

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**WEDNESDAY, 27TH MAY, 2020**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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## **WEDNESDAY, 27TH MAY, 2020**

The Parliament met at 9.43 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

### **PRESENT**

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Major-General (Ret'd) S.L. Rabuka; the Honourable Ro T.V. Kepa; the Honourable Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu; the Honourable N. Nawaikula; the Honourable L.D. Tabuya; the Honourable V.R. Gavoka; the Honourable A.M. Radrodro; the Honourable M.R. Leawere; the Honourable Ratu S. Matanitobua; the Honourable S.V. Radrodro; the Honourable Dr. Ratu A.R. Lalabalavu; the Honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi; the Honourable M.D. Bilitavu; the Honourable A. Jale; the Honourable Ro F. Tuisawau; the Honourable I. Kuridrani; the Honourable M. Bulanauca; the Honourable P.W. Vosanibola; the Honourable Ratu T. Navurelevu; the Honourable S.R. Rasova and the Honourable J. Saukuru.

### **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 Tuesday, 26th May, 2020, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

### **COMMUNICATION FROM THE CHAIR**

#### Welcome

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

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no papers for presentation today.

Honourable Members, on the next Item on the Agenda, I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Alexander O'Connor, to table his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

## **PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES**

### Review Report on the Ministry of Defence and National Security Annual Report 2016-2017 – Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Review Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence on the Ministry of Defence and National Security Annual Report 2016-2017.

The purpose of the review was to scrutinise the Ministry of Defence and National Security Annual Report, specifically on the Ministry's operations and administration.

The Committee recognises the essential oversight role of the Ministry of Defence in the security, defence and well-being of the nation and our people. Therefore, the Ministry should be seen to be the leading agency for the issuance of policy guidance to shape the functions of all Government Departments under its umbrella.

Through the briefings of the Permanent Secretary for Defence and National Security, the Department of Immigration senior officials and senior officers from the Republic of the Fiji Military Forces and the Fiji Police Force, the Committee was informed that the Ministry was undergoing extensive reform to ensure effectiveness of its role under the current legal frameworks. In particular, the Committee was aware that the Ministry, under the proposed reform, will be guided by the National Security Strategy and Good Governance Frameworks.

The challenges faced by globalisation and its transnational effects have posed additionally threats to the nation and as such, the Ministry of Defence needs to strengthen its efforts in dealing with such challenges, those being climate change, illicit drugs and transnational crimes.

The Committee, after reviewing the Report, identified pertinent issues confronting the Ministry of Defence today. The following were some of the issues identified and witnessed during the livestream submissions in the Parliament precincts on Monday, 2nd March, 2020:

1. The Committee is aware of the vast amount of acting positions for senior officers for the above reporting period.
2. On the issue of Critical Asset Protection, the Committee is concerned that there is little or no security policy, standard operating procedures and physical hardening of critical asset installations, especially the WAF reservoirs, catchments, water and sewerage installations.
3. The Committee noted that the Republic of Fiji Military Forces have not tabled an Annual Report in Parliament.
4. The Committee notes that the Ministry strengthens its commitments to progressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG5 on Gender Equality by aligning them to the National Development Plan (NDP).

5. The Independent Auditors Report highlighted the variance of \$3,006,088 on the Integrated Border Control Management System (IBMS) which records the Department of Immigration's operating revenue and the FMIS General Ledger.
6. The detailed listings of work permit holders equating to the security bond of approximately \$25 million held from relevant stakeholders be provided for scrutiny.

The Committee commends the good work of the organisation and achievements in the reporting period 2016 to 2017. While applauding the achievements of the Ministry, the Committee has identified some opportunities of improvements and these are outlined in the Report.

I take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Minister, the Permanent Secretary, including staff and their families, for a job well done and their dedication to securing the nation for all Fijians and visitors to our shores.

I take this opportunity to thank Honourable Members of my Committee, including contributions of Alternate Members - the Honourable Lenora Qereqertabua and Honourable Professor Biman Prasad who were Alternate Members for Honourable Pio Tikoduadua; and Honourable Mikaele Leawere, the Alternate Member for Honourable Anare Jale; and the Secretariat staff for compiling this bipartisan Report.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this Report to Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move::

A motion without notice that a debate on the contents of the Report is initiated at a future Sitting date.

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, the Honourable Alvick Maharaj, to table his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

Review Report on the Fijian Electoral Commission Annual Report 2016 -  
Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Honourable Speaker, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights of the last Term of Parliament was referred the Fijian Electoral Commission Annual Report 2016.

The same Report had been reinstated in this new Parliament and had been referred to the current Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. As in the previous Committee, the current Committee is mandated to review the Annual Report and table its findings back to Parliament.

This Committee Report specifies the finding and recommendations of the Committee with respect to the issues noted from the contents of the Fijian Electoral Commission Annual Report, divided into three main parts, as follows:

- (1) Introduction;
- (2) Committee's Observation and Findings; and
- (3) Recommendations.

In reviewing the Annual Report, the Committee took note of the deliberation by the previous Committee and also conducted its own independent review. This independent review highlighted a few pertinent issues, which included the recommendations that were made by the then Electoral Commission and these were as follows:

- The realisation of the independence of the Fijian Electoral Commission by having and controlling its own budget, being able to utilise independent legal services and having clear demarcation on the governance structure of Fiji's electoral management body;
- The realisation of the aforementioned by considering proposed amendments to the electoral laws - the *2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji*, the *Electoral Act 2014* and the *Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Act 2013*; and
- The Commission had a positive engagement with foreign electoral management bodies, such as the New Zealand Electoral Commission, whereby technical assistance was provided and numerous institutional documents were successfully created.

The Committee was also mindful of the requirements of the Standing Orders of Parliament regarding gender. However, as part of the review, the Committee noted and appreciated the fact that there was not much emphasis given to gender-focused analysis at the time of tabling the Annual Report.

At the conclusion of the review, the Committee noted that some of the suggestions made in the 2016 Annual Report had already been addressed by the Electoral Commission since the initial tabling of the Annual Report in Parliament. Therefore, the Committee commends the Commission for the great work being carried out on Fiji's electoral system.

At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights of the last term of Parliament for their efforts and input, which had greatly assisted our Committee in the compilation of this Report.

I would also like to thank the Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights: the Honourable Rohit Sharma (Deputy Chairperson), Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, Honourable Dr. Salik Govind and Honourable Mosese Bulitavu, for their deliberations and input; the Alternate Members who made themselves available when the Substantive Members could not attend; the Secretariat and representatives of the Fiji's electoral management bodies, who accepted the invitation of the previous Committee and the current Committee, and for taking an interest in the proceedings of the Committee and Parliament.

On behalf of the Committee, I commend the Committee's Report on the Fijian Electoral Commission Annual Report 2016 to Parliament, and seek the support of all Honourable Members of this august House to take note of the contents of the Committee's Report. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the contents of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report on the Coordination of Actions on Elimination of Violence  
Against Women - Standing Committee on Public Accounts

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

Honourable Speaker, I am pleased to present the Public Accounts Committee Report on the review made on the performance audit report on the Coordination of Actions on Elimination of Violence Against Women.

The audit assesses whether the implementation of the Women's Plan of Action (WPA) in particular its thematic area on the elimination of violence against women is effective and realising the commitment from key stakeholders in upholding the relevant existing legislation and policies that impact the issues surrounding violence against women and children. The 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji recognises through Section 26 on the "Rights to Equality and Freedom of Discrimination" which signifies Government's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality.

Gender equality and women's development is one of the priority outcomes of the State. This has been imbedded from the previous national plans, namely the Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development 2010-2014 and now the 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan. It is important to note that the Fijian Government has made a number of international and regional commitments for gender equality through the:

- (1) Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- (2) Beijing Platform for Action 1995;
- (3) Sustainable Development Goals; and
- (4) Revised Pacific Platform For Action.

Violence against women and children is a pandemic that is globally recognised as a political, social and health problem and this is a grave violation of human rights. In Fiji, 64 percent of Fijian women who have been in an intimate partner relationship experienced either physical or sexual violence or both by their husband or intimate partners in their lifetime. This is almost double the global average.

The most alarming reality is that although women and girls make up the majority of victims for sexual offences, there were processes that were not in accordance with the relevant guidance materials pertaining to the reduction of crime against women and children in Fiji. This includes the administration of the National Domestic Violence Helpline, Zero Tolerance Violence Free Community (ZTVFC) and the integration of key stakeholders working in collaboration such as the Fiji Police Force and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre.

The Committee notes the initiative from the Executive on the various policies developed such as the Fiji Police Force No Drop Policy, the National Gender Policy and Fiji's Progress Report on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which have been fairly implemented. However, there are further opportunities for improvements to allow for consistency in the review of the coordination process and identifying clear performance indicators that will administer and implement the underlying frameworks for more effectiveness.

The audit examined the three key areas and their findings which have been clearly reflected below:

- (1) Framework regulating the activities on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW);
- (2) Implementing and monitoring the activities of EVAW; and
- (3) Performance review and reporting of activities on the EVAW.

At the outset, I wish to extend my appreciation to all Honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan report namely, Honourable Joseph Nand, Honourable Vijendra Prakash, Honourable Aseri Radrodro and Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the Alternate Members who stood in during the Committee's hearings and deliberation process and this includes Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa and Honourable Mikaele Leawere.

I acknowledge the support rendered by the Secretariat in the process of the audit report and guidance until the finalisation of the Committee's Report. With those few words, I now commend this Report to Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that the debate on the contents of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion. Thank you.



HON. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed.

### MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the following Ministers have given notice to make Ministerial Statements under Standing Order 40:

- (1) Minister for Forestry;
- (2) Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment; and
- (3) Minister for Health and Medical Services.

Honourable Members, the Ministers may speak for up to 20 minutes. After each Minister, I will then invite a response from the Leader of the National Federation Party (NFP) or his designate to speak for five minutes. There will be no other debate.

I now call on the Minister for Forestry, the Honourable Osea Naiqamu to deliver his Statement. You have the floor, Sir.

#### Government's Efforts in the Forestry Sector during COVID-19 and after *Tropical Cyclone Harold*

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- The Honourable Speaker, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Government Members of Parliament, Honourable Members of the Opposition, ladies and gentlemen: Honourable Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my Ministerial Statement to inform this august House about the Ministry of Forestry's ongoing COVID-19 response and *TC Harold's* housing rehabilitation efforts. I wish to start by extending my best wishes to our brothers and sisters of the Islamic faith on the occasion of *Eid-ul-Fitra*. *Eid Mubarak* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured to share today Government's efforts in the forestry sector to help address the impact of COVID-19 and the natural disasters that have befallen our beloved nation. As many may recall, Fiji was struck by three tropical cyclones in the form of *TC Sarai*, *TC Tino* and *TC Harold* within a span of five months. Their cumulative impact coupled with a global pandemic is nothing short of devastating. These disasters have led to thousands of Fijians jobless, homeless and penniless through no fault of theirs.

In the history of our nation, Fijians have survived many disasters. We have shown resolve and resilience but never have we encountered such a lethal combination. COVID-19, in particular, is a pandemic of historic proportions, it turned our lives upside down in a matter of days. It did the same to the rest of the world and like the rest of the world, we are still reeling from its impact. But this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is where real leadership comes in. This is where genuine, wise, intelligent and compassionate national leadership is propelled to the fore.

The FijiFirst Government, led by our God-anointed Prime Minister, Honourable Voreqe Bainimarama, demonstrated earlier that it has unmatched capability to put in place measures to cushion the impact of these combined disasters. It depicts that he has the fortitude and agility to handle difficult situations. The world can attest to the results of our decisive actions. COVID-19 affected patients were contained to only 18, 15 of whom have since recovered. No fatalities, I repeat, no fatalities.

I join the Honourable Members of the House in conveying our sincere and profound appreciation to our health workers and all those in the front line, including our disciplined services. Many made significant sacrifices, staying away from home for weeks and months to keep the rest of us safe. They are national heroines and heroes. Honourable Speaker, Sir, this achievement will go down in the annals of our history as a people, Fijians rallying together to contain the pandemic and succeed - what a remarkable achievement.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, our attention is now firmly focused on our economy. We must do all we can to re-ignite our businesses and trade, to create employment opportunities and allow our people who lost their jobs to secure the basic necessities of life, including putting food on the table. Every sector must count.

The forestry sector has taken its hardest hit. Even before COVID-19, the sector has always been at the mercy of the weather. Prolonged rainy weather means little or no operations at all. This has always been the case year-in and year-out. It is little wonder that the sector languishes at the lower end of the economic spectrum, in comparison to the other sectors. However, COVID-19 and the natural disasters are providing an opportunity to re-calibrate the sector. There is a glimmer of hope.

In fact, in the maritime zone where there are several pine schemes, timber from the trees that were planted three to four decades ago are now the main product with which we are using to rebuild houses damaged by the natural disasters.

The Ministry has deployed portable sawmills to the islands to harvest the fallen trees. Time is of the essence when trees are damaged by the elements. These trees are being treated and re-purposed to re-build houses. The Ministry is working with the Fiji Pine Trust, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the Ministry of Housing and Community Development.

In Kadavu alone, a total of 300 homes were completely destroyed and a further 586 homes were partially destroyed. We have also extended assistance to Matuku, Vatulele and Ono-i-Lau through the provision of portable sawmills, training and capacity-building to empower communities to salvage blown-over pine for their housing needs. Our intention is not to leave anyone behind.

In addition to rebuilding homes, Government, through the Ministry of Forestry, is continuing discussions with the resource owners to purchase the fallen trees. It is considering paying stumpage to the resource-owners, providing timber to build their homes and trading any surplus timber. It is also considering options to share the proceeds from timber sales with the resource owners.

We are grateful to the retailers who have indicated their willingness to purchase the surplus timber from the islands. What this means is that there should be enough timber available for our domestic needs. We could even consider exporting.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, Government's efforts to revive the forestry sector are not done in isolation. I am happy to inform the august House that the Ministry has been consulting with stakeholders to understand their challenges and help address these together. We will continue to build on the recovery strategies. Our consultations have, for instance, afforded the Ministry an opportunity to enhance its facilitation processes without compromising standards that will ensure the sustainable management of our forest resources. At the same time, the Ministry is continuing Fiji's tree-planting initiative. Honourable Speaker, Sir, in the past 15 months since His Excellency the President launched Fiji's tree-planting revolution, we have planted over 1.9 million trees and mangroves. These trees have been mapped and we now have a live dashboard. We are continuing to plant trees within the COVID-19 social distancing measures. We aim to progress in earnest in the new fiscal year.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, with COVID-19 forcing people to change their lifestyles, to re-adjust and re-calibrate, people are now re-thinking their way of life, most are turning to backyard gardening and subsistence farming. This has increased the demand for fruit trees like breadfruit, *ivi*, *tarawau*, *kavika*, *dawa*, cumquat, avocado, guava, et cetera.

As such, the Ministry of Forestry is continuing its effort to empower communities to establish and raise fruit trees as well as livelihood trees which could generate returns in a shorter time. They include *sikeci*, *tavola*, and even coastal trees like *dilo* and *dogo*, to name a few.

The Ministry will purchase seedlings from these communities for establishment in areas requiring food security and rehabilitation. We are collaborating with the Ministry of Agriculture on this.

We are also working with over 150 community nurseries, and plan to establish more. I had the privilege of opening two nursery distribution centres for Rewa and Tailevu this past Friday. I could already see a bright future for the communities involved.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, my Ministry, in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, has employed numerous youths to assist in nursery production and tree-planting in the Western Division. Collectively, they helped plant over 100,000 trees in the past four months.

We are also collaborating with the Ministry of Women to actively engage women's groups in establishing nurseries. Materials for building nurseries and training in raising seedlings will be provided to women and youths in both rural and urban areas.

And, in the midst of the pandemic, and with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Government is coordinating a "cash for work or cash for tree-planting programme", geared especially towards the workers in the tourism industry who lost their jobs due to COVID-19.

This programme is being facilitated with Conservation International, a civil society organisation that has proven itself with community engagement in conservation initiatives.

This new programme is additional to the UNDP-coordinated Global Environment Fund Ridge to Reef Project on Reforestation of Degraded Areas. The Ministry is actively engaging resource-owners to plant trees in the specifically identified watershed areas.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the support of our development partners and stakeholders in the forestry sector - the UNDP and the Pacific Community (SPC) in particular have been forthcoming, even the World Bank which funds Fiji's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Plus (REDD+) Programme continues to support the initiative towards carbon-trading yet another commodity for countries that choose to have more greenery. We also acknowledge its continuing support.

While our Pine Scheme communities are committed to re-planting trees that have been felled, it is encouraging to note that stakeholders in the sector have also been re-strategizing to ensure they sustain the jobs of most workers.

The Pine Group of Companies, Honourable Speaker, Sir, has had to temporarily close the Tropic Mill. However, it has continued to engage workers by re-deploying them to re-planting and restoring harvested land. This is commendable in these trying times.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President had sought renewed efforts in building a future worthy of our children and the future generation's dreams and aspirations.

The Ministry of Forestry intends to ensure that the forests and ecosystems we leave behind contribute to achieving our people's dreams and aspirations.

Fiji may be a small developing nation but our work towards planting more trees to address climate change, to protect our environment, to enhance biodiversity, to re-connect us to nature, and to provide a more balanced country for our future generations will make a huge difference.

Now, more than ever, we need to plan for the new normal. COVID-19 has taught us that life and nature are inter-dependent. We cannot take things for granted.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, as we work together to rebuild our nation and strengthen our resources in the midst of adversity, we need to work together as a team, and not in isolation. I thank you for this opportunity to update the august House on the Government's efforts in the Forestry sector. *Vinaka vakalevu* and thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Minister for Forestry for his Ministerial Statement. I now give the floor to the Honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua. You have the floor, Ma'am.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you very much, Honourable Speaker, and I thank the Honourable Minister for the Statement.

Honourable Speaker, I note that the Government has revived with gusto the desire to plant 15 million trees and that is welcomed, and I understand that the community in Drawa in Vanua Levu is, or by now, was benefitting from Qantas purchasing carbon credits from them but it is funny that this august House has no eyes over how the project is being managed or indeed being regulated.

I note that in April 2022, our Conservation International put out a Commission Report on REDD+ Emissions Reduction Programme called 'Benefit Sharing Plan'. Unsurprisingly, the matrices and the document lead with the private sector as beneficiaries and this is where the problem lies.

On this issue, NFP has stated before that queues must be taken from the fair share of mineral royalties which was passed last year and we need to see an amended and expanded Bill for native and freehold landowners to catch forest carbon lights and blue carbon encompassing of landowner-governed mangroves, salt marshes and sea grasses.

Again, I stress that this is something that the Government of Germany via Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) should aggressively support as it has done in all these past years.

In April, Mr. Speaker, I note that some of the issues we highlighted have been addressed in the Report by Conservation International, but the Minister, I hope, should tell us how the draft Climate Change Bill for which all the hype was about seems to have vanished into thin air and his Ministry's Forest Bill all are lying seamlessly, so that there is no duplication or overlaps of oversight, and I am expecting that the Honourable Minister will table that as soon as possible, as an explanation to the people about the Conservation International Report. I thank you for that opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Vinaka.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, as you know, there is no vote after that Ministerial Statement and the response.

On that note, we will take an adjournment for morning tea, and we will take the other two Ministerial Statements after. We adjourn for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.23 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 10.55 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment, the Honourable Dr. Mahendra Reddy, to deliver his Statement. You have the floor, Sir.

Protecting and Enhancing Our Biodiversity

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party and the Honourable Members of Parliament:

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we always hear stories from our village elders about how plentiful nature was some 50 years ago when compared to the present. We now need to go further out in the sea to fish, wander further in the forest to hunt, our traditional medicines are disappearing, the beautiful birds are declining in numbers and we are gradually destroying this beautiful creation through our selfish actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the precious habitats and species are disappearing from our planet faster than at any other time in human history and, we, humans are the principal drivers of this loss. Through habitat conversion, over-exploitation, pollution, climate change and the introduction of invasive alien species, we have messed up this beautiful creation. As we lose this biodiversity, we lose the food, water, medicines, and cultural and spiritual well-being it provides us. It is, therefore, time to pull our acts together and do something, we cannot just sit back, relax and watch as endangered species are wiped off the face of the earth by our carelessness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a virus borne from *'the wilds'* grinds the machineries of the economy to a halt, the COVID-19 pandemic, has changed people's lives and has become a critical moment of realisation for all of us. We have realised in an unforgiving way that human health is completely connected to the health of nature. We have taken nature for granted for so long. We have assumed that that season will follow season; that our fields will be planted and yield bountiful harvests; that the soil will stay fertile and that life will be all well, all this, even as we continue to carelessly extract, emit, dispose effluents, and exterminate nature. Given the current COVID-19 crises, I am sure we have realised that nature matters, and if we infringe on nature, zoonotic diseases are possible with devastating socio-economic consequences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week we celebrated the International Day for Biological Diversity under the theme of, and I quote: "Our Solutions are in Nature." The theme brings to the limelight the importance of a very relevant issue the world faces today. It highlights the need for us to work together with nature to secure our future in harmony with nature. We need biodiversity-positive agriculture, biodiversity-smart construction and biodiversity-infrastructure integrating nature in design and execution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme strongly demonstrates the need to revisit our relationship with the natural world and recognise that solutions to our problems are found in nature. It may sound radical, but no matter how technologically advanced we may be, we are still completely dependent on nature and its constituents for our water, food, medicines, shelter and energy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both the Ministry of Waterways and Environment and Agriculture recognise the value of biodiversity and vibrant productive ecosystems as the foundation for thriving societies and as such, at both Ministries, we have started implementing nature-based solutions to protect against natural disasters with the use of Vetiver grass for riverbank protection and mangroves for coastal protection from storm surge and rising tides. Through the above, we are helping nature help us mitigate disasters, by making use of natural processes and ecosystem services to build resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past, we have tried to address emerging societal challenges through high grade infrastructure solutions. While these are expansive investments, it needs regular maintenance to maintain a level of safety.

Furthermore, it does not protect during events beyond its design capacity. With increased frequency and magnitude of natural disasters, it is only advisable that we switch to more sustainable nature-based solutions, and that is what we are doing. By using nature-based solutions to solve our problems, we are also healing nature's ability to cope with climate change and supporting the livelihoods of many Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as governments across the world take drastic action to get a grip on COVID-19 pandemic, save lives and reignite economies, 2020 has emerged as a year we realise that transformative change in our society is urgent and is possible. Transformative change requires a paradigm shift and doing things differently, implying that business-as-usual is archaic and unacceptable, and not a solution.

To ensure transformative change, we need to mainstream biodiversity and ecosystem services across all sectors, meaning conservation and sustainable biodiversity integrated into planning and decision-making processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have had a discussion with our staff in the Ministry of Environment that we will need to make an effort to go and talk to other Departments and Ministries, so that we can mainstream biodiversity issues in policymaking. We will assist as facilitators, rather than just environmental police.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current crisis illustrates the fact that if we are willing, change can happen quickly. This demonstrates that decades of climate change targets could have been achieved, biodiversity crisis averted, a resilient economy, healthy communities, and a thriving natural world was possible, if only we were prepared to accept change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to share insights into Fiji's biodiversity. According to the National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan (NBSAP) 2020-2025 and recent studies, Fiji has 50.1 percent of its plant species in "endemic status" ["Endemic status" means that they are only found in Fiji and nowhere else in the world, that is why they are called endemic plants, endemic animals, endemic species]:

- 35 of the 166 birds in Fiji are endemic to Fiji, which includes Fiji petrel.
- 6 known species of bats are the only endemic to Fiji.
- known frogs in Fiji, the ground-frog and the Fiji tree frog are endemic to Fiji.
- an estimated 166 species of freshwater and estuarine fishes – 13 out of which are endemic fishes, only found in Fiji.
- out of the 2,031 marine species in Fiji, 33 are considered marine endemics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident from above that we have a lot to do if we want to maintain these species and, therefore, balance the ecosystem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our existence is defined by the existence, safety and security of this ecosystem that we are part of. If they are safe, protected and looked after, the safety of our existence is also guaranteed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the species with high endemism represents habitats within ecosystems that are critical for protection and require management actions to safeguard it from ongoing and emerging crisis. We need to protect these ecosystems in the indigenous forest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my colleague, the Honourable Minister for Forests, earlier this morning spoke about the forestry sector, their contribution and relentless work in terms of protecting our forests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's forest comprise 85.3 percent of natural forests and continue to support the vast majority of country's endemic fauna and flora.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not delve much on that, as my colleague did speak about that, but Fiji has 13 known hotspots within the Vatu-i-Ra and Lomaiviti passages of particular importance to the migration pathways of cetaceans. The ecological connectivity and integrity of ecosystems that are essential for the survival and wellbeing of migratory birds that need to be conserved and protected.

Honourable Speaker, threats to Fiji's biodiversity are many and they continue to evolve in terms of complexities associated risks. As with our island neighbours, Fiji is continuously confronted by the devastating effects of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that biodiversity and climate change are two sides of the same coin. Biodiversity is affected by climate change with negative consequences for human wellbeing but by biodiversity through the ecosystem services supports climate change mitigation and adaptation, therefore, conserving and sustainably managing biodiversity is critical to addressing climate change. Both must be addressed in tandem if we are to increase resilience and protect biodiversity for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, biodiversity supports our current efforts to reduce negative effects of climate change, through carbon sequestration. Moreover, conserving in-tact ecosystems, such as mangroves, helps reduce the devastating impacts of climate change, such as coastal inundation and storm surges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while celebrating the International Day for Biological Diversity last week, the Ministry launched a number of initiatives and policy documents aimed at conserving our biodiversity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is home to some 250 endemic species with more than 56 percent having been reported as threatened and 32 percent as critically endangered. Common threats attributed include habitat loss, increase in invasive species; the changing climate affecting species population, distribution, resilience ability, vulnerability status and biological characteristics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has committed to a number of conservation global frameworks to guide its conservation work on endemic and threatened species. The Convention on Biological Diversity, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on Migratory Species, are a few that guide Fiji's Policy priorities and implementation of targeted species programme. To achieve the targets of these Conventions and Agreements, we have recently launched policy directions protecting terrestrial marine biodiversity.



Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were on the beautiful Island of Yadua and Yadua Taba on 21st May last week, to launch the Iguana Conservation Policy aimed at conserving and protecting Fiji's endemic crested iguana species (four species that we have). Yadua Taba is the stronghold for the species containing approximately 98 percent of the world's population, estimated to be between 10,000 to 13,000 animals and is the only legally protected population in Fiji. Yadua has close to 13,000 and another 1,000 on Malolo Island. That is what we have in the entire world and, therefore, this crested iguana is endemic, only found in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this policy, the Ministry translates the Government's environment and biodiversity targets into actions and illustrates our leadership in protecting endangered species.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have met members of the *vanua* on Yadua Island and spoke to them, first of all, acknowledging and thanking them for allowing Yadua Taba to be a sanctuary for the crested iguana. Secondly, I did have a good *talanoa* with them in terms of how we can assist them in supporting their work on the Island of Yadua, given that they have allocated that particular Island as a sanctuary.

Just this morning, I had a meeting with the Permanent Secretary for Agriculture and the Permanent Secretary for Environment on putting into action and delivering on the assistance that we discussed on the Island and we decided that we will go with the assistance in three to four weeks' time and provide them the support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was also with my team on the next day, Friday, the day of International Biodiversity on Vorovoro Island, closer to the Great Sea Reef, Fiji's coral reef, to also launch a policy on conservation and management of Fiji's coral reefs, aimed at promoting the conservation and protection of Fiji's coral reefs and associated ecosystems. This policy forges the Ministry's leadership in biodiversity, protection and national conservation efforts, delivering on our national biodiversity targets, as well as our commitments to achieve targets in other associated conventions we are a party to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to further protect and manage our coral reefs, we have just signed a letter of engagement that details the terms of engagement between the Ministry of Environment and Vulcan Incorporation to collaborate on the use of Allen Coral Atlas in Fiji for coral reef monitoring and management at no cost to us.

The Allen Coral Atlas is building a database fed with satellite imagery that can detect changes in coral reefs and provide us with the much-needed early warning, giving us time to devise strategies to better manage our coral reefs. This collaboration will allow us to better understand the evolving state of our coral reefs and ensure that necessary action is undertaken to protect them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that, and I quote, 'You cannot fix what you cannot see', hence the above quote in collaboration with Vulcan Incorporation, will allow us to monitor our coral reefs from space via satellite, allowing Government agencies, researchers and decision-makers to make informed, evidence-based decisions to conserve and protect our coral reefs that are incredibly being threatened by activities on land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Ministry takes the lead on Aichi targets, we, through various national products, including Global Environment Facility (GEF) Ridge to Reef (R to R) Programme, are getting various other Government agencies, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Forestry, Ministry of Fisheries, Ministry of Waterways and Infrastructure and other sectors that use the land, that often are the primary drivers of biodiversity loss, to implement projects to reverse biodiversity loss.

Such projects include reforestation programmes, strengthening locally marine protected areas, promoting nature-based solutions, Vetiver for riverbank stabilisation and also recently a project is being implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture is to look after animals so that the biodiversity is protected. It has been funded under the GEF Ridge to Reef Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, as a nation have progressed significantly in our commitments to recognise the importance of Fiji's biodiversity and its contribution to national social security and economy. We are mindful that our people's livelihood, particularly in the interior, rural and maritime division are linked, intertwined with our nature, our biological resources.

Fiji is a party to a number of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) that provided the international frameworks towards the protection, conservation, and sustainable use of biodiversity and natural resources, which in turn guides governments in developing tools for sustainable development and conservation purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has introduced a number of policies that recognise the critical importance of biodiversity as natural solutions to problems we face. The Climate Change Policy gives recognition to the critical role of ecosystems, such as wetland areas, mangroves and our oceans as nature-based solutions to the effects of climate change. It calls for conservationists, practitioners, investors, planners and economists to enhance collaboration in natural resource management practices, to promote the protection of carbon sinks and buffer zones that addresses climate change stressors and risks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, societies around the world are increasingly recognising and responding to the environmental challenge and looking up to their Government to lead. Here, in Fiji, we have rigorous environmental management legislation in place. What we need is synergy across sectors to realise our biodiversity and environmental targets. We need to take every opportunity to put biodiversity management at the top of the agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many still think this planet is ours to use as we like, demonstrating the willful ignorance of the importance of ecosystems to our wellbeing, as well as other plant and animal species. We have massively undervalued the subsidy provided by the environment. We need to stop thinking of biodiversity protection as a cost, but as an investment that goes hand in hand with other investments we have done to consolidate economic growth and national wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, nature, its sounds, the trees, the birds, all of these provide us with a sense of identity, a sense of home, a safe place. I am sure each of us will be able to recollect our time in nature, whether it is morning walks, sailing our oceans, farming our land or simply nurturing our children to care for nature. These moments define who we are, where we belong. Losing our biodiversity means we lose our peace, our joy, our humanity and ourselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to biodiversity conservation, we all need to lead our communities, we need to demonstrate that everyone has a role, this is our legacy - our gift to generations to come. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment for his Ministerial Statement.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker for this opportunity to reply to the Honourable Minister's Statement and I thank him for his statement. Also I wish everyone a belated happy International Day for Biological Diversity celebrated last week on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Honourable Speaker, we are always quite astounded by the fluff that we continue to hear about the need to protect nature. I am quite certain citizens of Nasinu whose immediate biodiversity surrounding their homes due to unchecked litter would also have many things to say. Honourable Speaker, can we just start with how many microns does Fiji's biodiversity possess? I know that, that may sound like a stupid question to some, but I do want to go back to the month of January when this Government plunged the whole nation into chaos with their knee-jerk taxation on plastic bags based on its thickness.

It seems a little disingenuous that the Honourable Minister is talking up biodiversity when our oceans, our land and our air are still teeming with plastic pollution. The people's pockets may be much lighter from increased plastic bag charges but it has had minimal impact on the supply of plastic packaging in the country. Let us start the biodiversity hype from there, Mr. Speaker, Sir. All these grand ideas being proposed today need a huge dose of reality and a major injection of consultation. We have had enough bubble and boom talk already. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution to the debate. We will move on and I now give the floor to the Minister for Health and Medical Services, the Honourable Dr. Ifereimi Waqainabete to deliver his Statement. You have the floor, Sir.

#### Update on COVID-19 Outbreak

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, today I rise before the House to provide an update on the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the February sitting of Parliament this year, I informed the House about the novel COVID-19 disease and the threat it posed to the world and to Fiji. Within three months, there has been more than 5.4 million confirmed cases and more than 346,000 deaths from COVID-19 global pandemic in 216 countries and territories of the world and it is still rising, Honourable Speaker.

At times it seem to have waived and waned but it continues to rise. Six months ago, Honourable Speaker, we did not know about COVID-19. Now this new disease is driving the new normal way of living, working and relating to each other. We recorded our first case of COVID-19 on 19th March, 2020, and our last confirmed case of COVID-19 in Fiji was diagnosed on 20th April, 2020. Fiji has now recorded 18 confirmed cases and no deaths from the six local individuals who imported the disease from abroad.

I am pleased to report that it is now 36 days since our last case of COVID-19 was reported, more than two incubation periods for the disease, and 15 of the 18 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have fully recovered and have returned to their homes.

HON. MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- This, Honourable Speaker, means that the recovery rate for COVID-19 in Fiji now stands at 83 percent. The three active patients who remain in isolation in Navua Hospital are all stable and well but they remain because there are still active cases on the tests that are done to them routinely.

None of Fiji's cases have had severe illness and none have required intensive care unit-level care and it was not by fluke, it was by a dedicated group of personnel and also the resources that were given to them by Government to do the work that needs to be done. This highly infectious disease requires stringent, non-medical interventions to stop its spread. Although it is a new disease to the world, knowing how the disease spreads and how we can prevent transmission from the sick to the healthy is critical to ensuring that our families are protected against COVID-19.

Honourable Speaker, I would like to highlight our response to this global pandemic and elaborate on six key areas which we have been asked to share with many countries around the world on our success.

Firstly, it is leadership. Our Prime Minister, the Honourable Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama has been at the forefront of our fight against COVID-19.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- His firm and decisive leadership and the support of my senior colleagues in Cabinet and the critical government agencies and statutory bodies ensured an efficient decision-making process and the timely implementation of containment strategies that reduced the risk of spread of the disease in the community.

I acknowledge the strategic thinking and leadership shown by the Minister for Economy, the Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum in devising a timely and comprehensive budget through the Supplementary COVID-19 Budget that has facilitated the whole of Government and a whole of society response towards the COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji.

Honorable Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 was included through gazetted regulations as a notifiable disease and this paved the way for health officials to be able to quarantine suspected cases of the disease under the relevant sections of the *Public Health Act*.

Further regulations were gazetted through the powers given to the Honourable Minister and the Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services to allow for the control of public movement and to enforce social or physical distancing. Our main objectives were to protect the population against further spread of the disease while we enhanced our health surveillance system and strengthened our health response program in the community.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, a Multi-Agency Steering Committee chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services was formed in January 2020, as the forum that informed and coordinated the responses across Government towards the disease outbreak. This forum was later converted into a Permanent Secretaries Forum, which played an important facilitative role in the whole of Government response to COVID-19.

The National Health COVID-19 Taskforce that comprised senior health managers within the Ministry of Health, health partners, local and international health experts, specialists from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the Fiji National University (FNU) and the private sector, monitored the global and local outbreak situation and provided policy advice to the Minister and Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services, as well as to Cabinet on the global pandemic.

The Incident Management Team (IMT) for COVID-19 was established on 2nd March, 2020 to plan, co-ordinate and facilitate the Integrated National Multi-Agency Public Health Response and this was ably led by Doctor James Fong and Mr. Vimal Deo, our Chief Health Inspector as being the Chief Operating Officer.

The Ministry adopted this WHO model and implemented it for the first time a full large-scale Incident Management Team. The IMT which has representation from most Government Ministries and the Disciplined Forces operates 24 hours a day and provides daily briefs to the Minister and ministries through daily face-to-face briefings, situation reports and the updates when required. And the \$40 million that was set aside for COVID-19 was run basically out of this Incident Management Team, separately from the Ministry of Health's enormity functions of the \$340 million budgeted to it in this current financial year.

Honourable Speaker, on 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, Parliament approved an additional supplementary COVID-19 Budget of \$40 million for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. A series of critical regulatory changes were also approved, which facilitated the control measures required to quickly and effectively stop the disease outbreak.

Secondly on border control, Honourable Speaker, Fiji began the screening of passengers for symptoms of COVID-19 from 28th January, 2020 at the Nadi International Airport. Fiji had been preparing well before the disease reached our shores and one of the very first nations in the world to introduce the supplementary health arrival cards, specifically for COVID-19.

Since 2nd February, 2020, all incoming passengers have been required to complete this card before disembarking at any of our international ports of entry. We have found this intervention to be extremely valuable in our ability to quickly identify and track down all contacts of suspected cases. We have heard reports of nations where when they later had community transmission, they then implemented their arrivals card and in retrospect they said, "maybe they could have done it earlier."

In a sequential manner and guided by the expert health advice on the global pandemic, the Department of Immigration placed border restrictions that banned the entry of non-citizens into the country, initially from China, and then eventually from all parts of the world. Fijians were exempted. Those returning from these countries were required to home quarantine initially for 14 days after arrival, then later on the 28th March, 2020 they were compelled to undergo quarantine at the Government designated quarantine facilities for a prescribed period of time. We left our borders open to our own citizens. The Department of Immigration had also issued travel advisories against overseas travel.

On 16th March, 2020, all cruise liners were banned from entering Fiji waters and docking at any port in Fiji. The international airports and seaports were shut down on 26th March, 2020 and only Fijian citizens and international trade remained open.

On 30th March, 2020, all yachts were banned from docking at any port in Fiji and if you look right around the world, Honourable Speaker, we will see that there have been countries that have significant spread or super-spreading of the disease within the cruise liners docked within their waters.

To-date, we have monitored over 5,840 individuals in various forms of quarantine and isolation, and achieved 92 percent surveillance compliance from all our quarantine individuals as reported by our health teams and through our own Ministry of Health software for contact tracing.

Disease Surveillance and Response: Thirdly, Honourable Speaker, members of the disciplined forces and other civil servants joined the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to assist with carrying out community surveillance through fixed and mobile fever clinics, quarantine enforcement and contact tracing teams operating in each of the divisions:

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 40 fixed fever clinics were set up around the country in strategic locations:

- (a) 11 in the Central Division
- (b) 15 in the Western Division
- (c) 8 in the Northern Division
- (d) 6 in the Eastern Division.

To date, these fever clinics remain functional and have seen 16,757 people as of yesterday, while 142 people that had been seen in these fixed fever clinics were then required to have testing and all of them have been negative. The mobile fever clinics conducted house-to-house visits and reached 809,704 people by 26th May.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- This is more than 92 percent of our population and when we include the 16,000 from the fixed fever clinics and the 810,000 from the mobile fever clinics, you can see that more than 830,000 of our people have been screened.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- This massive undertaking has become a feature of the whole of Government COVID-19 Surveillance Response, and it is a testament to the truly national coordinated response to the pandemic. Apart from these active screening activities, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services used the pre-existing early warning surveillance system for influenza-like illness.

Influenza-like illness is used as a proxy for COVID-19 surveillance as symptoms are similar for both diseases and we are in the flu season, so to speak, in our part of the world, Honourable Speaker. Any unusual increases or spikes were investigated immediately by the Fiji Centre for Disease Control, or Fiji CDC, as potential COVID-19 clusters. Even though we know at this moment that predominantly there were spikes that were likely to be just the normal flu that we have in our flu season. This system has been recording an average of 95 percent reporting compliance rate from the 69 surveillance sites throughout Fiji. The Early Warning System (EWARS) recorded the onset of the flu season in Fiji in February 2020 and reported the declining number of influenza-like illness by May 2020.

Honourable Speaker, this brings me to the laboratory testing capability for COVID-19. Fiji started laboratory testing of COVID-19 on 28th January with samples shifted to the WHO Collaborating Centre Reference Laboratory in Melbourne, Australia. A total of 19 samples were tested at this laboratory for Fiji from the 28th January to 12th March this year, 2020. I wish to acknowledge the support of the Australian Government and in particular, the Reference Laboratory in Melbourne for their support, guidance and technical advice to our local experts at the Fiji Centre for Disease Control.

Fiji commenced testing for COVID-19 at the Fiji Centre for Disease Control from the 11th March, 2020 using molecular-based, Real Time Quantitative Reverse Transcription PCR (RT-PCR) testing. This is a globally-recognised and approved standard of testing for this virus. The testing

capacity has recently been further enhanced with the introduction of GeneXpert testing capability, also a molecular-based test, but with a shorter turnaround time of less than one hour for results.

Since January this year, patients have been tested for COVID-19. If they have acute respiratory symptoms and a history of international travel or contact with a case of COVID-19, or have been admitted to ICU with severe respiratory illness. By 19th March, 2020, we amended our testing criteria to include all the close contacts of cases if they were symptomatic or at the completion of 14 days of quarantine if asymptomatic. To date, all individuals under quarantine have compulsory laboratory testing for COVID-19 after 14 days of quarantine, and this includes close contacts, returned international travellers and healthcare workers involved in the direct care of confirmed COVID-19 patients. We are testing in, outside and beyond the WHO criteria, we are testing aggressively and widely, Honourable Speaker. All patients admitted to ICU with symptoms of Severe Acute Respiratory Illness (SARI) have also been tested for COVID-19.

In addition, Honourable Speaker, we have also identified 10 health facilities in the public and private sector in all Health Divisions in the country to be sentinel testing sites, and they are now testing patients with respiratory symptoms for COVID-19 adding further surveillance capability.

As of 26th May 2020, we had conducted a total of 2,431 tests which averages to 33 tests per day. This equates to 2.47 tests per 1,000 population. Furthermore, we are doing 121.5 tests per confirmed case. So that means, Honourable Speaker, we generate 123 tests to have one case positive, and by this measure we compare favourably with the rest of the world, in that Australia does 153 tests per confirmed case and South Korea does 69.1 tests per confirmed case. We are testing more widely standardised for population than South Korea.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, let me now talk about the isolation facilities. From the onset of this global pandemic, the Ministry of Health had initially identified key hospitals as isolation facilities. These included Navua Hospital, CWM Hospital, Lautoka Hospital, Nadi Hospital and Labasa Hospital. We also identified 17 health facilities to provide surge support for COVID-19 if required. In total, we have identified and created a combined-isolation facility bed space for 128 patients. Honourable Speaker, there was much hue and cry when we announced that Navua Hospital was being used as an isolation facility. However, to-date, this facility has and is being used successfully as the COVID-19 isolation facility for the Central Division, while other health services continue to be offered from this facility. I pay special tribute to the people of Serua and Namosi, and health team in Navua for their understanding, dedication and support to make this work effectively.

Apart from the health facilities, the Ministry and other government agencies, with the leadership of the Divisional Commissioners, worked together to identify and commission community-based isolation facilities to facilitate the outbreak response activity. Those facilities are located in strategic areas and provide a total of 390 beds ready for any surge in cases. The Government has also invested in ICU equipment, consumables and medical supplies which have been ordered to boost the inpatient care capacity in all the major hospitals and isolation facilities in Fiji. We have doubled our ICU capacity and continue to look at avenues to ensure that our patients are treated early and adequately to limit ICU need, and I thank Fiji Airways for providing safe flights and bringing back this much-needed equipment and consumables.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, another area that was addressed was communication and information. The Government has been forthright and transparent with information on COVID-19, with regular press conferences to update the public on the progress of the disease in Fiji and the response measures implemented. We developed a comprehensive communication plan which included a community awareness package on COVID-19 that was delivered to all villages and settlements in Fiji.

All media outlets were engaged through media releases, press statements, press conferences, social media posts, frequently asked questions, posters and videos that included one by the Fijian men 7s team that became viral, amassing more than three and a half million views globally.

Through the Ministry of Communications, we also put in place a toll-free number, 158, which has received more than 9,000 calls, averaging about 150 to 200 calls per day.

Honourable Speaker, apart from the phone contacts tracing mechanism, the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Attorney-General, Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum have recently announced the introduction of the CARE Fiji App. This application uses Bluetooth technology and will significantly enhance Fiji's COVID-19 counter-measures. This phone application is intended to enable a community-driven contact tracing. The application is based on the Singapore model called "TraceTogether" which uses the Bluetooth Relative Signal Strength Indicator (RSSI) readings between devices across time to approximate the proximity and duration of an encounter between two users. This proximity and duration information is stored on one's phone for 28 days on a rolling basis - anything beyond that would be deleted.

It is currently going through a verification process before it will be trialled and tested and made available for the Fijian public as early as next month.

Honourable Speaker, in understanding how this disease is spread, we introduced measures to enforce social or physical distancing since early February and further gazetted them as Public Notices under the *Public Health Act 1935* on the 4th April 2020. These measures were relating to limitation on the people gathering, inter-island travel restrictions, persons in queues and distance that they had to adhere to. They have been done to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 once the disease was diagnosed in Fiji.

Prior to the diagnosis of Fiji's first case of COVID-19, overseas travel for Government Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, civil servants & staff of statutory bodies was stopped while international events and participation of overseas guests at local events were not permitted from 18th March, 2020.

Honourable Speaker, Government introduced the selective lockdown of areas based on risks at various times since 19th March, 2020. These were implemented from 14 to 28 days in the greater Lautoka area, the Suva area, the Nabua settlement in Suva, the Soasoa settlement in Labasa, and the Vunicagi settlement in Dreketi, Macuata. Non-essential services and businesses were also stopped and banned in lockdown areas. We have been successful in ensuring that no transmission of COVID-19 occurred in these lockdown areas.

All nightclubs, bars, gyms, cinemas, swimming pools and fitness centres were closed from 20th March, 2020 while restaurants were required to limit their seating capacity to less than 20 persons from 23rd March, 2020.

Honourable Speaker, we are at an unique and enviable position in the world. We have stopped the disease in its tracks and our comprehensive surveillance and testing are telling us we have no more presence of the disease in the community. We have learned from that and we cannot afford a second or third wave of the disease.

In closing, I make special mention and acknowledge the leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister and all Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Permanent Secretaries, the Heads of the Disciplined Forces in the Military, Police and Correctional Services, Divisional Commissioners and their



leadership teams, and all Government agencies and all civil servants and Government workers. I thank the leaders of the community - religious leaders of all faiths and denominations, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), *turaga-ni-koros*, advisory council leaders and traditional leaders for leading and supporting our response. I thank all fathers and mothers for showing the example and leading the way.

My special thanks to all the frontline health workers, Disciplined Forces, Border Control Officers, social workers, civil servants and support staff for your commitment, courage and dedication to be on the front line of this pandemic. I reiterate the call of the Honourable Prime Minister that you are the new heroes of our time.

In closing, Honourable Speaker, in the Measles epidemic of 1875, more than 40,000 Fijians died, estimated about 40 percent of our population, our people were helpless, they did not understand the signs behind the measles, they lack decisive and compassionate leadership and no one walked the streets to tell them to social-distance or to take their temperature. This time around we did not allow that to happen. I thank you, Honourable Speaker.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for his Ministerial Statement.

Honourable Pio Tikoduadua, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the Honourable Minister for his Statement, and as we do every time, we applaud our frontline health personnel in the battle against COVID-19. *Vinaka vakalevu* and *dhanyavaad* to everyone who is working very hard within our health fraternity to get rid of this disease that has vastly affected our community, not only in Fiji but also globally.

Mr. Speaker, last evening we discussed at length and we went to great length in emphasising why it is important that in our battle against this pandemic, we should not lose focus on the fact that while this fight is important for Fiji's future for the recovery and advancement of Fiji socially, economically and politically, it should not be done by neglecting or sacrificing the integral components of our health and medical care system.

Mr. Speaker, firstly on COVID-19 itself, we are lucky that both good fortune and sheer hard work by our frontline health and other personnel and timely strategies put in place by the Government have resulted in what seems to be now the containment of this pandemic to only 18 citizens, a vast majority of whom have now recovered. We all hope and pray that it stays this way as it may well be one of the pre-requisites of us joining the Trans-Tasman Bubble to start reviving our very badly hit tourism sector.

We also hope, Mr. Speaker, that this happens sooner rather than later for the sake of our many thousands of unemployed workers in the tourism-related sectors. But we are worried, Mr. Speaker, that what may become the only blot on this plan is our rate of actual testing of our citizens despite having the only WHO-accredited testing facility in the region and the state of our public health and medical facilities. We have talked about these things in the past as well as different interpretations of gatherings and social distancing in different places. Those controversies will go on for a little bit longer, but we genuinely hope and pray that given our health care fragilities, we do not succumb to a possible second wave of this pandemic which is still crippling the world today.

Mr. Speaker, in this respect, we expected the Honourable Minister to inform Parliament in detail how much of the \$40 million allocated in the COVID-19 (Response) Budget for four months has been used so far and for what specific purposes. Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I go back to the Government's social responsibility in this crisis. Like I said, many thousands of workers have lost their jobs. Thousands more have limited employment in the sense that either their hours and rates of wages have been reduced, in many cases employees have suffered both pay cuts and reduced hours. We expect the Minister for Employment to address this issue in the future. On Monday, due to COVID-19 and non-operations, over 700 Fiji Airways workers were, what I would call, summarily dismissed. That is what their stories of pain and misery tell us. They were not given any notice. One is only dismissed in this manner if he or she has previously breached employment terms and conditions. Now, I believe this happened because Fiji Airways wanted to prevent the employees and their unions from going to court to restrain the company from taking such action. This unfair dismissal also allowed Fiji Airways to get away with paying workers three months' salary plus two weeks for each year of service as part of redundancy that was in the collective agreement between the airline and the unions. It is unfortunate that such actions and breach are being committed by a company that is 51 percent-owned by the Government.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, do these workers and many thousands of other victims of COVID-19 not deserve our attention and assistance? We cannot abuse the COVID-19 excuse to compromise the health and wellbeing of our people because of the inability of the Government to afford basic health and medical care. That is why last evening's response by the Honourable Minister, that the focus right now is only on COVID-19, is ridiculous. The many thousands of unemployed workers and their families, Mr. Speaker, who now cannot afford anything, have a constitutional right to decent health-care and that our public hospitals must provide and that is why it is important to vastly improve our facilities and healthcare delivery.

I, therefore, ask the Honourable Minister to stop being lackadaisical about this aspect and always keep this in mind when talking about COVID-19 in the future, and this is what humanitarianism is all about, Mr. Speaker. I thank you.

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

Honourable Members, on the next Agenda Item, I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today.

Honourable Members, I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, the Honourable Viam Pillay, to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

**REPORT ON THE ANNUAL REVIEW OF THE FIJI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
(FNU) 2017**

HON. V. PILLAY.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Report on the Annual Review of the Fiji National University 2017 which was tabled on 1st April, 2019.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak on the motion. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, the Fiji National University (FNU) was established in 2009 under the Fiji National University Act 2009.

The University aims to be the premier university for higher education, technical and vocational education and training, research and development in Fiji and the Pacific Region, and to be the national centre of excellence in Fiji for all things to do with training and productivity.

The *Fiji National University Act 2009* provides the functions of the Council, including the following specific provisions:

- (1) to act for and encourage the creation, advancement and dissemination of knowledge through scholarship, research and teaching to the standards acceptable by the Council;
- (2) to provide the course of study or instruction at the levels of achievements the Council considers appropriate to meet the needs of the community, including technical and vocational education and training;
- (3) to confer higher education awards as determined by the Council;
- (4) to participate in community discourse through the application of knowledge generated and advanced at the University to society, industry and Government in an environment where the rights of all are respected; and
- (5) to perform other functions given to the University under this Act or under another Act or as determined by the Council.

I would also like to take this time to highlight some of the key achievements in 2017. Firstly, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between FNU and Douglas Pharmaceuticals, a New Zealand company established in Fiji. The partnership was to assist FNU develop training programmes in pharmaceutical, manufacturing, engineering and other related areas.

Secondly, FNU and Pacific Islands Rainforest Foundation (PIRF) signed a new partnership to formalise collaboration in the area of academic and educational activities, including practical attachments of students.

Thirdly, FNU partnered with two Indonesian universities with the objective to strengthen academic and research collaboration in the areas of agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

We commend the University for thriving towards excellence in ensuring that higher education is a priority for all Fijians. Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Honourable Professor Biman Prasad, you have the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I thought the former Dean of FNU might want to speak first.

Mr. Speaker, we would like to support the University. In fact, universities are very, very important for any country and FNU, of course, is our national university and we should extend all our support that is necessary.

Mr. Speaker, just looking at the recommendations, I thought it might be appropriate for me to say a few things here and one is the retention of expatriate staff.

Universities, Mr. Speaker, rest on an important principle of quality, and quality even to a large extent, apart from the processes, the curriculum and developments of all those, is dependent on the quality of people who actually teach.

It has always been a difficult proposition for Universities, whether it is USP, FNU or University of Fiji, to attract the best quality staff and invariably, we are not able to find those people all the time in Fiji or within the Pacific. So, the idea of getting expatriate staff from outside of the region and outside of the country is always an important one, and I note that the University advertises the positions halfway.

I remember these issues many years ago, at USP, there was a six-year rule, that expatriate staff positions ought to be advertised every six years. But I see here at FNU, it is being advertised in the middle of every three years which I think is unfair to the University and perhaps, to the students as well. I think the six-year rule could be better, if not more.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, this is very important and I think FNU has some legacy issues and is still in the process of getting to that point. Unless we get quality staff, we will always have issues about the quality of degrees, diplomas and certificates that we produce. I have heard many employers say things about the quality and this is not just specific to FNU, it is also in relation to other Universities and this is something that we need to be very careful about.

The second recommendation, Mr. Speaker, is about the FNU Campus Master Plan. I think that is good, they had talked about Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) with Investment Fiji and Fiji Development Bank. I am not sure how far that has progressed, maybe the honourable Minister can respond to that.

But I have also been told that the Campus construction at Labasa Campus is in trouble. I am told that the contractor has been fired and the amount of work that the contractor did is not commensurate with the amount of money that he has already been paid with. Perhaps, the Honourable Minister for Education can put some light on this.

On this, Mr. Speaker, I want to suggest to Government as I think the role of the Public Accounts Committee is very important. Whenever we have big projects, it is not always wise to wait until the audit report comes. There has to be some mechanism to look at when those big projects are going because in the end, if things go wrong, you have lost the money, you have lost the time and you have lost the quality.

I mean, in other countries, they do. Whenever they have big projects which involve large sums of money, the Public Accounts Committees do actually take an interest and look at what is going on so that in the process, if there are things which do not look good or are not done according to the processes and the financial procedures, et cetera, it can be looked at. So, I would suggest that Government to look at that as well.

Mr. Speaker, as I have said, we would like to fully support the university and its endeavours in promoting quality tertiary education in this country. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Professor Biman Prasad. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Agriculture. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Professor Prasad missed the entire point that some years ago when we were at USP and he was there as well, prior to the establishment of FNU, we noted that a large number of students were not able to get a place at USP. Government after Government were talking about converting the then FIT into a university so that accessibility will not be an issue.

I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was at the Business College at USP, parents would come to enrol their child for an accounting degree and the Registrar then (I do not want to name the Registrar) would tell them, “No, you go and do management” or “You go and do tourism”, because we do not have many students there and there is no space in the Accounting Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a student must only undertake a study in an area in which the student has passionate about and has interest in, otherwise the student will not succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will see in the lecture rooms, students will sit outside and watch the lecture from the window and take notes because there was no space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was in 2009 that this Government decided that we will establish FIT and convert it into FNU through the amalgamation of all the national institutes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, former students also who went through FIT, Advanced College, Lautoka Teachers College (LTC) and Fiji College of Agriculture (FCA) with certain diploma were also looking forward to completing their degree once the university was established.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was this Government that had the will and guts, and was willing to find the sources to convert and amalgamate all the national institutions into a national university which is the largest university in the entire Pacific Region, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of student numbers. No other universities, including USP and the University of Papua New Guinea has that number of students enrolled.

It is the largest university in terms of the number of programmes, and that shows that no other universities, including the University of Papua New Guinea and University of Samoa has this number of programmes.

It is the largest university in terms of the number of Campuses, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a university which has now got the largest number of students aspiring to lead, not only in Fiji but in other countries, internationally in various areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the growth, development and expansion of any country depends on the ability to develop that critical mass of thinkers, those who pushed the frontier and you will find that universities are the places where the thinkers those who push the frontier will be created. Of the entire graduates who will come out, 10 percent will be the ones who will be pushing the frontier - the thinkers; who will sit down and think big and say, “I can be the Bill Gates of the future.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNU now has got a good cadre of academics. At the beginning, Honourable Professor Prasad noted that it was so difficult to recruit, not because of the short term three years contract, but because salary was an issue. And when the amalgamation took place, it was the same salary bands that was utilised.

(Honourable Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Please, listen!

Reports talk about one aspect of it. The Report talks about why expatriate staff were having confidence issue. The issue of recruitment was because of salary levels, and when the amalgamation took place, the FIT salary band was utilised for the entire University salary band and the Honourable Minister for Health was there at that time at the Medical College.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from a budget of \$24 million at that time when the amalgamation took place, the individual budgets of all the joint institutions were combined, from that budget until now, the budget of FNU has increased about four times, it is now close to about \$70 million.

Primarily, I recall when I was at FNU during that time, the Honourable Minister for Economy said that the increased budget that was given to FNU was to fix the university's salary structure so that it was comparable with other universities. You cannot say that there will be poaching of good staff by USP, et cetera, because there is a salary difference. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say that there is no salary differential now. FNU is on firm footing and a competitive university and is able to recruit quality staff now both, locally and internationally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why you will see that even though we have the exchange rate issue, we have a reasonably good quality of international staff at the university, we have 10 percent of expatriate staff.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 10 percent of executive staff now in this era is a good number, given that large number of our own people (local and regional) have gone and done advanced studies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FNU has also got a research profile. Three years ago, they appointed a dedicated Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research) which demonstrated the willingness to get into research and publication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any university's credibility lies on its ability to undertake research and publication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, universities are the place where new knowledge is created and universities are the place where academics are required to engage in research and publications and those academics who are able to influence policy making are called the small group of intellectuals, Mr. Speaker, and that is where intellectuals are supposed to be and they are the ones who are supposed to pick up basic research as well as problem-solving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Report and I want to thank the academics, the staff at Fiji National University, the leadership of the FNU for making the University a competitive one and improving the University.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ranked University will become a world class, but progressively, and with the support of the Government and that is where you see how the Government has given the resources to the University and the new campus coming up in the Northern Division will also be an iconic campus there for the Northern Division. *Vinaka.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I give the floor to Minister Akbar, you have the floor, Madam.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Prime Minister and colleagues in this Chambers, a very good afternoon to you all. I would like to add my contribution to the motion before the House. A few of the things have been mentioned by colleagues who spoke before me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking about retaining expatriate staff at the University has been a major challenge and I note the Standing Committee's suggestion that a more vigilant approach to be undertaken with the Department of Immigration to retain them if possible, if positions cannot be filled locally.

In terms of some background information, under the current Immigration legislations, the university can only issue three-year contracts, minimum length of work permit for expatriates and positions held by expatriates must be advertised to ensure that there is no better qualified local candidate.

This actually allows our locals to be employed by the University. This uncertainty I think leads some expatriates to seek job overseas before their contract comes up for renewal resulting in the unnecessary loss of highly qualified academics which is a major issue for the university. Indeed, a more preserved effect is that the University is more likely to lose as mentioned "the best expatriate staff" while the mediocre hangs in the hope for having their positions renewed. I would agree that at times when we talk about quality, we need to have locals and also encourage our local qualified staff to take over these positions as well.

If I can give you some numbers, the number of expatriate staff fell from 154 in 2014 to 98 by 2018. During this period, 23 expatriate staff also gained Fijian citizenship, including five medical doctors.

In net terms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 33 more expatriate staff left the university than were recruited between 2014 to 2018. Because of the re-employment of expatriate staff is governed by the legislation and the length of the time it takes to obtain a work permit has increased to six months, this is again a major obstacle to the university recruiting and retaining highly qualified expatriate staff, but it is largely outside the university's control and this is something that we need to look at as the Committee suggests.

The University has also developed a Campus Master Plan to provide accommodation. Accommodation for its students has always been an issue and we are told that only 10 percent of the students are currently accommodated at the residential hostels.

The recommendation that the University continues with exploring Public-Private Partnership with Investment Fiji and the Fiji Development Bank to curb this problem is ongoing. The 15-year Campus Master Plan that was developed in 2018 and approved by Council in 2019, if I can just give you a considerable update on the progresses that have been made:

- The Research and Development Laboratory and Workshop Complex at the Derrick Campus was completed in early 2020. Honourable Prasad mentioned about the Labasa Campus. This project is under the Construction Implementation Unit managed by the Construction Implementation Unit under the Ministry of Economy, so we hope that the Minister for Economy will be able to provide an update on that.
- The Nasinu Sports Complex worth \$10 million is scheduled for completion in later 2020.

- The Business School Complex at Nasinu again worth \$28 million is also scheduled for completion later this year, 2020.
- The three-storey building at the Fiji Maritime Academy is well-underway and is also scheduled for completion in 2020, at a cost of \$16 million.
- Phase 1 of the Veterinary Science Hospital and Laboratory Complex has been completed and the building has been designed and the tender for construction has been issued. Work will start when the four projects underway are completed and hopefully in the near future.
- A new School of Creative Arts Complex has been designed and is also in the Campus Master Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the major challenges in terms of capital funding, the University aims to generate an operating surplus of \$20 million and sets just over \$10 million each year for depreciation, so that it can invest \$30 million a year in new capital projects without depleting reserves. The Government has allocated the University a capital grant of \$15 million to \$20 million a year over the recent years. The current slowdown in the economy is reducing the University's ability to generate surpluses and we hope that this will improve in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the University is in view of reviewing the tuition fee in the future, the Committee suggests that they pursue other income streams and investment opportunities to cushion the impact of the tuition fee so there is minimum impact on the students and the University Council is looking into that. The only comprehensive revision of tuition fees was in 2011 (effective from 2012), when a harmonised set of tuition fees for six Government colleges that merged to create FNU in 2010 was adopted. Since that time, there has been no increase across-the-board for tuition fees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the period of 2012 to 2019, consumer price inflation has averaged 3.9 percent. In other words, over this period, consumer prices rose by 30.7 percent. In 2019, FNU's tuition fee income was \$67.8 million. If tuition fees had been indexed to consumer prices in 2019, the income for FNU would have been around \$88.6 million, unfortunately, it did not happen. In other words, the failure to fully index meant that FNU's tuition fee income was \$20.8 million, lower than what it might have been.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, between 2015 to 2017, the need to index tuition fee was offset by rising Government's operating grant (which increased from \$36 million to \$53 million over the period). However, the base operating grant has been unchanged at \$53 million for the last three budgets.

In 2019, the new Council approved a 3 percent increase across-the-board for tuition fee to ensure that it could approve an operating budget for 2020 which generated a small 1 percent operating surplus. Without the increase, the University would have had no budget for an operating deficit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fees at FNU are significantly lower than USP which adjusts its tuition fees each year. Getting a precise percentage difference is problematic because USP's website only lists tuition fees for 2018 and it has different prices depending on the mode of studying and the degree structure. Any percentage calculation would need to weight the tuition fees for different courses by the number of students enrolled in every course and, of course, this information is not publicly available.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tertiary Scheme Loans Board advises that 85 percent of all tertiary students in Fiji are funded, with the remaining 15 percent who are private or international. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to conclude by commending the work of the University Council, the work of the deans and



the college staff and, of course, all the Fijian students who have placed their trust in our premier national university for quality and accessible education. I commend the Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her contribution to the debate. Honourable Minister for Health, you have the floor.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I rise briefly to contribute to the debate on the Report before the House. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Acting Leader of the Opposition: I must say that we are all immensely proud of this University. It is our National University and more importantly, it is a university that augurs well with the development of our nation through the needs of our nation.

One thing that I have been pleasantly happy with as being an academic myself in this University is the Industrial Committee meetings within the University where we sit down and listen to the industry and what the industry needs are. When I used to be with the University, we then worked with the industry to ensure that we offer programmes that meet the industry needs. This, I think, has been very important specifically around health, meeting some of the needs that we have specifically for specialised skilled areas, for example, a certification in particular areas that may not be available in other forms of training. For example, we had needed at one time to have phlebotomist who would be able to take blood out without doctors actually going to take blood out for themselves. So the Fiji National University came to the fore and made sure that they provided that programme for us and many other small programmes that they provide which is actually very important for the development of our nation.

Within health, I was also very immensely happy at the end of last year to participate in the opening of the WHO Collaborating Centre at the College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Science with FNU. This means that FNU is one of the few or maybe the only University in the Pacific outside of Australia and New Zealand that has a WHO Collaborating Centre specifically for the prevention of obesity and NCD. This augurs well in the health aspect because it shows that the FNU has the ability and has been able to do research over the years leading up to the designation as a WHO Collaborating Centre. This is not an easy feat for a university or an institution to achieve this, they have to show that they have quality publications that they have done over many years, they have published reputable journals and this has been recognised by WHO and WHO then gives the designation as a WHO Collaborating Centre. This is something that I believe shows the capacity and the capability that our university has.

One thing that is also certain, Honourable Speaker, is that universities need at least 30 years, 40 years, 50 years to mature. That is something that any academic will tell you. It does not happen overnight. If we look at the most impressive universities around the world, like the University of Oxford, the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, they have been around for centuries. If you look at the Harvard University, it was one of the first Universities to be developed in the United States. They need time and that time develops the intellectual capacity but in that time, we need to continue with the investment. The investment is not only in terms of the resources or in terms of money, but also investment in making sure that we have the right people at the right place. The University has gone through many reforms within its HR sector to ensure that it picks the right people at the right place to be able to contribute to the growth of our nation through the academia.

So, Honourable Speaker, I stand today just to contribute to this motion before the House and I support the Report as it is. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister Waqainabete. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister Usamate. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. First of all, I would like to congratulate the Committee that put together the Report and the comprehensive nature of the Report. I found it very interesting reading through the Report and especially the other annexes to the Report. It is great to see the development of this University over the time in which it was put together from the Year 2010 to where it is now and reading the comments being made by the former Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor Nigel Healey about what they are putting together, the restructuring of the organisation to amalgamate them together so that they become one entity on their own.

The Fiji National University has a particular challenge because of the dual nature university that we have at FNU.. It deals both with the normal academic learning and at the same time it has a heavy component of technical and vocational learning. This is something that you do not find in all universities around the world. A lot of universities are either focussed on one or the other. But there are successful examples of this in the world and I think here in Fiji we are beginning to see this in the Fiji National University. At one time, technical and vocational education training was always seen as a poorer cousin. It is something that you went to do if you could not succeed on the academic side. But we know generally in any economy, the vast majority of your workers are in this TVET sector, either at the vocational sector, at the technical sector or the technological sector. So it is always very important when you are putting together your education programmes and your training infrastructure in a country to be able to address both of these elements of your workforce adequately. Now that is always going to be a challenge for a dual nature university like we have at the FNU. I know, having served in that particular University at that particular point in time, looking at this particular aspect.

There was one concern that I noticed in some of the figures that are in the Report, the decline in the number of the people attending the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes. But I think that is also a reflection of the changing composition of the training infrastructure that we have in Fiji, with the development of the technical colleges of Fiji which has taken out the Certificate 1 and Certificate 2 programmes, establishing them in another strata in the Ministry of Education.

We have the development of the Fiji National Qualifications Framework which is putting together standards that all training providers in Fiji can use and I think it is important for us to fully support the FNU in what it does because of this important component that it does in dealing with TVET, producing people with those technical qualifications. I am glad to see in the Report that they are progressing towards accreditation according to the Dublin Accord. In engineering, for people at the diploma level, the Dublin Accord is like the standard that you have, that is internationally-recognised. Also, on the engineering side, there has been considerable progress to getting accreditation on the Washington Accord.

As the Minister has pointed out, I walked past the Fiji Maritime Academy almost all of this week, and I see the buildings going up. I hear now that the Fiji Maritime Academy is now attracting students even from the other parts of the Pacific. They have their own maritime academies in their countries but they are choosing to come to Fiji. I think this is one of the dreams that we have in this country, for Fiji to become an educational hub of the Pacific so the development of FNU is important for us and I think, from my point of view, it is very important in terms of the trades and skills that we need in this country, that we always make sure that our focus on developing the trades, the diploma level programmes and the certificate level programmes remain strong as part of FNU and that is what they intend to do. I hope that they will continue to do to the best of their ability so that this country can get the kind of skills that it needs from our own national University. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. Just in respect of some of the issues that have been raised in particular with, first of all, the Labasa Campus. It was actually contracted out to a Company called Kartik's Construction, however, because of non-performance and after 47 percent of the works had been completed, the contractor has been given the termination notice, essentially because of non-performance. It is not that they have not been paid more money than what they have done work for. The reality is because of non-performance, they are very behind so now we are going through the machinations to be able to get somebody else to do the work but, of course, it will be a huge boost for Labasa because a lot of the Labasa students will now be able to stay once the campus will be completed in Labasa. It is across the bridge as we know where the Damodar City is being built, right next to that and we hope that with the new contractor coming on board, we will be able to complete this as soon as possible. The plan was to complete it this year. It looks like it will not be completed this year as we have already another 53 percent of the works to be completed but this is one of the challenges that the FNU did have in respect of managing large contracts and not having the internal capacity to manage those contracts and this is why the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) is now dealing with a lot of these matters so we have an input into that.

We are getting structural engineers even people like acoustic consultants because you need lecture halls, where they are actually going to start echoing, there is no point in building the lecture hall so we are doing those type of, you know, professionally building the campuses around there.

Similarly, as has been highlighted by the Minister for Education, there is a number of other projects that are afoot, the Maritime Academy as the Minister for Infrastructure has also highlighted, we will again be putting in solar panels on the roofing too. That is part of the programme once the building is completed which provides also some avenue for training for students at FNU to be able to access that type of technology.

I would just like to very quickly highlight also and reiterate that the FNU operating expenditure and indeed the capital expenditure was far less and is indeed still far less than what USP spends and, of course, University of Fiji is probably the most least-funded of the universities in Fiji, and as has been highlighted about the staff, a few years ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Budget you would have seen an increase in the budget allocation to FNU, including in their operating expenditure and part of that, in fact, was to increase the salaries of the staff at FNU, because the salaries of the staff at FNU are far less than what they get at USP. That is why Honourable Prasad did not move across to FNU, but the reality of the matter is that, it still is less than USP and we hope to get some level of parity in that respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the course fees again we have got operating surplus of only 1 percent. FNU does not, for example, have the capacity at this point in time like USP, USP can outsource, for example, if you want your water tested and various other things tested, food tested, USP actually provides the types of service to the private sector for those outside of the university environment, and that is a revenue-generating mechanism for them, and we hope that the FNU will get into that space.

The focus of the courses you will see is more towards what we call or generally has been called "vocational courses" so it is more into engineering. FNU, a few years ago, had made the decision that students who went from Year 12 to various engineering courses in FNU would also get TELS. So this is to, you know, fast-track that learning environment because there is a shortage of engineers in Fiji and various other fields. The FNU provides the training ground for them and again it feeds in also into what has been highlighted regarding the quality of the lecturers available.

In many of the engineering fields, of course, we do not have the local capacity to provide training, again that is something that I think the Minister and I were discussing about the need to perhaps look at longer tenure for the staff, because if we want to bring in good people, we need to give them longer tenure in some of the specialised fields.

Last but not least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government, as you may recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have geo-fenced FNU Campuses, so we provide a higher speed and, of course, bigger bandwidth to internet connectivity, and we have actually provided that for free, so FNU students actually have the luxury of accessing those services, and as has been highlighted by the Minister for Education that a lot of the students who actually attend FNU, come from the lower socio-economic backgrounds, so they cannot necessarily afford or, you know, have their mums and dads pay for the internet connectivity, and so this is why we have geo-fenced those campuses so that they have access to internet for free. So you have the modules, modular object-orientated dynamic learning called, 'Module', whichever way you want to pronounce it.

In this new era, of course, a lot of them are accessing that through that particular facility, they are able to access learning from the lecturers, et cetera. I would like to take this opportunity also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding the announcement that was made by the Acting Vice Chancellor that they are looking at assisting students because of COVID-19, and will waive fees for those students who are unable to complete the units online during the COVID-19 crisis because not all the courses are available online, not all the lecturers are available.

So those who cannot complete their courses online, their fees will be waived, the University will do that, and Professor James Pounder is the one who has actually confirmed that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the Council of the University as you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Chair of the Council, Professor Rajesh Chandra, who is a former Vice Chancellor of USP was made the Chair of FNU, unfortunately has taken ill and we have the Acting Chair, Tessa Price, who is the Regional Manager of ANZ.

The new Council Members have brought, not just a new flare but a new energy and indeed a new Government structure which is a lot more accountable and transparent, and we look forward to working with them in that respect and as has been highlighted, we do need to support our Fiji National University.

There is a number of agencies we have spoken to so we want FNU to focus on the areas like you said - engineering, the studies of climate change and various other cutting edge technological advancements, for example, things like coding, we are looking at developments on short courses at FNU through the Ministry of Communications because in the next year or when the borders all open up, we will see that many of the countries that traditionally perhaps use only one or two countries as their sources of supply of goods and services, we will want to decentralise it. And this is where Fiji actually can pounce upon that and position ourselves and we can only best do that through our learning institutions. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Chairperson for his right of reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just would like to thank all Honourable Ministers who spoke on the motion and also the Leader of the Opposition for supporting the motion. Thank you.

(Laughter)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the contents of the Report.

Does any Member oppose the motion?

(Chorus of "Noes")

HON. SPEAKER.- There being no opposition, the motion is agreed to unanimously.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, time moves on, we will now take an adjournment for lunch. I think you are looking forward to that. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.26 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- I call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, the Honourable Vijay Nath, to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

### **PACIFIC FISHING COMPANY LIMITED (PAFCO) 2017 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. V. NATH.- Honourable Speaker, I move:

That the Parliament debates the Pacific Fishing Company Limited 2017 Annual Report, which was tabled on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2019.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Honourable Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, to speak on the motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Speaker, the Pacific Fishing Company Limited (PAFCO), has made an immense contribution to the Fijian economy, both in the past and now. This is through the manufacturing of canned tuna locally and internationally as well as being the largest employer on the Island of Ovalau.

It is also considered as the main economic driver of the entire Lomaiviti Province. At the time the mentioned Report was tabled, PAFCO had a total of more than 1,000 employees, both permanent and casual. These included indirect employment of approximately 100 people, such as canteen operators, transport and other service providers. Women make up 70 percent of the workforce. The loin process is largely a manual operation and is heavily labour intensive.

During its deliberation, the Committee noted collaborative work by the Ministry of Fisheries, PAFCO and Bumble Bee to ensure the smooth running of the operation at PAFCO. The Committee noted that staff attraction was issue for quality technical staff such as Manager, Quality Assurance and Manager, Maintenance.

Issues such as accommodation and social activities facilities were highlighted. The Committee recommended that suitable employment conditions be developed to alleviate these problems.

Finally, the Committee was pleased to note that out of approximately 1,036 employees working at PAFCO, about 664 were all working both, in Production, Raw Material and Logistics, Quality Control Office, et cetera. During the site visit to Levuka, it was evident that women workers dominated the production line.

Honourable Members, we must put all hands on deck to ensure that PAFCO continues to receive the support we need to fight for the betterment of our nation and its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments to enlighten the House as the Member moving the motion, I thank you for the opportunity.

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

Honourable Faiyaz Koya, you have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. I rise to support the Annual Report, in particular with respect to the noteworthy signing of a new 10-year agreement with Bumble Bee in October 2017, which is targeted to processing about 22,000 metric tonnes of albacore tuna in 2018. This is the third time, Honourable Speaker, Sir, that PAFCO has been able to get their agreement extended with Bumble Bee.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, noteworthy also that in 2017, PAFCO had been able to grow its sales by about three percent, despite the actual odds that they had faced. It has also ably achieved about 99.7 percent of its annual target for the 2017 sales.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that PAFCO has come a long way since its establishment. It is a large organisation with complicated production processes and requirements, the employees are made up of the majority of the working population in Ovalau and the surrounding islands.

Beside from contributing towards the economic development of Fiji, PAFCO has also been taking its social responsibilities quite seriously and has done so diligently. In 2017, Honourable Speaker, Sir, PAFCO partnered with Flying Doctors of America to support a medical visit to Ovalau where a total of about 2,316 patients were examined.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, the global demand for canned tuna products is expected to grow continuously and the local demand for canned product has also been increasing notably and even more so now seeing as we all have a passion for half a long loaf and some PAFCO tuna and our Rewa butter, Sir.

It is, therefore, prudent and commendable of PAFCO, Honourable Speaker, Sir, to have a long term vision in broadening its client-base and expanding its operations, conducting more value-additions on raw materials and expanding its product range and also increase canning.

PAFCO has been rising up to the occasion by adapting to the changing conditions around the world and unparalleled situations that have actually caused disruption to its operations, such as natural disasters and shortage of raw meat material supply which is actually part of the Report.

The *TC Winston* in 2016, Honourable Speaker, have left a substantial damage bill with the Company and following repair to the plant to restart its operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PAFCO should be commended on its foresight in the construction of a 4,000 metric tonne cold storage facility, which will enable PAFCO to counter the issue of shortage of raw materials and will enable it to continue operations without disruptions.

Also worthy to note, Honourable Speaker, Sir, that PAFCO has been able to achieve high quality standards and has passed all its audit processes, despite facing the global dynamics in food safety requirements which have been an ongoing challenge. The food safety requirements will no doubt continue to present challenges in the future.

We hope that PAFCO is able to further expand its operations and find new export markets and most importantly, that it is able to counter the issue that has been raised and is quite glaring about the shortage of raw materials in the near future.

I, therefore, support the actual Annual Report before the House and I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution. Honourable Pio Tikoduadua, you have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I rise to make my contribution to the motion before the House and, first, let me start by thanking the Committee for all this Report and the recommendations therein.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, I would just like to thank the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport for his words and also the note by the Chairman of the Committee that the commitment is there to continue to support PAFCO in the current role that it is doing. Of course, the Company has come a long way and, I think, to hear that coming today is quite reassuring, not only for Fiji but particularly for the Island of Ovalau and the community of Lomaiviti that depend on PAFCO for its economy and livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, I would just like to touch on a few issues that were raised by the Committee in this Report and there are three, in particular, that I would like to raise - Finding and Recommendation No. 2 on Page 5, which is the role played by Bumble Bee.

Bumble Bee had been a strategic partner for PAFCO for a while, Mr. Speaker. All along in this relationship between PAFCO and Bumble Bee, there was a lot of debate between the two entities - the Government of Fiji owning PAFCO and Bumble Bee as the strategic partner in terms of the kind of role that Bumble Bee gets to play in protecting their investment within the company and what they are getting out of it in the long term.

We all understand that PAFCO would really struggle without the existence of a strategic partner. They have been there for quite a while and the Committee, therefore, has recommended in their Report that perhaps, Bumble Bee either be considered for management contract, share ownership or lease option, or the like. And I think that is perhaps, made in good faith because in recognition of what Bumble Bee has done, because Bumble Bee is a big player in the world, they are not only getting their loins from Fiji, but from every other place. Because of the long existing relationship and that they have been able to partner with the Government of Fiji through PAFCO when keeping the Factory in Levuka and keeping Ovalau going, I think it might be well worth to consider these options, and I hope that Government will be able to consider that in the future, if not, yet already in recognition of that.

The Honourable Minister alluded there is an existing 10-year contract that was signed back in 2017, I think, and going on to end in 2026. I mean, it is entering into this long-term contracts and it is probably time as the Committee has recommended now for PAFCO to go even further, allowing Bumble Bee into the management of the Company, et cetera, for the benefit of the Company, the Government of Fiji and the people of Levuka.

The second issue that I would like to raise arising out of the Report, Mr. Speaker, is on Page 6 at the top of which No. 7: "The Committee notes that the workforce at PAFCO largely comprises women", and we are told today that women make about 70 percent of the workforce in PAFCO, and that some issues relative to women maybe in need of resolution.

The Committee recommends that these issues continue to be dealt with amicably and appropriately.



Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report lacks these issues. I think it stopped short of identifying them and given that women largely comprise the workforce at PAFCO in Levuka, a lot of women-related issues pop up. If the Committee or Government would inform Parliament at some point on what those issues are because I think there are a lot of prevailing social issues, not only in the workplace, but because of women and also the social issues that prevail in villages where the ladies come from.

I am a frequent visitor to Levuka and also to Ovalau for that matter, where my daughter goes to school. I hear these issues coming out of the parents of St. John's College who work in Levuka, there are primarily social issues, I am told. I hope that the Company has the support mechanism, particularly for women, to be able to allow them to concentrate on their work, and then also be meaningful contributors to society and to their own families. It will be nice at some point to know what the social issues are.

The next issue that I would like to raise is on Recommendation No. 8, where the Committee notes the high cost overheads. The biggest overhead to the Company at that time is the power - the cost of electricity and accounts for 39 percent of the total expense. For those who have been to Ovalau and Levuka will understand that Ovalau, 24 hours and seven days a week gets its power from the generator. By the same token, PAFCO also operates on a generator. So much of the power need and requirement of the Company comes from burning diesel generator engines.

What I am trying to say here is that, given there is a long term outlook to keep PAFCO in Levuka for the reasons that I have already noted, it would be good for Government to consider looking at renewable energy options in Ovalau for that matter, not only for PAFCO but for the whole of Ovalau. I thank the Government for electrifying Ovalau, almost I think at this point. The last time I checked, it was almost around the Island, but also whilst that is good, it is also burning a lot of power. So I think it is timely for an island like Ovalau to consider some alternative by way of renewable energy.

Mr. Speaker, those are my contributions. I thank the Committee and we join the Committee and join Government, particularly the aspirations that had been noted by the Honourable Minister for Trade, that we should all try to keep this business in Ovalau, for PAFCO to continue operating for the benefit of its people into the future and so as to avoid all the social ills and whatever else that would come out if we did eventually have to pull PAFCO out of Levuka. With those few words, I thank the Committee again and I support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. Honourable Minister Koroilavesau, you have the floor.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I would like to make contributions to the motion, the debate on the Pacific Fishing Company 2017 Annual Report, especially on the recommendations that concern the Ministry of Fisheries that had been mentioned in the Report.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for their comprehensive Report that has been reported to this august House.

On Recommendation No. 1, Honourable Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is taking an active role in facilitating dialogue between relevant stakeholders, and the most recent one was the Fiji Delegation to the Western Central Pacific Commission in December last year, where we had talks with key tuna fishing countries such as Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu for the supply of raw materials to our processing establishment which also includes PAFCO.

On this front, the Ministry of Fisheries is working on a feasibility study on the development of a regional processing hub. This exercise is being developed in collaboration with the Pacific Island Foreign Fisheries Agency (FFA) and this aspiration takes into account PAFCO's contribution as a downstream service provider.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, whilst Government is engaging in discussions on the regional front in showcasing Fiji as the most attractive port for vessels to utilise, both upstream and downstream processing and logistic facilities, we hope to strategically secure the necessary supply of raw materials for PAFCO and the local-based processing companies.

Honourable Speaker, on Recommendation 3, Fiji has recently been hit by three tropical cyclones, namely *TC Sarai*, *TC Tino* and *TC Harold* within a span of five months. Their collective impact made worse by the one in a global pandemic that has created unimaginable damage on our economy and people. I would like to thank the Committee for the recommendations and the supporting Ministries that are prepared to work with PAFCO especially the Ministry of Public Enterprise (now Department of Public Enterprise) in order to secure the best option for insurance cover against natural disasters noting the long-term investment Government has made to PAFCO over the years.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, on recommendation 4, I had personally been involved in these discussions and the Ministry of Fisheries has undertaken preliminary consultations across the relevant agencies on exploring key areas to reduce the cost of operations in Levuka. We are already working with the Ministry of Economy, the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services and industry stakeholders to assess existing impediments and to explore viable options to further grow Fiji's economy through the fisheries sector. We are encouraged with these initial discussions to identify key interventions to attract vessels and raw materials back to our ports.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries has been listening to the plight of the industry in this period of crisis and had made its formal submission on the untimely increases in ports fees and charges.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, we will continue to progress the implementation of the recommendations put forward by the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs and we will provide further information to this august House. I thank you for the opportunity and I fully support the motion before the House. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Fisheries. I give the floor to the Honourable Attorney-General. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just to follow on from the Honourable Minister for Fisheries, as has been highlighted, we have a processing agreement that exists between PAFCO and Bumble Bee, and Bumble Bee supplies PAFCO with the albacore tuna for processing into loins. It is also a supply agreement with Fong Chun Formasa, a fishery company which supplies tuna to PAFCO. But there has recently been some changes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In November last year, Bumble Bee actually filed for protection from bankruptcy amid criminal fines in civil lawsuits stemming from a federal price fixing case through Bumble Bee late last year in USA. Of course, it had nothing to do with PAFCO itself.

Following this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bumble Bee successfully sold its assets and is now owned by Fong Chun Formasa or FCF Fishery Company. This sale, of course, took place in USA. FCF previously had 30 percent shares in Bumble Bee and it has been a main supplier of tuna for Bumble Bee as I highlighted earlier on.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in respect of the agreement itself, the agreement is there and we have been told by the new owners that there will not be any changes to the current arrangements between Bumble Bee, with the new owners and PAFCO. However, a meeting is scheduled with all the new executives of Bumble Bee and, of course, the Board of PAFCO, once all the travel restrictions are removed and then we will be able to see some more movements in that respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just very quickly, most of the local fleet are now certified as Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) approved vessels. The MSC certified albacore fetches a price that is about 30 percent to 40 percent higher than a non-MSC albacore and thus the local suppliers supply the MSC customers. Bumble Bee purchased only a small volume of MSC albacore from local fleets. These are some of the issues that the Honourable Minister for Fisheries was actually highlighting. So as a backup, if you like, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the dearth of albacore, PAFCO and Bumble Bee are also currently negotiating the processing of skipjack tuna which is more readily available in order to meet its annual supply of processed tuna loins. PAFCO is also attempting to get more skipjack for its own production itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in respect of the Honourable Tikoduadua and the other speakers have also highlighted some of the challenges faced by PAFCO. For example, the working conditions for a number of years as Parliament would have noted, the Honourable Prime Minister was in Levuka a couple of years back where we did announce a pay rise across-the-board for all the non-management employees of 12.5 percent which was backdated to January 2018, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also there has been some working conditions that have been improved and of course, there is room for a lot more improvement. The reality of the matter is that not all the workers at PAFCO come from Levuka itself. Many of the women actually come from the nearby islands in the Lomaiviti Group so there has been, in the past, for example, issues pertaining to housing and social issues.

As we have highlighted to Parliament previously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at one point in time, Bumble Bee wanted to move the entire operations to Suva because for them, they said it financially made a lot more sense because at the moment when we had a lot of the ships that came and berthed in Suva then the albacore is taken by road from Suva to Natovi then from Natovi to Ovalau. So, they said if we had the operations out here in Suva, it would make it a lot more easier but Government, as has been highlighted, was very concerned about the economic and social impact on the Lomaiviti Group and Government persuaded, of course, PAFCO and Bumble Bee, in particular Bumble Bee, to keep the operations in Levuka itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to assist PAFCO and the fact that it plays an integral role in the Lomaiviti economy, we would have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the COVID-19 Budget Response, we have also decided to convert the Government debt to PAFCO into equity. Essentially, it makes the balance sheet for PAFCO a lot more cleaner. Similarly, as we have said that we are going to convert the debt into equity for Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) so it makes these businesses, these public enterprises a lot more attractive, a lot more independent ability to be able to go out and source funds from the market itself with having to be completely reliant on Government itself. We have, of course, as highlighted earlier on that the cold storage facility, we provided a loan of \$9 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for that which we are converting into equity.

We had also provided a Government guarantee of \$11.3 million for the Factory renovations and upgrades that was obviously approved by Parliament in 2015 and, of course, we had also provided funding for the repair of PAFCO's seawall that was destroyed by *TC Winston*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also been working with the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited in respect of the allowance of ships to actually go directly to Levuka itself and as a result of which, now you can have ships go directly to the port and where you have the Biosecurity and various other Customs agencies that assist in these ships that actually come from, you know, outside our sovereign borders. So, the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Fisheries, they all conduct their work and their authorisation and indeed regularisation of incoming international ships at the PAFCO Wharf which makes it a lot easier as opposed to going to the other port and then coming into the PAFCO Port.

The last point I would like to make, Mr. Speaker, is the issue raised about the renewable energy. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Members of Parliament may remember that we have already made an announcement in Parliament that we have been working with Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) and various other development partners where we have said that Ovalau and Taveuni will be working towards making 100 percent renewable energy dependent and already a lot of substantive amount of work has been carried out in terms of the assessments, the analysis, the type of technology that will be used. That work, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the COVID-19 has somewhat slowed down but we have already made some announcements in that. We have already got various working papers and we have got a number of agencies from overseas that are willing to work with us, including those that are based through the arena project that is based in Abu Dhabi to look at providing the funding for making Taveuni and Ovalau 100-percent renewable energy-based.

We would like to thank, of course, Mr. Speaker, the new board that has been put in place also. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we look forward to the input in terms of this very "transitional period" we will call it, in particular, with the change of shareholding in Bumble Bee with the FCF coming into play. It will be very interesting to see what FCF does now because they are now the majority shareholder and as we know that FCF also has interest in China and various other places and a lot of the fishing fleets that come from China are very heavily subsidised by their Governments. This is one of the challenges that the Minister for Fisheries was also talking about that we need to be able to ensure that we have a regular supply of tuna, whether it is albacore or skipjack, to be able to get enough feed in for production and keep the PAFCO factory in Ovalau alive. I would like to thank the Committee for its work. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, to speak in his Right of Reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. I thank all Honourable Members for their contribution, however, just a small amendment probably. I thank Honourable Tikoduadua for his contribution although he was quoting from the 2016 Annual Report, but he did speak on a few good points. He seldom speaks good about the Government but he did speak on some good points about electricity which the Honourable Attorney-General has just amended.

He mentioned about the social problem. When you look at the 2017 Report on Gender Analysis, you will read that during the deliberation on the 2016 PAFCO Annual Report, certain issues were highlighted by women workers at PAFCO regarding employment issues. Now the Committee requested a response from the management and was satisfied knowing that all the issues have been addressed with the workers through the grievance procedures put in place.

So this is the latest Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for 2017. Honourable Tikoduadua has just mentioned about the social problem which has already been taken care of, I think, through the Ministry of Employment and also the Board. I thank all the hardworking Board Members, in fact, for the good work they have done and the entire team of the management from Suva and also in Ovalau for the good work. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Chair. Parliament will now vote to note the contents of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

## QUESTIONS

HON. SPEAKER.- The first Oral Question for today, I call on the Honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua to ask Question No. 76/2020. You have the floor, Madam.

### Oral Questions

#### Air-Conditioning Units at CWM Hospital (Question No. 76/2020)

HON. L.S QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament as to how long it took to get the air-conditioning units at the CWM Hospital operating theatres fully repaired since patients due for surgery were turned away at least four times in December until mid-January this year?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Honourable Member for that question. Honourable Speaker, the Surgical Operating Suite at CWM Hospital - we have eight operating rooms. We previously had four constructed in 1997, refurbished and upgraded in 2010 and then we had another four that were constructed and completed in 2014, together with the new ICU and part of the Post Anaesthetic Recovery Unit.

The operating rooms were constructed according to Australian standards for health facilities and surgical operating theatres and the construction companies work with the Government Project Management Team to ensure that the standards that were achieved before the Operating Suite was put to use. Those who have recently visited the CWM Hospital operating theatres would attest to the exceptional status of the facility that provides close to \$10,000 surgical operations a year.

Honourable Speaker, when I worked in New Zealand and I came back, I can tell you that the theatres that we have at CWM Hospital are much much better than the theatres I worked in in New Zealand. I had a colleague who came from the Royal Melbourne Hospital and he said that the theatres at CWM Hospital were much better than what they were using there in Royal Melbourne. In discussing this matter, it is important to point out that the air-conditioning systems that are used in surgical operating theatres are not the simple air-conditioning units that you have at home or that we have in our offices.

The following are some important things that are important there:

- 1) The high ventilation rate in the air-conditioning system that is related to the micro-organism concentration in the air, so the higher the ventilation rate, the cleaner the air in the room which the system is supplying air into.
- 2) The high filtration rate of air removes the risk of contamination of wounds during surgery. So, this is very very important and it is recommended that HEPA (High Efficiency Particular Air) filters that we now have, filter particles down to 1 micrometre and have a filtration rate of more than 99.9 percent. So, it is both the way that you have the air pushed in and sucked out so that they develop some type of vacuum so that the micro-organism (some are floating in the air) and that the wound does not get infected but most importantly is the filtration that happens before the air comes into the room;
- 3) Laminar flow technique that provides unidirectional and uniform airflow reduces turbulence in airflow to the operating room which contributes to the reduction in wound infection from airborne organisms.
- 4) The regulation of temperature and humidity is important for the patient, surgical team and providing the service and preventing the proliferation of organisms in the operating theatre environment.
- 5) The recommending temperature and humidity setting in the operating theatre has an ambient room temperature of 20°C to 23°C, humidity level of 50% to 55% and this changes when you have a paediatric patient like a child. So, if the child has to be a little bit warmer to be able to prevent the child from going into hyperthermia, which they are very capable of doing, so, these are different.

In essence, what I am trying to say is, whilst we have eight theatres, we have theatres that are dedicated specifically for neurosurgical orthopaedics, we have a theatre dedicated to general surgery, we have a theatre that we regularly use for children, paediatrics and for that we need temperatures of about 25 degrees to 28 degrees.

The whole point of what I am trying to say is to highlight the fact that air-conditioning service in an operating theatre is a complex and intricate service that requires specialised industrial knowledge in this. It is also a well-researched area in the engineering and medical arena. The machines are costly to purchase and maintain, not all refrigeration or air-conditioning companies in Fiji deal with air-conditioning of surgical capabilities of surgical operating theatres.

In fact, we have had a number of local companies that have dealt with this issue and needed to resort to the assistance of engineers from overseas manufacturers to address issues that we have had with the air-conditioning units in our hospital operating theatres and the Ministry is always working to ensure that the standards of air-conditioning of our theatres in the hospitals are maintained at higher standards.

For the operating theatres at CWM Hospital, the Ministry has been aware that the air-conditioning units for the four rooms that were refurbished in 2010 began to malfunction at times at the end of last year due to their age and for this, we had organised the air conditioning units to be assessed, the necessary parts to be purchased to replace those that were identified as defective and as we plan towards the replacement of whole air-conditioning systems in those four rooms.

During *TC Sarai*, part of the electronic operating system for the AC units for the four rooms were damaged and required systematic overhauling. The Ministry has engaged the supplier for SESCO to fix the damages from the cyclone. The Ministry has also sought independent assessment of the damage.

Based on the recommendations from these assessments, the Ministry is taking all the necessary actions to address the matter. So, in summary, we currently have five functioning rooms throughout the week: three rooms over the weekend, two rooms continue to run overnight from 8.00 p.m. to 8.00 a.m.

Having said that, we do not run all the eight theatres all the time, even before we even had issues with the four that we have issues with currently at the moment. We are going through the process of fixing them up completely. We never run all the eight theatres all the time. The reason is very simple: you got to have a standby theatre in case an emergency comes through. You also have to have another theatre that because you have been running the theatre all throughout the eight hours of the day, you could be able to surge into the other theatres so that we can allow time to clean the other theatres.

We also have another theatre that we run as an endoscopy theatre, so in essence we normally run about five or six theatres, that is what we normally do and we are running five theatres at the moment.

We are also managing our emergency as well as the consistent flow in the clearance of the inactive lists, and the patient that you alluded to, the one that was turned away four times, was not turned away four times. He was a child who had hernia, was brought in, best practice suggests that you reduce the hernia through paediatric surgery. We have two paediatric surgeons, one trained in Starship in Auckland and one trained in Waikato - reduce the hernia, the hernia went back in, best practice suggests that you can operate a few days later, maybe a week later, maybe months later. They asked the parents, and their discussion which they agreed on was “maybe to do it now whilst still in the admission” and they were trying to connect because you need a paediatric surgeon, you need paediatric initiatives and you also need to make sure that you have paediatric intensive care available afterwards because operating on children is not a trivial matter, it is not just about taking a child into theatre, it is making sure that you have all the responsibilities available and that is why this child was finally operated on.

At this point, we are managing our emergencies well, as well as ensuring a constant, consistent flow in the clearance of our elective list, especially at the moment with the COVID-19 upon us, the cancers. Our hardworking surgeons, obstetricians, gynaecologists and specialist surgical teams, including the eye-surgeons are monitoring the health of booked surgical patients in the follow-up clinics, communicating with them regularly and are escalating their surgical care where necessary.

In the last four months with COVID-19 upon us and the challenges that we face, and the fact that we recently, for example, we had a patient who was taken to theatre suspected of COVID-19. The whole surgical teams – 15 of them, afterwards all had to dress up in all those PPEs and had to be quarantined.

In this COVID-19 environment, from January to April, in C.W.M we did nearly 3,000 operations averaging 698 to 700 a month.

In previous Parliament sessions, I described how the principles of universal health covers the Ministry, had designed surgical outreach visits to medical subdivisions across Fiji and through the Marine Vessel *Veivueti* for those in the maritime areas.

This strategy has really worked well for us in ensuring the effective clearance of our waiting list that could not be done if all commencing at CWM Hospital otherwise.

In our effort to ensure consistent flows in our operation, even during the COVID-19 lockdown, we activated operating theatres in Rakiraki and Sigatoka Hospitals, and that operating theatre in Sigatoka Hospital continues as we speak today. There is a team there in Rakiraki today, there is a team from Lautoka and I want to thank the Lautoka Team for covering Sigatoka at the moment and which Suva was covering when there was a lockdown. So, essentially if you think about it, you have got these five operating theatres, we also got the possibility of surging into Sigatoka and you have got the operating theatres there and obviously in the other areas.

While we have continued to deal with emergency operations in CWM for those who urgently need them, Honourable Speaker, we are mindful of the need to fully open elective surgeries in the immediate future. And we have actually had our surgeons working with teams from all over the world to discuss what will be the new norm in terms of COVID-19 operations because as you are aware when patients are brought in and have an operation, they are put to sleep, if they have COVID-19, they could spread it to everyone in theatre. It is important therefore that we get these air conditioning units flow right. We have in place processes to ensure that the care of surgical patients affected by these events are maintained and monitored and emergencies are addressed promptly when they arise.

The Air Conditioning Supply Company has assured the Ministry that the air conditioning units would be completely repaired rather than just partially and return to full function at the earliest opportunity when the rest of the parts come in.

While we are doing our best to ensure that all patients are cared for during this time, I can assure the House that the Ministry is doing all it can to address the air conditioning issue at the operating theatres at CWM Hospital. Thank you very much, Sir.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, I thank you very much, Honourable Minister. Honourable Minister, can you give us the same assurance about the elevators at CWM Hospital?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE:- Yes, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on to the second oral question for today, and I call on Dr. Salik Govind, to ask Question No. 77/2020. You have the floor, Sir.

Assistance from International Partners and Donors for *TC Harold*  
- Government's Coordination of  
Question No. 77/2020)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management explain Government's coordination of assistance from international partners and donors for *Tropical Cyclone Harold*?



HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I wish to thank the Honourable Member for this question. This question follows on from the Statement that I delivered yesterday, Honourable Speaker, Sir, on Government's overall response to *TC Harold*.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, this is one of the key and the very important activities that we undertake in the Office of the National Disaster Management, not only, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during disasters but most importantly, pre-disasters as well, because we need to work very closely with our strategic partners. I do acknowledge, particularly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on capability development. Most of what we have now in the Ministry of Disaster Management were given through the kind assistance of our partners in terms of vehicles, water tanks, electronic equipment, and the list goes on. This comes through this partnership and, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of capacity development as well

Our officers, I would say confidently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, previously, most of the people from the administration cadre join or fill up the posts in the Ministry, but there is a requirement for scientific and technical; even those with backgrounds in Economics and we are thankful, if I mention one programme at the Asian Institute of Technology where we have been sending, for the last three years, two per year to do Masters in Disaster Management from the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. So what I am trying to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I address the issue raised here on international partners and donors post-*TC Harold* partnership and the close cooperation and collaboration with our international partners, it is not only post-disasters but most importantly pre-disasters as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I alluded to yesterday, the eight coordination is usually between the following four major agencies of Government:

- 1) The Office of the Prime Minister,
- 2) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
- 3) The Ministry of Economy, and
- 4) The Ministry responsible for Disaster Management.

All these key agencies help in providing the information, the briefs and all the requirements that are needed in the facilitation of the meetings with our international agencies. I will address two particular areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir: one is at government to government level, and the other is in the form of clusters, which I will explain later, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

At government to government level, again we have been making improvements in our processes and systems and our arrangements as well, learning from previous disasters.

After *TC Winston*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were overwhelmed with so many humanitarian agencies, including our international partners. I did mention yesterday about the performance reviews that we conducted afterwards and one of the key issues that was raised consistently, was the need for Fiji to have its own humanitarian policy. Of course, again, with our partners, we have developed Fiji's Humanitarian Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Humanitarian Policy institutionalises the humanitarian practices so that humanitarian actors go through Government mechanisms, dictated by each priority and direction. What is important in this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, we are a sovereign country and when our partners come in, they work according to the plans, systems and processes that we have. Of course, it makes things easier for us, particularly in terms of our priorities and the direction that we are also undertaking.

This national policy ensures that any assistance that goes directly to communities, must be registered, cleared and coordinated by the National, Divisional or District EOCs, most importantly it ensures that the right assistance is provided to the right people at the right time. That basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what guides the coordination of assistance by our international partners when it comes to disaster management, particularly at government to government level.

The other key component of assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what we call the Cluster System. On the Cluster System, Sir, again, lessons learnt from 2014 after *TC Evans* which hit Fiji, if I remember correctly, in December 2012, we developed the Cluster System.

In the Cluster System, we basically have six clusters and, I think, this is perhaps the template in all countries. We have the Food Security and Livelihood Cluster, Health Cluster, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Cluster, Shelter Cluster, Communications Cluster and the Safety and Protection Cluster.

The beauty about the Cluster, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have talked about them coming in, identifying our priorities and direction and, of course, areas where they need to help. It is always chaired in most instances unless we give it to another organisation, but usually this is chaired by our own local agencies, mostly at Permanent Secretary, or at the Deputy Secretary or the senior management level.

In these clusters, for example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Food Security and Livelihood Cluster, we also have agencies that are involved in Clusters. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), for example, is a key player in the Food Security and Livelihood Cluster, that is the Food and Agriculture. And we have the World Food Programme, we have UNDP - these are all the agencies that come into the Cluster. I will not go into the list. In the Health Cluster, of course, WHO and a lot of other agencies, in the Communications Cluster, the International Telecommunications Organisation (ITO).

I remembered that in 2016, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we had *TC Winston*, it was through ITU through the Regional Office in Bangkok, they organised 20 satellite phones for Fiji, flown all the way from Geneva because our communication systems were down. That is through the Cluster System. And that, again, is one other avenue in which we deal with our international partners. So it is not only at government to government level, but also through the Cluster Systems.

May I also mention here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I have talked about the contribution from our partners in-cash and in-kind yesterday, not everything comes directly to Government, most of the agencies are also assisted, Fiji Red Cross, Live and Learn, and all the other agencies. Some of them, for example, if Australia pledges \$7 million, not all the \$7 million comes directly to the Fiji Government. Part of the \$7 million, they will probably allocate \$1 million to Live and Learn and maybe another \$2 million to Fiji Red Cross, this is how the system works, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Again, I take the opportunity to acknowledge all the UN Agencies, ADB, JICA, Red Cross USA, Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS), the European Union and, of course, Australia and New Zealand, USA, France, China, Japan, Indonesia and our many other partners that did assist during *TC Harold*. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his reply.

We move on to the third question for today and I call on the Honourable Vijendra Prakash to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

GIS Technology - Contribution to COVID-19 Pandemic and *TC Harold*  
(Question No. 78/2020)

HON. V. PRAKASH asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources – With Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) and its technologies becoming more recognised as a tool for substantial development, can the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on how the Ministry contributed towards the COVID-19 pandemic and *Tropical Cyclone Harold*?

HON. J. USAMATE (Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would like to thank the Honourable Member for his question on the Geospatial Information Systems and their technologies, and how that was used to assist in the COVID-19 pandemic and also in managing *TC Harold*.

Geospatial is basically talking about any data that is associated with a particular location and it involves digitising that information - information on topography, natural landscape and any man-made environment for a particular location and capturing it in a digitised format so that you are able to portrait it visually on a TV screen.

There is always a lot of data that is hidden away in files but through this GIS, it gives us an opportunity to look at things from different lens and to overlay different kinds of information on a map of an area, or using Google Maps, et cetera.

So it becomes a very visual tool that is an important way in which we can use to understand the problems that face us. In this particular issue, we are talking about the problems that affected Fiji in terms of COVID-19 pandemic and also in terms of *TC Harold*.

So it is an important tool for evidence-based solutions, to come up with evidence business solutions to social, economic and environmental challenges, and there are a lot of benefits that come out of using GIS systems to improve the lives and the use of this extends across Government, business and also our fellow Fijians.

In my Ministry and across Government, we encourage the use of geospatial information as it provides a lot of support and ease of understanding for those who are involved in decision-making in dealing with things like pandemics and also with cyclones.

My Ministry and across in Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, through its Geospatial Information Unit, provides a national platform to integrate all of our national different datasets so that they can be portrayed on the platform that we have and that, in turn, becomes a tool that any agency can use to make decisions to serve our fellow Fijians.

The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources delivers spatial information that meets the diverse needs of GIS bodies, for example, emergency response application which was used during the disaster through the National Disaster Management Office.

For COVID-19, in particular, we already have the VanuaGIS Platform. Under the VanuaGIS Platform, maps of Fiji are digitised and the Ministry is then able to overlay different national

datasets on to that map so that one can look at the map of that particular location and understand what is available or what exists in that particular area.

So for COVID-19 using VanuaGIS, the Ministry developed the VanuaGIS COVID-19 systems so that they can overlay information from COVID-19 on the datasets that they already had.

We also developed the COVID-19 Dashboard so that the Ministry of Health and all the stakeholders could look at the summary of the key factors that were involved in COVID-19. The VanuaGIS platform, along with the information collected by the health service teams were integrated to create these two platforms and this is similar to what the WHO had done for its own dashboards on COVID-19.

These two platforms had immensely assisted during the lockdown because by looking at the maps, by looking at the projections on the screen, it provided us a bird's-eye view on the distribution of patients, where they were located. It allowed us to track contact tracing by districts and by provinces, and also allowed us to see where the different health facilities, including isolation centres and fever clinics were located.

So the use of GIS allowed for accurate reporting for senior officials and allowed them also to have a better and stronger way of planning and for developing resources to where the needs were located.

For *TC Harold*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of geospatial information was also of great assistance, during *TC Winston* and again for *TC Harold*. And I think during *TC Harold* for those of us who were involved in the briefings, we could see the evolution and the upgrading of the usefulness of the GIS portals to be able to understand what was happening.

The Ministry was able to provide geospatial information through the base maps provided and the field data collected and mapped before and after *TC Harold*. This geospatial information allowed for a preliminary identification of communities affected by *TC Harold*, including the extent of damage, the number of facilities that would be affected, and the number of people affected. This then immensely assisted Government to better plan and mobilise the deployment distribution of relief immediately after *TC Harold*. This allowed for the monitoring of assistance provided to our fellow Fijians impacted by this event.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the events of COVID-19 and *TC Harold*, geospatial information and its technologies have proved to be a very useful tool for Government. It has enhanced Government's efforts in planning and decision-making to better serve our fellow Fijians during their time of national emergencies.

However, to be able to better respond to national emergencies and support economic recovery, a continued collection, integration and sharing of national geospatial information to the central platform maintained by my Ministry is of vital importance. The Ministry will continuously strive to ensure that the geospatial platform is well-maintained. Furthermore, the Ministry is supporting agencies to build their own geospatial information capability through awareness and training on the benefits of geospatial information and the VanuaGIS platform.

Secondly, on advice of suitable technology and software for the collection and maintenance of geospatial information and through collaboration with stakeholder agencies of digitising of hard copy datasets and field data collections that have a geospatial component to them.

With this support and the collaboration that is taking place between the stakeholders of geospatial information, that platform maintained by my Ministry on behalf of Government, will continue to serve its purpose as a useful tool for effective and informed planning and decision-making. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his reply to the question. We move on to the fourth oral question for today, and I give the floor to the Honourable Alexander O'Connor to ask the question. You have the floor, Sir.

Usage of Organic Fertilizers by Farmers  
(Question No. 79/2020)

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on what plans the Ministry has to introduce the use of organic fertilizers by farmers?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Honourable Member for giving me an opportunity to provide an update to this House on this very important programme that I had probably informed this House early last year.

Early last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had announced that we were going to embark on developing and supply of organic fertiliser to our farmers. That particular intention and that particular programme was announced for two particular reasons: firstly, to reduce the unit cost at the farm level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment, farmers are applying numerous amounts of fertiliser which is raising the unit cost at farm level. Continuous application of fertiliser does not necessarily contribute to increase in productivity at the rate that you would expect because soil would become acidic and once the soil becomes acidic then uptake of nutrients is affected.

Now, about four or five decades ago, soil acidity used to be corrected, particularly in the sugar belt through the application of lime, but that activity also has kind of got subdued and that is why you see that sugar productivity also has been affected to some extent because the soil pH is quite high and it has not been utilised.

The second motivation for that particular announcement for the development of organic fertiliser was from an environment point of view. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of inorganic chemical fertilizer has been utilised throughout Fiji and that is affecting not only human health but also our environment. Most of these chemicals find their way to the groundwater table very quickly and as you know, our drinking water is mostly derived from, you know, groundwater source.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, imagine the households who are doing backyard gardening, you talk to them and one of the things they will tell you is that they are buying these small quantities of fertiliser from hardware shops - 2 kilogrammes of urea and 3 kilogrammes of NPK. Now you multiply that with the number of households, you know, who are doing backyard gardening and then the number of times, let us say, four times in a year they will purchase, how much that will then add up to the volume of inorganic chemical fertiliser utilised by this sector alone, let alone the small, medium and commercial farmers.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project has been undertaken into two steps - we have just completed developing a bacteria medium organic material known as "Lactic Acid Bacteria." There are certain bacterias which will enhance uptake of nutrients - the bacteria designated to enhance uptake of nitrogen nutrient, a certain bacteria designated to enhance uptake of phosphorus and a certain bacteria designated to enhance uptake of potassium - the key nutrients that will affect plant growth for rooting, vegetation and fruit formation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am quite honoured to say that we have completed that stage where we have developed this particular medium which we can now, for example, give it to farmers which they can put on their fields. Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we want to go on to the second step where we then developed a large volume of organic manure using poultry droppings as the base.

As we speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a team from our agriculture office is now developing a piece of land, a 10-acre land in Navua with the Ministry of Agriculture along with the Ministry of Environment will develop a composting site, where the poultry manure will be dried up and then this particular medium will be mixed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the idea is to supply that to farmers, household sector who will then develop their own compost and then take the material and mix that with the compost where the bacteria will multiply. So, then they will have it in that volume that they need and put it on their farm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in that way, we will also be enhancing the developing of compost in the individual farmers' households as well. A lot of rubbish, a lot of green waste is now finding itself in the dump sites and landfill which really should be converted into compost which can then be utilised in gardens and farms and therefore nutrients can be recycled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project has also received blessings from the Honourable Minister for Commerce and Trade. He is also very keen and a very ardent supporter of promoting the Fiji-Made logo with organic certification and we are now also partnering with Honourable Koya in this particular project to ensure that we brand and differentiate our products, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that our products can end up in a differentiated market where the returns will be much much higher.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be launching that particular medium and we will give out to farmers who already have established compost on their farms but once we have the larger scale, we are looking at, on a daily basis, receiving 40 tonnes of poultry manure which will be dried, it will take about eight weeks for it to turn into compost and then mixed with the bacteria medium and packed into kilogrammes and given out to farmers in centralised locations where they will come and pick it up.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the long run, we will end up:

- reducing the volume of inorganic chemical fertilisers that we are importing, a major contribution in terms of saving our foreign currency;
- reducing the application of chemical fertiliser in Fiji's agriculture sector;
- contributing to better health of farmers, consumers who are using vegetable products which are grown supported by chemicals;
- reducing the unit cost where at the farm level, fertiliser is becoming a significant cost of production.

Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his reply to that question, and I now give the floor to the Honourable Rohit Sharma to ask Question No. 80/2020. You have the floor, Sir.

Travel Bubble with Australia and New Zealand  
(Question No. 80/2020)

HON. R.R. SHARMA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications update Parliament on the travel bubble with Australia and New Zealand?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM (Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief because we have already discussed this matter in the past couple of days. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, in fact, started the talks with New Zealand and Australia, I remember in the Easter weekend, we had a telephone conversation with initially the New Zealand Head of Mission over here and subsequently with the Australians. We had telephone discussions with the relevant Ministers from Canberra and also Wellington and in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had a conversation also with the Minister from Singapore also, who subsequently then, of course, provided us the source code regarding the contact tracing app. that we will be launching soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have discussed that the idea is to have a travel bubble. The New Zealanders and Australians have said they initially want to open what they call the "Cross-Tasman Bubble" which is Australia and New Zealand, and then they are looking at other partners. We have obviously said that we want to be in that bubble itself.

We have also said that the narrative needs to change because we found that the talk coming out from Wellington and Canberra was that they talked about the Pacific being included in the Bubble. What we have said is that the different countries in the Pacific have different experiences pertaining to COVID-19 and different capacities pertaining to the ability to track the spread of COVID-19. We are the only Pacific Island country that actually has a WHO-certified COVID-19 testing laboratory. All the other Pacific Island countries, in fact, send all their swabs overseas and the rate of testing in Fiji is actually significantly higher and, of course, we have not had any fatalities whereas some of the other Pacific Island countries have had fatalities.

So, therefore what we are trying to get them to do and also understand is, change the narrative to include and be able to say that if we are going to open it up, we can open it to Fiji or in respective countries within the Pacific region as opposed to treating us as a whole group. Because, for example, when they do talk about opening a travel bubble with Singapore, they do not say "Asia", they single

out “Singapore” because of the capacity of Singapore so similarly we are trying to get them to think along those lines.

The feedback so far has been very positive but as we know that there is a number of issues pertaining to Australia itself because within Australia itself different States are treating each other differently and I think they need to be able to resolve that before New Zealand actually agrees to that. As far as the conditions are concerned, they are moving pieces as we speak. We hear sometimes about having a health passport, we hear about different other conditions being put in place.

We are very keen, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to have this travel bubble open up but as we mentioned yesterday that there will be a number of conditions that will be placed and we are ourselves, of course, need to be concerned too because in comparison on the face of it, we are much safer from the COVID-19 perspective than those two countries. But, of course, we have to manage those risks because it has a huge impact on our economy with the inability of travel between those two countries. Those two countries provide nearly 70 percent of our tourism arrivals.

But as we mentioned the other day, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that if tomorrow we are included in the travel bubble, it does not mean that people will suddenly rush to Fiji nor does it mean all Fijians will rush to Australia and New Zealand those of you who have visas because people will still want to know what are the practices in terms of safeguards pertaining to the spread of COVID-19 or the ability to contract COVID-19.

This is why and this is a question that leads on till tomorrow. We have to make sure that things like the programmes launched like the contact tracing is, significantly there is a huge uptake of that because that gives people the reinsurance.

In fact, I can allude to that tomorrow on how recent studies, like one that has come out of England where when you have contact tracing, it gives people a lot of confidence in the ability of the Ministry of Health officials to very quickly get to the contacts of those people who may actually be COVID-19 positive.

So the uptake of the contact tracing is critically important because a lot of countries will do so and we hope to do so too, that any visitor arriving into Fiji needs to upload the app. It will help them, it will help us and we will be able to contain the spread of it really quickly in terms of the contact tracing capacity.

I would just like to highlight one other point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that when everyone talks about travel bubble, they simply talk about it in respect of tourism. But we are also looking at it from a trade perspective but other new opportunities that actually can emerge from this.

As we have seen now, if you sort of read all the articles that now come out almost on an hourly basis, that there is a move now, globally speaking, of a number of companies that want to not necessarily depend on one or two countries for production purposes. So, they are looking at decentralising, if you like, or bringing closer to home or indeed doing some of the production in their own countries.

I remember in February before we had the shutdown, I was in London and there was already a talk about a small company that used to make a particular component of a car and they had sent it across to China for the production. They decided to bring back the production house back to United Kingdom because they felt that the supply chain would be a lot more secure.



Similarly, there would be opportunities that could be there for us in Fiji. We are very close to Australia and New Zealand. We are an English-speaking country, only three to four hours away. We have a well-educated workforce.

We could, in fact, ourselves not just be looking at tourism opportunities but also things like assembly lines, production lines, manufacturing where companies that may, for example, be doing to the north of their country at the moment, may want to bring it to us and this is where it is critically important.

About a week and a half ago, we had a Zoom meeting with the Australian Fiji Business Council (AFBC) and the Fiji Australia Business Council (FABC) who were physically present and we talked about these opportunities and how, for example, our Trade Commission Offices in Australia and also in New Zealand, the need to be engaged very heavily in intelligence gathering as to which companies are now looking at, for example, bringing production closer to Australia and New Zealand and how we need to very quickly jump on board, get on to them and be able to tell them to come to Fiji.

We, of course, will see some measures announced in the Budget in respect of that, to provide a facilitating environment. In that respect, the Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Tourism has been working with the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) in respect of setting up and we talked about it for a couple of years. We had some issues with the location of it, but in Lautoka we look at Navutu to set up, what we call, a clean manufacturing area, locality or hub where we could entice these companies to come to that. Why is Lautoka being chosen? Because it is closer to the international airport, plus it has got a seaport next to it. So we are looking at those opportunities.

The Bubble means also not just tourism but also other types of commercial and financial opportunities for us, taking advantage of the hub status that we do have. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Attorney-General for his reply to that question.

Honourable Members, we have one last question. This question, I had made the Ruling that it will be held over from Monday because the Minister to answer the question was not in the House. But I was confident in her powers of recovery and if she did turn up, we will ask the question, so we have time.

I give the floor to the Honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua to ask her question. You have the floor, Madam.

Update on the One Laptop Per Child Initiative  
(Question No. 53/2020)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament why Government, for almost five years, has failed to fulfil its 2015 budget policy announced in November 2014 of providing tablets or laptops as per its objective of 'one tablet or laptop per child' to all primary and secondary school students, which is so critical now to online learning, especially with disruption to schools caused by COVID-19?

HON. R.S. AKBAR (Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the One Laptop Per Child Project was the response to the call from the Ministers of Education to implement the initiative in Pacific Island Countries in 2007.

In 2008, pilot programmes began in Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and this was done to bridge the digital divide at primary school level, targeting children aged six years old to eight years old in their own communities.

The One Laptop Per Child in Fiji was to run over a five-year programme in three phases, with the target of deploying in 50 percent of the then 735 primary schools in Fiji.

The first phase was planned to establish three model schools in Suva, as a reference point of contact for schools embarking on the main pilot which initially targeted 30 rural remote schools around Fiji.

In July, 2011, a donation of 15 laptops from the One Laptop Per Child Foundation to the Japan Pacific ICT Centre at the USP Campus at Laucala Bay was made to conduct teacher training on one-to-one approach.

In 2014, \$800,000 from the Ministry's budget was allocated for the One Laptop Per Child Initiative. The project was to be completed in various phases and at start of the first phase, the Ministry identified three primary schools in Suva to trial these programmes, they were Draiba Primary School, Nabua Primary School and Navesi Primary School. The Bank of the South Pacific (BSP) then came on board to donate laptops to these three schools in Phase 2. Phase 1 was completed and funded by the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Phase 1, the Ministry carried out preliminary works which involved installation of service, projectors, air conditioners and electrical works before providing these schools with the laptops.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2016, *TC Winston* caused damages to 495 schools out of our existing 908 schools, costing the Government more than \$240 million which led to the holding off of this initiative.

We were progressing well until the nation was, unfortunately, as I said, hit by a Category 5 cyclone and all hands on deck came on board for the rehabilitation efforts.

I would also like to inform the Honourable Members that there was a shift in Government priorities then, and as a result, the Ministry till today, has not been able to commence with the other phases of this project.

We halted everything to respond to *TC Winston* because our children were homeless and hungry. Sitting in tents on the wet floors, the main priority for the Government was to put a roof over their heads and books in their hands.

*TC Winston*, with its massive infrastructural damage, took its toll on our e-Learning plans and we had to re-strategise and re-prioritise. With 490 schools badly damaged and more than \$240 million as rehabilitation cost, we had to relocate funds to this massive rehabilitation process. It only needs an intellectual mind and a human heart to understand the shift in our Government priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during *TC Winston* rehabilitation process, technology was the last thing on our minds when our children had no classrooms, no books and no learning resources. We do understand the need for online learning, especially when our children are home now due to closure of schools as a preventative measure for COVID-19. But we also need to understand other factors, such as accessibility, affordability and connectivity that will create a digital gap, which is why we are providing various forms of supplementary educational resources so that every child across the country can have access to these during these hard times.

The Ministry's mission and the Government's mission is to provide quality, equitable and accessible education to all. While we understand that we need to benchmark quality to international standards, equity and accessibility are two other angles which we cannot overlook at any point in time.

The FijiFirst Government has made significant improvements in the areas of ICT. The massive Trans-Pacific Telecommunication Network that stretches 270 kilometres across the sea today, provides 95 percent of Fijians with access to cellular data.

The South Cross Cable Project has not only solved our connectivity issue, but the deregulation of the telecommunication industry has provided improved, quality and economical prices for high speed internet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Digital Fiji Initiative of the FijiFirst Government will continue to advantage all Fijians and our Ministry is also taking advantage of the Walesi Platform, which is part of this initiative, to provide educational video content for the children of Fiji.

As a way of background information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, we have about 57 schools out of our 908 schools which have no connectivity, and we are working with our partners to ensure that we provide these schools with Very-Small-Aperture Terminals (V-SATs), which are very small aperture modems, and Walesi is part of that, so we are on the right track.

Unfortunately, Honourable Member and Honourable Members of the House, as I said, this initiative - One Laptop Per Child had to be shelved because we had to re-prioritise and re-structure. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, and thank you, Honourable Minister. Just one final question, Honourable Minister: The last time we asked about school rehabilitation after *TC Winston*, I think, it was a question specifically from the Opposition side in regards to Yacata District School. At that time, I think it was just a few months ago, there still had not been any rehabilitation works and you had given us your word that in two weeks' time, materials would arrive at Yacata. Could you just update us on that, please?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just respond to that, it is a totally different question, but as a way of background, materials have arrived at the village and unfortunately, we are faced with this crisis. But work is in progress and we hope to fully complete the *TC Winston* rehabilitation programmes in the near future. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister.

Honourable Members, that brings to the end our Agenda for today. I would like to thank all Honourable Members for your contribution to today's Sitting.

Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow morning at 9.30. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.00 p.m.