

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 22ND MARCH, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 22ND MARCH, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.33 a.m. pursuant to notice.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

Hon. Niko Nawaikula
Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
Hon. Professor Biman Chand Prasad
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi
Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro
Hon. Salote Vuibureta Radrodro
Hon. Simione R. Rasova
Hon. Jese Saukuru
Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya
Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua
Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
Hon. Tanya Waqanika

Absent

Hon. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications
Hon. Osea Naiqamu, Minister for Forestry
Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 12th February, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

HON. SPEAKER.- I welcome all Honourable Members to the first Parliament Sitting day for the month of March and I look forward to working with you all during this Session.

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

Tabling of Committee Report – Deferment of

For the information of all Honourable Members, I have received a request from the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to table its report on the three election-related Bills at a later sitting date. These Bills are:

- (1) Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 50/2020);
- (2) Electoral (Registration of Voters) (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 51/2020); and
- (3) Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) (Amendment) Bill 2020 (Bill No. 52/2020).

Pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on 11th December, 2020, the Standing Committee was to have tabled its report during this sitting period. However, Honourable Members, please, take note that due to increased public interest on the Bills, the Standing Committee intends to undertake further consultations before finalising its deliberations and report.

I am of the view that this is a valid and justified notion, therefore, with the indulgence of all Honourable Members, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights will table its report on the three election-related Bills at a later sitting date. Thank you, Honourable Members.

On the next Agenda Item, I now call on the Acting Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications to table his Report.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), I present the Mid-Year Fiscal Statement – Actual Expenditure from 1st August, 2020 to 31st January, 2021 to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Acting Secretary-General)

Honourable Members, please, take note that the Acting Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications has tabled the Mid-Year Fiscal Statement – Actual Expenditure from 1st August, 2020 to 31st January, 2021 Report. The electronic copy of the Report will be made available to all Members and uploaded simultaneously on the Parliament website.

Honourable Members, you will note that there is a slight change of procedure to what is prescribed under Standing Order 38. Unlike the Annual Reports that are referred to the Standing Committees, this periodic statement will be circulated for the information of Honourable Members only. The purpose of these statements is to provide periodic updates to Parliament and these may be itemised by Honourable Members during debates and utilised by them from a budgetary or financial perspective.

On that note, Honourable Members, please, take further note that all periodic statements that were tabled over the years and which were subsequently referred to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts are hereby retracted from the Standing Committee, and the Standing Committee will not be required to take any further action.

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Committee Reports for tabling today. We will now proceed to the next item on the Order Paper.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports;
- (2) Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development; and
- (3) Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment

The Ministers may speak for up to 20 minutes. After the Minister, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the statement for no longer than five minutes. There will also be a response from the Leader of the National Federation Party or his designate, to also speak for five minutes. There will be no other debate.

Honourable Members, I now call upon the Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports, to deliver his Statement. You have the floor, Sir.

Progress on the Workmens' Compensation and ILO Conventions adopted since 1996

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to inform this august House on the progress of the workmen's compensation cases currently dealt with by my Ministry, which relates to injuries and deaths that have occurred during and in the course of employment till 31st December, 2018. I will then speak on the ILO Conventions, recommendations and protocols adopted since 1996.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, worker's compensation is an important element of the work of the Ministry to ensure that the rights of workers and employers in such instances are looked after under the ambit of the relevant legislations. It also ensures that we have in place regulations and implementation frameworks to ensure that rightful compensation is made where it is due.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through progressive labour reforms implemented by the Fijian Government, the Workmen's Compensation Act 1964 was repealed, and the Accident Compensation Act 2017 came into force on 1st January, 2019. From 1st January, 2019, any workplace accident is reported to and investigated by the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to quickly recap on the total number of worker's compensation cases that my Ministry has dealt with over the 10-year period from 2008 until 31st December, 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go on to the figures, let me briefly explain the investigation process. This involves locating workers that have changed addresses and have left employment, refer workers for final medical assessments and send compensation claims to employers, extract employment details, interview workers, workmates and dependents for death cases. The outcome of the cases are determined by the doctors that have undergone the Impairment Assessment Training.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has trained some 200 doctors nationwide from 2010 to 2018 to carryout final medical assessment on workplace injuries and deaths using the American Medical Guide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the 10-year period, there were a total of 11,558 cases reported to my Ministry and these cases were investigated. These reported cases comprise of 86 percent injury and 14 percent death cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 4,007 injury cases were paid out, amounting to a sum of \$15,460,996.02. This comprises of 2,941 private sector injury cases with a compensation payment of \$8,576,548.15 and 1,066 injury cases for Government with the compensation payment of \$6,884,447.87.

Over the same period, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were a total of 563 deaths with a total compensation paid at \$13,296,413.76. This comprises a total of 65 death cases in the private sector with compensation of \$1,510,185.42, as compared to 498 deaths in the public sector and a total compensation of \$11,786,228.32.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to report that over the 10-year period, my Ministry managed to settle and closed 10,768 cases, equivalent to 93 percent of all the reported cases. In total, over the same period, and as of 12th March, 2021, the total compensation payment of \$28,757,409.78 was made to the workers who were injured during the period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reported compensation cases over the last five years revealed that the top four high risk industries where majority of the reported workplace accidents occurred were the construction industry, wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels, manufacturing and among statutory authorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the 790 pending, I wish to further clarify that my Ministry has completed the process of 50 percent of the cases and this comprises of 166 cases, which is 21 percent for unallocated workers; 62 cases, eight percent awaiting medical reports from the Ministry of Health; 133 cases which is 17 percent are before the Employment Relations Tribunal for determination; and 30 cases which is equivalent to 4 percent are still on recovery period before the final medical assessment is carried out.

The remaining 50 percent or 395 pending cases are currently under investigation by my Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to clear these pending 395 cases, my Ministry has implemented the following measures:

- (1) establish Taskforce teams in all Divisions from 27th February, 2019 till todate;
- (2) close liaison with the consultant in conducting final medical assessment for injured workers to determine the percentage of permanent disability; and
- (3) continue to publish names of unlocated workers in my Ministry's *Facebook* page.

The main challenge for my Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in resolving these pending cases that have occurred until 31st December, 2018 is that, these pending cases were all subject to the mandated procedures under the repealed Workmen's Compensation Act 1964, where the cases are disputed by the employers based on a fault-based system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was also the main reason why the FijiFirst Government reformed the Worker's Compensation Scheme in 2019 to establish the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji under the no-fault-based system.

Secondly, the high mobility of workers and former workers locally and overseas which resulted in the Ministry having great difficulty in locating those clients, despite the numerous media marketing approaches taken, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The release of claims through delayed payments from the employers is another major challenge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as these are vital for the Ministry to process and pay out to the workers and conclude the cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank all our stakeholders and partners working with my Ministry during these years for the investigation and resolution of the Workmen's Compensation cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, please, allow me to also inform this august House the list of ILO conventions, recommendation and protocols adopted by the International Labour Conference from 1996 to 2019 as part of the process stipulated under Article 19 of the ILO Constitution.

The Article requires that each member brings to the Convention before the authority within whose competence the matter lies which is Parliament, for the enactment of legislation for other action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 1996 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Convention 177 - Home Work Convention 1966 (No. 177); and
- (2) Recommendation 184 - Home Work Recommendation 1996 (No. 184).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 1998 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instrument was adopted - Recommendation 189 - Job Creation in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Recommendation 1998 (No. 189).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the May-June 2000 Session of the International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Convention 183 - Maternity Protection Convention 2000 (No. 183); and
- (2) Recommendation 191 - Maternity Protection Recommendation 2000 (No. 191).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2002 Session of the International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Protocol 155 - Protocol of 2002 to the Occupational Safety & Health Convention 1981;
- (2) Recommendation 193 - Promotion of Cooperative Recommendation 2002 (No. 193); and
- (3) Recommendation 194 - List of Occupational Diseases Recommendation 2002 (No. 194).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2003 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instrument had been adopted - Convention 185 - Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention (Revised) 2003, as amended (No. 185).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the May-June 2006 Session of the International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Convention 187 - Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187);
- (2) Recommendation 197 - Promotional Framework for Occupational Health and Safety Recommendation 2006 (No. 197); and
- (3) Recommendation 198 - Employment Relationship Recommendation 2006 (No. 197).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the May-June 2007 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Convention 188 - Work in Fishing Convention 2007 (No. 188); and
- (2) Recommendation 199 - Work in Fishing Recommendation 2007 (No. 199).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2010 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instrument was adopted - Recommendation 200 – HIV and AIDS Recommendation 2010 (No. 200).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2011 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Convention 189 – Domestic Workers Convention 2011 (No. 189); and
- (2) Recommendation 201 – Domestic Workers Recommendation 2012 (No. 201).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the May-June 2012 Session of International Labour Conference, the following instrument was adopted - Recommendation 202 – Social Protection Floors Recommendation 2012 (No. 202).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the May-June 2014 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Protocol 029 – Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention 1930; and
- (2) Recommendation 203 – Forced Labour (Supplementary Measures) Recommendation 2014 (No. 203).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2015 Session of International Labour Conference, the following was adopted - Recommendation 204 – Transition from Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation 2015 (No. 204).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2017 Session of International Labour Conference, the following was adopted - Recommendation 205 – Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation 2017 (No. 205).

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the June 2019 Session of International Labour Conference, the following Instruments were adopted:

- (1) Convention 190 - Violence and Harassment Convention 2019 (No. 190); and
- (2) Recommendation 206 - Violence and Harassment Recommendation 2019 (No. 206).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the intent to bring these recommendations and conventions to the attention of this House is to assure that Fiji remains compliant with those Instruments or is in the process of gaining compliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, compliance is not an automatic process and in some instances, requires a considerable planning and implementation phase before compliance is achieved. The important thing to note from this listing of ILO Instruments is that, Fiji has been part of the conversation and global reforms under this world body, to ensure that the rights of workers are respected and all aspects of it is enshrined in the respective legislation.

Mr. Speaker Sir, moving forward, Fiji will continue to be part of this conversation and work closely with ILO and local stakeholders, to ensure that we have a productive and protected workforce. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement. I now give the floor to the designate of the Leader of the Opposition.

The Leader of the Opposition is unwell today and has sent his apologies. I give the floor to Honourable Leawere. You have the floor.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement. From the outset, I would say that the workers of this country are the backbone of the economy and also, they are the nuts and the bolts that make the engine room ticking and they are very, very important in terms of our moving forward.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the last five years, there was no annual report tabled in this august House, as required by law, from the Ministry of Employment. The Annual Report was tabled in 2016, so the statistics that are available are five years old.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- It is sad to see this disregard for the workers in Fiji, where the Ministry does not see fit to ensure his annual report is tabled and work of his Ministry is properly evaluated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Shadow Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, I must raise the concern of the workers or the plight of the 115,000 laid off by the tourism industry and workers downstream, affected by the travel restrictions as a result of the pandemic. However, Sir, if the Government had been prudent, the nation would not be over-leveraged and there would be funds and resources available to cushion the impacts of the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with regards to the management of worker's compensation, I am glad that the Ministry has been working on the massive backlog of cases. However, all cases after January 2019 should now be referred to the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji and the onus is on the Ministry to speed up and dispose off all pending cases to 31st December, 2018, so that workers and their dependants are duly compensated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister went on to say that the number continues to rise and we believe that this year, it must not drag its feet and conduct due diligence as most of these workers and their families suffer with the delay in paying out the compensation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight the continuing breach of the labour laws by employers. I have received complaints of employers who do not issue written contracts to their workers as required by the law and then terminate them at will. When workers seek a certificate of their termination to seek FNPf assistance, employers often delay or never write the letters. This grave injustice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, must be looked at by the Ministry as required by the law, and employers are not keeping two sets of records for their workers.

My question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is; what is Government doing for the laid-off workers, in particular from the tourism industry? While Government is channelling resources into infrastructure development and capital projects, there should be more assistance for alternative livelihoods for workers who have been laid off. I also wish to appeal to employers to keep workers employed on reduced pay hours or pay, but, please, keep them employed.

The 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was conducted before COVID-19 pandemic revealed that poverty has increased in Fiji. If a similar survey is conducted today, the poverty figure must be higher because over 100,000 workers have just lost their jobs. There is a dire situation in this country for these workers and their families, who are struggling today to send children to school and feed their families. Government's mismanagement

of the economy since 2006 has, unfortunately, resulted in the current dire straits, and beautiful speeches in Parliament cannot hide this fact. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your indulgence, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution. I now give the floor to the Leader of the National Federation Party, the Honourable Professor Biman Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister for his Statement. I am particularly pleased that he was able to provide a 10-year summary of the details of the worker's compensation. I think that that is the kind of statistics this House should appreciate and I want to thank the Honourable Minister for putting that out very clearly.

The only thing that I have a concern with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on compensation is that, the Honourable Minister did not talk about the timeliness and the time that was involved in the lodgement of a particular complaint or accident and when and how it was resolved, so I think that would be interesting statistics as well. Although in 10 years, it sounds that the compensation might be big but if you divide that on an average, it is about less than 1,000 cases that have been dealt with, and half of them would have probably got the compensation.

But the second part of the Honourable Minister's Statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is very interesting and this is where, I think, it is quite shameful that Fiji has not been able to adhere, in particular, to Convention 87 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention 1948.

If I can highlight some of those issues, while the Honourable Minister said that we have ratified, we understand that and the compliance will take time. But I think the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference in Fiji is quite damning and I think it is high time that Fiji and the Government takes this matter seriously.

When you have these ILO sessions, when you talk about a particular country not complying or not facilitating, it affects the status, the confidence that we provide to the investors, and to those looking at Fiji. And if I can just quote from this recent report on Fiji, especially on the trade union rights and civil liberties, this is what the Committee is saying, Mr. Speaker, and I quote:

“Recalling the independence between civil liberties and trade union rights and emphasising that a truly free and independent trade union movement can only develop in a climate free from violence, pressure and threats of any kind against the leaders and members of such organisations, the Committee requests the Government to make serious efforts to ensure that State entities and the officials refrain from anti-union practices including arrests, detention, violence, intimidation, harassment, interference in trade union activities so as to contribute to an environment conducive to the full development of trade union rights.

The Committee requests the Government to consider issuing instructions to the police and the armed forces in this regard and to provide training to ensure that any actions taken during demonstrations respect the basic civil liberties and fundamental labour rights of workers and employers. Further the Committee firmly expects that any charges against Mr. Anthony related to the exercise of his trade union activities will be immediately dropped.”

There are many other recommendations, Mr. Speaker, and the one that I want to quote also is the one on appointment of members to the functioning of the Employment Relations Advisory Board to review labour legislation and this is what the Committee says, and I quote:

“The Committee trusts that the Government will refrain from any undue interference in the nomination and appointment of members to the ERAB and to other tripartite bodies and will ensure that the social partners can freely designate the representative.

The Committee expects the appointment of ERAB members to take place without delay first to allow this mechanism to re-convene and meet regularly in order to pursue the labour law, review and meaningfully address all outstanding matters in this regard.”

There are several other recommendations and issues on this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in relation to Convention 87. There is one on the Public Order (Amendment) Decree and this is what the Committee says, and I quote:

“The Committee urges the Government to take the necessary measures to bring section 8 of the Public Order (Amendment) Decree into line with the Convention by fully repealing or amending this provision so as to ensure that the right to assembly may be freely exercised.”

There are other recommendations, Mr. Speaker, on Political Parties Decree on dissolution and suspension of organisations by administrative authority and then there is a recommendation on Convention 98 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention.

What this shows, Mr. Speaker, is that, we may be ratifying conventions and the Minister rightly said that compliance is the most important issue. We can sign these international conventions and say that Fiji has signed it but what is the practice? What is the compliance mechanism? Are we changing the laws? Are we making sure that we facilitate that?

At every session of the ILO, they have raised this issue about the Fiji Government’s failure to address the compliance issues under Convention 98 and Convention 87. This is what this Government should focus on because right now, we are trying to provide confidence to the international community and we must do this as a matter of urgency. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Honourable Members, that concludes that part. We will now move on to the second Ministerial Statement for today and I now call on the Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development to deliver her Statement. You have the floor, Madam.

NFA Integrated Community Fire Warden and Emergency Framework

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public; thank you for the opportunity to present to this august House the National Fire Authority’s (NFA) Integrated Community Fire Warden and Emergency Framework.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to outline the work of the NFA and how the Authority meets the challenges of educating Fijians on fire safety to mitigate and minimise the number of fires in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Framework was launched by the Honourable Prime Minister on 27th February, 2021 at Yako Village in Nadi to create awareness and a state of preparedness when it comes to structural fires. As owners of properties, each citizen has to take ownership and ensure that their properties have the necessary fire safety plans and equipment. Having well-trained community fire wardens and certified fire safety communities is a step in that direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Yako Village have set the example for all other Fijians. As the Honourable Prime Minister had said at the launch, the best way to fight fire is to prevent fire, and that is the job of all citizens, not just our professional firefighters. The people of Yako have shown that they can keep their communities safe rather than being vulnerable and solely dependant on the NFA. The Framework is simply an integrated effort of the Government, private sector and our local communities to enhance resilience and to become stronger and robust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the Framework essentially does is encourage behavioural change and genuine shared responsibility for emergency preparedness. We want to build a connection with communities and explore the opportunities for a truly community-centred approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the exhibition of skills learnt by the Yako community Fire and Emergency Response Wardens was absolutely magnificent to watch. It was a proud moment for the community and the NFA as we witnessed how this initiative completely transformed the youths of Yako Village, who can now contribute more by serving their communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were informed by the community elders that the community church which was once empty is now filled with these youths. They have taken a step forward by taking ownership of protecting their community. The purpose of this Framework is to minimise fires that we see as a regular occurrence, so what we are trying to do is create awareness amongst members of the community and give them a sense of responsibility and preparedness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Minister responsible, I acknowledge with admiration the integrated effort inbuilt in the Framework which has brought the NFA, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and the Fiji Police Force together to mould these youths.

The community fire wardens were trained on basic skills in lifesaving, evacuation, fire drills, awareness of community policing, sexual harassment, drugs and self-discipline. The launch of the Framework was the pinnacle of this initiation and the beginning of a five-year programme to be rolled out in Fiji. In fact, 32 other communities in the Western, Central and Northern Divisions are ready to be a part of this Framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Framework will be rolled out, covering a total of 1,193 villages and settlements that are under the ambit of 302 District Advisory Counsellors. With 50 percent of Fijian population below the age of 27½ years and 69 percent below the age of 40 years, we have the opportunity to engage many more Fijians under this Framework. We can have a large population fully prepared to identify the structural issues that can be corrected to avoid fires, whilst also being prepared to deal with fires.

These youths will be appointed by the community and they must be physically and mentally capable to undertake training for the full duration, committed and a permanent resident of the subject community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 55.9 percent of Fiji's population reside in urban areas. This is attributed to the extension of town boundaries, which are also the legal fire boundaries in accordance with the

National Fire Service Act 1994. Approximately, 44.1 percent of Fiji's population or 390,635 Fijians reside in rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this data is used by NFA for community survey and analysis, and includes the identification of communities, community structure, population profiling and determining the willingness of the community to participate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the role of NFA's services has evolved since its establishment. The essential services provided by the NFA no longer just evolves or involves firefighting. They are also skilled in responding to road accident rescue operations, hazardous material response, search and rescue operations, flood and swift water rescue operations, providing emergency ambulance service, first aid assistance and carrying out urban search and rescue operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with Government's assistance over the years, the NFA has been able to take its services closer to the communities. They have been able to reach out to a large population to put a stop to the occurrence of unwanted fires and attend to emergencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of fire incidents in Fiji is alarming. Fires impact people, property and the environment. In some cases, the losses are extraordinary, causing deaths, widespread damage to property and house contents. We cannot imagine the pain of losing everything to a fire, including the lives of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last five years, 46 persons lost their lives in fire incidents. In 2021, there were three deaths as a result of house fire. The effects are devastating to families and businesses and collectively can be substantial.

An analysis of emergency response statistics over the last five years revealed that NFA responded to an average of over 4,600 calls, of which approximately 50 percent were on variety of fire-related emergencies, such as sugarcane, building or vehicle-related fire.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of greater concern is the number of structural fires that have occurred. Despite NFA having conducted numerous community awareness programmes, house to house visits and educational institutional programmes, the number of residential fire remains consistently high. The statistics analysed for the last five years have indicated that the NFA has responded to an average of 139 structural fires, of which 91 percent were for residential properties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a slight drop in structural fires in 2020, in comparison to 2019. The NFA attended 133 structural fire incidents, in 2020, compared to 140 in 2019. There was a significant drop in the number of commercial property fires in 2020 which was eight, compared to 18 in 2019. The reduction in commercial fires is indicative of the commitment by the private sector to engage NFA in commercial training programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NFA has conducted 84 commercial training programmes in 2019, compared to 54 in 2020 due to COVID-19. The business sector also has annual inspections before compliance certificate is issued. In addition, all commercial building construction plans are vetted for fire safety compliance.

The devastating impact of fire to everyone's life can be crippling. In 2019, the total estimated value of property damages caused by fire was \$22 million but in 2020 it was \$13 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, therefore, apparent that there is no room for being complacent based on these statistics. It is envisaged that the integrated approach promoted in the Framework will assist in preventing and in dealing with emergencies.

The NFA's Strategic Plan for the period 2020-2025 outlines the strategies and commitment to realise the vision of "Resilient Communities with Effective Emergency Services". The first strategic goal related to the Strategic Plan is the safety and prevention, which focusses on the need to deliver effective risk reduction guidance and activities to prevent fires and emergencies.

The achievement of the first strategic goal is expected to result in:

- reduced likelihood of unwanted fires;
- increased preparedness for emergencies;
- communities' ability to recover from emergencies better; and
- strengthen mechanisms for protection of critical facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, therefore, imperative that an integrated community approach is initiated, if we are to realise resilient communities that will work closely with the fire service to effectively respond in the event of any emergency.

The Integrated Community Fire Warden and Emergency Response Framework is the perfect example of the integrated approach to dealing with fire emergencies. It is a guideline to ensure communities are central, through preparedness, response and recovery from fires and other emergencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Framework has been developed to provide guidance on the roles and activities of communities towards fire safety and the resilience in the face of any emergency. This integrated community approach will enable NFA to work closely with communities and teach them to become first responders in the event of an emergency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst professional agencies, such as NFA, Police, NDMO and the Ministry of Health remain at the forefront of emergency planning response and recovery, the Framework promotes resilience as everyone's business. The model for this Framework involves a four-step process.

The first and important step is the identification of communities and their willingness to participate.

Step 2 relates to determining the readiness level of the community and identification of distance from the nearest fire station topography of the area, building structures and building spacing, water supply and other water source provision.

Step 3 relates to the development of strategies through workshops with the community and its newly-appointed volunteer community fire wardens.

Step 4 relates to the sustainability of this programme where the Authority will ensure that quarterly refresher training workshops are conducted, along with monthly community engagements and meetings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the important aspects of this integrated community initiative is the valuable role in identifying those with special needs and ensuring that no one is left behind in any emergency. There are opportunities for the nearest fire station crew to involve the community fire

wardens in emergency drills, and friendly competitions between fire warden teams and nearby communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the community fire wardens are issued with certificate on completion of their training with the NFA, certifying them to carry out their roles as community fire wardens. Community fire wardens also conduct fire safety inspections of every house in their community. The compliance level of the home is illustrated by a small coloured sticker pasted on the front door of that house. A green colour sticker represents full compliance, amber represents semi-compliance and red represents non-compliance to fire safety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this basically provides a snapshot on the fire safety compliance level of that community which should give anyone a sense of security if the compliance sticker is green.

We believe that this new Framework initiative will greatly contribute to the reduction of property fire that is claiming properties and lives. It will also make our youths more responsible towards their community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the only way to fight fire is to make all Fijians become firefighters, making them understand the risk of fire and the steps they need to take to eliminate that risk.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank our past and present firefighters and volunteers who are our true heroes putting their lives in danger to protect Fijians from fire disaster and any emergency. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to take the floor.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for the Ministerial Statement.

I now give the floor to the designated speaker for the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Tabuya. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Integrated Community Fire Warden and Emergency Framework sounds like a very fancy phrase but let us look at the reality on the ground, Mr. Speaker.

The Honourable Minister has not stated to us whether the fire stations around the country are operational, especially in the rural areas, to realise this particular proposed Framework. For example, the Nabouwalu Fire Station building is completed but not functional, so our people select to call Seaqqa to get services. How are they going to realise that?

We have thousands of villages in Fiji. How are they going to cover those villages and what kind of budget is being allocated to realise this? We already hear a 50 percent down on revenue, what is the priority given to stopping fires? Here, we have the Honourable Minister herself saying that the number of fires in Fiji is alarming, is it alarming enough to have a budgetary allocation? We have not heard that from the Honourable Minister.

Mr. Speaker, we have a huge population. We have heard from the Honourable Minister that there is about 44 percent of population in rural dwellings and then we have those who live in squatter and informal settlements, in homes that are far from adequate. My question to the Honourable Minister is; why is the NFA charging services for uninsured properties? Why are they not telling this House about that?

I visited a family in Makoi whose house was burnt down. Of course, they were distraught that they had lost their belongings, only to be informed later that they had to pay for the services.

Why are our people who are already living in poverty and we are charging them services - our public service? We are already paying taxes for our public service. Why are we slapping our poor people with the bill to pay for fire services? Why are they paying double? Why did not the Honourable Minister answer that?

Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister talked about the needs of people with special needs, the need for them to be looked after. I visited a home of a family in Davuilevu, whose house burnt down earlier this year. They were just lucky that their mum who is bedridden, happened to be in hospital on that day, the night their house was burnt down. They live just a few doors away from the Davuilevu Fire Station. The first truck came, they ran out of water. When the second truck came and hooked up to the fire hydrant, it could not work. So, why has the Honourable Minister not told us that? Are all the fire hydrants in Fiji being checked and operational? What is the use of having these fire hydrants?

Again, the reality of the matter - this is what is happening on the ground. Now, the Household and Income and Expenditure Survey of 2017, there was no question on whether the property is insured. It asks about the material of the roof, the outer walls, are they getting water source and electricity source? One simple question, how many homes are insured?

This is very important for us to know because obviously, if they are charging us, we have to be able to see how the Government can help our people to insure their property so that there is possibly less fires. Perhaps, people feel more responsible but we hear that this is not even a question on this survey.

Recently, Mr. Speaker, with the tropical cyclones we have had, numerous power cuts by Electricity Fiji Limited (EFL) and power surges that can threaten homes with fires, what is EFL doing about that?

Mr. Speaker, our people are entitled to adequate housing which specifically connects back to that and if we are going to be charging people with those services, then ensure that our people can insure their homes. Once again, we are targeting our people, the poorest, who live in uninsured homes across the nation and once again, the Government is slapping them with a double tax to pay for this service and they should be ashamed of themselves. Our people are dealing with poverty and here we are – the Government charging them for this. Remove this immediately, please! Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution to the debate.

I now give the floor to the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would actually like to give some credit to the Honourable Minister for providing the details from the strategic framework. I have had a quick glance at that Framework and I think it is important to have that Framework and also have a strategic plan. But I fully concur with my colleague, Honourable Tabuya, about the lack of details as to what is involved in terms of providing the services.

I was told by a cane farmer in Tavua, who lives about seven kilometres away from Tavua Town that he had to actually pay \$600 for a fire pole on his sugarcane farm. So, we need some clarity and some details as to the nature of services that the NFA is going to provide? Is it just confined to services to the ratepayers?

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Well, I will tell you more about horses and bullocks later.

I think it is not clear as to what sort of charges they ought to pay if they are outside the boundary of the town. What is the framework in which they can operate? What is the accessibility to the services from the NFA for those who are outside of the town boundary? It is absolutely important.

I know the Honourable Minister talked about 1,193 villages and settlements and I think it is a good idea to provide capacity building - provide support to villages and settlements so that they understand the risks involved in a situation where you will have a fire. But it is also important, Mr. Speaker, as alluded to by Honourable Tabuya, to know what sort of services they can provide and at what charges. Invariably, those would be people who are poor, who are finding it difficult to make ends meet and on top of that, if you end up with a fire you have got to pay for those services so we need some clarity on that.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I also think that this is a very important subject. There is much more and I hope that the Honourable Minister will give another Ministerial Statement on a number of other issues under her portfolio with respect to deteriorating infrastructure in towns and cities, rates, hikes and regulations. There are lot of issues that the Honourable Minister has to inform Parliament as to what and how she is dealing with it because those are very, very urgent issues right now facing our people in towns and cities. I hope that the Honourable Minister would, Mr. Speaker, in the course of this week, provide a Ministerial Statement and address some of those issues that have been of concern to towns and ratepayers in all the towns and cities.

Last week, Mr. Speaker, I was in Savusavu and there were serious issues about machines not working and drains not being cleaned. I have complaints from town councils and cities about rubbish not being collected, grass not being cut. These are very, very important issues that people are bringing to us on a daily basis and the Honourable Minister ought to provide an update as to what is happening and why is it not possible for town and city council administrators to deal with those issues in a timely, efficient and effective manner? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, on that note, we will take an adjournment for refreshments and proceed with the third Ministerial Statement after the tea adjournment. We adjourn for tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.36 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.07 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will proceed with the third Ministerial Statement for today and I call on the Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment to deliver his Statement. You have the floor, Sir.

Recycling and Waste Management in Fiji

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members, I would like to take this opportunity to inform this august House of the steps taken by the Ministry of Environment to address waste management through recycling in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Constitution entitles all citizens to a clean and healthy environment. A clean and healthy environment is essential for the health and wellbeing of the public, as well as the natural ecosystems and their ability to continue to provide life-sustaining ecosystem services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a clean environment does directly affect the health status, playing a major role in the quality of life, number of years of healthy life lived and other health disparities. The built environment, for instance, workplaces, factories, educational institutions, common recreational spaces, transit systems, et cetera, affects both individual health and environmental quality. For example, recycling of products greatly reduces landfill waste and the resulting toxic pollution from the same. Of course, it results in financial savings and the circular economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are countries around the world who take great pride in marketing their country as a tourist destination by showcasing how clean their country is. No visitor wants to visit a country whose environment is not clean as it can be a health hazard. Countries in our neighbourhood have competitions amongst settlements and villages for clean environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, clean environment is often seen from the perspective of humans only. However, the three components of the environment - physical, biological and social, all strongly interact with each other. This phenomenon between the three enables sustainable life on earth. When there is an imbalance created amongst these three, that is when we see sustainability being threatened. A key imbalance occurs when we continue to use resources faster than they are being produced. This is a human element contributing to the unsustainability on earth.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, clean environment is a binding constraint for long term sustainable environmental growth and development. There are countries which are struggling to reverse damages to their environment, loss of habitat and species because they took their environment for granted. Some argued along the lines of the famous economics Professor Simon Kuznets, who noted that as per capita income increases, people will be willing to spend a large share of their income on environmental goods and thus, any adverse impact on environment in the early stages of growth could be reversed after increases in income.

At that particular point in time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Simon Kuznets' hypothesis was very famous and was thought to be a revolutionary argument. However, over time, it was noted that this claim could no longer be supported empirically due to the irreversible nature of certain environmental damages. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, environment must be seen synonymous to growth, they must go hand in hand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question that arises then is; who generates waste? Every one, every institution, every decision making unit, household, farmer, business, institution or the educational institution, you name it, every decision making unit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the waste generated by us, humans, has a great detrimental effect to the environment. We are generating far too much waste which cannot be dealt with sustainably. Increasingly, waste that is not biodegradable is fast filling our oceans and landfills, let us say, plastic waste as an example. A recent study found that of the 6.3 billion metric tonnes of plastic waste being produced, out of which only 9 percent of that plastic waste has been recycled. Studies indicate that if we do not act now, there will be more plastics found in our oceans than the fish stocks by 2050.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, the negative consequence brought about by rapid industrialisation and economic growth is, indeed, a large scale waste generation associated with the same. Adding to this, there is an inherent behaviour to choose synthetic alternatives over natural resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the danger with this is that, as income continues to rise particularly in developing countries - movement from low income category to middle income category and from middle income category to high income category, people tend to lose their consciousness about the waste they are generating and their willingness to recycle or reduce the waste.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, solid waste management affects every human being, this is irrespective of individuals managing their own waste or the Government providing these services. As national spaces around the world urbanise, develop economically and grow in population, a World Bank report estimates that waste generation will increase to 3.4 billion tonnes in 2050. Sir, it is estimated that, at least, 33 percent of this waste is being mismanaged globally today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through history, humans have moved from small scale hunter gatherers and agrarian societies to more commercial and consumer-based societies. We have essentially moved further away from economies that value the continuation of resources to a more disposal-oriented society.

Coming home, here in Fiji, the waste generated in the Central Division are reflective of waste generation patterns elsewhere in Fiji, assuming that to some degree of a margin of error, we can then use that as a proxy to say what is the situation with regards to waste distribution, waste generation distribution and disposal throughout Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an average Fijian produces about 0.7 kilogramme of waste per day. Waste generated in the Central Division can be split into two major categories and these are household wastes brought in by municipal councils and commercial and industrial wastes brought in by waste managers. Both share an equal portion of the contribution with household wastes having a slightly bigger part of this portion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have continued to exceed the year-on-year 90,000 tonnes mark at Naboro Landfill since 2017 and this is a clear reflection of the growth in consumerism of the economy and it is also a reflection that people are still not concerned and not undertaking, at least, by choice, reducing waste or recycling waste.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is estimated that production systems will devour about 140 billion tonnes a year of minerals, ores, fuel, fossil fuels and biomass by 2050 - three times the current consumption. Global food production alone needs to increase by 50 percent by 2050.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, natural resources, such as water are in danger. Agriculture alone already accounts for about 70 percent of global water consumption. To meet such huge food production increase, the two-thirds of the water withdrawn from the rivers of the earth, lakes and aquifers currently used for irrigation will need to be dramatically increased and will need to take into account the entire natural sources and environment to consideration, if we want to meet up with this demand.

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the rate of plastic waste ending up in our oceans each year, it constitutes a serious threat to our ecosystems, wildlife and human health. In addition, it is also projected that about 20 percent of the world's oil production will be used to make plastic and power the manufacturing of the same.

Given this grave scenario, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the urgent need for the hour is, while we continue to push for economic growth, we must not compromise on our environment. We are custodians of our environment for our future generations. They too have a right to enjoy the same level of natural resources and environment quality as we are enjoying now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, we must look at waste reduction. While we are talking about recycling that comes in the second stage, in the first stage we must look within at our consumption processes and our production system to see how we can reduce waste. If you are able to do that, then the recycling part will be much easier and a smaller lot to deal with.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to re-engineer our production process, we need to re-look at our consumption processes. Waste volumes can be significantly reduced, if waste avoidance behaviours are adopted. This means, making a conscious change and choosing to select products that are not developed on a single use premises.

We must make attempts to recycle waste, at least, those that are generated by us and furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow others who are willing to recycle waste to pick up and use it. What happens is that sometimes, while we are creating or generating waste and we are not recycling it, we are then also stopping others who are willing to come and pick up that waste and use it or recycle it in their business process. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to change our mindset. If we are not, for some reason or the other, are engaged in recycling and if there is someone, a third party, who is willing to pick it up and recycle it, let them do it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the re-use of waste is essential to ensuring that potential re-usable items do not have a premature end of life. There are two positive externalities in that, waste management costs are avoided and delayed and the burden on natural raw material is delayed or totally avoided. For example, if we recycle paper while we deal with an externality, a negative externality about reducing the paper waste going to the dump sites or into the natural resources environment but we are also delaying or avoiding a burden on the resources which is going to be utilised to produce these papers if we had not recycled the paper waste. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can deal with two outcomes with just a simple approach of recycling waste.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme for this year's Global Recycling Day which was on 18th March is our "Recycling Heroes". The Ministry, in recognition of the theme, led the national commemoration of the recycling day - commending the efforts led by our heroes. These heroes could be our students, our children, individual households, farmers and business owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry promoted the vitality of recycling, called for action, for all Fijians to come together in one accord and put our country and the planet first, reigniting the mindset of communities, businesses, citizenry and individuals around Fiji. It was a day of reckoning to see recyclables as valued resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need a national movement. Individuals cannot say I am not contributing to it and therefore, I do not have to do anything because if the environment quality reduces, everyone will be affected whether you contributed or not, so the environment cannot be seen as a private good, rather environment quality is a public good, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the global economy stumbles due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the international borders remain closed, nations have adapted to utilising locally available resources and live within their means.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a number of positives out of COVID-19 and one positive often cited by the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport is about looking within, utilising the locally available resources. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an amazing opportunity for us to move forward as we get out of this COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the soaring costs and the challenges to cross-border transportation of raw materials have also made a meaningful dent into our thinking. Businesses or business houses are now relooking at this, how we are able to re-engineer our production processes while we are resourcing locally for the benefit of the economy and the people, but also we are reducing and saving on transportation costs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recycling is the easiest way to protect our environment and protecting the wellbeing of our communities, the future generations to come. The success of recycling, however, depends on the active participation of every, every individual, every decision-making unit and I say the decision-making unit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whoever, whether it is a farmer, household, wherever the decisions are being taken, those decisions must include futuristic options, views and future scenarios.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Environment supports the efforts of our partners, individuals and companies to ensure that Fiji's recycling sector emerges as a key solution to the environmental problems posed by poor waste management. The Ministry embarked on several initiatives, to name a few.

On Friday last week, 18th March, the Ministry launched the Framework for Zero Waste Business Certification Programme targeting the private sector. I am delighted to inform that there are several businesses that have volunteered to come on board for this Programme. The first business to come on board this programme was McDonald's Group Fiji. Our hearty congratulations to them for taking this initiative or this important step, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry is creating a meaningful opportunity to transform plastic bottles, particularly. We are currently working on Container Deposit Regulations (CDR) under the Environment Management Act 2005. The CDR is one such system that will enable and incentivise and motivate people to rather than throwing the bottles, willingly collect it, taking it and depositing it for a small return.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this model of adding a mandatory value to the potential recyclables is expected to be extended to other waste forms based on its success with beverage containers, such as the PET bottles. Once we are able to trial this with these PET bottles, we could then extend it to other types of waste which could be treated in the same manner as PET bottles, which could be deposited in vending machines, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is good potential for replicating such a system with other difficult wastes, such as tyres, waste oil and derelict vehicles, to name a few. You may ask; what is happening to all these used tyres? Where are they going? We need to begin somewhere. We started with PET

bottles and we will get there as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and ensure these waste products are utilised and recycled.

The Ministry will be finalising and putting forward a National 7 Policy so that Fiji and its institutions can align to the 7R concept. The policy is intended to promote the concept supporting the circular economy model with the goal of forming a set of legislation to engrain circular economy into our everyday choices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has also declared the Naboro Landfill area as a tax free zone, to allow for the setup of recycling ventures. The Ministry has partnered with other relevant Ministries in promoting this zone and attracting investment groups.

The Ministry of Environment recognises the importance of recycling waste and safeguarding the environment. The Environment Management Act 2005 sets out the framework for waste management and pollution control in Fiji. The Ministry promotes compliance in newer ways of surveillance and monitoring and support to our communities through the Waste Management Think Tanks established by the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have established a think-tank, a group of people, expertise in different areas on this matter only, given noting the gravity of this particular issue. The Ministry cannot do it alone, as I alluded to earlier on. We need a national movement to protect our country, our environment, our natural resources, not only for ourselves but for future generations as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global community, in consistency with the recycling agenda are recognising the efforts of the recycling heroes in their respective countries. This includes the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), business sectors, activists, students, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to join my colleagues in the Ministry of Environment to motivate and call everyone in this country to join us in this national movement to keep our country clean. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement and I now give the floor to the designated speaker for the Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Salote Radrodro.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Honourable Minister for the narratives on waste management and yes, we agree that it is a national concern which we must consider very seriously because waste, as he alluded to, is threatening our public health, our environment, climate and humanity as a whole. Therefore, the question I ask the Honourable Minister Reddy is; how is the Government looking at waste as a valuable resource that can be re-used and cycled as business opportunities.

I know he touched on that briefly, but he did not come out strongly on what the Government can do rather than just talk about it. What programmes are in place to be able to actualise their words. Otherwise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in waste from industries, mining and mineral extraction, logging, domestic and food waste, if not handled effectively, Fiji will fall deeper into the vicious cycle of poverty, as reflected in the 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to make some recommendations which I hope the Honourable Minister responsible will not only listen and try and object to, but to hear and try and do something about it.

First of all, Mr. Speaker, let us stop all these cake-cutting, marking all these international days and divert that money to assist in the clean-up campaigns and waste removals, particularly in the Nausori-Nasinu corridor.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, is that before industries are established, they must be designed for recycling. For example, Government should aggressively pursue research into the reuse of plastic bottles and tyres, as alluded to by the Honourable Minister. But we must step up to that and have some kind of serious engineering research done so that those materials could be turned into industrial construction materials. Maybe, that will also help in the maintenance of our roads, particularly the potholes.

Mr. Speaker, another recommendation is that, the Government must revisit their failed promise on the waste transfer station for the Central Division. My colleague, the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports is smiling from the other side as he is very familiar with that because the project was not carried through. We, on this side of the House, very strongly objected to the location, Honourable Minister, not to the idea of the project but to the location which was to be at Laqere. We opposed that very strongly and then that saw the natural death of that project.

I am requesting the Honourable Minister now responsible, the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment to revisit that project and try and revive it so that it is done because waste management is a very big issue. It is a challenge in the Nausori-Nasinu corridor and if you will recall in my maiden speech, that was one of the issues I had highlighted and we, on this side, continuously highlight that because that is where the majority or bulk of our residential communities are located.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I heard the Honourable Minister touch on it but I would like us to look at it and take it to a level that a parliamentary committee be established to specifically look at this issue with the mindset that we turn our waste into wealth. That can be done, Mr. Speaker, but it needs the commitment, the political will from the Honourable Prime Minister, as well as from the Acting Minister for Economy, and all Ministers responsible from the other side. If it, in case, reaches and is tabled in Cabinet, that you all support it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the designated speaker for the National Federation Party, the Honourable Qereqeretabua. You have the floor, Madam.

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

The Honourable Minister is absolutely correct when he mentioned about tourists and visitors not wanting to visit a place where there is a lot of rubbish. And as we try and push Australia and New Zealand to open their borders to us, I think that should be front and centre because we are struggling environmentally, and we will struggle to reverse or, at least, mitigate the degradation of our environment that we see all around us.

Last year, the Government tender portal, Mr. Speaker, made mention that a company called Shanghai Electrical had been awarded the operational tender for the Naboro Landfill. I do not know when they will be taking over the Naboro Landfill, but I do hope and pray that their processes will be as strong as we see currently.

Mr. Speaker, during your travels along the Queen's Road, just out in Veisari before you get to the FMF biscuit factory, if you look over on the left, you will see one of the many eyesores on the Queen's Road and this is a compound which was operated by a Chinese national, with the specific aim of collecting and sending plastic and paper waste to China for recycling. Unfortunately, the owner had to abandon the operation.

If you go past now, the compound is full of plastic bottles and other waste, and is now overgrown with vines and grass. I understand that the site is now being remedied by the owner of the land. Can the Honourable Minister, please, ensure that this does not happen again down the line?

In collaboration with the private sector from the Government side, I hope the Ministry in particular, the Department of Environment will really collaborate in good faith with the private sector. The Vunato Rubbish Dump is one that comes to mind when we are talking about waste management. The repeated fires and the leaching of plastics into the *qoliqoli* just outside Vunato is something that we must be thinking about.

Mr. Speaker, lecturing us on waste management is all well and good but trying to link that to the thousands of families who can only afford noodles packed in plastic. I would like to know what the Honourable Minister is doing in terms of working with production houses to make recyclable packaging easier and cheaper to produce in-house or in Fiji. What kind of work is the Department of Environment and the Honourable Minister doing across the board to encourage things like the use of nappies, as opposed to diapers for communities where water and washing is not a problem?

The amount of glass that goes to the landfill could be broken down and used for sand-blasting at our shipyards, Mr Speaker. The list goes on so just in terms of the Honourable Minister's speech today, it is great to lecture everyone but I want to know the amount of work being done in collaboration with all the Ministries, to really encourage, support and reward locals for using recyclable materials for composting, and the list goes on. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, we will move on.

I now call upon the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF WOMEN, CHILDREN AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION 2014-2017 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the review of the:

- (1) Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2016-2017 Annual Report;
- (2) Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 1st January to 31st July 2016 Annual Report;
- (3) Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2015 Annual Report; and
- (4) Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2014 Annual Report,

that were tabled on 13th May, 2019.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

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

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation oversees the Department of Social Welfare, Department of Women and Children and the Department of Poverty Monitoring Unit. The Ministry's role is:

- to provide care and protection programme for children as stipulated under the relevant legislations;
- to provide social protection programme for the disadvantaged, older persons and disabilities;
- the administration of poverty alleviation programmes;
- the empowerment of women and gender mainstreaming; and
- to monitor, evaluate and report on the progress and impact of the Integrated National Poverty Eradication Programme.

The Committee, upon being referred the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation Annual Reports, invited its senior officials on Thursday, 28th March, 2019 for a public hearing. During this meeting, officials from the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation enlightened the Committee on numerous programmes funded by Government and donor partners, future plans and initiatives aligning to the Ministry's strategic goals, execution of new proposed plans and pending projects and overall operations aligned to SDGs and the measures that are being taken by the Ministry to progress the SDGs.

The Committee noted the changes in the Ministry's focus from the sole provision of social protection programmes to a planned, programmatic approach towards prevention, new innovations, graduating welfare to workfare, new communication campaigns for child abuse and community directed programmes on violence against women.

As the Ministry responsible for care and protection of children, women and the disadvantaged, people with disabilities and older persons, it continues to provide social protection, gender mainstreaming and empowerment programmes to address people's needs and alleviate poverty.

The Committee commends the work of the committed and motivated individuals, who have worked together to bring the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation to newer heights. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

I now give the floor to the Honourable Viliame Gavoka. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As we deliberate on this Report, Mr. Speaker, I would like to focus primarily on the Poverty Alleviation Programmes and raise the serious concern of SODELPA that Fiji is falling into a vicious cycle of poverty and debt trap. This is very concerning, Mr. Speaker, and if I could define what vicious cycle of poverty is, it is a set of events or factors by which poverty, once started will continue, unless there is sustainable intervention and commitment in the implementation.

Mr. Speaker, this House needs to focus on sustainable intervention on what we face today, as it is quite obvious and evident across the country that poverty is a huge issue in our country. Over the last six years, poverty has increased from 28.1 percent to 30 percent. This is prior to COVID-19 and one asks the question; where is the boom in all these? We have been hearing about the boom but in actual fact, poverty has been increasing.

Mr. Speaker, we all know what the figures are and they are very worrying, actually very depressing. At least, 115,000 people have lost their jobs in the formal sector. This is not including the underemployment in the informal sector.

If 115,000 people, Mr. Speaker, have lost their jobs and it comes down to one in each family, you are talking about 575,000 people in this country who are now facing extreme hardship. For a country of less than a million people, this is quite worrying, Mr. Speaker. This is a very serious concern to our Party and we need to look at remedial actions on how to arrest all these, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, some key indicators - revenue is down by 50 percent. This is despite the reduction in revenue of 50 percent that has been put in place by the Government. Employment, as I have said, is down and the key economic sectors, Mr. Speaker, are also under-performing. Visitor arrivals we all know, why? Electricity is down, mahogany is 98 percent down, reduction in Value Added Tax (VAT), commercial banks for lending is down, cement production is down and job advertisement is down. This is all from the Reserve Bank of Fiji Report, as late as February.

The debt level, Mr. Speaker, is now 73.2 percent of GDP, domestic debt is \$5.1 billion, external debt is \$1.7 billion and this is not including the \$1 billion from the World Bank and from Japan.

Mr. Speaker, we need to have immediate measures in place to reduce expenditure. I know that salary cuts have been put in place but in some areas, the highest paid need to have a 25 percent reduction in their pay but this is not happening. We are not talking about pay across-the-board but it is to be pro rata, to reduce those at the highest level. Mr. Speaker, we can reduce the telecom costs, the purchase of goods and services by \$20 million, unallocated debt payments worth \$300 million, there are so many things we can do and that we can save about \$755 million.

Mr. Speaker, the financial market also needs to be reinvigorated. If you look at the banks today, there is low appetite for borrowing. We should incentivise to create more borrowing and reduce interest rates.

Mr. Speaker, the overnight lending rate is 0.25 percent, yet some banks are still charging interest at 8 percent, 9 percent and 10 percent, so something is not right. There is no confidence in the banks to lend at a more attractive rate to attract more investments.

We all know that liquidity is high - \$844 million and, Mr. Speaker, I just want, at this time, for this Parliament to salute our people overseas who have remitted about \$652 million last year (up to December), which is the highest ever. We need this House to say, “thank you” to our people in overseas, who are now contributing to the second highest source of revenue to Fiji. We should, as a people, say, “thank you” to them.

We should do what we can to thank them. In the Philippines, Mr. Speaker, the size of a remittance is in billions, I think it was \$80 billion the last time I checked. When they come back from the Philippines, they are pampered by the people of the Philippines, who thank them for what

they are doing to their country. So for us, this House must recognise our people from abroad who are sending this kind of money to keep us alive.

Mr. Speaker, some key solutions to address the vicious cycle of poverty include; creating jobs, raising minimum wage, increasing income tax rebate on workers with more than three children, supporting paying equity, establishing cash for work programmes, investing in affordable child care and early education and expanding healthcare.

Mr. Speaker, on the debt trap, get rid of the expensive loan portfolio, restructure and consolidate all debts and sell redundant assets - unfortunately, FijiFirst has sold all the assets in this country so we do not have much more to go, minimise taking additional loans and restructure expenditure based on real revenue. You dream up revenue that you cannot realise and you tag your expenditure according to that.

You need to live in the real world. You are orbiting away from reality, Mr. Speaker. Reduce interest rates, get the RBF to relook at its policies, get RBF to relook at the rates and motivate the banks to lend more, stimulate the economy, generate tax revenue and issue debt bond to local entrepreneurs.

Mr. Speaker, you can do this. Instead of borrowing from abroad, you can issue bonds locally to big businesses. You can raise money locally.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- You do not know.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, easy to talk, this is what SODELPA can do, we know what we can do. The problem with FijiFirst is that, they are now crippled, they cannot even think anymore. The problem with FijiFirst is that, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

Did we have a Bill here late last week? They said, “Oh, we made a mistake to that Bill. Can we put it out?”

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- And there was TELS, and they said, “Oh, they are wrong!”

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We cannot rely on this Government anymore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to do it alone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe on this point, the economy is in crisis. There is a lack of confidence on investment, they subdue demand, the key sectors of the economy are not performing. We understand why tourism is not performing but what about mahogany? What about fisheries? What about pine? What about minerals? Why is it that they are not performing?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Tourism goes down, everything else goes down.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Stop talking in isolation.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Stop talking in isolation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and there is inconsistency in fiscal policy amongst other policies. There is a need for a proper policy mix.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all we are saying is that, you have been doing it alone for one year now with COVID-19. We have been asking you to be more inclusive, to be a bipartisan and include the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have spoken here in December last year about an economic summit. I tabled a motion here and we talked about it, everyone together to look at the economy that is in crisis. You have proven to the people of Fiji that you cannot do it, so let us get everyone to sit in and do it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if not, the cycle of poverty and the debt that we are in will stiffen everything in this country. We are giving you some ideas on how to do it. We are offering our assistance, we can help you do a better job of it. It is best, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they come down from their high horses. This is not the time to be grandstanding and include everyone together in the process of reviving the economy of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know most times with the FijiFirst, it is like having a dialogue with the deaf but I think they are running out of ideas. It is time to say, “We are here, we can work together and we can make it better. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Gavoka. I give the floor to the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa. You have the floor, madam.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- I thank the Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for this Review Report. The national poverty rate, as outlined by our Party Leader in 2013 and 2014 was 28.1 percent with the latest figures from the 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey showing that poverty has increased to 30 percent. This means that more people today are poorer than when the Annual Reports were written from 2014 to 2017. This tells us, Sir, that 30 households out of every 100 households are deemed to be falling into the poverty category and this is a vicious cycle, bringing them into a deep debt trap which is difficult to get out of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the issues raised in this Report which makes the work difficult for the Ministry to manage is firstly, the geographical dispersion of their offices all around the city and the country and trying to find enough room for the personnel and storage space for all the documents and equipment is not easy, since the Ministry has to manually do most of its work rather than storing it digitally.

In this regard Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the recommendations of this Report is that the Ministry should work closely with the Ministry of Economy and other stakeholders for appropriate resources to upgrade its ICT unit and to strengthen its network for setting up the Ministry’s database. On 7th June, 2019, *fjivillage* stated that the digiFIJI App will create a people’s hub and I quote:

“So that when someone applies for Government services, peoples’ basic information can be checked, if they qualify, for example, for social welfare assistance.”

This is highlighted in the OAG Report which was Parliamentary Paper No. 151 of 2019.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we hardly hear anything of this App. Is the App working or not, to facilitate and assist the most needy, or was it just a lot of hype - a lot of talk but no action, to help the people who are waiting and hope that they will be assisted out of the cycle of poverty?

Another recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the Ministry liaises closely with the Ministry of Economy to ensure that adequate resources are provided for any new programmes. According to this Review Report, which we are looking at presently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the years 2014 to 2017, each year the Ministry is requested to take on new programmes, for example in 2016 to 2017, it was the Help for Homes Initiative; in 2018 there were three new programmes, which were the Homes CARE, Bundle Insurance and the third one was the Bus Fare Top Up.

The Honourable Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not only expected to juggle all the balls in the air without dropping any, but also to work miracles with a fixed budget on these programmes that requires rapid deployment of resources and funds with the Ministry having to adjust its initial budgets and resources to accommodate the new programmes. Thus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to this Report, disruption is caused under normal activities and plays additional stress on the resources that are available to the Ministry and impact on its output.

However, if you dig a bit deeper, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will find it is not as clear as it may seem on the surface or as addressed in the Review Report. One such provision was in the 2016 to 2017 Budget, item titled, Help for Homes Initiative, which was allocated \$20 million. In the 2018 to 2019 Budget Estimate, this allocation was revised upwards to \$44.9 million.

We must appreciate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this is not a programme as it was for only one year and it is a one-off project. Although this Report states that it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, this Help for Homes Initiative was parked in Head 50, which is under the Minister for Economy. Its implementation, according to the audit report, is by the Construction Implementation Unit which is understaffed but under the Ministry of Economy. Why is this project, which is stated here in the Report, under the Department of Social Welfare, when the power and the person holding full authority is the Minister of Economy, where he makes all the decisions on this allocation? This is very puzzling indeed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and poses more questions than answers.

Lastly, on social welfare, the audit report states that the life certificates were not issued to recipients in accordance with the SOPs, verification from FNPF were not carried out before approving pay-outs and in some instances, worryingly, payments were made to recipients who had been deceased 12 years and beyond, which is depriving people qualified for assistance from receiving the help that they need.

The key findings that were noted was that, it was the internal controls that needed to be managed better to ensure the Ministry evaluates and reviews its SOPs to ensure that application and payment processes are fully complied with, to halt the cycle of poverty and the death trap that people may get themselves into because of the systems inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Interestingly enough, Mr. Speaker, according to the Auditor-General's Audit Reports for the year ending 2016, the Ministry of Economy's Internal Audit and Governance Division carried out an investigation for recipients who breached the Help for Homes Initiative and the investigation has been handed over to the Police. Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, the Chairman of the Committee in his right of reply, can update us on some of these programmes especially the Help for Homes Initiative which sounded so promising when it was first introduced here in Parliament, and how these breaches are being addressed as this can be revived and promoted from project to programme to assist people,

especially with the cyclones and other natural disasters that will continue to affect the country. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Kepa. I give the floor to the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my view, this is a very important ministry and more important in the post-COVID scenario. I have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no doubt that the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is a competent Minister and that she would be taking into account some of the things that I am going to say and also probably respond to some of the questions that I am going to raise.

Obviously, starting from where Honourable Gavoka left off and that is this report, Mr. Speaker, on the 2019 and 2020 HIES which was done before the onslaught of COVID-19 on our economy, if you compare this with the HIES done in 2013 and 2014, the poverty rate has actually increased. It is a small increase, you might say, a big increase given the nature of the poverty that we have in the country, but the fact remains, Mr. Speaker, that all the policies that we heard Government was implementing supposedly to reduce the poverty rate that was there in 2013 and 2014, has not worked.

Those policies, unfortunately, have failed. Poverty has increased, the figures, this is Government's Bureau of Statistics figure which says that the poverty level in this country has increased.

(Hon. Dr. M. Reddy interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- That means, Mr. Speaker, that the Government policies to reduce poverty - as an economist, I am afraid that he cannot understand the simple fact that the poverty rate has increased. What the Honourable Minister should do in her Ministry is to order a special audit of all the supposedly poverty alleviation programmes that have been put in place over the last three or four years, all the expenditure that we saw going into so-called poverty alleviation programmes in 2017 and 2018 must be audited, reviewed and analysed.

I want to point out some figures, Mr. Speaker, because this is very important and I think part of the responsibility of the Ministry, according to this report, is to monitor the poverty situation and basically the Ministry has no option but to look at this report. This is Government's own report, the Bureau of Statistics Report. This is a very clear document on which the Government should now, going forward, put its policies, and design its policy programmes.

If you look at the survey, 30 percent means about 258,000 individuals are living in poverty. If we add another 20 percent which means about 258,000 individuals who are always on the margin of poverty line, we could be looking at a poverty rate of about 50 percent right now in this country, Mr. Speaker, which means you are adding another 200,000 individuals falling below the poverty line. And as Honourable Gavoka said, if 150,000 people have lost jobs, the statistics, the Report also shows that employment income makes up about 74 percent of the total household income which means that if that many people have actually lost jobs, then many more households would have fallen below the poverty line.

The other important finding from this Report, Mr. Speaker, is that 62 percent of the poor reside in rural areas and the Eastern and Northern Divisions obviously have higher poverty rates than the Western and Central Divisions, but this is like pre-COVID. Post-COVID, Mr. Speaker, these scenarios would change. I mean in the Western Division, particularly Nadi and Sigatoka areas, people would be badly affected.

Mr. Speaker, the other important statistics (this is pre-COVID), if you look at the childhood poverty rates, it is about 34 percent of the total number of children under the age of 15 years. So if you look at the total number of children under the age of 15 years, 34 percent are actually living in poverty. The other interesting statistic, Mr. Speaker, from this Report, is of the total households which have more than three children. Of the total number of households in the country which have more than three children, 44 percent are living in poverty.

These are startling statistics, Mr. Speaker, and this is why I am saying, contrary to what the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment is mumbling from the other side, you have to look at how those policies work. Why were we not able to reduce the poverty from 28 percent when we thought that all these policies that we are putting in place are going to reduce poverty? It did not! It is not about accepting the blame. There is no shame in it to say if we had these policies. Look at the small and medium enterprises, the \$1,000 cash grants we are giving - whether that worked, if it worked, how far did it work? Why did it not work?

All governments, Mr. Speaker, throughout the world review these policies. You get experts to audit these policies, look at the impact, where were the pitfalls, was it in the implementation? The policy may have been good. The intention of the policy may have been good but the actual implementation of the policy, Mr. Speaker, has not produced the result which shows that the poverty rate actually increased. And if the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment wants to deny the Bureau of Statistics Report that the poverty has not increased, then there must be something wrong with him.

So, the issue, Mr. Speaker, is that we need to go back and review what was done before so that we can learn lessons but also so that we can design policies and programmes going forward that will have an impact on reducing poverty. I said this before in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, that we have a situation post-COVID where our economy is in a very depressed state. The issue is how do we create demand and I said, right now in the face of declining revenue, lack of physical space, any government in that situation, would look at three things.

Firstly, you make sure that our children get the best in education. You do not cut the education expenditure. Secondly, you make sure that health facilities are available. Yes, we are concentrating on COVID-19, but there are other things, for example, when we say 62 percent of the poor reside in the rural areas and this is why we are emphasising the availability of medicine, the availability of services in the health centres and subdivisional hospitals, because these are the people who cannot afford to go to a private pharmacy and buy medicine. They rely on public hospitals, they rely on public availability of medicine to cushion the impact of poverty on this group.

The other point that I picked up and the Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa mentioned that is the recommendation. I thought these recommendations are very interesting, the two where it talks about the ministry should liaise closely with the Ministry of Economy. Those are two recommendations there and those are important recommendations because it is even more important now; post COVID-19, because more and more people are going to fall into poverty and if we must have a plan Mr. Speaker, Sir, not for one year, next two years; we must have a plan for the next five years because we are in a real economic strife.

It is going to take about five years, even if we have the borders opening soon and we would like the borders to open sooner than later. Everyone is hoping and praying that it will happen, but even if that happens, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must think long term because it is not going to be anything before five years that we are able to bring the economy back on track and that means that we will have serious issues about poverty, loss of income, providing health facilities to our poor and that is why we need to look at education, health and income support.

I think this Ministry is going to be the most important ministry in terms of making sure that those who need the income support in fact, a lot of planning would require between the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation to be able to allocate enough resources at least, for the next two years when we are going to have these serious issues, I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can ask you to just remind the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment if he has some intelligent interjections to make, I would appreciate that, but he is actually quiet annoying and is distracting me from the points I am making.

I think Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important for us to look at income support and as I was saying, we, on a daily basis, and I am sure these Ministers are also getting that feedback from the ground. People are going to the Ministers, sometimes they go to the Ministers, they cannot get them and they come to us. Many of them actually ask for numbers of the Ministers, so we have a list of numbers for all the Ministers in our office and we give it to them. Because people are desperate, people want answers. At least they want us, Members of Parliament, to talk to them and that is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important for us to give full support to this Ministry.

If we are cutting expenditure, we must look at where we can cut expenditure, so that we can divert resources to that ministry and I hope that it will be done in the Budget that this Ministry is empowered to look at the most vulnerable, most needy which includes women and children, which includes poor in the rural areas, poor in the urban areas and squatter settlements. They, at this point in time, would need the biggest support and that is what we need to do and we cannot afford to have a single cent wasted at this point in time. That is why it is very important for all the Ministries to ensure that the planning, implementation and the targets that they are setting to help the people actually gets to the people that is intended for. Otherwise, Mr. Speaker, we will have serious poverty issues in this country. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Professor Prasad. Honourable Salote Radrodro, you have the floor.

Honourable Members, I have my list of speakers here and I am going to go by this list. If you indicate late, you will go late. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this Ministerial report. I would like to highlight on Page 7 the roles and responsibilities of the Poverty Monitoring Unit and relate that to the recommendations that have been given in regards to provision of resources, human resources and other equipment and also to the establishment of database.

Whilst we have heard the contribution from Honourable Gavoka and Honourable Professor Prasad, focussing on the increasing rate of poverty as given by the statistical news on 8th February, 2021, I believe the most recent statistic on our poverty rate in Fiji. However, this Unit, Mr. Speaker, is a very small unit in the Ministry, it is not well equipped in regards to its human resources,

to be able to carry out that important role of evaluating Government's poverty related programmes and policies. And like as has already been alluded to, the policies are there, the programmes are there but they are not working.

In regards to the Ministerial name, it says "Poverty Alleviation", major percentage of the budget goes to the Social Welfare recipients and we note that there is an increase in this allocation over the years. We must try not to mislead the people in saying that, that contributes to poverty alleviation, Mr. Speaker. Really what that contributes to is creating a dependency syndrome mindset in our country. So the policy in Government having to increase this social welfare allocation does not really empower our people in regards maybe, if they give more allocation to the Department of Women so that there could be more small and medium enterprises or projects that women could apply for or women's group could apply for, Mr. Speaker.

That is an important aspect that the Government must relook at in having to place the Poverty Monitoring Unit in that Ministry. I remember before, it was placed with the Office of the Prime Minister. In my view, that is correctly placed, it must be there or working together with the Ministry of Economy to be able to evaluate effectively the effectiveness of these programmes that tries to address poverty alleviation.

Mr. Speaker, on Page 8, I would like to touch on this to enlighten us more on these programmes which the Ministry has been given after *TC Winston* and they were home initiative, Home Care Programme, bus card top-up and all those. The Ministry has highlighted that they are not in a capacity to be able to handle those new programmes. But Mr. Speaker, the question really is, what is the Government's intent in having to transfer those programmes to the Ministry? What is the intent, when they know very well that Ministry is not really fully equipped in terms of human resources, in terms of equipment to be able and funding, to be able to address those issues properly? Why did the Government move that to that Ministry when it was effectively sitting with that Ministry in regards to National Disaster Management? So, having to move that, it raises a question on the Government's intent.

Also, Mr. Speaker, we must note that because of the increasing rate of poverty, what has happened to the Home Care Programme for *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* because without those programmes, how is the Government assisting our people in regards to the reconstruction of their homes?

We have heard, Mr. Speaker, that the big percentage of people living with poverty is in the rural areas and as we know those affected by *TC Winston*, *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* are in the rural areas. But the Government has failed to assist our people in regards to reconstructing their lives in rebuilding their homes.

So, I go back to the question on having to ask, what is the intent? I will ask this question to the Acting Honourable Minister for Economy, in having to transfer those programmes to a Ministry that is not fully equipped to capture and effectively run those programmes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Salote Radrodro. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment. You have the floor.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have got two comments to make in relation to Honourable Professor Prasad's comments. He has said that Government's poverty interventions failed and, therefore, poverty has increased.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when an academic or researcher makes that kind of statement, that person must produce to us the details of the research on the success or failure of each intervention.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Wait, wait!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to see from Honourable Professor Prasad where is the research for each intervention that Government has made to demonstrate whether it is failed or successful. Where is it? Produce it to this House.

(Honourable Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prasad is using that Poverty Report to say that individual intervention by various Ministries failed. Where is it?

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- A Point of Order. Mr. Speaker, I think the Honourable Minister is totally misleading the Parliament as to what I have said.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- No, no!

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I said two things. Firstly, poverty rate has increased, compared to the previous survey. I said that it shows that Governments poverty alleviation policies, I did not talk about individual policies has not work to reduce poverty.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- No, no. Do not change it.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- On top of that, Mr. Speaker, I said that the Government must go and do its audit and review those policies to see whether it works with that policy.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- My time! My time!

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- So, he has totally mislead what I have said, which reflects very poorly on the Minister himself, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I will leave it at that.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr, Speaker, Sir, I have not finish.

HON. SPEAKER.- Alright, you have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Misleading, that is why.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the second point, any intervention through any Ministry will have an effect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that does not mean, I hope the Honourable Member understands, if the poverty rate increases, that does not mean that the intervention fails. The question is that, without the intervention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the poverty rate could have been higher.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is why he is totally misleading.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Health?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- It pains.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, I just want to make a short contribution. We all know that the whole world is grappling with the economic challenges of COVID. There are countries around the world that are really struggling big time.

I have been privileged, Mr. Speaker, to be at a meeting of the Pacific Health Ministers and I can tell you, it is a struggle all over the world. There are countries that have chosen to reduce the budgets of their Ministries of Health because of the economic constraints they have. With us, that has not happened. We had an increase in our Ministry of Health budget.

Mr. Speaker, there are many ways in which Government is able to support those who need social protection and they are not limited only to the Ministry of Social Welfare. There is work being done with the Ministry of Agriculture in terms of the seedlings and chickens being given, in terms of the support given through MSMEs in the Ministry of Trade, security is so important in these challenging times, the accessibility to roads and water - these are the many ways that are intersecting. That is what Honourable Prasad seems to be insinuating in his debate that it was only the Ministry of Social Welfare that is actually working around the areas of poverty and it is not - these are all intersecting in many ways to be able to support the work of the Ministry of Social Welfare. They provide the leading role but all these Ministries work together, including what we do in the Ministry of Health.

As we speak, the Free Medicine Programme registration continues in the West, the dialysis centre which has opened (which I will talk about a little bit more at the end of the week) - it is only \$75 for those who earn below \$30,000 annually - these are the many ways in which Government works and also working hand-in-hand with the other stakeholders outside of Government. One must remember that the stakeholders outside of Government take their cue from Government's leadership and they are able to provide and look at ways in which we can map together.

Mr. Speaker, one thing that I would also like to bring to the fore is that, when these reports were done, the budget for the Ministry of Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation, was actually lesser than what it is enjoying today - their budget kept on increasing significantly over the last few years.

Also, Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Gavoka talked about the importance of being inclusive. Mr. Speaker, just a few days ago, I saw a picture of the Honourable Radrodro standing outside being very emotional, that is not inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is being able to allow everybody to be part of, to be able to empower everybody and work hand-in-hand and work together. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Just take your seats for the time being.

Honourable Members, I still have six speakers on this agenda item but before we continue with that which I do not intend to do until after lunch - Honourable Members, the list is as follows: Honourable Mosese Bulitavu, Honourable Tikoduadua, Honourable Nawaikula, Honourable Bulanauca, be ready when you are called.

Honourable Members, as you are all aware, the Fijian Government has mobilised COVID-19 vaccines for the country which is crucial in protecting all Fijians from the pandemic and to also prepare our country when borders reopen. Subsequently, the Fijian Government has opened registration to all Fijians who wish to be vaccinated.

On that note, I wish to inform all Honourable Members that the Ministry of Health Officials will be present in the precincts from tomorrow, that is, Tuesday, 23rd March, to assist Honourable Members who prefer to undertake face-to-face registration for the COVID-19 vaccine.

Honourable Members are therefore requested to have your birth registration number, which is evident on your birth certificate, on your your e-profile account on the DigitalFIJI platform. For those Honourable Members who do not have access to their birth registration numbers, this can be provided on site by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services once you present your valid ID.

Your valid ID is also required to complete your registration. This includes your passport, voters ID card, joint FNPF card and TIN card or your driver's licence. As leaders who have been elected to represent the Fijian people, I encourage all Honourable Members to lead by example and register accordingly.

Thank you Honourable Members. On that health note, we will now suspend proceedings for lunch and after lunch we will take the speakers in that order in the continuation of the debate, but that is not the final list - there are several others wishing to take it from there. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.31 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.35 pm.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Aseri Radrodoro. You have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to make a short contribution on the motion that is being debated before the House today, on the Annual Report for the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for the final period ending 2014, 2015 and period up to July 2016.

But, before I make my commentaries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this time, even though it is after lunch, to give my well wishes to the Honourable Attorney- General, the Honourable Minister for Forestry and the Honourable Leader of the Opposition for their speedy recovery from their illnesses. This has incapacitated them for quite some time and I pray that they will be well again soon to re-join us in this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our health is crucial to our roles as Parliamentarians and we must at all times have a lot of exercise. I think the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services and the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services are leading the way in having their exercises during the lunch break. Most, especially, have lot more rest to allow us to dispose our duties to the best of our abilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just going through the Reports that is before us this afternoon, I would like to make some short commentaries on the recommendations of the Committee. First, on the recommendation of the Committee, that the Ministry should liaise with the Ministry of Economy to ensure that adequate resources are provided for any new initiative, I fully concur that this is a valid recommendation that the Honourable Minister should take into consideration as it will improve the standing productivity of this important Ministry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will suggest that the Ministry in addition to this recommendation, addresses its current services and be provided with adequate resources so as to allow continuous flow of its existing services to women, children and the elderly citizens of Fiji.

Every now and then, I sometimes have to inform the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation about some beneficiaries of their programmes who have advised that they have stopped receiving assistance for some unknown reasons. The Honourable Minister, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say, has been helpful in trying to find the reasons for such incidences when they arise and for this I am very grateful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to highlight that most of the beneficiaries of the programme reside in rural areas, as has been alluded to earlier by some Members on this side of the House and the issues of conveniently accessing those services becomes a challenge on its own. For example, on our recent visit to the Yasawa Islands, beneficiaries of such programmes in Soso Village had requested that I highlight to the Honourable Minister, which I did, and to Government that if one has to travel to Lautoka, the return boat fare is \$100. So to collect an allowance, they will have to travel to Lautoka and wait for another system of payment, another period of payment to allow them to make it back to the Yasawa Islands on another \$50 or \$50 plus allowances plus food voucher.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when they do travel to Lautoka, that is, the inconvenience that they will create to their relatives and friends who they will have to stay with to anticipate the next periodic allowance payment from the Ministry of Social Welfare. This is due to the absence of resources to allow them to not only receive their allowances from their villages but be able to use it as well. We

need to find a way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to help these islanders access and use their welfare assistance to look after themselves. Spending more money to obtain a lesser amount of welfare defeats the logic of assistance, so I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Minister and the Government will look into resolving these challenges very soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just on the recommendation for appropriate resources to upgrade its ICT Unit, to strengthen its network and database. This is a very sad status, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry is yet to have a proper database and I strongly urge that this be made a priority in the next budget session.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Food Voucher Programme, if the Ministry could also look into providing more accessible outlets so that recipients who are residing in the villages are able to, without delay, access cashing in on their food vouchers, access their monthly allowances to ensure that they do not have to travel all the way to the urban centres, Suva or Nausori or Lautoka to access their food vouchers and allowances.

I trust, Mr. Speaker, the line Ministry can look into these issues along with the Fiji Competitive & Consumer Commission so as to allow our welfare recipients to access their basic food needs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Radrodro. I give the floor to Minister Jone Usamate. You have the floor.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to talk about the Report that is before the House in relation to the Ministry of Social Welfare and its annual reports for the years in question.

I think one of the issues that I wanted to highlight was, I appreciate the observations made by the Honourable Radrodro, who is actually talking to the recommendations in this Report. The thing that I wanted to address is some of the earlier comments that were made had nothing to do with the reports in question.

They were trying to depict the effectiveness of the FijiFirst Government as indicated by the level of the poverty reports that came out and some of the comments that were made, were to my mind the things that I wanted to address. One of things that we need to know right now is that inequality in the world is a rising phenomenon. It is not something that is found only in Fiji. It is found right across the world. It is something that keeps on increasing year after year and governments all over the world are grappling with this particular issue.

There was a question that was asked in this House, where is the boom. I think the boom, the Bainimarama Boom as it has been called is being reflected in the nine years of consecutive economic growth that we have had and all the developments that we have been able to produce as a result of that. It is being seen in free education that was never given before and now is provided. It has been seen in the subsidies that we give to power (electricity) subsidies for water. All of those things go to the most marginalised people in our country.

I think one of the most significant impacts that you have seen in the Bainimarama boom, if you look at the Ministry of Economic and Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation because we have been able to grow the pie in this country, we have been able to set aside funds for the most marginalised in our country. That is the sort of thing that we have been able to do, it is reflected in that.

Inequality is growing across the world. The boom has been seen in all of these things that I have talked about. If we see, for instance, we all know what has been happening in our country, as is being said here. Revenue is down by 50 percent and that is a reflection of COVID-19 as a reality of what we have. If you look at the inequities in Fiji, inequality is measured by the Gross Domestic Coefficient. I think the Honourable Attorney-General has mentioned this before.

When you look at the Gini Coefficient figures for Fiji that measured these things and I have to see the years that it was, let me just have a look at my notes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it was from the year 2002 up to the year 2013, the inequities in Fiji actually improved. But I look at the Gini Coefficient, for instance, for the USA in 2019, it went up to 0.48 which shows inequity is rising even in the richest countries in the world.

Here in Fiji, we are doing a lot to address these sorts of things, and I want to, a lot of the things that have been mentioned here about this Government not putting the needs of the most marginalised as the most important thing in what we do, is not correct. That is something that needs to be recognised and rectified. I leave the issues that would be related to the recommendation to this paper to the Minister who will speak on that particular issue. We should not use that as to paint a picture of how well government is doing. I think I will rest it at that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I give the floor to the Honourable Nawaikula. You have the floor.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The motion that we are debating now is the review of the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and it covers some years from 2014 to 2017. We are now debating the findings of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on those annual reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a nutshell, I think what the Ministry of Women and Poverty Alleviation needs is capacity. It is obvious from the content of this report, from the recommendations and observations of the Auditor-General's Report and from the Special Audits in relation to this Ministry that it needs capacity. It is an important Ministry that covers a lot of things, even recording and monitoring poverty and it needs capacity growth in order to do that.

Before I get into that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just reply first to what Honourable Usamate said. He was asking, "Where is the boom?" And the Honourable Minister said, "We will find the boom in free education, we will find the boom in everything that is free". But giving out subsidy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not boom. That is consumption; reckless, politically motivated consumption. That is not boom, that is the reason why the economy is at its knees and the sooner that other side of the House understands that, the better.

I was happy today, even for Honourable Usamate, on the other side, to acknowledge that the economy is in crisis, but the next thing that they should also acknowledge is that they are to blame and they should stop blaming COVID-19. That is where we are now, Mr. Speaker, is that in relation to poverty, we are going through this cycle of poverty. They are to blame because we were up there on the 30 percent, then we went down and you have taken us back to 30 percent poverty. That was even before COVID-19, so you are specifically to blame for poverty.

If I also can refer to Honourable Dr. Mahendra Reddy's comments where he quoted from Honourable Professor Prasad, to say that, "Government poverty intervention failed", and that is the reason why poverty has increased. I second that, that is totally true because they are looking at the macro level, instances of your programme might succeed.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- But the macro level is here and Honourable Professor Prasad told him, “look here, it is in the statistics.” If I quote Honourable Professor Prasad to him, he said “if the Honourable Minister cannot accept the statistics on poverty in relation to that, then something must be wrong with him.”

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- That is what he said. If the Honourable Minister cannot rely on the Government statistics in relation to poverty and to clarify why it has gone up to 30 percent then something must be wrong with it?”

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Mr. Speaker, coming back to the Report which is Parliamentary Paper No. 60 of 2019. The first thing that the Committee stated was to outline the responsibilities of this Ministry and I wish to repeat that.

The Ministry of Women oversees three departments, namely the Department of Social Welfare, Department of Women and Children and the Poverty Monitoring Unit. In relation to poverty, they do nothing about poverty but assist the Government in monitoring that. In relation to that, I think they will agree with us that we are now running in a cycle of poverty and add to that, a death track which I will come to later.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Look at the results and then you will agree with us.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Have you been to the roads? Full of potholes that is wastage and years of wastage, employing contractors who do not know how to build roads and that is where wastage has gone to.

Mr. Speaker, let me tell you this, next to FSC which has accumulated nearly \$40 million loss in the last 15 years comes the Department of Roads. They have spent nearly over \$1 billion of public money and where is the result – potholes, potholes and potholes. That is what I am talking about, that is no boom, that is no boom.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The Honourable Minister is saying “four lanes here and there”. But if the four lanes breakdown after two years, what use is that? If the four lanes after two years become potholes, what is the use of that? That is wastage. Coming back to the report because they have dragged me away from that.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- In relation to the Report, I wish to make a comment on the Department of Social Welfare's role. Under Social Welfare, it looks after poverty benefit scheme, food vouchers, bus fare subsidy, child protection allowance and special pension. I wish to say here that two weeks ago, I had a discussion with the Honourable Minister about someone who called me up to say, "I used to receive \$100, then it became \$80, then it became \$50. Can you please ask the Minister? So I am put it in my *Facebook*, "Honourable Minister can you explain the reason why?"

We spoke and the representative from the Ministry came to see him, but they have not returned and that is the truth. It was \$100 and it became \$80, \$50 and the explanation was a statement was given by the Permanent Secretary to say that, they continuously review situations and that is probably the reason why. But the review must be done in consultation, please. Do not do the review unilaterally.

The same thing they did in relation to the bus fares. Bus fares used to be \$40 then suddenly it became \$20, some went to check and it is \$13 and now it is \$10. For someone travelling by bus from my village (Buca Village) to Savusavu, it costs \$8.00. So, how are they going to return?

HON. GOVERNMENT. MEMBER.- What about their

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, it is not

The Honourable Minister will speak after me and he can rebut me wherever I go wrong.

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- So, that is what I wish to say in relation to the special pension. And it goes hand-in-hand with the finding of the Special Audit. The Special Audit, some years ago, said that this has been abused, there is no procedure. They need to review their process and that is the reason why.

Next, Mr. Speaker, let me now look at this Report which has made a number of recommendations. The first one being that the Ministry should liaise closely with the Ministry of Economy to ensure that adequate resources are provided for any new programmes. That goes hand-in-hand or support what I have stated that they need capacity.

The Ministry of Economy must give money to the Ministry for Women and Poverty Alleviation so that they can improve their procedure, so that there is no abuse. The Honourable Minister will agree with me that even the audit in relation to about \$5 million - the way it was used, I am not sure by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Office or a foreign nation for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

There were 30 recommendations of how they could not utilise that money properly for what is needed. There was the amount of about \$800,000 that was never used because it needs capacity. It needs to improve its IT, it needs new programmes and probably this old problem is caused because it has got a very old IT problem that cannot identify the amount. Next week, it gives \$80, this week it gives \$50 because they need new programmes, so capacity.

The other recommendation that they set up is that the Ministry worked closely with the Ministry of Economy, Civil Service Reform Unit and stakeholders from appropriate resources to

upgrade its ITC Unit. So, Mr. Speaker, that is probably why they are making payments, sometimes \$100, \$80 because that programme needs to be changed.

There is another very important recommendation here, Mr. Speaker. Does the Ministry identify new programmes and work with faith-based groups and other community groups to address the issue of increasing beggars?

We have Saint Vincent de Paul, Homes for Hope and every faith-based organisation has their own programmes. They need to work closely with the Ministry, and that is one of the recommendations that is here.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I wish to now make a few comments in relation to this household statistical news or the policy situation that we are now facing because that comes under the jurisdiction.

As I said, and I wish to repeat also what was stated by the Honourable Gavoka that we are falling into a vicious cycle of poverty and debt trap. That is the saddening situation that we are in now.

HON. MEMBER.- Your views?

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, I am begging you, please, to agree with us so that we can move forward instead of living in self-denial. We have been living in self-denial since 2006 thinking that the economy is growing and growing when it is not, and it was placed before them when the revenue suddenly dropped in 2017 from \$4 billion to \$3 billion to \$2 billion and this year, while you are operating, you are operating at \$1.6 billion.

I agree with him entirely, and I also agree with Honourable Gavoka, Mr. Speaker, that we should acknowledge and thank those that are giving money from because they are contributing more to our GDP and to our revenue more than the Ministry of Agriculture, more than the Ministry of Fisheries, much much more than the Ministry of Roads, who, all that they are doing is creating pot holes here and there. So, we should acknowledge and say “thank you” to those people that deserve it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just go through some statistics now because if you cannot believe us, you better read this. The latest amount of poverty, let us take borrowing, for example, the amount of \$1 billion from WG Group and \$200 million from Japan - that is the latest, not even counting what is already there. We are roughly around \$6 billion. If you add those to our \$6 billion national debt, it will be well over \$8 billion, that is where we are now. Well, do you believe me now?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- I can tell the other side, Mr. Speaker, Sir, poverty in Fiji has increased from 28.1 percent to 30 percent and this is why I am saying we are running in a cycle, chasing our statement because we were 30 percent before, we went down and now you brought us back to 30 percent.

In case they want to know, I will tell you now - Central and Eastern Divisions are the most poorest of all areas now. I think the Eastern Division is Lau, that is where you come from, Mr. Speaker. Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and just to go back when we told them “do not borrow”, this is what they told us, ‘we borrow to finance operating expenditure due to shortage of revenue. We

borrow smartly because it is borrowing and not increasing debt. We borrow so that the future generation need not borrow, this is all bollocks.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Yes, it is all bollocks and we have been telling them.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- What? Where? Let me tell you now where we were because they asked in relation to our government debt. In 2014, the total debt was \$4.8 billion; 2015, \$4.2 billion; 2016, \$4.5 billion; and now we are at \$6.98 billion. That is not including, as I say, the \$1 billion from the World Bank and \$200 million from Japan.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- What is your point?

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- My point is that, our *dinau* is excessive. Our *dinau* by over \$8 billion is untenable. We do not have the revenue to pay that. That is basically, what I am saying, I hope you hear that.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, I had. I have all the figures here and I am not finished yet. Now, let me tell you this, Mr. Speaker, Sir: Despite the reduction in revenue in the budget, the decline is still 50 percent. What kind of budgeting are you doing? You cannot even do the budget and the reason is because I have already said here, Mr. Speaker, they took away the National Planning Office. The National Planning Department is now just part of the Ministry of Economy, one desk for the National Planning and another desk for the Budget.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Well, the National Bank is finished.

(Laughter)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- The National Bank is finished. Now, it is their problem and our total current debt level is 73 percent, domestic debt is 5.1 percent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know they want to talk about the National Bank. I think we have far more greater problems now than the National Bank. You look at the Fiji Sugar Corporation, what did they do to the Fiji Sugar Corporation? Consecutive losses, losses and losses - \$400 million of losses, that is worse than the Fiji National Bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are still asking, who took the sugarcane farmers? It is not the farmers, it is not even the land, it is the management. Your skills and qualification, they got nothing. All they did to the economy is destroy the economy, piling up many debts and then run away, who will suffer? You, Mr. Speaker, Sir, me, your children, my children and our grandchildren, and that is what they are doing to us. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Nawaikula. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. You have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the motion before the House on the Report on the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. I wish to state from the outset that the Ministry does not work in isolation. When the Opposition talks about the capacities and all the other issues that they have highlighted, again, I wish to assure this august House that the Ministry does not work in isolation.

For that reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to poverty reduction, which seems to be the main focus of the debate this afternoon, poverty reduction is a whole of Government approach. It is not only the Ministry that looks specifically about this issue. Of course, poverty reduction and all the efforts by Government and us as a country to reduce poverty should be a thing that concerns all of us.

But I find it strange to hear the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, concerned about poverty because when we discuss about poverty alleviation programmes and initiatives in this House, they call it “freebees”, “vote buying” and this is the dilemma that they are in. On one end, they recognise that we need to assist them but they cannot look beyond their nose, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They are so quick to speak rather than digesting the information and do some critical thinking and analysis and then look at the issues. I do not know what to say. The Honourable Nawaikula focuses on potholes, but look at the bridges that are currently being constructed: the cost of a pot hole and the cost of a bridge - something is wrong up here.

This is the HIES Report of 2002. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is one Report that we, in the Ministry of Rural Development in support of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, take into consideration very seriously and we look at the various initiatives that we have and, of course, in the Integrated Rural Development Framework that was borne out of the consultations in the People’s Charter and, of course, the Framework in 2009, we follow these very closely.

On the incidence of poverty in Fiji in 2002 and 2003 was around 35 percent and in rural Fiji it was about 40 percent, in urban Fiji it was about 29 percent, this is 2002. If you look at 2008, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was 31 percent from 35 percent. In 2013 and 2014, it was 28.1 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are asking about the boom. In the programmes, the incidence of poverty, according to these: this is the 2008 Report, the 2019 and 2020, every five years. Those statistics are from the very institution that we have, let us not be selective, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is the incidence of poverty. If you go by divisions, if you look at the urban poverty, even for now in Vanua Levu, it was 53 percent. I attended that conference with my good friend, Professor Wadan Narsey. It was 53 percent back then, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Where is it now in Vanua Levu? It is 42 percent, from 53 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to contextualise what is before us. I have spoken about analytical and critical thinking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of course, it is an issue that we need to address. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may say when it comes to poverty in the rural areas particularly, alright put aside the pandemic but look at the cycle during 2002 to 2021. How many disasters hit Fiji? Who are the most vulnerable during disasters?

It is the poor who are the most vulnerable and if they cannot come out of that cycle of poverty through the various intervention programmes, they will be still in that loop, Mr. Speaker, Sir and this is why the necessary interventions. Do not call assistance programmes “freebies” because with rural people and rural poverty, you will need to understand the economy of the poor. You need to understand them, where they are because there is no one size fits all solution when it comes to addressing rural poverty, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

But I would like to urge all Honourable Members here, we have during the boom, we have increased, we have improved on addressing most of the issues. Slight increases because of the latest report that we have but if we look at where we were and I will suggest to all the Honourable Members start from 2002. If you also look at what Professor Wadan Narsey says here because when it comes to Household Income and Expenditure Survey Report, samples are taken at random. It is not every household in the urban areas, it is not every household in the rural areas and it is not every household in the whole of Fiji. It is taken at random, Mr. Speaker, Sir and of course, that is clearly stated here in the Report, so it is not and if I may add to what I have just stated, in rural Fiji this is one of the questions that I asked Professor Wadan Narsey way back in 2008. What is your definition of poverty and how do you quantify poverty?

We need to look at that because when it comes to the basic needs assessment, whether it is on food poverty line or the non-food poverty line, these are western approaches trying to analyse poverty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I always argued in rural Fiji, most rural Fijians have better meals than us, even in this august House. Three meals a day and then it is a huge problem too in rural Fiji about keeping records of their income.

I was part of a survey way back in 1985 when I was with Native Land Development Corporation, together with Israeli economists on agriculture people in Waibau and Lomaivuna. These are farmers but they do not even know their expenses, let alone their income, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so when it comes to keeping records of what is their consumption and so forth. It is very difficult, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so when we are looking at this report, I urge all Honourable Members, let us understand our people because when it comes to the cost of living or the cost of basic needs, whether it be on the food poverty line or the food basket or whether it comes to the non-food items.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a huge difference and, of course, we need to take this into context. So I can say that there are, of course, areas that we need to address and maybe the Honourable Minister can talk on that, but let us look at this within the context of what we went through, how we are progressing as a country and the determination of government to assist those that are in poverty, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to also end, let us also differentiate between chronic poverty and temporary poverty. There is a difference between chronic poverty and temporary poverty. Of course, the environment will have some implications on these.

If we read this book, I do not know how many on the other side have read this book, so that when we make contributions, we can be leading not only those we need to get out of the poverty loop, but of course, to assist all the stakeholders that are involved in this Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I urge all Honourable Members, let us leave aside our politics, let us focus on the issues that our people deserve and they need that environment to be created for them so that they can excel in society. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I wish to comment on the Report of the Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation Annual Report 2014 to 2017.

First of all, I wish to comment on the vicious cycle of poverty and debt trap that we are experiencing, particularly with the cycle of poverty. In my contribution and the proposal that I have

is an intervention and we request the government to commit itself in order to arrest or at least to mitigate or lessen the effect of the cycle of poverty hitting Fiji's economy and the people right now.

Poverty in Fiji has increased from 28 percent to 30 percent in the last six years and 41.6 percent in the rural areas. Also the trend of government debts have increased and the graph is quite steep and even the Honourable Attorney-General's comments on borrowing is hollow. His comments were on borrow to finance operating expenditure, there is a question mark there and borrow smartly, there is a question mark there too. You still have to pay.

The future generations need to borrow and after that, more expenses, so all those comments Mr. Speaker, Sir, are all hollow. The current status of debts has increased from 73 percent to 85 percent on GDP. So, debt servicing of \$34.8 million gives a shortfall of \$13.8 million of \$47 million monthly average. What are we talking about here?

The economic and financial market situation is bad. I do not want to elaborate on that, but we are dealing here with the Ministry that merely consumes by way of services which we need to do anyway, therefore our expenditure need to be controlled, if not reduced with alternatives.

Other Ministries through their expenditures need to be reduced or controlled as well in the Military, Police, President's Office, Office of the Prime Minister, so it is important to have a good look at all those things.

Also the key indicators of our shortfall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are many. Some have been mentioned but I just need to focus on two here; shortfall on mahogany production – 98.7 percent. I have been harping about that here for several years now and there is not even need to increase production, particularly in the economic sectors - in the forestry and mahogany. Also, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources' arrears stands at \$23 million. That is 232 percent over annual rent of \$10 million. We need to get our income in and other areas; VAT to be down and all that.

It is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to focus on our economic ministry to get revenue in order to move forward, particularly looking after these women, children and poverty alleviation programmes that we need to improve in the future.

The solutions to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I see it, we need to create jobs. As I already mentioned that we need to focus on agriculture, the Department of Lands, Ministry of Forests, Ministry of Fisheries, et cetera, and be competitive in whatever products that we can do in ways of doing things. We need to increase our production. In the last four years, when there was no report and over the years, production has been going down most of the time. So, we need to produce more in order to get more foreign revenue into our country and how we can serve people better; in other areas of services the Government Departments need to move into.

Increase income earned, income tax on workers with more than three children and share wealth. It is important that we share wealth down to the grassroot level and also across all levels, Mr. Speaker. Sir.

Sir, in expanding preventative health care rather than concentrating on curative care. It is important to concentrate on that because it is much, much cheaper than curative care.

I just want to conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he said the expenditure needs to be concluded. I now wish to comment on the findings of the Standing Committee. They have a lot of concern in the lack of resources and funding on technology needs to be improved. The Ministry to improve their

services and the increase in the number of beggars that they have come across and also the Rights, Empowerment and Cohesion Reach Programme in the urban and rural, which is a project funded by Japan. This project funded was ended in 2019, I am not too sure if funding is going to be continued or not.

Also, there are reports and concerns on the Golden Age Home in Labasa, the construction of a new elderly persons' home in Babasiga, Ashram in Labasa. Mr. Speaker, Sir. I also have a concern here on family pledges that are unsuccessful. It is very important for us to focus on. It has also been reported here that awareness be conducted in the *Bose Ni Tikina* and *Bose ni yasana* for families to care for their elderly. Where are the churches' participation, the increasing churches, et cetera? It is important to focus on that, Mr. Speaker.

The need for qualified caregivers, yes, we will go along with that. The Lomani Au Children's Home and Pearly Gates Home, et cetera. The budgetary increased in 2014 which was \$14 million to \$56 million. Now it is going down, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The fact remains, increase instances of care for the age, orphan and disabled physically and mentally need for care is increasing. We should ask ourselves about the root causes of all these. To me, I can see it is in the homes, it is the family and parents are failing in their role and duty.

I can go into various details about the authority where do parents get their authority from, particularly from the *Bible*. It is important that we get our family, unity and parents intact. Also in Genesis 1:2 -, it says that God bless them, be fruitful and increase in number that includes parents and children and subdue it and every living creature. Whatever Christian churches are doing in the *vanua* in particularly, what are we doing? What can we do to minimise this? Do we have to build more institutions or Homes and reduce the budget?

To me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is very important, it is vital, to bring back responsibility to the home, families to look after their own responsibilities. After their elders, their crippled children, et cetera. Government may help and others too from those individual families as part of their own life of serving and giving out love for others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education of the heart is spiritual. You need to have the whole church. We need to have parents bringing their families together every day for devotion and worship - sing, pray and hear God's word together and share. They should also meet, discuss and plan together - pray each day and also pray for healing. It is important that our families are intact again. Here also the education of the heart is where the decision making comes from - have the Holy Spirit there. Otherwise if the Holy Spirit is not there the devil will occupy you so, it is important to select and go for the right spirit in you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Highly important and I need to mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that fatherlessness or motherlessness is a major contribution to lawlessness which contributes to violence, poverty, intolerance, abuse of this and that, so on and so forth. It is important that we have our families intact with the fathers and mothers there, if not the influence of the father will not be there.

Some of us get married and get divorced. Some do not get divorced but even though they are in the house, they are not there. Some are in the house but not playing their role to guide people in the right way so it is important that we must have the right education for our home and family in order to resolve the future.

Secondly is education of the head and heart - I do not need to elaborate on that. It is academic and all of you know. It is important to educate our people in God's word which is the absolute truth.

The absolute truth is not anywhere else but only in the Bible. This must be in the curriculum, biblical moral values, principles and virtues. We must also live as examples because action speaks louder than the words. You must confess, Honourable Prime Minister. If you have done something wrong you must confess. I am thankful to the Honourable Minister for Defence for confessing the wrong they have done with the Police Bill – that is love in action and I am thankful to him for that.

The Sadducees and Pharisees got together and questioned Jesus and asked which is the greatest commandment in the law. Jesus replied and said “Love the Lord your God with all your heart (spiritual); with all your soul (body) and with all your mind (mental); this is the first and the greatest commandment. The second commandment goes like this - love your neighbour as you love yourself.

These two commandments are important. You may laugh at it but it is important to go back to our foundation of the family - to educate our families to be good decision makers. Parents, children, families to keep and serve the old aged, the orphans, and those with special disabilities at home to reduce or lessen Government’s involvement, except for serious cases. It is important to learn new skills so that we not only become the heads in our homes, but also become teachers, doctors, nurses in the home.

Physical health and a good body is important. More emphasis on preventative care is important, Mr. .Speaker, Sir, and it is cheaper. Good food, water, exercise and herbal medicine which is pure and cheap is not only for healthy living but to rebuild or regrade. So, it is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Healthy relationships, positive attitudes and spirit as you go along - prevention is better than cure and it also cheaper. You must use skills and the proper use of it will be meaningful in paving the way forward.

Shifting our roles and responsibilities to the Government will not solve our problems – we do not have to shift our family problems to the government because we are too concerned about working shifts and overtime to get more money out of greed or whatever but there is no time for it.

We do not have time for the aged, the orphans or the people with disabilities. We must have time for all God’s children, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because blessings are not in your money or assets. Blessings are found in the love of the spirit in you or us and it is manifested in the good we do to serve others starting from Jerusalem, or starting at home with the family.

But the Government is willingly taking over those responsibilities from the parents or from the homes, for many reasons. Some do it for political reasons - you want votes and you go to certain people. Some want to be in control – they want to be God and control everything. The one world order is already being initiated through the League of Nations, United Nations, World Bank, IMF and now, under COVID-19 rules. More will come with the insertion of 666 microchips on your right hand or your forehead.

The sign of the beast, the sign of the devil, the sign of Satan as in Revelations 13, 16 and 17 - go and read it. We need to have a totally new look at how we serve individuals in our families, our households or in our communities Mr. Speaker, Sir. With the current system we are separating our households by singling out women, children and people living with disabilities as if they are the only ones suffering from poverty. We are building and just choosing homes for them - building or trying to build new superficial homes under a foreign/alien roof and shifting a God-given family’s responsibilities to the Government.

You need a change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so instead of calling it the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation we should call it the Ministry of Family. It will be totally holistic. It is where all fathers, mothers, females, children, elderly or disabled, not in-betweens, are looked after, protected, nourished, in passion, love from the heart, not to be politically correct but correct in the eyes of God. Nip the problem in the bud. Do not be part of the evil spirit, the spirit of Jezebel and the spirit of legions to dismantle God given created homes, which is the family institution.

Encourage and educate parents and children accordingly. The roles and responsibilities towards parents, children and persons with disabilities must be in our hands - they must die in our hands or in our homes because of love. Honour your father and your mother, you will be good and have a long life and you will be blessed. There are serious consequences if you do not and we are now experiencing it. To empower and source God-given created families and institutions to properly carryout and enjoy that natural care. We need to strengthen God given families in their homes to cater for the elderly and people with disabilities and do away with evil Satanic formulas.

Why not institute an inquiry or commission not only to see financial projections but also the implementation of physical and spiritual benefits which these changes may bring about for a better society and lessen the cost of building new institutions by government. We need to strengthen and secure families, reduce reliance on artificial, superficial government man-made institutions for God-given love and care which would be relatively cheaper - families will be blessed even against COVID-19 or similar pestilences arising now and in the future. Thank you Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Bhatnagar. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. V.R. BHATNAGAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to make a short contribution to the motion on the floor this afternoon. First and foremost I acknowledge the work of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs and note the contents of the Review Report.

In a nutshell Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation Services cuts across all the socio-economic sectors in Fiji which includes supporting families without income, supporting children at risk, to improve services to both disabled and older persons and ultimately, to fill the need to empower women for greater value adding to mankind.

With respect to the recommendations made by the Committee on the Golden Age Home, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight that the Ministry is now seeing a trend where old people are being abandoned by their relatives and there is a growing waiting list of applicants who have been referred to or have applied to be accommodated in one of our Homes. More challenging is the fact that some of these cases do not fall under the category of old persons, but also include those with some form of disability whether physical or mental.

Currently, there are no dedicated homes for disabled persons, thus, in trying to address this issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is working with other homes for older persons for referrals if possible, at the same time encouraging the communities through its awareness programmes for families to fulfil their duties to look after their elderly family members and to access the Government social pension scheme or disability allowance. Here, I concur with Honourable Bulanauca for families to take ownership to look after their elderlies and the loved ones and they can also apply for the social pension scheme and disability allowance.

In order to achieve this, the Ministry is also conducting care giving trainings with the communities and trying to build their capacity to care for their own people. For that it is required to

understand the trend and to provide a baseline on the need for respite care and training resources for the carers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, plans are underway for the renovations of the three State Homes, work has commenced first with the Labasa Golden Age Home, that is the Babasiga Ashram, which should be completed in this financial year, with plans to include the other two Homes in Samabula and Lautoka in the coming years.

Under the National Council for Older Persons (NCOP), the Ministry works in partnership with other organisations that have institutions that care for the older persons. These include organisations such as HART, Father Law Home, Saint Vincent De Paul, Pearce Home and Home of Compassion. There is an institutional forum that is made up of members of these organisations that meets every quarter to update and discuss issues relating to the care and protection of the senior citizens. Apart from its work with these institutions, the Ministry also works with existing NGOs such as Ba Senior Citizens by providing funding for programmes likewise encouraging senior citizens in establishing their district committees that would be the advocates in their own communities to look at the plight and protection of our senior citizens.

Through NCOP minimum standards for the care and protection of the older persons in the institutions have been developed and currently implemented and monitored in these Homes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has engaged APTC and FNU as partners in the training and development of its caregivers. MOUs have been signed and scholarships have been issued by APTC for those working as carers in the institutions to be trained in caregiving. FNU students are attached with the Homes annually as part of this partnership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would also like to highlight that there are 11 residential homes for children in Fiji. Two of these homes are State owned homes that accommodates young girls between the ages of 14 years to 18 years. The young girls are often victims of abuse and there are also occasions where the court orders remand for young female offenders to await their court date. This home is called Pearly Gates Home and is located at 41 Mahaffy Drive, Domain. The service is outsourced to an NGO for global compassion and the home is given an annual grant for the operations, administrations and care of the young girls, meets their needs ranging from educational needs to health needs and for some, special needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second State home is the Fiji Juvenile Rehabilitation and Development Centre (FJDR) located at Lakeba Street, Samabula. The Centre is administered by the Department and is responsible for the safe keep of young juvenile offenders awaiting court decisions and for some are on committal warrant. The remaining homes, namely Dilkusha Home, St. Christopher's Home, St. Philomena Children's Home, Homes of Hope, St. Minas Children Home, St. Tevita's Home, Treasure House Christian Children's Home, Lomani Au Home and Veilomani Boys Homes are all owned and operated by the faith-based organisations, all children are in the age category of 0 to 13 years and all have care orders.

Admission rates is never static as admission is on a case by case basis. There are currently 170 children placed in the homes and their breakdown are as follows:

- (1) Dilkusha Home – 32
- (2) St. Christopher's Home – 27
- (3) St. Minas Children Home – 24
- (4) Veilomani Boys Home – 26
- (5) Lomani Au Home – 12
- (6) St. Tevita's Home – 12
- (7) Treasure House Christian Children's Home – 12

- (8) Pearly Gates Home – 9
 - (9) St. Philomena Children’s Home – 7
 - (10) Homes of Hope – 6
 - (11) Fiji Crippled Children’s Society – 2
- Total 170**

The divisional officers are responsible for visiting the homes and working with the children and of course, the carers. This is done on a quarterly basis to review care plans and also talk about issues that the children may have. There is an institutional forum which is made up of members from these homes that meets with the Director and senior staff of the Department on a quarterly basis to discuss issues and concerns that relate to the care and protection of these children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with reference to the recommendation on the increase of beggars on our streets, I wish to highlight the following. Currently, the Ministry has profiled 266 cases on the streets of our cities and towns, however, not all of them are permanent beggars. Some beggars are very mobile and have homes and they move from one town or one city to another when there are opportunities such as festivals or national events. Others spend their day on the streets but return home in the evenings while some have homes and family but prefer to live on the streets and there are those who are homeless and call the streets their home.

Working with such individuals is challenging and the success rate is very low. I must admit, however, there are success stories where some individuals have been given bean carts and are still selling while others had been issued with hawkers licence and some have been assisted in finding work.

The Ministry has established a Unit within the Department of Social Welfare to look at the challenges faced by the beggars. The Unit works with other stakeholders to assist these beggars find meaningful work which of course suits their abilities. This also includes finding their families and placing them back, finding accommodation and linking them to other service providers that can assist and mentor.

In situations where families could not be found, the Ministry works in partnership with faith-based organisations in facilitating accommodations for these individuals. Such organisations include the Salvation Army for its housing of juveniles found on the streets, the Good Samaritan Inn, Society of St. Vincent De Paul and the State Homes, that is our Golden Age Homes especially for the elderly persons and the mentally challenged.

Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the staff of my Ministry, the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, as a family for their compassion, for their dedication, their patience in their bid to serve the underprivileged in our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 6th March, we celebrated World Social Workers Day and I take this time to sincerely thank and salute the hundreds of social workers, tirelessly working to make our communities a better place for the most vulnerable. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Kuridrani. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will just make a short contribution because some of my colleagues have shared in this House some of the things that I need to say, so I will be very short.

I understand what has been mentioned from that side of the House, that poverty is a global issue or global problem, that is fine. But what they did not mention was that the reason for poverty in most of these countries are different, just like in Fiji.

The problem here is that. this Government has been lying about its economic growth for the last ten years, so they designed programmes according to lies and based on lies. I heard from the Honourable Professor Prasad that the problem is whether they have actually implemented those programmes or not, that is another question.

I gathered in the last Appropriation Report for the Ministry of Agriculture in 2019, more than \$30 million of their budget was not used, so was it really money? That is the problem because they have been living on lies. They have been designing programmes based on lies, so that is why they cannot implement the programme and get the exact output of what is needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problem in Fiji is the wrong policy mix that they are using. Say for instance, the Ministry of Fisheries, we understand and know very well that maritime islands and coastal villages have a wealth of marine resources. These people can move out from poverty if they are given the approval by the Ministry to use their marine resources. Even during *TC Harold*, they stopped the harvesting of sea cucumbers which all these islands have. These islands, people from the maritime and coastal areas do not need government assistance. They have the resources but the policy that this Government is using to stop them from using their resources, that is what is enhancing the poverty level in Fiji.

Look at the issuance of a licence. For a shop to be established as a retail business in the village in 2019, we used to pay \$95 to get a licence. You know how much as of last year? They get almost \$500. They have to go to the Ministry of Health, National Fire Authority and the Department of Environment; yes they know it! That is their policy and here they are trying to say that they care for the people. No, they do not care! Their policies are not helping the people to move out from poverty.

Honourable Seruiratu said that they needed a holistic approach; that is correct. You cannot tackle poverty in isolation. We need a holistic approach. Look at the performance of the Ministers. I wonder which authority is monitoring or appraising their performance. How many ministries have updated their annual reports until 2019? Look at the Ministry of Agriculture - 2015 and we rely on the Ministry of Agriculture to move Fiji out from this crisis, yet they only have the 2015 annual report. Where is the 2020 Census Report? It is still not here, taxpayers paid \$4 million for that report. It is almost one year gone, you cannot provide the report, so who is monitoring them?

The solution here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to eradicate poverty in Fiji, we need to eradicate them. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. First, I would like to just take this opportunity to say thank you to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for their hard work on coming up with this Report and also take this opportunity to thank the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for a tough and hard work that she does.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just now we heard someone saying that our policies are bad, we are lying. Let me tell him something, Sir, we have had 10 straight years of economic growth that has been unsurpassed, unchallenged and no one has ever done it, so take that to bed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been said and I am sure the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation will address those specific issues in the actual Report. But I want to briefly go through some of the issues that have actually been raised with respect to the economy and especially what was raised by Honourable Gavoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every single economy has contracted due to COVID-19. The pandemic is obviously severely disrupted the global economy, not just Fiji, with devastating impacts on financial markets, jobs and businesses. The International Monetary Fund, Mr. Speaker, has projected the global contraction of around 3.5 percent for 2020 and in reality these makes it the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression in the 1930s. So it has to be put into perspective before they come here and shoot off what they want to without actually thinking about it. These pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has impacted and severely impacted household incomes and it actually threatens to derail the significant progress that many economies around the world have made over the years to actually reduce global poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact with respect to economy is like Mauritius, like Fiji, like the Maldives and Bahamas that were tourism dependant countries have been double digit contractions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have, in fact, everyone in this Parliament on this side of the House has pretty much several times spoken about the actual Government debt issue. Government revenue, let me say this very clearly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been reduced by 50 percent compared to pre-COVID levels.

Sir, there are only two options once that happens. One option was to cut expenditure and the other option was to borrow more and it is a simple as that, Sir. We chose the latter for the betterment of the country and I want to ask the Opposition, Sir, if they want to lower debt then what expenditures do they really think that we should be reduced? If their suggestion is stop borrowing, are they suggesting that we cut the Civil Service pay or no they will not say that, are they suggesting that we reduce infrastructure spend, are they suggesting that we reduce the money we spend on health? Are they suggesting that we reduce the money on education? Where is their alternative budget? Never to be seen, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the alternative to reducing borrowing will have a lot of implications and will actually further effective economies. Now prior to COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government debt was actually falling, debt to GDP ratio fell from about 56 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2015. So the debt ratio was actually falling and then everyone chooses to forget this, we had a Category 5 cyclone by the name *TC Winston* which literally blew us out of the water in 2016 and now we have COVID-19 yet we still survived, Mr. Speaker.

We survived because we have a strong economy, we survived because we have a strong Government, Sir. The recent increase in debt, Mr. Speaker, which is projected to be around 84 percent of the GDP by the end of this financial year is mainly due to the fact that Government revenue is down by 50 percent from pre-COVID levels. The debt to GDP ratio has increased substantially not only due to high levels of borrowing, Sir, but also due to massive contraction in the nominal GDP. The nominal GDP has reduced from about \$12 billion in 2019 to \$10 billion in 2020.

Temporarily increase in Government borrowing is important to provide much needed physical impetus and I want to emphasise it, it is needed to provide much needed physical impetus

to create jobs, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to develop infrastructure and actually continue to provide essential Government services. These, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is actually critical for economic stability and it actually lays the foundation for a very quick recovery for Fiji.

Through this pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has actually borrowed but we have borrowed sustainably, Sir, and we have borrowed from the most credible, multilateral and bilateral institutions such as the Japan International Corporation Agency (JICA), World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB). I hope everyone hears this: these credible agencies actually lending to Fiji at this point in time reflects the legitimacy of the need for Government to support the economy, which has to be put into perspective, Sir. It actually also shows that these lenders, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are confident on the Fijian Government's ability to repay back these loans: that is the whole point.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has never ever defaulted on any debt repayments. This has enabled the Government to ensure Government programmes and Civil Service salaries are maintained and not substantially impacted.

Government has actually recently borrowed from the International Development Association around US\$125 billion which is a concessional loan and this is the kind of loans that we actually give. It is a concessional loan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a 40-year repayment term inclusive of a 10-year grace period and a 0.75 service charge. In addition, from the Japan International Corporation Agency (JICA) worth around US\$100 million, with the 15-year repayment term inclusive of a four-year grace period and an interest of 0.01, that is one basis point, Sir.

Our most recent loans have been accessed through policy-based loans which are financing, only released upon the completion of agreed reforms. These reforms have actually been agreed without development partners - incredible, respectable institutions such as JICA, World Bank and ADB as well as Australia and New Zealand governments. Offshore borrowing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had actually cautioned, the substantial impact on foreign reserves without which would have led to a possible devaluation and significantly impact in the Fijian Financial Systems.

Foreign Reserves currently stand at about \$2.2 billion and that is sufficient to cover 6.8 months of retained imports and is likely to remain strong in the near future.

Post-COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, setting the debt to GDP ratio on a downward trajectory will actually be a key focus and will be largely dependent on the quick economic rebound and progressive reductions in the budget deficit over the medium term.

While financing growth through increase debt is warranted during this extraordinary time, the sustainable long term focus will be on a private sector-led growth that will bring down the GDP ratio.

Sir, I just also wanted to just quickly point out that Honourable Nawaikula was talking about all these debts that we took. He actually forgets that all these loans that he is talking about are actually part of the 2020/2021 Budget approved by Parliament. He knows about it, we are not actually borrowing anything additional, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of unemployment support, let me put it into perspective. Unemployment support provided by the Government in partnership with the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) since April 2020, it has been critical in supporting the livelihoods of those that have been affected.

Before you start going on over their money, they may tell you about their money.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just listen. May be you should listen, it is time you listen.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of \$236.2 million has been paid out to support those that are unemployed or on reduced hours. Now, let me say this very slowly: Of this, Government has paid out \$118.3 million, and around \$117.9 million has been withdrawn from FNPF members' General Accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over 100,000 Fijians have actually been assisted so far, put that into perspective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have an actual chart on this. If they want I will actually give it to them so that they can decipher it.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- *Facebook!*

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to actually support the informal sector, Government actually introduced the “Stronger Together Job Support Scheme” and the concessional loan of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) which they all know about. It is not like we are sitting around just doing nothing and twiddling our thumbs, we have done a lot already and we will do some more.

In terms of the MSME loans, over \$30 million was actually disbursed to 5,438 businesses and this is across the sectors of agriculture, wholesale and retail, food and hospitality, transportation, manufacturing and other service-driven sectors under the concessional loan facility of MSMEs.

Under the Stronger Together Job Support Scheme, a total of 70 employers have been approved worth around 1,081 new jobs, Sir. In terms of MSMEs, the Fijian Government, since about 2007, has invested \$90 million dollars into the MSME sector, our livelihood programme that is designed to support and develop MSMEs and create employment and diversify our economic base and ultimately alleviate poverty.

We have actually invested, Sir, and these are the amounts that are under the various programmes:

- (1) Young Entrepreneurship Scheme, we invested more than \$200,000.
- (2) National Exports Strategy, we have invested more than \$15 million.
- (3) Northern Development Programme, we have invested more than \$10 million.
- (4) IHRDP Programme, we have invested more than \$2.8 million.
- (5) Micro Small Business Grant, we have invested more than \$34 million.
- (6) Concessional loans of MSMEs, that is close to \$30 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, really this is such a good thing for the Honourable Minister so we are actually so pleased and we are so proud to say that under the MSME concessional loans, close to 46 percent are actually women entrepreneurs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just quickly to finish off, Sir, visitor arrivals in 2020 declined by about 84 percent to around 147,000 visitors. Now, 147,000 visitors is similar to arrivals during the 1990s and I think that may have been when the Honourable Gavoka was at the Fiji Visitors Bureau.

The closure of the border, domestic movement restrictions, reduced domestic demands and continued uncertainty has weighed heavily on business activity, that is the truth, Sir. They need to understand that. The economic estimates have declined by 19 percent in 2020, has been a loss of GDP of around F\$2 billion. It is not a simple task to be able to manage an economy at this particular point and juncture and that is not just for us, that is for any other country, Sir.

It must be put into perspective honestly and truthfully like we do always, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and you know, it is quite simple and I will sit down by just saying this, Sir: if you had a business from the tourism sector and you were earning let us say, for example, \$2 billion and another billion from the airlines, that is \$3 billion and overnight, you earn nothing, you would also suffer too, Sir. We do recognise that, but we have done a lot more than any other government prior to this. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. First, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for their Review Report on the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation's Annual Reports for the Years 2014 to 2016/2017, that made a number of recommendations that I would like to firstly speak to.

One of the recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which has been referred to by the Opposition is in relation to the need to liaise closely with the Ministry of Economy to ensure that adequate resources are provided for in any new programmes. Like any other Ministry, not only the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, this is something that happens every year through the budget cycle, where Ministries would front up with their needs for the year ahead and justify the resources that they asked for from the Ministry of Economy. So, it is an ongoing initiative through the national budget consultation process.

On technology, the recommendation that is being made in relation to the upgrade of the ITC system that the Ministry has and we totally agree, Mr. Speaker, Sir, something that is being referred to by a number of Members on the Opposition side. It is a need for the Ministry and something that as a Government, we have been working towards and I am happy to announce that we finally have the right platform in place to carry out the reforms, not only in relation to the IT System, but also in relation to the policies surrounding social protection and the programmes therein.

This came about, Mr. Speaker, Sir, through an assessment that was made by DFAT in 2019. It is a fiduciary risk assessment that they carried out on the social protection system and they identified the gaps within the current IT System that needed to be addressed. We sat down with them, we went through the Report and we did accept that these are the needs of the Ministry which Government has also endorsed and it is due to that that DFAT, you would recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, poured almost \$10 million into the Ministry late last year. A portion of the money that they had granted to us, was for these - a reform of the IT System, the Standing Operating Procedures around our programmes, and the capacity-building for officers who work in the Social Welfare Department. It is a two-year reform programme.

The Government of Fiji within the current year's budget, has also poured in half a million dollars to complement the \$2.19 million that DFAT has put in, so that the two-year programme can take place and put in place a better and more effective ITC System for better service delivery to our over 80,000 beneficiaries, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So that is in play right now, as we speak. To start off the process, Cabinet has already endorsed a social protection policy a few weeks back, that would lay the platform for all these reform programmes to carry on through the next two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to refer to a few of the statements that have been made by the other side in today's debate. I must say that I have been listening with great interest and I noted that not many of them spoke on the Report itself. A lot of the discussions and debate that have evolved in the House today, have been to do with poverty in Fiji, it is an important topic to discuss, yes. But I am speaking about this in the context of parliamentary rules and procedures and having to speak on a Report that has been tabled, which has not been done properly, I felt.

But in any case, a lot has been said about the incidents of poverty as per the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2019- 2020, and that Report has been used consistently by the other side to show that the incidents of poverty has risen from 28.1 percent in 2013 to 29.9 percent in 2020, comparing two Reports. Yet, I did not once hear from the other side, about any qualification in relation to the using of the 2019-2020 figures that the CEO for the Bureau of Statistics himself had stated in the Report that we have been using all day. Page 1 of the Report actually says, and I would like to quote this:

“The survey result also reflects the changes in the methodology and best practices in household welfare measurement, in line with the latest international and regional guidance on aggregate construction and poverty measurement. The major adjustments in the methodology includes the using of consumption expenditure measures over the traditional income measures in welfare analysis.”

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, up until this 2019-2020 survey, we have been using, as a nation, a totally different methodology to measure poverty in Fiji. For this Report, we have come up with a new methodology and there is reason for that ...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- There is reason for that and good reason for the changing of methodology. In fact, the CEO for Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBOS) goes on to say: “Therefore, the survey result is not directly comparable to the previous HIES survey results.” And he went further to produce a five-page annexure to show the differences in the methodology that he has used and I have also been advised that as we speak, the World Bank is assisting ...

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- We do not know that, Honourable Prasad. It could be high, it could be low, I do not know. My point is, we are comparing apples to oranges and we should not do that.

It is alright to cite the figure, it is alright to cite the figure of 29.9 percent but it is simply wrong to say that it has increased, given that we are using a different methodology this year. But, be that as it may, the World Bank is now assisting the Bureau of Statistics ...

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- ... in a write-up of the Poverty Assessment Report for Fiji, as part of the standard World Bank analytical package to contribute to the World Bank's engagement for Fiji and the Pacific. Now, the Report will attempt a back casting of comparable poverty trends and it is that approach that will then allow us as stakeholders, to make a direct comparison with previous HIES Surveys. So, Mr. Speaker, be that as it may, yes, poverty is an important issue for us to be addressing now. The figures we are looking at now was prior to COVID-19 and we understand that. We understand that as a government, it is an important issue to address, so what are we doing about it.

We do have a Poverty Monitoring Unit that monitors our programmes and policies across of government. The poverty reduction measures that Government has taken across ministries to see how effective it is and it is something that Honourable Professor Prasad had referred to in the statement that he made and I agree with it. For every policy or programme that we put in place, it is important to be able to monitor and evaluate to see if it is effective, if the people that are being targeted are actually benefitting out of these programmes and it is something that the Poverty Monitoring Unit does on a daily basis.

Its latest report, Mr. Speaker, they looked at 22 programmes for the fiscal year 2019/2020. They looked at 22 programmes across 14 ministries. It is a report that is being considered internally at the moment and will be tabled in Cabinet shortly, to be shared with my Cabinet colleagues, so it is not right to say that as a Government, we are coming up with programmes and we are not even sure whether they are working or not. There is a specific government department whose sole responsibility is to monitor and evaluate such programmes and make recommendations to Government on gaps to address or opportunities that may arise.

Mr. Speaker, one of the Opposition Members, I think it was Honourable Salote Radrodro, who referred to social protection as creating a dependency syndrome and says that it does not empower people. So, I was listening to her whole contribution and trying to make sense out of that particular statement. I was wondering whether is it, I do not know, I could be wrong, Honourable Radrodro, but what I was hearing was this. Why are we pouring money into social protection when we should be using that money to empower people to go into business? So, scrap social protection, get everyone to go into business.

Seriously! Seriously! Social protection can play and does play a key role in reducing poverty and inequities. The whole world knows that. The Fijian Government knows that which is why Mr. Speaker, if we look at the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, Section 37, there is a constitutional guarantee of this right for every Fijian. The gaps that exist between the haves and the have nots, it is wide and this is why social protection systems are put in place in countries that can afford it to ensure that, that gap is narrowed down and that is why we have that social protection system in Fiji.

I am glad that over the years since the inception of social protection systems in Fiji, the welfare system, there have been a lot of studies by independent bodies and we are talking about World Bank, we are talking about some foreign governments that have done reviews of the social protection system and one thing that these reports, these reviews came up with, was that they love the idea that we have this social protection and that we need social protection systems in our country. They have come up with recommendations, and I will give an example.

Back in 2010 and 2011, the World Bank reviewed our social protection system at that time and made recommendations that what we used to have then was the Family Assistance Program.

They recommended that it become more targeted that instead of family assistance, we do poverty benefit and introduce the proxy means debt, which is used now.

Basically, what they were saying, yes, it is lovely to have a Social Protection System program, but it is important that you target the vulnerable groups that you are actually aiming at and make sure you get those people. That is why those kind of recommendations have been implemented over the years. That is why we started with the Poverty Benefits Scheme back then. They also recommended that we come up with a Social Pension Scheme which we now have implemented over the years.

They also recommended for a Disability Allowance which we started implementing in 2018, so these reviews continued. These interested stakeholders continued to look at our social protection system and they continued to tell us how to make them better. One of them is what I referred to DFAT with their fiduciary assessment. They have made recommendations for a reform with the IT system. They went a step further and gave us \$2.19 million for it. So, these assessments continued to be done to make sure that our Social Protection System remains what it supposed to be addressing; the vulnerable people in our community.

Apart from that, the World Bank and currently is the World Food Programme, they are looking also at the top ups that government give to a social welfare beneficiary post disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years since *TC Winston*, the Fijian Government has been able to use the Social Protection System platform that we already have, to assist welfare beneficiaries post disasters and they have done this through top ups where beneficiaries get more than they normally do in a particular month.

That particular exercise has been touted as international best practice by the World Bank where our Director for Social Welfare himself, was invited to Germany, I think it was 2018 or 2019 to go and tell the rest of the world basically, what we did in Fiji post *Winston* and how this best practice that every country can adopt and it is something we should be proud of. It is something to be proud about as a country.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was also a question that I wanted to address that was posed by Honourable Salote Radrodoro, I believe. What is the Government's intent for moving programmes to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation which is not fully equipped to run programmes? I believe she was referring to again *TC Winston*; the Home Care, the Help for Home Programmes that was happening.

One thing we need to understand, *TC Winston* was the first cyclone of its kind to hit us in this country and as a very responsive government, we had to look around and see the best machinery we already have in place that could deploy this assistance in the most effective way and quickly enough. Of course, it had to be us, because we already have the Social Protection platform in place. Our officers are already very well versed.....

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.-with the communities that were very badly affected by *TC Winston*. That is why it came to the ministry and when we started (because we have never done it

before), it was difficult. We were running all over the place but by the end of the exercise, I would say, that the officers of the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation did a great job in deploying the assistance that government needed to deploy at that time.

But that also enabled us as a ministry, which is something I believe that is also being raised in the report to come up with standard operating procedures in relation to these new events. What can we do, what should we be doing if you are hit again by that kind of cyclone and Government decides to deploy again, the kind of assistance that we did post-*TC Winston*.

Mr. Speaker, there was also mention about the budget for women's project as an alternative to social protection. I have said this so many times, I do not know how else to say it, the empowerment of women like poverty alleviation, is not something that belongs to my Ministry alone, to the Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. There are cross cutting issues that every Ministry has something to do with and as a former Director for Women, Honourable Salote Radrodro should know that.

In relation to the budget for women, the economic empowerment or empowerment of women generally, the Ministry this year, has started a gender transformative institutional capacity development programme, starting with nine agencies, eight Ministries, plus the Fiji Police Force, where for two years, gender experts from the Ministry and our partner non-government organisations will go into these Ministries, look at their policies and their programmes and see that it is gender sensitive, that the opportunities that each Ministry has to empower women in the particular sector, to make sure that the policies and programmes that already exist in these Ministries, are actually gender sensitive and are doing all they can do in relation to the empowerment of women in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, it is not a standalone issue, gender equality, empowerment of women, poverty alleviation, it is across of the Governments spectrum.

My final point, Mr. Speaker, is in relation to Honourable Nawaikula and his social media post. I am saying this because I have a serious request on behalf of over 80,000 social welfare beneficiaries that we serve, as Members of Parliament, when we make these posts, people believe it, they listen and believe it. His post was that this person receiving a pension was getting \$100 and then kept reducing, that is wrong. Social pension does not change, it only gets removed when the beneficiary dies. So he posted it.

My request is this, we have Members of the Opposition, the likes of Honourable Aseri Radrodro, who makes the effort to come to my office with the list of names of beneficiaries who may have issues with their accounts, and we help them out. Then we have the likes of Honourable Nawaikula, who uses the circumstances of a social welfare beneficiary for political purposes. It is wrong. What we did, Mr. Speaker, in fact, when I read that, I called him up, he did not call me. I called him, asking for the details.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- I wanted the details of the person who had gone to him so that I could find out what was wrong. He finally forwarded me the information in relation to this beneficiary and I called the number he gave, it was his brother because the beneficiary is in the place that had no communication, so that is fine.

We managed to speak to his brother and found out that he is not on the social pension scheme. He was not on pension. So my advice to his brother was to transfer him to the pension and to come to our office. So, my request Honourable Members, when you come across these kind of cases when people come to you for assistance because of your position as Parliamentarians, do not use it for political football, but come to me. Bring the issues to us and we will help. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her contribution to the debate. I now call on the Chairperson for the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any further comments. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the contents of the Report. I remind Honourable Members that once the vote is taken on the motion it ends there and the Report will not be debated again in Parliament. This will be the case for all the Standing Committee Reports that will be debated this week.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Members for your contribution to the debate on that Report.

Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times I will now a suspension motion to be moved and I now call on 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 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 Honourable Leader of the Government to speak on his motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Very briefly, under Schedule 2, we still have an outstanding agenda and, of course, Schedule 3 thus the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the listed items on today's Order Paper. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

There being no one wishing to take the floor, Honourable Leader of Government in Parliament, do you have anything further to say? You have the floor.

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, before we take the next item on the Agenda, we will break for afternoon tea so you might be able to stomach the next Chairperson after that. We adjourn for afternoon tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.02 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

**EXAMINATION OF 2015 AUDIT REPORTS –
STATE-OWNED ENTITIES AND STATUTORY AUTHORITIES**

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

That Parliament debates the Examination of Audit Reports on State-Owned Entities and Statutory Authorities for 2015, which was tabled on 14th May, 2019.

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

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members Parliament, as the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion with regards to the debate on the Public Accounts Committee Review Report on the Audit Report of State-Owned Entities and Statutory Authority for 2015. This Report presents our overall analysis of the internal control of state-owned entities and other significant matters highlighted by the Auditor-General which may have an impact on the operation of the entities in future if left unaddressed.

It was noted that the Report was for the year 2015 and the issues discussed may not be current. I wish to highlight that the issues identified in this Reports have either been resolved or are in the process of being addressed as mentioned in the Report that are before us at committee stage for scrutiny.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report contains the finding of Committee relating to 18 entities. The state-owned entities and statutory authorities are as follows:

- (1) Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Limited;
- (2) Post Fiji Limited;
- (3) Public Rental Board;
- (4) Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji;
- (5) Water Authority of Fiji;
- (6) Land Transport Authority;
- (7) Sugar Industry Tribunal;
- (8) Fijian Elections Office;
- (9) Higher Education Commission;
- (10) National Substance Abuse Advisory Council;
- (11) Airports Fiji Limited;
- (12) Fiji Electricity Authority;
- (13) Fiji Roads Authority;
- (14) Copra Millers of Fiji Limited;
- (15) Fiji Development Bank;
- (16) Fiji Development Bank Nominees Limited;
- (17) Housing Authority of Fiji; and

(18) Film Fiji.

The Committee commends the work of the Auditor-General on the issuance of five modified audit opinions for the 2015 Financial Statements that were completed for the various entities and one entity was issued with the disclaimer of opinion. It is important to note that 23 of the 2015 Financial Statements of the various State owned entities and statutory authorities that were audited, were issued with unmodified audit opinions. This means that mis-statements were not noted in a majority of the entities that were audited.

State owned entities are basically Government Commercial Companies (GCCs) and these entities should make profits and give dividends back to the government as sole or majority shareholder. Whilst certain entities have evolved over the years and overturned losses into profits, there are still some entities such as FRA, Fijian Elections Office and Higher Education Commission that do not operate to make profit, but rather provide service of its international standard for the benefit of every Fijian.

One needs to know that some of these entities, just two decades ago, were not making a single cent as profit. I, therefore, would like to thank the CEOs, Boards and Board Directors for turning losses into profits, for example, Post Fiji Limited. Please note, when internet and email was not much in use, the people used to resort to letter writing and rely on the Post Office and Post Box and the profit used to be around half a million dollars, two decades ago for Post Fiji Limited. In today's era when everyone uses email, there is a 70 to 90 percent decrease in the use of Post Box and revenue, as people hardly use the Post Box.

The CEO, Dr. Anirudha Bansod, has overturned the company under his leadership making a profit worth \$2.3 million which is a tremendous achievement, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This was done through diversification that on one side when revenue was going down, on the other side the introduction of new business opportunities saw businesses thrive. We salute CEOs like Dr. Anirudha of Post Fiji Limited; Mr. Hasmukh Patel of EFL; late Mr. Faiz Khan of Airports Fiji Limited; Mr. Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum of FBC; Mr. Raj Sharma of Copra Millers of Fiji and Fiji Rice and Acting CEO of FRA, Mr. Kamal Prasad, for their dedication towards State-owned entities. It is indeed a pleasure to acknowledge them in debate today.

While on one side, we do acknowledge the fact that these entities are doing above par, the Committee needs to keep these entities on their toes to ensure that their performance continues. The Committee noted that there were a few control issues within the entities included in this Report which indicates that operation of these entities are improving. I wish to highlight the common findings of the Committee;

- (1) There have been issues in terms of internal controls or inventory of WAF. The response from WAF revealed that the Authority conducts independent quarterly stock takes in all its stores and each storeman is held accountable for any unresolved variances. The stock take procedures and processes have been put in place for inventory requests and issuance of stock. Stock acquisition are authorised by the supervisors and the team leaders.
- (2) Plants and equipment not insured, was another significant issue for WAF. Sir, WAF in its response has stated that Erasito Beca Consultant Limited was commissioned by WAF to assist the reinstatement value of critical asset for insurance purpose.

This exercise was completed in April 2019. Insurance valuation has been provided by the consultant on the asset including building, plant and equipment on an as is where is

basis. WAF is currently in the process of getting quotes from its brokers, Marsh Pte. Ltd for these critical sites. Due to the substantial value involved as per the valuation, the brokers have approached insurers based on first loss limit policy restricting cover to fire and earthquake impact.

- (3) Airports Fiji had issues relating to the fixed asset verification. Airports Fiji, in its response has confirmed that they have successfully completed revaluation of fixed assets. After receiving the verification report from Erasito Beca, Airports Fiji engaged an independent audit firm, Ernst & Young, to provide an assurance on the accounting treatment of the report. The report clearly identifies each asset as description, life of the asset, category, rate of depreciation and location by the airport.
- (4) Sugar Industry Tribunal had issues relating to fixed assets. The entity has responded to the Committee's recommendation stating that the fixed asset register is now updated with all machinery and equipment written off which were not used in business operation. Generally, it is pleasing to note that these entities have taken the Committee's recommendation positively and are working towards resolving its issues and gaps that were identified during the time of audit.

Finally, I commend the effort of the Members of the Public Accounts Committee in the compilation of this Report and most importantly, to the State-Owned Entities and statutory authorities in taking the Committee's recommendations positively and working towards improving the issues raised by the Office of the Auditor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those comments, as the Member moving the motion for the debate of this Public Accounts Committee Report, I thank you for this opportunity. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson of the Standing Committee.

Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this issue and I give the floor to the Honourable Aseri Radrodro. You have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As a Member of the Public Accounts Committee, I would like to make a contribution in terms of the motion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am privileged to be a part of the Public Accounts Committee and like all other Members of the Committee, we take our role very seriously. The Public Accounts Committee is usually referred to in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the mother of all committees of parliament and so, given the various issues this Report covers as well as others that will be tabled later in this House, I will reiterate and urge the Government to reconsider the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association benchmark as to have a Member of the Opposition chair this important Committee ...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- ... and to allow for better, transparent and efficient scrutiny of Government spending, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to start by saying that one of the most serious concerns of a Committee when reviewing this Report is noting that a number of entities that the Office of the Auditor-General previously used to audit are now opting to be audited by private auditing firms and

this is very concerning. This practice eliminates the opportunity for this august House to scrutinise the manner in which these entities have utilised taxpayers' money. It could have been forgiven if these entities are funded entirely by their own resources, however, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be funded through Government grant, there is no exception and the most prudent way to ensure good governance is maintained by those using taxpayer's funds is to allow for parliamentary scrutiny as we are the representatives of our people in this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the failure in not allowing the Office of the Auditor-General to scrutinise these entities opens the door to a lot of anomalies, possible corruption, collusions and a lack of guidance. These practices, in fact, is already highlighted in these reports, so hopefully it is not the reason why some of these entities have opted to go for private auditing firms, instead of the Office of the Auditor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also must be noted that it is not the right to continue to have a lot of these various entities still under the Public Enterprise Act, years after they have undergone reform and yet not allow the Office of the Auditor-General to scrutinise their books and systems to ensure the intention of the reforms have been realised and I urge that as long as these entities are being supplemented through Government grants, the Office of the Auditor-General must be allowed to audit them, so it allows for Parliament scrutiny and debates of their books and functions.

It is always important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Government is in a position whereby it sets benchmarks and once we allow private auditing firm without public scrutiny of public funds and be prepared to set dangerous precedence not only for the current Government but for future governments as well.

We have learnt from the past where such entities like the Fiji Sugar Corporation, Air Terminal Services and Fiji Airways chose private firms to conduct their audits and in doing so, the people of this nation were not aware of the earning business environment that they were encountering until very late.

Today, entities like the National Centre for Small and Micro Enterprise, Fiji Airways, Fiji Pine Limited and many more similar entities are again choosing private auditing firms. Whilst these auditing firms are reputable, the point is, without the Office of the Auditor-General's involvement, we do not get to scrutinise these entity's reports in this august House. It is crucial that Parliament is allowed to scrutinise and question public spending on behalf of taxpayers to ensure prudent use of Government resources for the equal benefit of all our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the 2015 reports, as time may be a little bit of a question in terms of how we are debating now and how have they been addressed, I expect some of the responses from that side to update us on how these audit issues have been addressed.

I will start with Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC) Mr. Speaker, Sir. For FBC, it was noted that Government grants were treated as revenue instead of capital equity and fortunately it was explained that this was a result of a Cabinet decision taken in 2012 which was later rescinded in 2016 to be compliant with the International Financial Reporting and Accounting Standards (IFRS). This is why Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet needs to engage professional people who are equipped with the right financial background to provide guidance on Government policies because this is a classic example of ill-informed policy advice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is commendable that entities make amendments when anomalies are noted by the Office of the Auditor-General. This is the whole reason why the Office of the Auditor-General

must scrutinise entities assisted by Government. It is important to note that the functions of the daily corporate governance of an entity is very sensitive business which can grow or collapse entities due to simple accounting reporting anomalies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while still on FBC, I note that additional issues like asset impairment have been highlighted in FBC's auditing relating to projects that were undertaken by the company regarding the digitisation of television operations in Fiji.

The Government has been providing FBC annual grants from the budget estimates to provide television services and in simple terms, what these impairments indicates is that the entity cannot determine how much revenue it will generate and collect from these digitisation projects.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were in the Lomaiviti and Yasawas a couple of weeks ago and it was a pleasure to see very clear FBC television reception in these areas through the *Walesi* platform and I commend Government for that. However, in many other areas in Viti Levu like Serea, Waidina, Lutu, Muaira and Waibasaga Villages, where we used to enjoy television and mobile connectivity, we now have major disruptions, Mr. Speaker, and to have good television connectivity, we now have to construct very long home-made antennas. I urge FBC to speed up the work that they are doing to allow the accessibility of coverage.

On the Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF), I note similar reporting anomalies like the FBC emanating from a Cabinet decision that show Government grants being reported as capital contributions. The Office of the Auditor-General reported that this was against best international reporting financial practices. Mr. Speaker, we commend the assurances by MSAF that these anomalies would be rectified in the 2016 Audit and which I trust has now occurred.

Mr. Speaker, it is now imperative that I address the very important role that the Fiji Institute of Accountants play in these reporting entities. In both these entities, the accounting of Government grants became confused as a result of conflicting financial reporting guidelines, which is ridiculous at Government level. Government should ensure that any changes which is recommended for adoption by such entities like the Fiji Institute of Accountants should engage full consultation with Government and Government institutions prior to it being implemented, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), the Committee noted that WAF had recorded in its books revenue on water and sewerage charges of \$32 million which included outstanding receipts on water and sewerage charges of \$10 million. The OAG had highlighted that WAF is merely a collecting agent of Government and cannot record such revenue as belonging to the entity. I trust that this matter has been resolved, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The OAG has also highlighted the need to conduct a valuation exercise on WAF's property, plant and equipment amounting to \$1.8 billion for the year 31st December, 2010 and this is to truly reflect Government's assets and liabilities. With the current ailment of water supply, it is prudent that WAF conducts its valuation exercise to allow for a problematic areas that are being affected by constant water disruptions, which is now an ongoing annual event, particularly during drought. When will Fiji's water woes be resolved, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is the question I beg for the Honourable Minister to provide an answer to?

The immense budgetary allocation poured yearly into WAF should see issues being resolved, not continuing with the definite solution insight. The Government must remember that our communities, especially our mothers are struggling daily to fetch water for cooking and washing. Imagine those with toddlers, Mr. Speaker, and imagine the old and vulnerable, water disruptions

becomes a hygiene and health issue. Mr. Speaker, Sir, access to treated water is a constitutional right and we cannot afford to play havoc with Government policies in this regard.

On a side note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be appreciative if the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure enlightens this House on what WAF is doing to address the sewer water leaking at Kabara Street in Samabula, which the residents are complaining not only about the sewer water leak, but the unbearable stench associated with it.

Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), audit noted discrepancies in accounting for fixed assets whereby reconciliations were not done. These are basic accounting processes that needs to be conducted by any executive in organisations. Consequently, deferred income reconciliations recorded for donation assets are not adjusted on a timely basis for revaluation and disposal of the donated assets. Also the fixed assets register at the time of the audit had not been updated to record the revaluation perform for property, plant and equipment.

The revelation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the audit is very disconcerting and now grasp the depth of abeyance left behind due to the poor policy decisions at the time of reform of Public Works Department into the entities, MWH and FRA, whereby the two existed together at the initial stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Who is to be held accountable for that poor policy decision is yet to be determined given, Mr. Speaker, Sir, millions was lost as a result of the duplication which is now being done by FRA without any need for MWH. No wonder the depots are left in derelict condition. If these entities are unable to understand what the assets of FRA are, I make this point, Mr. Speaker, because Public Works Department (PWD) used to be one of the best-meant entities of Government.

In my last trip to Lomaiviti, we came across issues raised by villagers who requested that this be raised in this august House. For instance, they are asking Government's assistance for the completion of their playing ground in Sawaieke, Gau, as well as the repairs of their roads and ailing depots.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, it is sad that the Office of the Auditor-General checks all Government spending every year in processes which is called an audit by carrying out annual audits, the Office of the Auditor-General assists Parliament to hold and call to account all persons interested with management of public funds and resources.

We, the Members of this august House, will come and go, in fact some of us will not be here in the next Parliament term. What is important is the legacy that we leave behind with respect to the sustainability of our governance structure, and therefore, Mr. Speaker, I support the motion before the House.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every time we have a debate on Public Accounts Committee (PAC), I am always saddened when I remember the way it was. The way it was, Mr. Speaker, was that the Opposition would appoint the Chairperson to the Committee, and this was how we set out in 2014, and this was the practice observed in the majority of the Commonwealth countries.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Honourable Professor Prasad was the Chairperson of the PAC at that time and doing a wonderful job, putting pressure on the agencies, Ministries as expected from an

auditor as in PAC and lo and behold, FijiFirst was getting very, very uncomfortable with the way things were happening because they were very thorough in the way they were scrutinising the reports.

The work of the FijiFirst Government, Mr. Speaker, they changed the Standing Order to say that the Committee Members of five will decide on the Chairperson. Now, they have three in the Committee and two on this side so Honourable Professor Prasad lost the chairmanship of that Committee. It was a sad day for Fiji that we decided that FijiFirst like I have always characterised as the tyranny of the majority, abused its power to change what should have been a normal part of Parliamentary democracy. That is the story about Public Accounts Committee.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- When the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Honourable Sir John Phillip Key came, I was invited to sit with the Leader, Honourable Kepa, at that time when he came to the Opposition Office. We thanked him for bringing or helping Fiji to come back to Parliament democracy. New Zealand was very instrumental in helping us, like Australia, but we said, "Honourable Prime Minister, unfortunately the bars for Parliament have been set very, very low" and he appreciated that. I was thinking he went back and tried very hard to bring the bar up in our Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, I guess it will have to wait for a SODELPA Office to bring up parliamentary democracy in this country in the way it should be. That, Mr. Speaker, is the way Fiji should be. No more of this abuse of power that the people of Fiji were noticing. They noticed all these. Remember, they have 32 seats, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We had 15 from SODELPA and 3 from NFP. What happened in 2018? They came down to 27, they came up to 24 and the difference between FijiFirst and all the Opposition was only 147 votes.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It was all that because the people of Fiji saw the abuse, they knew what democracy is like and they wanted true democracy to come into your Parliament. Unfortunately, there was inclement weather during voting and a lot of people were demotivated to come to vote because they just thought that Parliament was a circus at that time, but we will change that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, just stick to the Report. We are not talking about what happened in the last Elections.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I just thought I will put a bit of background to PAC, Sir. Mr. Speaker, in the Report here, we are talking about Film Fiji, and I am worried that it is not effective in the conduct of its operation. Are they properly structured? Are they properly resourced? Because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I come from the West. In the Mamanuca, Yasawa, a lot of filming is happening in there and a lot of complaints are coming from the people. The resource owners are not getting a fair return for the use of their resources.

In one particular year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they were not allowed to fish, walk or sail in a part of a lagoon there, and they were paid a sum of money which came down to about \$60 per head. They gave away so much but they were not properly compensated and I have often said many times - can

we coordinate between Film Fiji and NLTB and decide on a rate that is equitable, not something that is almost ad hoc in the way they do it, Mr. Speaker.

As we speak about resources in that part of the world or in the marine resources or for entertainment, I am always reminded about the Surfing Decree for Tavarua. Through FijiFirst, the people of Nabila and Momi have lost more than \$10 million since the Surfing Decree was introduced by the regime and by FijiFirst. Here we have, Mr. Speaker....

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- A Point of Order. Mr. Speaker Sir, as the Chairperson who has moved the motion, I would just like to bring to your attention that the Surfing Decree has nothing to do with the Report that is before the Parliament.

The Honourable Member has been talking about the chairmanship, membership of the PAC Committee, et cetera. Now, he has gone to the Surfing Decree, Surfing Act which is not part of this Report. We request him to actually stick to the Report and talk about the Report which is before the Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have heard me very clearly when I asked him to stick to the Report and I have just asked him that. You do not have to remind me - stick to the Report.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What I am saying here is that when a huge part of the equation is to properly reward or properly compensate the resources owners in the use of their resources, Film Fiji is a huge part of that so basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the focus should be on being equitable. Here, we have a people who normally categorise as “cash poor”, why would you remove \$10 million from them over 10 years? Here are people who are crying out for a formula that can be understood by all when they give up their resources for filming yet Government continues to behave in a very ad hoc manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I continue to be saddened by all these and I am glad that we will have the opportunity to debate on this today and I am very concerned with the way Film Fiji is structured. I think it is not properly resourced, I think it should do a much better job in rewarding, compensating the resource owners when they come and film in Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I give the floor to the Honourable Qionibaravi. You have the floor.

HON. ADIL QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion before the House, on the Examination of Audit Report on State-Owned Entities and Statutory Authorities for 2015. I would like to thank Mr. Chairman and Honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for their work in examining these entities and their Report to the august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is pleasing to note that on page 5 of the Report, the Committee has made a comment that they found significant work has been undertaken to address issues raised in the audit. It is clear that entities have taken the audit review process seriously and instigated processes to implement accepted recommendations. Such recommendations will take time to fully action or are being addressed through implementation of larger projects.

I also note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statement also on page 5, where the Committee noted that entities which had been issued unqualified opinions or clean opinions, have various control issues which had been recurring in previous audit reports, and warranted the Committee’s scrutiny.

As such, the Committee resolved to hear from relevant agencies, which had been both qualified and unqualified. I would like to congratulate the Committee for continuing to scrutinise both entities that have been given unmodified opinions or certified opinions as well, as for those who had been given qualified opinions.

I note further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at page 7 of their Report, that 29 audit opinions were issued by the OAG on the 2015 Financial Statement on State-Owned Entities as at 31st October, 2017. Out of the 29 opinions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, five were modified opinions or qualified opinions which means, that the auditors having obtained sufficient appropriate audit evidence, concluded that misstatements individually or in the aggregate are material but not pervasive to the financial statements, or the auditors are unable to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence on which to base their opinions. But the auditor concludes that the possible effects on the Financial Statements of undetected misstatements, if any could be material but not pervasive.

These five entities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, includes the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation Limited (FBCL), Post Fiji Limited, Public Rental Board, Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji and the Water Authority of Fiji. I was going to speak briefly on the FBCL Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but the first speaker from this side of the House has elaborated enough comments on the FBCL Report. However, I would like to just state a fact that, given the success and losses at FBCL, it is still surprising that the CEO and staff continue to receive year end performance bonuses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to one entity that received a disclaimer of opinion from the Auditor-General. The Auditor-General gave a disclaimer of opinion to one entity, which is one out of the 29 accounts which were audited. The disclaimer of opinion is the worst of the three types of modified opinions. It simply means that the auditors are unable to obtain sufficient, appropriate audit evidence on which to base their opinions and conclude that the possible effects of the Financial Statements of undetected misstatements, if any, could be both material and pervasive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is in relation to the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council Report for the year ended 31st December, 2015. The OAG noted that the Financial Statements of the Council must be prepared in accordance with international standards for Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises and that the Council is yet to comply with this requirement. It reported that the Council has agreed to improve internal controls and adopt the required financial reporting framework from 2016.

It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have a backlog and debating reports from six years, but we are hopeful that the extra sitting week in May will enable this House to catch up and be up to date so that we are debating current rather than outdated reports on government entities.

The good news, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that 23 out of the 29 accounts were issued with unmodified opinions, which is 79 percent of the total reports that were examined by the Public Accounts Committee. That is a very good progress and we look forward to the day when all audited accounts of State-Owned Entities will be given unmodified opinions or unqualified opinions which both mean certified opinions.

Be that as it may, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am concerned that 11 out of the 29 have, by way of the requirements of the Companies Act or by the resolution of their own boards, elected other chartered accounting firms to audit their accounts. These entities are listed on pages 50 and 51 of the main report and comprise of the following entities:

- (1) Fiji Pine Ltd;
- (2) Fiji Sugar Corporation;

- (3) Fiji Airways;
- (4) Air Terminal Services;
- (5) Fiji Ships and Heavy Industries Ltd;
- (6) Fiji Ports Corporation;
- (7) Fiji Hardwood Corporation Ltd;
- (8) National Centre of Micro Finance;
- (9) National Trust of Fiji;
- (10) Fiji Museum; and
- (11) Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board.

Government holds shares in these companies which are listed in this category or is providing budgetary allocation to maintain the principal activities of these entities and these include the last four in the list which I have just read. I am concerned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the audited accounts of these companies and entities are not being scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee and submitted to Parliament to be debated on behalf of the people of this nation.

The Public Accounts Committee is mandated to examine accounts of Government of the Republic of Fiji in respect of each financial year and reports of the Office of the Auditor-General and for any other matter relating to the expenditure of the Government or any related body or activity directly or indirectly that it sees fit to review.

Public funds, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have been injected to these companies and their audited accounts should also be scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee and tabled to the House for debate. It is the people of Fiji through Government hold majority or significant shareholding in these entities, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The fact that taxpayer funds allocated to these entities in the form of grants or in the form of loan guarantees approved by this august House requires public scrutiny of the performance of these entities to be accountable for the public funds they are granted and the fact that the board of directors are appointed by the Minister for Economy and Public Enterprises and that the people of Fiji hold significant or controlling shares in these entities. For example, the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), the millions of dollars which the Government has continued to inject into the FSC. Its accounts should be audited by the Office of the Auditor-General and scrutinised by the Public Accounts Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my colleagues have addressed the House on the increasing level of poverty and that situation. The reality of the matter is that, our country is falling into vicious cycle of poverty and debt trap. It is all the more reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Office of the Auditor-General should audit the accounts of all State-owned entities to enable the Public Accounts Committee and this august House to scrutinise its performances and use of public monies and Government guarantees.

With the reduction of Government revenue collection by 50 percent, there is the expectation that all Government investments should be contributing to Government coffers in an effort to enlighten Government's burden to deliver on its charge to ensure the good governance and wellbeing of the people of this nation. Unfortunately, we have some lame dark performers who continue to chew our public funds and take loan after loan guaranteed by the people of Fiji through this august House.

All those loan guarantees, Mr. Speaker, Sir, constitute and contribute to the liability of the people of Fiji as they comprise and jerk up the contingent liability for our future generations because if these entities fail and cannot repay their loans, it is the taxpayers who will have to repay these

exorbitant loans. The vicious debt trap that the Government has put this nation on, constitute a threat to the future of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as such, the reality of the matter is that, Fiji is falling into a vicious cycle of poverty and debt trap. It is also high time that the grants allocated annually in the National Budget to these entities are reviewed, whether they are necessary or a waste of public monies, particularly if the entities are already profitable. I thank you, Sir, and I support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you and I now give the floor to the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I thought the Acting Minister for Economy was ready but anyway, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My colleagues, all three of them, have quite eloquently raised many issues so I am not going to talk about these specific entities. But I do want to pick on a number of points and if you look at Page 8 of the Report, basically, I want to pick on the issue of delay in submission of draft accounts for audits. All draft accounts submitted were incomplete, relevant information, record note provided for audit on a timely basis.

But before I go on to this, I just wanted to correct the Honourable Minister for Fisheries when he was interjecting from the other side. In fact, he was the Member of the Public Accounts Committee when I was the Chairman, Mr. Speaker, and he was absolutely a fabulous Member of the Committee. He was doing a very good job, but he forgot that the old Standing Order and that was the only Standing Committee which said that the Chairman of that Committee would be from the Opposition.

Unfortunately, this Government did not like the work that, that Committee was doing at that time, but with the help of Government members, that Standing Order was changed in Parliament. But more importantly, relevant to this Report, Mr. Speaker, is this, when they changed the Standing Order, they actually changed the provision which stated the brief of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and I want to just read that. Just the whole Standing Order 109(d), it says, and I quote:

“(d) Standing Committee on Public Accounts – including examining the accounts of the Government of the Republic of Fiji in respect of each financial year and reports of the Auditor-General, and for any other matter relating to the expenditures of the Government of the Republic of Fiji or any related body or activity (whether directly or indirectly) that the Committee sees fit to review...”

That was the original. What was added in this provision that the Committee must only examine how public money has been dealt with and accounted for in accordance with the written law, and must not examine the merits of the underlined policy that informs public spending.

My colleague, Honourable Radrodro, quite clearly stated the role of the Public Accounts Committee, Mr. Speaker, and in most Commonwealth countries, with the exception of one or two or maybe a few more, all of them have the Opposition as the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. And one other important role that the Public Accounts Committee plays, Mr. Speaker, is that they not only wait for the reports to come to Parliament before they actually examine it, in many commonwealth countries, the Public Accounts Committee takes a very active role in ensuring that the public funds are properly utilised. In some countries, when they have big projects, I mean, if you

have a statutory organisation like FRA, where we allocate, not millions but billions of dollars, in those kind of situations the Committee actually looks at periodically how the money is spent.

For example, we are told that the new four lane road in Denarau initially the cost stipulated was \$66 million but we ended up spending \$166 million. I mean, the horse had halted, it is too late for the Public Accounts Committee to look at how the expenditure has not been properly utilised, so the value for money is very important for the Public Accounts Committee and that is why this provision, Mr. Speaker, does not allow the Public Accounts Committee to actually question some of the policies because the policies and the regulations can actually have a serious implication on how the money is used.

It is very important, and this is why Honourable Radrodro said quite rightly, that the Public Accounts Committee is the mother of all Standing Committees because that Committee is charged by Parliament which is the supreme oversight institution to actually ensure that every dollar that is spent by Government, brings value for money. Now, I heard the Chairman of the Committee talked about some of the successes. Well, Mr. Speaker, that may be true but we also need to understand that many of these commercial companies and statutory entities have had increases in fees, charges in the way they operate. Some of the profit they made is a reflection of what the people have been paying, for example, the departure tax for Fiji is probably one of the highest amongst those high charged countries elsewhere.

The final point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, is in this Report and Honourable Radrodro also highlighted this, which says the Committee expressed concerns that other significant findings arising from audit of entities for which the Auditor-General is no longer the external auditor, cannot be reported to Parliament under the current legislative framework. This is, Mr. Speaker, a serious dereliction of duty, I would say by this Parliament, and by this Government, for allowing that kind of situation where the Auditor-General is not allowed to audit entities where Government gives grant. For example, we guaranteed the loan that Fiji Airways takes, FSC we guaranteed the loan. Mr. Speaker, this is why it is very important and I think that the Committee made the right observation. I am glad that the Committee actually picked that up.

On top of that, Mr. Speaker, if you look at it, there is a provision for special audits. At any time, the Auditor-General can ask for a special audit. I know under section 72 of the Finance Instruction 2010, the Permanent Secretary must authorise the conduct of any audit of all budget sector agencies. That provision, Mr. Speaker, some two years or three years back, I do not have the exact date, but that section 72 was changed by the Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy's office and the new paragraph was stated and I want to read that. The new paragraph states that the Permanent Secretary for Finance must not authorise an audit of an independent office, unless the audit has been requested in writing by the responsible authority of the independent office.

What it means, Mr. Speaker, that if there has to be a special audit, then the entity itself will have to request, for example, the Chairman of Media Industry Development Authority of Fiji (MIDA) or the Human Rights Commission, as an independent institution or the Elections Office. If there is a need for a special audit, they will have to request. The Auditor-General and the Permanent Secretary for Finance cannot authorise the special audit. This is something that we, as a Parliament, need to think through carefully.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, I tried to make sense of the expenditure, for example, with the FRA and if you look at the last two years or three years and what is the total expenditure, you look at what has happened in terms of the actual output, then you can figure it out. You leave the civil service salary aside, but if you look at the total government expenditure apart from the civil service salary, I

would estimate that between 30 percent to 40 percent of the expenditure is wasted. I think the wastage would be about 30 percent to 40 percent and I would actually say to the Government that they should have an independent commission of inquiry and look at the value for money into some of the projects that have already been undertaken, and some of the expenditure that has already been done in the last few years, and look at whether we have the value for money.

This is why when people are looking at the budget for FRA, they are saying, “where is the money gone? Why are we not having this?” It is the value for money and that is why this provision in this Standing Order. Mr. Speaker, this needs to change and it should give more teeth to the Public Accounts Committee so that they are able to question not only the actual provision in the Financial Act, where basically you look at how much money has gone, what has been spent, whether the receipts are there and whether it is recorded or not recorded. These are normal audit issues in every account, every year, but more important than that, Mr. Speaker, is the value for money and that is what is the Public Accounts Committee and this Parliament ought to look at.

I would respectfully submit, Mr. Speaker to the Government and to the Public Accounts Committee Members to actually look at recommending the change in this Standing Order; look at recommending change in the provisions. Why are some entities which receive Government Grants not being audited by the Office of the Auditor-General and why are those Reports not submitted to Parliament? We have raised this in the past in regards to Fiji Airways, Mr. Speaker. We have been saying that those Annual Reports must end up in Parliament.

I have no issues, Mr. Speaker, now that the Standing Order is there for a Government Member to chair this Committee. I have no doubt on the integrity and the capability of the Honourable Maharaj, but I think the Committee, to begin with, needs to be given proper legislative authority, proper resources, proper administrative authority to analyse expenditures and make sure that we as taxpayers of this country get value for money. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Professor Prasad. Honourable Nawaikula, you have the floor.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak to this motion. The motion, of course, is for the House to examine the Audit Report on State-Owned Entities and Statutory Authorities for 2015. That is the subject of the Parliamentary Paper No. 80 of 2018. The Audit Report is also contained as Parliamentary Paper No.128 of 2017. I have seen that basically what the Public Accounts Committee has done is to uplift the recommendations in the Audit Report and take it as its own, which is good.

Agreeing with Honourable Professor Prasad and Honourable Adi Qionibaravi, I think we all suggested the first oversight of the Honourable Maharaj Committee is to recommend that other entities of Government come under its scrutiny. In the Auditor’s Report, Mr. Speaker, these entities which is contained at Page 15, defines the types of Government agencies and it says, commercial companies, Government Statutory Authorities and majority-owned entities. So, it is imperative therefore that all institutions that come under that definition including specifically Fiji Sugar Corporation and Fiji Airways, should come under the scrutiny of this Committee.

I say that, Mr. Speaker, because it is important that these entities should not come to this House and beg this House for a loan or for guarantee if this House does not scrutinise their books. I am speaking in particular to Fiji Sugar Corporation and Fiji Airways. Imagine, Mr. Speaker, we guaranteed \$455 million for Fiji Airways. We have given another \$20 million to this company but we have not looked at their books. Our auditor has not looked at the books of Fiji Airways and it is

a peculiar company where the planes or the property which is the subject of the company is owned by someone else, Waqavuka Holdings.

I spent some time, Mr. Speaker, in December to try to trace down the ownership of this company Waqavuka Holdings and it led me to an address and a few individuals in Ireland. Now, if the books of Fiji Airways was also subjected to the scrutiny of the Office of the Auditor-General it would have told us whether it is a good idea for us to be guaranteeing a debt where the subject matter of the property is owned by someone else. This is where I wish to commend the Office of the Auditor-General because when I look at FBC, there are some entities that the Auditor-General audits directly. There are others like FBC for example where they choose to be audited by private auditors but all the same, the Auditor-General scrutinises it.

One good example is FBC. When you look at the FBC Annual accounts and the comments of the Auditor-General, it is very hard for me to find out the reservations that they made as opposed to the Auditor-General. The Auditor-General was very specific in saying that the grant that was made to FBC is not correct but looking at its Annual Report by its independent or private auditor, it is very very hard. So, that is where I recommend that all these entities are subjected to the Auditor-General and subjected to the Parliamentary Accounts Committee.

I will come back to the FBC later when I look into these books. Looking at the Auditor-General's recommendation, if I can talk further on FBC. The recommendation for FBC is contained in page 9 of Honourable Maharaj's Committee report and it says (this is taken from Auditor-General's Report on 2015 for the same company) and if I can quote; "the audit of the 2015 accounts of the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation resulted in the issuance of an audit opinion.

Coming down it says, "By following the government circular requiring FBCL to treat the government grant received as a capital contribution, FBCL did not comply with international accounting standards. Now, that came out very clearly to me after reading this as opposed to my reading the private auditors report. This company chose to have their Annual Report set at the back, of their auditors report. This is very clear to me as opposed to what their private auditor said.

The Committee asked them for their FBC's comment and they gave their comment and the Committee concluded by saying this and I quote, "finally taking into consideration the cabinet decision of 2016 all FBCL Report are prepaid in compliance with IFRS and IAS". They said it complied but that is not to be Mr. Speaker, if you read the following years of the Auditor-General's Report on FBC and if I can refer to that. So, the very next year, when the recommendation was made the Auditor-General also had the opportunity to relook at its books and it made this observation - also a modified opinion.

It says that the company accounted for all government grants received from 1st January, 2016 as a capital contribution. This is a departure from IAS 20. So, there is a contradiction there and the good thing that I wish to say here is Mr. Speaker, is that it came about because of the Auditor-General and the work of the PAC Committee allowing as it should, jurisdiction or authority to scrutinise and audit all government entities.

Now, I am saying here specifically that this would have happened if it looked at the books of Fiji Airways and it also looked at the books of FSC. For the second reason as I have clearly submitted that no company should come to this House and beg the nation for a loan or for guarantee unless this House and the Auditor-General scrutinises its book. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Nawaikula. I now give the floor to the Honourable Ro Tuisawau. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion relating to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts examination of the Audit Report on State-owned entities and statutory authorities. I rise to point out in particular, the few entities here, the other Members have contributed.

Honourable Nawaikula had mentioned FBCL, some may think it is a repetition, but it is an interesting case study in terms of the operation of the State owned enterprises. When you look at the auditor's audit opinion on page 9, it specifically mentions the government grants. Government grants received by FBCL, meets the definition of a grant in that they constitute government assistance provided to enable FBCL to broadcast in the outer stations and local programmes.

By following the Government's circular, FBCL to treat the government grant received as a capital contribution, but FBCL did not comply as mentioned. However, I would like to comment in particular on this grant. If you look back at FBCL over the years, looking at their annual reports, they have been making losses, from 2010 - \$517,000; 2011 - \$1.1 million; 2012 - \$7.1 million, 2013 - \$5.6 million and also in 2014 and 2015.

In those years, Government grants had been as follows: 2010 - \$2.6 million; 2011- \$2.5 million; 2012 - \$2.6 million; 2013 - \$2.9 million; 2014 - \$2.9 million and 2015- \$2.9 million. So, when I look back the accumulated losses in those years, was \$21.5 million and grants were \$16.4 million. On top of that, they have taken out a loan with Fiji Development Bank in the six years, but there was still a loss of \$21.5 million. So it was continually receiving cash grant of up to \$16.4 million accumulated of 2010 to 2015, and we could say that the Government was basically underwriting FBCL. The interesting thing is that these grants were increased in 2016 and 2017 to \$9.2 million.

Looking at the contributions made by the Honourable Members, we also note in 2018, there was a bonus pay to the CEO of \$21,259 based on the performance throughout the 2017 financial year, and that was just the second year where the FBCL made a profit but also we will note that in 2016 and 2017, the grant increased from \$2.9 million to \$9.2 million. So you know when we are talking about public enterprise accountability, this is something which is odd because the bonus was paid straight after the government grant was increased by massive \$2.9 million to \$9.2 million.

I also note in one of the recent statements made by the CEO, regarding that grant which is for the specific purpose, it is a public service fee for the services it provides and one of his explanations was as follows:

“I am glad you have asked us the question on the acquittals as it stands at the moment, the value of what we provide government, inclusive of the new channels that we have provided at the FBC 2 which is non-commercial, we are now sitting at the value of around \$30 million for which we receive a fee of \$11.4 million.”

So from that \$9.2 million that is mentioned it has now increased to \$11.4 million but from their perspective the value is \$30 million so they are saying it is a shortfall. For us as Parliament, we question the value of the public services being provided and there is quite a number of programmes being provided – *Speak Your Mind, Na Vakekeli, Sports Lounge, Bati Ni Tanoa*, et cetera.

Who determines the value of these programmes which they are saying is amounting to \$30 million? That is something, I believe, as mentioned by the Members from this side of the House which is why it is very critical for the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise these kinds of what I would call “odd use of public funds”.

Some of the ways in which we could look at is to conduct an independent review of the Public Service Broadcasting fee between the Government and FBC and determine how that broadcasting fee is apportioned or how the costings are being done? Another way probably is to be cost effective and we tender that out because there are other service providers here in Fiji, including Communications Fiji Ltd or even Fiji Television Ltd, and of course, we need to look at how cost effective are its operations to date.

Someone has mentioned about the bonuses et cetera and again, some of the public entities listed are paying that out at this time, I am not saying it is bad but given the situation we are in, maybe there needs to be a policy review by Government on that.

Also, if one looks at page 19 of the Committee Report where in terms of plant and property, I was surprised that the entity’s response there is that they are still using excel sheet, but it is good that on the next page, they have mentioned that the Authority plans to conduct a full board of survey and upload its results in an asset management module, Sage 300 ERP system which was supposed to have been implemented from last year.

We hope that that is in process and again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note with concern the internal controls, maintenance and issue of inventories and project monitoring system. I believe in internal controls of assets and project monitoring also involves the use of equipment, et cetera which is internal (WAF assets), but also those engaged from outside contractors. I raise the case of an investigation about the diggers. Let me just read out this report and I quote:

“The FICAC confirmed that an investigation into alleged WAF diggers scam of \$33 million is still underway. However, the Commission is not divulging any further information so as not to interfere with the investigation process. Last year in June, it was alleged that WAF spent more than \$33 million to hire a digger for 15 months. This was identified in a second KPMG Audit Report, the draft report reveals alleged abuse of funds dating back to 2016.”

We are looking at 2015, it has identified issues related to asset and inventory control and I believe that is related to these kinds of issues and \$33 million, that is a huge amount. The draft report was tabled to the board which was in place in August 2017. The report stated that WAF needs to seriously consider the option of procuring vehicles and heavy machinery. The planning process in connection with the purchase of heavy machinery at WAF is not effective.

In 2015, WAF acquired two brand new large steel track excavators which are based at Wailoku and Lautoka. We noted that the excavator was not fully utilised based on enquiry with the staff in the Western Division. This was due to the fact that buckets for the excavator were too large to be used in operations. The report also noted that the board had approved rates to be made for hire of plant equipment, however, hire rates were paid to the contractors without any board approval. It further revealed that a large steel track excavator was mainly used at the Natabua Wastewater Treatment Plant for six months at \$80 an hour. The same work could easily be done by medium steel track excavator at \$45 an hour. The WAF would have saved \$25,497.

In another instance, total charges paid to a contractor for works in Natabua was \$59,119. The overcharge was about 65 percent. So these are some instances which were identified in that KPMG Report which when I read this report we are looking at, it seemed as a consequence in terms of the monitoring of projects and the maintenance and effective use of inventories.

The last point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to raise is page 22 regarding lease arrangements between Water Authority of Fiji and landowners. I would like to raise my concern regarding an ongoing issue with Savura Creek landowners. Various letters have been written to the Honourable Minister for Economy and Attorney-General. The landowners even came here to see us and I would like to read out the statement by iTLTB on the issue and I quote:

“In response to the claim made by iTaukei landowners where the Suva Water Supply catchment area, Savura is located. The iTaukei Land Trust Board now confirms that a special water catchment lease was issued to the Government in 1967. The lease land which covered a total area of 1,008 acres is owned by landowning units including Mataqali Solia, Mataqali Valebure, Mataqali Daunivurevure and Mataqali Naisagavaki.”

What is currently being questioned by Mataqali Valebure is whether there was compensation paid to them for the standing trees since the beginning of the lease.

The CEO, Mr. Kuruvakadua said iTLTB together with the Ministry of Lands and the Ministry of Forestry are currently verifying whether there was any compensation payment done at that time. He said that although this lease was issued 52 years ago, the annual lease payment has been reviewed from \$2,643 to the current rate of \$120,000.

The issue of compensation for loss of forest as claimed by the landowners need to be clarified further with the Ministry of Lands. I am requesting the other side of the House, please, that particular lease provision regarding loss of standing forest beside the water catchment area is in that particular document to compensate the landowners as soon as practical. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I confirm the motion to support the motion at hand. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Ro Tuisawau, Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. I will concentrate on the findings of the actual report and just a couple of remarks that I have. I also want to thank the Committee for the Report. Obviously the Committee has reviewed and examined 17 audit reports on State-Owned Entities and Statutory Authorities for the year 2015.

A comment on the recommendations relating to four of the state-owned entities and just quickly, in terms of auditing, et cetera. Those were the issues brought up by Honourable Professor Prasad and Honourable Aseri Radrodro. The entities that are being audited by private chartered accountants, they are chartered accountants. You do not mess around with their businesses.

I do not think there is a difference if there is a report by a chartered accountant or the Office of the Auditor-General, they both are subject to the exact same scrutiny which people do not do us any favours. They do not do favours to government nor any private entity. That is their reputation; that fact stays. So, if Fiji Airways and other entities are actually using private chartered accountants to audit their accounts, it is properly done, Sir. There is no cloak and dagger stuff going on. I think they should forget about that idea.

With respect to the recommendations from the Committee on the Report, Sir, especially with the Water Authority of Fiji, obviously, the Report from the Committee was noted. Just for the purpose of explanation, Sir, WAF actually conducts an independent quarterly stock on all its stores and the storemen are actually held accountable for any unresolved variance and the procedures and processes that have been put in place for the inventory request and issues of stock, this deals with the exact things that have been raised by the Auditor-General. The supervisor or the ones who authorise to approve these things and stringent controls are now in place whereby all those purposes require management approval.

There was a second recommendation, Sir. That recommendation, WAF is engaged with Erasito Beca Consultants to assess the reinstatement value of critical assets for insurance purposes, because the recommendation had asked that WAF ensure its significant assets included as part of the property plant and equipment, et cetera. It is currently in the process of getting quotations from insurance brokers, like Marsh Pte. Limited for these particular sites. Due to the substantial values involved as per the valuation of brokers have approached, insurance based on first loss limit policy restricting cover to fire, earthquake and impact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to Energy Fiji Limited, formerly known as Fiji Electricity Authority, the recommendation from the Committee was that they carry out a physical verification of all its properties, plant and equipment and make reports on verifications performed at all locations available for audit review. Obviously that was noted and, this is a bit of substantial answer Sir, as per EFL's initial response in 2018, EFL's property, plant and equipment were worth about \$1.3 billion as at 31st December, 2015 and since then, EFL's property, plant and equipment as at 31st December, 2020 is now worth \$1.44 billion.

The exercise of physically verifying these assets simply could not be completed in one years' time. In view of this, EFL adopted the strategy to do staged approach for verifying its assets and they have undertaken this considerable task to two fixed assets officers to conduct the verifications. It commenced in 2016. Those physical verifications Sir, in 2017, they have done all the motor vehicles, the land and the buildings. Most of the land and where the buildings are have been traced back to the original titles and the land has been pegged against these titles in the asset register.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the verification of the power generation assets is anticipated to be completed by 2021. It should be noted that EFL's monitoring practices also include daily updates on the performance of each particular power station, Sir. The power generation assets include the thermal diesel assets, the windmills and the hydro plants, such as dams, tunnels, weirs, water conductors and turbines.

Sir, apart from the issues mentioned earlier, there have been further delays in this verification exercise over the years because of the numerous cyclones that we have actually suffered. The EFL had to devote seven months to restore power to the nation and this exercise also cost EFL about \$35 million. Cyclone restoration works were also in terms of the highest priority in order to reduce the impact on its customers as well as to avoid any further damage, Sir.

With respect to Fiji Airports Limited, formerly known as Airports Fiji Limited, the recommendation again was that each structure is fixed assets registered in a way that will enable the company to easily identify assets belonging to a specific section of the airport by location. In 2015, Sir, they acquired fixed assets module in accounting software and I am sure Honourable Radrodru will confirm this, it is known as Sage Accpac which captured all the assets in detail. In 2017 they have embarked also on a valuation exercise for its assets by Erasito Beca which was engaged to conduct an independent valuation on these assets and to ensure that the fixed asset register is in

compliance with statutory requirement. The register has been audited by the OAG in 2018, in which zero material misstatements were found, Sir.

With respect to Copra Millers of Fiji Limited, also, Sir, the recommendations are there. Again, this was a fixed asset register and it has been updated where different class of assets have been properly grouped and CFL now maintains a spreadsheet of all these. They had a second one with respect to carrying out assessment of property, plant and equipment. This has actually been undertaken in payment assessment of all its property and plant and equipment, fixed assets with negative or zero written-down value which are still in operation of the revalue and subject to its board's assessment.

There was a general recommendation, Sir, with respect to the Ministry of Public Enterprise through regular and active interactions. The State-Owned Entities (SOEs) should encourage them to prepare and submit quality draft Annual Financial Statements as per the Public Enterprises Act 1996. The then Ministry of Public Enterprises worked closely with entities with respect to submission of quality SOEs and draft Annual Financial Statements and the new Public Enterprises Act 2019 does not require SOEs to submit their draft Annual Financial Statements to the Department but actually provides State-Owned Entities five months in which to complete and submit their audited accounts.

In addition, the Department also has regular meetings and discussions with the boards pertaining to statutory requirements and State-Owned Entities compliance issues and matters that may be raised by the Office of the Auditor-General.

I also just want to take this opportunity to say "thank you" to the Committee for the work that they have had undertaken so far.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution to the debate. I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee of Public Accounts to speak in reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At the outset, the way the debate was going, I thought as a Member to actually stick to the Report that is before Parliament but I believe it makes no sense to the Opposition to tell them to stick to the Report.

Basically, what the Honourable Ro Tuisawau was saying was that the Water Authority of Fiji is not even part of this Report but you had actually made a ruling, he went on not discussing about what is in the Report itself, but totally something else.

Honourable Gavoka also mentioned a lot of scenarios where he was very concerned about the Committee, the membership, et cetera. I think he should be more worried about his own division within his Party rather than the bipartisan approach that the Committee actually takes.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- That is not good.

HON A.A. MAHARAJ.- Please, do not worry about the Committee. It is an insult actually not just to ask as the Committee but the Opposition Members who are sitting in the PAC, Sir, it is an insult. These are the bipartisan Report and I am proud to say in this Parliament ever since I became a Chairperson of this particular Committee, we have been handing all bipartisan Reports, they actually signed. It is not that we actually restrict our Members to ask questions, they have the full right to ask anything, to clarify anything they want to. Even the Members from the Opposition, I

invited them to actually come and sit as an audience to PAC when we are doing this scrutiny, so that they actually understand how the Public Accounts Committee works.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Very poor.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Committee Members who actually sit in other Committees doing an Annual Report Review is not the same as the Public Accounts Committee Reports. We actually stated that there were almost 28 to 29 Financial Statements in this particular Report. That means, in very simple terms, we were actually scrutinising 29 Annual Reports at one particular point in time. This is the extent of work that the Public Accounts Committee actually carries out.

Honourable Members from the Opposition who actually sit in this particular Committee, participate fully in this scrutiny process. It is very unpleasing to actually hear from some of the Members how they tried to manipulate things when the Reports actually come into Parliament.

The other thing, Sir, there were certain concerns raised specifically with FBC. I would like to put this on record. For example, again, in very simple English, Fiji Airways' majority shareholder is Fijian Government. When we travel through Fiji Airways, that does not mean that we actually give them grant, we pay for our seats. Likewise, when FBC does something for the Government, there is a fee.

All this while, it was through the Cabinet ruling that anything that goes to FBC could be regarded as a grant, it is not a grant, it is a fee that Government actually needs to pay for the services rendered by FBC. That was actually cleared in their financial report, then only they started showing the profit. It was not FBC's issue that it was all this while regarded as a grant. They do not provide service to us. The way they calculate is that they sell air time, that is how they make money.

When Government puts an advertisement or any kind of thing through FBC, they charge us. The total value of work they carry out for the Fijian Government per year is almost close to \$25 million but what Government actually pays FBC is close to around \$9 million to \$11 million only. That is their social responsibility that they cover from their own pocket yet at the end of the day, they are giving profit now.

This is why, Sir, I recommended and appreciated the work of the CEO and the board members who are turning this Government commercial company, from a loss-making entity to a profit-making entity. Everyone here knows that it is a service fee, not a grant that is given to FBC. But yet every time a particular report is presented in which FBC is mentioned that it is a grant, FBC is still making a loss, no it is not a grant, it is a service fee that we pay to FBC to channel or to take programmes on air that is requested by the Government of the day. It is not a grant but a fee, I hope that clarifies that.

The other thing with regards to WAF, Sir, we would like to appreciate the work done by the CEO. They are bringing in a lot of reforms, they have taken our recommendation on board in a very positive manner. They are trying to rectify the reports that are before us, which we are scrutinising and seeing the changes that the new CEO, Mr. Barry Omundson, has brought about with regards to WAF.

With those words, Sir, I would like to thank you for the time given to me. *Vinaka*.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Members, we will move on.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Installation of New Boiler - CWM Hospital (Question No. 48/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament when a new boiler will be installed at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Honourable Member for that question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the CWM Hospital used to have two boilers: one located at the East Wing and the second at the West Wing of the Hospital. The one at the East Wing feeds the autoclave room, the operating theatres and the wards while the one in the West Wing provides steam and hot water to the laundry, kitchen and the West wards. In the boiler room, there are two boilers.

In 2019, the Government Tender Board approved the Ministry's request to purchase two boilers: one for the East and one for the West Wing. These machines were to replace the two older ones and the total cost was nearly F\$800,000 and had come to their recommended life time and were due for replacement.

However, the preparation towards the project implementation was interrupted by the fire incident in the West Wing boiler that not only destroyed the boiler machines but rather the entire CWM Hospital West Wing boiler room unusable after the technical assessment by the Ministry of Infrastructure and the subsequent identification of traces of asbestos in the boiler room infrastructure in May of 2019.

Thankfully, this was safely and hygienically removed by experts but this had significantly stalled the boiler replacement process. The Ministry continued with the project, the purchasing of the new boiler with the contract signed in early 2020, however, there is a global procuring landscape that has been affected, the supplier from New Zealand was unable to source the boiler from the manufacturer at the same price.

The Ministry had deferred this project for further discussion with the Fiji Procurement Office and advice had been received that the tender needed to be recalled and changes in price and scope of works, and this is an ongoing process that is happening with the EPO. Instead of two boilers, we have now made a presentation to have one boiler repaired. The tender documents for the new purchase are currently undergoing through their own processes with the Ministry and the Ministry of Economy. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Is that the supplementary question you wish to ask?

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Yes, it is, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister for his reply. Would it be correct, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Hospital lacks the boiler, the health and well-being and safety of patients and staff are at risk? I would like to ask the Honourable Minister, how has the absence of the boiler contributed to the rise of infections of surgical cases which had been returning to the CWM Hospital and also how has this contributed to the lack of linen in the wards at the CWM Hospital?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am yet to see any evidence that the Honourable Member has alluded to. What evidence does she have that there has been a rise of infection? I have just raised the point that there is a boiler that continues to exist in the East Wing. That boiler works and at the moment that is currently being used to be able to look after the theatre services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the services in the West Wing of the Hospital, the boiler that is not working any more, obviously has been taken out because of the fire. The services are predominantly laundry and has been through a competitive tender arrangement. An outside contractor is actually providing the laundry services to the Hospital and the hot water and the steam needs of the Hospital kitchen are now back, met by gas and electricity, in essence certainly Fiji Gas came to the fore and talked to us about how we can be able to do this in utilising gas and also utilising electricity. Our boiler exists on the East Wing of the Hospital. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on to the second Oral Question for today and I give the floor to the Honourable O'Connor to ask his question.

Government Support – Tourism Industry Recovery Efforts
(Question No. 49/2021)

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

Given that the prolonged border closure and pandemic continue to have a dire impact on the Fijian tourism industry, can the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport update Parliament on how the Ministry is supporting recovery efforts for the industry?

HON. F.S. KOYA (Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir, I apologise in advance that my answer is a little bit lengthy but I think it is best heard. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Member for the question.

Last Friday on 19th March, actually marked one year since our first case of COVID-19 and the weeks and months that have followed simply meant 40 percent of our GDP is lost. But for all the hardship, the year has actually ushered in and has also given us a unique opportunity to reflect on the future of the industry, and the Fijian Government has always come together to prepare.

On Friday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the Fijian Excellence and Tourism Awards, the Honourable Prime Minister acknowledged the industry's stalwarts for their contribution to the Fijian economy and how we have laid the groundwork when the first case finally came to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are in a position today because we prepared ourselves even before the first case. We knew it was only a matter of time and although the suffering we have seen has no dollar value and can never truly be measured in mere facts and figures, we can actually proudly say that we did a great job.

With respect to the tourism response team, Sir, our preparation is largely attributed to how we have come together as a nation to ramp up coordination, not only as different arms of Government but it has actually been hand in hand with the various industries and the communities and as Fijians. Through the TRT, we have addressed a number of unique issues with respect to the tourism industry.

The Ministry of Employment undertook an awareness on how employers should treat leave without pay and better work with employees. We have also accommodated exemption for marine vessel surveys which will now be issued for 12 months and through the TRT, the industry and Tourism Fiji were already working with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to create awareness and register all the frontline workers and everybody else for when the next batches of vaccines are made available, Sir.

In terms of budget relief, our historic 2020-2021 National Budget has undoubtedly been the driving force for most of our recovery effort, Sir, and Government has directly paid a \$118 million in unemployment benefit which has largely gone to the tourism sector. The new tax incentives also in the Budget have kept the confidence of domestic investors and tourists arrival and we are actually realising the benefits. We had our “Love Our Locals Campaign” and since its inception last year, has been a key part of the tourism sector and what started with only hotels putting out specials for our locals has today encouraged tour and activity providers and transfers as well as restaurateurs to join the campaign and as of two weeks ago, we now have about 200 businesses from every region, actually signed up for it.

The local tourism market will be part of Tourism Fiji’s marketing strategies also even after the borders open, Sir, and based on the growing success of our “Love Our Locals”, we are now embarking on the Pacific as a key source market and the preliminary focus will be to capitalise on existing leisure segment with the outlook of developing meetings, conventions and events. We have also had the local events fund, Sir, and the adaptation of the current local events fund is another initiative we are working on with the business community. Our preparation also includes harnessing our strengths and creating the actual sectoral linkages, Sir, and we are looking at supporting our MSMEs and including the requirement of having locally grown produce in the criteria for the funding and I think this was also mentioned earlier by the Honourable Minister for Agriculture about how we collaborate and get all of these things done.

Since the launch of the local event fund, Sir, we have supported events including the Fiji Festival in Suva, the Namosi Marathon, Beach Beats and Eats, Leleuvia Ocean Swim, A Sustainable Fashion with a Purpose and the Fiji Super 7s Series. With the other part of it also as the careFIJI commitment, Sir, with Fiji’s care and CFC programme we actually received global recognition by the World Travel and Tourism Council. With this recognition, travellers can recognise destinations and businesses that are adopting health and hygiene protocols that are aligned with WTTC’s Global Safe Travels Protocols.

Sir, this may seem just like word but it is actually a very important component in terms of people making decisions about when travel does open and they actually get to Fiji. So, to date, we have registered nearly 200 wellness ambassadors across the industry with about 400 businesses signed up and as I am updating this particular House, Sir, with the support, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, we are out actually conducting second round of the CFC roadshow. Sir, with the CRMT, also it has now been over 330 days since our last case outside of the border quarantine

and much of the success is owed to the Fijian COVID Safe Economic Recovery Framework under which we have implemented safe entry both the leisure and non-leisure travel and to date, Sir, we have welcomed about 103 yachts, 438 passenger and crew under the Blue Lanes and these yachts actually arrived via Port Denarau Marina. To spread the associated economic activities, we are now working with relevant stakeholders also to see if we can designate Savusavu as an additional port of entry and as we all know Savusavu is a wonderful destination for yachters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had mentioned in August in the House the last time, we continue to work with our industry partners to find new ways to encourage safe travel to Fiji, for instance, there is a programme called “work from home” or what we termed as “work in paradise”. We call it, “work in paradise” where visitors who can stay longer and spend more money in the local economy.

Regionally also, we have introductory meetings with New Caledonia and Tuvalu health officials to try and explore some quarantine, free travel and of course, there are number of variables to consider on this and at the moment, discussions with New Caledonia have actually being put on hold, Sir, in light of the community outbreak.

With Tuvalu, we are progressing to share health protocols and COVID-19 safe protocols to ensure this is done acceptably and therefore as a Pacific Pathway concern, progresses are actually being made, Sir.

A couple of weeks ago, Sir, I spoke about Fiji Airways and its partnership with the Tourism Industry. I am putting together a 150,000 fully inclusive holiday packages in anticipation of borders reopening. This was the result of \$60 million travel stiffen and commitment by the Fijian Government in the last Budget and a quick meeting with Fiji Airways about a week ago, Sir. We will be trying to get that done as quickly as possible, and as soon as the border is open that is something that is actually important to us.

Of course, no amount of preparation will ever get the industry back on its feet if we do not have visitor numbers resuming to the pre-COVID-19 levels and whilst support will continue we are actually still pushing very hard, Sir, despite all the negative publicity with our key markets; Australia and New Zealand, to open their doors to Fiji.

We are hopeful, Sir, with the vaccines, we are in a better position to actually make this happen. Tourism is certainly alive and well, Sir, and the industry will in most definitely a major part of our vital recovery plans and that has sustained our economic growth for almost a decade. We will succeed, Sir, thank you very much.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Nawaikula, your supplementary question.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Considering the vaccination, considering the local situation in our market countries, especially New Zealand and Australia, when does the Minister expect things to return to normal?

HON. SPEAKER.- I will give you the floor, Honourable Minister.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, if I have the answer, I would charge him for it, Sir. It is the \$100 million question, so there are so many parts to this equation and I am sure everyone in this House understands. What everyone must remember, is first and foremost for us, as priority is the health well-being and safety of our citizens and that is it. We start there, Sir, at the moment with the vaccines that are being made available, once we are all vaccinated and I urge you all to get registered, so that

we can all get vaccinated. Once we are all vaccinated, we are in an even better position than we are now to make our submission that we can with respect to try and get Aussies, Kiwis, et cetera, and it is not just the Aussies and Kiwis, there are also people in the US who may be able to travel once they get vaccinated.

It is all a process but in terms of the time, Honourable Nawaikula, it is a million dollar question, Sir. If I had the answer, I would tell you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Viliame Gavoka, you have the floor.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Qantas has announced that they will only fly people who have been immunised. Has Fiji Airways made a similar statements?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- If he is asking that question, then obviously, we have not, Sir, but again, I know the article that the Honourable Member is referring to, they did an article in today's paper and he was saying that Qantas is saying that.

But what we are doing now will eventually lead to a vaccination passport that people will have to carry and all of that is part of it. The mechanics of how we do it, you need to understand, it is not just about giving vaccination and you jump on the plane, it has to be worked out as to how it is done. Because of vaccination has its limitation also, registration is one of the other thing.

The Honourable Minister for Health has laid out how this vaccine actually works, et cetera and how we deal with other countries so, for Fiji Airways to just turn around right now and say, we are not going to fly or unless we are vaccinated would be a bit premature, Sir. We have to ensure that all the other boxes have been ticked, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on.

The third Oral Question for today is for Honourable Saukuru to ask his question.

Effectiveness of Tsunami Warnings
(Question No. 50/2021)

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

Can the Honorable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on the effectiveness of our tsunami warning system?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU (Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I wish to thank the Honorable Member for raising this question.

The simple answer is, it is effective, can be improved and government is committed to making those improvements. I will explain a bit, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this work is shared between the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre and the Mineral Resources Department, where they have the Seismology Observatory Team and, of course, the Ministry of Rural Development and Disaster Management. Basically, tsunamis will be triggered by earthquakes in terms of the detection and monitoring of earthquakes.

We have about eight seismic stations in Fiji, in Dawasamu; Nasinu Village; Nabukelevu i Ra; Yasawa i Rara; Mua in Taveuni; Tubou in Lakeba and Dogotuki in Vanua Levu. Those are the seismic stations, Sir, and we have three tide gauges, one in Lautoka Wharf, one in Suva Wharf and one in Vatia in the Ba and Tavua area.

The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre helps us as well, particularly with their voice and they are relaying information and the voice work through satellites and they give us advance information as well, usually within the range of 15 minutes but it has come down now to lesser than 15 minutes. Apart from the detection, communicating the information perhaps, is where some of our challenges lie but as I have said, it can be improved and Government is committed to make the improvements, particularly to our people in the rural islands where there is no Vodafone or mobile phone coverage.

What Government did through a Japanese funded aid few years back, was to improve on the AM stations and that has helped us in communicating, particularly with the extreme rural areas. Mobile applications and the use of mobile phones, we are still in discussions with the service providers, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Of course, there is a modem that we are currently exploring, it is with Singapore that we are hopeful that we can procure and have it with the service providers apart from the blast text we use, particularly, during disasters and COVID-19, but we are also looking at a system where through the modem, every mobile user will be alerted through this modem that will be with the service providers and with the Ministry of Rural Development through the NDMO office as well.

We have the early warning systems, we have our disaster risk reduction in the Suva Peninsular, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we started a few years back with an initial three sirens and then added a few more. Now we have about 13 sirens within the greater Suva area, starting from Nadawa to Lami. We have this concentration because that is the concentration of our economic activities as well and heavily populated too.

We are following the Honorable Prime Minister's meeting with his Japanese counterpart. Way back in 2017, we have also been able to secure some funding and that funding has been signed and confirmed that we will start this project in November this year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where we will install an additional 26 sirens for Viti Levu.

Those 26 sirens, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the locations have been identified. It will start from roughly the Kiuva area right up to Lautoka. If you are interested in the details I have the locations that have already been identified given the technical aspects of the machine that we are getting.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the training of our people. Now, the village communities the Ministry has conducted over 300 trainings in almost all the four divisions - training our people to manage their own disaster responses should they receive alert.

So, that basically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the work that we have done as I have stated. It is effective for now but can be improved and, of course, Government is committed in making those improvements. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister. Honourable Saukuru?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his response to that question.

My supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, our people have been asking why was a warning not issued but later in the day on the 5th March this year, a retraction was issued?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr .Speaker, Sir. I have already stated in this Parliament there is a difference between alert and warning, so people are alerted. Warning is only given if the signs and all the predictions are indicating that it is going to happen in terms of the height of the waves and when it is coming that is when the warning will be given. But everyone is alerted initially, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, we will move on.

Plans to Minimise Flooding – Ba Town
(Question No. 51/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the Ministry's plans to minimise flooding in and around Ba Town?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Honourable Member for asking the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Ba Town has been severely affected by recent floods. The contributing factor of course is the excessive rain that is happening in the catchment and downstream as well. But one of the ways to quickly solve that problem to some extent, is to clear off the Ba River so that the excessive water that comes downstream can be discharged in the shortest period of time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2015 was the last time when the Ba River was addressed. Following that we thought that you know Ba River could be cleared by a company which is undertaking iron mining. Unfortunately that company has their own interest. We have decided that we will dredge the Ba River for five kilometres downstream from the Ba Bridge and 14 kilometres upstream from the Ba Bridge a total of 19 kilometres. We have advertised, calling for expression of interest from the private sector to partner with us to undertake dredging of the Ba River.

The expression of interest closed last Friday. We wish to select not one but a number of companies and engage them in cleaning up the Ba River and pay the royalty and take the material and sell it so that they can make their money.

Of course there are certain processes that need to be followed which we our part we are undertaking, for example, we are now undertaking scoping of the entire 19 kilometres. We will be getting the fishing rights waiver, we will be going through the process at the Ministry of Lands to fulfil all the obligations there and with their concurrence, we will be engaging a number of operators to dredge the Ba River.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we had to do that, it will cost us no less than about \$3 million a total of 1.5cubic metres of silt material that needs to be dredged from Ba River. The last time we did 1.4 million cubic metres of silt material was excavated four times starting from 2012 to 2015. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if everything goes as per plan, we intend to engage a number of contractors maybe in a few months' time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the river mouth has an exclusive licence to the mining companies and are in discussion with them through the Ministry of Lands to do the rightful thing, to move the machine, to open up the river mouth. If they do not do that then, we will have to relook at their contract because they cannot hold the Ba community at ransom. Thank you.

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Does the Ministry have enough money to pay for all that?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is precisely the problem with those people from the other side. I have just said that we are engaging a number of contracts for private sector where in partnership they will undertake the dredging and then they will pay the royalty, take the silt material, sell it and make money. Not a single cent they will have to spend.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on. The fifth Oral Question for today, I call on the Honourable Ratu Matanitobua to ask his question. You have the floor.

Available Land for Agricultural Development
(Question No. 52/2021)

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the initiatives to make land available for agricultural development?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are working very hard in terms of assisting farmers so that they can have land for cultivation and there are a number of ways we are doing that. One is that our Ministry is working very closely with iTLTB. They are having regular meetings with the Deputy General Manager as to how we could facilitate. We do get direct requests from new investors for land in various parts of the country where they prefer to undertake commercial farming. That is one way we are facilitating availability and access to land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, secondly, Government through the budget has allocated \$6.9 million under the Committee on the Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) Programme, to assist in subsidising rental rates for farmers so that the landowners are able to get the true rent while the farmers or new farmers are not affected or not incentivized to rent that particular piece of land and undertake farming.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a pretty successful programme which started a number of years ago and this year's budget has got \$6.9 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are number of allocations which is there to incentivize farmers to expand commercial agriculture as well as new farmers to come in and take advantage of those assistance to undertake commercial farming.

For example Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sustainable Land Management Programme has \$0.3 million dollars; Agriculture Extension Services to provide technical advice has about \$0.6 million; Export Promotion Programme that helps both the exporters as well as the farmers link to the exporters - \$0.25 million; Food Security Programme to ring-fence the rural interior, maritime, households to secure their households with respect to food and nutrition has an allocation of \$0.25 million.

We have an allocation for coconut farming, ginger farming \$0.6 million, flat land development so that we undertake clearing and development of land so that farmers can use that particular land for cultivation. That particular scheme is there for the Demand Driven Agriculture (DDA) programme. The farmers are given the assistance or land clearing at zero cost to them.

Access road, Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$0.8 million is allocated to construct access roads so that farmers are able to access the land or get their produce and have an access to the market. Mr. Speaker, Sir, without having these farm roads, it is very difficult to have that value chain operate efficiently.

We have a livestock extension programme under which we have beef, goats, sheep and cattle. So, all in all we have got allocation for different crop and livestock to allow and incentivise and assist farmers to get into agriculture and expand so that we can push commercial agriculture.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on to the sixth Oral Question for today. I now call on the Honourable Sharma to ask his question.

Japanese Aid – Fight Against Crime
(Question No. 53/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on how the \$5.5 million aid from Japan will contribute to the fight against crime, particularly in maritime zones?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU (Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Again we are thankful to the Japanese Government for this package of \$5.5 million and the initial discussion started back in 2017 as well under the Japan's Grant Aid for the economic and social development programme, under Japan's International Corporation Assistance (JICA).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this assistance will come in two batches, if I would say. I have already received the first part of it and the remaining component probably will be arriving into the country around June and July period. What we have received so far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, includes 11 rigid inflated boats, we have 22 rescue boats, underwater camera unit, underwater communication system and diving and training equipment. This will definitely assist the Police Force in so many ways, particularly, in dealing with crimes here in Fiji, in investigations of various crimes, particularly in maritime and rural zones, drug raids, including attendance to some of the court cases and conducting community outreach programmes to raise awareness on preventative measures of curbing crime.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the equipment will also assist us in terms of our role in assisting other Ministries, for example, Ministry of Fisheries on illegal fishing in the rural areas which is a concern, particularly, to the resource owners. This will assist us in that regard too. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the equipment will also assist our first line responders when it comes to disasters, particularly, with the rescue boats that I have mentioned apart from the 11 rigid inflated boats.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have mentioned about underwater communication systems, cameras, et cetera. These equipment will strengthen our police maritime and marine capabilities during drug operations through intercepting unlicensed boats and yachts in Fiji's waters, monitoring transponders on ocean floor pursuing suspects on water, filming illegal activities above and under water and for routine maritime patrols. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister. We will move on to the next question and I give the floor to the Honourable Kepa to ask her question. You have the floor, Madam.

Status of Survey - Save the Children Fiji
(Question No. 54/2021)

HON. RO T.V. KEPA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the status of the survey conducted by Save the Children Fiji and the Ministry on school dropouts that was announced in October 2020?

HON. R.S. AKBAR (Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet colleagues and Members of Parliament, I rise to answer the question asked by Honourable Kepa in Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to correct the question. The survey conducted was by the Ministry and our Fiji Programme Support Facility funded by DFAT. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can start by saying that we at the Ministry are very focused on implementing the Fiji Government's "No Child Left Behind Commitment" and we have as a Government made substantial investments in ensuring education is made accessible and affordable to all the children of Fiji.

The FijiFirst Government has implemented a number of initiatives that directly benefit the education sector and the children of Fiji. One such initiative is the Tuition Fee Free Grant which we also call FEG. That is aimed at ensuring that parents do not have to bear the full burden of sending their children to schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Free Education Grant was introduced in 2014, it not only provided relief to the parents but also encouraged children who had dropped out of schools to re-enrol. The initiative initially recorded 215 students who had re-enrolled and I feel that was a great achievement. In 2013, we had a total of 203,157 students enrolled in our schools, 135,526 primary and 67,631 in secondary. Today, that figure stands at 221,637 students in all our primary and secondary school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Fijian Government continues to make significant investment in ensuring that we do not leave any child behind, there are several factors that often force children out of schools. The last survey was conducted in 2018 on the causes of student dropouts in primary schools in Fiji and it revealed that more children leave school due to abuse, disability, other economic factors such as poverty, health problems and social factors. The Ministry has since then reviewed a number of its policies on child protection, behaviour management and counselling policy to ensure our children are given the appropriate forms of assistance and support so that they remain engaged and committed towards their academic ambitions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the pandemic last year, the Ministry engaged the services of the Fiji Programme Support Facility to conduct an evidence-based survey on the out of school children, school age children who have never enrolled in a primary school or who have dropped out and are no longer attending school and this survey will help us initiate and form policies to bring these children back to school.

The report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is here with me. It is in the final draft stage. This will be formally handed to the Ministry by DFAT in a couple of weeks and during my tea break, Honourable Kepa has shown a keen interest in receiving a copy of this. Honourable Kepa, I will definitely make it available to you and all the other Members who are interested to know and help us towards getting these children back in school. Like I said, there are various factors.

The report has been compiled in consultation with our relevant stakeholders and this includes; the Save the Children Fund, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, Fiji Bureau of Statistics, the Fiji Disabled Federation and our teacher unions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while it may not be in our capacity to address all factors that force children out of schools, we have been in a position to extend support to those dropouts due to poverty reason. The Ministry has provided support to families who are not able to send children to schools and again this is done in partnership with our various stakeholders who keep our children at heart.

Through collaboration with our donor partners including DFAT, UNICEF, private sector organisations in Fiji, NGOs and religious organisations. This year, we have assisted more than 10,000 affected students across the country through the provision of school bags and stationery. We have also assisted 93 students in the Northern Division with shoes and uniform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are currently working with the Australian Government (DFAT Sector) to provide food assistance to 19 schools in the Western Division and the 33 schools in the Northern Division, out of which 23 are boarding schools.

Students in these identified schools are being assisted with lunches as well. Students in the boarding schools are being provided with breakfast, lunch and dinner. This programme was initiated after we identified schools and communities that had their farms destroyed after *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. This programme will go on for 12 weeks and we will allow communities to normalise their farming resources. We have also engaged members of the community such as our mother's club and village groups in assisting, preparing and serving meals to our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through programmes like this, we will be assisting 6,280 students, 1,728 in the Western Division and 4,552 in the Northern Division. We are also working with our Fiji Police Force to identify children wandering off the streets of towns and cities and put them back in schools. I am proud to say that I have received funding and support from the Prime Minister's Office to look at street kids initiative and as of today, we have successfully put two students back in school who will be monitored to ensure that they do not fall out again.

We have a number of students we have profiled in the Central Division with our Police Force and who we will work with the parents to put them back in school. I had a meeting with the parents last week and the reasons given by the parents were varying factors. Of course, we sympathise with the parents and one of the things that came out quite clear was, some students really do not want to go to school. These students will be put through counselling, but I am proud to say that I have put two students in school today and we have spoken to the Head of School to ensure that he continues to advise us of their attendance. Like I said, we are not giving up on any child, but we need co-operation from the parents and a whole of society approach to ensure that we assist our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other than that, as a Government, we continue to invest in a conducive learning environment. I will go back to what my colleague, the Honourable Minister for Women has said and actually plead to the Members of Parliament, we are right across, if you have issues with that, please talk to us and we will provide.

Honourable Salote Radrodro, this is in response to your social media post, you could just ask me, how long will it take for me to rebuild a school. Five schools currently are awaiting approval from the Ministry of Economy. I think we have just being given the green light, so construction will start next week. These are the students who are currently in the tents. We will be providing them with the semi-permanent structured buildings while we work to provide new buildings.

We have identified 15 schools that will be rebuilt, we have secured funding for that, but obviously there is a process that needs to go through. The contractors have given me six to ten weeks to complete these buildings. They are at Lekutu Secondary, Maramarua District School, Dreketi Primary School, Bua District School and Dama District School. These schools within the next six to

ten weeks, I can assure the House that we will move the children out of the learning shelters and back into their classrooms. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Minister. Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa?

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her response where she mentions DFAT and the policy leaving no children behind and her evidence-based studies. Just in case, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Minister has some kind of comparative study which is being conducted by the Ministry to look at the trend of school dropouts because you did mention school dropouts. If you have any comparative study done over say the past five years, if you have it available, if you could give me a copy? Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I am sure that will be the case.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, I have two documents in front of me, one is the report of the initial study done in 2018 and this report that I have in the final stage. Obviously these two documents do show trends. Like I said, I will be sharing it with those interested from both sides of the House, so we can come up with solutions.

HON. SPEAKER.- We move on to the eighth Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable Veena Bhatnagar to ask her question.

Kidney Dialysis Facility in Nadera
(Question No. 55/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the Kidney Dialysis Facility in Nadera?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I thank the Honourable Member for that question.

Mr. Speaker, last week on Thursday, the Honourable Prime Minister commissioned and officially opened the Fiji National Kidney Centre in Nadera.

Mr. Speaker, at the last Parliamentary Sitting, there were discussions about what was happening in the Nadera Dialysis Centre. Certainly work was happening, as you may be aware that I have said in the initial Parliamentary sitting that we have been able to have a Senior Biomedical Technician accredited with Fresenius, the German provider of the machine that was actually installing in it.

We have 10 machines that are in the Centre with three reverse osmosis machines. These are machines by which water is brought through from the piping system into these reversed osmosis machine. They are cleaned by ultra violet light and also by many other filters to ensure that they are sterile and ready to be taken across to the machines and therefore being able to take away the toxins from the patients.

Mr. Speaker, what is more important is the fact that there is growth in our nephrologist services. This has happened because of the fact that we have two consultant positions in nephrology in the Ministry of Health. When the former consultant left, it was advertised and through a competitive recruitment process through OMRS, an Australian applied and came across and he is our

Head of Nephrology now within the Ministry of Health and also in Fiji. So we have the presence here both in Suva and also in Lautoka, we have the capacity to actually look after 40 Fijians in Suva at the moment. There is also a capacity to increase the dialysis to 180 sessions a week.

Mr. Speaker, the fact that they are offering this nephrology service and actually providing advise around it is the opportunity to also rescue Fijians from not having dialysis so that they can be able to have treatment to prevent them from having dialysis and that is also one of the important things that the Fiji National Kidney Centre would be able to provide. We are also now looking at being able to look at being able to look at other means to be able to provide this service outside of Suva for chronic dialysis. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you all for your co-operation and contributions to today's proceedings. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.23 p.m.