

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 10TH DECEMBER, 2020

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 10TH DECEMBER, 2020

The Parliament met at 9.30 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 Wednesday, 9th 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.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

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

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

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report on the Electoral Commission Annual Report 2017 - Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights was referred the Electoral Commission Annual Report 2017 and the Committee was mandated to review the Annual Report and table its findings back to Parliament.

The Electoral Commission is a constitutionally-mandated independent electoral management body in Fiji that oversees the running and conducting of free and fair elections in accordance with written laws governing elections and any other relevant law. This Report specifies the findings and recommendations of the Committee with respect to the issues noted from the contents of the Electoral Commission Annual Report.

The Committee conducted extensive deliberations and independently formed its view and stance on the issues noted in the Annual Report. The Committee identified pertinent issues from the Annual Report and sent correspondences regarding these to the Electoral Commission and its representatives for clarification.

As a result of the review, the Committee identified a few key findings, which are provided as follows, the:

- (1) Commission, through the Fijian Elections Office, conducts regular revision and assessment of the National Register of Voters, which is a vital part in determining the number of seats in Parliament, as provided under the Constitution.
- (2) Commission works closely with the Supervisor of Elections in order to effectively manage the electoral system in Fiji.
- (3) Annual Report provides insufficient information on gender equality and related work by the Commission, however, after further discussions, it is encouraging to note that the Commission's work is directly guided by non-discriminatory policies and legal frameworks, which also encompass the gender equality principles.

At the conclusion of the review, the Committee noted that the Commission did a commendable job during the reported period. Thus, it resolved that it would be appropriate to highlight the Commission's key achievements and also put forward a few recommendations for consideration by the Electoral Commission. A summary of these is as follows, the Committee:

- (1) notes the establishment of the full time secretariat service for the Commission and recommends that proper resources be provided to the secretariat staff to ensure provision of institutional support to the Electoral Commission;
- (2) commends the work of the Electoral Commission for the development of internal operational and procedural guidelines; and
- (3) notes the new organisational structure of the Commission and commends the work regarding the appointment of new commissioners and the chairperson.

At this juncture, I would like to acknowledge the Honourable Members of the Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee - Honourable Rohit Sharma (Deputy Chairperson), Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, Honourable Dr. Salik Govind and Honourable Mosese Bilitavu, for their deliberations and input, the secretariat and the representatives of Fiji's electoral management bodies who accepted the Committee's invitation and made themselves available to make a submission, which assisted the Committee in its work.

On behalf of the Committee, I hereby submit this Report to Parliament and commend the Fijian Electoral Commission for its Annual Report for the year 2017. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there should have been second report to be tabled today but because there has been transportation problems, there is a delay in the arrival of the Honourable Member who was to present the report. So we will tide this over to later on in the day and I will fit that in accordingly. You can relax, Honourable Members.

Honourable Members, we will continue with the responses to His Excellency's Address and I now call upon the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications. You have the floor, Sir.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I actually make my contribution, I would just like to draw to the attention of Parliament that it is Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security, Policing and Rural and Maritime's birthday this morning. May we wish him happy birthday.

(Acclamation)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I understand he is turning 40 years old.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious speech and for setting the broad direction for the 2020-2021 Parliamentary Session with the three key priorities:

- Our containment of COVID-19;
- Our focus on inclusive economic recovery; and
- Our response to the climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are still in an extraordinary difficult and uncertain period. The entire world continues to suffer from the COVID-19 pandemic and there continues to be no reference point in living memory for a crisis of this scale and complexity. There have been over 68.5 million COVID-19 cases globally and more than 1.5 million people have lost their lives. Every government is combatting severe economic and financial stress, joblessness and uncertainty.

We have been encouraged, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the positive news of a vaccine rolled out in the United Kingdom. We are in close discussions with our development partners in setting aside funding for a viable vaccine. We have used our voice in various global forums to ensure the vaccine is treated as a global, public good rather than a private commodity. But we must acknowledge the equal distribution of this vaccine that will take some time, and we are very grateful to the Australian Government that has made a public pledge to ensure that Pacific Island Countries will be moved up the ladder in terms of the availability of this vaccine.

In the 'here and now', the world economy is still faced with the most serious socio-economic crisis in a hundred years and Fiji and other small island and tourism-dependent economies have taken the hardest hit. Our borders have been closed for more than nine months, businesses are severely

affected, thousands are without jobs, our public finances under severe strain and socio-economic challenges have intensified.

Fiji faces our sharpest economic contraction in history. We had said that the contraction would be about 21 percent, but the latest figures demonstrated that a contraction now will be 19 percent; some improvement.

Our tax revenue is halved, forcing us to borrow to sustain the provision of public services and sustain critical support to our people. We are confronting the uncertainty we face with a strategic effort to spur domestic activity and investment where possible. But we know our full recovery hinges on the safe re-opening of our borders so that our people, particularly in the tourism sector, can return to full time work and Government can re-establish the flows of revenue. In the meantime, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is critical that we maintain our status as a COVID-contained country which we have already done for more than 240 days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank, of course, our Honourable Prime Minister, for the decisive leadership he has provided, our frontline workers, our doctors, nurses and members of the Disciplined Forces for their dedication, hard work and sacrifice in keeping Fiji safe.

We would also like to thank all those who have downloaded and installed the careFIJI contact-tracing app and thank all Fijians who have been abiding by the COVID-19 restrictions and measures that have been put in place for everyone's safety. These measures are very important to give confidence to countries, like Australia and New Zealand, to safely re-open their borders with Fiji. Even when a vaccine is available, the threat of COVID-19 will not simply disappear and we cannot be complacent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to cushion the blow to our economy in the early months of this pandemic, we acted quickly, announcing a COVID-19 Response Budget one week after the announcement of our first case, to re-position Government revenue towards combatting the virus and preparing a long-term response.

We built on that plan through our latest financial budget in our Fijian COVID-Safe Economic Recovery Framework, as we have certainly rolled out measures to mitigate the economic impact, including innovative programmes like Blue Lanes and pathways for luxury tourism to support our people's livelihoods as best as we can. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been told that we have been responsible and we have been consistent, and we will continue to be consistent with regards to support for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to very quickly mention about comparison of debt relative to GDP and just compare nominal values over the years. We have got a good track record on our GDP, debt to GDP ratio bringing it down from 56 percent in 2010 to around 43 percent in 2015. And then, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, came along *TC Winston*, *TC Josie*, *TC Keni*, *TC Gita* and now COVID-19. We had to borrow more, but apart from the borrowing, the massive shrink in our nominal GDP also led to the spike in the debt to GDP ratio projected to reach about 83 percent.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, debt ratio would have been around 71 percent with the same level of borrowing if nominal GDP was assumed at pre-COVID levels. So debt is 12 percent point higher just because of the impact on our GDP. Once GDP picks up, our debt ratio will, of course, stabilise.

We will, of course, also have to reduce our deficits and cut back on expenditure. We are, Mr. Speaker, Sir, committed to physical sustainability and ensuring financial and macro-economic stability.

Meanwhile, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition has clearly decided that they will not hesitate to turn these crisis into a game of political point scoring. They continue to mislead the people as COVID-19 was created by the Government and the economic challenge and job losses are something that we have created. Of course not, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every single country in the world is struggling with this pandemic. Fiji is amongst the safest places in the world. Our overriding focus must be on our economy's long term economic recovery, or else the challenge of 2020 is permanently scarring our national development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Professor Prasad, for example, as always, has claimed the worst and offered us nothing in response. He claims that Government does not have a plan, it does not have a vision. Then he attacked our Fijian COVID-Safe Economic Recovery Framework without any regard for what that Framework has actually allowed the Fijian people to achieve through this extremely tough period. Honourable Professor Prasad forgets that every business that we have opened today is open because of that Framework. There are people in their jobs today because of that Framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same Framework he is quick to dismiss is the reason why Fiji remains COVID contained. It provided the guidelines that have helped our industries and our national carrier, Fiji Airways, to step up safety protocols and kept many of our tourism properties operational, despite borders being closed.

It is the reason some businesses, like nightclub operators, have repurposed their workspaces and are bringing people back to work. In fact, we have had new businesses open up in the past few weeks and the ones that we recently opened are the Peri Peri in Modyl Plaza, the Grills in Laucala Bay and incidentally, the Grills in Laucala Bay employ 25 people, 23 of whom had actually lost their jobs because of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also got various investments taking place. Approximately, 15 local businesses have previously operated as nightclubs and opened as pubs or taverns, re-employing another 120 Fijians who had been laid off due to the pandemic.

It is the Framework that has enabled the Love our Locals Programme and the high-end segments of tourism to recommence, including luxury VIP Lanes and Blue Lanes where we saw close to 100 vessels coming to Fiji, and we are seeing new growth opportunities as a result. It has led to more Fijians being rehired and this may not be much for them or for Honourable Professor Prasad, but every Fijian matters to the FijiFirst Government. Even if one person gets re-employed and is able to support his or her family better, we believe we are doing something right.

The Framework is also the basis upon which travel discussions with Australia are going on and we have got some very deep discussions with them. Indeed, the Australian High Commissioner, who spoke at the Attorney-General's Conference last weekend, publically applauded us for the Framework and all the good work that the Fijian Government is doing both, through its Ministry of Health and also overall from its Economic Recovery Framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Framework is the basis for which COVID-related social restrictions have been eased. It may not have been obvious to Honourable Professor Prasad that the Framework is structured in two phases that will assist Government in working with stakeholders to escalate or de-escalate COVID-safety measures, if the situation demands.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian COVID Safe Economic Recovery Framework is a reason why we are one of the few countries in the world where our people, we Fijians, are able to move

around quite freely while the pandemic rages on. If this is not a solid plan, then I challenge Honourable Professor Prasad and the others to come up with a better one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the vast uncertainties we are faced with, Government has a plan with many initiatives announced in the 2020-2021 Budget and many more to come, and we cannot and will not be distracted by these gimmicks and cheap political shots.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Budget, we drastically cut tourism sector taxes and tariffs, include the removal of 6 percent STT, reduction of Departure Tax from \$200 to \$100, ECAL reduction from 10 percent to 5 percent and, of course, increasing the threshold for the ECAL threshold from \$1.25 million to \$3 million, cutting alcohol taxes down.

The reason why, Mr. Speaker, we have done this, including 2,000 items, if you go to the Web pages now in the tourism sector, Bali, Phuket are all advertising for \$99 for five nights and \$100 for seven nights. They are positioning themselves for the tourism market when the borders open. We also need to do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this is Government's contribution to ensure that we do not lose our share of the market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, on top of that, we provided \$60 million as part of the Fiji Recovery Rebate Package that will provide \$400 per passenger subsidy to the first 150,000 tourists. Again, we have been criticised for that, but it means that actual people will get back to work. The economy gets the robustness within it. We were predicting nearly a millions tourists for which we were being told that we are not doing quick enough and today, we will all be very grateful, even if we get 20,000 tourists. That is the situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been told, again, like I mentioned about the economy not being diverse enough. Sir, if you look at the GDP contribution to the economy only about 15 years ago, 20 years ago, it was even less diversified. Now, our economy is a lot more diversified. Yes, there is no doubt, there is a heavy dependence on tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is, the Opposition were berating us saying, "Why are we not achieving one million tourists? Why are we not achieving it?" And now they are saying, "Tourism is not good for us." They are saying we are too heavily dependent on tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, we have a manufacturing sector that was almost non-existent 10 to 15 years ago in such a way. We have a fast growing ICT industry, a booming construction sector, financial and telecommunication services and a very good, in the top-end segment of the clothes manufacturing sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our agriculture sector, as highlighted by the Honourable Minister for Agriculture is, again, becoming more diversified. Recently, we were told by Fiji Airways that the agriculture produce that are now going out to the United States of America (USA) - the flights to Los Angeles (LA), apart from *yaqona* which is the highest agriculture produce, is turmeric or *haldi* because now everyone is getting health conscious and *haldi* is now the next best thing to a super food.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, we need to do more to diversify our economy and, of course, we are doing that, but it takes time. You cannot do that overnight. We need to ensure that we have the comparative advantage with the right skills and technology and access to the market. Otherwise, any effort will be a waste and would be unsustainable.

It is not that easy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I will have you know that we are already talking to Australia and New Zealand and mooted that idea because given what has happened after COVID-19, some people are looking at moving their manufacturing away from countries, like China and faraway manufacturing sites.

Sir, we are looking at how we can reposition ourselves in setting up assembly plants in Fiji for markets closer to home, like Australia and New Zealand. That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been providing a target of tax incentives in areas like ICT, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, housing development, construction, set up of private medical facilities, aged care homes and retirement villages (these are areas that we have strengths in), development of warehouses, public partnership with Aspen Medical, which will feed into the retirement of village packages and providing support to the manufacturing and retail sector, and many more. That is why we have targeted expenditure and support in areas like agriculture, fisheries, forestry, rural and maritime development. This is to further diversify the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it does not mean that if we start throwing money, our economy will be diversified, it has to be specifically targeted. We have also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in that respect, I would like to highlight to members of the Opposition and to this Parliament, we are now getting direct budget support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, European Union (EU), Australia and New Zealand.

These entities will not give direct budget support, unless they trust your Public Financial Management System and your management of the economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Normally, they give aid-in-kind or you can go off and buy this. They give actual money to the budget support itself. They are working together with us in supporting deep reforms, in improving fiscal management, improving the business and investment climate, improving policy and legal institutional framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, of course, need to also support and promote domestic investments, apart from continuing to attract foreign investment. This is why we introduced new incentives for the construction sector, removed stamp duties and removed the need to obtain business licences, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also giving start-up initiatives and incentives to them, streamlining our business processes. The Honourable Minister for Local Government and others have actually highlighted that the digitalisation of these services, even in this pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have about \$15 million allocated for the processing of building permits, et cetera, so Government can get these approvals done really quickly which will instil confidence.

Honourable Nawaikula claimed that we sold our ports, that we are selling everything else, we are not. Fiji Ports is still majority Fijian-owned. The Fiji Government still owns 39 percent, FNPF owns the largest share of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

He said that we have sold our Printing Press. It has been sold to Fijian Holdings, you are all saying, "Sell it to Fijian Holdings", it is now being sold to Fijian Holdings, you are now questioning that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been a number of inconsistencies that had been raised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also been working with the banks. As you know that we tabled the Bill yesterday, and we have worked with the banks and we are very grateful to them, I should say, in giving holidays, not just for people who borrowed money to purchase homes but also for commercial purposes and also for personal loans, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is very critical that we work with the banks and the private sector in this respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also need to ensure that we relook and review our National Development Plan, as COVID-19 actually thwarted our progress and development, it is time we need to get on a reset mode.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many jobs have been lost directly due to the crisis and again, a lot of misinformation was told about FNPF. We have been working in partnership with FNPF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to allow for a payout of \$220 per fortnight for those fully unemployed and a pro-rata payment for those who have reduced hours, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as everyone knows that this is crisis we are not sure when it is going to end, that is why we needed a sustainable solution to support those that are unemployed, we could have jumped up and said, "Government fully pay all those who are affected, we will pay you \$500 a fortnight" but we are being practical and upfront about this, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

A populist solution which the Opposition always come and sort of pontificate over here would have been unsustainable and unlike the Opposition, we do not cave-in to populism. Being leaders, we have to make tough decisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Parliamentary decision, it is so obvious that each of them here is fighting for the small collection of votes without any regard for the larger national or global picture. Honourable Kuridrani talks about his constituency and that is not how the FijiFirst Government operates. That is why rather than empty out the coffers, we allowed affected Fijians to access funds through their FNPF general account and Government would provide top-ups to those that have exhausted their General Account balances.

When we started, we were providing a top-up of around 10 percent of the total payout, as numbers started exhausting their General Account balances, their top-ups have increased to over 45 percent and this will obviously continue to rise further. So far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, around \$176 million has been paid out of which Government tops up about \$79 million. Over 115,000 people have been assisted, with Government providing top-ups to close to 50,000 of them. Let us not forget why the FNPF is in a strong position to do that, to help Fijians ride out of this crisis.

We implemented the reforms necessary to make FNPF financially sustainable. We ended the cross-subsidisation from the younger workers and low income workers that placed FNPF on the path to financial insolvency. Because we did, Fijians can access their general accounts now in times of crisis, whether that be cyclones or COVID-19 and they can count on the fact that the majority of their funds in their protected or preserved accounts will be there for their retirement.

Honourable Gavoka talked about low-paid workers getting paid \$12.30 a week, simply dividing the total payout by Government, 277,000 members, that does not work that way, Mr. Speaker, Sir. All this sort of misleading comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, does not actually augur well. I would like to just very quickly go on and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the comments require some responses.

Some people talked about the independence of institutions: Please, go to Section 129, the Fiji Police Force has complete constitutional independence; Section 117, the Director of Public Prosecutions; Section 116, the Solicitor-General's Office; Section 115, the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC): these are independent legal institutions. They operate on their own, they are not dictated by anyone, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Kepa same rhetoric, Constitution was not done the right way. She had absolutely no problems with the 1990 Constitution, no problems with the 1997 Constitution

because the genesis of that was the racist 1990 Constitution, no problems with that, 19 consultations were held throughout Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this particular Constitution.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Bulanauca, let me get to him before I finish. This Honourable Member told us to cast out the devils from ourselves. He said that his former leader cast out the devil. He did not cast out the devil, he simply resigned from your Party to go and form another Party as we have just found out this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point is, Honourable Bulanauca told the Honourable Prime Minister and I to cast the devils out from us. I have to tell you, Sir, this gentleman, at the height of the 2000 crisis and I have said this in Parliament before, there is a documentary evidence on this where you were talking about it in front of Civic Towers, where he stood up and said: "Who is the head of the legislature? Mahendra Chaudhry, *kai dia*, Hindu, *tevoro*. Who is the head of the judiciary? Reddy, *kai dia*, Hindu *tevoro*. Who is the head of the Executive? Chaudhary, *kai dia*, Hindu, *tevoro*."

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the *tevoro*, no one is the devil. The devil is around there, but you do not have the right to do that. And this is the kind of hypocrisy and the contradiction that we have been facing throughout this Parliament.

We have had people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, who come to this Chamber and actually insult His Excellency the President, questioning him. Some have been saying that he said, "My Government".

Every single President, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or Governor, will always say, "My Government", as you would know, Sir. You have been also the President. Whenever you deliver the Address, it is the Government of the day you speak on their behalf because the President represents the State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Address. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for his contribution to the debate.

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

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I proceed with my contribution this morning, I would like to also add my condolence and tribute to the *Vanua o Vuda*, *Yavusa Sawaieke*, and the *Vanua o Betoraurau*, *Yavusa Waruta* for the passing of the *Momo Taukei Sawaieke*, Ratu Tevita Namuira Momoedonu, and earlier on the *Momo Taukei Waruta*, Ratu Apisai Vuniyayawa Tora.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both chiefs were past members of this august House and more importantly, they were also instrumental in the process of nation building. I join the chiefs of Ba and friends to thank them for their contribution to our province and to Fiji, and we send our condolences to the *Vanua o Vuda*, *Vanua o Betoraurau* and in particular, to their families. May they rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister and Members of Cabinet, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise in the name of my Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator and Sustainer of the world and all its beautiful things, through His holy

power to deliver my third speech in response to His Excellency's Address since my election to this House. In doing so, let me thank His Excellency the President of Fiji for his most gracious Address, from my gracious heart while praying for his good health and a long life.

Sir, we have been here in this House for two years now, and let us honestly ask ourselves, whether we are doing what we ought to do or not? If we are doing what is required of ourselves, then I believe it is one way we are paying our fitting tribute to His Excellency and the people of this land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will fail in my very sacred duty in this House if I do not remember, thank and pay my very special tribute to the founding fathers of our beloved nation and all the past Governments of this beautiful country for their immense contributions. The fruits that we enjoy today are from the trees they planted during their times and emulating upon inspirational legacy, it is our duty now to bequeath a better future for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let it go on the record that there is absolutely no denial on our part that we have diametrical ideological differences with the ruling FijiFirst Party, but that does not and should not stop us from working in unison for the good of our country, if and when the need for the same arises. I am hopeful that the Government side will feel all their goodness appreciate, recognise and reciprocate accordingly by creating the adequate spaces for us in those processes.

History and success stories of bipartisanship, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a living testimony of how we have and what we can share and care in the process, thwarting off challenges to achieve the extraordinary or the extra mile. If we miss or deny ourselves this opportunity, I believe we are doing a great disservice and injustice, not only to the mandate we have, but also to the future generations, whose future we are seen to be compromising. Therefore, I call upon the Government side to come out of its myopic mindset and learn to look at the bigger picture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, his Excellency the President of Fiji who is also the Commander-in-Chief, symbolises the unity of the nation, and I believe this is the best tribute we can pay to His Excellency, should we learn and commit ourselves in working together in the bipartisan process. So much so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that even the former Leader of the Opposition had to sacrifice himself on the first day of this Parliament session to allow us to come together and work in unison for this nation. The same goes to my Party where democracy is alive, well and at work but it appears we are outworking ourselves.

That brings me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to pay my tribute and express my sincere gratitude and thank my former Leader of the Opposition, Major-General (Retired) Sitiveni Rabuka, for his selfless service and personal sacrifice for our nation. It was my sheer privilege to be inducted into politics under his able leadership in 2018, and I wish to dedicate my life in championing the ideals and principles he stood for because that is the way forward for Fiji.

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to offer my good wishes to our new Party Leader, our new Leader of the Opposition, and also congratulate our two new Honourable Members of the House. I wish them all the very best of luck and may they have a fruitful tenure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will confine my contribution in this debate to mainly issues pertaining to my portfolio as Shadow Minister for Regional Development and Disaster Management. Allow me to begin by thanking the Honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and the Honourable Minister for Disaster Management and Meteorological Services, for the work that they have been able to implement, despite limited resources at stake. That gives me the basis and reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to call upon the Honourable Minister for Economy to give a serious thought to

increasing the budgetary allocation for those important portfolios. With your indulgence, Sir, allow me to begin with rural development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while acknowledging and appreciating the amount of work done for the rural areas by this Government and the previous Governments, there is still a lot to do. I will concentrate on what needs to be done and why it needs to be done.

Firstly, as equal citizens before the law and taxpayers as required by the law, all Fiji citizens are expected to receive a fair share of accessible, open and accountable governance. That is not the case now, as the rural government stations still face a number of problems due to paucity of funding and the red tape bureaucracy involved in the public service to render efficient services to the people in rural areas.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the attitude of our civil servants providing customer service to our people must change. They should be reminded that they are not doing them a favour, but simply doing the work for which they are paid for by the people.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has come into power with the truncated mandate of 50.02 percent, after making a number of promises to the people in the areas, in some cases, exceeding what is pronounced in its Election manifesto. That being so, people are now waiting for those promises to be fulfilled. We are already half way into our term of office and the people are now asking questions on the same.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other information that we want the Honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development to divulge to this House for the benefit of the rural and maritime communities of this country, is the processes and procedures involved in seeking assistance in cash and in kind, or technical assistance for community development projects by way of grants and sponsorships. I have deliberately meant to raise this question because there are some rural and maritime communities which have been signalled out for special community projects more than once, while other needy communities watched helplessly. I think all of us as elected representatives and even all the people of this nation should know these processes and procedures to empower themselves.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is developing strategic partnerships to empower rural and remote communities to build resilience, not only to thwart off the challenges posed by natural disasters and the impacts of climate change, but also to sustain their livelihood with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Where have the more than 125,000 people who were laid off their jobs or were engaged in part-time jobs, gone to? Is it not a fact that they have returned to their villages and are now willing to cultivate the land to earn a living or grow to sustain their livelihood? That being so, it is an area that needs specific attention by Government now and in the immediate future, but I see very little of that reflected in His Excellency's Address.

Fiji is one of the island States in the Pacific, Sir, which is like the rest, except one of the bigger ones that is prone to the effects of climate change. Fiji has approximately 330 islands of which, 110 are uninhabited, and that number will decrease as sea level and temperature increases.

It is envisaged, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in the years to come, more of our maritime residents are expected to become marooned to the mainland. This gradual but sure demographic shift is highly likely to cause a number of geo-political and socio-economic problems which the UN Agenda 2030 seeks to address by way of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Whilst still on maritime development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other pertinent issue that continues to create simmering tensions and sufferings for the outer-islands residents is the shipping services which we appreciate is still being partially paid by the State, but needs to be made more efficient. I am hopeful that the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure and Transport will look into these outstanding issues and redress accordingly.

The other humble plea I wish to make to the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure and Transport is the improvement in maritime public utilities, such as damaged jetties, or left unattended for some time now. They are slowly but surely becoming an eyesore to public eyes and worse still, occupational health and safety risk and potential hazards. Any assistance by way of remedial works in this respect will bring relief to the aggrieved people.

The third and last issue that I wish to raise with respect to the maritime dwellers in Fiji is about the need for the Fiji Consumer and Commerce Commission (FCCC) to make an effort to monitor the prices of several goods and services availed to the people in the outer islands at an increased price, which is against the spirit of consumer rights and fair trading. I would urge the Honourable Minister for Trade, Industry and Commerce to look into addressing that matter urgently, given we are approaching the festive and hurricane seasons, as well as the beginning of the new school year in January 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are in the early part of our hurricane season and I pray to beseech the mercy of the Almighty Lord to save us from the wrath of natural, as well as manmade disasters. That being so, it is important that the Government assures this nation that we have necessary support services to keep the nation informed and advised of disasters as and when it strikes our country.

It is also gratifying for the Honourable Minister for Communications to stand up and boast in this House about the success of the Walesi Platform. That being so, it is important for this House and the people of Fiji to know how that Platform could be one of the means and ways for messaging and news before, during and after the disaster, keeping in mind the limited appeal and impact upon the Walesi Platform by the kind of disasters striking Fiji.

In addition to messaging and news reporting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that the National Disaster Management Office of Fiji become a proactive partner in our public showcases and civic awareness programmes to outreach and network, create awareness and train people to develop resilience to climate change and natural disasters. Sir, I do not see such activities being conducted at the grassroots level anymore in contrast to the past where it was a must.

While still on disaster management, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to, once again, draw the attention of this Government to the importance of developing community halls, other civic infrastructure which could be used in times of disaster to shelter people and provide them relief in case their dwellings are damaged and destroyed during these disasters. This is becoming a challenge - we have to recognise the poor quality of housing and those affected by previous disasters able to rebuild their homes without assistance.

My last limb of statement on this important subject, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in relation to emergency water supply for rural and remote communities which is now becoming a nationwide ongoing issue, needing urgent attention and redress. Clean, regular piped water is a necessity for human life and it is a basic human right, and failure of the Government to ensure this speaks volumes about the quality of leadership and governance.

Just a fortnight ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Vaturu Dam which supplies water to residences and all the civic and business-houses from Nadi to Lautoka which is the most heavily populated area in

the West, reached its critical level. Thanks to the heavens for the rain which came, a blessing to replenish and restore water in the dam sufficiently. Now, that leaves me to ask the Honourable Minister to confirm or deny, whether water in the Vaturu Dam in the recent dry spell was indeed seven metres down and if yes, was there a public announcement on this matter?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years, the Fiji Government has become heavily reliant on the tourism industry after the sugar industry saw the first signs of decline. This saw the public and private sector in the Western Division move away from sugar to tourism, creating as much jobs as the sugar industry was generating. This dual contribution from the lands of the West sustained our job market and the economy for a while until the effects of the balloon-type socialist-slanted FijiFirst budgets began to take a toll on them. The COVID-19 and the resultant economic meltdown was just an icing on the cake of destruction for our economy, in addition to the woes inflicted by the gross undermining of resource-based sectors, namely; fisheries, forestry, copra and meat industries.

While sugar industry reforms, without an input from its key stakeholders, namely, the landlords and the cane growers, has been a failure pending the implementation of the recommendations of the *Deloitte Report*, the stepbrother treatment of our resource-based sectors and mismanagement, as well as the counterproductive results from reorganisation of industries, such as mahogany, left all hopes high on the tourism sector which was dashed by the impact of COVID-19.

What is the solution now if the pandemic continues or we have another such pandemic or disturbance in the Pacific, given the trade warfare between the economic giants involved? What will happen if the cane growers totally withdraw totally cane farming after 2022, or what is the answer to the failed reorganisation and step-brotherly treatment of our resource-based sectors? This is further complicated and compounded by the impact of climate change and the fast developing mood of resignation and loss of sense of belonging.

Indeed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are issues of soul searching, and I see that His Excellency the President does not seek to take those matters into consideration as per the Address we are debating. Those that were made relevantly were purely banal or at best, lip-service. Is this the tribute this Government now seeks to pay to our Head of State?

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have the following statements to make. Firstly, like every Address from the throne, this Address is without doubt aimed at creating a feel-good impression but the ground reality is otherwise. This is an insult to His Excellency the President and to the intelligence of the people of this land because this Government has failed to live up to its promises. That to me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is masquerading with the mandate of the people.

Secondly, Sir, this Government is suffering from policy paralysis which had failed our economy more than the impact of COVID-19, and has lost direction and is floating like a rudderless ship. That is, again, contrary to the sentiments shed in His Excellency's Address which we are debating here.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, with none of the 25 reasons cited for the military *coup* in 2006 proven true and this Government caught up in the web of its own statements, it reflects very poorly on the accord of consistency and integrity of this Government and its leadership. They have not been faithful to themselves, to this nation and to His Excellency the President. They are only concealing information, facts and all their misdeeds under the guise and protection of their draconian legislations to evade public probity. That explains the reason for silencing dissent and those who question the authority in this land.

Mr. Speaker, may I take this opportunity to thank all Fijians who are living abroad for the financial support rendered to their families and friends living in Fiji. On a cumulative basis, FDB's Economic Review for November showed that personal remittances rose by 7.3 percent to \$521 million in the first 10 months of the year. For the month of October alone, personal remittances totalled a record \$69 million, an increase of 29.5 percent over the previous month and an increase of 58.7 percent over October last year. Overall, remittances have performed well above expectations and contributed positively towards foreign reserves. Fiji needs your support.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to wish your good self and the Parliament Secretariat, all Honourable Members of Parliament and every Fijian in Fiji and those living abroad, an enjoyable Christmas and a prosperous 2021. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Saukuru for his contribution to the debate. I now call on the Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august Parliament to lend my support to the motion by the Honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address during the opening of the 2020-2021 parliamentary year on Monday, 30th November, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that while we were all looking forward to a grand celebration to mark our 50th Anniversary of Independence, the unforeseen and unplanned, unfolded on our beloved nation like many others had to adapt, cope, review, re-prioritise and adopt new changes necessary for our health and safety, survival and wellbeing. While we are not out of the woods yet, Sir, the new norm demanded major shifts in some areas and perhaps, minor in some. The wellbeing and safety of every Fijian remains the top priority of Government during such trying times and our COVID-19 responses were of no exception.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our economy has been severely affected where a lot of our fellow Fijians and hoteliers have lost their jobs. Moreso, the civil aviation industry also suffered severely in terms of reduction in flights and travel restrictions imposed by other countries. However, that does not mean ceasing of key economic activities and programmes of Government as laid out in the COVID-19 Response Budget. I, therefore, wish to assure every Fijian, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that as a result of this, some projects have to be temporarily put on hold or deferred, while others had to be re-prioritised, to allow us as a nation to persevere and absorb together the shocks brought about by this deadly pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us also not forget that 2020 is a unique year and one that will be registered in our records as a year in which Fiji suffered a double blow in two separately declared catastrophes (COVID-19 and *TC Harold*) that hit us simultaneously which is a first, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Emergency Committee convened on 9th April, 2020, recommending the declaration of a state of natural disaster for the worst affected areas. On 12th April, 2020, Cabinet declared a state of natural disaster over certain parts of Fiji severely affected by *TC Harold*. Subsequently on 15th April, 2020, due to the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, Cabinet, again, declared a state of natural disaster for the whole of Fiji. Both declarations were for an initial period of 30 days. Those were unprecedented and has never happened in our history. It is, again, this background, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I wish to make my contribution to the motion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that our Head of State has quite clearly articulated in His Opening Address, Government's focus in this new parliamentary session. This is to continue to drive bluer, greener and more inclusive and more sustainable development through the three key priorities, the:

- (1) containment of COVID-19;
- (2) our economic recovery; and
- (3) our effective response to the climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis.

On COVID-19 containment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our containment remains the first key priority of Government in this new session of Parliament. I would like to echo the same sentiments of His Excellency the President in offering our gratitude to the frontline workers who are battling COVID-19 on all fronts. To all our health workers; members of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces who accompanied the contact tracing teams and manned the isolations centres; the Fiji Police Force who worked tirelessly monitoring the movement during the lockdown period in Lautoka, Suva, Soso in Labasa and Vunicagi Settlement in Dreketi and the manning of checkpoints around the country and, of course, other Government officials; I thank them for their courageous work and for their unwavering dedication to duty in maintaining Fiji as a COVID-contained country in the Pacific. Our aspiration to grow as a nation is a continuing challenge amidst this pandemic and this Government will aspire to rise above that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our COVID-19 containment efforts continue to be a success, not only because of the selfless dedication of all our frontline workers but in a great part, it is also attributed to the steady, sensible and decisive leadership that this Government continues to provide under the Honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our citizens is the main priority of this Government. We are committed in providing them the best service we can offer in addressing the operational requirements of COVID-19 and other threats to the discipline services that come under my purview. My Ministry is continuously working to elevate our capabilities and capacities through the review of legislation governing the two Disciplined Forces and other associated laws, to ensure that broader and more dynamic roles are supported and, of course, the continuation of the provision of required technical knowledge, training and education.

Let me focus on the Bills, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to by His Excellency the President. In His Excellency's Address, he had mentioned multiple Bills that will be considered in this Session of Parliament, two of which are under my Defence portfolio. Firstly, the draft Volatile Substance Abuse Bill, which provides a legal framework for the prevention of volatile substance abuse and the protection of persons, particularly children. The draft Bill has been taken to the public through online submission, before it will be forwarded to Parliament for debate.

On the Search and Rescue Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill will embrace current practices of Fiji's Search and Rescue Services and, of course, empower agencies. It will set up the Fiji Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) collocated and managed by the Naval Division of the Royal Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) and facilitate the subsequent alignment of the three classes of search and rescue namely; land, maritime and aeronautical, to the RCC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this set up is envisage to align the existing fragmented responses in a more coordinated approach. This is particularly crucial for the areas that are outside Fiji's sovereign control but falls within our search and rescue region which includes, Tuvalu and parts of Kiribati. Let me give an example of how this was tested and utilised recently, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Fiji's RCC, very lately on 20th November, received a distress call from Honolulu's RCC. A seriously injured Pilipino national on board a fishing vessel close to Tarawa, Kiribati, required medical evacuation. The medical evacuation was successful through the coordination of agencies that I had already mentioned and, of course, with the assistance of the New Zealand Government through the provision of a military aircraft.

For this particular case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of Kiribati's COVID free status, the injured fisherman was not allowed to be taken to Kiribati. Therefore, within the activation of our search and rescue coordination within the region, he was picked up by the New Zealand aircraft and brought to Lautoka, and the fisherman, Sir, is now recovering at the Lautoka Hospital. We just saved a life, and life is precious, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Let me focus on legislative reviews. Mr. Speaker, Sir, work has already started for the review of the legal framework supporting our Disciplined Forces. These include; the RFMF Act, the Manual of Military Law and the Fiji Police Act. The RFMF's role in the Constitution, is to oversee the security and wellbeing of the people of this beloved nation. This dynamic role requires a review of its current setup, and this starts with the review of the existing Republic of Fiji Military Forces Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Manual of Military Law, you would know that Fiji's Military Justice processes and procedures are based on the colonial era British Army Act of 1955. The RFMF has been working with the New Zealand Defence Force who had already undergone their review and are now working with ours for the review of the MML.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on completion of the current review, the new portions and relevant supplementary legislations will greatly enhance the administrative and discipline processes within the RFMF. The new manual will, of course, be modern, user friendly and, of course, tested as well for the use of our Military Forces.

Let me turn to the Fiji Police Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In addition, the Fiji Police is undergoing a similar review of its principle legislation, the Fiji Police Act of 1965. You will see that these reviews are long overdue. The Police Act 1965 is the overreaching law that governs the Force. Comprehensive research has been conducted in the review of the Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we expect to carry out public consultations soon, before bringing the Bill to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, concurrently, serious efforts are also undertaken in the enhancing of the technical knowledge, training and education of our service personnel and that will be continue right throughout. Again, let me say that the review of these Bills will not only assure that law and order are maintained, but will also give confidence to our investors, our development partners and civil society.

On economic recovery, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the 42 confirmed cases and only two COVID-19 related deaths, Fiji has managed the pandemic remarkably well. Other island nations with comparable population size, GDP per capita and dependence on tourism, have fared worse.

At the official launching of the Pacific Insurance and Climate Change Adaptation Programme last week, the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji confirmed that our economy has contracted by 19.8 percent, even though it was forecasted initially to contract by 21.7 percent. This reduction in negative growth is testament of our collective efforts to attain economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me focus on rural programmes. I always say that this is the best time to be a rural Fijian. Through this pandemic, we have come to witness how our rural-based economy has cushioned the blow to our national economy, in terms of providing to be more resilient during

times of disasters and, of course, with the support given to MSMEs and other income-generating projects. I think the Honourable Minister for Fisheries, Forestry, and, of course, Agriculture, have already shed some light on these respective programmes, but I will just focus on the programmes that are in my Ministry.

Let me focus on the Self-Help Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Ministry. This Programme has seen a paradigm shift, from solely focussing on social projects to livelihood approach through income-generating projects as a means of empowering rural communities. In the last three years alone, the Ministry has invested over a million dollars in income-generation projects across the four Divisions and, of course, you would have heard about cases on the rural millionaire concept that has been piloted in Sawaieke, Gau, and, of course, other places like Nasolo in the Bua Province.

Let me particularly refer to Nasolo, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with an initial injection of \$45,000 for their farm roads. Sir, the community has gone into serious farming and this year, they have managed to construct a bridge worth \$41,000, purely financed by the community themselves. This is a leading example of how our rural development programmes empower rural people to become more self-sufficient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from a national security perspective, the best way to protect our economy is to protect our people, therefore, the need to invest in areas within our health sector that deals with infectious diseases, such as COVID-19. It will allow us to be more proactive for any future occurrences. Sir, under the draft National Security Strategy, health security is one of the thematic areas that will directly address some of the limitations that we encountered during our current pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the context of globalisation and further economic integration in recent decades, the relationship between the economy and national security has become increasingly interlinked. Sir, I also wish to acknowledge our bilateral partners in assisting us during this crucial period. They have contributed to the economy by engaging the local workforce and companies in multi-million dollars projects that are currently ongoing.

Let me just give an example about the Black Rock Camp in Nadi. International companies have engaged locals to continue with the construction until such time the travel restrictions are lifted. The Black Rock Project alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has about 180 to 200 Fijian construction workers onsite everyday. The construction has soared approximately \$1.5 million per month into our local economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just focus on our response to the climate ocean and biodiversity crisis. Recalling the third key priority of Government, as set out in His Excellency's Opening Address of developing an effective response to the climate oceans and biodiversity crisis, I wish to speak on how both, my Ministries are advancing in this area.

The Ministry of Defence, National Security and Policing, through the draft National Security Strategy has prioritised climate change and climate-induced security threats, as the single latest threat to our livelihoods. In providing a security lens to this issue, we have hosted a number of key workshops in partnership with the Governments of Australia and the United States of America, with the aim of shaping agency response or thinking cycles in mitigating future threats stemming from the effects of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, on climate action, as His Excellency has alluded to, Fijians remain on the frontline from the worst climate impacts, while Fijian voices stay at the forefront of the global campaign to curb emissions and build a more resilient world. The *UN World Risk Report* places Fiji

and a number of Pacific Island Countries as the most vulnerable to natural disaster in the world, and these disasters are anticipated to become more frequent and intense with significant impacts on our communities and economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) forecasted our displacement risk at 5,800 people on average for any given year who could be displaced by storm surges, earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis. This is an alarming figure, if we do not mitigate now. Fiji, therefore, is chosen with four other Pacific Island Countries to be a recipient of a shared €3 million funding over a three-year period for a project titled, "Understanding and Enhancing Preparedness and Response to the Risk of Disaster Placement in the Pacific".

Under that Project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking, again, at how we have addressed this matter previously and guided by the Relocation Guidelines and, of course, our recent Displacement Policy, developed together with the Relocation Trust Fund. One of the key examples very lately, is in Narikoso, Kadavu, where seven families have been relocated and, of course, this falls under this Programme.

On national preparedness, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst recovering from the effects of *TC Harold* and the pandemic, again, we are now in our cyclone season. As I speak, we have two tropical depressions developing in the region, which are expected to slightly affect us over the weekend. No need to panic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but let us be vigilant and let us monitor the development very, very closely. But let me assure this august House that a lot of preparations have been carried out and that includes the National Emergency Operations Centre, and the list goes on.

Before I conclude, let me just go through some of the comments made by the other side of the House. Let me start, again, with Honourable Bulanauca, stating in his statement that the Honourable Prime Minister needs to confess his spirit of evilness in ordering the killing or his alleged self-killing of Kalounivale at the Navy Boat Building Factory in Walu Bay by himself, in his own hands by a concrete block smashing his head, not only once but many times, that his wife could not recognise and identify him at CWM Hospital. He goes on to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that that is true.

Why bring that issue into Parliament, if he does not have concrete evidence about the case? He has two options as an Honourable Member, he either apologises to the Honourable Prime Minister through the Honourable Speaker, or go outside and face the media. Honourable Member, you have been running away from the media with no comments. Do the honourable thing, face the media and tell them the truth. Otherwise, that is cowardly act when you hide behind the curtains of parliamentary privilege in this House.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Do not bring rubbish into the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me turn to the Leader of the SODELPA Party. I was shocked when he made a statement and let me read, "To pay for the savings, Mr. Speaker, we need to raise about \$852.8 million. There are areas where we can save. We can sharpen the pencil and go through the books." But the very first thing that he stated, "stop peacekeeping and redeploy troops to border control which will give a saving of \$45.3 million", I do not know whether that is a kneejerk solution, a band-aid short-sighted solution or was he still in the state of shock when his leader resigned.

Let me remind the Honourable Member that Fiji has been involved in peacekeeping for over 42 years and this commitment has been upheld by successive Fijian Governments as Fiji's

contribution to the UN mandate. Is that his own thinking, or is that a Party approach as part of their strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Where is their foreign policy?

Fiji respects multilateralism. We are punching above our own weight because we are a small country. We cannot influence the world, nor the region, but this contribution is so important and to come from the leader of a Party is very, very irresponsible, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let alone the loss of jobs. Bring the people home, there will be loss of jobs. We already have people who have lost their jobs in the country, yet you bring in more people, so they will lose their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I conclude, I wish to remind and urge all Honourable Members of this august House of our collective responsibility and the importance of working together in partnership at all levels, Government and society as a whole. I have said this so many times and I will say it again, we can only work better if we coordinate better, work smarter and more effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we begin this new session of Parliament, it is my sincere hope that we, as Honourable Members of Parliament, will take His Excellency's Address seriously. It is our duty as parliamentarians, leaders and responsible citizens that we be vigilant and take all necessary measures to ensure that we remain COVID-contained. Therefore, it is imperative, Sir, that we rally together, for the sake of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me this opportunity to address Parliament and also thank His Excellency the President, for his most gracious Address to the House. With those words, I wish all Honourable Members of this august Parliament a safe and merry Christmas and a new year filled with emerging opportunities and prosperity. *Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavaad* and thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- On that note, Honourable Members, we will suspend proceedings for refreshments. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.47 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.20 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, earlier today, under Agenda Item 4(b), I had announced that the Chairperson had transport problem and was not able to make it here on time. The Chairperson is now in the Chamber and we will deal with this report now, and after that, we will continue with the debate.

I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs. You have the floor, Sir.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report on the Sugar Cane Growers Council 2007 – 2018 Annual Reports - Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. My apologies first, and I thank you very much for allowing me to deliver my Report.

The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to report to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report of Sugar Cane Growers Council 2007 to 2018 Annual Reports.

The Sugar Cane Growers Council (SCGC) is recognised as the peak grower's organisation that represents the interest of all cane growers of Fiji. Despite the continuous challenges faced by the sugar industry, the Committee commended the efforts by the Council to continuously provide its mandated services. It is also noteworthy that its offices are conveniently set up and strategically located to assist farmers effectively in all cane growing districts in Fiji.

The Committee visited the SCGC Headquarters earlier this year, to be able to better understand the functions and operations of the Council. During the visit, the Committee noted the various essential services provided by the SCGC to the farmers. These include, but not limited to:

- providing legal and advisory services;
- conducting grower-consultation meetings;
- resolving gang disputes; distribution of farm supplies; assisting in income tax returns; and
- renewal of land leases.

While scrutinising the Reports, the Committee noted that in November 2009, in an effort to facilitate efficiency in terms of costs and implementation of programmes, Councilors were replaced by grower's representatives. Following this, the growers were relieved of the burden of paying a levy of approximately 29 cents to 44 cents per tonne when the Government replaced the levy with an annual grant.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to all the stakeholders for their various input. The Committee would like to acknowledge the CEO of SCGC and his team members for being prompt in answering the various queries and questions raised by the Committee.

Finally, I would like to thank the Honourable Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this Report: the Deputy Chairperson, Honourable Veena Bhatnagar, Honourable George Vegnathan, Honourable Inosi Kuridrani and Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the Secretariat, who gave us invaluable support.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Consolidated Review Report of the Sugar Cane Grower's Council 2007– 2018 Annual Reports to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move a motion without notice:

That a debate on the content of the report is initiated at a future sitting.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now continue with the debate on His Excellency the President's Address and I now call on the Honourable Tabuya. You have the floor, Madam.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, my fellow Members of Parliament; *yadra vinaka*, good morning, *namaste* and *faiaksia*.

I would like to begin by welcoming our two newest Members to this esteemed House, the Honourable Virendra Lal as well as my fellow old girl - Bond University alumnus and my *kai*, Honourable Tanya Waqanika.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 11 women Members of Parliament now in the House, what a milestone achievement as we celebrate today the end of 16 days of activism against violence against women and children. As a survivor of violence myself, I stand tall for all women and children, who continue to face this national shame which we, as leaders, must band together to eliminate.

I would also like to warmly congratulate, on their appointments, our Party Leader, the Honourable Gavoka, and our Deputy Party Leader, my colleague and friend, Mr. Filimoni Vosarogo. I wish to also congratulate the Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu on his election as the Leader of the Opposition and as the Whip, I look forward to working with him closely.

Mr. Speaker, in early December 2017, I was formally invited to bring two political parties together by someone who believed in my sacrifice and potential to add value in the interest of our beloved nation. Three years later, almost to the day, the former Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka, sacrificed his seat in this esteemed House because he believed that bringing us together across the floor in bipartisanship, would be in the best interest of our beloved nation. And I wish to remind the other side of the House that he has, indeed, left and it is upon them, they keep resurrecting him into the House.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to honour his sacrifice and selfless spirit by standing here today and saying to all parties, we are here to add value, let us help. In this time of crisis, our people are

not interested in their leaders shouting at each other across the floor, swearing at one another, or fighting, which the media just loves to highlight on their front page.

Our people are fatigued and looking for solutions to very basic daily needs - food, water and roof over their heads. Our people struggle with job losses that have forced them to look for alternative sources of income, mostly without Government assistance or even FNPF help. Many of our people struggle with paying water and electricity bills, so their water connection is cut and they are getting water from a kind neighbour.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- They are cut because they cannot pay the bill.

Our people struggle with paying mortgages, which will soon return to full interest and principal payments needing to be made as COVID-19 concessions expire. Our people are losing hope and faith in the Government that is responsible for spending their hard-earned taxes to take care of them. So they look to Parliament which includes the Opposition to provide solutions that can save lives. As the Honourable Anthony Albanese, the Australian Opposition Leader, recently said while supporting Government incentives, and I quote: "not because it is perfect, but because it's urgent and in that spirit, I will also vow to keep making suggestions until the Government gets it right."

Now, Mr. Speaker, in addressing His Excellency's Address, we need more than just rhetorical challenges, it requires all of us to roll up our sleeves and get to work now. Not since World War II has the world or our beloved Fiji been faced with such devastating consequences as those brought by COVID-19. But just like World War II, my deep respect and admiration goes to the sacrifices of the men and women on the frontline - our doctors, nurses, armed forces, airport staff and the many other citizens, who turn up to work and get the job done. You all deserve a medal, and our sincerest and heartfelt gratitude.

One of the most important lessons I have seen from COVID, Mr. Speaker, is cutting down costs and becoming self-reliant. This holds true for our beloved nation. Now, while the Honourable Attorney-General has attempted to cut costs in the Budget, such as cutting leadership salaries by as much as 20 percent, I believe more wastage needs to be eliminated. For instance, I would humbly suggest that we have less fleet of gas-guzzling Prados rushing off to yet another celebration or event, and maybe more convoys of Priuses visiting Senior Citizen Homes, Orphanages, HART communities, displaced residents, squatter communities and the homeless.

In the interest of cutting down expenditure, we must take an honest look at the type of sacrifices we all need to make. I believe that the discussions around budget reductions, such as the possible reduction of civil servants' salaries, must be one, done in the true spirit of transparency and with dignity, especially in the light of civil servants being let go with the offer of redundancies.

Would it not be a viable alternative to reduce civil servants' salaries so that all remain employed and share the burden together, rather than seeing their colleagues in the hundreds go home and add to the already high numbers of unemployed people and more burden on FNPF and the social security system with no guarantee of security and stability for their future? Aggressive cost cutting measures are just the beginning. As my *kai*, the Honourable Qereqeretabua, rightly pointed out and I quote, "the true test of our mettle will come once the borders re-open and efforts are ramped up to kick-start the economy through tourism." This will, indeed, be a daunting challenge.

A recent international finance corporation business survey found that half of all tourism-related businesses in Fiji are closed, dissolved or hibernating. One does not need to look far to see

the crumbling state of hotels and thousands of unemployed hotel workers. Former hotel workers I have helped out in our outreach have returned to their villages for their livelihood, and herein lies what I believe to be the answer to addressing His Excellency's Address about our response to COVID-19 and what is needed for our economic recovery. I had already alluded to this in my response to the Budget Address but I am obliged to keep repeating it until something meaningful is done.

Fiji needs that agriculture revolution and it needs it now, not piecemeal attempts like the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment was detailing yesterday without any dollar value, not the piecemeal attempts by the Government that still sees a meagre budget allocation of less than 10 percent of our GDP. A large portion of money saved from our national budget cost-cutting measures and sourced from overseas funds must be directed to revitalising our agriculture infrastructure and knowledge. To grow Fiji's economy, we must grow Fiji's agricultural foundation which is key to faster recovery and poverty reduction.

Recent studies by the World Bank done in the Philippines have found that, and I quote:

“...transforming the country's farming and food systems is even more important during the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure strong food value chains, affordable and nutritious food, and a vibrant rural economy.”

The World Bank Report highlights the importance of modernising and adding value to the agriculture sector. How do we do that? By re-directing our resources to investing in our agricultural infrastructure, diversifying our agricultural products and value-adding.

Firstly, we need to invest more into our agricultural infrastructure. We have to upgrade our ease of access to modern agricultural equipment. Recently a pawpaw farmer was asked why they could not compete with their counterparts in Hawaii. He smiled and said, “While most farmers in Fiji looked up to the sky and tried to guess the reasons why our soil might not be healthy, farmers in the United States stick a pen-like device called “Crop X” in the ground and it sends information about the type of fertiliser needed and how much to use, when you can invest, how big the harvest and how weather will affect it; all to their smart phone via satellite”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that type of technology is available to Fiji farmers but is not widely used, not because they cannot afford it but because most Fiji farmers have button phones and even if they have smart phones, they would not be able to connect to the network. The proposed tower-sharing arrangement with the consistent power supply will certainly complement this type of technology.

Government must increase their incentives and grants given to small and medium farmers and businesses to upgrade both, their tools and knowledge. A simplified way of looking at it could be, that if the Government uses \$90 million of its annual budget to help finance 10 new large private agricultural businesses at \$9 million each, in five years, we would have 10 large agricultural businesses employing thousands of people and generating over \$100 million per year in revenue, which could form the basis of Fiji's agricultural revolution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$90 million a year spent on developing commercial scale agricultural businesses pales in comparison to the billions of dollars that the Government spent working on our roads. Incidentally, this is the annual budget for the Military. Perhaps, it is time to consider repurposing some of the Military's role to more income generating projects in several sectors, including the agriculture sector, which will help the economy grow. The Military is already doing small scale farming with the planting and harvesting of those Taiwanese breed guavas, as well as vegetables in the Nasinu Army Training Group, that the Military sells to our local supermarkets.

Of course, it goes without saying that proper management and upskilling locals is crucial in ensuring the long term sustainability of any such initiatives, but it is possible. Government policies must encourage farmers to invest in the latest farming equipment and to be trained in it. We cannot allow cheap farm machinery made in Asia to flood the market and keep us in the stone age.

Our failing sugar industry can only be revived if more is done to improve its quality and quantity through technology. In Fiji, we average only about 40 tonnes per hectare, while our neighbouring Australia averages twice that and many other countries about three times that amount. Increasing our yields is directly linked to our use of appropriate technology.

I mention appropriate technology because millions of dollars have been spent on sugarcane milling machines that end up not being used because they were the wrong specifications. Secondly, diversifying our agricultural products is crucial in securing our future. If we do not have the money or knowledge to invest in keeping our flailing sugar industry alive, we must find an alternative that can replace it.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, industrial hemp can replace sugar as the backbone of the economy. Now, before the *Fiji Sun* prints a “Lynda becomes Drug Queen” headline. Let me just state this for the record, industrial hemp is not marijuana, and I repeat that, industrial hemp is not marijuana. It does not make you high smoking it. The worst that can happen to you when smoking it, is a massive headache.

I will not delve into legalising marijuana (medical or otherwise) but I would like to point out the reasons what I believe hemp can help save our country. I first came across the innovative idea of industrial hemp replacing sugar after an ADB study recommended it as a replacement for sugar in Fiji nearly two decades ago.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is high time we got serious about hemp or industrial hemp which is a variety of the *cannabis* plant species that is grown specifically for industrial use. It can be used to make a wide range of products. Along with bamboo, hemp is one of the fastest growing plants on earth. It can be refined into a variety of commercial items including paper, rope, textiles, clothing, biodegradable plastics, paint, insulation, biofuel, food and animal feed. Please, allow me to briefly summarise the benefits of hemp.

The environmental advantages are manifold. Hemp only take four months to grow, as opposed to sugarcane which can take up to 16 months to harvest. Hemp requires less water and due to its ability to return nutrients to the soil, it can be the perfect crop rotator for sugarcane. Hemp grows thicker so there is less chance for weeds which means less weedicide and other chemicals and more harvest yield per acre. Clothing made from hemp is more durable and cost efficient, even being 10 times stronger than cotton and polyester.

Growing and harvesting hemp is not only a possible solution to our sugar problems but also a new raw material input for our struggling garment and textile industry which imports large quantities of cotton and polyester. Not only is cotton and polyester not good for our environment because they consume much larger quantities of land, water and other resources to produce compared to hemp, but they also affect our balance of payments, given we import them as an input for the garment industry. Hemp could replace cotton and polyester as a major input, thereby providing not only farmers with the new viable alternative to sugar and an import substitute to cotton and polyester, but it can also provide the garment industry with a locally sourced alternative to which they can add value before exporting.

Why do we not grow organic hemp and make surf clothing and accessories stamped with our internationally recognised Fiji brand, to feed the growing export market which demands these creative, new, environmentally friendly alternatives? Hemp derived material can also be made into a cheaper and stronger replacement for wood. This could be used widely in construction where it would be stronger, lighter and more durable than wood.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate the important of value adding in agriculture, Mr. Speaker. The Fiji 2020 Agriculture Policy Agenda - *Modernising Agriculture* - written in 2014, had many aspirations for 2020 but six years later fell woefully short in its execution, and we all know who is to blame for that, COVID? I think not. One thing that Report did accurately point out was that, and I quote:

“Given the limitation of government resources the best way is to present the development agenda as a package of worthy projects for domestic and international investment”.

Domestic and foreign investment into agriculture must be encourage at all costs, including the removal of bureaucratic requirements that stifle the ease of business.

I would like to conclude by stressing, Mr. Speaker, that the road to a vibrant, resilient and self-sufficient economy is a difficult journey, but one that must be taken in a spirit of honesty, transparency and compassion. It is high time that we all, especially the Government, take heed of the agriculture revolution.

Divesting from industries that leave us vulnerable to outside forces, such as tourism and sugar, is the surest way to guarantee self-sufficiency, self-reliance and an economy we can proudly build for future generations. Let us grow Fiji, let us grow. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Tabuya for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the next speaker on the list.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament; good morning and *namaste* to you all.

I rise this morning to lend my support to His Excellency the President's gracious Address for the opening of 2020-2021 session of Parliament. Firstly, I would like to especially thank His Excellency the President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konrote, for the realistic overview of the country he has provided to us. This is, indeed, at a time when the global community is challenged to find realistic solutions to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 remains a challenge to the health and wellbeing of the nation and to our health system as a whole. The robust measures with the accompaniment of an effective strategy will yield good results. Most importantly, however, is the strong, decisive and unifying leadership that the Honourable Prime Minister has provided to the nation.

Coupled with their leadership is the recovery and social protection measures that were immediately put in place to stem the tide of a potential economic collapse. From small businesses to households, the protection packages contributed in maintaining livelihood in the context of reduced employment and productivity. There is, no doubt, that the challenge was enormous but equally significant lessons have been learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic, to lead to further strengthening of the health system to withstand another health crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed, COVID-19 has had and continues to have negative effects on us all. However, it has, at the same time, provided a context in which we have tested our health system, public health regulations and the fortitude of citizens to respond to crisis.

Mr. Speaker, there is no better time to make good use of the opportunity provided by Government in educating our children than now. The FijiFirst Government has invested into our education system with the objective to advance Fiji to a level that is on par with the developed world.

We want Fiji to be an educated country with high literacy rate, to be at the forefront in research and development, to be the centre for businesses and finance, and to consolidate our position as a leader, especially in the Pacific region. That vision can only be achieved if we invest our resources, our time and our efforts towards the education of our children. Their education should be our priority. Therefore, I urge you all in this august House for your continued support. Let us give them the best we can as they will replace us and will continue our legacy to their children and to their children's children, for future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government believes in true democracy, transparency, equality without any form of discrimination such as gender, race, colour and ethnicity, and it is this faith by every Fijian provided through vast, valuable, political, civil and socio-economic rights enshrined in our Constitution and the Government's commitment towards a bright and secured future for all.

I believe there have been prudent and disciplined financial decisions made to ensure that we achieve a balance in terms of expenditures and revenues, and investments with strong relationships with development partners, along with the extreme climate vulnerabilities that we face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has always invested in our people by caring for those who are vulnerable, building resilience to worsening climate change impacts, empowering the disadvantaged and giving all our people a fair shot at success in our economy.

There are tremendous efforts made by the FijiFirst Government in looking after our oceans and the protection of our marine resources. We would like to have our oceans free from plastics, over-fishing and industrial dumping.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our 2013 Constitution is a landmark achievement for a great nation that has ensured we all are equal, and at the same time, guaranteeing opportunities for all. It has also laid a strong foundation for the future growth and progress of our nation. It has also given great hope to our younger generation to forge ahead with much vigour and enthusiasm, as this great Constitution supports them in every way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as rightly pointed out by His Excellency, our rural development programmes are at the forefront of the Government agenda. More roads, bridges and roadside stalls have been built to ensure our citizens get better access to our towns and cities for the purpose of business and also doing business in the locality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in an unprecedented scale, our landowners have been engaged to ensure that their land is used productively, thus benefiting their own communities and also households. It has also given them opportunity to actively participate in the nation's economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our leap towards technological advancement to digitise Fiji has been embraced with open arms by our responsible citizens. It has provided great platform for our young entrepreneurs to do business in a smart way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our relatively though small economy has maintained a steady growth. Our role as Honourable Members of this august House is to give positive feedback to members of the public, who are curious to know about the developments in our economy. As rightly pointed out by His Excellency, we must not politicise our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noteworthy to say that our younger generation has seized the opportunity to start new business, taking advantages of the many tailor-made initiatives, policies and programmes that have contributed to our nation's economic growth.

We have played a pivotal role in climate change issues and our Honourable Prime Minister has gained respect and adoration, not only in the Pacific region but on a global scale as well. Currently, public consultations on our Climate Change Bill is underway. We must, as Honourable Members, present to the public and make their voices heard before the Bill is finalised and tabled in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member of this august Parliament, I, therefore, appeal to all the Honourable Members to join hands together by disseminating His Excellency's message honestly and truthfully to our people, if we are genuine in taking our nation forward. Gone are the days when we lie to people about the truth, and let us work responsibly as Members of Parliament for the betterment of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I believe we can take our nation to new heights if we are united and work together. Thank you, *Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavad and namaste*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Rohit Sharma for his contribution to the debate. I now call on Honourable Tikoduadua. You have the floor Sir.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before I speak on the motion, I just want to take a moment to pay tribute to a very special woman, who passed away on 17th November, 2020 at the Sisters of our Lady of Nazareth Nursing Home in Wailoku. She was Sister Maria Rafaele, who was 93 years old, a woman unknown to the world and known only to the hundreds of thousands of Fijian lives she touched and to God, her spouse.

During the 70 years she served as a Catholic nun in the order of the sisters of our Lady of Nazareth. She was physically small for a woman, Mr. Speaker, Sir, humbled, warm and of a big heart. Sister Rafa, as she was personally known to her fellow nuns and to those she served was born in Nakorovou, Tailevu, on 28th April, 1927. Sister Rafa served God, her spouse with faithfulness, fidelity, dedication, loyalty, inspired purely by God's love for his beloved and that is God's people. At the time of her death, she had been a Catholic nun for 70 years having made her vows in Solevu in Bua to serve God on 21st November, 1950.

During her work for God and God's beloved people, she served in various Parishes throughout Fiji and that institution belonging to the Sisters of our Lady of Nazareth. These places include Bethany Hostel in Laucala Bay. Thousands of young Fijian women and also from throughout the Pacific who matriculated at USP were housed and cared for by Sister Rafa at the hostel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of these women are leaders in Fiji communities today and in the Pacific at large. Sister Rafa has spent almost 20 years of her life serving and caring for lepers in the leper colony at Makogai and later at the Twomey Hospital for a significant period after Makogai closed. Like her fellow nuns...

Like her fellow nuns who served with her at Makogai, she was motivated and dedicated to serving the people by the undying love for God. Sister Rafa, like her fellow nuns, are unpaid and funded their charity work through their own initiatives. Sister Rafa also served at the Mahaffy Girls Home in Muanikau (I do not think it is still there today), and at the Hilton School for the Handicapped. She also touched the lives of many during her services within the parishes of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Suva.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, she is a saint in heaven today and I pray that many young Fijian women will be inspired to follow in her footsteps and by the example. I wish to end my tribute to Sister Rafa in the words of Saint Matthew's Gospel.

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master's Kingdom.”

Sister Maria Rafaele, Rest in Peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 30th November, 2018, while responding to His Excellency the President's Address, when he opened the new term of Parliament after the General Elections, I said in reference to the FijiFirst Government, and I quote:

“I only hope that faith will be magnanimous and start talking to us, instead of talking at us, because talking at us will not bring equality, dignity and justice to all our people; talking at us will not result in lasting, social, economic and political advancement. Above all, talking at us will cause irreparable damage to race relations in our beloved nation.”

Tragically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, two years later, we are in the state of social, economic and political decay, because of point blank refusal by the current Government to embrace bipartisanship and work collectively to overcome our challenges post November, 2018 General Elections. Strategising low-hanging fruits on level 9 to 48 hours, barely a month of the elections has seemingly exacerbated our decline with nothing left in the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) or nearly bursting the ceiling of our capacity for borrowing at a time, when we need it most during a global pandemic.

We are now facing the wrath of the single biggest calamity since World War II and apart from keeping our population safe, at least till now thanks to border closures worldwide and the sterling work of our health workers, professionals, security personnel and frontline workers. This Government is powerless to do anything else to alleviate the plight of a growing number of our population reeling from lack of help and below are the facts staring at us daily.

The first is the 115,000 unemployed and increasing, thousands more enduring wage reductions through reduced hours or rates, total lack of respect for collective agreement between unions and statutory employers in terms of fair and adequate redundancy packages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this total lack of empathy is also likely the result of declaring COVID-19 an act of God in May. We had then warned it was a noose around the workers' neck as it would casualise employment and deny them fair redundancy packages. At that time, Fiji Airways workers where some summarily dismissed with total disregard their redundancy agreement of three months' pay plus three weeks' pay for each year of service.

Air Terminal Services (ATS) workers were also kicked out without notice. In both cases, the terminated workers found out sooner rather than that their jobs were advertised in the *Fiji Sun*. We

know that some ATS workers were re-hired, but for a day or two in a week. If this is not casual employment, what is it, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Is this the Bainimarama Boom?

The second, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the total reliance on FNPF Funds for survival by the unemployed and those on reduced wages, not forgetting Government's own reliance on the fund to be the biggest source of domestic debt. That stood a little over \$3 billion or more than half of the total debt as at 31st July, 2019. Is this the Bainimarama Boom?

Third is the public health and medical system that is deteriorating as fast as the sugar industry. We are inundated with complaints about the state of hospitals and health centres, and lack of basic medication. We are bombarded with complaints about lack of/or breakdown of diagnostics, as well as the inability of hospitals to perform simple blood tests.

There is growing concern about women's reproductive health. The wellbeing of our women, most of them are mothers in rural areas, is critical to the health of their respective families and their children.

The role of all women, particularly rural women, is ensuring that the health and nutritional requirements of their families cannot be emphasised enough. A sick woman or mother severely undermines this important aspect of a healthy family, many of whom are already looking for cheaper options of food and medication just for daily survival. Is this the Bainimarama Boom?

Fourth, Mr. Speaker, is that the sugar industry is in comatose with no hope whatsoever of revival by this Government. From 3.2 million tonnes of sugarcane and 310,000 tonnes of sugar in 2006 before the Military Government and later the Bainimarama-led Government took control, we are now producing in 2020, 1.73 million tonnes of sugarcane and 152,000 tonnes of sugar.

We had 18,272 active growers in 2006. In 2019, we had 11,902 growers, a reduction of more than 6,000 growers. Now, growers are faced with a fresh predicament of denial of a guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne of cane. The 2019 season payment finally paid out on 20th October, saw growers being short-paid by \$2.79 per tonne of sugarcane, or almost \$5.04 million in total where calculations are based on the 2019 total cane crop of a little over 1.806 million tonnes.

On 31st August, we, through a question to the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Sugar Industry, pre-warned him about declining production and increasing TCTS - tonnes of cane required to make one tonne of sugar. He replied to our question saying that the sugar industry was booming like the Bainimarama boom. He said we did not understand how TCTS worked.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a little over three months later, the Honourable Prime Minister had to literally swallow his own words - low cane production, low sugar production and TCTS of 11.38, worse than 2019. Boom has exploded, Sir, but in the face of the Honourable Prime Minister's very own eyes. His bragging rights, in my opinion, are best suited for drama and theatrics - not the highest court of the land where we deal with facts and figures. Is this the Bainimarama boom, Mr. Speaker?

Fifth is the lack of any positive impact on the exorbitant prices of food, medicine and other basic items by the so-called duty reductions announced in the 2020-2021 National Budget, thereby ensuring the cost of living that had sky-rocketed and made mockery of low inflation, remains as a sore thumb for our ordinary people. More and more people are resorting to cheaper alternatives, or forced to live on half-filled stomachs.

Mr. Speaker, basic food items still carry VAT of 9 percent, so do all medication, including prescribed medicine. We frequently see patients or their relatives checking prices of medicine in

pharmacies and opting not to take the fully prescribed causes, but half or even less, just to shrug off the illness but not to fully recover. Is this the Bainimarama boom?

Sixth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the deteriorating infrastructure, particularly roads under Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) and the water supply under the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), leaves much to be desired. AP40 continues to be used to fill potholes and barely a week later, gets uprooted or washed out. Even new road sealing leaves much to be desired. Old tarseal is being scraped and the roads coated with fresh seal. It is a cosmetic exercise because just like scars, one can clearly see the remnants of a pothole, even after the road's top layer is scraped. It is just going through the motions, never a desire to implement a lasting solution. Why such shoddy workmanship? The answer is obvious – *sa sega na i lavo, paisa nahi hai* or no money.

I will also request the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure to clarify whether or not local contractors are being hired, of course, through stringent tender processes to carry out major road-related works that have been funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The Honourable Minister should clarify whether works funded by the ADB have a caveat that for local companies to have an annual turnover of \$18 million to qualify for projects funded by the ADB.

Mr. Speaker, WAF is another organisation that is seemingly plagued with financial woes. We have had water cuts in the Central Division for many months. The reasons - lack of rain means low reservoir levels; heavy rain also means low reservoir levels. Why, Mr. Speaker?

The pumps are not working because electricity has failed. What about generators? We are told the under-capacity generators cannot operate constantly and go off after a few hours. When there is heavy rain, debris clogs the filters of purifiers. Common sense dictates that personnel have to be on standby to clear debris.

Then there is emergency water cartage in the Western Division. We are told that families have to call a toll free number that connects to Suva and authorisation is given from the Headquarters for water cartage because district officers are powerless.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2,000 litres of water is being rationed per household for two weeks. We know that most rural families have extended households, so 2,000 litres would last, at best, three days. And to add salt to injury, 5,000 litres capacity water tanks supplied to homes before the 2018 General Election, that were filled each week, now remain dry and empty after votes have been cast. Is this, Mr. Speaker, the Bainimarama Boom?

Seventh, Mr. Speaker, is that majority of the members of the Fiji Police Force are professionals and law abiding. However, it pains us to see cases of police brutality, resulting in serious injuries, or even death, and police inaction in responding to complaints. This is a sign of an unprofessional Force that does not respect its motto of *salus populi* and the rule of law. It demonstrates indiscipline and a lack of competent leadership.

Only yesterday, it was reported that a senior police officer, who received a medal, was being investigated for child rape. Worse, the officer was still at work, despite the police policy stipulating personnel facing such allegations have to be suspended.

This is the level playing field that is being created in a Force that has been, for long, absolutely trusted and respected by our people. Heinous crimes are alright, physical frailties and medical conditions are punished. Worst cases of police brutality continue unabated ever since my arrest in April 2020 for highlighting the brutal bashing and torturing of one citizen at Naqia Village.

Why is this happening, with blatant disregard to the rule of law and non-conformity to police ethics? The answer lies in the lack of professionalism arising out of recruitment process of personnel and a few rogue elements or bad apples, tarnishing the image of the good Force. It is leadership and governance. It is the notion that a few rogues can become the law unto themselves and defame the entire Force of hardworking men and women. If I, as a Member of Parliament, can be traced and arrested for highlighting through a video, the cries and pain of a victim of police brutality, then what becomes of ordinary citizens, Mr. Speaker, and their human rights in police custody, if they end up with rogue officers?

Eighth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the perceived lack of independence of independent institutions. For example, the Fijian Elections Office, through the Supervisor of Elections and the Registrar of Political Parties, was like a noose around our necks, threatening us with barrage of letters for more than two months, refusing to accept or believe our explanations. Yet, when it comes to FijiFirst accounts and disclosures, it was cleared in no time, despite the fact that millions of dollars were raised. We wonder if the bank statements were compared against receipts to ascertain the truth! If not, why not, Mr. Speaker? Is the truth too painfully discriminating?

This perceived lackadaisical approach is being regarded as sweeping the issue under the carpet.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- It does not bode well for a office vested with delivering totally free, fair, credible polls based on electoral integrity.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We have donations. Don't misrepresent, Honourable Tikoduadua.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, may I continue?

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Nineth, Sir, is the lack of accountability and transparency with no effort whatsoever to implement the code of conduct for Government and MPs. The Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights is gathering dust since April 2019. Without it, there is no Accountability and Transparency Commission. Why, Mr. Speaker?

Tenth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that this morning, we heard the Honourable Attorney-General talk about our Government's policies were creating jobs. He referred to 23 new jobs. At the same time, a few hundred Technical College staff, most who are ancillary workers, do not know their future after 31st December with no guarantee of a fair redundancy.

Then we have the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) staff being targeted. We are told that 25 percent of the total FRCS staff will be made redundant at the end of December, that is, more than 230 employees, not only frontline Customs Officers. They have been asked to express their interest for voluntary redundancy and take up the offer of one week's pay for each year of service, failing which, redundancies will be enforced. The reason – a \$10 million budgetary reduction. Staff have been offered to forego one-day's pay each week to save their colleagues and maintain job security. Mr. Speaker, this is like taking away labourers from the vineyard because there are no grapes, or simply revenue collectors have no money to rake in for the State. Is this the Bainimarama boom, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker, we live in extraordinary times. The pandemic shows no sign of abating. Our frontline workers, health professionals and security personnel from the Disciplined Forces will continue to work tirelessly to keep all of us safe.

The only way to overcome the challenges facing us, is to take a giant leap of faith and march forward in unison. It is a time to stop pretending that all is and will be well. It is a time to stop bragging about booms and how visionary the leadership has been because this myth has fallen flat on its face when confronted with a challenge. This is a time for sound and sensible leadership, not grandstanding or 'my way' or the 'highway-type' of road that we have been subjected to for the last 14 years and above all, this is the time to take that giant leap of faith. We must not be faint-hearted. The decisions we make and the actions we take, will have a profound bearing on the future of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, all that is left for me to say is to wish you and the Parliamentary staff and all the Members of our House and your families and the nation at large, a very merry Christmas and a fruitful 2021. Thank you, *vinaka vakalevu*.

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

Honourable Members, I now call on the Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of this august House; *bula re* and a very good afternoon. I rise in this august House to lend my support to the motion by the Honourable Prime Minister, to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me first acknowledge the hopeful statement made by His Excellency the President, as he reminded all Fijians that we are still in the midst of the global COVID-19 crisis, while we continue to battle the climate crisis. Nevertheless, we have proved not only to ourselves but also to the rest of the world, the spirit of resilience that is in the core of every Fijian.

This same resilience has allowed us to build back stronger from natural disasters and helped us to celebrate and mark our 50th Anniversary of Independence as a COVID19-contained country. And I personally believe that, because of our resilience, the best is yet to come for Fiji.

Secondly, I echo the sentiments of the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management in acknowledging the visionary leadership of the Bainimarama-led Government that has revealed the masked potentials for Fiji through our 5-year and 20-year National Development Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Fiji settles into the 2020-2021 tropical cyclone season, achievements of our National Development Plan and its planned initiatives are threatened by the possible onset of natural disasters, some of which can be terrible in nature that, unfortunately, we have become accustomed to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this august House has heard how, through good governance, the Bainimarama-led Government has developed legislations, policies and plans to safeguard our hard-won developments. Fiji has even made notable achievements on the world stage because of it however, we will not rest on our achievements. We will continue with our efforts to secure all people and our environment for a better future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I concur with His Excellency the President in applauding frontline responders for COVID-19. They have shown their loyalty and care for fellow Fijians in serving diligently and passionately at the various isolation facilities to ensure that COVID-19 is contained. The containment of this deadly disease is, indeed, a test of the effectiveness of the COVID-19 safe restrictions and protocol carefully designed by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has put in place relevant interventions, aimed at maintaining our current COVID-contained status and, at the same time, drive economic recovery and build communities that are resilient to disasters and have measures of climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to share some of these ongoing risk-informed developments, in particular those that have taken place in the rural communities from the friendly Northern Division and the Eastern Division respectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to providing an enabling environment, the Ministry will continue to empower our rural population to contribute to the socio-economic development of Fiji. In my contribution today, I will be elaborating on Government initiatives in the Northern Division and Eastern Division.

In the Northern Division alone, Government has, since 2016, invested a total of \$1.4 million in Self-Help Projects, while the Eastern Division recorded \$0.5 million. As also mentioned by the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management this morning, the Self-Help Scheme has moved from solely focussing on social projects to a livelihoods-approach to address root causes of poverty. This is implemented through the provision of income-generating opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the current trend, we are seeing the urban to rural migration of skilled workers. This Self-Help Grant will ensure that skills do not go to waste in the rural areas, but are strengthened for effective socio-economic contribution to the communities and the country. We acknowledge that COVID-19 also brings opportunities to rethink our systems and make them more resilient to future shocks. Sir, I must note that it is obvious that such programmes also support our commitment to various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The construction of community access roads is another fine example of the Ministry's Rural Empowerment Programmes. While our remote rural areas make available the market for primary products that feed our primary and secondary industries, the construction of such roads will assist with making this market accessible. In the Northern Division, Government has invested \$0.7 million over a four year period with a total of 29 projects implemented. For the Eastern Division, a total of \$0.3 million has been invested in this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in facilitating the expansion of our services to remote rural areas, the Government has invested \$0.5 million in the establishment of Government stations on the island of Koro. This Government Station will serve a population of 3,000 by bringing Government services closer to the people. It also reduces the risks that the people of Koro have to face when crossing to Ovalau by sea to access Government services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just last month, an additional Government Station was opened in Kavala on the island of Kadavu to complement the existing station at Vunisea. Government has invested \$1.2 million for this project to ensure that the four *Tikina* of Yale, Ono, Nakasaleka and Naceva can eliminate the risks and cost of travelling to Vunisea by sea, to access Government services. In addition to these, an administration station is currently being constructed in Wainikoro, Macuata, and additional residential quarters in Kubulau, worth \$1 million and \$0.5 million respectively.

Next year, the Government is proposing the establishment of Government offices in the Lau Group. Initial works had commenced for the construction of a station in Vanuabalavu. There have also been discussions to consider one for the Yasayasa Moala or Central Lau group of islands. This serves to contribute to Government efforts in bridging the development gap that is existent in the Eastern Division, particularly in the Lau Group and through the establishment of these Government offices, the risks and cost of travelling to access Government service is eliminated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me emphasise that extending the risk to our communities will certainly establish an enabling environment for the potential of our rural and maritime islands, as we reset the rural community for Fiji's economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, through the Integrated Rural Development Framework (IRDF), it collaborates with other agencies in the identification of pressing and long term development issues for our rural and maritime communities. In addition, our District Advisory Councils (DACs) provide development management link between the communities and the Government, and this is done through promoting, facilitating and implementing Government policies within their communities.

The DAC meetings in the Northern Division were conducted last month and the councillors were also briefed on the new terms of reference to which they are required to work. The Eastern Division DAC was conducted yesterday. The Ministry is doing its best to improve its level of preparedness for disaster, and this is one of the reasons for convening DAC meetings last month and this month, so that it drives the message of preparedness continuously to our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry works with other Government agencies to implement adaptation measures in response to climate change, as well as programmes for mitigation and adaptation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the Honourable Minister for Waterways and Environment for the various initiatives implemented in our rural coastal areas and river banks, such as the planting of mangroves and vetiver grass and construction of seawalls. These include projects such as the nature-based eco-seawall in Raviravi Village, Macuata; the new hybrid seawall at Viro Village, Ovalau; and the nature-based seawall in Nabukadra Village, Ra, to name a few. Planting of vetiver grass in those areas were also carried out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been involved in the Ridge to Reef activities. Earlier this year, the Ministry signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Ministry of Waterways and Environment. The purpose of the MOA is to document a framework of cooperation between the Ministries, to effectively and collectively implement the project titled, "Implementing a Ridge to

Reef Approach to Preserve Ecosystem Services, Reduce Carbon, Improve Climate Resilience and Sustain Livelihoods in Fiji”.

This Project is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) with funds implemented through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with activities executed in Fiji through the Ministry of Waterways and Environment. The project, under MOA, will be implemented for six water catchment areas in Vunivia, Tunuloa, Labasa in the Northern Division, Tavua and Ba in the Western Division, and Rewa and Waidina catchments in the Central Division.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is represented in the National REDD Plus Steering Committee, which is led by the Ministry of Forests. This is to ensure that we also participate in the decision-making process for initiatives that impact the environment and climate action, and to assist in the dissemination of information to our rural people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the push from global and regional disaster risk reduction agendas, Fiji has also recognised the need for a proactive approach to disasters and not a reactive approach. Government endorsed in 2019 the National Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Policy, outlining 122 action items that will mainstream disaster risk reduction into all aspects of development. However, the Government has already been investing in DRR activities that will safeguard our vulnerable, rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, between 2014 and 2018, a total of 10 DRR Projects were implemented in the Northern Division and one in the Eastern Division. These DRR Projects include; the construction of seawalls, construction and retrofitting of evacuation centres, river bank protection and relocation of climate-displaced communities. A total of \$2.3 million has been invested by the Government to safeguard our vulnerable rural and maritime communities by building their resilience to the impacts of natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another critical service that Government provides is the coordination of disaster risk management activities. The establishment of district administration offices in these remote areas will act as the coordination hub to deliver timely disaster relief to ease suffering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government officials are currently being trained on how to work as a team in an emergency operation centre. Please, allow me to thank the Government of Australia, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, whose funding support through the Australian Humanitarian Partnership has allowed these trainings to take place. Those trainings will equip Government officers with the right skills and knowledge to work as a team inside an emergency operation centre, to deliver timely response to ease suffering of disaster in affected communities. The target area of these trainings has been the Northern Division with trainings conducted in Taveuni and two more trainings to be conducted in Labasa and Savusavu respectively.

The Ministry has also established smart partnership with NGOs through the Fiji Cluster System, to ensure that disaster-ready activities also reach our rural and maritime communities. One such activity is the delivery of community-based disaster risk management trainings. Through those trainings, our communities are empowered with the knowledge and skills which they can add to their existing traditional coping mechanisms to respond to and bounce back from the impacts of disaster. For this financial year, a total of 20 communities have been trained in the Northern and Eastern Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these community-based disaster risk management trainings will also empower the communities to form and establish their Disaster Management Committee, that will then develop a Community Disaster Plan (CDP) which will be tested through a model exercise where

the communities are given scenarios to test and validate their plan. This plan is, of course, aligned to our existing disaster risk management arrangements. While the Government through the Ministry coordinates disaster response activities, we also empower our communities with skills to build their resilience to natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in looking to the future, the overwhelming concerns are the climate crisis with impending impacts of terrible natural disasters. This, coupled with the global COVID-19 crisis, will only test our resolve, but come what may, Government through the Ministry will continue to provide the enabling environment to reset the rural economy and build our people's resilience to disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, we all know that we are in the cyclone season. We have been experiencing heavy rain this week. I urge all Honourable Members of this august House to encourage our families and communities to take heed of the alerts, advisories and notices of weather conditions and take precautionary measures accordingly. Let us all be responsible and embrace disaster preparedness and readiness to be role models for the people that we serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity to respond to His Excellency the President's Address and wish Honourable Members of this House a merry Christmas and a successful and prosperous New Year. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Maritime Development for his contribution to the debate.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 12.32 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.41 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members we will continue with the debate. I now call upon the Honourable Vosanibola. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute to the motion before the House. First and foremost, I sincerely thank His Excellency the President for his gracious Opening Address on Monday, 30th November, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst analysing the Opening Address by His Excellency, it focuses on the:

- containment on COVID-19;
- economic recovery;
- response to climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis; and
- Government's legislative agenda for this parliamentary session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was expecting the Opening Address to discuss further on the Economic Recovery Framework and its policies. Nevertheless, Sir, I wish to deliberate on the containment of COVID-19 and the economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the containment of COVID-19 in Fiji, we all commend the sterling performance of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services staff and members of the Disciplinary Forces in sustaining the containment of COVID-19 in our country, as highlighted by His Excellency the President, and I quote from Page 2 of the *Daily Hansard* on Monday, 30th November, 2020: "It has been more than 220 days since the last case of COVID-19 among the public and together, we potentially saved thousands of Fijian lives."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that very successful intervention, I propose to this House that there is a dire need to review some of the COVID-19 restrictive measures in place, such as the percentages or number of religious worshippers to congregate in a church service. The sports ground facilities have been filled with thousands of spectators and I will give as an example, the Farebrother Sullivan Trophy Rugby Match between Tailevu and Nadi at Prince Charles Park, whereby it enhances economic activity in public transportation, food outlets, markets and others at the jetset town, but most importantly, there was no further local transmission on any new case of COVID-19 or the virus from that event. Sir, on the above case, I strongly recommend that all religious worshippers to attend their church services rather than restricting numbers or percentages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said in this House about this global pandemic which I totally agree and thank the Government for the plans and actions taken towards its containment. Sir, our main role and responsibility in this august House is to debate the nation's affairs and pass laws. The Public Health Act had been amended in the last Parliament session, therefore, it is also pertinent to review the existing legislation which specifically and legally deals with ships, aircrafts, passenger clearances and border control.

Sir, the Quarantine Act (Cap. 112) which was enacted in 1964, is specifically enforced by quarantine officers of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services who are appointed by the quarantine authority which is the Permanent Secretary for Health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the exponential increase in international travel and trade, and the emergence and re-emergence of international diseases, threats and other health risks, Fiji as a World

Health Organization Member States agreed to implement the International Health Regulations 2005. Here in Fiji, it synchronises with our Public Health Act and the Quarantine Act (Cap. 112).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the stated purpose and scope of the International Health Regulation 2005 is to prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease in ways that commensurate with and is restricted to public health risks, which avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic and trade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we are living in extraordinary times, there have been changes and the revolution and emergence of new diseases and transmission patterns, international movement of travellers and mode of transportation which pose risks to disease transmission either globally or locally, I, therefore, strongly recommend to the other side of the House, especially the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for the review of the Quarantine Act (Cap. 112) to be on par with new development on international travelling, global emergence of diseases and its transmission and the risks involved.

Sir, on economic recovery and according to the Economic Review by the Reserve Bank of Fiji for the month of October 2020, the global economic conditions remained fragile with daily increases in new COVID-19 virus cases in many parts of the world where the spread of the virus had previously been partly brought under control. Domestically, the magnitude of this year's economic contraction is expected to be smaller than initially anticipated, whereas next year's projected recovery largely hinges on the opening of the international borders and the resumption of travel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian economy is envisaged to contract by 19 percent in stemming from higher than expected growth in the agriculture sector, coupled with lower than anticipated declines in the wholesale and retail trade, also on restaurants, hotels, manufacturing and construction sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our very weak economic condition situation, the Government should reveal the extent of its cash problem in light of the proposed redundancy of workers. Government cannot continue to say that our financial position is normal when the signs are all around us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I quote from the Opening Address by His Excellency the President as outlined on Page 4 of the *Daily Hansard* on Monday, 30th November, 2020:

“Our people's well-being also cannot be separated from our economy's recovery. We cannot settle for providing struggling Fijians with short-term assistance, we owe them each the opportunity to work again in jobs they have loved, in established sectors with potential for growth, as well as in emerging and cutting-edge industries.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that tourism and aviation industries remain dormant or static locally and globally but only God knows the time when the two industries will be back in full operations. Therefore, the Government must develop, support and provide much more financial, mechanical and technical assistance on our three main established sectors, such as agriculture, fisheries and forests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sectoral performance continued to be well below 2019 levels in the first 10 months of this year. As of October, we know that visitors arrival declined by 80.7 percent, a consequence of the prolonged closure of international borders. Electricity generation also fell by -10.4 percent, together with cement by -14 percent and gold by 110.5 percent production. In addition, Sir, output from the timber industry showed mixed results as pinewood supply by 22.8 percent and woodchip output sawn timber increased by 45.7 percent, while sawn timber by -11.4 percent and mahogany by -22.5 percent production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank my dear friend, the Honourable Minister for Forests, and staff for the launching of the Million Trees Initiative on the islands of the Lomaiviti Province, the setting up of plant seedling nurseries and its awareness to communities and also the launching of the Coral Farming Initiative in Levuka, on the Island of Ovalau. The forestry sector has a huge potential to support economic development, especially the hard declining economic situation in our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has a total of 1.2 million hectares of forests and with plans and programmes stipulated in the Ministry of Forests' Operational Plan 2020-2021, we expect growth from these natural resources based on our economy. When our main economic drivers are declining, I strongly recommend that the Honourable Minister for Forests be provided with more support and resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to sustain growth in these resource-based sectors, we need to take into consideration the rights, interests and aspirations of the resource owners. I would like to inform this august House that our position in regards to the forestry sector remains unchanged, and we will continue to advocate the following as defined in our 2018 Manifesto:

- (1) Sustainable development of the natural resources such as forestry; and
- (2) creating meaningful jobs and adding value to the national economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the last Annual Report submitted to Parliament by the Ministry of Forests - the 2015 Annual Report, performance indicates that the:

- total log production was 522,008 cubic metres;
- total log input for sawmill production was 140,313 cubic metres, sawn timber volume was 70,714 cubic metres and sawmill recovery rate were at 50.48 percent;
- export of forest products - pine chips with 44 percent on total export earnings whilst mahogany recorded the lowest export earnings of \$57,500; and
- import of forest products with the total import of \$15.2 million with sawmill timber which dominates the imports amounting to \$3.4 million.

On the current sectoral performance, domestically, there is a weak demand and supply-side constraints which led to the contraction in pine wood, sawn timber and mahogany.

In August 2019, woodchip weakened at -24.6 percent and an increase of 7 percent in August this year. Mahogany gained 39.8 percent in August 2019 but weakened at -28 percent in August 2020. Pinewood intake weakened in the period of August last year by 13.1 percent and also in August 2020 at -8.1 percent. In November 2020, the Economic Review reported an increase of pinewood supply by 22.8 percent and woodchip output by 45.7 percent, as mentioned earlier.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on export performance, Fiji's main timber-related exports are woodchips followed by mahogany and other wood products. Total exports for timber increased in the Year 2015 at \$85 million, but declined in 2016 at \$55.3 million and 2017 at \$19.7 million, an increase in 2018 at \$100.4 million. The total export of timber was \$57 million and this year, it is being forecasted at \$32.2 million. Nevertheless, woodchips remain the major forestry export earner for Fiji to-date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the gross domestic production contributes to forestry and logging sectors the total share of GDP which is 0.6 percent. However, the output from the sector is also used as

valuable input into manufacturing processes which include sawmilling and planning of wood as well as the manufacture of wood products; this has a share of 0.7 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I wish to highlight some issues and sincerely request the Honourable Minister for Forestry for his advice in this august House on the following:

- (1) The strategies to improve 50.48 percent recovery rate in order to minimise wastage.
- (2) The forest sector policy reforms to enhance its contribution towards Fiji's National Gross Domestic Product.
- (3) The export policy reforms like value-adding to forest products that will enhance communities' forests to generate income and increase export revenues.
- (4) Evidence-based policy reforms for the sector to produce its own sawn timber to prevent and minimise import of those products and simultaneously, any chance of value-adding to quality products to maximise exports to markets so that the revenue is retained within our country.
- (5) Evidence-based policy reforms and justifications to enhance strong demand and supply of pinewood, sawn timber and mahogany in the world market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight some issues from the Lomaiviti Province. I sincerely thank the Government and its responsible Ministers for the action taken towards matters, which I have been raising in this august House pertaining to the post *TC Winston* Rehabilitation Programme. These include the construction of new classrooms and other amenities to replace all destroyed school buildings in the Lomaiviti Group as follows, the:

- (1) opening of the Nakodu Mudu Primary School in Koro Island by the Honourable Prime Minister;
- (2) continuous reticulated water supply project for Moturiki Island;
- (3) provision of outboard motors to fishing wardens to guard their marine-protected areas and the solar refrigeration equipment at Navaga Village in Koro Island; and
- (4) provision of farming tools and equipment to the Nasaumatua Youth Group of Lovoni Village in the Island of Ovalau and the Naseasara Youth Group of Moturiki Island.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to report to this House the malfunction diesel generators for electrification at Naqaidamu and Namacu Villages of Koro Island and request the Honourable Minister responsible to urgently look into the matter.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to remind the Honourable Minister for Local Government for the construction of the new Levuka Town Market in this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our sinful acts to the environment through development and industrialisation enhance on climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis. As alluded to by the Honourable Minister for Forests, and I quote:

“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 may I also add the oceans and biodiversity crisis.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with His Excellency the President's keynote Address, and I quote:

“Our coastline, our reefs are disappearing, storms are becoming stronger and farming is impacted by the changing weather patterns.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *Holy Bible* in the Book of Isaiah 24:4-13 reminds us, and I quote:

- “4. The earth wilts away, its mighty leaders melt to nothing.
- 5. The earth is polluted because its people disobey the law, breaking their agreement that was to last forever.
- 6. The earth is under curse, its people are dying out because of their sins. 10. Towns are crushed and in chaos, houses are locked tight.
- 11. Happy times have disappeared from the earth and people shout in the streets.
- 12. Cities are destroyed, their gates are torn down.
- 13. Nations will be strapped bare, like olive trees or vineyards after the harvest season.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Coronavirus; economic recovery; and climate, oceans and biodiversity crisis, I wish to inform this House that it also requires supernatural powers or spiritual intervention to mitigate, and the solution is Jesus. Jesus is the reason for the coming season. May I quote from the *Bible* on 2 Chronicles 7:14, and I quote:

“If my own people ... will humbly ... pray and ... turn back to me and stop sinning, then I will hear them from Heaven. I will forgive them and heal their land.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank you for your indulgence and may I wish you, Sir, all the Parliament staff and all the Honourable Members of Parliament a blessed Christmas and a Prosperous New Year. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Vosanibola for his contribution to the debate. I now call on the Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji; I rise to commend and thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address.

Once again, he has aptly summarised our key concerns and laid out the key components of Government's legislative agenda for this Parliamentary Session. He has highlighted the three things that we, as a nation, need to focus on now in our country:

- (1) COVID-19;
- (2) the need to restore our economy; and
- (3) the greatest challenge the world faces today - climate change.

He has also reminded us that we, in Fiji, are fortunate that we have our 2013 Constitution that ensures we have a just and fair political system, and which is steering Government to ensure equal opportunities and enjoyment, and protection of rights for all the people of this country. COVID-19 is the scourge of the day - 65 million cases and 1.5 million deaths, this is impacting health, life, economy and it is impacting everything else on this planet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was taken aback with the comments made by the Honourable Bulanauca during the week on COVID-19, in particular his rant on COVID-19. He said that COVID-19 was invented by a group of rich people around the world, who are acting as God, creating chaos and paving a path to a one-world government and one world order through controlling and tracing people on the forehead.

He questioned the use of science to battle COVID-19. What utter nonsense! Pure absurdity! Science is merely understanding the laws of nature or the laws that God the Creator has used to address the ills that befall us (these are all science) and using this understanding to minimise negative impacts.

I am sure that the Honourable Member uses a mobile phone. Science is built into this phone. If you have a laptop, science is built into that laptop. If you are using a microphone, science is built into that microphone. Science is everywhere. It is just a way of getting things done. We need to know a thing or two about science and harness the knowledge of using science because the whole world relies on science. It is just an understanding the laws that God created.

The cost of ignoring science in handling COVID-19 has been stuck. Science tells us to hand wash, it tells us to social distance, it tells us to use PPE and if we ignore this, it invites spikes in death. Just look around! In USA, see what is happening there, because they are ignoring science. Fiji is fortunate that we have the leadership of this Prime Minister during this COVID-19 pandemic, and a leader who has recognised what needed to be done, who has listened to the experts and then made quick, precise and deliberate decisions on how to address this problem.

Honourable Professor Prasad keeps saying that this Government has no vision, no plan and zero vision. I think he is zero, but if you look back at the history of this Honourable Prime Minister, from the time he started his vision is seen in this Constitution - the rights of the people, bringing this country together, making sure that the socio-economic rights of people are preserved in this country. That is the vision and over and above that, if you want to see the outcome, we have been able to contain COVID-19 in this country because of the vision of this Honourable Prime Minister and our plan.

We are making an impact on the people of this country so thank you, Honourable Prime Minister, for your decision. Thank you, Honourable Minister for Health. Thank you to the Ministry of Health Back Office Team and to all the frontline workers. Hats off to all of our COVID-19 frontline workers for your courage, dedication, loyalty and for your sacrifice. Thank you to all of you. I applaud you, Fiji applauds you and we are indebted to you.

My Ministry has been playing its part in addressing COVID-19. Our Geo-specialists have been successfully creating platforms - not zero platforms but real platforms, to provide a bird's eye view on the distribution of cases, suspected cases, contact-tracing, health facilities, including isolation centres and fever clinics, through the Vanua GIS COVID-19 and Dashboard Platforms. After the announcement of Fiji's first positive case of COVID-19, the Department of Works rolled into action, swiftly responding and preparing infrastructure support facilities needed by the Ministry of Health.

Access to clean water has been critical for hand-washing in order to control COVID-19. We have focused on trying to ensure as much as possible that people have access to that water. Honourable Tabuya, the Water Authority of Fiji (WAR) has not disconnected water meters of domestic accounts, despite budget reductions. That has not been done, so let us not say that in this House.

Our subsidised water initiatives continue, despite budget restrictions, benefitting more than 150,000 households, even with our aged infrastructure that we have begun to replace.

This week we had a burst main in Nakasi, causing loss of pressure. This was followed by a 30 year old valve giving up. We did not immediately carry out the repairs last night because to do that, would have meant having a large part of Nasinu without water, but we persevere. The process of upgrading infrastructure continues, whilst we manage such daily challenges.

We have not forgotten our most vulnerable, in terms of access to power. Subsidies for electricity to lower income households continue and Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) has provided an additional subsidy to the same households from April 2020 to December 2020.

The economic shock of COVID-19 has been enormous and economic recovery is now critical. For the Ministry, as part of this process, we have reviewed our overall directions. We have relooked at our vision, mission and our values. We have relooked at our structures and commenced fine-tuning all of these. We are fine-tuning our service delivery to assist in economic recovery. Some examples of this include:

- A waiver of interest on rental arrears for a six months' amnesty period from 1st November, 2020 to 30th April, 2020.
- Encouraging undertakings or arrangements for rental arrears for our lessees and such arrangements have enabled 10 businesses to pay a sum of approximately \$200,000 over a period of time, and three of these entities have been able to clear their arrears this year. So there has been some flexibility in the way we manage our lessees.
- These measures assist those who have been laid off due to the pandemic and people who lease State land, and this has brought about financial relief and security for our lessees.
- Identifying our key processes, mapping these processes and making improvements to them. This exercise is being undertaken both, in Infrastructure and Meteorological Services and also in Lands and Mineral Resources.
- A review of Operational Plan targets to include the time taken to achieve each process, the monitoring of this and taking remedial action as and when needed, is what we are also doing.

Fiji has high-value mineral resources that contribute significantly to the national economy. We are looking to develop our more sustainable mining industry, so that the sector will continue to provide employment, income, foreign exchange earnings and revenue for Government.

We are doing our utmost to increase and enhance mining activities in the near future with primacy given to our environment because we want to make sure that nothing bad happens to our environment, with eight mining leases currently being monitored and 78 exploratory licences being issued.

With border closures, our mining companies have faced delays in receiving mining supplies from other countries, but we applaud these companies for hanging in there to continue operations until we return to normalcy, especially as this sector employs approximately 2,000 workers, who are still being employed by these mining companies.

Many of these companies who are not able to bring in international expatriates for exploration and mining activities. Many of them have been forced to use their local workers to conduct drilling and exploration programmes, who then liaise with their offshore experts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was this Government (not all governments that came before), that ensured that landowners receive 80 percent of royalty from mining.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- This is the Government that did it! This is the Prime Minister that did that!

Now, we have paid out a total of \$5.34 million to three iTaukei landowning units (LOUs) and two Freehold landowning units since 2018. The LOUs will continue to benefit from this pay-out as Mineral Royalty Fair Share.

The Mineral Resources Department's (MRD) Environmental Officers conduct routine environment monitoring site visits to the exploration and mining sites, to ensure that mining and exploration companies adhere to our requirements for protecting the environment.

We are ramping up the promotion and support of locally investment in different ways, by issuing as appropriate, special leases and licences, such as tourism lease, jetty licence and acquiring land for public purposes, all of these, to boost economic returns for all Fijians.

We are making sure that good State agricultural land is provided to those who will use it productively. We are retaining as much arable land as possible for agricultural leases and, thereby, ensuring food security.

We are also finalising the review of our Land Allocation Criteria so that we address the twin needs of food security and enhancing MSME development. For example, if a particular agricultural land is located along a road, a portion of the land maybe converted to commercial use, we will make the necessary changes to the land zoning to continue to strike the right balance in conserving agricultural land and at the same time, encouraging economic activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources have been the subject of many complaints about its services and speed of delivery. We are taking this challenge head on. I have charged the Permanent Secretary and her team to improve customer service relationship, responsiveness and to ensure that the people of this country are well served. This has required adjustments in the way we define operational targets, and to improve our key processes, some of which run across different Ministries, requiring the development of Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) and Memorandum of Agreements (MOAs) amongst the various Ministries that are involved in these ministerial processes.

Through these process improvements, we will boost service to the people of Fiji, and we will boost and encourage primary industries to grow and flourish during this difficult time. The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has embarked on digitizing its land administration records and is looking to introduce online applications to boost efficiency and effectiveness. This will improve the speed of our land transactions and enable us to serve our customers more effectively and efficiently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to assist our economic recovery and working through agencies, such as the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), we are looking to optimize the resources available for safe transportation. The FRA has had to be as nimble as possible in keeping our major transportation networks working, whilst at the same time continuing unfinished projects that were already in the pipeline.

Our road network, shipping lines and our jetties are the artery through which the economy beats, linking producers to markets, workers to jobs, students to schools, and the sick to hospitals. Roads are vital to our development and to our economic recovery agenda.

I am just addressing some of the issues that were brought up by Honourable Salote Radrodro in relation to jetties. On the Nabouwalu Jetty, there is a waiting shed in place now, but FRA has a

plan to completely put a new jetty there to completely overhaul the existing jetty because that one is using the end of its useful life. The new Nabouwalu Jetty is planned to begin construction in 2024 and the development of a new waiting area will be included as part of that.

For the Natovi Jetty, lights have already been installed at the shed and are being checked, the design of the replacement jetty is out on tender and construction is expected in 2024. This will include a made-for-purpose waiting shed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, we have completed five new bridges in Tamavua-i-wai, Korovula in Macuata, Korovuli in Macuata, Vesidrua in Macuata and Nakasava in Cakaudrove. Sir, five new low-level crossings in Taqaniwaqa, Macuata; Nayarabale, Cakaudrove; Rabaraba, Bukuya Road, Navosa; Solovi 1 and Solovi 2 in Nadi.

We are soon to complete another nine bridges by the end of the year in the following locations:

- (1) Nayarabale in Cakaudrove;
- (2) Vunikawakawa in Macuata;
- (3) Matewale in Navosa;
- (4) Bulu in Nadroga;
- (5) Nasese in Queen Elizabeth Drive, Suva;
- (6) Waidamu in Vuci, Rewa;
- (7) Velovelo in Lawaki, Ba;
- (8) Naseyani in Ra; and
- (9) Yaqara, Kings Road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two new low-level crossings are Waibula in Taveuni and Naviavia in Cakaudrove. Sir, there is a lot of work to make sure that the infrastructure is in place.

Work on rural roads, including the Namata Village Access Road, Nakorosule/Nawaisomo Village Access Road and the two low-level crossings providing accessibility to daily bus services from Labasa to Qaranivai and Cawaro Village.

To ensure safe and comfortable road travelling, the FRA has rolled out a Pothole Reduction Programme in the three Divisions on deteriorated road sections, and at the same time is continuing its road rehabilitation programme in different areas.

The Honourable Tikoduadua was making fun of pothole reduction. We need to be able to do two things at the same time. We need to make sure that the existing infrastructure is usable and at the same time, we have to rehabilitate the ones that are really bad. You cannot rehabilitate everything at the same time. Prudent management - make sure the ones that can be repaired and the potholes are repaired and at the same time, you rehabilitate on an ongoing planned way. Upgrade work is being undertaken now in urban areas, such as Amy Street, Milverton Road and Princess Road.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of developing more resilient, sustainable and self-sufficient energy systems that are capable of withstanding future shocks. We have installed over 13,000 Solar Home Systems (SHS), implemented new Solar/Diesel hybrids at Nakoro and Yasawa High School, and re-established hydro-plants in Muana and Kadavu.

We are working with and through EFL, provide access through the Tokaimalo Stage 2 Project from Burelevu to Vanuakula to electrify 745 houses. This is expected to be completed by 2021. Currently, Vanuakula, Nauria and Nailuva have already been connected. Burelevu and the

surrounding settlements will be connected before Christmas. The remaining communities from Namara to Nasukamai will be connected before June 2021.

Our power infrastructure is being built to international standards and all precautionary measures are taken to ensure safety without endangering the lives of our people.

We are focussed on “building back better” which means, constructing more resilient water, sanitation and hygiene systems that will deliver services, despite the challenges. The WAF is now constructing the new Rewa River Water Supply Scheme that will supply 40 mega litres or 40 million litres of water per day, benefitting 300,000 people living within the greater Suva and Nausori areas. That will cost us more than \$250 million. This project is targetted to be commissioned in 2022.

This year, saw the commissioning of major water projects, including the:

- (1) Namau Water Project;
- (2) re-commissioning of the Divisional Medical Officer (DMO) Reservoir in Lautoka;
- (3) Tavuki Village Water Project; and
- (4) Waikubukubu Village Water Project

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Aseri Radrodro raised a concern this week about water sources in South Taveuni. Currently, in the South of Taveuni, we have desalination plants and a borehole, and the WAF has also identified a water source at Wainivasa. We are continuing investigations of this source, in particular the flow of water during dry season and our intention is to provide metered water to the whole of South Taveuni from this source.

We are determined to achieve the targets for access to safe and clean water and wastewater, as set out in our National Development Plan:

- (1) Safe and clean water for all by the year 2036. We are now sitting at 80 percent and we will make sure that we achieve that target by that year.
- (2) Increase in access to wastewater services in both, urban and rural areas.

Significant progress, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been done in trying to achieve those targets.

We will eventually get to grips with COVID-19, but the enduring threat of our time and for our future generations will be climate change. The rise in sea-level has affected boreholes located near the sea, which results in salination - salt getting into the drinking water. We are making sure that all groundwater would be sampled and treated to cater for our affected communities.

We continue to fund groundwater development projects in the large maritime islands and have, over the years, drilled 945 boreholes at various selected locations around Fiji for urban, rural water supplies, commercial and also for irrigation schemes.

In the last financial year from 2019-2020, the Ministry investigated 26 borehole sites, with an additional 24 reconnaissance surveys undertaken.

The Fiji Meteorological Service continues to enhance its advisory service to Fijians. Examples of this include the following:

- The use of Fiji Flash Flood Guidance System to further improve the quality and lead-time for early warning of flash flooding.

- Coastal Inundation Forecasting Demonstration Project (CIFDP) which improves the forecasting and warning systems for coastal inundation, and to protect our coastal communities, as well as support sustainable development.
- In order to advise the public on the real effect of adverse weather, the Fiji Meteorological Services has been developing impact-based forecasting, to enable members of the public to prepare themselves accordingly. I am sure whether most of us know that we have a tropical depression forming close to Samoa, moving across to Vanuatu and it is forecasted to become a Category 1 cyclone by Sunday. But we hope that it will not cross Fiji and we will get to that point as we get closer to the weekend.
- In order to communicate weather forecasts and warnings better, we have implemented graphics, simple messaging using social media, video recording disseminated to other social media platforms, media releases during severe weather events and radio interviews using our vernacular languages.

So, in a nutshell, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is making sure that we do the kind of things that His Excellency the President has addressed - the three key components in his Address; we have a legislative agenda that we will push through. The Honourable Attorney-General has already laid out most of the legislations that will be coming through Parliament but that is not the end of the legislation, there will, of course, be other legislations.

For Fiji, a vital long term objective is building resilience to natural shocks. The country is no stranger to natural disasters and as we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. The people of this country can be rest assured that when you have strong leadership - leadership that is committed to the country; leadership that does not dilly-dally; leadership that does not change from one day to the next as we can see here; leadership that does not do this but is firm in what it wants to do, they know that their future lies with the FijiFirst Party.

Once again, we thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address. In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we wish you the very best for a festive season and to all Honourable Members of Parliament, may you have a Merry Christmas and a very prosperous New Year. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services and Lands and Mineral Resources for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, just on the note about jetties, in one of the Parliaments when the Honourable Minister for Works was talking about the jetties - all the jetties that were being built in Vanua Levu) and when he was about to finish one Honourable Member said - "Do not build one in Bua because we already have a Ram Jati Singh there."

(Laughter)

Honourable Members, we move on and I now call on the Honourable Tuisawau. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank, you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the debate on His Excellency the President's Address on Monday at the opening of Parliament.

The Address touches on various issues about the development of our nation and the serious challenges we face. The Honourable Members of this House have touched on a lot of that, including COVID-19, economic development, et cetera.

I refer in terms of economic development to the UNDP guidelines on Economic Development Recovery on COVID-19 which emphasises the need to avoid unsustainable increases in national debt in our developing countries. However, the FijiFirst Government continues to drag Fiji into debt. They have given various excuses in terms of the need to have debt but as we see, a lot of the borrowings is to pay for the old debt and the 2020-2021 National Budget provides for a total of \$640 million in new loans. It will raise Fiji's total debt to \$8.1 billion which is a humongous 83.4 percent of the nation's GDP, up from \$6.7 billion in July 2020 or 65.6 percent of GDP. When you add contingent liabilities of 12.4 percent of GDP, government's total exposure comes to a staggering 95.4 percent of GDP. Fiji's debt level has trebled under the FijiFirst Government from \$2.56 billion in 2006 to \$8.1 billion in 2020. Let me reiterate that in addition to that the economy was going downhill before COVID-19.

We continue to hear praises from the Government's side about their own performance - praises, praises, that is what we have been hearing this week, self-praise, why? We need to put things in perspective. Any government can do what the FijiFirst Government is boasting about as related to His Excellency the President's Speech. They cannot even acknowledge their own weaknesses which is a drain on resources and reeks of total hypocrisy. Let me give you some examples.

The tender for COP23 Qorvis MSL engagement. On Monday 13th May, 2019 the Honourable Attorney-General, Minister of Economy stated in Parliament and I quote from page 1279 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“Mr. Speaker, Sir, the waivers are actually given in exceptional circumstances and the regulation clearly sets that out or there is only one supplier, the general principle of it.”

On 1st April in response to a question on whether he waived the tender processes for Communication Services for COP23 he stated, and I quote from page 749 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“I cannot waive procurement regulations. The regulations allow me to waive certain processes.”

The Honourable Minister of Economy clearly mislead Parliament on 1st April, 2019 and again on 13th May, 2019 because the minute by which the Honourable Attorney-General purported to waive the requirement for tender for the COP23 Communication Services, clearly shows that he approved the waiver on 6th September, 2017. Yet the waiver clearly did not allow the requisite procedure laid out on Regulation 32 on Emergency Purchases under which tender processes can be waived.

Regulation 32 requires that an application for waiver must be made first to the Major Tender Board (MTB) before they submit to the Minister. The minute dated 29th August, 2017 from John Connors, Executive Director of COP23 Presidency, did not go to the MTB and instead, it went under first sight of the Permanent Secretary for Economy yet it is addressed directly to the Honourable Minister of Economy who writes, “as approved (approve the requests on 6th September, 2017). While the minute from John Connors is dated 29th August, 2017, Qorvis MSL had already been engaged and the payments were backdated to March 2017.

The Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) disclosure shows that the Honourable Attorney-General signed the contract with Qorvis for COP23 Communication Services on 22nd September, 2017 yet Qorvis commended services under the contract before that on, 1st March, 2017.

On 1st February, 2017 Qorvis approached the Honourable Attorney-General offering their services for COP23 Presidency secretariat to commence on 1st March, 2017 to 31st December, 2018. From the preparatory phases for the Honourable Prime Minister as incoming President until the cessation of his Presidency in December 2018. This offer letter was filed by Qorvis MSL under US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). The Honourable Attorney-General signed the contract with Qorvis on 22nd September, 2017 and he waived the requirement for tender on 6th September, 2017.

The FARA filing refers to their principal as John Connors, Secretary General, COP23 Presidency Secretariat; filings are a legal requirement for U.S. companies when they provide services for foreign governments. This shows that John Connor, engaged as the Secretary-General for COP23 presidency, is an employee of QORVIS MSL. He had already been engaged as the Secretary-General, and is submitting again for the waiver of the tender requirements for the engagement of QORVIS to undertake communication services for COP23 under the COP23 Trust Fund Act.

This is a breach of financial procedures and I am calling for an investigation on the matter. In the meantime, the Honourable Minister for Economy needs to stand down. I did not come to Parliament to praise Government as they are already doing it themselves. I am not accountable to FijiFirst Government but to the people of Fiji.

The other issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, relating to the continuous praise on the movement or on their achievements, the late submission of annual reports and subsequent ineffective Parliament oversight on ongoing problems related to those particular organisations or institutions. For example, Housing Authority Annual Report 2015 was submitted to the Honourable Minister on 27th August and tabled in Parliament on 18th November and referred to Standing Committee on Social Affairs; financial audited completed in December 2016 and report not put together till August 2017- six months; and then another 15 months to be tabled in Parliament.

Now finally, the public hears about the Housing Authority performance five years later - five years too late and the report might be too irrelevant. So many projects have been boasted by the Government side. So as I said the Government should stop highlighting and being boastful, as failures must be highlighted in this House. Otherwise, what is the use of being in the Opposition if we do not highlight that, and we do not expose Government failures.

Still on the Housing Authority, I refer to the Fiji Lost Cost Housing Project, 2015, which terminated the China Railway Group contract funded by an EXIM Bank Loan. The financial statement in the Report states as follows:

“In 2010 the Government of Fiji entered into a financing agreement with the EXIM Bank of China for the Low Cost Housing project. The project was contracted to China Railway First Group (Fiji) Ltd for FJ\$49.9 million. The Authority, as the eventual owner on behalf the Government entered into a non-lending agreement with the Government. As at 31st December, 2014, the total disbursement from the EXIM Bank included an advance of FJ\$3 million for mobilisation which was equal to 20 percent of the total part of the contract price. The advance payment of 20 percent was not utilised since that part of the project did not eventuate as a joint inspection between the Authority, Ministry of Finance and the contractor, revealed that the quality of model houses built by the contractor was substandard. Subsequently, the parties involved, reached an agreement to terminate the contract. This was formalised through a Deed of Settlement which was signed on 24th October 2014.”

Questions that can be raised (as the Opposition) for accountability purposes are as follows:

- (1) Has that \$3 million been paid off? By who, Housing Authority or Government? Any recovery court action against the contractor for substandard housing?
- (2) Was there no supervision of the subcontract?
- (3) How was \$3 million spent without the Housing Authority Board being aware of the substandard nature of China Railway First Group?
- (4) Page 13 of the Report shows EXIM Bank loan comprises 48 percent of Housing Authority's debt stock - was the \$49 million taken or where has it been spent?

I am again calling for an investigation on this issue. So my question is: What else is the FijiFirst Government hiding? What is happening to the Raiwaqa State Land project? Where is the Honourable Minister of Lands in terms of this project? Who is in charge? In relation to this project, it is sad that people of Suvavou have never been included in the dealings on this land. They have their commercial arm which owns Suvavou House and I can tell the Government that they are just paying lip service to landowners, in particular the people of Suvavou; and they are paying peanuts to the people of Suvavou.

The Tui Suva and his people even took the Government to Court to address their grievances? This was not accepted by the Court. However, the Honourable Attorney-General is reported as stating that: "We will use this as a legal precedence in terms of such claims." We still have the case of the Botanical Gardens. What happened to the Petition?

We have not heard anything about it and to make matters worse, they are referring to the 2013 Constitution. If you refer to Section 28(2) of the Constitution, it states and I quote:

"Any *iTaukei* land acquired by the State for a public purpose after the commencement of this Constitution under section 27 or under any written law shall revert to the customary owners if the land is no longer required by the State."

So the key words there are "after the commencement of this Constitution" from 2013. What about the land before that?

The way I see it, this is legalised dispossession of the property of indigenous Fijians – who inserted this clause? The way I see it, it was inserted after the 2010 court case to solidify that court case.

Back to the Raiwaqa land, I recall that the project was supposed to be a \$500 million satellite city by a Chinese Developer, Gold Century Group who obtained the development lease. This was around September 2011 and a deal was signed with Fiji Government, which the Members on the other side are fully aware of.

Work on the project stopped after some earthworks. I understand Gold Century Group collapsed in China but they managed to sell the State land for \$19 million to a local developer and then it was resold. Questions - what were the conditions of the development lease? Should not the land be reverted to the State when development stopped? How did Gold Century Group get that development lease? What kind of due diligence was done on them and was there any collusion? What is the current situation on the land? Why is the *Tui Suva*, Suvavou people and their commercial arm, Nadonumai Holdings continue to be disregarded in State land dealings in the Suva Peninsular in favour of the rich and business people well when connected to FijiFirst Government? How much money has been transacted on that land and how many times?

The case is a clear example of exploitation and speculation, unscrupulous profiteering and possible collusion. It is also an insult to the people of Suvavou, the original *iTaukei* landowners who are deprived of their rightful dues while speculators, well connected business people and international fly by night scammers have profited? Is this why you do not want to negotiate with the Suvavou landowners? You distribute State land to friends and those connected to you. It would be interesting to see the donor lease of FijiFirst and whoever acquired State land. I call for a full investigation in this case.

On Tuesday, Honourable Maharaj stated that the current system of national constituencies encourages unity. This is rubbish as it encourages hero worship to one particular person and this is what has been happening since the election of 2014. It is designed that way, Sir, in order for votes to go to one particular person who is highlighted, who is lifted up and even referred to as the "messiah". In this situation, such votes, there are no equal value to each vote because his votes has carried others inside including those who have less than one thousand votes, 600, 500 et cetera. It is a *kana loto* and *vodo loto* system.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- There is no accountability in such a system because it is a national constituency, how do you account to your voters? You cannot account to the hundreds of thousands of voters. You need to account to one particular constituency such as a province, so they know when they come to you and ask you questions on your areas in terms of constituency issues. At the moment, everyone is waiting outside there for the Honourable Prime Minister. They are waiting outside there for their issues to be solved.

Sir, the Veronika Malani case is one of public interest. I am very concerned that Honourable Alvick Maharaj referred to Veronika Malani's complaint against the Honourable Attorney-General as one lacking in credibility. Where is your human compassion, Honourable Maharaj?

This incident in 1987 was a terrorist attack, resulting in severe injuries to Veronika Malani's family which still affect them today. Serious questions need to be raised such as; why was she taken into custody without a search warrant? What was the late investigator who just passed away, Isireli Tagicaki's role? Why were disclosures not ready? Approval of payments were clearly made including authorised by General Manager, Operations, Faiyaz Ali? Why was he not investigated and what is his link to the FijiFirst Government? These are the questions that need to be asked.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- And there are issues of harassment regarding this case where a white Prado car was parked in front of her house and a flare thrown into the compound. They have raised this formally with the Prime Minister's Office. So I am saying that this case is a complicated web and the nation must know the truth.

In order for the truth to be established, it is best for the Honourable Attorney-General who is in charge of the agencies involved to step aside, that is the reason why the public is calling for that. If you do a vote now maybe about 60 percent or 70 percent would agree with me because they are serious conflict of interest issues regarding this particular case.

His Excellency the President touch on economic performance which is also related to remittances. One of the major sources of remittances are our British Army Fijian Soldiers. I refer in

particular to the situation of retired British Army Veterans in the United Kingdom which is a very sad situation. A report states:

“Eight Fijian-born soldiers who served with the British Army in Iraq and Afghanistan have failed in a legal effort to overturn what they say were, bureaucratic errors that have left them living illegally in the country they once served.

The group were refused leave for a judicial review of their cases. The claimants included Remesio Waqaliva and a few others who were discharged but not advised that they had to immediately apply for UK Citizenship to which they were entitled.

Mr. Waqaliva, subsequently discovered he was unable to work and has had to rely on handouts to survive. Others in the group include Taitusi Ratucaucau who is recovering from an operation to remove a brain tumour and is liable to pay about £50,000, he has had offers of financial help.

Ministers in the UK have allowed several hundred Afghan interpreters who worked with British troops in Helmand Province in Afghanistan to relocate to the UK, and have previously waived the fee requirement and also some of the requirements”.

So, I am requesting the Honourable Minister of Defence to intervene on behalf of our Fijian Veteran soldiers in the UK, some of them are in Fiji because the Afghan interpreters have been allowed to relocate to the UK. These Fijian British Army Veterans have given their lives, some have lost their lives, being injured and served with dedication and I implore the Fiji Government to restore the predicament for UK residents like the Afghan interpreters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on his departure, the former Honourable Leader of the Opposition stated and I quote:

“I am departing because I am confident that there will be dialogue, there will be a consensus between the new leader of the FijiFirst Party and the Honourable Prime Minister”.

This morning they have emphasised continuously consensus and unity. Clearly the Honourable Party Leader is here, so he is able to communicate with you too and I am talking about consensus on the Constitution because the Constitution is imposed by you. So imposition of Constitution. Honourable Aiyaz this morning shared that the 1990 Constitution was imposed and that it was negotiated like the 1997 Constitution. So that means based on your logic, Honourable Aiyaz that we need to have consensus and

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Point of Order.

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- When we address each other in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not call him Honourable Filipe. Why is he calling me, Honourable Aiyaz? Withdraw that.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Apologies, I withdraw that.

The Honourable Attorney-General had stated this morning the need for consensus. He stated that the 1990 Constitution, there was no consultation but that is similar to the 2013 Constitution, there

was no consultation. The one where there was consultation, it was burnt by someone. Up to today, who burnt it? So right now we are offering you a way out.

The Honourable Party Leader will be contacting you regarding a Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on the Constitution and from there that will be a way out for you because in 2022 you will not be the Government and you will not have a choice. So, this is the only way out for you. To the Honourable Party Leader, you need to sit down, have a consensus because in 2022, there is no other room for negotiation with you. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Ro Tuisawau for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, time moves on, so for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I will allow the suspension motion to be moved. I now call upon the 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. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak to his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have three more speakers according to the Batting Order and, of course, the last item is the Consideration of Bills on today's Order Paper, thus the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion. Anyone wishing to take the floor?

Since no one wishing to take the floor, do you have any further things to add?

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- No, thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will now suspend proceedings for refreshments and we will resume in half an hour. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.48 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.20 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate, and I now call on the Assistant Minister for Sugar Industry. You have the floor, Sir.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament, the media and fellow Fijians; good afternoon and *bula vinaka* to you all. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for allowing me this opportunity to contribute in support of His Excellency the President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konrote, for his most gracious Address at the Opening of the 2020-2021 Parliamentary Session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been more than two years since my appointment as the Assistant Minister for the Sugar Industry, and I am grateful for the opportunity that I have been given to serve the people of Fiji. I have learnt a lot during those two years and I am humbled to be entrusted with the responsibility of such magnitude by the Honourable Prime Minister. Thank you, Sir.

I also thank my team members within the Sugar Industry, who have worked effortlessly and, of course, not forgetting the most important players - our sugarcane growers, who rendered their full support to me during this time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you all on the final leg of this very unique year, 2020. As if the global pandemic was not enough, we were faced with a tropical cyclone at the beginning of the year, just days after the first case was announced. We have had many curveballs this year but if there is one thing we have discovered, it is the resilience that the people of Fiji possess.

Indeed, we managed to control the spread of the deadly disease but it, of course, was not easy. It was only through the sheer dedication of the medical fraternity, the members of the Disciplinary Forces, the Fijian Government and the commitment to rise above it all, that we were able to contain the spread of the virus.

Now that we are COVID-19-contained and moving on with life close to normal, one should keep with them the lessons we have learnt. The most important thing to prioritise is good hygiene practices. This is not the only virus that exists, there are many more out there and this has and always will be the case. We must, therefore, play our part to ensure that we and those we love are protected from it.

COVID-19-contained did not mean, happily ever after for our beautiful Fiji. There have been devastating impacts on the world economy because while we were fortunate enough to have controlled this virus, countries around the world were not. In this time of great uncertainty, it has been very humbling to witness first-hand the resilience that we talk about. Being invited to the opening of many ventures by driven entrepreneurs was a much-needed assurance for the Fijian Government that our situation will improve.

However, it is of great importance to acknowledge that this pandemic is not the only threat looming Fiji and the globe, it does not automatically obliterate or put on pause an already large battle we continue to fight, that being climate change. We must continue our fight in full force to mitigate the impacts of climate change. This is not an option for us living in this beautiful country, neither is it for our neighbouring islands. We were able to contain a virus that many countries are still battling with, we have to fight the impacts of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the number of lessons this pandemic has taught us, at the same time it has provided a number of opportunities for Fiji, particularly on the agricultural sector, including sugar. This year, all sugarcane mechanical harvesters were operated by locals. Even some new ones which arrived this year were assembled by locals - an opportunity that arose out of necessity. Despite the odds we have faced, it has been a year where we appreciate milestones, one such being our local operators harvesting on sloppy terrains that our overseas counterparts were not able to do in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, we have had our fair share of hurdles in navigating our way through this pandemic. Life, as we know it, has changed. We all had to put on our thinking caps, work together as a team and had to be driven by the idea of innovation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like we have said on numerous occasions and I will reiterate in this noble Chamber again, this Government does not believe in band-aid solutions, rather it believes in providing long term and sustainable solutions. This Government believes in developing policies that are not biased to benefit a particular group of people. Instead, we focus on developing policies that are applied to all equally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even during this challenging time when the future is uncertain, Government will continue to provide grants for the upgrading of cane access roads, planting of canes and subsidy on fertilizers and weedicides. Government has and will still honour its commitment to pay \$85 per tonne of cane for the 2020 crops.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to inform this august House that over the last five years (from 2016 to date), the Fijian Government has injected more than \$300 million towards the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know that this a very trying time for the world. During this time, everyone should come together and support each other. We have seen how Fijians have come together to support those families that have been directly or indirectly impacted by COVID-19 by giving donations or coming up with initiatives, such as the Barter for Better Fiji.

Before I take my seat, I wish each and every Honourable Member and all Fijians a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I hope that the year 2021 will bring some good news for the globe.

With those words, I support His Excellency the President, Major-General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, for his most gracious Address for the Opening of 2020-2021 Parliament Session. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for the Sugar Industry for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, I now call on the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, and Honourable Members of this august Parliament, I rise to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address on 30th November, 2020.

As we move into a new year in the Fijian Parliament, the message from His Excellency is, indeed, one that should set the focus for us as representatives of the Fijian people. The year that has gone was not the easiest for us as Parliamentarians, and it was obviously because of the unprecedented situation we are faced with - a situation that demanded quick decisions, critical thinking, proper reasoning and compassion for our people unlike ever before, a situation that only threatened us at the given time, but also threatens our wellbeing into the future.

On the outset, I must thank the Honourable Prime Minister especially, for his visionary, dynamic and compassionate leadership at a time that demanded only urgent solutions. I am glad to say that with a leader like him steering the Fijian Government and the nation forward, the Fijian Government will never forgo the interest and welfare of its people in favour of petty politics.

Today, more Fijians than usual are in need of financial support and the Government did not, at any point, forget or neglect the fact that the most vulnerable will be the worst affected. At a time when incoming revenue is limited and cuts had to be made in every possible budget line, the allocation to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation received a demand-based increase.

In his Address, His Excellency clearly outlined the key priorities of the Fijian Government through this august Parliament, which are the:

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

I must say that there is absolutely nothing that could be more important than these three things at this point in time for us to prioritise. These situations are, indeed, the underlying causes of many other social problems that our society is faced with right now. I support His Excellency's call on us to begin work for the next 50 years with this new session and this includes work that can change mindsets, work that can change the way we treat each other, work that can make human equality and dignity a norm and not something we must have to fight for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji would have disproportionately affected women and girls, with women at increased risk of infection, intimate partner violence, job losses and vulnerable work, if we had failed to contain the virus in the time that we did. Historically, climate change policies did not address differing ways in which climate change affected men and women. Given existing gender inequalities and development gaps, climate change ultimately places a greater burden on women. Men and women are affected by climate change in different ways because of the societal and cultural roles and responsibilities expected of them by families and communities.

Understanding that climate change impacts men and women differently, it is necessary to ensure that we have gender-sensitive climate policies that are informed by women and address the realities of women's needs. The Government of Fiji, especially our Honourable Prime Minister, has given high priority to the global climate agenda and aims to continue the momentum for action since the entry into force of the Paris Agreement. At COP 23 in 2017, we achieved new heights with the adoption of the Gender Action Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to thank the Government of Australia and the United Nations World Food Programme, who, through two different sets of direct aid to the Ministry, helped in providing cash top-ups for our beneficiaries. Over \$7 million from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) was a direct cash top-up of \$100 per month to beneficiaries under selected social protection programmes. The assistance from the World Food Programme was directed specifically to those recipients who live in areas affected by *TC Harold*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, real progress on human development is not only a matter of enlarging people's choices to lead a healthy long life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living, it is also about ensuring that those choices are secure and that requires us to understand and tackle vulnerability. Those who are particularly vulnerable are the poor and other disadvantaged groups, who do not have the same resilience when there is any form of instability. There are two basic

propositions; one is that people's vulnerability is influenced by their level of capacity such as health, education, income, personal security and their social position and the other is failures to protect people against vulnerability which are often a consequence of inadequate policies and poor social institutions.

The Fijian Government recognises this well and I am glad that the Ministry forms an important part of the latter for fellow Fijians. I wish to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy for ensuring that this mandate of the Ministry is not compromised, but rather slightly readjusted for the new year. Effective social protection systems are crucial to safeguarding the poor and the vulnerable when crisis hits.

While we can boast of having a political wheel to continue the Fijian Government's Social Protection Programmes, the times that we are presently in are demanding us to leverage the existing social protection systems to help families and businesses restore income and preserve livelihoods. It demands from us to enhance the preparedness of our social protection system and build resilience against future crisis. Keeping this in mind, we have just completed drafting Fiji's first ever Interim Targeted Social Protection Policy which, of course, we will build on in the very near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of Social Protection Programmes, we continue to provide the following:

- (1) Social Pension Scheme (SPS), which has been allocated over \$55 million, targets the elderly of 65 years and over who have never received a pension or superannuation. At present, there are 45,000 recipients in the Scheme and the number continues to increase, exceeding projections.
- (2) Poverty Benefit Scheme (PBS), which targets the poorest of the poor and has been allocated \$38.3 million. There are 25,000 families being assisted under this Scheme at the moment.
- (3) Care and Protection Allowance (C&P), allocated \$12 million, assists single parented children from poor households. Currently, there are 8,000 households being assisted under this programme. This Scheme is for a duration of five years. However, some families continue to be assisted through the Scheme until the children turn 18 years old.
- (4) Bus Fare Concession (BFC) Programme, which currently assists over 52,000 elderly persons over 60 years old and persons with disabilities has been allocated \$6.5 million.
- (5) Rural Pregnant Mothers Programme (RPMP) has assisted 3,279 rural pregnant mothers since the inception of the Programme in 2014 and has been allocated \$1.2 million this year.
- (6) Disability Allowance Scheme (DAS), which has been allocated \$9 million is given to a person with a functional disability. There are 8,000 recipients assisted under this Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Salote Radrodro spoke extensively about the Women's Plan of Action yesterday. As a former Director for Women, she should know that the Women's Plan of Action expired last year. It was for the term 2010 to 2019. The work of the Ministry is now guided by a new five-year strategic plan.

This upcoming year is a year of great efforts that Government, through the Ministry, is pulling together with funding support from the Governments of New Zealand, Australia, European Union

and Canada, with technical expertise from UN Women and, of course, the Australian Government funded Gender Advisor to the Fijian Government. The National Women's Machinery, through a transformative ambition to focus on policies, will do bulk of the work around elimination of violence against women and girls, women in leadership, women's economic empowerment, gender and climate action and women's access to services.

The three major initiatives for the National women's Machinery in this upcoming year are:

- (1) National Action Plan on Preventing Violence Against all Women and Girls (NAP-VAWG). National consultations were launched by the Honourable Prime Minister last month as we embarked on 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence. The NAP-VAWG is the whole of Government, evidence-based, measurable, inclusive and a funded five-year plan, with an emphasis on stopping violence before it starts.
- (2) Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Building. On 6th February, 2020, Cabinet endorsed a whole of Government Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative to be led by the Ministry. The Initiative is designed in response to challenges, such as:
 - (i) limited awareness, knowledge and technical skills on gender transformative concepts and the application of technical tools, including gender analysis, gender-responsive planning and budgeting across Government institutions;
 - (ii) shortage of context and sector-specific knowledge products; and
 - (iii) the need for a comprehensive and coordinated institutional capacity development mechanism/structure and interventions.
- (3) Republic of Fiji Country Gender Assessment (CGA) – a key report to be undertaken periodically by the Ministry to inform on the status of women and girls in Fiji and provide a comprehensive overview of gender issues in all sectors. This initiative is in response to the Government of Fiji's commitment to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as to meet the needs of line Ministries in the formulation of gender-responsive policies and programmes in their respective sectors. The CGA will highlight the many achievements made to-date, as well as the remaining challenges and will provide comprehensive policy guidelines and recommendations for policymakers across Government, to deepen our collective efforts for promoting gender equality and women and girls empowerment.

The coronavirus has changed many aspects of our lives. Pandemics do affect men and women, boys and girls and marginalised groups, such as the elderly, persons living with disabilities and children differently, as they often magnify all existing inequalities. While everyone is facing unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, women have had to cop the impact of what the UN Secretary-General calls, "a shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls".

I have said in this august House before in the past and I will repeat it at every opportunity, that violence against women and girls is preventable and if all get involved, make it our business to talk about it, to condemn it, to challenge the patriarchal foundation that upholds it, to raise children with good values, to stop blaming victims, to break the silence, we will make the change, and we will make this country a country where a woman can always feel safe. To my friends on the other side of the House, stop asking us what we are doing. In this new year, tell us how you will support this cause.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- The Address by His Excellency the President has been a perfect reflection on the power of unity, especially when he said and I quote, “ In a truly patriotic, whole-of-the-nation effort, we achieved what few countries could; we contained the virus.”

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I could not agree more. The same whole-of-the-nation effort is, indeed, and truly the answer to end many social ills that we are faced with at this day and age.

A few weeks back, every Honourable Member on that side of the House was invited to attend a launch by the Honourable Prime Minister of the national consultations for our first National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls - something we should all support and be proud about, being the only second nation in the world to venture into the consolidation of a whole-of-the-nation, evidence-based, measurable, inclusive and funded five-year National Action Plan.

Only two Honourable Members of the Opposition turned up, Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa and Honourable Professor Biman Prasad. Perhaps, if the Honourable Qereqeretabua had attended, she would have found out that Haus of Khameleon is a member of the Technical Working Group that will drive this initiative forward. And if Honourable Salote Radrodro had attended, she would have found out that this initiative is not an initiative only of the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Minister for Economy and myself but the Technical Working Group that will be driving this initiative comprises of both, Government and Non-Government Organisations, with secretariat support from the UN Women, the Ministry and Civil Society Organisations.

Honourable Salote Radrodro yesterday also referred to the need for a bipartisan approach to address violence against women and girls, referring to two motions they had proposed for a special Parliamentary Committee and for a Commission of Inquiry. Why do they propose a bipartisan approach to these issues when they do not even turn up to initiatives where Government is working in conjunction with critical national stakeholders who are actually making an effort in their everyday work to address these issues? In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had received an email from the Opposition Office to advise that only Honourable Kepa, Honourable Qionibaravi, Honourable Salote Radrodro and Honourable Tabuya will be attending the launch, and we all know that only Honourable Ro Kepa and Honourable Professor Prasad turned up on the day.

That email, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also speaks volumes about the mindsets that exist in our society when it comes to talking about violence against women and girls. In our role as Parliamentarians, we must always emphasise that violence against women is not only a woman's issue, it is a human rights issue. From this side of the House, you will see the Honourable Prime Minister himself picking up the mantle when it comes to gender-based violence.

Honourable Salote Radrodro rightly stated that the National Action Plan will not include boys and asks the question, who will look after the boy victim? This is coming from a former Director for Women in the Ministry mandated with the task of looking after not only women but also children; someone who should know about the Child Welfare Act and its provisions in relation to the protection of all children mandated with the task of looking after, not only women but also children; someone who should know about the Child Welfare Act and its provisions in relation to the protection of all children - boys and girls; someone who must also know the great disparity in numbers between the two sexes when it comes to victims of gender-based violence and why we, as a Government and as a nation, need policies and programmes, specifically targeted at women and girls.

I am encouraged by the Government's legislative agenda for the new year, as stated by His Excellency the President. I refer specifically to the Child Justice Bill and the Child Care and Protection Bill. Progressive laws, such as these show, yet again, Government's resolute focus on ensuring that solid and positive legal foundations are in place for vulnerable groups in our society.

The Child Care and Protection Bill will aim to replace the very archaic child protection sections of the Juveniles Act, providing a more comprehensive framework for Child Welfare Services and in particular, to better guide the work of the Ministry in preventing and responding to child abuse.

The Child Justice Bill will aim to replace sections of the Juveniles Act which deal with children in conflict with the law and provide a comprehensive framework for the special treatment of children at all stages of the criminal justice process, from the point of their initial contact with the police through to trial, rehabilitation and re-integration.

We continue to work closely with all our stakeholders in the various sectors and I take this time to thank all of those who particularly work with the Ministry. The one thing any crisis can teach us is that, we can overcome anything if we work in unison.

I must also take this time to thank all those Fijians who took it upon themselves to help fellow Fijians in these trying times and there is no better commemoration of our 50 years of independence, that today with all our diversities, we remain one.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President had said and I quote: "Our commitment to remain COVID-contained must be engrained in all of the work of this august Parliament." I fully agree. And I wish to conclude by saying that the most vulnerable Fijians have a greater battle than the transmission of COVID-19 and that is the direct and indirect implications of the pandemic and all our climate-related crisis. When it comes to times like these, we, as a Parliament, must put our differences aside; our focus should be our people and only our people. The battle at hand is greater than just containment. The real work now lies in building back, and building back better.

I thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address and I wish you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very blessed Christmas and New Year, and I also extend the same well wishes to all Honourable Members of this august Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for her contribution to the debate. I now call on the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable colleagues; I thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address and this has, indeed, been an unprecedented year. Around this time last year during the opening of Parliament when I made my speech, we had measles - an epidemic outbreak that started in Serua/Namosi and a few other villages in Namosi and also in Naitasiri.

Mr. Speaker, we embarked on a public health intervention never witnessed before in this country where more than 700 of our staff with the support from other Government agencies, were deployed and immunised within six weeks by 24th December, 500,000 Fijians which included a large number of adults. Sir, 33 Fijians, mostly children, were infected and some required Intensive Care Unit (ICU) care but none died. In the midst of this and taking a passionate approach to ensure that the large scale deaths that our forefathers witnessed in 1875 is not repeated, and as you know we

think it is about 30,000 to 40,000, we did not know or we knew but only in slight ways that the beast of COVID-19 was lurking offshore.

Mr. Speaker, what happened next, I will not dwell on, but suffice to say the following truce that I would like all of us to know. Firstly, for several weeks in the midst of COVID-19, I think in nearly eight weeks, there was comprehensive efforts made by the Honourable Prime Minister and my Cabinet colleagues, who would meet daily at the Ministry of Health Headquarters to be briefed and provided with the now globally-reputable, recognised timely and definitive decisions that has kept our nation COVID-19-contained. And the envy of many nations and many international experts from Monday to Monday inclusive of the weekend is that, there were meetings everyday.

Those daily visits and briefing to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Cabinet, had the ability for the Ministry of Health staff to liaise with them personally and give them the signs, including our leaders from the West and the North connected through zoom. As you are aware, at certain stages, there were lockdowns in both, Suva and Lautoka. This also lifted the spirit of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services system and strengthened the resolve to protect this nation because the leader was at the 'war-room' at Ministry of Health Headquarters.

Secondly, the health system comprises many components that form the whole machinery of health and includes resources, such as human resource, the medical products and technology, health information and finance as well as policies and processes.

We have seen how first-world health systems have succumbed to COVID-19. Our health system took on measles, COVID-19 and the impact of three cyclones. This, Mr. Speaker, was in the midst of a global shortage of medicine, consumables and equipment caused by this COVID-19 black hole. I call it a black hole, Mr. Speaker, because of the immense need created by it, where every nation and every healthcare provider is using large amounts of medical consumables, drugs and equipment like never before. This has caused a strain on the global supply chain, even when we prepaid well in advance for our equipment, medicine, et cetera, and despite our timely orders, the economy of scale works against small island nations. We have been blessed though because of our strong diplomatic position on the global stage, strengthened by the Honourable Prime Minister's global leadership in climate change, to draw on these resources in the midst of a COVID-19 black hole to continue to ensure that we provide our resources here at home.

Thirdly, the criticism of the health system by the Opposition includes criticisms of every component of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, including its human resources, that is, the sons and daughters of Fiji, who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to keep Fiji safe; it is criticising those who were exposed to risks so that they, the Opposition, can walk around without a mask, not be at a risk of an ICU admission and have their children and grandchildren go to school. This is not new to me, Mr. Speaker.

The Honourable Professor Prasad and the National Federation Party had put in their webpage and it was also published in the *Fiji Times* that they wanted all civil servants to have a pay cut of 20 percent. Just today, we heard the Honourable Tabuya say that perhaps, we should be looking at cutting the salary of civil servants. How can they work when their salaries are cut? They have also talked about the rural allowance. Let me tell you one thing - if we cut the salary of a nurse by 20 percent, as they alluded to, that is \$4,500, but the only thing that we have done from this year, is to take over the rural allowance which is \$1,200. You do the math - which one is bigger?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative that I shed some light on the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that there is now nearly 70 million cases globally and 1.6 million deaths recorded. The number

of new cases globally continue to increase with almost one million new cases in two days. In the Pacific, we have had nearly 23,000 cases with 246 new cases in the past 24 hours.

To combat this, we needed great leadership and political will, and as I have alluded to since day one, the Honourable Prime Minister has been at the forefront of policy decisions and support that is pivotal in the success of our COVID-19 containment. We have also had multi-stakeholder engagement and this was initiated initially with the COVID-19 Incident Management Team (IMT) and the General Manager, who is now the Permanent Secretary for Health, and it proved beneficial because it led to rapid and appropriate responses which protected the Fijian team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no country can say they are COVID free until this pandemic is complete and, ladies and gentlemen, it has now been more than 240 days since Fiji's last community case. To date, the IMT is still operational with the Disciplined Forces and weekly engagement from liaison officers, continues to lead our COVID-19 preparedness and response activities for the country.

The same multi-stakeholder engagement has now proven beneficial in all the ports and our quarantine facilities. As you are aware, recently we have had two cases on board the *MV Island Chief* which has now, more than ever, shown that our machinery works - the testing, early warning, contact tracing, case management and the secure and hygienic retrieval and isolation.

I commend the effort of all our frontliners, including the RFMF, border agencies, tourism operators, the Police, Fiji Airways, AFL staff and the many others, whom I may not have mentioned. Some of them will be spending Christmas in isolation and quarantine, and this is a must so that we can have a safe Christmas.

There are eight quarantine facilities in Fiji and currently at the moment, we have up to 500 individuals in these facilities. We have tested more than 17,000 people, and the Fiji Centre for Disease Control continues to operate day-to-day and testing, in some instances, nearly 300 tests a day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be really sure that there is no community transmission of COVID-19, they do not only test those who in the border quarantine facilities, they also test those who are in the frontline. They also randomly test those in the community, who front up with fever and so far, we have known that there is no community transmission. When we say 'we have no community transmission', we know it by science, not because we are just saying it for the sake of saying that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the inbound passengers with medical conditions are communicated to the COVID-19 Response Unit and the specialists are engaged from day one, to ensure that their conditions are managed well during their days of mandatory quarantine. If there are forecasted possible events in the facilities, then those are mitigated to ensure that frontliners are protected during the response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to talk a little bit about the immunisation for COVID-19. Unprecedented resources have been expended globally with the aim of rapidly developing safe and effective vaccines against COVID-19. As of November, 2020 there are over 200 candidate vaccines, many based on newer but unlicensed promising vaccine platform technologies. They are in various stages of development, with over 40 vaccine candidates in human clinical trials.

The Fijian Government, through the COVAX facility, has secured agreements for the supply of COVID-19 vaccines but due to the different characteristics and requirements of each vaccine, they will still require specific programmatic requirements determining needs.

We are working with our Fiji National Inspectorial Regulatory Authority (IRA) and to make sure that we actually have efficacy requirements and the WHO prequalification of vaccine assessment programme before we accept vaccines into the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are marshalling all our efforts towards the protection and safeguarding of our borders, and we will work simultaneously during that period in developing a vaccination readiness plan so that when the vaccine is available, we will be able to roll it out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that we are COVID-ready in our clinical services delivery which provides patients with the best experience, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has invested significantly in the purchasing of equipment. We have now received about 50 purchased ventilators - 11 are now at CWM Hospital, another nine in Lautoka Hospital, five in Labasa Hospital and another one delivered to the RFMF Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF GMC Hospital has been converted into a five-bed intensive care unit, specifically left aside for our frontliners. If any of our frontliners gets sick and really need intensive level care, they will be taken straight to the GMC Hospital which now has a five-bed intensive care unit. So, we want to ensure that our frontliners are at peace, knowing that the risk they go through, if God forbid they have COVID-19, there is a specified area that they will be looked after in.

We have also managed to buy vital signs monitors, patient monitors, infusion pumps, syringe pumps and cardiac monitors which was distributed in phases in our health facilities. The problem is, they only look at the outside of the house. They do not even go inside and see the new equipment. Through the support of our donor partners as WHO, we have also had five new biosafety cabinets and other equipment, including the Zolls Ventilator through USAID support and also Airvos, about eight of them, from the New Zealand Government.

Through our tender processes in the last two months, we have been able to receive our dental equipment - new dental chairs, autoclaves, ultrasonic scalers, major radiology equipment, floor mounted X-rays, digital-mounted X-rays, general ultrasound machines and portable digital X-rays. We are about to receive 22 portable digital X-ray machines this week to replace the existing conventional X-rays in all the Sub-Divisional Hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will do away with the wet film, that will be no more. This will be taken with the digital format and that digital format would be available on the computer so that the doctors can look at and they can actually take a picture in real time, if they need to, and send it over either by *Viber* or *WhatsApp* to the radiologist to be able to get a second opinion. This is something that you cannot do easily with wet-field technique. Equipping our laboratory services, we have also received our arterial blood gas machines, urine analysers, autoclaves and centrifuge and they are being installed as we speak.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of medical supplies supply chain reform process that we are currently rolling out is a 15-month phase-out plan which includes the installation of a new Warehouse Information Management System to health facilities around the country. This project is supported by the Government of Australia and in support of this initiative, JICA is also showing interest to help us with building new warehouses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency talked about us being a regional leader in digitalisation and we must continue to leverage digital technology to improve the reach of Government. Our health information system provides much of the information required to guide clinical management

decision-making and the need to find new ways of dealing with healthcare and having an effective service delivery.

Having said that, the initial step taken by the Ministry was to bring all stakeholders and applications to address the COVID-19 effect and also assess the need for digitalisation support for COVID-19 response, the primary response, ensuring that all divisional and major national facilities are equipped with internet and conferencing facilities, that enable efficient communication with the leaders, UN agencies and the outside world in the height of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Through general consensus, we also was able to purchase a software called Surveillance Outbreak Response Management and Analysis System (SORMAS), which we are now using together, as you know, we also have the careFIJI App. Sir, SORMAS is a paperless solution and assisted with near or real time data. It allows the application of linking tablets, health quarantine control officers, surveillance officers, laboratory technicians and the IMT.

The way it will work, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if there is a community outbreak of COVID-19, again God forbid, then the careFIJI App will be able to identify those who have been in close proximity to that person. When they are finally being called, we will be able to load them onto the SORMAS and then we will be able to visit them and actually work with them in terms of case control. Sir, this is all part of our Fijian COVID-Safe Economic Recovery Framework because we want to make sure that it is a whole-of-a-nation effort in keeping us safe, but also moving our economy forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to address the issue brought up by Honourable Qereqeretabua on the careFIJI App. This antithetical statement regarding the careFIJI App is something that needs to be addressed and rebutted. It is misleading Parliament and the Fijian people. We need to first understand the facts before speaking on a matter because it is an irresponsible statement, questioning the COVID-response tool. This is a COVID-response tool that not only protects our people, but protects our frontliners. Such a statement, Sir, only impedes the work of our frontliners and results in the escalation of fear, panic and rumours in the community. It is nothing more than a politically opportunist and a nefarious propaganda of misinformation and cynicism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be noted that the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has not yet counted this matter as an official border case. However, it is clear from Honourable Qereqeretabua's statement that we need to set the record straight again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, she said, "The point that stood out like a sore thumb was that in the briefings by the Health Ministry, there was no mention of contact tracing efforts through the careFIJI App to track down and isolate those who had come into contact with this health personnel." For the benefit of Honourable Qereqeretabua and everyone in this House, close contacts are those who came into contact with a COVID-19 case. The close contacts of the two crew members who tested positive for COVID-19 are the 21 Government Officials who have already been identified and have entered into quarantine facilities. Therefore, there was no need to track down those because they have already been quarantined.

On this border case, the Government has set up rigid processes and the border officials are known to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. Furthermore, as the Ministry of Health and Medical Services had confirmed, as a matter of excessively cautious approach, all Government Officials who had boarded the vessel had worn personal protective equipment as always, and have already been identified and entered into the quarantine facilities.

Honourable Qereqeretabua questions the purpose and the effectiveness of the careFIJI App. The purpose of the careFIJI App is simple and has been widely communicated. It is to assist contact

tracers to slow down and stop COVID-19 transmission in the community. When there is a community transmission, when no one knows how that was picked up, that is the usefulness of the careFIJI App. For those who are at the border, we know who they came into contact with. However, as the Permanent Secretary for Health has stated on Sunday, the careFIJI App, in addition to other measures, is to ensure that we are COVID-ready. So it is critically important that every Fijian takes ownership in our national effort to contain the virus.

We also have to know that New Zealand has rolled out a Bluetooth close-contact tracing tool yesterday, as their QR scanning tool rate has plummeted. Australia uses a Bluetooth contact-tracing App. International experts and technologically advanced countries have, time and again, emphasised the effectiveness of contact-tracing applications, such as the careFIJI App, in controlling the community transmission of COVID-19. We are not doing anything that is unique, we are doing something that has been proven by science, something that top nations of the world are beginning to use and know that it is very useful in preventing community transmission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thirdly, the Leader of NFP talks about bipartisanship and just yesterday, he was speaking about collaboration. How can there be any collaboration, if Honourable Members keep doing the dishonourable act of misleading this august House, especially on a national health initiative, such as the careFIJI App, where every Fijian's safety is at stake? Do not play politics with the health and safety of Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the critical role, today the careFIJI App has been downloaded by nearly 90,000 times and we have a 16.12 percent adoption rate. We need more people to do this because it is protecting our community and is protecting our frontline health workers. How can you say that you actually appreciate the frontline health workers and then at the same time, you belittle an App that is important for their safety? Completely ironic! Zero!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to remodel our health service. We want to ensure that we are working towards universal health coverage. We are also working with the private general practitioners because as part of universal health coverage, we want to ensure that everyone has access and working with the general practitioners in that regard, and there is already discussions happening and we are hoping to pilot it soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our remodelling of our health services, we have identified a few things. We want to be comprehensive, we want to be holistic, we want to be integrated and enhanced, and be fit for Fiji. We are taking CWM Hospital services down to the Health Centres, to Valelevu, Nausori, Vunidawa and to Kadavu. We are taking Lautoka Hospital services over to Nadi, Ba, and then we are expecting the Health Centres to then take their services down to the communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have with me here, some of the subdivisions that have been doing outreaches. In Ba, they did 15 outreaches. They saw 45,000 people, they went to 22 villages and 70 settlements, which is about 50 percent of the population of Ba.

In Serua/Namosi, including the island of Beqa, they had 4,000 people. In Bua, they saw 3,300 people and went to 14 villages and settlements. In Rewa, 22 villages and settlements. In Cakaudrove, they saw 7,000 people, with more than 100 villages and settlements. In Tailevu, 52 villages and settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not stuck in the Health Centres, nor we are stuck in Hospitals, we are pushing our services to the people and we know what the people need. We are taking it to them. They know because they have seen our presence and we have been there with them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want to build a resilient health system. We want to strengthen our health workforce. We will continue to improve the service, provision of our medicinal products and we will continue to improve our information systems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are heading towards the festive season. The first thing is, I have a message for this country. Please, in this festive season, eat right, diet and exercise. I want us to be a health promoting country. Let the religions and the churches, and temples and mosques promote healthy living. Let the schools promote healthy living. Let the communities promote healthy living. Let all these intersect, Mr. Speaker, because COVID-19 has shown that those who are well and fit before they are hit by COVID-19, have a good reserve and are likely to recover.

The second thing I would like to share with us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also time for disasters, and I want us to actually understand that we need to work together. We need to reduce the sources of leptospirosis, typhoid and dengue, which the Health Inspectors are doing an amazing job in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish you, the Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable colleagues a blessed and restful Christmas. I would like to thank all our staff in Health, those on the frontline and those who work hard elsewhere so that those on the frontline can do what they have to do. Those in the clinics, outreaches, wards, theatres, administration, supply chain and everyone, I mean, everyone in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and our many partners.

Vinaka vakalevu, dhanyavard and thank you for being committed to the cause. We cannot drop the ball, we have to keep pushing for excellence. Merry Christmas, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, we will have the Right of Reply by the Honourable Prime Minister tomorrow morning, which will be followed by the Maiden Speeches from the two new Honourable Members. After that, we will then proceed with the other items on the Order Paper for tomorrow. Those are the setting for tomorrow. We have a bit more to do today.

Honourable Members, I have been informed that there are no Bills for Consideration today, which brings us to the end of the sitting for today. I thank you for your cooperation, forbearance and your contributions. Parliament is now adjourned until 9.30 a.m. tomorrow.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.12 p.m.