

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 8TH DECEMBER, 2020

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	61
Communications from the Chair	61-62
Election – Leader of the Opposition	62
Presentation of Reports of Committees	62-66
(1) Review Report on the Agreement between the Republic of Fiji and Solomon Islands Concerning their Maritime Boundary - Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence	
(2) Review Report on the Amendments to the Framework Agreement of the Paris Declaration on the International Solar Alliance - Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence	
(3) Review Report on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography - Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence	
Reinstatement of Bills – Order Paper	67-68
2021 Calendar of Parliament Meetings	68-70
Debate on His Excellency the President’s Address	70-114, 115-120
<u>List of Speakers</u>	
(1) Hon. Cdr. S.T. Koroilavesau (Page Nos. 70-73)	
(2) Hon. Dr. Ratu A.R. Lalabalavu (Page Nos. 74-77)	
(3) Hon. Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu (Page Nos. 77-81)	
(4) Hon. P. D. Kumar (Page Nos. 81-85)	
(5) Hon. M.R. Leawere (Page Nos. 85-91)	
(6) Hon. A.A. Maharaj (Page Nos. 92-95)	
(7) Hon. Ratu S. Matanitobua (Page Nos. 96-99)	
(8) Hon. A.T. Nagata (Page Nos. 99-102)	
(9) Hon. Ratu T. Navurelevu (Page Nos. 102-106)	
(10) Hon. O. Naiqamu (Page Nos. 107-109)	
(11) Hon. N. Nawaikula (Page Nos. 109-114)	
(12) Hon. R.S. Akbar (Page Nos. 115-120)	
Suspension of Standing Orders	114-115

TUESDAY, 8TH DECEMBER, 2020

The Parliament resumed at 9.39 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 7th December, 2020, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

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

Ministerial Responses – Standing Committee Reports

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to acknowledge receipt of the Ministerial responses, pursuant to Standing Order 121(6)(b), to the following Committee Reports:

- (1) Standing Committee on Economic Affairs on the Consolidated Report on the Ministry of Sugar Industry 2012 to 2016 Annual Reports. The response was from the Honourable Prime Minister.
- (2) Standing Committee on Public Accounts on the Review of the Office of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji 2019 Annual Report. The response was from the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications.
- (3) Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Review of the National Fire Authority 2013 Annual Report. The response was from the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development.

- (4) Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Review of the Fiji Airports 2017 Annual Report. The response was from the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications.

Thank you, Honourable Members. We will proceed to the next item on the Agenda. I now call for nominations for the Leader of the Opposition.

ELECTION - LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to move:

That Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu do take the position of Leader of the Opposition.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, are there any further nominations?

Honourable Members, there being no further nominations, I now declare the Honourable Ratu Naqama Lalabalavu, elected as Leader of the Opposition.

(Acclamation)

HON. SPEAKER.- I congratulate the Leader of the Opposition.

Honourable Members, we will take a break in situ while we make rearrangements. Honourable Leader of the Opposition, you can now proceed to your rightful seat. Your papers will be moved across by the Orderly.

(Honourable Leader of the Opposition resumed his seat)

Thank you, Honourable Members, we will proceed with the proceedings of today.

I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to table his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report on the Agreement between the Republic of Fiji and Solomon Islands Concerning their Maritime Boundary – Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Review Report on the Agreement between the Republic of Fiji and the Solomon Islands concerning their Maritime Boundary.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the legal principles for coastal States to define their maritime boundaries and to enjoy the rights and obligations set forth in UNCLOS, to utilise and sustainably manage the resources within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Fiji was the first State to ratify UNCLOS on 10th December, 1982.

Fiji is progressing in securing and finalising the delimitation of its maritime boundaries through negotiations with neighbouring Pacific Island Countries. According to UNCLOS, all coastal

States are entitled to a 12 nautical mile territorial sea (Article 3 of UNCLOS), 24 nautical mile contiguous zone (Article 33 of UNCLOS), and a 200 nautical mile EEZ (Article 57 of UNCLOS), including the extended continental shelf claims not exceeding 350 nautical miles (Article 76 of UNCLOS) from the baseline from which the territorial sea is measured.

As a party to UNCLOS, Fiji has an obligation to define its maritime boundaries, most especially its EEZ which, while it is measured to 200 nautical miles, often overlaps with the EEZ boundaries of other coastal neighbouring States which surround Fiji. In accordance with Article 74 of UNCLOS, if there is an overlap of the EEZ boundaries between coastal neighbouring States, these States need to negotiate and finalise an agreement for the delimitation of those EEZ boundaries.

Forum Leaders in 2018, acknowledged the urgency and importance of securing the region's maritime boundaries as a key issue for the development and security of the region, and wellbeing of the Blue Pacific. The Leaders committed to progressing the resolution of outstanding maritime boundary claims.

Fiji's commitments to UNCLOS at the Oceans Conference in 2017 to finalise its maritime boundaries issues by 2025, will be a milestone achievement. This portrays Fiji's commitment to SDG 14 – Life below Water.

Fiji shares its EEZ boundaries with the following neighbouring Countries; Vanuatu, Tonga, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Wallis and Futuna and New Caledonia.

This Agreement with the Solomon Islands is pivotal in the resolution of maritime boundaries regionally. In total, there are 48 shared maritime boundaries in the Pacific with 35 boundaries being resolved through agreements such as this one. Fiji's conclusion and execution of this Agreement will bring that number to 36.

Compounding this issue is the region's biggest security threat – climate change, being a key driver, in particular, the findings of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report on 1.5 degrees, which provided clear evidence on the urgency of responding to the threat of climate change. In the context of maritime boundaries, it means securing our place in the face of climate change and sea-level rise.

The endorsement and execution of this Agreement will contribute to improving governance, security, law enforcement and management of the marine resources within Fiji's EEZ.

The Committee was informed by the Fiji Maritime Affairs Coordination Committee that:

- (1) There is no dispute between the two parties on their maritime boundaries; and
- (2) The Solomon Islands Government has assigned its High Commissioner to Fiji to sign the Agreement.

As such, the Committee recommends to Parliament that Fiji sign the Agreement.

The Committee commends the Republic of Fiji and the Solomon Islands Government for the active efforts to conclude one of the 13 remaining shared boundaries in our region, and we acknowledge the immense contributions by stakeholders that assisted in the preparation of this Report.

I take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Members of my Committee and the Secretariat for their unwavering support. On behalf of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, I submit this Report to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Pursuant to Standing Order 121(1)(b) and Standing Order 130(4)(a), the Standing Committee has now reported back to Parliament.

I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to present his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

Review Report on the Amendments to the Framework Agreement of the Paris Declaration on the International Solar Alliance - Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Review Report on the Amendments to the Framework Agreement of the Paris Declaration on the International Solar Alliance of 30th November, 2015.

Climate change, pollution, resource depletion and environmental concerns are driving a shift to more sustainable forms of energy. Fiji, through its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) Implementation Roadmap 2017-2030 has articulated efforts to reduce national emission and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

The Governments of India and France established the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in 2015 at the margins of the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP 21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris with collective aims to address key common challenges to scale up solar energy applications in line with the needs of member countries.

The ISA is a coalition of solar resource-rich countries to address special energy needs and provides a platform to collaborate on addressing the identified gaps through a common, agreed approach. The vision and mission of the ISA is to provide a dedicated platform for cooperation among solar resource-rich countries where the global community, including bilateral and multilateral organisations, corporates, industries and other stakeholders, can make a positive contribution to assist and help achieve the common goals of increasing the use of solar energy in meeting the energy needs of prospective ISA member countries in a safe, convenient, affordable, equitable and sustainable manner.

Amendments to the Framework Agreement which was proposed in 2018 relate to:

- (1) The expansion of membership to all UN member countries, as opposed to the original purpose of the ISA to restrict membership to solar resource-rich states which lie fully or partially between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn.
- (2) The deletion of the term "partner country" from the Agreement.
- (3) Observer status is made available to those whose applications are pending and organisations that can support the objective of the ISA.

The Committee is of the view that the amendments reflect the significance of multilateralism and collective action for enhancing energy security and sustainable development, and to improve access to energy in developing member countries which also provides opportunities for rich collaboration and exchanges on best practices with solar rich countries.

The ISA can be the main vehicle for creating ideas on the implementation of SDG 7 (Renewable Energy), and also contributes to the attainment of various targets under other SDGs, for example, SDG 2 (No Hunger), SDG 13 (Climate Change) and SDG 14 (Life below Water). As such, the Committee recommends that Parliament accepts the Amended Framework Agreement.

I take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Members of my Committee and the Secretariat for their unwavering support.

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

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Pursuant to Standing Order 121(1)(b) and Standing Order 130(4)(a), the Standing Committee has now reported back.

I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to present his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

Review Report on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography
– Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Review Report on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (Optional Protocol).

Fiji ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1993, which sets out standards and protocols to safeguard the rights and welfare of our children.

The Optional Protocol is an international instrument to the CRC and was adopted on 25th May, 2000. It entered into force on 18th January, 2002, with 176 States being party to the Optional Protocol. As a Party, the Fijian Government is mandated to implement child protection laws and initiatives aligned to the CRC.

The Optional Protocol is an extension of measures from the Convention on the Rights of the Child that State Parties should undertake in order to guarantee the protection of the child from the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Fiji has fulfilled its pledge made in 2010 in its first Report for the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to ratify all core international human rights treaties by 2020, with the two last remaining treaties ratified in August 2019. Following the latest UPR in November 2019, Fiji further committed to ratifying all of the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a member of the Human Rights Council, Fiji would continue to demonstrate its leadership at regional and international levels by ratifying, not only the nine international human rights treaties but also the optional protocols.

In its concluding observations of 2014, the United Nations Committee on Human Rights expressed “deepest concern” that sexual exploitation and abuse of children is prevalent in Fiji, including through organised child prostitution networks and brothels. The Committee also expressed concern that sexual exploitation of children is closely linked to poverty, with pressure placed on children to earn money. It also noted with concern that specialised services that take into consideration the needs of children are not readily available, with services for boys almost non-existent.

The Optional Protocol recognises the need for a holistic approach to address the contributing factors, including poverty, economic disparities, inequitable socio-economic structure, dysfunctional families, lack of education, urban-rural migration, gender discrimination, irresponsible adult sexual behaviour and harmful traditional practices.

It also stresses the need to raise public awareness to reduce consumer demand for the sale of children, sexual exploitation of children in prostitution and child sexual exploitation material, as well as the need for strengthened global partnership among all actors and the importance of law enforcement at the national level.

While the rapid spread of ICT provides great opportunities to accelerate human progress and reduce inequalities, this development has also exposed more children to the risk of sale and sexual exploitation. It has opened up new ways for sexual offenders to:

- connect with and solicit children for sexual purposes;
- view and participate in online child sexual abuse via live video streaming;
- distribute child sexual abuse material, including self-generated content produced out of “sexting”; and
- commit the sexual extortion of children.

The Committee recommends that Fiji ratify the Optional Protocol, it:

- is consistent with the laws of Fiji;
- reflects our values;
- protects our children; and
- reaffirms our commitment to global solidarity.

I take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Members of my Committee and the Secretariat for their unwavering support.

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

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Pursuant to Standing Order 121(1)(b) and Standing Order 130(4)(a), the Standing Committee has now reported back.

I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

REINSTATEMENT OF BILLS - ORDER PAPER

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 97, I hereby move:

That the following Bills be restored in the Order Paper, the:

- (1) Code of Conduct Bill 2018 (Bill No. 33 of 2018);
- (2) Registration of Sex Offenders Bill 2018 (Bill No. 34 of 2018); and
- (3) Cyber Crime Bill 2020 (Bill No. 11 of 2020).

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is purely a procedural motion pursuant to Standing Order 97. Standing Order 97(1) provides that a Bill that lapses due to Prorogation before it has been passed may proceed in the next Session at the stage it had reached in the previous Session by resolution of Parliament, and restoring the Bill to the Order Paper.

As all Honourable Members may be aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Parliament is mandated under Section 46 of the 2013 Fijian Constitution to make laws for the State through the enactment of Bills passed by Parliament and assented to by His Excellency the President. Therefore, Sir, in order for Parliament to undertake or continue with the necessary processes as stipulated in the 2013 Fijian Constitution, as well as the Standing Orders, Parliament is required to take a vote on the reinstatement of the lapsed Bills. With the reinstatement of the three lapsed Bills, the respective Standing Committees will be able to proceed immediately where they left off at Prorogation on 26th October, 2020.

As alluded to in the wording of my motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bills which had lapsed are the:

- (1) Code of Conduct Bill 2018 (Bill No. 33 of 2018);
- (2) Registration of Sex Offenders Bill 2018 (Bill No. 34 of 2018); and
- (3) Cybercrime Bill 2020 (Bill No. 11 of 2020).

Sir, I, therefore, seek the full support from all the Honourable Members to approve the motion before this august House, as it is imperative for Parliament and its Standing Committees to fulfil its constitutional mandate and representative roles.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had alluded to earlier, this is merely a procedural motion but an essential one and for that, as the lapsed Bills must be reinstated and restored to the Order Paper in order for the Standing Committees and Parliament as a whole to undertake all the necessary procedures which have been laid out, both in the 2013 Fijian Constitution and the Standing Orders.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do commend this motion to Parliament and I hereby seek support from all Honourable Members to approve the motion before this august House. I thank you for this opportunity.

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

There being no one wishing to take the floor, I give the floor to the Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments but wish to thank and acknowledge all Honourable Members for supporting the motion.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on the next Agenda Item, I call on the Honourable Leader of Government in Parliament to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

2021 CALENDAR OF PARLIAMENT MEETINGS

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

That Parliament adopts the Sitting Calendar for the period February 2021 to December 2021.

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as all Honourable Members may be aware, Standing Order 22(1) states, and I quote:

“The Business Committee must recommend to Parliament a programme of sitting periods for each session of Parliament or each 12-month sitting period of Parliament, whichever is the shorter.”

In that regard, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Business Committee convened and undertook discussions on a proposed Sitting Calendar for the year 2021.

For the information of all Honourable Members, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Business Committee agreed and endorsed the Sitting Calendar for the period February 2021 to December 2021, which was circulated to all Honourable Members this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the Business Committee had agreed and endorsed this Sitting Calendar, the Business Committee also further agreed that should there be a dire need to readjust some of the sittings, that this would be subsequently tabled in Parliament. This is merely to allow for some flexibility, given that we are still not out of the woods with the COVID-19 pandemic. With

that as it may, assuming that travel restrictions may change in the future this would also accommodate for the necessary readjustments that may arise.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to put on record that there were no objections from Honourable Members and, therefore, I agreed with all Honourable Members to approve the proposed Sitting Calendar. But again, I do acknowledge the clarification that was sought by Honourable Tikoduadua from the National Federation Party during the Business Committee about the outstanding Reports that are with Parliament. I believe about 73 Reports or so, and we have agreed in principle, again in consultation with the Secretariat, on the possibility of having a session dedicated to discuss all the outstanding Reports.

Of course, as I have stated earlier, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the flexibility that we have in the Sitting Calendar, so there is likelihood that we will have perhaps, two sitting periods within one of the months in the Sitting Calendar that has been highlighted.

However, for the benefit of all Honourable Members as well as the general public at large, the endorsed the Sitting Calendar outlines the following sitting periods.

FEBRUARY 2021 – DECEMBER 2021		
FEBRUARY	Monday, 8th - Friday, 12th	Parliament meeting
MARCH	Monday, 22nd - Friday, 26th	Parliament meeting
APRIL	Monday, 26th - Friday, 30th	Parliament meeting
AUGUST	Monday, 16th - Friday 20th	Parliament meeting
SEPTEMBER	Monday, 20th - Friday 24th	Parliament meeting
OCTOBER	Monday, 25th	Prorogation
NOVEMBER	Monday, 22nd	Opening of New Session of Parliament
DECEMBER	Monday, 29th - Friday, 3rd	Parliament meeting

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as is now ongoing practice, the dates of the Budget Address and subsequent Budget debates will be confirmed in due course and this must and will take place either in June or July.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion before the House does not propose a reduction on Sitting days, in fact, it does propose for an additional sitting week. Additionally, some may still view this Sitting as limiting the Parliament legislative and the oversight roles on the contrary, but it does not, in any way. Parliament is at full liberty to execute all these roles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am adamant that the Standing Committee Chairpersons and Members of the six Standing Committees are in agreement to this Calendar, as it would allow them to look through and scrutinise the pending Bills, Annual Reports that are currently pending with the Committees, including the ones that will be referred later this week. Sir, it is for this reason also that all Honourable Members must support this proposed Sitting Calendar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also crucial to note that the Committees are essential mechanisms through which Parliament is able to reach out to the members of the public and they are essential mechanisms in terms of accountability and scrutiny and, therefore, it is vital to allow them to undertake their work which this proposed Sitting Calendar allows.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this proposed Sitting Calendar provides a balance for the work of Parliament, as well as the work and schedule of the Government, as the Government is mandated

under the Constitution to follow up on its programmes and policies to ensure that services are delivered to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have stated this before and I will say it again today, in essence when Parliament is not sitting, Government has to execute and implement its plans, policies and programmes and this is why we need to be away from the House, to follow up on such programmes. There is work also in the Ministries and we need to be there, to guide the work and this, again, is also critically important for us and for the Fijian people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the certain points that I have put to the floor of this august House, I do commend this motion to Parliament and I hereby seek support from all Honourable Members to approve the proposed Sitting Calendar for the period February 2021 to December 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to thank you again for giving me the floor.

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

There being no one wishing to take the floor, Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, you have the floor, if you wish to add anything further.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I have nothing further to add but, again, I acknowledge and thank all Honourable Members for supporting the motion before the House. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the Response to His Excellency's Address. I call upon the Minister for Fisheries. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency's most gracious Speech, delivered in this august Parliament, to mark the Opening of the new Parliamentary calendar. I echo the sentiments of His Excellency, in that, the outbreak of COVID-19 has disturbed the global politics, social, economic and financial structures and most importantly, the loss of loved ones and those who have struggled to make ends meet in Fiji and around the world. With millions becoming victims to the virus, our nation has fought valiantly to defend its borders to contain the virus from further entering our social fabric and affect our lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's leadership's decisive actions and the whole of nation coordination has resulted in over 200 days' containment of the COVID-19 pandemic at our borders. I wish to join His Excellency in acknowledging the true patriotism and selflessness displayed by our frontliners for the past 220 plus days, and to this day, they continued to stay united to maintain our COVID-contained status.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to salute the resilience of our people and recognise that while no system, operating guideline or response strategy was available to spare our nation for the catastrophic impact of this global pandemic, we rose above the uncertainties, the anxieties to a stronger, safer and more resilient Fiji. To the fishermen, the farmer, the entrepreneur, the business owner, the loyal employee and the student, all of whom have adapted, diversified and become resolute in the face of this calamity.

While we begin to enjoy some level of normalcy in our day to day lives, I call on all Fijians to remain vigilant and disciplined to adhering to the only proven prevention to this global pandemic - wash hands, exercise, cough etiquette and good hygiene practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the nation reels to take a grip of the global economic upheaval from the effects of COVID-19, Fiji has soared to greater heights with pro-activeness, strategic planning and smart partnerships when the Fijian Government announced its Budget earlier this year. We all have a part to play in bringing Fiji back to the road to economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will restrict my contribution to the Ministry of Fisheries and the initiatives the Ministry has embarked on, to assist our people, especially those communities involved in the industry. Fisheries has not only been affected by COVID-19, but also climate change, which has a major effect on the changing conditions of our oceans. For the fisheries sector, like any other, the impact of COVID-19 cannot be understated and the Ministry of Fisheries is working its level best to implement its repositioning strategy of ensuring a balance between resource utilisation and resource sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the context of global fisheries, the tuna industry has always provided for the Pacific Island Nations. While some countries are not heavily dependent on tuna, it is important to acknowledge the high dependency of others. If we look back at how most of our economies have evolved, it is imperative that we recognise the contribution of the tuna sector, which has paved the pathway for most of our Small Island Developing States.

A reason behind this is the development of international and regional framework that ensures the sustainability of fish stocks. This is only possible through the collective commitment of countries, such as Fiji and others in the region, to start implementing sustainable measures at a national level. The Fijian Government values its development partners in our efforts to:

- balancing our desire to establish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs);
- investing in research and development;
- investing in satellite technology;
- investing in our policing capacity and capabilities to help with monitoring our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); and
- strengthening our laws to be able to effectively combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing within our EEZ.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to speak on the repositioning of coastal fisheries. In clear recognition of this, we can say that to some extent, our coastal fisheries needs our attention. To help transform our coastal fisheries, there are key elements that need to be in place. Firstly, the need for investment support in research and development. The wellbeing of all Fijians is one of the Government's priority. The Ministry is working to provide alternatives for an ever increasing population. In years to come, the world's growing population will need more food, medicine, energy and minerals. If managed wisely, the oceans and its resources hold the key to meeting these needs and the need for economic development.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the legal framework. The Ministry of Fisheries recognises the need to develop relevant and fit-for-purpose legislation. Work is already underway in this space to support the activities geared towards the development of sustainable coastal seafood platform. These legislative provisions will support and guide the need for science, enforcement, management measure and economic progress in a way that recognises Sustainable Development Goals.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the management guideline or policy framework. Recognising the different stakeholders who are involved in coastal fisheries, management guidelines play a key role in achieving a holistic approach. The holistic approach includes but is not limited to community inclusiveness and recognising the need for available science and the use of traditional knowledge, all of which are important for sustainable fisheries management.

Fourthly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is having enough workforce and finance to aid implementation. Workforce and financial support have always played an important role in sustainable fisheries management. If we are to ensure that the fish we consume and those we send off to the markets are sustainable, then we need to invest in our workforce and identify appropriate funding mechanisms to support this work. The vastness of our coastline, coupled with the different activities weaved into our fishing sector, constantly requires additional workforce and funding support. We are fortunate that through internal and external partners, Fiji is able to address some of these needs and we are determined to continue to work towards building on this.

Let me discuss ocean farming and the impact it could provide. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the area of ocean farming, I am happy to share with Parliament the developments that have evolved on this. Ocean farming, definitely, builds towards a Blue Continent. Ocean farms produce incredibly nutritious food that benefit fish and other marine organisms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this pandemic calls for a change in narrative and drive towards ocean farming, coincidentally building towards a Blue Continent. In Fiji, this is done through the various scales and inclusive of different marine species. At our communities, ocean farming involves the culture of seaweed, edible oysters, pearl oysters, mabe pearls and clams. While this is done at different levels, the result of these developments is worth recognising. The Ministry hopes that through ocean farming, communities are presented with alternative sources of livelihood that can be sustained, managed and protected. This leads to a reduction in wild-caught species, allowing for vulnerable stocks to recover.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally, most of these designated areas will become safe nursing and foraging grounds for marine species and since ocean farms have a natural setup, species interaction will be boosted. It is important to note that the Government has been relentless in its efforts to ensure Fijians are secure and have needs provided for during these unprecedented times.

The Ministry of Fisheries, earlier this year, was provided with an increased budget on the Food Security Project for Aquaculture. The Ministry of Fisheries has maximised the scope of assistance to Food Security and Commercial Aquaculture Farmers. The Ministry received more than 200 applicants this year, the most since its inception. This assistance includes - pond clearing; fertilizer; piping for ponds; feed and seed for one cycle; provision of specialised aquaculture equipment, such as nursing, sampling and harvesting materials; infrastructure development and improvement.

We are strictly working with the farms that were assessed as this will be a critical time for aquaculture in Fiji. Additional to that, the Aquaculture Division has reallocated its manpower to work with all farmers in the four regions and pooling all its resources together by providing sampling, harvesting and post-harvesting kits to key allocated clusters. In line with this, the Ministry's immediate response and recovery to large and small scale aquaculture Fijian farmers, is the efforts to produce and supply maximum number of tilapia fries, prawns and shrimp post-larvae to farmers. In this regard our

National Hatcheries are putting all resources together to double our targets and maximise supplies to all farmers across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenge to building back better and re-positioning our key programmes to meet the needs of today and tomorrow's generation is even more critical than ever. The intensifying impact of climate change on our oceans is compelling us to review our approaches in managing our oceans and our fisheries resources. As you may be aware, late last month, Government launched a public consultation of its first National Ocean Policy (NOP). The Government is committed to harmonising several and occasionally competing issues that may be adversely impacted by a range of development activities that are regulated by different Government agencies.

National ocean governance is, therefore, challenging, unless there is a single vision or policy that commits all of Government to follow and implement in an integrated way. Our work on ocean protection and production must align to our UN global goals, inclusive of SDG 14 – Life below Water and our resilience of the ocean and our ocean economy must be enhanced.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, ocean farming and sustainable aquaculture practices is the future, if we are to successfully protect our depleting ocean resources. What this calls for is, building our knowledge around Sustainable Ocean Farming, while being aided by innovation and technology. We all share the benefits of our fisheries resources and we are privileged to have inherited it from our forefathers and those who have stood by the work of sustaining it for us. It is our time now to do the same.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government gives the reassurance that through the Ministry of Fisheries, it is committed to a swift and inclusive recovery across the offshore, coastal and aquaculture fisheries in cushioning the current and future impact of COVID-19, ensuring repositioning of focussed efforts to economic recovery and strengthening resilience to the looming climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis for present and future generations. We must change the narrative.

I would like to end by stating that as we transform towards a sustainable economy, as we work our way through to economic restoration, our approach should be that – “everyone has a part to play”. This includes; smart partnership, greater and effective collaboration and a holistic approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this is the last scheduled meeting of our Parliament for 2020, please allow me to wish your good self, Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament and all Fijians a merry Christmas and a happy 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu* and I thank you for your indulgence.

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

Honourable Members on that note, we will suspend proceedings for refreshments. The Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.37 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.13 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the Honourable Dr. Ratu Lalabalavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before this august House to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I would like to reiterate His Excellency's message that we are in the midst of a global crisis, as a small island vulnerable to the effects of climate change and now the current COVID-19 pandemic. Before Fiji registered its first case, this side of the House had suggested that we must be proactive rather than reactive to the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I share His Excellency the President's sentiments in saying that we bit the bullet early and did the hard work of locking down the country to protect the people. To date, we are still a COVID-19-contained country and thus, acknowledgement must be directed to where it is due.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I wish to acknowledge and thank our hardworking frontline workers in our battle against COVID-19 – the healthcare workers, Fiji Police Force, Republic of Fiji Military Forces, NGOs, and special appreciation and recognition to our development partner, whose assistance and generous donation enabled us to effectively fight and contain COVID-19. Their resilience, dedication and sacrifice must be recognised and commended.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are being designated as a COVID-19-contained country which is commendable, we are, by no means, out of the woods yet, as this pandemic still poses a clear and present danger to the lives of our people. This is underscored by the quarantine of 25 border workers and officials in Lautoka over the weekend and the discovery of two new cases. I am glad to see the Permanent Secretary for Health and his team are on alert to minimise the risks of local transmission, which can be fatal.

It is critical that we, as leaders, and every individual, realise that we all have a role to play to maintain our current status with COVID-19 so that the hard work of those on the frontline is not in vain, and that is:

- (1) follow the rule of law; and
- (2) adhere to the advice from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only become a Public Health crisis but has also affected the economy. Here, in Fiji, we are no different: there are job losses, closure of business and more and more people facing unprecedented hardships. Today, more than 60 percent of our population are struggling for basic needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to take this time to give thanks to the Lord and Saviour for His blessings and protection. I would also like to thank our aviation industry during these trying times for managing the risks in the continuation of services for cargo, both import and export, and the repatriation of Fiji citizens back to their homeland.

The opening of our ports of entry is essential for necessary and essential goods to be brought in and export for our earnings. So while authorities do their part, the rest of the nation must remain vigilant and alert, and abide by the protective guidelines and advice from the Ministry of Health to maintain our status. We all remember what was it like during the early stages of the pandemic with lockdowns and restrictions, and what that brought about in our various localities and settings, and I

am sure we would not want to go through that again. The festive season is coming up and mass movement of people will follow, and we should all adhere to the advice and protocols so that it will be good for all of us.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I urge the Government and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to continue to ensure:

- (1) full and proper PPEs are made available to our frontline workers.
- (2) our frontline workers are properly remunerated for their overtime work.
- (3) that those who plan to be repatriated or visit Fiji undertake testing. We continue to receive border cases and it begs the question of credibility testing from other countries.
- (4) that strict protocols are followed by those in the frontline to minimise the risk of infection.
- (5) that those who are being quarantined follow strict guidelines with regards to their respective isolation and definitely no special treatment.
- (6) that media release is on time and on point to counter fake news. The recent media release by the Permanent Secretary for Health and Medical Services with regards to the recent scare was well articulated and timing.
- (7) our testing facility continue to be credible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we seem to have control over COVID-19 in Fiji, the burden of other diseases and infections continue to affect us. Non-communicable diseases, infectious diseases, cancer, circulatory and respiratory illnesses, et cetera, continue to contribute to morbidity and mortality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to COVID-19, the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services had mentioned some of the achievements in this august House, such as the:

- (1) Opening of new nursing stations, health centres and subdivisional hospitals.
- (2) Public Private Partnership (PPP) with ASPEN to operate Lautoka and Ba Hospitals.
- (3) Patient/doctor ratio has improved.
- (4) New medical vessel, *MV Veivueti*, taking outreach services in terms of dental and surgical to maritime areas.
- (5) Our status of health indicators are above par to WHO and international standards.
- (6) Medical specialist services.
- (7) Newer model Catheterization (Cath) Laboratory.
- (8) Decentralised General Outpatient and Specialist Services.
- (9) Dialysis subsidy, to name a few.

The achievements are commended but the quality of service delivery is dependent on the right policies, budgetary support, the right and relevant priorities and equipping our healthcare workers with the tools to carry out their respective services to the best of their abilities.

We may put the blame on COVID-19 for now and rightly so due to its impact and disruption of the supply chain that equips our health system on medication, perishables and equipment, but most are chronic issues that have been there even before COVID-19 came along, such as the:

- (1) Debilitated conditions of our nursing stations, health centres and hospitals need attention.
- (2) PPP between ASPEN and FNPF is still not operational, with the new Ba Hospital a white elephant that promised so much but has not delivered.

- (3) Patient/doctor ratio has improved but I welcome His Excellency the President in addressing a deeper collaboration across the medical field to include general practitioners. I will elaborate on this later in detail.
- (4) Medical specialty services without tools, equipment needed to carry out the respective work is just lip services. Specialty services as informed to me by a colleague are operating daily on a miracle with case by case.
- (5) The increase in numbers attending decentralised services but only to be told that further treatment or pharmacy to come from the patient's own pocket. Shortage of medication supply, especially essentials, perishables is a chronic issue and even made worse with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (6) I had mentioned this before in that for shift work to be successful, you need capacity within the workforce. The cessation of overtime payment will affect performance when staff are overworked, fatigued and mistakes can occur.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look forward to the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services in addressing the chronic issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also touched on general practitioners in private practice joining the forefront of addressing every health challenge Fijians face, and this is commended. The Primary Health Care teams from the public and private sectors maintain no formal relationship. General Practice complement the State's PHC services. Planning and coordinating public private sector services and programme delivery has been slow and delayed. The need to roll out an interactive system and not run parallel is needed with commonality in programme outputs.

The Fiji College of General Practitioners (FCGP) now runs its own conferences, workshops and trainings for its members. A Mentorship Programme exists for new trainees with established pathways to full membership, annual accreditation and licensing. Research is encouraged and a regular quarterly publication is established and operational.

Some of the barriers of implementing community-based Primary Health Care services:

- Fiscal restraints, primary healthcare delivery in both sectors.
- Poor referral and reporting systems. Digital technology poorly developed.
- Feedback very rudimentary to primary healthcare from public primary healthcare.
- Public health awareness and health literacy are very poor.

Primary Health Care is the foundation of health, wellbeing and socio-economic development in society. Continuity of care is needed, especially with current poor palliative care for NCD complications, cancer patients and those with disabilities in the community. There is even a greater need for health screening and health promotion. The vital interconnectivity of the private PHC and public systems are long overdue.

The use of digital technology, remuneration options for the private sector in PHC needs addressing before the private sector goes into bankruptcy and the public PHC is overwhelmed and totally dysfunctional.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to turn to issues within my constituency, as follows:

- (1) I thank the initiative by the Government sector in Taveuni, especially the Fiji Police Force in collaboration with the *Vanua* in promoting sports to combat crime.
- (2) The Waibula Crossing upgrade is ongoing and upon its completion, will ease the burden of travelling to the North of Taveuni.
- (3) The Kanakana Seawall in the *Tikina* of Tunuloa needs feedback on its progress and also the need for a seawall to protect the boundaries of school in Navaca - South of Taveuni.
- (4) The permanent water source to the South of Taveuni needs addressing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a member of the loyal Opposition, over the last two years of my term, I have endeavoured to commend the Government on its progress, while identifying areas for improvement. I have joined the former Leader of the Opposition in offering our friendship and cooperation across the aisle, to work on many challenges that face our nation.

On that note, Sir, I wish to commend and thank the former Leader of the Opposition, Major-General (Retired) Sitiveni Rabuka, for his courage and leadership at the helm of SODELPA in the last four years, and over the last two years as my Parliamentary Opposition Leader. I have been inspired by him and have been fortunate to learn from him. I wish him success and I have no doubt that he will continue to play a role in national leadership.

While we, as the loyal Opposition, led by the former Leader of the Opposition offered our hands in friendship and cooperation across the aisle, this was unfortunately rebuffed. I am, therefore, thankful that he has sacrificed his position to perhaps, give Government the opportunity to cooperate across the aisle.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respectfully commend His Excellency's Address and look forward to another Parliamentary Session that may yield more relief for our suffering people of Fiji, and I thank you for the opportunity, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Dr. Ratu Lalabalavu for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, I now call on the Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, Honourable Members of this august House, Ladies and Gentlemen; I wish to side track a bit in mentioning how honoured I am to be here for being selected to this office, Sir.

It is not an easy task in trying to fill into big shoes left vacant yesterday on the retirement of my predecessor. As such, I will be banking on the support of the Honourable Members of the Opposition and in that, I also wish to mention my gratitude to the Honourable Members of our caucus and also of the great support from the National Federation Party (NFP), their leader and Honourable Members as well. I thank you, Sir.

It is quite challenging and now I have to play my part. Apart from the Opposition, plays all along and that is to try and show, not only to this august House, but more so to the people of Fiji, that we are the alternate Government. It is our duty to provide constructive decisions and offer better

ways in achieving greater results from whatever Government programmes that are brought before this House.

Sir, I will now go into my speech proper. I wish to contribute and thank His Excellency the President for addressing this august House on 30th November, especially in the opening of the third Session of Parliament after the 2018 Elections. Sir, there is no doubt and we all agree that we are all living in extraordinary time. The people of Fiji are now facing challenging times. I believe the worst is still yet to come for two reasons with sincerity and it must be taken positively.

Firstly, we must be prepared and support each other in these difficult times ahead of us. Secondly, the worst is yet to come because Government finance is in a very precarious situation and I will deliberate on this issue later.

Against this background, I would like to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. As usual, His Excellency the President articulates his vision for the nation and outlined Government's key development agenda to be implemented to benefit all.

I share the sentiments expressed by the former Leader of Opposition in his response to His Excellency's Address that despite adversity and hardship the nation is facing, the message from His Excellency will always give us hope and provide assurance for a sense of unity, prerogative of mercy and common purpose for all our citizens.

Sir, the prerogative of mercy rests with His Excellency the President, who appoints the Mercy Commission which is chaired by the Honourable Attorney-General and four other members appointed by His Excellency the President acting on the advice of the Judicial Services Commission, following consultation by it with the Honourable Attorney-General. His Excellency the President has the power to grant free or conditional pardon to a person convicted of an offence and remitting all or part of a punishment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this prerogative of mercy, I urge His Excellency the President to consider the release of prisoners who have served and have good track record and are qualified to be released on parole. They must be given another chance to be integrated into our community and participate effectively in our community and the nation as a whole. I would like to mention a few names, Sir, the *Turaga na Qaranivalu*, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. RATU N.T. LALABALAVU.- No, Sir. We have undertaken the traditional ceremony that is echoed some time ago in this august House, at Albert Park in front of the then His Excellency the President, Prime Minister Qarase and members of the Government. I even had the opportunity to pay a visit to the Honourable Prime Minister's Office, when he was still the Commander at Berkeley Crescent and also that of Prime Minister Chaudhary in his office but was told by Prime Minister Chaudhary that he needed time because he needed to consult with indigenous Fijian honourable members at that time.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not to create another *coup*. We want to take a step forward and see how best can we interact with each other more properly and easily by accepting each other. I was one that was incarcerated for the events that took place in 2000, Sir. I mentioned this during a conference in Brisbane in which your good office sent me to attend, on the role of traditional leaders. It was not an easy task because in here, we were talking about something that had happened and the hurt that befell everyone that came across this very hard time.

As such, I am only talking here or amplifying what my predecessor had said yesterday as to perhaps, a way to have a better start, our way forward together, hand in hand. If we have the audacity to come here and preach about the Yellow Ribbon, et cetera, I hope we could sink further to take account of all those who have been affected. Some have served for more than 10 years, some have gone beyond 20 years and some of us have served our time as well, but we are back serving our country as a whole because the most important thing here, Sir, is no one is above the law.

We carried out our traditional *matanigasau* twice, Sir, coming with the chiefs from the North and making arrangements with the former Commander of the RFMF, now the Honourable Prime Minister, but he was busy then. So we ended up with His Excellency the Vice-President, Ratu Jope Seniloli. Later on, a big function was held at the ground where chiefs, like the *Turaga na Qaranivalu*, was there.

We offered our sincere apologies to the nation to seek forgiveness. All that I am asking, Sir, through this shared vision that we have of this high office of His Excellency the President is, if His Excellency the President, the late *Turaga na Tui Vuda*, Ratu Iloilovatu, was able to accept our traditional ceremony of forgiveness, then I urge the Government of the day if they could also consider this humble plea and please, relook at the role of the Mercy Commission in trying to clear and build a better Fiji, therefore, giving those who have served their time and are doing good and could be in line for this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the big question that arises out of this is the commitment from Government in the effective implementation of the initiatives, as announced by His Excellency. It is unfortunate that it has been a common practice and a norm for the FijiFirst Government in not practicing what it preaches or just lip service, and supporting a selected few. I say this, Sir, because the sentiments expressed by our citizens are totally different from political rhetoric and claim by the FijiFirst Government that the Fijian family matters more or matters, after more than 120,000 people lost their source of livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are better ways in addressing redundancy than supporting the mass laying off of the workers from their jobs, asking them to use their own retirement funds so that they can fend for themselves. Sir, I will be deliberating on better ways I believe will minimise mass redundancy later on in my deliberation.

In his Address, His Excellency highlighted three key initiatives to be implemented by the Government, firstly, in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the nation; secondly, is our economic recovery phase; and, thirdly, is the importance of the impact of climate to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I share the sentiment expressed by His Excellency the President that we must all be proud that our nation quite recently has been classified as a COVID-contained country. The Government must be commended for its proactive approach, in putting into place measures and protocols so that we can achieve the status of a COVID-contained country.

We must all continue to appreciate and acknowledge the efforts and sacrifices of our frontline response team. I must mention the hardworking doctors and nurses out there, the volunteers, not forgetting the members of the Military and the Police, for their tireless work since the outbreak until today, to ensure that our nation continues to be safe.

Having said that, Sir, this side of the House feels strongly that we must not be complacent, and continue to be vigilant although we are classified as a COVID-contained country. The latter status of the spread of COVID-19 whereby additional three cases have been identified, could get worse, if we continue to be complacent.

I urge the Government that we should think twice or be cautious in the opening of our borders too early. Despite the fact that the Government has put into place necessary measures to contain COVID-19, there are still much bigger risks and loopholes in the implementation of necessary protocols in other jurisdictions. Therefore, I urge the Government to take a more cautious approach in the opening of our borders.

On non-economic recovery, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the biggest challenge today is for all of us to work together in addressing our economic recovery effort. We must look at the opportunities internally, to find employment for more than 120,000 people who have lost their jobs or source of livelihood rather than relying on tourism alone and other factors.

Our recovery effort will not be easy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We must all work together to address this mammoth task. Although the revised figures on the economy from the review report issued by RBF by the end of November suggests that the economy will contract by 19 percent, compared to 21.7 percent as earlier forecasted, I believe that this revised forecast is still bullish and optimistic, taking into account the poor performance of all key sectors of the economy, including the tourism industry. The drastic drop in the performance of key sectors of the economy is a clear indication that aggregate demand will continue to decline or subdue.

I am very much worried about the comments made by the Honourable Prime Minister that Government will continue to borrow. His argument is on the premise that other developed countries continue to borrow to support their stimulus initiatives. Sir, it is unfortunate and so sad that he is comparing the resource-rich and broad-based economy with a small, vulnerable and narrow-based economy like ours. The unprecedented high debt level which has increased four-folds has gone far beyond our capacity, so we now are facing a debt crisis.

Sir, there are many ways to skin a cat and we should look at best options and alternatives, and be cost effective that will have the greatest benefit to the ordinary citizens. It is time that the Government should re-look at its policies and re-prioritise its development agenda in the short term, so that it is cost effective in our recovery effort. The reason why I urge Government to relook at its priorities is based on my assessment on what is happening on the ground.

Despite hardships faced by families in the urban and semi-urban centres in putting food on the table, I notice very little change in the movement of our citizens between Vanua Levu and Viti Levu. Flights continue to be over-booked from Vanua Levu to Suva and the travel by local shipping services between the two main local islands continue to increase. Although a number of families had moved back to their villages to cushion the hardship after losing their source of livelihood, the movement of people between the two main islands continue to increase. The latest review report by RBF confirms that agriculture (I must commend the Government of the day for that) is the only sector that will continue to grow. If this is so, then the Government should pay more attention to non-sugar agricultural sector, to ensure food security and support export-led growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, rather than doing business as usual, the Government should be looking at innovative ways to find employment opportunities for more than 120,000 people who have lost their source of livelihood. As a short term measure, Government should consider "Cash for Work Programme" in the public sector. I believe that the Programme has been implemented successfully in different jurisdiction in times of crisis.

Cash for Work Programme is essentially social protection programmes that provide employment to unskilled and semi-skilled workers as labour intensive public sector projects. This short-term initiative should target those who have lost their jobs, and provide some relief in working under this programme, and this should be urgently addressed, Sir. It will also reduce the number of

workers who solely rely on their FNPF contribution for survival. I urge the Government of the day to stop using the workers' retirement fund to support those facing hardships, but look at other viable cost-effective alternatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sir, on my part as a traditional leader, I had addressed the people of Cakaudrove on two occasions, reminding them to follow Government directives and protocol to minimise the risk in the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and idealistically speaking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the premise that what had happened in our country a couple of years ago with the measles epidemic, we lost half of our indigenous population and that happened because there was no medicine available and the sickness was foreign to us. That is why traditional leaders are urged to also be proactive in their role and ask the people to, please, follow the directives given by the Government and more so, emphasise the need to respect the curfew law being put in place by Government.

This is another unfortunate part, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reduction in the duty of alcohol which has made them cheaper and easily accessible. It would be interesting to know the statistics from the Ministry of Defence, especially the people who continue to breach curfew laws, most of them were caught drunk. I also urge the people of Cakaudrove to be proactive in their approach and find innovative ways to utilise their God-given resources, rather than waiting or relying on Government for handout or support. We need to fend for ourselves at this difficult time, to allow Government to direct its resources to priority areas that need to be urgently addressed, such as the improvement of health services and infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know I have gone beyond my time, and on that note I wish you, Sir, and the Honourable Members of this august House, a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. Thank you, Sir.

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

I now give the floor to the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public; I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his thoughtful and encouraging statement at the opening of Parliament Session. In highlighting the issues and challenges that our nation is facing, he showed us how we can realistically move forward.

Mr. Speaker Sir, at this time last year, no one had a clue that year 2020 will challenge our society, our economy and our country in so many different ways. We are in a period of great stress and anxiety, and our road to recovery is rocky and uncertain. Our greatest challenge must be to rebuild our economy and keep our citizens safe, secure and employed.

Fiji is not alone - the whole world has been threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Every country, whether rich or poor, with an economy small or large, has been affected. Each government had to create an ecosystem of support for their people and this has meant record debt levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has asked us to focus our attention on three areas for action. These are the containment of COVID-19, the rebuilding of our economy and sustainable development, as we continue our crusade on climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis. Mr. Speaker Sir, my Ministries have set clear goals aligned to these three priorities and we are delivering against each one.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the pandemic presents many challenges for the Municipalities, challenges very similar to what other businesses are experiencing. After all, Municipal Councils are also complex and large to micro-sized businesses. They have customers; they have a large number of employees; operate a breadth of essential services and facilities, and it is expected that their costs and revenue must be managed tightly. Just like any other business, they cannot sit back and wait for things to get better. They must think long term and position themselves for a strong recovery.

Mr. Speaker Sir, when COVID-19 reached our shores earlier this year, the whole of Government machinery immediately went into action. The Ministry of Local Government moved quickly to spread market vendors across 54 decentralised market sites to ensure social distancing and installed sanitizers at public places. Council properties were made available for fever clinics and as isolation centres. We facilitated the opening of flea markets to provide SME opportunities for those who had lost their jobs. We raised awareness on the do's and don'ts of preventing COVID-19. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all 13 Municipal Councils stand ready to assist in containing this virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second priority outlined by His Excellency the President is economic recovery. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report states that many economies will not recover their 2019 output levels until 2022 at the earliest. His Excellency rightfully points out the need for us to stay the course with the current National Budget and the Fijian COVID-19-Safe Economic Recovery Framework.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the efforts of the Honourable Minister for Economy for the pro-growth stimulus budget, creating conditions for reigniting economic growth and job creation that will put Fiji on a sustainable path to economic recovery. Many initiatives have now either been successfully rolled out or are in the process of being implemented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to our Government's incentive to increase residential construction, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development has taken on a wider responsibility this financial year. The increase to \$30,000 in the First Home Grant for Fijians to construct their first home has seen many more Fijians convert their dreams into reality. A total of 260 applications have now been approved under the First Home/Land Grant Assistance Programme with a total pay-out in excess of \$3.7 million. This assistance increases economic activity, spurs the construction sector and creates more business activity and much-needed employment for many Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has not stopped at that. Three capital projects in Ledrusasa, Cuvu and Waidamudamu under the Upgrade of Informal Settlement Programme are completed or near completion. Over 450 households will soon receive their 99-year leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these projects completed, the Ministry is now working towards the commencement of capital works in four other settlements – Tore and Tavela in the West Division and Sakoca and Wakanisila in the Central Division. We are creating more employment in the important construction sector. We are building not only homes but a collective economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I wish to explain one very important fact about the upgrade of informal settlements. Honourable Opposition Members continue to ask, "Why is it taking so long?"

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency has rightly pointed out that a government can neither settle for short-term assistance nor quick-fix solutions. The FijiFirst Government's investment in upgrading informal settlements is both, extensive and long-term.

It is easy to draw a scheme plan and provide everyone with a short-term lease agreement, but a responsible government will do it the proper way and this is what we are doing. Every settlement that we upgrade has proper roads, drains, water, electricity and sewerage facilities. The upgraded lots that the settlers receive at the end of these developments have a commercial value that will assist them in securing funding, not only to acquire the land but to build a proper home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is currently in discussion with several local developers for possible housing development partnerships. Though discussions are still in the preliminary stages, along with the reforms currently underway with the Housing Authority and Public Rental Board (PRB), we are confident that we can work closely with the private sector in this area.

Whilst economic recovery is our urgent priority, the Ministry has never forgotten those who are most vulnerable. After the pandemic was declared, the Housing Authority and PRB announced relief packages to their customers and tenants. We also worked with the Housing Assistance Relief Trust (HART) homes funded through the National Budget, to provide rent concession to those whose income was affected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on improved service delivery, the biggest challenge to this is corruption. Corrupt practices lead to a lack of confidence in the system and the waste of public funds and the deterioration of efficiency.

The housing sector is currently undergoing a complete review in its effort to achieve the highest level of integrity in service delivery. The Housing Authority has undergone a special audit and a public inquiry. Findings from these investigations have highlighted the need to strengthen the legal and governance framework surrounding the housing sector.

Our National Housing Policy Review is progressing well and the Ministry is currently undertaking public consultation on a new informal settlement lot allocation policy. The outcome of these efforts are to develop a new National Housing Act to address such issues and to ensure lots are fairly allocated to the most deserving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Municipal Councils are seen as key development partners in driving local economic activity. The Department of Town and Country Planning has focussed on reducing outdated and unnecessary bureaucracy and lengthy turnaround times for building, zoning and subdivision approvals. Why? Because obtaining approvals in a timely manner increases business confidence and delivers more jobs in the construction industry.

We now provide a monthly update on the numbers and timelines for Major Building Approvals, which is a key indicator of economic confidence. From January to October 2020, we have approved 30 Major Development Applications at a value of \$154.7 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know that modern and practical legislation will enable the Government's economic recovery work. The Town and Country Planning and Subdivision of Land legislations are way outdated and are being reviewed to reflect the demands and dynamics of a modern construction and planning environment based on the world's best practice.

The outdated general provisions of the Town Planning Act will be replaced with modern regulations, providing the necessary guidance on areas, such as setbacks and plot ratios. We must respond to the needs of our changing housing sector and the increase in commercial developments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Municipal Council infrastructural projects also have a vital role to play in Fiji's economic recovery. While increasing the liveability of our cities and towns, they also provide employment.

Our Teams of Special Administrators across Fiji have created a total of 35 projects which are now at different stages of development. Municipal Council projects, whether it be parks, town beautification, an e-Hub, a decentralised transport hub, car parking stations, markets or market infrastructure, must be equitably distributed across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also emphasised the increased importance of digitization to our economic recovery. The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated digitalization around the globe. There are now a multitude of ways we can serve our citizens and businesses in this new environment.

The Ministry of Local Government has endorsed a transformative approach to digitization. We will build an e-services platform, linking and harmonising the work of Fiji's 13 Municipal Councils.

Our digitization strategy will deliver a MY COUNCIL App and a complete range of e-services that will transform how our ratepayers interact with their Councils. This work is a game changer. The benefits are wide-ranging from online construction approvals, online payment of rates, permits, fines and the easier payment of bus and taxi base fees. Over time, ratepayers will be able to book Council venues and facilities online, find and pay for parking and lodge complaints.

We will roll out the MLG e-services platform over the next four years. Again, I want to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy for giving us some seed funding to roll out this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the third priority outlined by His Excellency the President, the Ministry of Local Government's response to the climate change, oceans and biodiversity crisis is best reflected in the Savusavu Blue Town Model. The significant economic impacts of COVID-19 have highlighted the urgency for a "blue economy". Focused on economic recovery and resilience, the Savusavu Blue Town Initiative is a powerful replicable model to ensure local communities not only survive this crisis, but also thrive.

The ground-breaking Blue Town Model is the world's first and is designed to develop sustainable livelihoods, mitigate climate change and reduce ocean pollution. Supported by \$20,000 seed funding from the Fijian Government and \$75,000 from the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, the new year will see the introduction of the first pilot programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in September this year, to better manage household waste, Nasinu Town Council successfully sub-contracted Suva City Council to deliver solid waste collection services. Going forward in 2021, the four Central Division Councils will explore the possibility of creating the new Waste Management Company as outlined in our 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plans, as well as Urban Policy Action Plan. Under a shared service arrangement, they will deliver solid waste services, develop a new transfer station and increase composting and recycling programme. This model will, over time, provide a profitable income stream for those Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the entire effort of my two Ministries is directed towards increasing our much needed economic recovery and the long-term wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I wish to thank Honourable Bulitavu for providing positive feedback on how Government assistance and projects have reached rural communities based on

his personal experience. On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have to jog Honourable Kuridrani's memory that every Ministry has achieved a lot in the last two years and even during the COVID-19 period. Therefore, it is not correct for him to say and I quote: "The only thing Government achieved was controlling COVID-19".

Mr. Speaker Sir, let me give an account of what my two Ministries achieved, if I have not said enough:

- In 2020, we opened the Rakiraki Market, Laqere and Namaka Markets, including the Korovou restroom facility.
- Opening of three Fire Stations in Nakasi, Lami and Rakiraki in 2020.
- Over 2,900 households received \$27.3 million in assistance to purchase their first land or build or buy their first home.
- A total of 73 households who were victims of accidental fires had been assisted.
- A total of 48 families have been assisted so far with the 1/3 and 2/3 assistance for rural housing.
- A 19 year old informal settlement upgrade policy is going through public consultation to ensure low income earning Fijians benefit in informal settlements.
- Over 1,600 families living in PRB flats have continued to receive Government subsidies, a total of \$2.9 million paid in the last two years.
- HART homes have been allocated with an assistance of \$1.3 million to look after over 800 households in those homes.
- Both Housing Authority and PRB are under a complete restructure to deliver better services to Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, once again, commend His Excellency the President for his opening Address. Thank you for listening and thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her contribution to the debate. I now call on the Honourable Leawere. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to associate myself with Honourable Members of this House, to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address on the occasion of the official opening of this new Session of Parliament.

From the outset, Sir, I am extremely grateful and thankful to our Party Headquarters and the SODELPA Branches all over Fiji and Women and Youth Groups. I thank my colleagues in the teaching and trade union movements, whose advice and guidance have always made my task easier as the shadow Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations.

In acknowledging, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am thanking them for their ever-ready services. I wish to state in my speech that I dedicate the rest of my term in Parliament towards two important objectives; to set the people of Fiji free from the bondage of over-regulation and over-taxation. For example:

- (1) Labour Reforms for right to meaningful employment, right to strike, right to collective bargaining, fair wages and working conditions; and
- (2) Realisation of the SDL Affirmative Action Programme 50/50 by 2020, which needs to be reintroduced to enable the first people of this land to become equal partners in the economic activities of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to convey my condolences to the family of the late Ratu Tevita Momoedonu and also our former Members of Parliament, who passed away during the year. Let us thank them for their loyal services to the nation and borrow a leaf or two from the legacy to bequeath better examples for the future generation of leadership.

Sir, may I also, with your indulgence, thank the Government and the Opposition, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and all the people who have rendered their assistance and co-operation and offered their condolences and floral tributes, as well as messages of sympathy to the family of the late *Vunivalu of Serua* on his passing away. He was a caring and great chief, a mentor figure, whose passing had made our province poorer.

As that was not enough, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Serua was robbed off another of its proud sons, a humble school teacher, dutiful Civil Servant, former Diplomat, Parliamentarian and Assistant Minister and one of the founding and guiding lights of SODELPA, the late Mr. Pio Kameli Tabaiwalu. His passing is a great loss to our province, our party and our country. May he rest in peace.

It is rather unfortunate that in this 50th Independence Anniversary, there are only two surviving members of the Fiji Legislative Council from 1970; Mr. Karam Chand Ramrakha and Mr. Ujargar Singh. They are away overseas and could not be here to mark the occasion. A more painful thing is the wound inflicted to them by the Fiji College of Honours, in not awarding them the commemorative medals, as it would have suited this historic occasion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I take this opportunity to thank the former Leader of the Opposition, Major-General Sitiveni Rabuka, for his services to the country. I thank him for his dedicated service to Fiji. On that note, I also wish to congratulate the Honourable new Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji marked its 50th year of nationhood last October. We have become of an age as an independent country which was in that period, blessed with prosperity, and we also had our share of disasters. Not every disaster was an act of God that shaped our history in the last five decades. Most of it was manmade prosperity and manmade disasters. I am sure we all have learned our lessons and that will help us and our future generations to seek to achieve and live up the noble dream and great vision shared in the Address by His Excellency the President.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sharing of noble visions and great dreams cost nothing. We can continue to imagine to be a king while still being a pauper. Illusions have no limitations but the resources or capitals at stake to realise those dreams and visions do. That is the crux of the matter which dampens the spirit of vision 2050, more so, given the experiences of the last one and half decade.

A nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not what its leaders or government is, but rather it is what its people are. That being so, let me ask this House, how would you summarise a nation that we are now, where one-third of the nation voters voted for the Government, second-third for the Opposition and last-third abstaining to vote in 2018?

It lethally fractures the mandate that is now being claimed by this Government. As such, Mr. Speaker, Sir, legislation, motions and plans initiated for this Government with such a truncated mandate cannot find acceptance and support until and unless it is subjected to a bipartisan process where the second third of voters of Fiji can find space to become stakeholders and equal party to such decisions and policy making processes. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition as a whole realised this fact on day one and proposed for dialogue and consensus building, for reconciliation and bipartisanship which has been rejected by this Government, creating the divide wider as never before.

That brings me to raise the question that given His Excellency the President, who symbolises the unity of this nation and one who had urged for unity in his Address that is under debate, is whether it was His Excellency who allowed himself to be used, or did the Government used His Excellency to promote the theme, "Unity as a mask to hide its undoings, dividing Fiji and using the *Divide Et Impera* rule"?

Nothing is further from the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Now, redeeming the call by His Excellency the President for national unity, I challenge the Government to demonstrate to this House how successful it has been in uniting Fiji. Every possible attempt that was made in that direction proved counterproductive because of its unilateral decisions that have not only wounded but raped the ideals and principles of our long nurtured, celebrated and civilised political culture and goodness of the people of this land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Government that is divisive as such, one which fails to acknowledge our glorious past and recognises our previous leadership, a Government that is drenched in ego-centric muddy waters and devoid of direction, a Government that has become a problem more than a solution to this nation and a Government that is limping in power due to policy paralysis than ushering direction, has no moral right to stay in power. It must do the honourable thing - resign and face the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said this in my response to the Budget Address this year and I say that again, it appears that this Government is dilly-dallying the labour reforms under the guise of COVID-19 and economic meltdown. The Opposition would like to remind the Government that the Fijian Labour Reforms is still a pending item on the agenda of the International Labour Organization (ILO). You cannot evade our responsibilities towards the workers and trade unions of this country.

The key focus of the Labour Reforms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, continues to be meeting universal or ILO Standards with regards to the:

- (1) Right to meaningful employment;
- (2) Right to fair wages and better working conditions;
- (3) Right to collective bargaining and arbitration;
- (4) Right to strike; and
- (5) Rights of trade union leaders to actively participate in political activities as individuals.

Therefore, Sir, I would like to draw the attention of the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations specifically and this House generally, to speed up the review in partnership with the worker representatives and resolve this impasse amicably.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are getting the wrong message!

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition is also concerned about the heavy-handed treatment by this Government of our workers, especially our FRCS Border Security staff. The Government cannot choose and parade itself as champion of workers' rights to the world when you suppress workers at home and ironically, that has been one of the key reasons in our failure to achieve the SDGs. So we call on the Government to place those staff on leave without pay and assure them to return to work when our borders are re-opened.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other serious labour relations issue that is now a national issue is the unilateral and sudden decision by the Fiji National University (FNU) to close some of its Technical Colleges. The irresponsible and uncaring manner in which the staff had been dealt with is deplorable and disconcerting. It clearly illustrates how this Government treats our workers and in this case, respectable teachers and ancillary staff.

In drawing the specific attention of the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to urge her to advise the people of Fiji on:

- (1) what led to the sudden closure of some of these Technical Colleges?
- (2) why were the staff in the Technical Colleges not given even the slightest indication of the closure until the last minute?
- (3) what does the Government intend to do, apart from FNU, to assist the laid-off staff of these Technical Colleges?
- (4) what will happen to the schools with whom the Ministry of Education has signed its tenancy agreement with and have closed since? Will they be compensated?

Is this the tribute we want to pay the teachers or workers of Fiji and the Fiji Education Sector? I see that as an insult to the spirit rekindled by His Excellency's Address.

Whilst still on education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must express my concern for those students losing out on Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS), whose marks are above 200 but below 249. I believe this is an unjust move, and asking the Government to seriously consider reviewing the same.

The child and the youth are the hope of any nation. It is a pity that while our youth are entrapped in debt under TELS and were looking for jobs, the children of this country are now on the streets instead of being in schools and homes.

They are, Mr. Speaker, Sir, seen selling food parcels at night, begging, being left stranded by family members and are even ill-treated, to the point of escaping and running away from homes. Yet, what we are told here is that, "no Fijian would be left behind." Behind from what? Pain and sufferings, neglect and delusion? Is this how we are going to nurse our children and expect them to become productive citizens?

An average of 10 cases of abandoned children are being reported to the authorities each week. No caring government can turn a blind eye to its children and more so, when you have an address from the throne where His Excellency the President talks about our duty towards our children.

I request the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation to kindly and urgently inquire and redress those issues of concern so that we can save and groom a healthy, educated and safe generation for our future.

The legislative agenda, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the new year for this Government looks impressive on paper but given its past record, there is still a cloud of uncertainty on this accord. I say this for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the pace at which some Bills had been dealt with before this House by the use of Standing Order 51, not allowing us the opportunity to scrutinise them in detail and subject them for public consultation, again, is an imposition of the tyranny by majority.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, laws are made to guide and govern the society, not to dictate or assume control over the lives of the people, their resources, or jeopardise their future and rights. Unfortunately, this maxim of legislation has been lost upon this Government and the various legislations it has brought before this House. This sends vibes of fear and entrenches instability which is not only dangerous for our economy, but also the morale of our right-thinking citizens.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot be oblivious to what is happening in the other two arms of the State, apart from this Parliament as a legislative body and more so, the need to empower the work and lend an ear to the Fiji Law Reform Commission. That certainly brings into question that competence of legal advice being given to the Government on the need to update, enact or repeal laws. I think the number of amendments, editorial or substantive, speaks for itself. Are any of the proposed legislations for these purposes only?

That being so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the announcement by His Excellency on these three areas of legislation, the:

- (1) Electoral Reforms;
- (2) Anti-Doping Legislation; and
- (3) Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Bill.

Alluding to Electoral Reforms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we anticipate that it is not going to make any further mockery and destroy political party activity or spirit of electioneering in Fiji.

On the contrary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we hope that the Government will give serious thought to the Report by the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights on Electoral Reforms and the submissions that were made to the Committee on issues pertaining to Electoral Reforms. This includes a joint submission by the Opposition Parties, namely, the:

- (1) Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA);
- (2) National Federation Party (NFP);
- (3) Fiji Unity Party;
- (4) Fiji United Freedom Party; and
- (5) Fiji Labour Party (FLP).

They had submitted a total of 138 recommendations on electoral reforms to the Committee.

Given those issues of concern, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition further believes that Electoral Reforms up to our expectations will not even make our elections just and democratic, unless other pertinent legislations affecting electioneering in Fiji are also reviewed to international standards and that includes the:

- (1) 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji;
- (2) Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Decree 2013;
- (3) Media Industry Development Decree 2010;
- (4) Public Order (Amendment) Regulations;
- (5) Crimes Decree 2009;
- (6) Criminal Procedure Decree 2009;
- (7) Employment Relations (Amendment) Decree 2015;

- (8) State Proceeds Decree; and
- (9) the draconian provisions in the Electoral Decree itself.

On the proposed anti-doping legislation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hail it as long overdue, urgent and a must-to-do enactment, given substance abuse and its effects upon our society and their health. I am eagerly awaiting the legislation to be introduced before this House so we can make our input and pave the way to combat and control substance abuse. I can assure the Honourable Minister responsible that I have a lot to hear and a lot to say when we come to debate that Bill. It may send some bells ringing for a while.

Welcoming the Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I assume that it is a step towards fulfilling the intents of Article 169 of the ILO Convention, dealing with the rights of the indigenous peoples, given Fiji's unique pottery and history, as well as our diversity as a nation. I venture to suggest, Sir, that traditional institutions and structures be consulted to avoid this legislation becoming another controversial set of laws in Fiji. That is the best advice I can give this Government, given that they have chosen to ditch the bipartisan approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that leaves me to make some general remarks before I conclude. Firstly, I wish to urge the Honourable Prime Minister as Minister for iTaukei Affairs to consider allowing the landowners to use reserved land, or be given priorities to land use over non-landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is requested to re-define and re-survey these reserves in order to identify the rightful owners. Numerous benefits, Sir, can be enjoyed by these landowners, especially the owners of the Vaturu Dam - *Mataqali Navuke*, as well as *Yavusa Wacakena*, as well as *Yaqara Mineral Waters* and also *Yavusa Naikorolevu* in Deuba, Serua.

In 2018, the Native Lands Commission (NLC) administration and iTaukei Affairs told the landowners to conduct their own survey. I urge the Honourable Prime Minister to consider revisiting this exercise as he had been informed already.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this House will note that the Serua Rugby Union and Navua Football Association have done well in their respective sporting activities. Big teams, like *Namosi Rugby*, has been popular in rugby which prompts me to call for the development of a sports complex in Navua. This ambitious project, Sir, will not only add value to the economy of Navua, but help in producing more athletes and generate sporting activities to combat and control the rising cases of NCDs in the region.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to thank the Honourable Minister for Waterways and Environment for the maintenance of drainage and new drainage projects in Serua. I hope the rest of the drains will be maintained soon.

While still on waterways, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me draw the attention of this House to the plight of those communities, whose livelihood is threatened by the eroding river bank. They need river walls, and one such community is *Waidova*, Navua. I am hopeful that these developments in the region will gradually help prepare Navua to attain the status of a town, which this Government has been working towards and also to move the focus of development from the Suva to Nausori corridor, to the Suva to Navua area.

Whilst highlighting the plight of the *nasi ni koro* for Navua Hospital to the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services and the Honourable Assistant Minister for Health, it was discovered that others around the country have yet to receive their allowances. Their intervention has brought smiles to those *nasi ni koro* around the country.

I thank the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports for his Ministry's assistance towards the youth groups of Galoa Village, Dranikula and Tubarua.

To the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources, thank you for listening to the request from Nakorovou Village and Vunaniu Village in Serua, for village lights. I also thank other Honourable Ministers for the development assistance in Serua.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to say that the legacy of the FijiFirst Government would be remembered as that of a tobacco seller funding a cancer hospital. I say this because this is the creation of this Government by a problem to solve what they said was a problem when there was no problem. Failing that, they became a problem themselves but still appear to be solving the problem. The sooner Fiji realises and works out this puzzle, the better.

On this note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish everyone, yours truly and the Honourable Members of this august House the very best that Christmas can bring and also a prosperous 2021. Thank you very much.

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

Honourable Members, on that note, we will adjourn for lunch and resume at 2.30 p.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.24 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.30 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and I now call on the Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members; good afternoon to you all. It is an honour to deliver my opening speech for the 2020-2021 Session of Parliament.

I would like to thank His Excellency for his gracious Opening Address during the third opening session of Parliament. In the space of just about 10 months, our daily lives have changed drastically. COVID-19 had its negative effects on all Fijians but through the immediate action by the FijiFirst Government and decisive leadership provided by the Honourable Prime Minister, we were able to tackle the spread of the virus. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the social and economic impact of it is still felt in Fiji, just like other Pacific Island Countries and the rest of the world.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as parliamentarians, we have a strong role to play in the containment of COVID-19 and decreasing its adverse effect. We should be focussed and act at national level to fight the COVID-19 pandemic because, Mr. Speaker, dealing with COVID-19 is not a simple matter, it is a complex matter. It is a phenomena that opens up fronts at all levels, in all sectors, so it is not simple.

Talking about simple, Mr. Speaker, Honourable Kuridrani has a tendency of simplifying things. I hate to think what hullabaloo he is telling his supposed constituency. Mr. Speaker Sir, our electoral system does not have single member or even multiple member constituencies. Our entire country is one constituency. In other words, we as Members of Parliament, are responsible for all Fijians everywhere. We cannot say that I represent one specific area or location or district or province or an ethnic group. Countries like Israel and Moldova have systems like ours where the entire country is treated as one constituency.

The reason why we, in Fiji, have such a system is because in the past, we had single member constituencies where Members of Parliament were simply concerned about their own constituency. They did not care about other constituencies. They became very parochial and very narrow-focussed. They did not care about what happened nationally. They only cared about their vote bank.

Of course, it was made worse because majority of those constituencies were based on ethnicity, so it became even more inward looking. A 'them and us' attitude prevailed and was engrained. This is precisely what we were supposed to get out of but Members, such as the Honourable Kuridrani, who are caught in a time warp. I suppose it is because his Party is structured in that manner.

His Excellency reminded us that he was concerned for all Fijians everywhere. Unfortunately, we can see that they are not. Honourable Gavoka, under your leadership, why can you not direct your Members to have a more expansive and inclusive view of your political obligations? We assume that under your leadership, SODELPA will actually become truly liberal.

This type of inward-looking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has led to political simplification of, amongst other things, how our independent institution functions. For his political gain, Honourable Kuridrani stated that the Honourable Attorney-General, whom he called a terrorist, should resign because a lady, some 33 years after some alleged incident, has decided to lodge a complaint against the

Honourable Attorney-General but only after she was recently charged by FICAC. Without saying too much, one simply has to question the credibility of such allegations.

Despite this fanciful and uncertain allegation, Honourable Kuridrani has joined the ranks of Mr. Mahendra Chaudhary and Mr. Savenaca Narube, calling for the Honourable Attorney-General's resignation, or removal or stepping down. The Honourable Attorney-General has not been charged. He has given a statement to the police. The police has not said that it had been interfered with. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) has not said that it had been interfered with. Honourable Kuridrani has said that other Ministers had stepped down. Yes, one had, but only after he was charged for an electoral-related offence.

Honourable Kuridrani, there is a difference between a complaint lodged and being charged. Talking about charges, seven Honourable Members of Parliament were charged with lots of evidence by FICAC. Our FijiFirst MP did the honourable thing and resigned as Member of Parliament to protect the integrity of Parliament and maintain honour in the august House. What are these six charged SODELPA Members doing, Honourable Kuridrani? Why the double standards, Honourable Kuridrani? Why the double standards, Honourable Gavoka, the Leader of SODELPA? Let me also remind him....

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, the case is before the courts. We should not be discussing it in this House - the FICAC case regarding the seven Members of Parliament. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, what is being discussed here is all part of His Excellency the President's Address, and part of that Address was referred to by Honourable Kuridrani and he is just replying to Honourable Kuridrani. It is all part of that Address.

You have the floor, Honourable Member.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for that interjection, Honourable Member.

Let me also remind him that there are a number of good cases from Great Britain, from where we base our parliamentary democracy on, where their Members of Parliament, who carried out similar acts of claiming allowances for which they were not entitled to, went to prison.

I know some of the media are trying to have a trial through the media, including the politicians. But whenever the Honourable Attorney-General has been asked to comment, he has said, and I quote, "No comment and to follow the due process". I thank the Honourable Attorney-General for adhering to the rule of law, for maintaining honour and decorum in dealing with such matters, with dignity.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank Mr. Vijendra Prakash for putting Parliament first and for adhering to the values and principles of FijiFirst by resigning. Mr. Prakash, you have dealt with the matter with honour and dignity and have not been a coward like some. Thank you and we give you respect, and the whole nation will respect you. Thank you for your service to the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, relying on social dialogue for solutions is vital. The labour market has been significantly affected by the pandemic. It is important to strengthen social dialogue, labour relations, institutions and processes. Together, we can strengthen the capacity and resilience between employers and workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past few months, our Ministry has conducted a number of stakeholder engagement consultations towards realigning the strategic priorities and focus areas for constant improvements in service deliveries. The Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations will continue with the stakeholder consultations in all its upcoming endeavours, such as implementation of the National Productivity Master Plan, review of the Productivity Charter, formation of National Productivity Council, review of National Minimum Wage and to activate its other plans.

The economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 will not be rapid. The fiscal measures adopted by the FijiFirst Government have assisted in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. Front-loaded spending, especially by not reducing the civil servants' pay, and the continuation of social wages to recipients by the Government has helped to stabilise the situation by ensuring that as much money as possible is flowing into the economy.

We all do understand that civil servants would have gone from spending mode to saving mode, had we reduced their pay. This would have had a very negative impact on our economy. Locals are spending and that is one way to keep our economy going. We have a crucial role to oversee this response, as well as evaluate and swiftly pass emergency legislation to approve national funds to meet the needs of the population we serve. We need to ensure that while we are trying to stabilise the nation today, the future of our children and grandchildren is also secured.

Our Honourable Prime Minister made a bold statement while we were working on the COVID-19 Response Budget. He said that our future needs to be secured, thus we should continue to invest in the education sector. Children need to be in school and they need to be educated. The other thing he mentioned was that our senior citizens have done enough for the development of our nation and it is our responsibility to look after them, even in these hard times.

We need to ensure that while we are securing our future, we also take care of those who have worked hard for this nation. This is why we see that we continue to invest in the education sector and social welfare scheme. We borrow in hard times, we borrow when our revenue declines, we borrow to help Fijians when Fijians are struggling to have food on their table.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by His Excellency the President in his Opening Address, digitalisation has accelerated as many businesses are now serving their clients through new arrays of digital tools. Fiji has already ventured into digitalisation through its effective reform and investment in Information and Communications Technology sector by introducing digitalFIJI platform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby support my line Minister's speech on improving economic recovery through implementing the National Productivity Master Plan 2021-2036. As elaborated by the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, the effective implementation of the National Productivity Master Plan will ensure gradual improvement at workplaces through innovation and productivity movements. To achieve this, the Plan focuses on five strategic goals, to have:

- (1) productive and agile enterprises;
- (2) high value added sectors;
- (3) a broad economic base with high value added industries;
- (4) robust business enablers that will propel enterprise and sector growth; and
- (5) advanced macro enablers, underpinning sustained productivity growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the past 10 months has shown a hike in the labour complaints attended by our Ministry during this pandemic. As highlighted by the Honourable Minister for Employment,

Productivity and Industrial Relations, the Labour Standard Services has been empowering workers and employers on full compliance of the Employment Relations Act 2007.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to the climate change, oceans and biodiversity crisis, our Ministry continues to empower and educate on green job initiatives through the Labour Management Consultations and Cooperation Committee trainings and the implementation of the paperless concept through necessary reforms within the Ministry. Our Ministry has also participated and collaborated in green-growth activities.

The most important aspect in responding to emergencies is governance and leadership, trust between the leadership and the State, and a social contract that allows citizens to accept interventions that are not comfortable. The pandemic has taught us that shutdown works, hygiene helps, focus is effective and telecommuting is possible.

Let me take this opportunity to acknowledge the initiatives undertaken by our Government, the commitments, dedications and sacrifices of the people of Fiji, in ensuring that we battle the crisis together. The successful implementation of the strategies and measures put in place by the Government is commended to everyone's effort in helping the most delicate group, namely the youth.

Mr. Speaker, through registration drive of youth clubs, we are working closely with registered youth clubs in trying to assist them with food security and income-generating projects.

We have seen a rural drift amongst youth and majority of these youth are resorting to farming. We have noticed that youth are doing wonders when they work together in a group, so through the Ministry of Youth and Sports, we are getting these youth groups registered as youth clubs and providing them with assistance.

Mr. Speaker, the same youth groups are helping us in our health and wellness programmes whereby we are organising sporting activities in which the whole community and village members participate, thus reducing the risk of Non-Communicable Disease (NCDs).

We have brought in new modules on issues that are affecting the youth today, modules such as mitigating climate change. Since we are doing a lot of income-generating projects, we have a module on financial literacy through which we train youth on how to manage finance. This helps the youth groups to better understand how the financial system works for the income-generating project that they have engaged themselves into.

Other programmes that we are offering is poverty eradication whereby we are training these youth at our training centre for free. The certificates offered at our training centre is now recognised by the Fiji National University (FNU) where the youth can enrol and further their education so that they can secure a better job.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most vulnerable groups that is affected by COVID-19 is our youth. Both, their present as well as their future is very blurry. Through combined efforts of both our Ministries, that is, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, we are getting unemployed youths to be registered with our National Employment Centre (NEC). Once registered with NEC, we try to find them suitable attachment sites where, through their efforts, the youth are able to secure permanent placements, thus improving their livelihood and have a brighter future.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your time. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

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

Honourable Members, I now give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before the House and thank His Excellency the President for his Address in opening the 2020-2021 Parliamentary Session.

Allow me, Sir, before I respond to His Excellency's the President Address, to honour the former Leader of the Opposition and Party Leader of the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), Major-General Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, for his continuing service to our nation. I honour his sacrifice in stepping down to encourage the Government to accept the hand of friendship and bipartisanship that is outstretched from this side of the House. I have no doubt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Major-General Rabuka will continue the tradition of service and duty to the people of Fiji, whether inside this august House or outside of it, and I pledge my continuing support to him as a national leader.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand here as a proud descendant of one of the 13 high chiefs of Fiji, who ceded Fiji to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on 10th October, 1874. The Deed of Cession reflects the spirit in which this country was handed over to the Crown and the obligations of the Crown towards the first people of this land.

Subsequently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Crown handed over the Instruments of Independence 96 years later in 1970, that same spirit was continued by the 1970 Constitution, as well as the 1990 and 1997 Constitutions of Fiji.

As we marked our 50th Year of Independence Anniversary two months ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that mockery of the history of co-operation that led to the 1970 and 1997 Constitutions in the 2013 Constitution, and the draconian decrees which dilute indigenous rights and have weakened our traditional institutions, was in stark highlight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sad to note that the indigenous rights of our first people - the *iTaukei*, is further wounded with the announcement of a Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Bill. The Bill, perhaps modest as possible, but our recent past experiences cast a cloud of doubt on the same for a number of reasons which include, the:

- (1) fear of invocation of Standing Order 51 to fast-track such a legislation without scrutiny of the true and elected representatives of the indigenous people in this House;
- (2) limited timeframe that is availed for public consultation or worse, and the usual fast-tracking with zero consultation with the stakeholders; and
- (3) need for necessary safeguards that is required to protect our indigenous fine arts, music and symbols from blatant commercial use with no fair returns to our people.

Given those risks involved, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would humbly request the Honourable Prime Minister who is also the Minister for iTaukei Affairs, to assert his control on the composition and piloting of this Bill, protecting us from any other exploitation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has, once again, read a speech which, on surface, creates a feel-good image or the Fiji Shining after the Ka-Boom Budget of last year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the suffering of our people in the 14 years since the 2006 military *coup* in terms of the following:

- (1) high cost of living;
- (2) poor health and medical services;
- (3) breakdown of law and order situation, worsened by substance abuse;
- (4) unemployment and social issues; and
- (5) failing public infrastructure and conundrums in the public sector.

In addition to these string of contemporary national issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the true scorecard of the Bainimarama-led interim regime from 2007 to 2014 and the FijiFirst Government from 2014 until now, is all but a script of delusion, division and hopelessness. The scorecard includes:

- (1) inability to prove any of the 25 reasons cited for the military *coup* in 2006;
- (2) aiding and abetting the systematic loot of our natural resources and destruction of our environment;
- (3) tampering of group rights and human rights;
- (4) making a mockery of law and order situation by compromising the independence of the State institutions and structures;
- (5) failing to provide good governance, resulting into poor financial management and losses;
- (6) unable to sustain the existing industries or to create new industries for meaningful job creation;
- (7) enslaving the workers of Fiji by dilly-dallying the labour reforms and putting undue pressure to stifle trade unions' activities;
- (8) becoming super performers in the art of politics of diversion to evade public probity;
- (9) concealing the vital data, information and statistics destroying every ideal and principle of a knowledge-based society;
- (10) silencing dissent, including the Opposition; and
- (11) consigning the lives of the Fijian people to slavery by over-regulation and over-taxation of their daily lives and subsistence activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the announcement of Electoral Reforms which has been a long overdue agenda and express the hope that it will be a collective exercise, other than an unilateral imposition of electoral laws suiting one party.

Sir, on youth development, I wish to thank the Government, specifically the Honourable Minister for Youth and Sports, for his leadership and hard work in realising some of the objectives of the Youth National Development Plan.

Noting the impact of the global pandemic and economic meltdown, the creation of job opportunities continue to be a major challenge for our economy. This is fraught by job losses on the contrary and shortened work hours in tourism and related sectors.

Developing resilience on this matter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I suggest to the Honourable Minister for Youths and Sports, who is also the Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial relations, the following:

- (1) Speed up labour reforms up to universal standards, specifically to comply with the eight fundamental ILO Conventions that Fiji has ratified.
- (2) Call a National Economic Summit as the Leader of the Opposition has been calling since 2017.
- (3) Increase budgetary allocation and support to resource-based sectors, which are the economically productive sectors.
- (4) Seek to create new home-grown industries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think everyone in this House realises the importance of sports and its relevance to our lives and the economy of this country. It is about our health, job creation, international talent exchange and revenue earning. The impact of COVID-19 and resultant economic meltdown has been devastating to the development of sports.

The urgent need to develop a legal code for sports medicine and insurance, as well as for the statutory authorities to become proactive partners in anti-doping tests is welcome in the proposed Anti-Doping Legislation in His Excellency's Address.

Further to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to echo the calls of all the Honourable Members of this House to remind the FijiFirst Government on its pledge to develop sporting grounds and other infrastructure, as per its Election Manifesto in 2014 and 2018.

Water supply, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a basic human necessity and one of the rights spelled out in the 2013 Constitution, as well as in the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, let us examine the achievement of this Government with regards to supply of clean and regular piped water to the people of Fiji. It is:

- (1) defined by regular and abrupt water cuts;
- (2) neglected by failure to supply water by trucks;
- (3) worsened by supply of muddy water and pipes lacking water pressure;
- (4) complicated by the non-implementation of pending water schemes and projects around Fiji; and
- (5) compounded by outstanding issues still pending redress as per the reports of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, the Office of the Auditor-General and the information supplied by the authorities concerned, not forgetting an exorbitant sum of budgetary allocation for Water Authority of Fiji.

That brings me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to question the sincerity and commitment of this Government towards the pending implementation of the Wainadoi Water Scheme since 2016. The Scheme covers 5,930 people and the water catchment area in Wainikasiniura in Namosi has the capacity to supply 10 million litres of water daily, while Wainadoi only needs 1.5 million litres of water daily. A wise government in office would have used this opportunity to plan a regional water scheme for the people of Kalekana Village in Lami to Navua Hospital, with the surplus of 8.5 million litres of water daily.

This initiative which I am suggesting, Sir, would bring relief in terms of water supply to thousands of our people in Lobau, Veivatuloa, Mau, Nabukavesi and Wainadoi in Namosi and Naboro, Kalokolevu, Togalevu, Veisari, Wailekutu and Kalekana in the Lami area. After all, these are the worst affected areas in terms of water supply in the Central Division, and I think this is more important than spending millions on super rugby matches and golf tournaments, which have lost their glamorous appeal with the impact of COVID-19 and borders expected to be closed for some time.

On a pleasant note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure and Transport for his assistance and intervention to see a number of capital development projects come to realisation in the interior of Namosi. I hope he continues to help rural and remote communities as such, to empower our people.

Before I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to congratulate the Navua Football for retaining their place in the super premier division after a tough fight, and felicitate the Namosi Rugby Union for its impressive performance this year. It is not news when we win in Navua or Namosi but it is news when we lose. That should send the message across the nation that when times get tough, Namosi gets going.

To conclude, Sir, we, in the Opposition, continue to have our hand in friendship and cooperation across the aisle. These positive glimmers of hope have been given the boost with the selfless resignation of the Honourable Major-General Rabuka yesterday, to emphasise that we can serve the people of Fiji better by cooperating.

The duty of the loyal Opposition is to point out where Government can do better, and we continue to emphasise that we hope for more bipartisan initiatives, to solve the following challenges that face us - unemployment, poverty, rising cost of food and high cost of living, the sugar industry and our economy.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you and commend His Excellency's Address, and look forward to a transformative year of cooperation to make better laws for the wellbeing of all the people of Fiji. *Vinaka vakalevu, Sir.*

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

I now call on the Honourable Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.T. NAGATA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, families and friends; *ni sa bula vinaka* and very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion by the Honourable Prime Minister in thanking His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, for his most gracious Address during the Opening of the 2020-2021 Session of Parliament on Monday, 30th December, 2020. He spoke with pride and great conviction and for that, I am thankful for his life of leadership. In spite of the circumstances we are in today, we, as a nation, have become stronger because of our God-fearing leader.

Without a strong leadership, the country would be doomed.

I thank the Honourable Prime Minister for his great vision and for all he has done and all things yet to be done for our beloved nation, Fiji. We would not have reached this far without God's amazing love and protection. He has never failed us and He will not fail us. To Him alone, we give the glory and honour.

Mr. Speaker, and before I may go any further, allow me to congratulate our Flying Fijians on their comprehensive victory over Georgia at Murrayfield on Saturday. Despite three test cancellations due to a COVID-19 outbreak within the squad, this did not dampen their spirits and they came back

stronger and took the seventh place in the Autumn Nations Cup. To the Coach, Vern Cotter and your team, *vinaka vakalevu*.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to congratulate Mr. Eroni Talemaigau from Makosoi in Pacific Harbour, who was Fiji's best-placed athlete when he finished sixth in the 49 kilogramme category at the recently completed 2020 International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) Youth Online World Cup. Eroni broke his personal best with a snatch of 65 kilogramme and clean & jerk of 86 kilogramme, which is more than triple his body weight.

Mr. Speaker, again, it gives me great pleasure to congratulate Mr. Jerry Tuwai, for achieving another milestone in his rugby career. Jerry has recently been named the "World Rugby Sevens Men's Player of the Decade". A big *vinaka* to fans worldwide, who voted for Tuwai and helped him beat some of the famous names of Sevens Rugby.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to congratulate the Suva Soccer Team for winning the 2020 Fiji FACT Tournament. *Suva sa Suva ga*.

Mr. Speaker, in His Excellency the President's Address during the Opening of the 2020-2021 Session of Parliament, His Excellency covered a wide range of areas that have been badly affected by the global crisis. He spoke on the effects of the deadly novel coronavirus in the global economy, how thousands of lives are lost everyday. Fiji did the hard work of locking down the country to protect its people. This was only made possible through strong leadership, hardworking medical workers and the whole of the nation's effort and cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, I share the same sentiments in thanking our doctors, nurses and members of our Disciplined Forces, the hardworking Permanent Secretary, and the Head of Health Protection and the team for their dedication in their calling, protecting us from the COVID-19 pandemic. I must also commend all of Fiji's citizens, who are faithfully adhering to health advisories and continue to follow the safe health practices and habits.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Youth and Sports continues to address ongoing issues and the new challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our team have become very cooperative in terms of re-strategising programmes to suit the growing demand of our youth in improving and sustaining their livelihood. I take this opportunity to thank our line Minister and Team Youth and Sports for their hard work and dedication.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President also spoke about the ongoing ocean and climate crisis that continues to be a major concern for our country. The rising seas continue to claim our coastlines, our reefs are disappearing, storms are becoming stronger and farming is being affected by changing weather patterns. The impact of climate change will continue, regardless of the present economic impact of this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to mention here in this august Parliament, the efforts of our Ministry in mitigating against the impact of climate change. I take this opportunity to congratulate Organisation for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement (OISCA) Fiji on its 30th anniversary of partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

It is through this partnership that the environment arm of OISCA Fiji continues to conduct a number of climate-related projects around the Western Division, as part of its Climate Change Teaching Module for youth who are enrolled into their organic agriculture programme at the Nasau Youth Training Centre. These activities include:

- coral restoration;
- mangrove planting;
- reforestation programme conducted in the highlands of the Namosi region;
- waste management programme;
- children forest programme which targets primary school students; and
- community forest programme which targets specific communities along the coast of Nadroga/Navosa and the Ra Province.

This project is envisaged to provide the missing link to the programme through the integration of youth into these environmental programmes by the establishment of the Youth Coast Care Club, similar in structure and administration to existing youth clubs. However, this particular concept focuses specifically on the conservation and preservation of geographical areas 50 metres immediately from the coastline and 200 metres immediately towards the sea from the coastline. By integrating the Youth Coast Care Club concept, youths will be further developed to take pride of their inheritance and heritage, and learn every sustainable way to manage their coastal areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to put it simply, the project aims to bring together youths from coastal communities to appreciate, realise and value their natural resources and understanding how the ecosystems are interlinked. That is, whatever happens on dry land will affect the coastal ecosystem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, responding to coronavirus is one of the main serious threats to Fijian lives. The Fijian Government will continue to ensure life-saving treatments, such as kidney dialysis, are made affordable and accessible to our nation, and national effort to strengthen Fiji's nutritional security and encourage lifestyle changes that will set Fijians on a better and healthy environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports through the Fiji National Sports Commission and Fiji Sports Council is taking the lead role in advocating healthy living through sports. We continue to run community sports outreach programmes that involve young children, youths and adults. Our sports and wellness champions are also taking a lead role in the promotion of healthy living. We are also involved in the distribution of sports equipment, development of hard courts and upgrade of rural sporting facilities as a form of promoting healthy living amongst our youths.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the unemployment rate has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic whereby employees have been made redundant or work under reduced hours. To alleviate the problem, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has introduced the Youth Farm and Youth Grant Initiatives, with the supply of agriculture farming tools to youth groups and individuals. The Youth Farm Initiative will promote and encourage youth groups and individuals to utilise their land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Youth and Sports will also be promoting youth grants that will be granted to successful youth groups or youths to support Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to commend the work of the Chief Executive Officer for the Fiji Sports Council, Mrs. Litiana Loabuka, and her wonderful team, for going the extra mile in organising Micro-Markets Day to assist individuals and families who have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and coordinating musical extravaganza in raising funds to support our local artists.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also important to note that the Ministry of Youth and Sports continues to engage in upskilling our youth through mobile skills and agriculture training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, amidst the global crisis, we were still able to celebrate Fiji's 50th Anniversary. It was a celebration of joy and hope for a brighter future. Our resilience, strength and trusting God has kept us together from breaking apart. This was only possible through the joint effort of good leadership, loyal and dedicated Fijians. It is our ultimate duty as Members of this august Parliament to continue spreading positivity and speak in the national interest, and not for our individual or party interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, I take this opportunity to wish you, Sir, all Honourable Members of this august Parliament and everyone an enjoyable and safe festive season. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports for his contribution to the debate.

I now call on the Honourable Ratu Navurelevu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RATU T. NAVURELEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's Address in the 2020-2021 Opening Session of Parliament. Before I give my response, I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to the most highest, the Almighty God, for His gracious love that allowed me to strongly stand before this House this afternoon.

I quote from paragraph two of the His Excellency the President's Address which states, and I quote: "We gather to open this 2020-2021 session of Parliament in the midst of a global crisis. Beyond our borders...." Yes, indeed, I agree, the global pandemic is beyond our power, control, knowledge and understanding. It is well witnessed globally, the shutdown, borders closed, areas locked down, illness and death, hardships and difficulties and very much the decline of our economy. Therefore, I invite one and all to join hands and offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the Almighty for His protection and divine guidance.

The impact of COVID-19 has greatly affected our nation's economy. Despite this situation, I hail the love of God we are witnessing in the rural areas - the richness of food resources available on our land and fishing grounds. May I share with you a special menu.

Our women in the community love to prepare the resources available which is God-gifted, the seafood. The *Vanua o Verata* call *kaikoso* (seashells) as "*na marama*". The *kaikoso* flesh is cut into pieces, blended with smashed garlic and onion and then packed back into the shell which are then cooked in concentrated coconut milk. Similarly, with sea cucumbers (*dairo*), after boiled for several hours, are cleaned (in and out) and then packed with tuna flakes, smashed garlic and onion and also cooked in concentrated coconut milk. Very delicious! I invite Honourable Members to come down to Namuka and taste this menu.

The objective of sharing this menu, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to assure the people of Fiji that our God *Jehovah Sama* (God is with us) will never abandon His beloved people if we are righteously standing before Him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to combat and sustain the impact of COVID-19 in the rural areas, communities are empowered through the *vanua* strategy of group works also known as "*solesolevaki*" on their farms, as well as in village developmental projects. This is the traditional method of capacity building. By doing this, we ensure that families will have a stable source of food and a stable source of income. We believe that it will contribute dearly to the recovery of our

economy. The farming groups are liaising with the Provincial Office and the Ministry of Agriculture with the assistance of farm roads.

I now join His Excellency in saluting the frontline workers, medical services, security forces and other stakeholders for their untiring effort to contain COVID-19. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, our nation has been severely impacted by this pandemic, despite the fact that we only had few cases of COVID-19. With the closure of international borders and while hotels and the tourism sector is still hibernating, this has resulted in the collapse of our economy, showing a major decline of 1 percent of Fiji's GDP annual growth rate in 2019, compared to 3 percent in 2018.

According to the Reserve Bank of Fiji, our economy is foreseen to contract by 19 percent in 2020. This has led to slow recovery, economic instability, high unemployment, reduced investment opportunities and the possibility of political instability. A decline in the education service may have a long term impact on our young generation in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, informal settlements and migration may rise as people continue to drop out from formal employment and are forced into borrowing and debt. In addition, Sir, unhealthy imported cheap foods may increase and be the only affordable option for vulnerable groups, leading to a high number of NCD cases in Fiji. According to WHO, Fiji had already reached crisis level of NCDs before COVID-19.

Our country has encountered 77 percent of deaths among persons under 70 years relating to NCDs this year, compared to 44 percent in 2015 and 2017. Therefore, it is critical to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on this matter both, for health and economic reasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of economic recovery, it is necessary for the Government to focus more on resource-based sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries and forests. It is evident that at this time of hardship, the tourism sector which contributed almost 40 percent towards Fiji's GDP is still hibernating, whereas agriculture contributed \$725.9 million in 2019 - an increase of \$39 million from \$686.9 million in 2018. May I suggest that our roadmap to economic recovery from now on is to support the resource-based industries in our country, and that will help boost our economy back into a stable state.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Reserve Bank of Fiji, pinewood supply of 22.8 percent and woodchip output of 45.7 percent increased for the month of November this year. Domestic export for agriculture produce has increased marginally from \$449 million in 2015 to \$528 million in 2019. Kava export has tripled since 2015 from \$8.9 million to \$32.5 million in 2019. Sugar export has increased to \$408.3 million in 2019 as compared to \$37.5 million in 2018.

With this great sectoral performance, it is vital for the Government to allocate more funds and resources to these resource-based industries to encourage and support small and micro enterprises, focussing on resource-based income-generating programmes that will provide employment opportunities, potential export trading markets in Australia and New Zealand and overall, will boost our national income in future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our country is highly dependent on food imports. In 2015, approximately 32 percent of the country's food was sourced domestically. The problem is the scarcity of freehold land, making it difficult to increase the area available for agriculture production. Idle land or land held by people whose lease has expired should be re-allocated to agriculture.

Fiji needs long-term strategies that will allow it to maintain some degree of self-sufficiency to cushion the impacts of any potential crisis on tourism and the food system. Farmers need incentives and better access to agricultural inputs to increase production for the domestic food supply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I suggest that we, as leaders of our beloved country, should develop a broad-based economy and focus more on non-tourism industries, creating more opportunities for investment and nurturing for donor and partner and technical support as a way forward towards economic recovery. The recovery presents an opportunity to build a climate-smart, risk informed, resilient and sustainable economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate this opportunity to speak on the issue of the new Civil Service Reform, the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS) and Selection Policy. The OMRS is a system of appointing employees based on their ability to do the job assessed against objective selection criteria. This reform, to the fact, greatly affected this group of teachers when comparing academic achievements and they are the victims of this reform.

It must be clearly understood that OMRS is an imposed system. This means that there was very little consultation amongst the key stakeholders before implementation. Furthermore, the architect of this new system left no room for negotiation, dialogue and discussion. This is, perhaps, the saddest part because it was viciously shoved down the throats of hardworking citizens without considering the repercussion it will have in their lives in general.

According to the teachers page on social media, Mr. Speaker, Sir, seven teachers have died between the end of 2019 school year and week four of term one in 2020. Indirectly, some of the teachers of our beloved nation are dying from stress and I believe the OMRS is a contributing factor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how does one feel for the civil servants who have worked their way up the hierarchical ladder of promotion and in doing so, have accumulated valuable experience and work ethics that cannot be taught by any textbook, only to be replaced by a raw young person of little or no experience at all? I will leave that to your own sound judgment and personal discretion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent revelation by the Honourable Minister for Education that experience will also be taken into consideration in the matrix to determine the MQR for recruitment is good news to all stakeholders, especially for senior civil servants who are the backbone to the success of our public service machinery. Sir, frankly speaking, to get a job faithfully done, who will you hire between decently qualified people with lots of experience and knowhow, or an extremely qualified person without or no experience at all?

Common sense will choose the former while the architect of OMRS, I am afraid, had chosen the latter and by the look of things, we are not prepared to budge and come to the negotiation table in the name of justice, fair play and progress. It is my humble prayer and plea that in all circumstances, common sense will prevail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the current education arena, the senior head of the school is fully aware of how the school operates. Through maturity that seasoned over their years of service, they have come to know the nuts and bolts of the system which takes them many years to learn. New teachers, even though they are qualified, are still young and raw in the system, that is, they are still novice in the skills of the trade. The negative side is because they do not have the experience, they tend to enforce their ideas which have not been proven, thus creating trial and error situation which will surely bring a lot of issues and stress to all stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fiasco created by the OMRS with faith-based institutions is common knowledge and cannot be over emphasised. What needed to be said have already been voiced by the leaders of the faith-based institutions. As for my purpose today, I will draw attention to the demonic and stubborn refusal of the architects of OMRS to listen to the plea of our people and allow faith-based institutions to at least have a say in the choosing of their leaders.

It is too much to ask to be granted the right to choose competent leaders who will protect and safeguard the principle, faith, essence, ethos and aspiration which are the foundation of the institution. Even when after the legal machinery of the Republic of Fiji have ruled in favour of faith-based institutions, they still plan to appeal and challenge the rule of law. This is the kind of stressful situation created by inexperienced and immature leadership, as I had discussed earlier in my speech. If the Government of the day will not listen to the humble plea of its stakeholders and citizens and choose not to respect the rule of law, then I am afraid, our final subjugation shall be our own nemesis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the trial and error approach used by the Ministry of Education in yesteryears stuck out like a sore thumb, akin to mount jokes against the scenic background of Suva City on a fine day. Hitherto, it has become the *bete noire* of their *modus operandi*. I have three issues to raise in regards to this:

- (1) The decision to stop public and internal examination, and use assessment and CBAs in its place, it failed. Now we are back with internal and public examinations.
- (2) Failure of the Annual Performance Appraisal (APA) system. Before APA, it was Performance Management System (PMS). They both failed, making a mockery of our systems.
- (3) The most recent one is centralising decision-making to HR and the birth of the Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS). Before, decision-making was decentralised at district level where Divisional Education Officers were in a better position to monitor teachers, results, transfers and filling of teaching posts. Those were the golden days when great results were achieved, good public relations prevailed and peace and good relationships were cultivated and maintained among field officers and their superiors. In other words, a solid, clean and clear system that is understood by all stakeholders and more importantly, it delivered the desired millennium goals of the Ministry of Education.

Are we prepared, as a people, to dump a perfectly tailor-made system that has served our purpose well all these years and adopt a cut-and-paste product of western import that is already creating a lot of head-on collision with the values of our national workforce, or is it wise to allow ourselves to be taken on a joy ride at the expense of our security and welfare in the name of experimentation and trial and error?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly, these are some observations made by the teachers in regards to OMRS:

- Non-Christian teachers are transferred to Christian schools as head of institution.
- Unfair distribution of teachers, the same teachers that are downgraded from one school on OMRS are, again, upgraded to another school on the same OMRS system.
- Downgrading of schools, no assistant head teachers, creating work overload.
- Salary differences: new graduates with less experience are paid with \$26,000 if with degree. Teachers who are in the field more than 10 years and acquired a degree in the process are paid with \$22,000.
- Create chaos amongst Government Ministries.

- Stakeholders have no say in the selection of school teachers.
- Things are changing for the worse. In 2019, some schools scored zero percent pass in Mathematics. These are schools with Heads appointed through OMRS.
- Expatriates (CEO/PS) appointed through the OMRS system were paid huge salaries.
- OMRS is a farce, a façade, worse than Coronavirus.

I conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the Government for the work done in Vanua Levu on the improvement of roads from Naiyarabale to Korotasere, the road from Sasa to Valovoni, the construction of roads from Lakeba to Nabubu Village in Namuka, the road from Lagi to Duavata Secondary School in the *Tikina o Udu*, the construction of the seawall in Raviravi and Naividamu in the *Tikina o Macuata*, and there are plans for other villages in the *Tikina o Namuka*. The communities are looking forward to other works being done, for example, the road from Lagalaga to Sogobiyau, the Village of the *Tui Nadogo* in the *Tikina o Nadogo*.

On behalf of the people of the North, I wish to convey their sincere appreciation to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Government for all those developments.

With all those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

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

On that note, Honourable Members, we will suspend proceedings for refreshment and we will resume in half an hour. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.02 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will continue with the debate and I now call on the Minister for Forestry. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. O. NAIQAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Colleagues, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to deliver my response to His Excellency the President's Address last week, and I wish to start by thanking His Excellency the President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, for his thought-provoking Address, challenging all Parliamentarians to act with wisdom, foresight and urgency.

His Excellency the President has fittingly outlined in his Address the struggles and progress Fiji has made, emphasising that we cannot afford to be complacent. His Excellency also provided strategic guidance on the areas of priority that include our:

- containment of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- economy's recovery; and
- response to the climate, oceans and biodiversity crises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I echo the sentiments of His Excellency the President on COVID-19 and our strategies on minimizing its impact. It has been a challenging year for Fiji and, indeed, the world as we continue to battle the health, social and economic impacts of this virus.

We have done exceptionally well to contain the virus at our borders, and we are fortunate so far not to have any community transmission. I wish to salute our healthcare professionals and border protection personnel for their sacrifices to contain the virus. They are our real life heroes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 wreaked havoc on the lives of our people when it forced the closing of our borders and many businesses. It is estimated that over 120,000 Fijians lost their jobs or are working on reduced hours. But this is where the FijiFirst Government took some decisive steps and I am pleased to advise that the Ministry of Forestry is fully committed to supporting the Government's vision to adapt to the new normal and to work together to reignite the economy, create employment opportunities and address food security, all these while also addressing the ongoing threats of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recognition of the need to immediately generate economic growth, the Ministry of Forestry has reviewed its business facilitation processes and is now able to provide export licences within 24 hours. A number of companies are now benefitting from this quick turnaround time. The Ministry is working on issuing harvesting licences also within 24 hours, taking advantage of the advancement in information technology.

In the recent months, the Ministry has signed a number of agreements with agencies, such as the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services (FRCS), Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF), Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) and the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations. The agreements will help in a whole range of areas, including but not limited to preventing the intrusion of threats to our biodiversity, accounting for the true value of our forests and ensuring our industries are compliant in taxes, and with the health and safety of the workers.

The Ministry is also working closely with other agencies, including the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Agriculture, Fiji Pine Limited, Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited and the iTaukei Land Trust Board. The thrust of partnership with these

stakeholders is firstly to facilitate economic growth from the forestry sector, whilst also ensuring sustainable management of our forests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of our national tree-planting revolution as part of Fiji's green recovery, I am pleased to inform this august House that we have now planted over three million trees and mangroves since His Excellency the President launched the initiative in January 2019. And I wish to thank all Fijians, including your goodself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who have contributed to this national effort. This achievement is a reflection that many Fijians appreciate the importance of trees and forests, and how they protect the environment.

In my visits to almost 300 villages around the country, I have seen that our people have a profound understanding of the role of trees and forests in addressing climate change and maintaining a balance with nature. My Ministry will continue to coordinate the planting of 30 million trees in 15 years. This initiative is also helping Fijians who have lost their jobs owing to COVID-19, and have returned to their villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, food security is a vital part of our tree-planting initiative, especially during these challenging times. This is why the planting of fruit trees and the adoption of agroforestry practices are key parts of the initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our efforts to generate economic growth from the forestry sector in a short span of time, the Ministry of Forestry is investing in non-timber forest products, such as bamboo, candle-nut trees or *sikeci* and *dilo*, to name a few. These products could be harvested within three years, thus providing a good alternative to the timber trees, which normally takes over 30 years to mature.

Fiji formally joined the International Bamboo and Rattan Organisation (INBAR) in September this year. A key target of our membership of INBAR is the establishment of a Bamboo Research Centre to help rural communities not only to plant but also to process high value bamboo products. These short-rotation species will not only help ease the pressure of our native forests but also help our ongoing fight against climate change and the restoration of ecosystems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has the third largest mangrove area in the Pacific with an estimated 46,600 hectares, most of which are on the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. The Rewa Delta has the largest strands of mangrove ecosystem complex in Fiji. However, it is under constant pressure, as well as degradation via firewood harvest, as most of these communities are still largely dependent on those vulnerable mangrove forests for a wide range of subsistence and commercial forestry and fisheries products.

With funding from the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), the Ministry has been able to set up a community brackish shrimp pond at Narocake Village in Rewa and three more will be open this month at Naivakacau, Waicoka and Natila in the province of Tailevu.

The brackish shrimp ponds and other projects like piggery farms, tree and plant nurseries, beekeeping and basic sewing skills provided to the communities in Rewa and Tailevu, constitute alternative livelihood sources that should ease the pressure on our mangrove forests.

My Ministry has empowered the people of six coastal communities in the Rewa Delta to conserve and grow more mangroves, to combat climate change and protect their coastline from erosion while training them in alternative livelihood projects to sustain them now and into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry is currently leading the charge in implementing Government's commitment to housing rehabilitation in the islands following *TC Harold*. I am pleased to advise that after 30 weeks of operation in Kadavu, my Ministry has managed to complete the structures of about 340 houses, covering 37 villages. The number of completely damaged houses in Kadavu after *TC Harold* struck in April this year was assessed at 596 houses.

We have purchased additional portable sawmills and are also carrying out housing rehabilitation work in Vatulele where we have re-purposed timber for 15 houses, 16 in Matuku, 11 in Totoya, and 15 in Ono-i-Lau. In total, we have re-purposed timber for about 400 houses in the Maritime Zone and my Ministry is collaborating with other agencies, including the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the Ministry of Housing and Community Development, to help villagers build back better and stronger with Category 4 cyclone resilient houses.

On the same note, there is now renewed efforts in the mahogany industry to complete the boundary surveys, confirming stock availability, facilitating the full and active participation of resource-owners in the industry, promoting downstream processing and value adding, and marketing our high-value products to niche international markets.

Honourable Bulanauca's question yesterday reminded me of someone who is still stuck in the past. We probably have progressed way too fast that has left him wondering what has happened.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a collective responsibility to ensure that Fiji's forest resources are managed sustainably through the engagement of all stakeholders in long term stewardship. This means that while we want to create wealth from our forest resources, we have to strike a balance between generating economic activity on the one hand and expanding our resources, protecting our natural environment and ecosystems on the other hand.

May I thank the Opposition Member of Parliament, Honourable Bilitavu, for his positive comments on the planting of 30 million trees in 15 years. I also commend him for spearheading his *mataqali* in this Tree Planting Programme. We may sit on opposite sides of this august House but we share a common goal when it comes to the fight against climate change and how it is important to plant trees now for the sake of our future generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we approach the festive season, let us give thanks for all that we have because if there is one thing that we have learnt during these difficult times, it is to be appreciative of life. I wish you and your families a Merry Christmas and a Prosperous 2021. *Vinaka vakalevu, shukriya*, thank you and may God bless Fiji.

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

I now call on the Honourable Nawaikula. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish, firstly, to congratulate a fellow villager and fellow member of the *Vanua o Natewa*, Mr. Speaker, and his name is Jerry Tuwai. Mr. Jerry Tuwai is currently the Sevens Player of the Year and being confirmed as also the Sevens Player for the Decade. He follows in the footsteps of some big achievers from the *Vanua o Natewa* notably, Mr. Savenaca Siwatibau, Mr. Joe Rauto and the late Dr. Rakuita.

Those individuals, Mr. Speaker, manifest humility, obedience and simplicity. Those are the traits that a lot of our youth can look up to. He was waiting in the periphery for about five years and was actually never selected. He only became known when he took replacement in Brisbane some

time ago. So once he got into the team, the rest is history. So, congratulations, again, Jerry, and I am sure that your father will be very happy. His father is a personal friend, we went to primary school together and he earned his living by snorkelling around the wharves at Suva and Laqere. That is how simple this family is.

Mr. Speaker, in my contribution, I will be talking about the law and order situation in Fiji, or rather the lack of it. But before I do, allow me time to rebut or comment on some of the speeches from the other side that have gone before me.

If I can start with the Honourable Minister for Fisheries, he said that we all play a part in bringing back economic recovery and his Ministry is working its level best. He referred to some investment in technology and coastal fisheries, legal framework, management policy framework, ocean farming and aquaculture, but I feel that that is not enough.

What I was expecting was details as to what the Ministry of Fisheries plans to achieve in terms of projects that will bear for us, export earners, to replace our reliance on tourism, but nothing came. I was expecting the Honourable Minister to talk about achievements. What is going to happen to the pearl industry? There is a very good person out there, Mr. Justin Hunter, who needs to be empowered. What is happening to all the other industries in fisheries? I did not hear that, so totally lacking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can turn now to the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development in terms of the economic recovery when she was referring to housing. She said 30,000 Fijians will build new income, \$37 million has been allocated for that and 250 applications.

I would like to tell the Honourable Minister that all of these had been directed to towns and cities and informal settlements, and there is discrimination against the rural villages who, she must understand, is also the Minister for every village and their housing needs. There is discrimination in this Ministry against those people. There was hope that when this was taken out from the Ministry of Rural Development and taken to the Ministry of Housing, that they will be looked after there. But no, consideration is given to towns and cities and what we call informal settlements.

She referred to some new legislation and the Town Planning Act, but we continue to ask; what about the Local Government Act and when will this be amended?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- After.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- After elections?

When will we have the election that was promised to us by the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports? So when?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- On climate change, she referred to Savusavu as a Blue Town model but if she goes to Savusavu and looks across, just the other side, Nawi Island, a total wreck of the environment. Even before Nawi Island, she will see the wreck on the Municipal Market. What will happen to that? What they did in Savusavu, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was that, there is a functional market that they took away to rebuild a new one, but that never happened.

If I may turn now to the Honourable Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, he stated that Honourable Kuridrani has a tendency to simplify things because the entire country is our constituency, but therein lies the problem. How does the Honourable Member expect me, for example, to attend to my voters if I have the whole nation as a constituency? I find it even hard travelling the length and width of Cakaudrove. This is an area that we will change as soon as we take over from Government.

(Laughter)

And then he says that ethnicity promotes a 'them and us' attitude. But the Honourable Member must understand that ethnicity is a human right. You have a human right to maintain your cultural identity, so you cannot just push it away. It is there, it is their right, it is our right and the Government is responsible to see that that happens.

Then he went on to imply that the Honourable Attorney-General should not step down because he was not charged. He needs only to look aside onto the left or right to the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports and the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment. They did not resign, they remained. But the point is, you shift a person away from the area that he might be in conflict with.

The Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment was shifted from the Ministry of Education because they might have conflict, so the reason why we are asking the Honourable Attorney-General is because, he, in his position, is ultimately the advisor for all Government Departments. He is an advisor for the Police and that, likely, puts him into conflict. That is the simple reason why we are asking that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the Honourable Minister for Forestry. He stated that his Ministry is now in a position to reignite the economy and to review its business. I wish to tell the Honourable Minister that I travel from the West to Suva, and I saw that all the pines that are at Nabou have never been replanted. Why? Can he, please, tell us why they have not been replanted? Again, from Nabouwalu to Seaqaqa, not replanted. It is nearly over five years now and it is overgrown. Seaqaqa is not replanted, what is the reason for this?

Then he goes on to talk about mahogany. He explained that they are going to conduct a survey to take stock. To take stock after so many years? In the year 2000, which is 20 years ago, we set up and were ready to harvest those new crops. We were promised billions of dollars and now we are still planning that, we are still going to take stock and we are still talking about the downstream process. What is happening, what is the problem? Tell us! That side of the House must admit today that they are the reason for bringing the economy to its knees. They should admit that! Please, can you admit that before I move on?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Can you admit the fact that in 2017, the revenue for this nation was \$4 billion and then in 2018, one year later, it dropped to \$3 billion, an \$800,000 loss of revenue?

In 2019, \$2 billion, and that is all before COVID-19 came. Now, of course, with COVID-19, we are forecasted to be \$1.6 billion. So, who is the problem? You are the problem! What is the problem? What is happening?

You look at all the assets that have been sold. They sold Ports Authority of Fiji. They sold the printing industry but they could not sell Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) so they sold it back to

individuals. It has been there for years and they have been looking for people to buy it. They cannot sell it. Where are we now? Admit it, please!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, you have been in Government, and our income is going down and down and down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could go back to my speech now - the lack of law and order situation. In reference to the law and order situation in this country, in His Excellency the President's Address on page 2, paragraph 3 and on page 5, paragraph 2, he said and I quote:

“We have a Constitution that enshrines a vast array of civil, political, and socio-economic rights that government must make every effort to realise and defend....”

Then on page 5, he lists down the number of legislations that Government intends to pass this year, including the Volatile Substance Abuse, Anti-Doping Bill and others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about law and order, firstly, we refer to the Constitution and the Acts that guarantee our rights. Then we also refer to the agencies that administer those laws for our benefit, such as the Police, independent bodies, such as the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC), Fiji Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, the Courts that interpret the laws and the Prisons that implement it.

Mr. Speaker, the law and order situation in Fiji is in a deplorable state and if I could repeat, it is in a deplorable state. Let me give some examples to illustrate this situation. On 16th November, 2020, the President of the Fiji Law Society, William Clark, said the following, and I quote:

“There were concerns at the latest report that 400 police officers had faced prosecution over the past five years on a range of matters including police brutality and sexual assaults. Figures from the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) show that between 2015 and 2020, 16 charges of rape were laid against the police, two of murder and nine of manslaughter. The figures also show that more than 110 charges of assault were brought against the officers.”

Mr. Speaker, the 2019 US Department of State - Country Report on Fiji recorded the following and this is the latest one because the one for 2019 has not been released so this is the latest that I have got. I quote from page 1 the Report, first in November 2018:

“On November 20, a court convicted a police officer of manslaughter in the November 2018 death of 26-year-old Josua Lalauvaki.... Another officer was acquitted in the case. The officers allegedly assaulted Lalauvaki during an altercation outside a Suva nightclub in September 2018. After police released him, Lalauvaki died in the hospital of injuries sustained from the beating.”

Then it goes on in page 2, and I quote:

“Three police officers were suspended and brought to court on November 22 and charged with causing grievous harm to 27-year-old Manasa Rayasidamu. Rayasidamu alleged that while in police custody on November 4, the three police officers hit his ankles with a cement block, rendering him immobile, before pouring hot water on his back.

On July 20, police officers allegedly beat Pelasio Tamanikoula while arresting him in Labasa, northern Fiji. Tamanikoula was later rushed to the hospital after suffering seizures from injuries sustained while in police custody....

A court martial remained pending for four military officers charged with the sexual assault and rape of a female military officer in March 2018.”

Then it goes on, I quote:

“The investigation into the death of Vikram Nand, found dead in a cell at a local police station in Valelevu in 2017, remained pending....”

Then it continues in page 3, and I quote:

“In July, authorities investigated an alleged assault of a 20-year-old remand inmate by corrections officers. The investigation remains ongoing as of November.”

I quote from page 11 of the Report:

“On May 2, police raided the FTUC’s headquarters without a warrant and confiscated documents, laptops and other equipment....”

Then it made reference to the incident that we all know. It happened here between the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Tikoduadua. We all know that no charges were made based on the advice from the DPP that he had already served his sentence from the apology. That is totally wrong. That was totally wrong advice. That might go to the sentence, but not the incidence of a crime.

Mr. Speaker, the Fiji 2020 Crime and Safety Report prepared by the US Embassy in Suva for the use of travellers noted the following, and I quote:

“Crime is a continuing problem in Fiji, and can have a major impact on the work and life of the community...

The most common types of crime are property crimes (e.g. robbery, burglary, petty theft)...

Most assaults and robberies occur at night around popular restaurants and nightclubs....

Sexual assaults are also a concern, particularly for women traveling alone at night...

There are elements of Asian organized crime involved in illegal gambling, prostitution, cybercrime and narcotics distribution in Fiji.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in September 2019, the Bureau of Statistics analysed the trajectory of offences from 2012 to 2018 and found the following:

- Crimes against lawful authority increased from 305 in 2012 to 515 in 2018; and
- Crimes against a person increased from 4,947 in 2012 to 2018.

The conclusion I wish to make here, Sir, is the abuse of process by Government. The most serious problem we have, which has now become the new norm, is the abuse of the legal process by the Government and Government personnel. The law in Fiji does not exist to apply equally but it is only there to protect the Government.

The new norm is that Government will interfere with due legal process and, again, there are many examples of these. Here in this Chamber, we have had the incident between the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Tikoduadua. Here in this Chamber, we have six Members of Parliament who have been charged unnecessarily because they are the Opposition and it has been done to intimidate.

It shows that when democracy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not genuine, the legal process is seriously affected, existing only to protect the Government that is in power. While on this, may I ask the Honourable Minister for Defence to explain to the House as to why the Police Officers who were convicted for the murder of Rabaka, continued to be looked after by the Police and their families and were harboured in the Lautoka Police Barracks? The Police Officers who were imprisoned, upon their release, why were they immediately employed? Please, explain.

It is all very sad when that abuse extends even to our independent bodies, like the Fiji Independence Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) and the Human Rights Commission. All of those are compromised - FICAC and the Human Rights Commission are not independent. There are many problems with FICAC. It is not really independent but it is now a convenient tool for the Government to threaten and intimate those who oppose Government.

I wish to end, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by wishing everyone a good Christmas and you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, hopefully you are spending your Christmas in Lau. Thank you.

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

Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I will allow a suspension motion to be moved. I now call upon the Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

That under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items as listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I believe we still have an item outstanding in today's Order Paper which is the continuation of the response, according to the motion before the House and thus, the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, is there anyone wishing to take the floor?

Since there is none, Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will continue with the debate and I call on the last speaker for today, the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts. You have the floor, Madam.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *as-salamu alaykum, ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before the House and I would like to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I continue, I wish to respond to the comment made by Honourable Leawere earlier this morning on the subject of Technical Colleges. For the information of this august House, all Technical Colleges teaching staff were given the opportunity to decide whether to remain with the Ministry of Education or join the Fiji National University (FNU) when the Technical Colleges were being transferred. Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of those staff opted to remain with the Ministry while most of them chose to join FNU under the University's terms and conditions. For the information of the House, FNU is governed by an independent Council which make decisions on their day to day operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those staff who will be made redundant are free to apply for a position within the Ministry of Education and, of course, they will be considered for those positions in the year 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to proceed with my contribution on the motion before the House. We all can agree with His Excellency about the enormous impact of COVID-19 and the impact it has had on the world and continues to have, as infection rates soar and millions of lives are lost. Thousands of businesses have closed down probably never to re-open again. Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the largest economies in the world have been brought down to their knees by this pandemic.

Through the strong leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister, we have been able to protect our people, both in terms of lives and livelihoods. The Fijian people have witnessed first-hand through this unprecedented crisis that the strong leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister and his ability to keep, at least, this side of the House united is what our country needs.

Our amazing frontline staff are working tirelessly day and night to keep us safe and they must be commended. But as His Excellency said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must remain vigilant if we are to continue to survive this pandemic as a nation. Never before has it been more important for us to stand together in solidarity, as we combat this deadly unprecedented virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regardless of which religion or denomination we belong to, we must all pray for the world, for our country, for our families and, of course, for our fellow Fijians. Fiji is a secular State and every Fijian has the right to practice their religion as enshrined in our 2013 Fijian Constitution. Our religious events, such as Christmas, Easter, Diwali and Eid are so important because they give our fellow Fijian brothers and sisters who celebrate those occasions hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, hope is something that we cannot live without. It was very heart-breaking to see bigoted statements recently on the social media, which hurt so many of our brothers and sisters during the festival of lights. Statements such as these which demand that religious groups inhibit their celebrations should have no place in the Fijian society and most certainly, not under this leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vast majority of Fijians are good people and the response against these bigoted statements was strong and swift. Fijians of all background took to *Facebook* and social media to quickly denounce this statement and supported fellow Fijians. This is proof that the Fijian people, filled with the Fijian spirit, make our country the best in the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in future as Members of this august House, let us all pledge to set good examples for the sake of our young ones and the sake of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has shown us that we cannot afford to be divided. We cannot afford to divide our people but we need to be there to help our people work together, many of whom look up to us for guidance and as Honourable Members of the House, we must guide them with honour and integrity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while COVID-19 has impacted and changed most aspects of everyone's lives, one of the most vulnerable groups that we must fight tooth and nail for are our children. According to the United Nations Policy Brief - Education During COVID-19 and Beyond, it states and I quote:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disruption to education in history, having already had a near-universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational education and training institutions, universities, adult learning and skills development establishments.

By mid-April 2020, 94 percent of learners worldwide were affected by this pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth from pre-primary to higher education in 200 countries. The disruption caused by COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to everyday life meant, that as many as 40 million children worldwide have missed out on early childhood education in their critical pre-school year.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education of our young ones has been a casualty of COVID-19 around the Globe. Just when COVID-19 first hit our shores, we knew that education would be severely impacted and we needed to minimise the impact and ensure that our children continue to get educated.

A key aspect of returning to normalcy was ensuring that we could still access our basic rights, such as the right to health, the right to work, the right to economic participation and, of course, education. We needed to be smart and innovative and we implemented an array of strategies to keep students up-to-date with their curriculum.

One of the first things that the Ministry of Education did, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was to take supplementary school curriculum online, on television and on radio. At this point in time, I would like to thank *Walesi* for partnering with the Ministry to reach out to students through the television platform. This, not only enabled our children to continue learning while the lockdown precautions were implemented, but it also allowed parents to be more directly involved in their children's education.

Through our strict protocols, visitor policies and hygiene standards that we implemented in schools across the country, we were able to get our children back into the critical learning environment, that is, the school, while keeping them safe with an added layer of protection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our universities took classes online and they were able to do so because of the infrastructure that existed, which allows Fijians from all over the country to be online. The FijiFirst Government had seen the need for such infrastructure earlier on and we had invested substantially in this, to ensure that our people were not left behind and were on par with the rest of the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this week, 20,627 Fijian students are sitting for Year 12 and Year 13 External Examinations. I would like to wish all our students and, of course, the parents, the very best for their children's success in their final examination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I was appalled at some comments made recently on social media, spreading misinformation and panic among students and parents. At a critical time when students and parents need to focus on their final examinations, some decided to use the examination to gain some media attention.

The students' subsidised e-ticketing cards were earlier restricted to only be usable from a certain time to stop the large number of students who were abusing to skip school and get up to mischief during and after school hours. We also found out that some parents were abusing these cards.

This year, 6,188 students sitting for the national examinations will be affected by this new time restrictions. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has taken full responsibility to ensure that transport is available for these students so that they could be transported directly to their homes after the examination. Neither students nor their parents will pay a single cent and parents wishing to pick up their students after the examination are most welcome to do so.

Unfortunately, on the eve of examinations, misleading statements were made, insinuating that students will somehow be deprived of education because the Free Education Grant was being used to rapidly arrange transportation so that children can get home safely to their parents. Absolute nonsense!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, as honourable members of this august Parliament should ensure that we know and understand all the facts before making such statements. Our statements can have a huge impact on our people and in this case, the statements caused confusion, fear among Fijian parents and students and distracting them from important studies. Parents can be rest assured, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that their Government is utilising and using budgeted allocations within our 2020-21 Budget and managing funds wisely to fully benefit our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, indeed, true that Fiji's economic recovery is at stake and we must do everything we can to assure our road to recovery, and our young ones and our students play an important part in that recovery. They are the future workforce, the future entrepreneurs and employers and they must be given the education and tools they need to turn their dreams and ambitions into reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than 230,000 Fijian students returned to school on 6th July, 2020, after three months away from school. During the school closure period, we continued to provide children with the much-needed support to stay engaged with their school work. We realigned our

curriculum to ease the academic pressure on our students and realigned the school terms to compensate for the absent school time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2020-2021 Fijian National Budget enabled us to continue with the many great initiatives that directly benefit our Fijian children from all backgrounds. Initiatives such as, free tuition fees and free textbooks will continue to ensure that thousands of Fijian children get an education.

A total of 151,692 primary school students and a total of 64,019 secondary school students were assisted through free education in the last financial year alone. Subsidised bus fare further ensures that children from low-income families have the opportunity to reach school and go back home on time.

This financial year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 70,801 students have been assisted through the subsidised bus fare and 32,927 students through the rural transport vouchers. Despite the reduction in our budget in this financial year, we continued to assist a total of 103,728 students through the Fijian Government Student Subsidised Transport Assistance initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to provide funding to 44,804 students pursuing tertiary education through the National Toppers Scholarship Scheme and the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme. The FijiFirst Government has taken a lot of responsibilities off the shoulders of parents to ensure that their children continue to have universal access to free quality education at all levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are very mindful as a Government that families face even more hardships today due to COVID-19 and the Government remains committed to providing free education, free textbooks and free bus fare subsidisation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Honourable Members of this Parliament, we need to ensure that our children are fully equipped to handle the challenges of the future, some of which may be even worse than COVID-19 and heaven forbid that.

The participation of parents in a child's growth and their educational process is critical as children tend to perform better academically when parents are more engaged in their school work. I call upon all parents to be mindful of their children, the company they keep, the peer pressure and their movements in this coming school holidays. I also call upon Honourable Members of this House to, please, use every opportunity to promote good parenting within your communities so that we bring up our children with good values and a lot of discipline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, we have been made aware of a lot of indiscipline issues occurring outside school hours and we urge community leaders, faith-based organisations and, of course, we urge parents to be mindful of their children's behaviour. The Ministry will continue to work together with relevant stakeholders, organisations and individuals who have interests of our children at heart.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency said and I quote: "The immediate action taken by the Fijian Government has protected and continues to safeguard our citizens."

The Ministry is still the largest civil service employer employing over 13,500 staff, out of which 13,192 are teachers. We have 1,422 Early Childhood Education (ECE) Teachers; 6,188 Primary School Teachers; and 5,582 Secondary School Teachers. We have plans to recruit a further 65 ECE Teachers, 90 Primary School Teachers and 95 Secondary School Teachers in this financial year. Positions will be created through retirements, resignations, deaths and migrations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we continue to safeguard teachers and students, the Ministry is also focused on continuously improving learning facilities for our children. We continue to work with

the Construction Implementation Unit within the Ministry of Economy in our schools rehabilitation programmes. Rehabilitation works for the schools in Southern Lau and Kadavu will continue into the next school year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are very grateful to the Embassy of Japan, that has come on board for the Adopt a School Programme and has donated close to FJ\$3 million to assist in the reconstruction works of the completely destroyed buildings at Kadavu Provincial Secondary School, Vunisea Secondary School and Richmond Methodist High School.

The Ministry of Infrastructure has already completed drawings for Category 5 cyclone-resilient buildings. They will be working closely with our Ministry Officials to see that those projects are completed satisfactorily.

The Ministry has also received a budget of around \$2.6 million to go towards some of our ongoing school projects. This includes upgrading and maintenance, as well as some new construction works across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has also reminded us of how important health is and I echo the sentiments of His Excellency that the health of every Fijian is essential to our recovery and this is especially true for our young ones. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through UNICEF has donated \$1.4 million to undertake the maintenance and upgrading of our existing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, as well as the construction of new WASH facilities in selected schools around the country. Of course, WASH facilities is especially important in this new normal. They have also assisted us in providing soap for the schools, handwashing programmes which is targeted to improve health and hygiene standards for our school children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is working with relevant stakeholders and donor agencies to develop online content and rebuild a more resilient education system. Last month, the Ministry launched the Pacific Regional Channel through its partnership with the Commonwealth of Learning that is populated with video content which is accessible through mobile devices and devices with internet connectivity, providing learning materials for teachers and students. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government is fully committed to providing students with opportunities to engage with e-learning tools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another reality, rightly highlighted by His Excellency when he opened Parliament, is climate change. I fully agree with His Excellency that the oceans and climate crisis have not stopped for this global pandemic. The disasters associated with climate change are upon us and are likely to continue to become more intense and frequent in the future, and it is our children who will have to face them when we are no longer here. We will ensure, as a Ministry, that climate change continues to be discussed in schools and our students are fully versed with the causes and effects of climate change. I know that our teachers are true Fijian heroes, who are striving to educate our young ones in the new normal.

Mr. Speaker Sir, these are extraordinary times for Fijians. This is the time to show resilience and work together for the benefit of all of us, including our children. So far, we have together withstood every challenge that COVID-19 has thrown at us. We know that the hard times are not quite yet over and it will, of course, require more hard work, unity and sacrifice if we have to do, and we will get through this.

We have risen as a nation again and again from the many challenges in our history. I have faith in our leadership and our unity. We cannot afford to squabble right now when so many of our

people are suffering. This is not about politics or power, this is about the future of our great nation. This is about what you and I can do to improve the lives of our people.

I thank His Excellency for his powerful and inspiring Opening Address and for the wisdom he brings us as we tackle the issues that affect our nation today. Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to put on record our appreciation to all our Ministry stakeholders, our international donor partners, civil society organisations, faith-based organisations and supporters who have supported us and continue to do so as we endure the impacts of this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to wish all Honourable Members of this august Parliament compliments of the coming season, joy and good tidings. May you all have a restful, safe and a peaceful Christmas and may the New Year bring good tidings to all of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to wish you a very, very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts for her contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, that brings an end to the consideration of this item for today. We will continue with the consideration of this item tomorrow.

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for Consideration today. On that note, we have come to the end of today's proceedings. I thank all Honourable Members for your contributions today.

I now adjourn Parliament until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.59 p.m.