to support the motion that is before the House. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

The Question is:

Pursuant to Standing Order 6, that so much of the following Standing Orders be suspended:

- (a) Standing Order 68(1), to exempt the COVID-19 Response Budget Address from the ordinary speaking time limitations;
- (b) Standing Orders 102 and 104 to Standing Order 108, to expedite the COVID-19 Response Budget Process through Parliament to allow the Fijian Government to urgently respond to COVID-19 Pandemic;
- (c) Standing Orders 23(1) and 34 to allow the COVID-19 Response Budget Process to take place today and tomorrow.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications, the Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

BILLS – FIRST READING

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move that:

- (a) The following COVID-19 Response Bills be considered by Parliament without delay:
 - (i) COVID-19 Response Bill 2020;
 - (ii) Tax Administration (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (iii) Income Tax (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (iv) Value Added Tax (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (v) Stamp Duties (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (vi) Customs (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (vii) Customs Tariff (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (viii) Fiji National Provident Fund (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020;
and
 - (ix) Public Health (COVID-19 Response) (Amendment) Bill 2020.

Mr. Speaker, the –

- (b) Bills must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bills must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Attorney-General and Minister for Economy begin the debate tonight, Thursday 26th March, 2020, by delivering the COVID-19 Response Address;
- (e) Leader of the Opposition be given a right of response to the Bills tomorrow, Friday, 27th March, 2020;
- (f) Debate on the Bills proceed after the response by the Leader of the Opposition and be limited to three hours with the right of reply given to the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy; and
- (g) All the Bills be voted upon tomorrow, Friday 27th March, 2020.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion.

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

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Similarly to the objections that we have made earlier and this time on the motion that is now before the House as raised by the Honourable Minister for Economy on the three hours, we on this side of the House, are not content at all at the urgency of this matter.

We all understand that it is a war as proclaimed by the Honourable Prime Minister. Not only has Fiji declared war on this COVID-19 but the whole world as well. We, as responsible citizens of this globe, have the very duty of protecting our lives and the future of this planet, of human nature and the people that God had put to this world and to protect the world as it is as He has created.

However, Mr. Speaker, times of emergencies have come and gone. We have been through many World Wars and as I have said earlier, even a war is guided by rules. We are battled by the neutralists because it would seem to appear to me as a member of the Business Committee that really, a lot has been veiled from my Party and I, as a Member and, of course, to the Opposition, the secrecy through which this has been borne before the House. Of course, I understand that Standing Order 6 has been moved earlier by the Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, to suspend the other Standing Orders that normally would be used to process Budget Estimate, as you had ruled the other day on 12th March when we met that we would go through the whole process.

Mr. Speaker, you were the Commander of the Fiji Military Forces once and we have many soldiers here too. Battle procedure has one of the biggest principles is the anticipation at all levels. Bad anticipation, Mr. Speaker, absolutely bad!

I mean, just hearing from the Honourable Minister for Economy today, blaming the Opposition from coming here today and not being ready to support the people of Fiji because we are only looking after our self-interest.

We have been to our own communities telling them. I have been in the village all this while since January, telling the people, “This thing is going to come to our shores. Are you ready?” We have set aside village funds because we know the hard times that is going to hit us. We have been looking at this from January when it first hit the world.

Now, Mr. Speaker, this Parliament has been forced to consider this appropriation for three hours. As I have said, we understand the urgency of this matter, but to rush through this process for three hours, setting aside the rules, someone needs to answer the question here to the people of Fiji - why? Why only three hours and it has taken all this while?

Mr. Speaker, this is not about a joke. We are talking about the transparency and the accountability of our nation, of the hard earned money of our people.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, of course, I mean, you will do that. But, Mr. Speaker, three hours is not good enough. No one is going to agree on three hours. You could never say everything you want to say within three hours. You cannot! Seriously, you cannot scrutinise it well.

I have even forgotten all those Bills that the Honourable Minister for Economy had just mentioned, and he expects us to be debating those today and tomorrow?

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Well, of course, we will look at it tonight but this is not a laughing matter. Half of the people of Fiji deserve to know that we, at least, on this side of the House demand accountability, demand transparency and demand processes.

My Honourable Leader has been saying all along that our economy is coming to a slow and grinding halt. It has stopped, Mr. Speaker. There is no doubt, you go to the village, you will see it. You speak to the taxi driver, he feels it. We are all looking at this. I mean, the Government is lucky, COVID-19 came along. For whatever it has taken us, they are using it to come to this House and then we will actually salvage the integrity as Government.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- The Government is using COVID-19 at this stage to justify this expenditure. I mean, it does not make sense. Where is the boom? Where is the boom?

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Where is the boom? Where is the unprecedented growth?

In your earlier comment, Mr. Speaker, you said that we should debate sensibly. We are trying to be sensible, Mr. Speaker. I am trying to be sensible.

I have been out for six months, Mr. Speaker, I have missed a lot. A lot has changed. I mean, a lot of challenges have met our nation. And I tell you, Mr. Speaker, I come back into this House today, many of the things I have said six months ago when I left are all floating in the air.

In the Privileges Committee, the Honourable Minister continued to ask me, and I am asking today, three hours? Mr. Speaker, I am sure we are a strong nation and a strong people. Our people are struggling, of course. We are all struggling. We want the people of Fiji to be secure from this COVID-19. They need to feed their families. We have been feeding our families but that is no excuse, Mr. Speaker, to rush through this Appropriation. I am sure it is going to be a little bit over half a billion but realistically, Mr. Speaker, we are responsible people. We need to be responsible to the people as well as about the decisions we make here. Of course, we look after their interest so, Mr. Speaker, I am sure, my Leader is going to speak on this. Absolutely three hours, no, we do not agree. I am sure it can be given a longer period of time, at least give the Standing Orders some decency and some integrity. I thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Viliame Gavoka.

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

Honourable Speaker, I came today from Nadroga to the expectations of the people that the leaders of this country will meet as scheduled, to have this important dialogue regarding a threat that today is threatening the whole of mankind. They know that I am their Parliamentarian and that there is a Parliament in Fiji that abides by framework of rules to help it conduct the very important affairs of the nation, and the arrangements, the programmes were spelt out to them weeks ago that we would follow to debate this very very important matter that is holding mankind in the state it is in today. The whole of Fiji is watching, they want some answers, they want their leaders to deliberate. They were expecting some change in the way FijiFirst would behave.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- FijiFirst has been in power for the last four years, now going to five, and we all know that in the first Elections, they had a majority over the Opposition exceeding 90,000 votes. In the last Elections, the majority has dwindled to 147 votes, telling us that the people of Fiji are sick and tired of the behaviour of FijiFirst. They were hoping that this time, there would be some cooperation across the aisle, and as has been articulated by the Leader of the NFP, an offer had been made even from SODELPA to work together towards this crisis.

The Leader of the NFP had alluded to the situations in Washington where both parties have come together to pass a bill worth about \$2 trillion between two parties that were at each other's throats not long ago - the impeachments. Now, you see President Trump saying, "I will absolutely sign this Bill that was worked out between people who were virtually belligerent not long ago, and here today, I was hoping the Prime Minister would have replied to Honourable Professor Biman Prasad with a bit more response of accommodation instead of pointing out all the differences that they have.

Let bygones be bygones when we have this threat before us. That is what the people of Fiji are saying, they are saying, "Forget what you said to each other in February, today is the end of March, work out something that will benefit the country"

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... in a responsible manner!

HON. MEMBER.- Okay, that's enough.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- You cannot ask us to take those books now at about 9.15 tonight and come back tomorrow to debate these things, you cannot. We were prepared to work through the weekend. We care about our people, we are prepared all through the weekend. The way they go on about caring about the people of Fiji, they almost made me cry, I wanted to cry. I was asking the question - why did you not call us something this morning? We could have thrashed it out today and debate it tomorrow.

Honourable Speaker, this is very disappointing and we represent just about half of the people of Fiji and I am sure they are expressing their disappointment in the way it has been done today. This is nothing worse than an ambush.

We came prepared to work and this is what has been done to us. Take these books, read them tonight and we debate for three hours tomorrow. It is a mockery of the system, a mockery of what the people and our country believe in so, Honourable Speaker, all I can say to the other side is, "Shame on you for trying to sound as if you are trying to help our people, but doing it in a manner that is irresponsible and not in-keeping with good sense that we expect our people to embrace in this country.

Honourable Speaker, three hours is totally unacceptable to this side of the House. Thank you.

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

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. I rise to give my contribution to the motion that is before the House. This is exactly what I said in my contribution in the last motion, that the way the Honourable Attorney-General will come in through Standing Order 51, deciding the way this particular Bill will be passaged, is now before us. It will be debated tomorrow only for three hours and given that I have already alluded to the last time when I spoke in the previous motion, that you had assured us, Sir, that everyone will speak in the three hours. How will we divide these three hours? How many will be speaking? How many minutes each speaker will speak for?

If the Honourable Attorney-General is moving this Supplementary Appropriation Bill today, he will be speaking, say, for about one hour, will the Honourable Leader of the Opposition as the Shadow Minister for Economy have the same privilege of speaking for one hour, like in all the previous Budgets that we have had? These are some of the rules that probably you, Sir, oversee Parliament with. We will have to see that the rights and privileges of Members are not limited, as I had alluded to in my previous speech, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again the amount of Consequential Bills that the Honourable Attorney-General has moved plus the Supplementary Appropriation Bill, and for us to make a three or five minutes response to all that is not sufficient.

We understand the dire situations that we are in right now and we are talking about the situation of life and death and the right to life, as alluded to by the Honourable Minister for Defence, but again, the honour and the dignity of the House should prevail, Sir, given that we, as selected Members, should have those privileges. This should not come by way of Standing Order 51 that has been used many times, as you have said, and has limited the legislative powers of this Parliament and also now moving into our Bills concerning money, which will be appropriated so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, give us proper time to scrutinise this.

We all agree with what the Honourable Attorney-General said that people have lost jobs, people are waiting for stimulus and packages to give them relief in the situation that they have lost jobs to pay bills, rent, et cetera, to keep them afloat given that COVID-19 has somehow contributed to the changes in the circumstances that they are in but again, Sir, we need to give proper debate and thought, and you know that things that will be passed, Sir, will be everyone's opinion but one thing, Sir, again, the Government had failed to utilise this opportunity to unify the nation and again shadow boxing is the way or approach that they have used tonight, Sir, to come in.

They lack the leaders who take responsibility to unite the nation and come together. The Honourable Gavoka has talked on how leaders in the USA Congress can come in, given the Honourable Leader of the Opposition too had also written a letter suggesting some kind of bipartisan approach on this on how we can work it out. It is unfortunate that this has unfolded in the manner that we have dealt with this tonight and how again political interest has overridden our national interest and patriotism. Also, how the Honourable Attorney-General chooses to come through this way to try to circumvent and bring everything together in three hours.

I know better than you, Sir, on the things that will be debated. Three hours is not enough, it is not sufficient, Sir, knowing that everybody will have a perspective from the rural areas. Some will talk about employment issues and other issues, Sir, and given that those rights and privileges be maintained, Sir, I seek your ruling that the rights of the Members of Parliament are maintained, ensured, protected, Sir, that we do not go by vote to allow this because if you allow this, we open the floodgates of other opportunities that the Honourable Attorney-General will come to in the future.

Again, Sir, just a look back, other countries have announced their stimulus packages without needing a mini budget or a supplementary budget. Only Fiji wants a supplementary budget to do this. It shows that those other countries have money and he has to clarify to the people as to why there is urgency? Why are they desperate for this? Why do we not follow the full procedures? Why are they so desperate in trying to appropriate these funds when they can also make internal changes within the financials that they have? Every time they boast about those contingency funds at Head 50, they always boast about that and now we are in a situation where we cannot cater for things that have come and again, we did not appropriate proper funds, we did not estimate properly when we did the estimates the last time. We did not take the future into consideration that things like this could happen. There were examples that they

had faced like *TC Winston* and other things. They should have seen how things and measures should be in place in order to overcome the situations that they are in at the moment.

Again, Sir, my view is that, you really need to make a ruling on this, given that this will impinge into the right of every Member in this House. Also, for the respect and honour of the House, Sir, I think you have to intervene and that is my request.

I do not support the motion that is before the House, to come through by Standing Order 51 but a ruling from you, Sir, will be respected.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Tuisawau.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I rise to contribute to the motion at hand. I was thinking of touching on the technicalities of the motion but in my mind, I was thinking about the subject matter on the nature of leadership.

Since I have been in Parliament, I think that is a fundamental question we should be asking, given the crisis situation we are facing and we are reading in the newspapers today all the problems and we know, we have been out to the constituencies regarding the situation at hand. We do not oppose the austerity measures, the rescue package, et cetera, and there are no issues about that. It is just the manner in which, from my personal perspective, this is relating to the nature of leadership in this country and that is a fundamental issue which we need to address as we move forward. I do not know how to address that because we are not the leaders, the leaders of the nation are on that side.

When we look at what happened last week, we had the letter from the National Federation Party and the SODELPA Party Leader to the Head of Government which basically is suggesting that bi-partisan approach. Basically bi-partisan approach is like a swear word to the other side. It is like a foreign word, a word which is to be detested. From my assessment, that is the fundamental problem facing leadership in Fiji because the Government side cannot accept bi-partisanship and I am not sure why that is a problem.

Is it the nature of the people in leadership or what? That is what we need to address in this country. That has been a problem not only this year but in the last few years in how we deal with national issues.

At the Committee level, it is working really well, we work very well, we reach consensus and write reports via consensus. It is hardly that those reports are voted on and they come through a majority. So, Mr. Speaker Sir, that is the fundamental issue facing our nation.

When we look back at the beginning of the crisis, there should have been a Joint Committee formed. The leadership should have asked the Opposition for us to come together and look at joint approaches, et cetera in trying to solve this problem. So today I am expressing my concern, not only myself but I believe for the whole nation, they are watching this and wondering what we are doing.

How did we reach this situation where we seem to be divided when we should have been together to solve the problem? What the Government side should realise is that we represent 50 percent of the population or close to 50 percent and most of the other side did not even reach 1,000 votes.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- So, I would like to emphasise to the Government side, there must come a time where they must recognise that we are also representatives of the people and that we need to

work together and that should have been done from the beginning. I am very sad today to hear of the response from the Honourable Prime Minister when he read out his response to the Party Leader of the Nation Federation Party. The contents of the response is a concern. When our people are hearing that onward reading and hearing that over the news on television, it really demotivates them.

Today, we need to come together to lift the spirits but no, I do not know whether we have lifted the spirits of the nation today or not. I can say today that it would have been a good opportunity for the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy not to have uttered those words, they could have said something else in response to what will bring us together. We have missed that opportunity of bringing the nation together in order to address the problem we are facing today which is a huge threat to the nation.

So, Honourable Speaker, Sir, going back to that letter by the Honourable Prime Minister, if I was the Prime Minister, I am not saying that I want to be a Prime Minister....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Yes, I am not the Prime Minister, but if I was the Prime Minister, I would have taken the two letters and called the two leaders together and worked out a joint solution. Imagine what that would have done to the nation?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- If the Honourable Leader of SODELPA, Honourable Leader of NFP and the Honourable Prime Minister had come together, sat together and showed the nation that they were working together but no, they choose to reject the letter. That is the fundamental problem with leadership in this nation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- The Government side cannot bring themselves down to that level to work together; that is the problem.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- That is why we have this motion before us which is rushing things through but we could have solved that. We could have had a Joint Committee, we could have discussed it yesterday and come here and just approved everything. But no, they chose the other way. Of course they have the majority, they know they have the majority and they will always use that but you do not have to do that all the time. We can work together. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. The last speaker on this motion. Honourable Niko Nawaikula, you have the floor.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Honourable Speaker, I wish to contribute. Before the House is a motion under Standing Order 51 and it is requesting the House to push this Bill through without delay.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- First they have moved a motion to suspend the Standing Orders and I am saying, Honourable Speaker, they are doing all these, their excuse is, they are trying to help the people as soon as possible.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- But that is wrong. The reason as I have said is they are trying to hide their inefficiencies, they are trying to hide their failures.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- So let me just outline some of those failures. This is a Government that is responsible for bringing this virus to Fiji ...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- ... because of their inefficiencies and neglect. The public has been saying over and over again, “close the borders”. They did not listen. Now we compare ourselves to those that matter, small States like Samoa, Cook Islands but the problem is

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order!

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The Honourable Member said something that is not true. No one in this Government brought COVID-19 to Fiji.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- You brought it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- He cannot stand up in the House and say something that is not true.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Everyone in this country knows how it came. The Government did not bring it in, to stand up in Parliament and to make a statement like that is an obvious lie.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is a distortion of the facts, this is fake news. Honourable Members of Parliament should not stand up in Parliament and say something that is obviously false that everyone in this Parliament know is false. We are Honourable Members, we say things that are true. The Honourable Member needs to make sure that he stands up here and say things that are the truth. That is the Point of Order.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Take some responsibility, please. You are the Government, you brought it by your neglect.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Why the neglect? Why the irresponsibility? Their own plane – Fiji Airways brought it. So accept it. Take some responsibility, you are responsible because you did not lead. We were crying and crying, close the borders.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- They did not. They want to behave like Australia and New Zealand. Australia and New Zealand are ten times more in economics term, in facilities, in knowledge and in technology. We cannot afford that, they did not listen, so they are responsible for bringing the virus to Fiji. Take that and accept that.

Honourable Speaker, then last Thursday they made a declaration. They advertised all the screening processes they do in Nadi, holding some kind of a gun to a person as he passes by, even that did not detect it, it still got through.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The virus still got through to Lautoka and that person had been going around and around. He even went to a dance place, he went to a dancercise. So you are responsible, accept it.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Accept it!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- After so many days then only they knew, then they made that declaration and their second failure is that declaration is based on we do not know, we thought there was a declaration of a State of Emergency but no. So, it seems like they are acting on the Public Health Act which enables the Minister to do this, to restrict the numbers. But even now as I speak and I challenge the Honourable Minister after this to stand up and clarify the law. Where is the law that says you cannot get over 20? What is the law that you have to when you reach Fiji that you have to self-quarantine? Where is the law that you have to curfew or lockdown Lautoka? Where is the law?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, two or three *turaga ni koro* were arrested. For what? For being in their work place just like us. The *turaga ni koro*, their responsibility to be in the workplace to conduct meetings. Another, one priest was saying mass, that is his workplace but he was handcuffed and taken away. That is their failure. Then another thing, Honourable Speaker, after declaring that lockdown, 82 of the passengers, they could not get, five days, six days going. They cannot even collect them and one of the reason is their own inefficiencies.

The Ministry of Health as I speak have taken away the Public Health Sector of the Ministry. That is the Department that is responsible for all these. So, how can you supervise the quarantine? How can

you monitor the quarantine when the people who are responsible, the Public Health Sector of your own Ministry is out? Honourable Minister for Health you should answer that.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Point of Order!

Honourable Speaker, I need to correct him. He has lied to this House. The Fiji Government did not bring coronavirus here; one.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- You brought it.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Number two, ever since January we have sent out a Health Declaration Card. In the Health Declaration Card people must declare if they are unwell or if they are sick.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- The Point of Order is this, this person ...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- What number?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- ... who is in the index case did not declare that he was sick, that he was unwell and put the whole of Lautoka at risk, ...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Whole of Fiji.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- ... the whole of Fiji at risk. He did not declare. That is why there were more than 300 people who had to be contact traced.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Tell them!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- The person who was in Suva, he declared. When he came in, he was well, he called when he had symptoms and because of that only 12 people we could contact trace; that is the difference. Please do not bring into this House the irresponsibility of one person to be the reason why everyone has to be facing the circumstance as it is.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- We should not do that and we should not lie when we declare on a declaration card. I want to clarify that today because he is blaming this House, blaming this Government for coronavirus. It is the responsibility and the leadership of individual people, statutory declarations they must be faithful to and truthful to. That is the role not only of this noble House but everyone in Fiji. That is my Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- How can a person declare that he is sick when he does not feel it?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- That is what happened to that victim in Lautoka. He does not know. He went to Zumba, he went to dance, he hugged someone and kissed another body and you expect them to declare it; no. That is not the whole point. The responsibility of the Government is this, same as self-quarantine and he works for Fiji Airways which we can now simply say was a coffin box that carried this disease from the United States of America to Fiji. And that is your plane, that is their aeroplane; Fiji

Airways. So you are responsible. Take some responsibility. Grow up. I need to tell the Government, “please grow up and accept responsibility.”

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Do not push it, accept it. That is your problem.

Now, self-quarantine, Honourable Speaker. How do you expect the person to self-quarantine? That is where their responsibility comes in unless you have supervision, unless you have monitoring! They have the army, they have the police, they have the radio, they have the money at their disposal but still, they cannot get to those 82 people. That is their failure!

Another failure, Honourable Speaker, their differences. The Honourable Prime Minister said, “Everyone who comes to Fiji will have to self-quarantine.” The next day, the Permanent Secretary stands up to correct him and says, “No!” The Honourable Prime Minister said, “Only from declared nations of China and five others.” So they cannot even agree, they are confused. What do you expect the public to be? How do you expect the nation to believe you? So it is your failure! And now you come here and try to convince us that we are trying to help you? No! You are trying to hide your failures and you are blaming the flight attendants.

Honourable Speaker, there is another point that I need to make. All these people, how are you going to charge them? You have charged a priest, that is totally irresponsible! How can you charge a priest? The priest was doing his job saying mass and here they dragged him to Court under handcuff. Totally irresponsible! What is his discretion? He is not a criminal, he is at his workplace. His workplace is still there and say mass. So shame on you! Shame on you for your failure! Shame on you for your irresponsibility! Shame on you for brining coronavirus to Fiji!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General, you have your Right of Reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I obviously do not want to prolong the matter because I have got the COVID-19 Budget Response Address to make. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just very quickly, I cannot over-emphasise the fact that we need to do this very quickly. There are people, actually, waiting for this. We are getting messages by the minute, frankly, but, unfortunately, the Opposition will not necessarily get a very good standing, given their display currently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think one of the Honourable Members from the other side said, “How come the other Governments have done it so quickly. It goes to show that they have lots of money.” No, because their appropriation system is very different to ours. Different jurisdictions have different appropriation systems, and they should know that. But the reality is that, if they were actually in such a healthy position, many of them would not actually be issuing stimulus packages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue about the authenticity or the genuineness of the bipartisanship, we have been down this track so many times. Honourable Professor Prasad’s letter is dated the day that he was actually condemning Government, that it was the day his article was published in the paper, that was the day that it was published on the NFP *Facebook* page, so you cannot be genuine about it. It is all very personalised. The whole shenanigans about the financial times are disclosed, it is not genuine at all, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Honourable Gavoka's favourite topic of minority Government or hundred votes, they forget about the fact that the SDL Government actually got far less votes in the Opposition but still were in Government because of the electoral system then. I mean, these are all petty stuff.

The people of Fiji want us to go ahead with this Budget. The Opposition needs to see this Budget as a means of trying to get assistance to ordinary Fijians very quickly, not just the workers, but the various businesses who will keep people employed. We need to get additional funding, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Ministry of Health and various other agencies that will help implement it.

Honourable Nawaikula's ranting and raving as usual about Coronavirus being the fault of Government, I mean, it is such a pity that he has this approach, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality is that, even if you look at the other jurisdictions, like Honourable Nawaikula was mentioning, if you look at the Opposition Parties in Australia and New Zealand, they do not have these kinds of comments made by them.

When the New Zealand Prime Minister announced the lockdown, they do not come running around saying, "We should not do this because of our rights. Where is the particular regulations?" They do not do that, because they see the big picture. They see what is necessary for the country. They have a sense of patriotism. They have a sense of urgency. But these people do not, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not want to go on about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is that, SODELPA by the way, never issued us a letter. We did not get a letter from SODELPA. I have just asked the Honourable Prime Minister, he never received a letter from SODELPA, so I do not know what two letters they are talking about Mr. Speaker, Sir. And again, there seems to be this thing about condemning our national carrier, calling it the "coffin box", et cetera. I mean, it is such a shame.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me get back to it, I do not want to prolong this. I urge all Honourable Members. They said three hours is not enough. Do you want five hours? Let us do five hours. You want six-and-a-half hours, let us do six-and-a-half hours. If you want seven hours tomorrow, let us do seven hours tomorrow. But let us pass this Bill tomorrow for the ordinary Fijians, who want their money. They want the assistance. They want the delivery of services. They want EFL bills to be addressed. They want their FNPF matters to be addressed, but let us get it all done tomorrow. I was quite willing to sit all night tonight to get it done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I know they would complain about that too, "We did not get enough notice." Someone mentioned, "Why did you not do it earlier?" You would have complained about that too. You would have said, "We did not get enough notice."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are quite happy to sit tomorrow for seven hours. We are now more than doubling it and if by consensus they agree....

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You do not even know what you are talking about, go away!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if they want to talk about consensus bipartisanship, let us agree to bipartisanship to have a debate on this tomorrow for seven hours, but let us approve it. Let us meet at 6.00 a.m. tomorrow. Let us meet at 9.00 a.m. tomorrow, but let us get it done. Do your job! This is your workplace,

do your jobs! Your leader does not understand this is your workplace, do your jobs! Let us do it! By consensus let us do it for seven hours tomorrow, but let us approve it tomorrow.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- A Point of Order, Sir. Just a point of clarification, because the mover of the motion has said seven hours. Is the mover of the motion willing to amend his motion, because it is three hours and we are going to vote for that?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I have told you before, I decide on this. You should know that.

Honourable Members, we will now vote.

The Question is:

Pursuant to Standing Order 51:

- (a) That the following COVID-19 Response Bills be considered by Parliament without delay:
- (i) COVID-19 Response Bill 2020;
 - (ii) Tax Administration (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (iii) Income Tax (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (iv) Value Added Tax (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (v) Stamp Duties (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (vi) Customs (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (vii) Customs Tariff (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020;
 - (viii) Fiji National Provident Fund (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020; and
 - (ix) Public Health (COVID-19 Response Amendment) Bill 2020.

That the –

- (b) Bills must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bills must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Attorney-General and the Minister of Economy begin the debate tonight, Thursday, 26th March, 2020 by delivering the COVID-19 Response Budget Address;
- (e) Leader of the Opposition be given the right of response to the Bills tomorrow, Friday, 27th March, 2020;
- (f) Debate on the Bills proceed after the response by the Leader of the Opposition and be limited to three hours with the Right of Reply given to the Attorney- General and the Minister for Economy; and
- (g) All Bills be voted upon tomorrow, Friday, 27th March, 2020.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications, the Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, to take the floor. You have the floor, Sir.

COVID-19 RESPONSE BILL 2020 AND CONSEQUENTIAL BILLS 2020

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; thank you for tuning in tonight, wherever and however, you are joining us this evening.

As you can see by the way we are all spread throughout the Chamber, these are not normal times. We made these changes to ensure we are adhering to the principles of physical distancing, so if you are watching from a public venue, stop, look around the room and follow this example by making sure you are keeping a safe distance of two metres from all other individuals, and then maintain that level of diligence and distance as much as possible in everything you do. Do it for your health, do it for the health of the most vulnerable amongst us, do it for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since its origins in Wuhan, China, last year, Fijians have watched the novel coronavirus or COVID-19 spread from country to country, and then continent to continent, crippling markets and sickening tens and now hundreds of thousands in its wake with the worse clearly yet to come. This is a crisis, bigger than anything the world has seen in a century.

Hundreds of people are dying everyday. Hospitals in the world's wealthiest and most powerful nations are being pushed to the breaking points. The United States of America (USA) just saw case numbers surge past 65,000, up from 15,000 cases four short days ago - 50,000 in four days.

In the most badly affected nations, like Italy, doctors are being forced to choose who to treat, who lives and who dies. Both Italy and Spain have now eclipsed China in COVID-19 fatalities, despite having much smaller populations. Any student of Fijian history watching this evening knows that pandemics, like COVID-19, must be battled with the same urgency as full scale military conflicts. If not, they can be just as fatal as any war.

In 1875, measles arrived at Fiji's shores when one of the chiefs visited New South Wales. The disease ultimately claimed the lives of an estimated 40,000 Fijians, one third of the entire population at that time. Then in 1918, the Spanish flu broke out across the world, infecting 500 million people and killing around 50 million. Upon arrival at Fiji's shores, the virus claimed the lives of nearly 9,000 Fijians, five percent of all people in Fiji at that time.

These are the cold hard facts of our history. Taking stock of this past should not drive us into panic, but it should serve as a sombre reminder that extreme crises of health warrant the sternest possible measures in response before it is too late.

When it comes to COVID-19, it does not rank among humanity's deadliest diseases. Recent viral strains, like Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Ebola, have all proven much more fatal. When it comes to the sheer number of deaths, NCDs, like heart disease and cancer, still outpace COVID-19 in the number of victims they claim.

But, it is the nature of this new coronavirus that has made this disease the trickiest, most unpredictable and most punishing pandemic of our lifetimes. It is highly contagious. Even if symptoms are not showing, it thrives in everyday environments. It can go undetected in young and healthy people until it infects a more vulnerable member of society. It spikes, as people go about their day-to-day lives and quickly and quietly, the virus has spread around the world, killing thousands and dismantling the way people live, and the world does business. In doing so, it has appended the very fundamentals of the global economy. It is clear that we are faced with more than a crisis of health far more. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could just perhaps say that I am being disturbed by the talks that is going on there.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, when you are spaced apart, it does not mean that you can converse at will.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are faced with more than a crisis of health far more. This is a crisis of lives and livelihoods alike, no government, no business, no financial institution and no multilateral organisation was ready for the economic devastation of this pandemic. Indeed, some leaders even scoffed at it. Under the strain of necessary travel restrictions, rightful health concerns and other unimagined impacts, we are facing a once-in-a-lifetime Coronavirus-driven collapse of the very foundations of international economic system.

Some people, including here in Fiji are still dangerously blind to this new reality. They need to take a good long look at the world economy. Entire industries are crumbling, businesses are closing and unemployment is sky-rocketing. Major stock indexes are plummeting, carving of trillions of dollars in value and the flaw is nowhere to be seen. Companies that mere months ago were considered economic stalwarts, including the world's largest airline, are hurtling towards insolvency. This virus has paralysed the world literally, no one is going anywhere. Planes are empty, sitting idle, airports are deserted, once-humming factory floors are silent, floors of trade reduce to trickles. Supply chains are unhinged with only a handful of exceptions. Every business everywhere in the world is facing its most difficult year on record.

Even the best case scenario global containment, this will be the most severe global economic depression of our time worse than anything our parents or most of our grandparents have experienced. We are talking worse than the global financial crisis. For Fiji, the economic fallout will not only prove greater than *TC Winston*, it would be far worse than *TC Winston*, *TC Josie*, *TC Keni*, *TC Gita* and *TC Tony* all combined.

Every aspect of our economy will be thrown out of whack, even in the global financial crisis planes were still flying. In 2009, our arrivals were down only by 7.3 percent on the year. The year after *TC Winston*, tourism numbers actually surged by 6.4 percent. As of today, Nadi Airport is shutdown. Over the next few months, there will not be a tourism sector in Fiji. Right off the bat, that is up to 38 percent of our GDP gone. Even if we were ICT-driven economy, Call Centres and other workplaces would close as well.

In fact, one call centre has already planned a permanent shutdown in Fiji. Meanwhile, the rest of the world economy, including our major markets, is rapidly approaching recession territory propelled by historic declines in growth across Asia and Europe. While we had already been preparing for a softer regional growth numbers, COVID-19 threw a grenade into any of the projections. Australia, our largest source of tourism and trade had been riding the longest recorded streak of unbroken economic expansion among the developed world.

A remarkable feat spanning nearly 29 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has derailed their growth in a matter of weeks. In a matter of weeks, 29 years of growth, derailed in a matter of weeks. Our friends in New Zealand meanwhile, will likely see an even bigger impact as the global travel shut-down has decimated the economy that prides tourism as its largest export earner. Like our more developed neighbours, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's projection for the eleventh year of growth, have reversed in a matter of weeks also.

Under the crushing weight of this pandemic, our economy is projected to contract by 4.3 percent this year, an optimistic projection that depends entirely on the success of Fiji and our major source markets in combatting the virus. COVID-19 has been present in Fiji for exactly one week as of today with five Fijians with COVID-19 in the country. We are aggressively moving to stomp out this virus and prevent a large scale outbreak but if people, including some supposedly well-educated individuals continue with violating the strict measures we have instituted and the virus spreads further, we will have no choice but to lockdown all of Fiji. In that scenario, non-essential businesses would be closed nationwide, infrastructure development will stall, student's education will suffer, economic activity will

grind to a halt, we are likely to see a massive loss of productivity, the weakening of our domestic supply chains and a double-digit economic contraction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, but even if we were successful in containing the disease and God-willing we see our last case sooner rather than later, we are still part of the global economy. What if Australia, New Zealand, United States of America fail at containing the outbreaks? So long as they remain vulnerable, we remain vulnerable, our people's jobs and the tourism sector remain vulnerable and our economy remains vulnerable. Wealthier nations can dip into their deep fiscal reserves to right their recovery. But small States do not have the luxury of bailing out entire industries of pumping trillions of dollars into our financial markets. Instead of operating silos, we much rely on international solidarity. That is why we have been disappointed and even disheartened to see some choose to politicise a recent article we penned for the financial times of London, one of the world's leading sources for economic views. There was no political agenda behind this article. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was an overtly and intentionally apolitical call for assistance from Multilateral Development Banks (MDB) and a recognition that small island States will face a unique set of problems and vulnerabilities in our economic recovery.

The article was not written for me or for our Party or even only for Fiji. It is written for our Pacific brothers and sisters from the Solomon Islands to the Cook Islands, our fellow islanders of the Coast of Africa and the Caribbean and everywhere in between, small Island States around the globe that are suffering, desperately needing relief as tourism cash flows evaporate and supply chains are eviscerate, so the world's most vulnerable small State economies may not even survive and no one nation can go in this crisis alone.

Thankfully, Mr. Speaker, despite the political games here at home, our international partners heard our call. Our diplomatic and multilateral partners have given us a great deal of positive feedback generally and are indeed on that article and have begun to step up to help us both contain and plan our recovery from Coronavirus.

In the wake of COVID-19, we have had positive discussions with the Asian Development Bank to top-up its previously pledged funding of years of \$100 million dollars by up to another years of \$100 million dollars more. The World Bank is also offering Fiji US\$5 million from its COVID-19 facility adding more fuel to our fight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this level of cooperation surely lend security. Certainty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, however remains elusive. At the moment, what we know about the situation is as terrifying as we do not. Every hour the ground shifts beneath our feet. We do not know how long this pandemic will last, or when the vaccine will be ready? We do not know how deep the economic impacts will be? We do not know how many around the world will die? We do not know if we live, how we will work and how will we interact with the world that has changed forever? But what we do know is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ordinary Fijians cannot bear the brunt of this crises alone. The people of this country and the businesses of this country deserve every measure of support their Government can afford to give them. And that support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is precisely what this Bill is all about.

This Budget, through this Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, arms our doctor and nurses with the tools they need to combat this virus and keep themselves and their Fijian families safe. It puts more testing kits in our molecular labs, more ventilators in our hospitals, more masks on our health care workers and more beds in our filler clinics.

This Budget grants resilience to all the workers and companies who are staples of our economy and way of life but we have been cut off from that economy by COVID-19. This Budget lifts financial burdens from the shoulders of those made most vulnerable by the devastation of this virus keeping

services running, balance sheet buoyed and workers healthy. This Budget gives businesses the flexibility they need to keep their people invest in new opportunities and prepare for the inevitable end to this pandemic. Together with the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) and our financial sector partners, this evening we are announcing a \$1 billion COVID-19 Stimulus Package, it is that said value.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians affected by this crises can take comfort knowing that this Government's record-breaking decades of progress has been defined year after year by our unrelenting commitment to the most vulnerable Fijians. They can trust that this pandemic will not rob us of our strength of character or our ability to help each other. It will not change who we are or how we choose to lead. It will not erode our commitment to leave no Fijian behind but define it. Right now that means giving businesses, the workers they employ and the families the support, the financial security badly needed. This is a Budget for all these Fijians. We are starting by assisting all of the Fijian workers who rely on the strength of Fijian tourism to sustain their livelihoods. I am speaking of the chef, scuba guides, waiters, the receptionists and all other Fijians who should be preparing for another record breaking season of visitor arrivals, instead they are seeing their hours cut. The doors of the resorts closed and the jobs disappear and they cannot simply pack up the serving trays, scuba tanks and cleaning supplies and start working from home like so many employees in larger countries and white collar industries. These Fijians need more than words of support. They need real relief.

From 6th April, 2020, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact we will be hastening this particular period from tomorrow once the Budget gets passed. Fijian workers in the hospitality sector who have lost their jobs or had their hours cut since 1st February, 2020 can, for now, access an initial \$1,000 from their FNPF accounts with the additional funds to be considered as the situation unfolds further.

If any worker does not have this full amount available, the Government will directly subsidise the difference. So, if you have only \$100 in your FNPF account, you will be receiving \$900 boost from your Government and we will tell this to FNPF. And as we know there are many workers, for example,

wait staff, et cetera, they do not have a \$1000 that they can withdraw, so we will be actually subsidising them, and that is for now because, of course, this can prolong.

All these employees, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you listen to what I am saying, you will understand. All these employees, Mr. Speaker, Sir, affected by our nationwide physical distancing requirements who work at gyms, fitness centres, nightclubs, swimming pools, et cetera, along with employees in the Lautoka confined area who have been placed on leave without pay or had their hours cut will be able to access an initial \$500 from their FNPF accounts. If other parts of the country are locked down, impacted workers in these areas will be able to access these payments as well. The Government will also subsidise the difference for any Fijians who do not have this full amount available. As the Opposition will see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of these combined unemployment benefits, totals to about \$60 million.

Furthermore, for those affected in the informal sector and the locked down areas, Government will also be providing a one-off relief payment of \$150 for those who have a street trader or street hawker licence. These are people who are not with FNPF. These measures and those with FNPF will inject at least a total of \$150 million back into the economy, topped off with another \$60 million contribution from Government. So you are looking at a total of \$210 million. For all employees in Fiji, we will reduce their FNPF contribution from eight percent to five percent effective from 1st April, 2020 through to December 31st, 2020, putting \$18 million in the pockets of Fijian workers for the next nine months, whilst still maintaining a steady contribution to the Superannuation Scheme.

From 1st April, 2020, we will reduce employers' FNPF statutory contributions from 10 percent to five percent until 31st December, 2020. Over the next nine months, this will keep \$130 million in their accounts, helping them to sustain their businesses and cash flow, which is a critical issue at this point in

time and minimise job losses and hour reductions. While we know the need is great, no Fijian should make a mad dash for the nearest FNPF office. It is your money, you will get it without putting yourself at risk of queuing up too close to others. The money will get to you safely and quickly, directly into your bank accounts, *M-Paisa* or through Post Fiji. The FNPF will announce further details from tomorrow.

Just as Government is helping employers by reducing their FNPF commitments, we expect employers to work closely with FNPF, to assist with the withdrawal process for any of their employees who qualify. To shift the burden of sick leave of businesses and ensure employees who do not have to use their leave, the Government will pay 21 days COVID-19 leave for low income Fijians who have tested positive for the virus as certified by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- To keep things flowing smoothly with minimal disruption, any affected employers should continue to pay salaries as normal and Government will then reimburse this directly to the employer.

If salaries cannot be paid by the employer, Government will fund the salaries upfront. This applies to all workers with less than \$30,000 in annual income. Fijians in the informal sector; those who sell stuff by the roadside or have their own businesses and do not have FNPF, who are confirmed to have contracted the virus will be paid a one-off sum of \$1,000.

With so much of life going on hold, and no clear timeline ahead of us, loan repayments are the last thing affecting Fijians and businesses need on their plates. Under the Consumer Credit Act, section 66, hire purchase companies, licensed credit institutions and banks are all mandated to go the extra mile for their customers in times of hardship. We have been communicating with the banks and hire purchase companies over the last couple of weeks.

Yesterday we got a deal done to defer loan repayment for six months for any Fijian or Fijians who have lost their jobs or have their hours reduced. Mortgages, personal loans even hire purchase payment plans from stores like Courts and Carpenters, Vinod Patel and all others will all qualify. For those hit the hardest, principal plus interest payments may also be deferred as well. The same goes for affected businesses, if you are facing serious cash flow challenges, six months of loan repayments will be deferred. If the impact you are feeling is particularly severe, you may qualify to have principal plus interest payments deferred as well.

During this period, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we got an agreement this morning with the banks, banks will also waive all charges on minimum balance in customer's accounts and remove the minimum purchase requirement for electronic transactions; this is important. You should be able to go and use your card at the nearest store to buy something for \$2. The stores will now accept that because we do not want people to be rushing into one store in particular. They should be able to buy this very quickly, do not have to go to banks and line up to get out cash, they should be able to purchase things through their ATM cards.

Apart from the Consumer Credit Act (CCA), should the situation deteriorate, Government has already made a commitment to the banks to give further assurance to them to protect ordinary Fijians who have home mortgages. We will in fact offer them letters of comfort for the period this time, the CCA will suffice. When the situation gets bad, Government will go ahead and give a letter of comfort to all the banks to protect people's home mortgages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please let us be clear about this. Those who can pay their mortgages should pay their mortgages. If you have not had a job loss, please pay your mortgages. Do not rob from those who

need it now and do not rob from yourselves if down the track, you also require this assistance. Taken together, a new COVID-19 response deal with the banks will provide a relief of an estimated \$400 million for workers and companies. That is \$820 million in total stimulus so far, if anyone is keeping track of that.

An additional \$5 million will be added to the Small and Medium Enterprises Credit Guarantee Scheme. Under this Scheme, if any of these businesses with an outstanding guaranteed loan failed, the Government has more resources to cover 50 percent of the outstanding loans. We will also be reviving the Fiji Investment Corporation Limited to aid existing small to medium businesses with immediate equity injections and refinancing opportunities. This will be managed through the Fiji Development Bank. In fact, other banks have also shown an interest in propping up these initiatives capital base.

For students who are paying tertiary education loans, all repayments will be suspended until 31st December, 2020 providing these working Fijians around \$10 million in immediate relief. The Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) is also stepping in with an unprecedented economy wide monetary stimulus. The RBF will re-activate and expand the Natural Disaster Rehabilitation Facility which is now being renamed the "Disaster Rehabilitation and Containment Facility". Under the new Facility, RBF will make available \$60 million worth of loans available to banks at an interest rate of 1 percent. Banks can then loan these amounts to small and medium businesses and customers at a maximum rate of no more than 5 percent. Low rates mean greater borrowing, giving businesses badly needed financial resources to ease the pressure of this pandemic, keep the doors open and keep people in their jobs. This facility will be made available immediately. The RBF has already slashed the reduced overnight policy rate to 0.5 percent to stimulate demand, cut borrowing cost, boost consumption and incentivise investment.

Mr. Speaker, the ANZ and HFC have led the charge by announcing lower lending rates across the board. We expect lending rates to drop even further in the near future. We are on secure financial footing in providing the stimulus. Foreign reserves stand at a high and healthy \$2.2 billion, equal to 5.7 months of retained imports. We will also be rolling out a sweeping package of direct tax reforms and deductions aimed at bolstering our existing businesses and incentivising new ones to take route.

Through the end of 2022, the current already generous new Hotel Investment Incentive Package will be made even more attractive to current industry operators and potential investors, affording an income tax holiday of five, seven or thirteen years, depending on the level of capital investment. An investment allowance of 25 percent will also be allowed to cover construction, renovation, refurbishment and extension of new and existing hotels. So, as our tourism industry hits pause, our liquidity of course is flushed and rates are falling, it will then be a prudent opportunity to prepare for the days when hundreds or thousands of visitors return to our shores. We need to project and think about the future.

The export income deduction will be increased from 50 percent to 60 percent for the next three tax years; 2020, 2021 and 2022. Business loans of up to \$20,000 will be allowed to be deducted against employment income. So a person earning \$50,000, for example, who also runs or starts a business on the side can offset the losses of that business against their personal income, even though they only pay PAYE.

The Certificate of Exemption will also be re-introduced for the 5 percent Provisional Tax, further boosting businesses cash flow. The rule for advanced payment of tax for companies and other taxpayers will be relaxed from the current three payments at a rate of 33.3 percent to nine payments at a rate of 11.1 percent. This more flexible and affordable payment schedule will be based on their post COVID-19 adjusted profits, offering serious financial relief to businesses, sole traders and partnerships.

Penalties on estimated tax will also be removed with this policy lasting through 31st December, 2020. Debt forgiveness by associated companies will not be subject to Income Tax. This applies to the

forgiving of any and all outstanding debts effective from 1st April, 2020 to 31st December, 2020. Also from 1st April to the end of December, thin capitalisation rules will be suspended for local business subsidiaries that rely heavily on borrowings from their parent companies overseas. Previously these businesses were limited to a 2:1 debt to equity ratio to qualify for tax deductions. By relaxing this threshold, we will further ensure the cost of borrowing is muted for our foreign control businesses to access capital from their parent companies offshore.

A 300 percent tax deduction will be afforded to employers for wages and salaries paid to employees who are self-quarantined with the approval from the Ministry of Health. If the Family Care Leave is available, this deduction will kick in once those days expire. For those who are not compensated by their employer during self-quarantine, Government will provide \$100 in relief.

A 300 percent tax deduction will also be offered for any donations that businesses make to the Government's COVID-19 Donor Fund, a trust to be utilised for any coronavirus assistance, from medical supplies to economic relief. That Fund has been generously kick-started by our Pacific *Vuvale* with the New Zealand Government providing NZ\$3 million in cash and the Australian Government pitching in AUD\$1.5 million in combined cash and in-kind assistance and whilst we are sitting down listening to the Opposition, we got news and confirmed news that the Australians have now committed another AUD\$10.5 million to this Fund.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The Employment Taxation Scheme will be further incentivised from its current levels. The tax deduction that businesses can claim on their first fulltime employee will increase from 200 percent to 300 percent. The tax deduction of wages paid for applicable student apprenticeships will also be increased to 300 percent and to continue to build on an inclusive economy through these tough times, Mr. Speaker, Sir, deductions for businesses employing Fijians living with disabilities for three consecutive years will increase from 300 percent to 400 percent. A 100 percent write-off of up to \$10,000 will be made available on the purchase of fixed assets for business purposes. A 100 percent write-off will also be granted for the construction of new commercial and industrial buildings, provided the appropriate approvals are obtained before the end of this calendar year.

To incentivise commercial landlords to reduce rent to fit our current economic landscape and prevent the disruption of broken leases by easing the burden of these reductions to their tenants, a tax deduction will also be given to cover any deductions made to existing rent contracts. This reduction will apply for rent payable between 1st April and 31st December, 2020. To give an example basically it means if someone is paying rent of \$1,000 and the landlord reduces it to \$500, that loss of \$500, they can claim as a tax deduction. So the landlord has no loss and Government will pick up that burden but we do not want people to be booted out of their shops.

Knowing that bookkeeping is going to be complicated by this crisis, we will also be giving flexibility to businesses when it comes to filing paperwork, waiving penalties for lodging late tax returns or other documents. And to offer serious mortgage relief for our home owners, we will also be reducing stamp duty rates for Fiji resident taxpayers for mortgages from 1 percent to 0 percent. Foreign nationals will see their mortgages stamp duty reduced from 5 percent to 0 percent also.

Until we pass this pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the processing of applications and pending payments under the Film Fiji tax rebates are going to be put on hold. Implementation of the VAT monitoring system will be deferred. Added up, these tax measures directly save businesses, exporters and individuals approximately \$120 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unlike past recessions, monetary and financial policy is not a cure for any ailing economy. This is first and foremost a crisis of health. Without first winning the war against this virus, the world economy cannot get back up and running. With revenues down and health measures debilitating capital projects, Fiji will be redirecting financial resources in support of our health workers on the frontline of combatting COVID-19. We are adding another \$14 million to enhance our health system's capacity to respond to this pandemic on top of the \$347.5 million allocated to the health sector in this financial year. This \$40 million top up will simply put more supplies like face mask to complex and expensive equipment like ventilators in our hospitals. It will fund more personal protective gear for workers and thermal scanners. It will fund the setup of fever clinics throughout the country to isolate at-risk patients. It will fund vital efforts to raise awareness among ordinary Fijians of what they can do to keep themselves healthy and it will fund the diligent work of our contact tracing team to nip emerging outbreaks in the bud as well as emergency medical responses and other COVID-19 contingency plans.

To ensure the medical sector has the specific technical tools it needs to combat COVID-19 crisis, we will be introducing a VAT exemption on imports for a vast range of medical supplies and equipment effective immediately. Hand sanitizers, antibacterial hand wash, vaccinations, hospital beds, scanners and cameras used in medical examination, ethanol for companies already involved in hand sanitizer production, disinfectants, air purifier, medical ground boots, hydrogen peroxide, paper bed sheet, thermostats and other specialised supplies like medicaments under chapter 30 and medical equipment under chapter 90 of the Customs Tariff Act. To this end, the Customs Tariff Act will also see significant changes in the form of fiscal duty cuts to essential medical supplies.

The following items will see the fiscal duty reduced to 0 percent:

- (1) Hand sanitizers
- (2) Antibacterial hand wash
- (3) Gloves
- (4) Masks
- (5) Disposable hair net
- (6) Disinfected wipes
- (7) Tissues
- (8) Medical great face heals and goggles
- (9) Protected gummers
- (10) Long-sleeve medical gowns
- (11) Ethnologic for local companies have already involved in hand sanitiser production
- (12) Disinfectants
- (13) Sterilisation products
- (14) Hospital beds
- (15) Hydrogen-peroxide
- (16) Paper bed sheets
- (17) Thermo sets
- (18) Air purifier
- (19) Medical grade boots; and
- (20) Hospital beds.

Many of these items, Mr. Speaker Sir, were already exempt but only for the public health sector but now we are opening the same relief to the private sector as well, ensuring Fijians can keep hygienic and healthy levels as at low cost as possible, regardless of whether they are treated or whether they buy their own supplies. So, the private sector can now import more of these items and pass its benefits to the customers. This emergency funding to health along with these new targeted tax measures push the total COVID-19 Stimulus Package pass the billion dollar mark.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will also take some financial measures at this point in time to strengthen some of our entities. We will also strengthen the balance sheets of the Fiji Sugar Corporation, PAFCO, Fiji Rice Limited, Food Processors Limited and Viti Corp Company Limited by converting government debt into equity. The Government is in the process of acquiring FNPF and Fijian Holding shares in the FSC to meet the legal requirements to convert government's debt in FSC into equity.

Fiji Rice Limited has already confirmed with the conversion of their debt into equity, they will inject \$1 million dollars into a Rice Planting Scheme. There is also an additional \$1 million dollar allocation in the COVID-19 response toward the Ministry of Agriculture to bolster Fiji's food security.

In addition, we are allocating \$50 million dollars to the FSC to fund cane delivery payments. The government is the only FSC shareholder, making an additional financial commitment, not because it is the easy route to take but because we made a promise to cane farmers and we are keeping our word. However, moving forward, we need to keep a careful eye on the impact on world sugar prices and make some tough decisions, if necessary.

Mr. Speaker Sir, even in a crisis, there are some costs that are too high to accept for any Fijians. No matter what happens in the coming months, we have sought agreements with the Water Authority of Fiji and Energy Fiji Limited to ensure essential services keep running. Through July 2020, Water Authority of Fiji has agreed to cart water to any area in Fiji infected by water cuts regardless of expected repair time at a total cost of \$4.25 million and suspend all water disconnections until 31 December 2020 foregoing \$28.4 million dollars in revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Energy Fiji Limited, we have just struck a deal with them just a few hours before we came here, will now fully match government's existing 50 percent subsidy with the first 100 units of electricity for all of its subsidised customers. Those households that have registered and are earning less than \$30,000 a year annually. That means a 100 percent of the electricity costs are to the first 100 units will be covered by EFL and Government, leaving subsidised customers responsible for just the 9 percent VAT.

A move that will keep the lights on for our most vulnerable Fijians and all subsidised EFL customers will be granted up to one month to make the electricity payments and these are all up to 31st December, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have, of course, allocated additional funding COVID-19 Response to the Fijian Police Force as you know they are doing a sterling job despite the various pressures at the new borders that we have established and, of course, around the country, \$700,000, RFMF \$150,000 and FCCC, of course, \$100,000 specifically for COVID-19 because they need to go around to see that people are not putting up the prices. They are not price-gouging.

Mr. Speaker Sir, while these assurances are vital to uphold our people's well-being, let us be clear if you can pay your Bills, please, pay your bills. If you are still working and earning a salary, pay your utility bills. If you pay your bills now while you can pay then if anything happens to your employment down the road, your government will be able to actually assist you also, but if you do not, you will be robbing the Fijians who need this assistance today and yourself in the event you will need this assistance in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are proud to be delivering this Budget only one short week after the COVID-19 hit Fiji. By contrast, the United States, for example, only just passed their own economic stimulus more than two months after their first case in January but times like this call for more flexible policies and billion dollars stimulus packages, they have actually called for leadership, not with words but with deeds. That is why all elected officials, the Prime Minister, Ministers, Assistant Ministers and all

Members of Parliament will have their pay cut or pay suspended by 20 percent for the next six months. The cost savings for this move add up to around \$400,000 an amount that may not seem monumental but more importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, show us that we lead from the front, that everyone must share the burden because the reality is in the coming months, many ordinary Fijians may see their hours and pay cut as well and we as the elected Members must be the first.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge business leaders across Fiji to show solidarity to the working people of this country. Your legacy as leaders in your own industries will be defined by your actions today. Do not wait to make the strategic moves and structural changes to position your business for the long haul and empowered by this historic stimulus package, do everything you can to look after those who you look to for your employment. Meanwhile for the time being, we will not be making salary cuts across the Civil Service nor statutory bodies or Government-owned companies. I heard the Honourable Prasad say cut salaries even though he said for all civil servants up to Director level. If we cut salaries up to Director level of 35 percent, people working below him or her will be earning more than the Director.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHIAYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rippling socio economic effects, even a 10 percent cut within the largest employer in our nation which is Government would amount to over \$150 million in savings. If we cut all the salaries of all civil servants by 10 percent, all the statutory bodies, all Government-owned entities, there will be \$150 million that will not be put out as expenditure and salaries and would be far reaching. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must display prudence when considering this type of action. We must understand the impact of it. You will be sucking out \$150 million from the economy, \$150 million will be less spent in the economy. Do we want that at this point in time? No.

Across Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also given our social setting in Fiji, across Fiji it is common to see two, three or more generations sharing a home often with their aunties, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters. So a broad-based cut to the pay of our Civil Service, Statutory Bodies, Government-owned Companies would be a painful burden shared by many of those already suffering such as a hospitality

worker or employees from other highly impacted industries who may share roof with or is related to a Government employee. And in those cases, those workers may very well shift to the primary breadwinner or even the sole income earner in the house. So for now we will be keeping money circulating in our economy by keeping salaries where they currently stand across Government entities or statutory organisations.

If a hotel worker is no longer working and his brother is working in the Civil Service, who do you think he will go to? Of course he will go to his brother or he goes to his sister, his cousin, grandfather, uncle, aunty; that is how we do things in Fiji. But even if they are incapacitated from helping them, you create an even bigger social problem. They need to understand this.

Elderly citizens are at most risk from this virus. The mortality for people over the age of 65 is at a frightening high and these Fijians should stay home until Fiji is coronavirus free. We will be reducing the monthly travel allowance for pensioners from \$40 a month to \$20. We encourage younger family members to do their shopping and other errands for elderlies. This will be reviewed in three months' time as we hope to return to normalcy.

On that front we will also be raising revenue through an increase in fiscal duty on the importation of diesel and petrol which will gradually rise by 20 cents per litre, in fact it will rise by 20 cents per litre. But thanks to a dramatic global reduction in the price of fuel due to price war being waged between Russia and Saudi Arabia, Fijians will still end up paying lower rates of fuel than what they do today.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are few other significant expenditures in this Response Budget not directly related to COVID-19 response.

We are adding another \$20 million to the education sector to cater mainly for teachers' salaries, now that the total of teachers work in the country has been consolidated and we are beefing up social welfare with another \$20 million to cater for those who already qualify for social welfare even before the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had mentioned about the \$50 million for FSC.

The Fiji National University (FNU), Mr. Speaker, Sir, will also explore a new partnership with *Walesi* to strengthen online learning with 430,000 people using the *Walesi* platform. This is an opportunity to leverage technology to create a more inclusive and resilient education system in Fiji and already the Ministry of Education is working out a number of policy initiatives in this respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the most immediate rapidly deployable steps we can take today to prepare our people, hospitals, businesses big and small and our economy as a whole for the COVID-19 phenomena.

Given the devastating nature of this crisis and the unprecedented blows to our revenue, our economy is contracting and we are borrowing substantially more than what we planned for. These are extraordinary times that call for extraordinary measures. The budget deficit is at 9 percent. As a result, our debt to GDP ratio will increase to 60.9 percent. As soon the cloud with this pandemic part, we expect an economic rebound and stronger revenue that allow us to rain down our debt.

A great many possibilities still lie before us, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We must all recognise that this virus will fundamentally reshape our society, how we do business and how we interact. We must embrace this new reality and think proactively about how we can adapt by harnessing technology, by rethinking productivity and margins and by changing not only the workplace but how we view work itself.

And as we ask businesses and individuals to look inward to the duration of this crisis and this Budget, the Government must do the same. Depending on how this situation evolves, more response measures will come and more help will be provided and still more sacrifices may have to be made. Because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will not rest until Fiji fully recovers by remaining diligent. We have good reasons to place faith in our future. Fiji can come back from this crisis better, smarter and more capable of seizing opportunities that will one day emerge.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this week China announced that it will lift the mass quarantine in the central province of Hubei after a decline in new COVID-19 infections. On 8th April, the city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the global pandemic will end its control over its outbound traffic.

As the lockdown ends and the first of Wuhan's residents to depart the cities and generally reconnect their friends and family as factory floors refill with workers and resume production, as restaurants welcome back diners and hotels fill their rooms, the entire world will see a glimpse of normalcy, of recovery and of hope. The trend is looking similar in places that have been most aggressive with combatting coronavirus with zero tolerance of rule breakers was most strictly enforced and where even more importantly the general population took this disease more seriously. Nations like South Korea, Taiwan and even China are proving that global and national containment measures can actually work, but in most of the rest of the world things are going to get far, far worse before they even start getting

better. Given the enormous risks and the vast unknowns, we must recognise that this disease is above all else unpredictable. So our response will need to be able to adapt alongside the reality on the ground.

We need to remember that the situation could dramatically change and our needs could dramatically shift as this Budget holds us over to the end of this financial year. Just like no one could predict this global pandemic or just how far reaching and devastating it could be, no one can predict precisely how it will unfold in Fiji, the Pacific or the world; not in two months, not in two days and not even in two hours. Perhaps all we can predict is that our ability to combat this crisis depends directly on how many of our people are careless versus how many show care for their community and our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amid this churning sea of instability, this Budget and this Government will always provide steadfast direction and decisive leadership guided by a beacon of hope. Each of us in Parliament today is blessed to be here in good health and representing the Fijian people. We are bound by our duty to God and country to lead Fiji through these unpredictable times and in a moment when lives are on the line, we cannot take that duty lightly. We must act quickly. We must act decisively. We do not have a moment to spare. Let us for once cast petty partisanship aside, come together and pass this Budget with resounding consensus for the nurses who are awaiting supplies, for the families awaiting FNPF assistance to pay their bills, for businesses wanting to stay afloat, for the laid off workers awaiting relief, for all Fijians, Mr. Speaker, Sir and indeed for Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy. Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament passed tonight, the Honourable Minister for Economy has now delivered the COVID-19 Response Budget Address. We will continue with the response from the Honourable Leader of the Opposition tomorrow morning.

ADJOURNMENT

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture I thank the Honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communication for delivering the Supplementary Budget tonight. I reiterate the statement of our Honourable Prime Minister that Fiji is at war with the coronavirus and therefore it is prudent that we all join the fight by washing our hands with soap and water practicing physical and social distancing and following any and every directive given by the authority.

Honourable Members, I apologise that there will be no refreshments served tonight. Honourable Members, you now will all realise from the new positions of seating and the necessary social distancing how lonely I feel at times when I am up here. Thank you, Honourable Members.

Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.42 p.m.