

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 8TH FEBRUARY, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 8TH FEBRUARY, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.47 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. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications
Hon. Lt. Col. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu, Minister for Defence, National Security and 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
Hon. Cdr. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau, Minister for Fisheries
Hon. Osea Naiqamu, 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. 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 Dreca Bulitavu
Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka
Hon. Anare Jale
Hon. Ro Teimumu Vuikaba Kepa
Hon. Ratu Naiqama Tawake Lalabalavu
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. P. Tikoduadua
Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
Hon. Peceli W. Vosanibola
Hon. Tanya Waqanika

Absent

Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj, Assistant Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports
Hon. Inosi Kuridrani

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 11th December, 2020, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- 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 of 2021 and I look forward to working with you all, again, throughout the year.

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.

Non-Smoking Signs

For the information of all Honourable Members, I have issued instructions for the 'Non-Smoking Signs' to be put up across the Parliament precincts, including inside the offices. The secretariat will continue with these works in the course of the week. The designated 'Smoking Area Sign' will also be put up. I expect that everyone will take heed and adhere to these.

Urgent Oral Question

Honourable Members, additionally, I am to inform the Honourable Members that I received notification of an Urgent Oral Question from Honourable Professor Biman Prasad this morning. I have had a look at the question and rule that the Question is not of an urgent character or relates to a matter of public importance, therefore, it does not qualify as an Urgent Question under Standing Order 43(1).

Adjournment Motion

Honourable Members, I also received an Adjournment Motion from the Leader of the Opposition under Standing Order 36. I have considered the nature of the Adjournment Motion, and rule that the matters raised in the Adjournment Motion are not something that requires the immediate attention of Parliament or the Government. Therefore, the Adjournment Motion is disallowed under Standing Order 36(2).

Honourable Members, I wish to remind all Members that Parliament must always respect the doctrine of separation of powers.

Thank you, Honourable Members

(Members of the Opposition walked out of the Chamber)

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs to table his Reports.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 38, I present the following reports to Parliament:

- (1) Sugar Research Institute of Fiji 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 172/2019*);
- (2) Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 49/2020*); and
- (3) Sugar Cane Growers Council 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 51/2020*).

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

(Reports handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Under Standing Order 38(2), I refer the following Reports to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs:

- (1) Sugar Research Institute of Fiji 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 172/2019*);
- (2) Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 49/2020*); and
- (3) Sugar Cane Growers Council 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 51/2020*).

I now call upon the Attorney-General and Honourable Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications to table his report. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in accordance with Standing Order 38, I present the Office of the Auditor-General 2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 264/2020*) to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Under Standing Order 38(2), I refer the Office of the Auditor-General 2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 264/2020*) to the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Thank you, Honourable Members. We will now proceed to the next item on the agenda. I now call on the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, the Honourable Joseph Nand, to table his Report.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report on the 2017 Audit Report on Social Services Sector – Standing Committee on Public Accounts

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Committee Review Report on the 2017 Audit Report on Social Services Sector.

The Report covers the audit results of the five Government Ministries and Departments under the Social Services Sector and these include; the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts/Higher Education Institutions, Ministry of Health and Medical Services, Department of Housing, Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

It is important to note that Ministries and Departments that were scrutinised by the Committee were not invited for interview because of the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place at that time but were requested instead to provide a written response on audit issues that were raised in the audit report.

The audit highlighted that four out of the five Ministries in the Social Services Sector were issued with an unqualified audit opinion and one was issued with a qualified audit opinion.

Out of these, four Ministries were provided with an unqualified audit opinion with attention drawn in some instances. The qualified audit report emanated from issues ranging from unsubstantiated and unreconciled general ledger account variances, accounting irregularities in account balances, non-disclosure of account balances, board of surveys either not carried out or carried out but the losses were not approved or not recorded as losses to government and stock take were not carried out.

Furthermore, the Committee's review of the Audit Report highlighted that capacity was an inherent issue with accounting officers lacking the basic fundamentals required for reconciling and maintaining accounts, lack of basic financials report trainings, lack of monitoring and supervision by Manager Finance and senior management.

This report contains few recommendations and observations made by the Committee. These recommendations have been made in good faith, and we urge the relevant party to which the recommendation is made, to consider and respond accordingly. Some of the pertinent recommendations made are as follows:

- Ministry of Economy should increase staffing and resources in their Internal Audit Division in order to be able to conduct (quarterly and bi-annual) internal audit inspections to all Ministries and Departments.
- Ministry of Economy should consider regular and timely training for all Ministries Accounts' Officers on FMIS and ensure that the system is compatible with actual operations of the Ministries and Departments;
- Ministries and Departments should ensure that daily reconciliations are conducted and also strengthen their internal controls in terms of circulation of duties, and conducting supervisory checks.
- Ministries and Departments should ensure that procurement of technical equipment, such as generators, pharmaceuticals, vessels, mechanical equipment, non-sugar access roads for example, are carried out by competent personnel, particularly where procurements are made from abroad.
- Finally, Ministries and Departments should promptly take action on valid recommendations made by the Office of the Auditor-General and the Committee.

At this juncture, I wish like to thank my fellow Committee Members, namely; Honourable Alvick Maharaj, the Chairperson; former MP, Vijendra Prakash; Honourable Aseri Radrodro and Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa; for their efforts and contribution in the scrutiny process of the Audit Report and the final compilation of the Report. I also extend my gratitude to the Honourable Mikaele Leawere, who stood in as an Alternate Member.

With those few words, I commend this report to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services; and
- (3) Honourable 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 more 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 on the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy Civil Service and Communications. You have the floor, Sir.

COVID-19 Vaccines

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Minister for Health will be speaking later today, as stated by you, Sir, on Fiji's stellar record of COVID-19 containment. I will be speaking now on Fiji's economic recovery through the procurement of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amid the global pandemic, Fiji is one of the safest places on earth and we thank God everyday that we have our health and I am sure we all do that. But all it takes is one drive down the Coral Coast, through Denarau, or up the Hibiscus Highway to see the obvious. We are not necessarily alright. Life is far from normal, for far too many of our friends and family members whose jobs and businesses, and industries they count on are stuck in what feels like a bottomless rut due to this global pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, globally, this is the most brutal poverty-inducing crisis in living memory and with global cases surpassing 106 million worldwide, it is clear there is only one way the world will ever return to normal. The same way we defeated polio, measles, tetanus and other former plagues, the Coronavirus will only be stopped by vaccines.

The fact that safe and effective vaccines are available to us at all is nothing short of a medical miracle. These remarkable advances have given humanity a chance to defend ourselves from this pandemic, in a manner that does not decimate our economies because immunisation, once achieved, protects a nation better than any border possibly can, even one as well-managed as Fiji.

As of this weekend, over 128 million doses of various COVID-19 vaccines have been administered in 73 countries around the world. Compare that to the grand total of zero in Fiji and other sovereign Pacific island nations. The story is much the same across small island States and the Global South. So far, this is shaping up to be a rich country's race. At present, countries with just 16 percent of the world's population have bought up 60 percent of the world's vaccine supply and that means, the world's recovery risks being relegated to that concentrated group of countries.

Medically, that does not make sense. We know no nation is safe unless all nations are safe. Morally, it is indefensible. As it means, the gap between the developed and developing countries, as

well as large and small nations will grow wider than ever. Fiji must secure our place in the world's economic comeback by securing vaccines as soon as we can, not months after the rest of the world but alongside. Otherwise, our people will be made more vulnerable than they have ever been exposed to infection, economically-disadvantaged and left behind, as the rest of the world races ahead.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just imagine the alternative. Say we sit timidly by through the coming months, fail at securing and procuring vaccines in a timely manner and keep Fiji on the margins of the global economic resurgence. Other future-focussed tourism destinations which immunise their populations will reopen their borders and welcome back visitors. Meanwhile, our hotel rooms will sit empty.

Those other nations will recreate jobs while Fijians remain unemployed. Foreign airline companies will get their planes back in the air, while our national carrier risks not flying scheduled flights at all. That is not ground that can be simply made up down the road. Everyday, we lose out on that recovery, will place exponentially rising costs on our economy, costs that are too high to be measured and too astronomical to ever accept.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the success of our recovery hinges on our timing. That is why every Government is laser-focussed on procuring vaccines now. Even New Zealand, one of the few nations to match Fiji's success against the virus, is focussed on getting "jabs in arms" as they say, as quickly as possible. Safe as they may be today, the Kiwis know they cannot afford to drop the ball on immunisation, neither can Fiji. Yes, there is a cost to procurement. But it pales in comparison to what we will lose if we fall behind and our major source markets send their tourists to more forward-thinking countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global effort at equitable vaccination distribution is led through a facility known as COVAX. Technically, it is a vaccine distribution arm of the COVID-19 Tools Accelerator, which also covers tests and treatments. COVAX is jointly led by GAVI - the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the World Health Organization (WHO) and aims to secure and distribute 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2021. So far, a 191 countries, including Fiji, and most recently the United States, have signed up to participate in the COVAX Facility. Of this, Fiji is part of a group of around 92 countries that are eligible for donor-funded doses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, here is the rub - the timeline for COVAX is anything but guaranteed. It could be many months, or even a full year until we get enough vaccines to cover a mere 15 percent of our population, far below anything approaching "herd immunity", which is the level of immunisation that makes transmission all but impossible.

Rich countries are clear-eyed about the urgency of getting as many people vaccinated as quickly as they can, and for good reason. They want their economies back, they want their jobs back, they want their lives back and they want their people protected. They will not wait, we cannot either. Patiently awaiting our turn in the global COVAX queue would be economic-suicide for the country.

Of course, we're going to work with this facility as much as possible, but we are not going to bet our people's lives and livelihoods on it alone. Instead, we are working on a bilateral basis with our development partners to secure financial resources to buy vaccines now, as well as secure shipments of the vaccines themselves. So far, Australia and India have stepped-up with direct funding and shipment support, and we will provide updates on other bilateral arrangements as they finalise.

We are also keen to make direct purchases from the companies producing viable vaccines. If you consider our eligible population in Fiji, we are looking at around 1.3 million doses. In the USA, they are vaccinating at a rate of 1.43 million doses per day, so this is a marginal number of vaccines. With the right support, we can make it happen soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are currently more than 50 COVID-19 vaccine candidates in trials. With the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine being the first one to have been listed on the Emergency Use List (EUL) by WHO, several country regulatory bodies have approved the Pfizer, Moderna and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines through their stringent regulatory authorities.

A number of vaccines such as Janssen by Johnson & Johnson, Sputnik of Russia, and the Chinese Sinovac are still in the third phase of trials. The rest of the vaccines are in first or second phase trials. Our standards for the vaccines we will accept are as high as they are anywhere. Once a vaccine is medically trialled and deemed safe and effective by reputable country medical boards, such as Australia or the United States, we consider them as options on the table.

Mr. Speaker, procuring the vaccine or vaccines, is only part one. Rolling them out nationwide will be the most complex logistical exercise in Fijian history. It is critical we have a plan in-place today. Unlike many larger nations whose rollouts are suffering from inconsistent implementation, Fiji can and should be able to vaccinate our population quickly and more efficiently. Our medical staff are battle-tested in vaccination campaigns, and we will lean heavily on their vast experience. But due to the nature of COVID-19 vaccines, this will be a far more data-focussed and technologically-intensive campaign.

COVID-19 vaccines are almost all stored at extremely cold temperatures and most require two doses. Mr Speaker Sir, in terms of cold chain requirements - for the Pfizer vaccine, it is minus 80 degrees Celsius. Moderna requires storage of minus 20 degrees Celsius, equivalent to that of a deep freezer, and AstraZeneca and all the other vaccines are stored at normal refrigerated temperatures of 2 degrees to 8 degrees Celsius. Should the Pfizer vaccine be made available in Fiji, we have the required high-degree cold chain facilities, including the capacity to manufacture dry ice to allow storage of up to 30 days. The Moderna, Oxford-AstraZeneca and all the other vaccines are well within Fiji's cold chain capacity.

With the exception of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, all other vaccines, including Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna, require two doses per person. That requires careful biometric tracking, and we have a digital registry in development now that will ensure Fijians are vaccinated in line with the most effective dosage timelines.

Our COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign will cover all individuals above the age of 18 years, as all clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines were conducted on this age group. Given our unique status as a COVID-contained country, our priority group for Phase 1 will be our Front-liners - all individuals in border control at sea and air ports; front-line health care and hotel workers, and their immediate family members. Phase 2 will cover vulnerable persons, including but not limited to those with pre-existing comorbidity issues, for example, diabetes, hypertension and cardiac issues including rheumatic heart diseases, et cetera. Phase 3 will cover all those above 60 years of age, followed by any other person above the age of 18.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are closely monitoring the latest efficacy of proven vaccines against emerging strains of the virus. It may be the case that booster doses are required at later stages. In the meantime, developed nations are pressing ahead with the vaccines they have available. As they should, the science supports it, but we should not go into this expecting that vaccines will immediately send life back to normal and keep it that way forever. There will be a gradual process

and many of the good habits and health protection measures we have adopted, must remain. They may always be with us in some form.

Mr. Speaker, we expect the COVID-19 vaccines to arrive in phases throughout 2021, starting in the first quarter. As highlighted previously, our vaccination campaign will be implemented in phases according to the schedule of vaccine supplies and deployed in order of priority.

The phase supply of vaccines will make deployment somewhat complicated as priority groups need to be pre-identified, tagged and tracked according to the deployment plan for each batch. However, mitigation measures are being planned to safeguard the effectiveness of the campaign. On the other hand, a guaranteed supply of 1.3 million doses at any one time, of say AstraZeneca or another vaccine with similar storage conditions could be easily deployed over 12 to 16 weeks, based on the Ministry of Health's proven capacity and capability of vaccinating between 15,000 to 20,000 Fijians per day. We will ensure that the relevant authorities and stakeholders are fully prepared and pre-positioned to inoculate target groups as the consignments arrive into the country. Much of this will be based on the type of vaccine we secure, and we are all preparing for viable options.

Given the absence of a national identification mechanism and a digital immunisation registry in Fiji, the need to have a credible registration process and an internationally acceptable vaccine passport is paramount. This is where other countries, who have robust national identification infrastructure, coupled with biometrics, are able to deploy these vaccines at great speeds and accuracy. Our priority is to authenticate the identity of the individual who is getting vaccinated, accurately capture the vaccine doses taken and issue a vaccination passport, which I will discuss a bit more shortly.

To do this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government will also soon deploy a National COVID-19 Vaccine Registration for the administration of vaccines. The point is to identify people prior to the vaccines arriving on our shores. The registration can be done in two ways. Firstly, self-registration whereby Fijians complete a registration form online from the comforts of their homes. To log into the form, you will need to input your Birth Registration Number (BRN) which is evident on your Birth Certificate. Also, for those who have registered for a digitalFIJI e-profile, the BRN can also be found on their secure e-profile account.

Once both these login details are correctly filled in, a form is generated which contains critical questions that will need to be answered. Once the form has been completed, you will receive a confirmation via text message and email, if you provide your email address. You will then be able to visit a designated facility to complete the registration by providing your biometric details. Fijians, who do not have access to their birth certificates will be able to obtain their BRN by visiting the list of health facilities which will be published by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in the next few weeks.

The second form of registration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is face-to-face registration whereby Fijians can visit designated registration centres to register and give their biometric details at the same time. After registration, Fijians will be notified when to go for vaccination via text. The system that we are developing will be able to capture the two vaccine doses as and when it is carried out. We are also considering the inclusion of a personalised, what we call a "digital wallet" whereby Fijians can have their vaccination details right on their smartphones.

The registration system and digital wallet that we are seriously considering are in compliance with the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) of the European Union. This will allow for cross-border seamless verification and authentication, and also help us to travel. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services as the

agency, will be making announcements of when the registration exercise will commence. They are obviously working with the Ministry of Communications behind the scenes to develop these forms and also the digital process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us talk about vaccine passports. Just last week, the Global Tourism Crisis Committee called for a vaccine passport, saying it must become an essential travel document to help restart global tourism. A vaccination passport is proof that the holder of the passport has been vaccinated against COVID-19. This is crucial for assuring future travellers that Fiji is safe and open for business.

The vaccination passport could be an App on a mobile device, a QR code or barcode printed on a vaccination certificate, or an authenticated way of verifying the individual vaccine passports through information systems. We are actively exploring all possibilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, therefore, critically important that every eligible Fijian registers for vaccination. We cannot afford to jeopardise our safety and chances of economic recovery, which can only truly begin once the target population is completely vaccinated. The sooner the process begins, the easier our rollout will be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji suffered one of the most severe economic crises anywhere in the world. We are a remote service-based economy and unlike our friends in the Caribbean, our major markets - Australia and New Zealand, have much more strict border control policies than, for example, the USA. This vaccine will protect us, it will save lives but it will also be a shot of life for our economy. It will protect our frontline officials who risk their wellbeing to help Fijians come home. It will protect our tourism workers who hope everyday to fully return to the jobs they love. It will protect those most vulnerable in our society, those who grimace every time they hear a person cough for fear of what it means for their everyday lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are pleased to have the full support of the Fijian tourism industry in this unprecedented effort to vaccinate our people and get our economy moving again. The hotels have the unique capability to be able to provide additional vaccination venues. Our national carrier, Fiji Airways, has offered to carry vaccines into Fiji, providing the necessary storage conditions, while our Airport Terminal Services has the capacity to produce dry ice.

Tourism transport providers, like buses and ferry services, are also willing to step in to help transport tourism frontline workers, while public transportation can feed in to bring members of the other services identified as frontline. The good news is that the industry stakeholders are ready to work with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to map out schedules and logistics, and work with the Ministry of Communications in the digital effort that we are to putting in place, in particular for biometrics.

There are other factors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we, and other developing countries, must contend with. We are not only competing with the citizens of wealthier countries due to what can only be described as active global sabotage, we are actually competing with developed world citizens that do not exist at all. According to data analysis, with the pre-ordered vaccines, the European Union could inoculate its residents (about 447.7 million) twice, the United States - 382.2 million four times, and Canada - 37.5 million six times. We are also urging these nations to supply their surplus vaccines to lower income countries.

To meet the growing supply-demand gap, several countries have initiated domestic production of medical products and/or are modifying existing medical products for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. The rapid scaling up of manufacturing globally is an obvious multi-beneficial

solution to address the timely availability and affordability of medical products to all countries in need. Fiji may not be able to produce vaccines, but we are fully capable of serving the Region as the hub of distribution.

Another important barrier to also consider is also misinformation on COVID-19 vaccines, a global trend that is threatening the success of vaccination campaigns around the world from the UK and USA to India and East Asia. Not surprisingly, research has found a significant relationship between the spread of false information about COVID-19 vaccines and people's reduced willingness to get vaccinated.

Now, we should have an open, transparent and facts-based discussion about all the vaccines that we are considering, but we have to base those conversations in medical reality. That starts in this Parliament and it carries to the grassroots of every Fijian community. We have heard numerous stories, for example, from some cleaners at Suvavou House, who told us that their leaders in their faith-based organisations told them, "do not get vaccinated because it is something evil." We are urging, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Fijian to do more than refrain from sharing or spreading misinformation. If you hear it, condemn it or even better help guide that person to facts. Lives and livelihoods depend on it.

We are talking about Fijians being able to put food on the table, businesses being able to run again, families separated by border closures being connected again, and lives of vulnerable Fijians being saved. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will say it again, if you hear people lying about these vaccines, please tell them, 'do not lie about our economy, do not lie about our lives. Please, stick to the facts.'

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this campaign is the most ambitious global and local effort that Fiji has ever undertaken. The stakes are as high as they can be. We have to procure vaccines now before the window of an inclusive economic recovery slams shut in our faces. We are doing that through every avenue available to us, and we are willing and able to meet the costs of buying vaccines directly. We do not want to wait around just for hand-outs. We need to have a rollout plan, and we do. We have a technology-backed, data-driven approach with private sector linkages that can achieve immunisation nationwide on a rapid timeline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to be united. God help us if this becomes a political issue. We have spoken with too many Fijians who are out of work, too many business owners who are anxious about the future, and too many healthcare workers who are nervous for their wellbeing, to watch this effort being strangled by anyone's political point-scoring. This is a national effort - the most important of our lifetime.

We must meet this momentum and moment together, equipped with nothing less than facts. We can protect our frontline workers, we can protect our lives, we can restore our livelihoods and we can give our economy the shot of life that it so badly needs. That is what our people deserve, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is exactly what we are going to do. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Attorney-General for his Ministerial Statement.

Honourable Members, as the Honourable Leader of the Opposition nor the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party and their designates are not here, that brings to a conclusion this portion of this agenda item. We will now adjourn for refreshments. After refreshments, I will take the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services. We adjourn for refreshments.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.27 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.00 a.m.

(Members of SODELPA Party resumed their seats in the Chamber, except the NFP Members)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue from where we left off before the refreshment break. I now call on the Minister for Health and Medical Services to deliver his Statement. You have the floor, Sir.

Current Status of COVID-19

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament; first of all, Mr. Speaker, I want to raise my disappointment at the walkout that was done this morning by the Opposition Members.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister for Economy, in his Ministerial Statement this morning, which they were not here to listen to and participated on, explained to the nation about the COVID-19 Vaccines Procurement Programme that is in place.

This COVID-19 vaccines procurement is a strategy that is of a greatest importance for this nation now. By their not being here, they have shown to the nation that they do not care about those who have lost their jobs. They do not care about the tourism industry. They do not care about the vulnerable population. They do not care about the front liners. They do not care about Fijians.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Shame!

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Shameful. Fiji is COVID-contained and as of today, Monday, 8th February, we are now nearly 300 days without any cases within the community. Honourable Nawaikula, do not talk. You were not here this morning to listen to what we are going to do, to save this nation and the economy of this nation.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Globally, there have been 105 million cases of COVID-19 reported, with more than 2.3 million deaths. Cases are increasing with over 300,000 to 400,000 cases every 24 hours and 10,000 deaths every 24 hours. Just because your nation can start having vaccination, it does not mean you will stop having COVID-19 straightaway or people would not die. As of last week, we had 26,635 cases in the Pacific, French Polynesia with over 18,000 cases and 132 deaths. Guam with over 7,000 cases and 129 deaths. Papua New Guinea with over 800 cases and nine deaths.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the beginning of this, our scientists together with our experts sat down and went through an Epidemic Model and that was presented to the Honourable Prime Minister in the beginning of last year. In that Epidemic Model, we looked at something called R-zero where R-zero is the possibility of somebody infecting someone else.

If R-zero is one or less than one, that means that infection can only infect one person. We knew from them that COVID-19 was more than one, R was more than one, and we knew that if we allow this to go uninhibited within the community than we would be seeing the numbers that we are seeing here, 26,000 in French Polynesia.

We knew given our population if we had followed what they had suggested by not having a layered approach than this Nation would have seen at least 5 percent of the nation get infected which is about 40,000 to 50,000 people. With a 5 percent, possibility of death would have been easily 2,500 people die within this nation, if we had followed what they had said. We decided not to because we follow science, we follow what the experts are telling us. The same experts they have said to cut their pay by 35 percent.

Fiji has had 56 cases in total. We have one active case at the moment and it is a historical case, currently admitted at the Lautoka Hospital, 53 recoveries and 2 deaths. The last 38 cases have been detected in the mandatory 14 days boarder quarantine in the government designated quarantine facilities, supervised by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 27,100 tests have been conducted with the daily average of about 150 tests. Mr. Speaker, Sir, even though there is only one case, we are testing 150 because we are testing widely. We are testing those who are in the front line, we are also testing those who present to any of our 75 early warning signs with approx. of fever, cough, or being admitted to hospital with pneumonia or admitted to Intensive Care Unit (ICU), needing ventilation.

Our test positivity is 0.2 percent. As well as testing people in our border quarantine facilities and as I have alluded to, we conduct surveillance testing right across the nation. For example, if someone might actually turned up to Wainikoro Health Centre and have fever, and cough, they would be tested.

I must convey our appreciation to our border health protection team and they are everyone. They are not only Health, Disciplined Forces, Airports staff, Customs staff they all participate. We hear of breaches in border quarantine in other countries but thanks to the men and women at our borders that we have not had a breach leading to a case in the community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to touch again on this topic of a layered approach. Some countries, Mr. Speaker, Sir, had made it very clear in the beginning of COVID-19 that they would rest their laurels on their hospitals. Some countries rested their laurel on the ability to be able to produce a vaccine. We did not.

We looked at a layered approach, a Swiss cheese approach where we knew that the layers in between would be able to cover that. What are the layers? The layers are the quarantine process that we have in place, the region and robust testing mechanisms that we have.

Whilst we have RT-PCR, which is the test will require of people coming into Fiji and there are more than 1,000 panels of light throughout the world. We only recognise 24. There was a period of time where anyone in the Eastern sea border of USA who wanted to come to Fiji actually had to go to one particular lab in Washington that we recognise. That is how pedantic we were, to be able to come to Fiji.

Apart from the quarantine, also the other measures that we have in place, the Disciplined Forces actually managing the quarantine facilities. The PPEs that we have, the designated isolation

facilities for those who are unwell. The designated equipment that goes with the ventilators that we procure. These are all part of the layered approach. Also part of the layered approach is the slight restrictions that exist. One continues to ask, what is the role of the curfew in terms of health? This is what it does Mr. Speaker.

We know that the breaches in quarantine that has happened in New Zealand, Australia and all over the world have happened because people went out to go and buy something. They went out to have a good time, they went out to go and see family and if for example, in the Nadi area, if we still had night clubs going for 24 hours, it will be a place where the people in quarantine will feel like they want to come out, so breaches could happen. These are the many layers that are in place. Not only a particular layer does solve it all. All the many layers all contribute included in it is the slight restrictions that we currently have in place.

We continue to build capacity and respond to this pandemic. Since my last update, we have been using GeneXpert technology as this is now available in the three divisional hospitals of CWM, Lautoka and Labasa. This compliments the RT-PCR testing that we have. We are also exploring opportunities with our development partners for developing capacity to conduct whole genome sequencing for this virus.

Mr. Speaker, this was actually something that the Regional Director of WHO said to me in a zoom meeting. He said, “Minister, your Fiji CDC molecular laboratory has grown from strength to strength. We now believe that it is time that we can support to have genome testing so that we can be able to identify the variant or the strain where it comes from.” This is a level that many countries around the world do not have.

Mr. Speaker, we are also formalising the creation of border health protection unit in Nadi and this will also include a new Fiji CDC laboratory in Nadi and again it has come because development partners have seen the strength that we have shown in terms of our COVID-19 containment and the capacity within our laboratories and they want to support that.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, immunisation is a global health and development success story saving millions of lives every year. Currently, two million to three million deaths are prevented from diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, influenza and measles and the list goes on. Immunisation is a key component of primary health care. It is the best health investment money can buy in our effort to strengthen global health security and will be a vital tool against antimicrobial resistance.

Mr. Speaker, we have shown the strength of our immunisation programme with the MECN Programme that was done. We have also shown it with the measles campaign. In 2018, Fiji faced the Meningococcal C outbreak. We recorded 85 cases and 6 deaths. In response, we conducted rapid test investigation and isolation and we vaccinated 91 percent or 292,000 of our target population of 1 to 39 years. With the measles campaign, November 2019, we vaccinated more than 98 percent or 360,000 people in the target population. Six months to five years, a 19 to 39 years old. Those numbers do not include the many that are above the target population.

Mr. Speaker, we have had zero measles outbreak cases after the outbreak last year. We had just one meningococcal case last year and no deaths. It is essential for us to understand the importance of vaccination. Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Attorney-General alluded to what we are doing in terms of procurement of the vaccine and because of time, I want to talk about the misinformation on vaccine. I want to reiterate the message that the Honourable Attorney-General

mentioned this morning, as we progress on the discussion related to vaccines and proactively planning on getting them earliest to Fiji. A number of the false claims are emerging and I will list and address them now.

Firstly, there is a claim that the vaccine is a mark of “666” with the mark which will be placed inside you. This is not true. The smallest micro-chip, even if they exist is too large to insert in one immunisation shot.

Secondly, the vaccine contains weak products. Again this is not true. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are made from mRNA while the AstraZeneca from the DNA strand and contain lipids or fats and a few other products such as sucrose (sugar), salts, water for injections and amino acids.

Thirdly, the vaccine contains foetal products; this is again not true. It does not contain any foetal cells, blood products, mercury, egg or latex stoppers, preservatives or pork products. Mr. Speaker, vaccinations that are currently widely used worldwide in Fiji are safe and side effects of these vaccines are usually minor and temporary such as sore arm or mild fever.

More serious side effects are possible but extremely rare. Any licensed vaccine is rigorously tested across multiple phases of trials before it is approved for use and regularly reassessed once it is introduced. Scientists are constantly monitoring information from all the sources, including ours when we begin ours, for any sign that the vaccine may cause health risk. Remember, you are far more likely to be seriously injured by a vaccine-preventable disease than by vaccine. For example, tetanus can cause extreme pain, blood clots, measles can cause inflection of the brain and many vaccine-preventable diseases can result in death, including COVID-19 as we are seeing with the millions of deaths worldwide.

The benefits of vaccination greatly outweighs the risks and many more unnecessary deaths could occur without vaccines. We have competent health workers who have been administering vaccines for decades and as this vaccine is new to the world, we continue to strengthen our nursing capacity to ensure we deliver to the expectations of the nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not possible to predict every individual who might have a mild or serious reaction to a vaccine, although there are few contraindications to some vaccines. But following contraindications, the risk of serious adverse effects are minimised. It must also be remembered that by the time anyone in Fiji gets vaccinated, millions of people in other countries around the world will have already received their vaccines. Therefore, we have the time to watch the effects of vaccines in other countries to ensure they are safe for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I invite and encourage all our community leaders to assist the Ministry and the Government in addressing the misinformation around the vaccine, to discourage those who are spreading false information and support those who are vulnerable in our communities, so we are all well placed to successfully vaccinate our community just as we have done together to fight the outbreaks in the past. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have developed our National Deployment Vaccination Plan, we have done consultations on the campaign with the medical team and development partners, and in this process we have the resource capacity, as alluded to by the Honourable Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be on top of our game, we have the right number of staff to deliver efficiently and effectively with minimal to no hiccups to service delivery, ensuring universal access to all Fijians regardless of how near or far one stays. We will ensure that for every team carrying out vaccination, there is a medical doctor to support the team at all times and address any adverse event. Though, unlikely as mentioned earlier, that the adverse events are rare.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a programme that we have experience in. As I have alluded to before, we have experience from the MenC vaccination campaign and we have experience from the measles vaccination campaign. Those experiences will be useful in how we will roll this out. As I have alluded to we are hoping that the Honourable Members on the other side of Parliament will show responsibility and leadership by not spreading fake news but supporting us in ensuring that misinformation is cancelled and taken out that we will all support the vaccination programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also ensure to communicate as much as possible to everyone. We have started doing it. The Government Pages including the Ministry's Pages and WHO Pages and apart from this, we have to encourage one another to consider giving the correct information. With registration process starting soon and the preparedness plans in the country, Fiji is ready to receive these lifesaving vaccines for the nation. We intend to target more than 90 percent of all individuals who are eligible to receive vaccines. When science is ready to tell us that it is safe to administer amongst children below 18, we will ensure to protect. The objectives of these are simple – to protect all Fijians from contracting COVID-19 and ensure that we do not have any more deaths or complications. These, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would allow us to leverage on the opportunities to open borders, bring our economy up to par and we can only do this together. This needs an all-of-Government and all-of-society approach like never before, we have done it together once and we can do it again for our beloved nation. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

I now call on the designated speaker for the Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Dr. Atonio Lalabalavu. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Health on his update with regards to COVID-19 contained issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with regards to the update on COVID-19 vaccine, there is no doubt that we must have a collective effort working with government to ensure that COVID-19 vaccine becomes available and accessible for all the people of Fiji. Although we are considered a COVID-19 contained country, however the risks are still high due to those entering our border which we must continue to manage with stringent measures. There are lessons to be learnt from experience in other countries like the United States and United Kingdom, although they have all the necessary resources and logistical arrangements, they still encounter challenges.

We would urge the government to work and consult very closely with the competent authority, WHO, to ensure that the vaccine that will be purchased or donated meets Fiji's specification. We must not accept donations because it is given to us free. We must ensure that it is the right dose for our people. I believe there are a number of vaccines currently available in the market, therefore, we should not rush and make unnecessary procurements. We must take a precautionous approach rather than rushing into receiving free vaccines because we are dealing with people's lives.

The Government should work with all key stakeholders to ensure the efficient and effective way in the acquisition and immunisation programme:

- We must be very clear in the prioritisation of those that will be vaccinated first and there must be clear public awareness of the programme.
- Logistical arrangements must be organised to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

- Processes and procedures must be in place to minimise delay.
- Better targeting to ensure accessibility;
- We must ensure that the right type of vaccine is suitable and appropriate to the needs of our people.
- The tender process must be followed and we should learn from the COP 23 which was given to Qorvis.

In addition to the update of COVID-19 vaccine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to raise a question on the restrictions of our freedom of movement by the 11.00 p.m. curfew under the Public Health Government Regulations issued by the Permanent Secretary for Health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no scientific evidence to prove that by forcing people to stay home between 11.00 p.m. and 4.00 a.m. will help with the management and containment of the virus. While we in these chambers are subject to the social distancing rules, this is not the case for the vast majority of Fijians outside of curfew hours, in particular sporting events.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge on the Honourable Minister and the Government to review the curfew because while the crime rate did reduce briefly, more crime is happening during the day and also because of the curfew. All crimes are undesirable, but the curfew cannot be used to reduce crime. It is appropriate for Government to increase support for law enforcement rather than locking down the whole nation with this draconian curfew.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I again thank the Honourable Minister for his update and I thank you for the opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. There being no designated speaker from the National Federation Party, we will move on.

I now give the floor for the next Ministerial Statement to the Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment. You have the floor, Sir.

Devastating Impact of TC Yasa and TC Ana on the Agriculture Sector

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and Honourable Members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise this morning to inform this august House through my ministerial statement, the Ministry of Agriculture's response to the devastating impact of *TC Yasa* and more recently, *TC Ana* on Fiji's Agricultural Sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture, as we all are aware, is a vulnerable activity that is highly susceptible to natural disasters, particularly cyclones and floods. It is therefore imperative for the sustainable development of the sector that we are all prepared and have the right response plans in place that reflects disaster risk and resilience. Only then, can we facilitate quick recovery. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, building resilience will ensure that in the future, if there is a natural disaster such as a cyclone or flood, we are able to bounce back quickly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Category 5 *TC Yasa* made landfall in Fiji on the evening of 17th December, 2020, with over 250 kilometres per hour wind speeds experienced in zone 1, located 50 kilometres from the centre of the cyclone. This area included the Bua Province, Macuata and Cakaudrove Provinces, parts of Lomaiviti Province, Koro Island, Naigani Island and the Lau Group. Agriculture

in those areas were severely affected and reports highlighted significant losses due to damaging winds, coastal storm surge, flooding and land slips in sloping areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 44 days after that, another system, *TC Ana*, brought in weather devastation, impacting the entire Fiji this time, not only greatly scaling up the demand for recovery and rehabilitation efforts, but hampering our ability to respond quickly, given its widespread impact, cutting-off access and causing major infrastructural damages around the country.

At 6.00 a.m. on Saturday, 30th January, 2020, *TC Ana* as a Category 2 system made landfall near Rakiraki and continued to track South-South East of the Central Division towards the Suva area. From midday, the centre of *TC Ana* was located over the coast of Viti Levu between Suva and Navua and headed towards Kadavu. It exited Fiji in the late evening on that date, leaving behind a path of destruction.

Close to the centre of *TC Ana*, destructive storm force winds with average speeds of 100 kilometres per hour with momentary gusts of up to 140 kilometres per hour was experienced over Viti Levu, Yasawa, the Mamanuca Group, the Western half of Vanua Levu, the Lomaiviti Group, Vatulele, Beqa, Kadavu and nearby small islands. It was groundhog day for Fiji, fortunately, we were spared from the wrath of a third cyclone immediately after - *TC Bina*, which was later downgraded and fizzled out without causing too many issues. The real work starts now as we bounce back to rebuild, recover and rehabilitate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me first to acknowledge the assistance by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in the provision of a Disaster Risk Management Consultant, who has been working with the Ministry in the past six months, reviewing our preparedness, response and rehabilitation plans and Standard Operating Procedures. This technical support provided timely assistance during the Ministry of Agriculture's *TC Yasa* response operation whereby we were able to implement our response plan in a more timely and well-coordinated manner, ensuring distribution of agriculture rehabilitation items within few days after *TC Yasa*. We are following a similar approach for *TC Ana* at the national level and detailed assessments are ongoing to map out the areas, spread and quantum of the impact on the agricultural sector.

The Ministry's initial damage assessments was conducted within 24 hours to 72 hours post-*TC Yasa*. The Ministry of Agriculture's Extension Services staff interviewed community leaders and this initial raw data, was complemented by available baseline agriculture data, and GIS wind speed information provided by an initial estimated total damage to the affected agriculture households valued around \$108.9 million.

Categorising the impact of the cyclone by zones, according to distance from the centre of *TC Yasa*, ensured rapid analysis in the identification of estimated damages that occurred to crop and livestock infrastructure such fencing and livestock sheds.

I wish to highlight that amidst this devastation, the Ministry also ascertained damages to staff quarters and research stations that were located in those affected areas. Work was also organised – the ripping of fallen trees, utilising the timber to ensure timely repairs are coordinated to affected stations.

With *TC Ana*, further damage was caused, including the greater Viti Levu this time around. The Ministry's desperate estimates considering its impact and damages, took around 10 persons to vegetable farmers in the Sigatoka Lower Valley area and about 60 to 80 persons to vegetable farmers in Ba and Nadarivatu. Rootcrop farms in the Central Division were also badly affected by flooding in low lying areas with farmers experiencing more than 80 percent damage to their crops.

Farmers in the Northern Division are the worst affected for both cyclones. The Ministry is considering the implementation of an intensive response plan, to ensure farmers are fully rehabilitated. The teams that are deployed on the ground are currently carrying out a detailed damage assessment which will form the basis of our response for *TC Ana*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on *TC Yasa*, based on the initial findings from the initial damage assessment, the Ministry after 72 hours, recommended the provision of three months of food ration to National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) for households in Zone 1 and Zone 2. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture commenced the immediate food security response which included distribution of vegetable seed packages for home gardening, root crops cuttings and other planting materials targeting households in Zone 1 and Zone 2.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of Phase 1, the following items were distributed to households in affected areas today.

- 19,779 households were provided with seed packages with five commodities which would guarantee them, at least, some vegetable supply within three months' time.
- Additional to those 19,779 households, 7,000 household seed packages were sent to Taveuni and the Eastern Division to be distributed there as well.
- 7,402 households were provided with 10 *kumala* cuttings.
- 1,114 households were provided with *bele* and cassava cuttings.
- Mr. Speaker, Sir, also 2,500, a day-old chicks were distributed in Bua/Macuata area farmers along with feed.
- Due to damage caused by *TC Yasa* to the flora, the Ministry of Agriculture also supplied 190 bee farmers with over 3,000 kilogrammes of sugar to supplement feed, as well as rehabilitating 1,722 beehives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also organised the deployment of a mobile veterinary clinic to set up in various parts of Vanua Levu to assist with the injured livestock so livestock could be saved. This mobile veterinary clinic was deployed to Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove, and assisted a lot of farmers who needed assistance to save their livestock from injury during the cyclone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this veterinary clinic, we had deployed vets, animal health production specialists along with medicine to be provided free while this clinic was executed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the collaboration of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, we also assisted in the clearance of dead carcasses so that they are not a risk to the community. We had mobilised machinery where there was a lot of dead carcasses of large animals, cattle, we assisted in digging up the ground to provide for burial of these dead animals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also assisted in quickly repairing some of the farm roads and also clearing roads so that farmers can have access to their farm. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support from the Ministry of Waterways, we also assisted in quickly clearing up drains in a number of areas in Vanua Levu so that we are able to get the farmers to rehabilitate their farms. We have organised and outsourced these works to contractors so that we can have multiple contractors working simultaneously so that we are able to clear up these fields so that farmers can quickly get back and start working.

But again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work was hampered given the weather conditions there. We have also just deployed a team from our entomology and plant pathology section to assist the farmers in pest and disease control so that their crops can be saved and this is ongoing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also, with the support from Fiji Rice Ltd, were able to provide a special assistance package to rice farmers to rehabilitate their rice farms. I wish to highlight in this august House, the Ministry's *TC Yasa* Demand Assessment Exercise was undertaken. This time, very rapidly using an IT tool called Goplus Tool Box and we were able to deploy all our staff from the Western Division to undertake the survey so that we can do a detailed assessment of the actual damage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the findings from the overall operation recorded that 19,678 agricultural households were affected by *TC Yasa* whereby 9,936 were located in Zone 1, 8,942 in Zone 2 and 799 in Zone 3. Of these recorded households, 18,496 were headed by male and 1,182 were headed by females.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actual damage assessment done following this exercise came to about \$147 million for the agriculture sector, 94 percent were valued damages on crop, 5.4 percent on livestock and 0.6 percent on infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the top five crop damaged was *yaqona*, *dalo*, cassava, water melon and chillies and top five livestock was goat, sheep, bees, cattle and horses. Zone 1 was the most affected area according to cyclone path, crop planting area damaged were recorded was more than 50 percent in the total area and captured value of dead livestock was around \$5.2 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture as need for food security and livelihood customers was tasked with designing the response rehabilitation plan for the next six months post *TC Yasa* crop and livestock. Following, the Phase 1 assistance, we have now move on to Phase 2 covering lifesaving rehabilitation plan with six rapid recovery of a rule productive sector by targeting almost 14,000 agriculture households and prioritises subsistence and semi-commercial farmers that lost 75 percent or more of their stock.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Phase 2, we are continuing to provide farmers with farms response package planting materials and tools, land tilling and preparation, rehabilitation of infrastructure and repair to farm roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Phase 1 was looking at food security and Phase 2 is now looking at rehabilitation and expansion of agriculture in this area. As we continue with the Phase 2 programme of expanding commercial agriculture, we are now also putting together a new programme in collaboration of our donors called 'cash for cultivation'.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, later this week, we will be announcing this new programme of "cash for cultivation" where farmers who have cultivated a minimum of one acre of land, completely cultivated will be provided with a \$150 cash. So one acre per farmer throughout Fiji for vegetable production. Work is on the way to support this cash for cultivation programme while we are getting funding from donors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to announce at this juncture, the support from the United Nations through the Central Emergency Relief Fund to the value of \$1 million. As you probably would have read from the papers and heard from the media, the United Nations through Food and Agriculture Organisations have provided us with FJ\$1 million to assist the most vulnerable farming households and fishermen who had been affected by *TC Yasa*. This particular \$1 million programme was launched in Bua on Friday last week and this includes a basic agriculture rehabilitation kit for 2,200 most vulnerable affected farm households and 1,100 fishing households should benefit from a basic fishing kit. Also this package will assist female headed households and also all the households in this area who have people with special needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to take this opportunity to thank the UN Pacific Regional Head, His Excellency Sanaka Samarasinha, for his assistance in securing this fund so that we can assist these most vulnerable households affected by *TC Yasa*. I want to assure the House that the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with the Ministry of National Disaster Management and other Ministries that we are working very hard in terms of ensuring that not only in securing these households that were affected by the cyclone in regards to food security and nutritional security, we are also working very hard to ensure that we will continue our programme of expanding agriculture in the national interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is in brief, the work that we are doing and I want to assure the House and our Agricultural households that we will continue to work hard to support them during these difficult times. Thank you.

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

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Honourable Minister's update this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Agriculture has been the backbone of the nation since Fiji was ceded to Great Britain through Independence and never more so than now. When we had the COVID19 Pandemic which has brought our largest foreign exchange earner - tourism to its knees, the need to safeguard the industry is imperative because when all else fails, Agriculture will ensure food security for thousands of our people, even if they lose their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding mitigation and adaptation efforts to the impacts of climate change which includes the increasing frequency and severity of cyclones, I wish to thank the Honourable Minister for addressing the issue of food security, especially amongst over 115,000 workers laid-off, as a result of this pandemic in his Ministerial Statement.

Mr. Speaker, the Western Viti Levu hosts many of the highly sought-after tourism destinations in Fiji, and a lot of our people have lost their livelihoods as a result of this pandemic.

Sir, it is likely that tourism will not be fully operational in the next three to five years therefore, Agriculture is our only hope to revitalise the economy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need accurate, up-to-date data and I ask the Honourable Minister, for the National Agriculture Census Report that cost taxpayers \$4 million conducted in February 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is now 11 months and there is still no sign of that National Agriculture Census Report. The Ministry needs to refocus and develop high value and low volume products, such as *yaqona*, *dalo*, ginger, cocoa and vanilla.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *yaqona* has been doing well for the exports and tripled since 2015, from \$8.9 billion to \$32.5 billion in 2019, yet Government has reduced the allocation for *Yaqona* Farming Programme to \$250,000 in the 2020-2021 Budget, compared to \$300,000 in the 2019 Budget and \$500,000 in the 2018 Budget.

I ask this question: where is the cold storage for Nukuloa, Ba and Kavanagasau in Sigatoka? This was approved in the 2018 Budget and still not constructed to date. We also need to increase allocation for milk production, beef production and poultry production.

The improvement and capacity-building in monitoring and evaluation is critical. We need more qualified extension officers, field officers, supervisors to be recruited. The implementation of programmes to promote resilience, go hand-in-hand in ensuring the Ministry is making the right interventions, training and support to our farmers and growers as well.

I take this opportunity again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to thank Government for taking on board the cash-for-crop programme that they have suggested this morning. Thank you, Sir.

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

Honourable Members, as there is no designated speaker from the National Federation Party, we will move on to the next agenda item.

HIGH COURT (AMENDMENT) BILL 2021

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

That the -

- (a) High Court (Amendment) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 1/2021) be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 11th February, 2021 and;
- (e) one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I intend to be brief as we hope to debate this on Thursday but essentially, this particular amendment seeks to create a specialised division within the Fijian Judicial System, a division that will deal solely with anti-corruption cases.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji's Judicial System there are already various divisions in the High Court and also the Magistrates Court. So, for example, we have the Family Division. We have the Court of Review established to look at the Customs Act, the Tax Court and the Employment Relations Court. So, the creation of a division is not anything peculiar. Also of course in the UK they have specialised courts as the Commercial Court, Admiralty Court and of course the Administrative Court. There has been a growing emergence of specialised courts to deal with corruption in many countries throughout the world, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Essentially, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the idea is to ensure that we get consistency in the application of anti-corruption jurisprudence in relation to corruption cases. The specialisation of magistrates and judges in this new and growing area of jurisprudence in particular the adherence to international norms and standards in relation to anti-corruption. And also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by having specialised courts it will give not just the prosecutors but those who actually get prosecuted, a particular level of certainty and indeed will further reinforce the rule of law because it will get rid of inconsistency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those introductory remarks, I would like to recommend that we debate this Bill on Thursday.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover.

There being no-one wishing to take the floor, Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Sir, I have no further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

CRIMINAL PROCEDURE (AMENDMENT) BILL 2021

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

That the –

- (a) Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 2/2021) be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 11th February, 2021; and
- (e) one hour be given to debate the Bill, with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Criminal Procedure Act was in fact put in place in 2009 where we completely repealed the Criminal Procedure Code of 1944. There were a number of archaic provisions in relation to the Penal Code which we inherited from the British India, Queensland and came to Fiji which is now called the Crimes Act.

One of the archaic provisions that still remain Mr. Speaker, Sir, and is becoming quite problematic now is the issue of what we call Lay Assessors. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a matter of interest the Criminal Procedure Ordinance of 1875, the Criminal Justice System was very heavily influenced by ethnic considerations. So, if you are European, you had your case only tried exclusively by a European jury but if you are of any other ethnic group than the case was tried by lay assessors but also were Europeans.

The legal theory being that when Europeans as lay assessors decided on cases concerning non-Europeans they may have a particular bias so therefore the Judges could overrule the decision of the assessors. That was the philosophy that actually continued until the 1950s when people of other ethnic groups were then included in the list of assessors. In 1961 they got rid of what we call “The

All European Jury System” so, since then we have been left languishing with this particular assessors system. It essentially means Mr. Speaker, Sir, in practical terms, if a group of assessors find someone guilty, the Judge can overturn them and on the other hand for example if the assessors find a particular ruling or let us say the person is not guilty, the Judge may simply go along with them.

Now, this has led to a number of inconsistencies and one of the other issues that we have discovered Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, there is only a handful of assessors that are currently being used. There is only about 30 people or 40 people who actually act now as what I call “professional assessors”, and they are well known to the registry clerks, they are well known to the lawyers but more so, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we are concerned about in particular is that given that we have a small group of people they are very subject to our economic, peer and political pressure and influence and in particular the level of sensitisation.

When we talk about sexual offences and gender related offences Mr. Speaker, Sir, and recently we have seen some cases in respect of that, where a lot of people are coming from a very patriarchal based society, we are getting a lot of inconsistencies in the verdicts (for want of a better word) by the assessors. So, in some cases we have recently seen that where very similar facts, very similar evidence, assessors find not guilty.

In other cases they find them guilty and similarly the Judges whether it is maybe the mood of the day they may go along with the assessor or maybe they do not actually get influenced by the assessors, they go against the assessors. So, you cannot have a criminal justice system in particular when you try to address issues such as gender issues that will have a dual system; we need to have consistency. You either have the decisions of all the assessors always adhered to like a jury system or you actually do not have the assessors where the assessors’ decisions can sometimes be followed and other times cannot be followed.

Interestingly enough, Fiji and Vanuatu are the only countries in the Pacific that actually has this system, everyone else has moved along. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are seeing a lot of this in particular, some of the prejudices coming through in sexual assault and rape cases, et cetera, and in particular, when you are now getting sophisticated crimes, use of technology, et cetera, the ability of the assessors to perhaps comprehend these matters and come up with a ruling is very limited from that perspective. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this amendment seeks to remove the assessor system and have the judges, like in many other jurisdictions in the world, actually make the decision themselves. Thank you, Mr, Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General for his motion.

Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have a right of reply from the mover. Is there anyone wishing to take the floor?

With no one wishing to take the floor, Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHIAYUM.- I have nothing further to add, Sir, thank you .

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HERITAGE BILL 2021

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

That the -

- (a) Heritage Bill 2021 (Bill No. 3/20221) be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must be immediately referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at the May sitting of Parliament and that upon presentation of the report on the Bill by the Standing Committee, the Bill must be debated and voted upon but;
- (e) one hour be given to debate the Bill with the right of reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief. The Heritage Bill 2016 was tabled as Bill No. 10 of 2016 for the First Reading on 9th February, 2016, that was during the last term of Parliament. The 2016 Bill was developed to provide for the domestic application of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and National Heritage which was adopted at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization commonly known as UNESCO, at their General Conference in 1972. Fiji became a State party to the World Heritage Convention on 21 November, 1990.

The 2016 Bill was later moved in Parliament for a second reading on 25 April, 2016 and referred to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for review. The review report on the 2016 Bill was not tabled by the Standing Committee during the last term of Parliament and as a result the 2016 Bill lapsed in accordance with Standing Order 97(2) of the Standing Orders. Following the lapse of the 2016 Bill, the Department of Heritage and Arts held further consultations and revised the 2016 Bill.

Fiji as a State party to the World Heritage Convention is required under the World Heritage Convention to adopt legislative and administrative provisions to give effect to World Heritage Convention. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, quite a lot of work has already been done and this Bill essentially tends to finish the work it started in 2016, domesticate the World Heritage Convention in Fiji thus the reference to the Standing Committee and to be brought back in May. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the right of reply from the mover. The floor is open, if anyone is wishing to take the floor. If there is no one wishing to take the floor, Honourable Attorney-General, you have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I have nothing further to add, Sir. Thank you.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

REVIEW REPORT - PUBLIC RENTAL BOARD 2016 ANNUAL REPORT

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

Parliament debates the Review Report of the Public Rental Board 2016 Annual Report which was tabled on 1st April, 2019.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, 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 Public Rental Board was established in 1989 to manage the rental portfolio of Housing Authority. Its vision is to provide affordable, quality and appropriate rental housing for financially disadvantaged Fijians, and to realise this vision, the Board is mandated with the following missions:

- (1) Facilitate the development of affordable and quality rental housing to meet the socio economic needs of customers;
- (2) Maintain efficient and effective customer service to meet customer expectation;
- (3) Maintain and enhance flats to PRB standards;
- (4) Empower customers through innovative public relations and community building;
- (5) Provide cohesion communities while enhancing openings that can be used to facilitate a win-win opportunity for every one;
- (6) Undertake profiling and analysis of existing potential customers; and
- (7) Promote migration to home ownership.

The Committee upon being referred the Public Rental Board 2016 Annual Report, invited its senior officials on Tuesday, 29th January, 2019 for a public hearing. During this meeting, officials from the Public Rental Board enlightened the Committee on numerous housing projects fully funded by Government, future plans and initiative in maximising the number of flats to cater for large wait list applications and overall operations aligned to the SDGs and the measures that are being taken by the Board to progress SDGs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Rental Board reported another year of favourable results, achieving increase in revenue and higher operating profits in 2016. The Committee is of the view that the Public Rental Board is now in a sound and sustainable platform for the future with an objective to develop more affordable rental flats for low income earners around Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Mr. Chairperson. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Is anyone wishing to take the floor?

Honourable Tabuya, you have the floor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the debate on the Report by the Public Rental Board (PRB), but before I do that, I just want to remind the Honourable Minister for Health that his disappointment with our walk out this morning fails in comparison to the disappointment and heartache that under his watch, has been caused with a lack of services at the

Savusavu Hospital, so he should be more worried about that. His own Permanent Secretary has admitted that, that hospital is not up to par. The absence of the generator during the *TC Ana* has quite possibly led to the death of a young lady.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- A point of order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, she has misled Parliament. There were 2 generators there that were used during *TC Yasa* and also *TC Ana*. You have misled Parliament, take it back!

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Member, just stick to the agenda item.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, I will move on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report as tabled by the Committee expressed some issues of concern and this is in 2016, and I wish to address those. The first is the funding for capital developments under Public and Private Partnerships (PPP).

The Housing Authority developments which we have heard from the Minister are now given over to be developed or by IFC and there is still no update about that and we have not heard in this House what is happening there, even though we were informed last year. Now, has there been any PRB new developments today by the government, or they have just been taken down like the PRB flats in Raiwaqa and nothing has been put in place?

The report notes a decrease in demand for PRB rentals. It appears from the graph there that most of our people have given up, waiting. They have been on the waiting list and we still have families that live in PRB flats, they have gone above the means test and should be out of there. What is the Ministry doing about it? We have seen recently and over the years, a population boom in our urban centres, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with substandard housing for the majority of our population that live in these areas.

The recent cyclones, Mr. Speaker, Sir, had shown a lack of adequate housing in the squatter and informal settlements with poor drainage systems caused by immense flooding and as well as roofs blown off and homes destroyed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I visited a settlement called 'Ucuna' in Nakasi in the past week. There are about 15 families that live there, wedged in between the homes there, still have not had electricity connected to date and their concern is that, there are now stringent requirements and costs to connecting their electricity. This is something that EFL needs to look at, in terms of providing for low income families in connecting electricity to their settlements. But they had few roofs blown off just from *TC Ana* and they have been displaced. Our most vulnerable which are our urban poor are left on the wayside. They do not have access to this PRB flats and there is no space there and the waiting list obviously, our people have given up there, but I now move on, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the decision by the Government or their policy to merge the Housing Authority and PRB.

Now, the Minister for Housing, in February last year, talked about this merge and it is still in its transitional stage as noted in her report. I wonder whether this power season effective move, Mr. Speaker, or this should still be kept separate and independent from the Ministry.

I refer specifically, Mr. Speaker, to the recent stabbing in the PRB on Mead Road, Nabua where the Minister issued a statement blaming the PRB employees and the Board for that. She stated that she had directed the Board to profile all the tenants and that by that date; January 8th of this year, nothing had been done.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are conflicting reports from within the Ministry saying that the employees had provided a very extensive profiling to the Ministry. It was conducted by the Board, so who is telling the truth? In any event, Mr. Speaker, Sir, now that the government has brought PRB and Housing Authority under it and merging the two, the buck stops with the Minister. The Minister needs to accept responsibility for what happened and not blaming the employees, who had done their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, our Bills of Rights in the Constitution states at Section 35 that our people have the right to accessible and adequate housing. I think there should be another word added there, Mr. Speaker, the word 'affordable' to read, "... accessible, adequate and affordable housing."

Our tens of thousands of people who live in substandard housing, Mr. Speaker, with no direct or connected water, no electricity and frequent flooding, as well as poor structures that have easily blown away, or a threat to life and person during this frequent cyclone season, should be addressed. We have been informed that the IRC has taken over to provide housing that can be owned by low income earners. What is the update on that? Nothing! There is nothing from the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank the Committee for highlighting the concerns and the works of the PRB from 2016 and it appears today that it has not improved. The Government must do better and they should do better. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, let me just start by educating Honourable Members on the other side that a parliamentarian has a range of arsenal available to him or her, one of which is to walk out of Parliament. The answer now is questions, motions, petitions, private Bills, and the like.

What we ask, as Parliamentarians is that, we want to create dialogue at a national level and today, we wanted to create dialogue on the USP saga. We were denied that opportunity so we walked out, and the whole country is now having a dialogue on this. So dialogue is happening, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, just stick to the motion.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, because it came from the other side, it is just a way of fighting back. That is all, thank you.

The Public Rental Board (PRB), Mr. Speaker, when you look at Fiji in total and you look at the global phenomena today, the migration into the cities, we can never meet the needs of everyone who migrates to the city in terms of housing. I am just concerned here, Mr. Speaker, that we continue to use models that are quite outdated. I think it is about time that we relook at this and come up with a model that will truly meet the needs of those in need of housing.

I note here that the PRB relies solely on Government for funding, thus the need to accelerate the availability of rental via PRB. We can never meet the demand, Mr. Speaker. It is time that we relook at the model. Should the private sector play a role in it, Government can never provide enough homes to meet the need, the demand from our people. Like I said, it is global, people are migrating

from the rural areas into the cities and towns. Squatter settlement is not unique to Fiji, it is all over the world, but it is time, Mr. Speaker, that we relook at this.

In my visit to Singapore some years ago on a Parliamentary visit, we were briefed on how Singapore did it. They put together a housing commission and that was able to provide housing to just about everyone in Singapore. So, Mr. Speaker, the time has come. I think that we look beyond the PRB and Housing Authority, and relook at the model, Mr. Speaker.

With our real status today, we need to do this. My colleague, Honourable Tabuya, talked about water, sanitation and hygiene. That could be perhaps, the way to start, Mr. Speaker, that whoever today is living in what we call as 'informal settlement', to be provided with the basics in terms of sanitation, water and hygiene.

That could be a way to start, Mr. Speaker, because it is a mammoth undertaking and the model that the Government is using today will never be sufficient to provide adequate housing to the people in Fiji. I would urge the leadership today, the Government and us, to sit together and relook at this, and look at some of the best practices. I quoted Singapore, what did they do right? We should also emulate that in Fiji.

That, Mr. Speaker, is my contribution to this because I think it is timely that we consider this, Mr. Speaker, a challenge that will not go away and that we are not able to meet right now with the way we are doing things. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to support the Review Report of the Standing Committee on the Public Rental Board Annual Report 2016.

I commend the work of PRB during the year 2016 and I note that gender reporting is included by PRB in its annual report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, gender equality at PRB has vastly improved over the years with managerial positions which were previously held by male staff are now held by female staff. To date, there are 49 percent female and 51 percent male staff for established positions. For unestablished staff, there are 18 males and one female staff due to the nature of work. This team is involved in repairs and maintenance of PRB properties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the operating income for PRB in 2016 was \$4 million as a result of increase in rental flats from 1,343 to 1,553 after the completion of Raiwai flats. In 2016, two housing projects were commissioned in Savusavu and Kalabu. In Savusavu, 48 units were developed at a cost of \$3.8 million while 36 units were developed in Kalabu for a sum of \$2.2 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PRB is currently constructing 36 units in Simla, Lautoka which is fully-funded by the Fijian Government. This is expected to complete by the end of this year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard from Honourable Tabuya many times as well as from Honourable Nawaikula in the past and it continues like an old record that this Government has done nothing, and that is his favourite line that this Government does nothing. So today, let me tell him what we have done. In the last six years, total Government grant to PRB was over \$16 million for capital projects and rent subsidy.

The PRB has to maintain its asset. General maintenance work was carried out on Vakatora, Naodamu, Kalabu, Charles Street, Mead Road Estate, Levuka, Tuatua and Kia Street. In addition, PRB concreted Raiwai Estate car parking area to increase the number of car parks for its residents.

Savusavu flats were provided with grills, the area was fenced and a walkway was made for the tenants. Construction of rock-lining and hall upgrade was carried out in McFarlane Estate. For Kalabu flats, drainage upgrade work was completed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PRB in its effort to provide better services to its customers, has invested in the installation of CCTV cameras and has plans for new projects. New projects are planned for Newtown and Raiwaqa which will add close to 358 flats. Honourable Tabuya mentioned about the merger of Housing Authority of Fiji with PRB. There are a lot of benefits by doing that and it is important for me to brief the Honourable Members about the future direction for PRB. The operational merger of Housing Authority of Fiji and PRB, as I mentioned, will bring about many advantages, not only in saving costs but also provide access to funds and new technology. This merger is in line with the recommendations made in the 2011 National Housing Policy Framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are certain services carried out by both organisations that can be consolidated. For example, customer service, finance, human resource, credit management and information technology. The Housing Authority of Fiji can provide additional service in legal, internal audit and risk and land and housing development. It is not prudent for PRB to engage in construction of rental flats on land given by Housing Authority when the expertise lies with Housing Authority. Based on economies of scale, the cost of construction can come down if Housing Authority builds rental flats that can be managed by PRB.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also taken a lead role in identifying and introducing potential business partners with new technologies to work with these two institutions. The next step is for these institutions to engage with appropriate partners that will bring in new technology and innovative financial models to increase the housing stock. I definitely agree with Honourable Gavoka that no country in the world has provided homes to their citizens. Generally every country tries to look after the vulnerable population and that is what we are doing here. I also agree that Housing Authority, PRB or the Ministry of Housing cannot provide the housing solution. We need to depend or we must rely on the private sector and that is what this Government is doing.

If you have heard the budget which was announced by the Honourable Attorney-General, not only in last year's budget even the year before, there were a lot of incentives given in the housing sector, not only to the first home owners but also to the private sector so that they can come on board and start building these apartments that we are talking about (strata apartments). The Government is taking appropriate measures at every step and we are mindful of the fact that housing is a basic need and we need to work towards that.

Honourable Tabuya mentioned that there are certain people who are still staying in the PRB flats; I agree. For some people, PRB flats has become their permanent home and they have been living in that flat for the last 20, 30 or 40 years. Unlike the Koroipita Programme where a family can live only for one generation and they have to move out and start looking after themselves, but in PRB's case that has been the norm where people continue to live in the flat and sometimes in one bedroom there are 14 to 15 people living in that flat. So we need to change that.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, PRB's role is to assist those families who take the first step towards home ownership by providing them subsidised rental flats and helping them save money to build up their deposits needed for home ownership unfortunately we do not see this happening. Instead in some flats we have come across cases where families who have been subsidised by the Government are abusing the extra money they have on hand. And that is why we

see a lot of social problems in a number of PRB flats around the country. People have excess money and then they indulge in drinking parties, et cetera.

The PRB case in Mead Road, I did the thorough analysis of the case and what I found was, when this lady was given the flat many years ago, she was barely in her 30s and she has been living in that flat and today she is about 58 years old. So you can imagine, she was not able to accumulate her deposit and move out. So she continued living there, she had her children and now she has got her grandchildren. So this is not something that we are encouraging, we are trying to curb that and this is the reality that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on International Finance Corporation (IFC) Projects. IFC has stepped in to help Housing Authority to build strata apartments. The work was progressing very well and some of the preparatory work is complete. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, we could not progress the work further and the main reason was that consultants and technologies had to come from abroad and because of the travel restrictions, we could not proceed with that, so we are hoping that once the travel situation improves, we will be able to commence with IFC Project as planned. Besides IFC, there are other local investors who are keen in developing strata apartments and they have come to the Ministry of Housing. Even I had some meetings with the private sector, they are very keen to go ahead with it, and some of them are already in the planning stages.

One good example is Rups. Rups is also building strata apartments. There are other bigger companies who are also involved or have engaged consultants to explore the possibility of putting up strata apartments. So every effort is being made from all directions to build the housing stock in Fiji. That is all I have to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Premila Kumar for her statement and I give the floor to the Honourable Niko Nawaikula. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With your leave, I would like to contribute. The Honourable Minister had stated that I am on record as saying continuously that this Government has done nothing for the housing needs of this country. That is the fact, and on the next breath, she admitted that Housing Authority and the Public Rental Board do not have a solution to housing, so there it is.

She referred to a sum of about \$16 million for the building of a rental flat in Raiwai as a measure of success - that is not a measure of success. A measure of success is, if you meet the requirements of a mission statement, one of those is that, you have to assist migration to other housing and she admitted that one lady in Nabua went to the Public Rental Board and she was 35 and she is still there when she is 58 - that is a failure. Your mission statement says, "You will assist them to migrate to better housing" and she has admitted also that there are people who have been living there for years, that is a failure on their part, that is a failure on the Government's part.

Let me just refer in general that the failure of this Government to look into the housing needs of this country, consider the time when Ratu Mara was here. First, you have the Housing Assistance Relief Trust (HART). People who cannot afford, go to HART and HART is obliged to push them on to better housing. They might go to Public Rental Board and then go to the Housing Authority of Fiji.

At the moment, you have a whole generation of people. I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, from 25 to about 40 who cannot afford housing, who cannot afford a lot in the Housing Authority, who cannot afford a room in Public Rental Board. Where are these people? These people are renting and she admitted that Rups has tapped into the business of having strata titles, why? Because the Government

is not addressing that, and so you have this whole generation of people who are renting. Some of them are even staying in squatters and here again, you have the problem with this Government formalising squatter settlements as an agreeable standard for housing in Fiji. You should not do that.

What was done before is that, all previous governments recognised squatters as “squatters” and they insisted that they move away from those areas to better housing. This Government is not doing that, this Government now has a Ministry which is called “Ministry of Housing and Community Development”, “community development” is squatter. They do not want to call it “squatter”, they call it “informal settlement”, and they are now calling it “community development” but it is sad that all these squatters are living in sub-standard conditions.

What happens if a cyclone comes in, if a cyclone comes in, what will happen and you will be to blame. This Government will be blamed for agreeing for the public to stay in substandards.

(Hon. A. Sayed-Khaiyum interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- That is their problem.

They must admit it, Mr. Speaker. Where is your policy on housing? You do not have policy on housing. People cannot afford a lot in Housing Authority lots. People cannot afford a room in PRB. Now, they are renting this PRB to university students because they cannot afford it. That is not what your Mission Statement said. She should have listened to the Chairman.

Provision or facilitate affordable housing, maintain effective customer service and very importantly, assist in the migration to new homes. They are not doing that.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Very sad!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Yes, it is very, very sad because this Government is not doing anything to the housing needs of this nation.

Now, the Honourable Minister also referred to the PRB in Lautoka. She should have read what the auditor said, that is a subject of corruption.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- You need to review the leases.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- A contractor who has done that, she should have addressed that.

So, the bottom line is this, Mr. Speaker, this Government has failed a whole generation of 20 years to 35 years, they have not provided their housing needs. They cannot afford a lot in Housing Authority. They cannot afford a room at PRB. And where are they going? They are going to the squatters. They are going to rent here and there.

Let me just go back, Mr. Speaker, to the need for PRB to merge with Housing Authority. The history of PRB was this, Housing Authority in 1988 or 1998 had whole lot of tenants that they cannot afford so they were just piling and piling debts, so it split it up. It split up Housing Authority and started what is now called the PRB and it was left on its own with no expertise in housing. All the

expertise in Housing Authority, as the Honourable Minister has just now admitted and, therefore, the reason why they should merge.

The recommendation from this Committee is very funny. They said that the PRB is in a sound footing. The PRB is not in a sound footing, it should go back and join with Housing Authority. The PRB is not achieving its mission. It is not pushing the tenants to better housing and in totality, this Government has failed the housing needs of this country and a whole generation are there, renting here and here and here. Thank you.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to bring a bit of rationality into the way this particular Report has been discussed. Honourable Nawaikula had just contradicted the Leader of his Party because the Leader of his Party actually said that there needs to be private sector input. Honourable Nawaikula is saying that everything should be done by Government. That is an enormous contradiction. He probably needs to listen to his Leader, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The donkey has bolted, let us not try and recover that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have on the floor of this Parliament on a number of occasions for the past number of years, highlighted some of the issues pertaining to housing and some of the legacy issues that we have had to deal with.

The issue pertaining to affordable housing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been that there has been no plans when these were developed. Honourable Nawaikula talked about HART, PRB and Housing Authority, et cetera. We can cite Raiwaqa, we can cite Matavolivoli and also Tavakubu. A lot of the people who were given housing in those areas, in fact, have never progressed, even though they may have owned those particular houses or apartments.

The reason why they have not progressed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the inability of their properties to be appreciated in value over a period of time. Any real estate that anyone owns, the value of a house if it was \$20,000 in 1995 must appreciate to a higher value 20 years or 10 years later but because we have what we call the ghettoisation of these areas, property prices have not increased.

Property prices outside of these areas have always appreciated, and that is how real estate works. So, fundamentally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the policy of that system was flawed in itself. So, those people who are low income earners, they came into those areas, even though they did the repayments, even though they have bought their houses, 20 years later the value of those houses depreciated because no one wants to go into those particular areas. Period.

That is a fundamental issue and Honourable Gavoka talked about Singapore. They have done exactly the same thing, contrary to what was done in Fiji. Previously, they had apartments like that. Previously, they had streets that no one wants to go in, but they changed the whole concept. So, as we have said repeatedly on the floor of this Parliament that when you have, for example, strata title, you have different price points. On one floor you can have a pilot that may own a three-bedroom apartment, you may have a janitor or a school teacher or a bus driver or you may have someone who is a market vendor, different price points and, therefore, the properties will continuously appreciate.

So, if I buy a one-bedroom apartment, I then get married and have children, I want to go and buy a two-bedroom apartment, I want to buy a house on its own, I should be able to sell my property, get value for it, which is appreciated, then move along. That is what we call socio-economic progression.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what needs to happen.

Fact number 2, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Nawaikula is pointing out as if prior to 2007 no one lived in the squatter areas. There were numerous people who lived in squatter areas. If you go to Omkar, people have been living there for 40 years, 50 years, 60 years, and people living in *vakavanua* arrangements for 60 years or 70 years. That is the reality of the matter and, of course, the demand for ownership of homes has been enormous.

As people get more income, et cetera, they move to the towns and cities, they need access to housing but their housing stock was low and it has been a phenomena, not only peculiar post-2007 but prior to that also. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are number of factors that we need to deal with.

Honourable Tabuya talked about those people who lost electricity connection after the cyclone, yes, of course, and they will get connected if they have the approval. But someone else was saying, I cannot remember who it was, that even in this informal squatter areas, we should give them sanitation, water and electricity. You need the consent of the landowners! We have so many situations, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I was recently in Nawaka in Nadi where a particular landowner got about 100 people in *vakavanua* arrangement with him. He has to give the approval, so they got electricity. One day, he had a disagreement with one of the tenants, he told EFL, "I no longer give my consent", so they had no electricity for six months. That is how the squatter system works. You need the consent of the landowners. It is like anyone who comes and squats on your land, he or she needs the consent of the landowners. So, it is not very simple to say, "Oh, let us give them all of that."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to highlight is precisely what the Honourable Leader of SODELPA has said, we are working with the private sector. There are six sites - Raiwaqa - 10 acres; Davuilevu - 131 acres; Nepani - 45 acres; Wainibuku - 3.5 acres; Tavakubu - 70 acres; and Tavua - 32 acres.

Now, Honourable Tabuya is saying, "Oh, what is happening?" There are different models and we are currently working with IFC and also the Australian Government. You do not just pull things out of thin air, Honourable Tabuya, you need to actually have a project that will actually attract. Attract, Honourable Gavoka, you will learn if you listen! You will attract private sector investment and these things need to be modelled properly.

The Honourable Minister for Housing has also highlighted that some of the consultants, et cetera, could not come, but we are still working behind the scenes. Laws need to be changed, regulatory amendments need to be made and we hope to get this construction on the way. People who are involved in the private sector with modern day technology that is not available in Fiji, obviously cannot come to Fiji at the moment or are hesitant to come to Fiji, or cannot leave their own countries, because their own countries will not allow them to travel. Welcome to COVID-19 world.

This is the reality. So some things have actually slowed down as a result of that, but that is what we are doing, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to highlight very quickly is that, in the meantime as the Honourable Minister for Housing said, we need to increase the stockpile of homes. When you increase the stockpile of homes, there is less pressure on demand for housing. So if the private sector local investors are coming, doing strata title, if the Ministry of Housing is offering \$30,000 grant, if you are building your first home, the banks are lending people money. There is a demand for it. So when people build their own homes, there is less people asking for homes, so the others can move up the ladder. You have to have a multi-pronged approach, giving people ownership of homes and the opportunity to do that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I lastly want to highlight is that, the formalisation of squatter areas is also very critical. Formalisation of squatter areas means that we go and talk to the landowners or we have the Lands Department where people have been living there for years and we actually give them proper 99-year leases. Once they get the formalisation, they get the road, water, electricity and 99-year leases, then they can actually go to the bank, use their proper lease title as a security to mortgage their homes and build proper homes. They do not have to live in shacks because when you have a year to year tenancy, no one is going to put a concrete home, they are going to put a tin home. When there is a cyclone, it will get blown away. But you have the ability to mortgage that land, provide security and get money from the bank to put a concrete home. That is the reality of it, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Of course, it is not a matter that can be solved overnight, but we are working, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in that respect and I hope the Opposition understands that. I know some of them on the other side see the squatter areas as the vote bank and go and make all sorts of promises to them, all out of thin air. That is fundamentally, Honourable Tabuya's *modus operandi* to go to the squatter areas, offer them unrealistic enticements and then come to this Parliament and pontificate on unrealistic basis. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney- General. Honourable Members, it is not very often that I do this, but I will suspend the debate on this motion now, and we will carry on after we have had a lunch break. I will take the Honourable Tuisawau as the speaker to lead off after the lunch break.

Honourable Members, it has been brought to my attention that there has been a typographical error in today's Order Paper with respect to the second motion for debate under Schedule. Honourable Members, please take note that '31May 2019' should be corrected to '13 May 2019'. I have instructed the Secretariat to upload the amended Order Paper on the Parliament website. I apologise for that error.

Honourable Members, we will now take a lunch break and after the lunch, we will proceed with the debate and the Honourable Tuisawau will take the floor. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.44 pm.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue from where we left off before lunch and I now give the floor to the Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion on the Public Rental Board. The latest Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2013 & 2014 indicates that our total housing stock is around 184,335 units evenly set between rural and urban areas with an average household size of 4.7 per family. Around 57 percent of houses consist of reasonably well-constructed timber frame and a further 40 percent of houses are of concrete and masonry construction.

Whilst the average population growth is around 0.7 percent, the urban population is growing at an annual average of 1.5 percent and an average -0.1 percent annually in our rural areas. Again, as I mentioned, this is the 2013-2014 survey and given the COVID-19, the rural data would have changed drastically in the last 12 months. The annual average growth of 1.5 percent in our urban population clearly suggests that more pressure is on urban housing compared to rural housing. According to the 2013/2014 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), there are more than 186 informal settlements in Fiji with a population of 53,611 or 12 percent of the total urban population and comprising 10,944 households. The lack of affordable housing is one of the most pressing problems in urban areas. Rising costs have made it hard for low income earners to access affordable housing, leading to the rise in squatter settlements. The influx of foreign buyers in the last few years has worsen the problem of (lack of) affordable housing for a lot of people. So, as mentioned by the previous speaker, Sir, the ongoing issue of housing will continue to be a major problem.

The Honourable Minister also mentioned the merging of PRB and possibly Housing Authority of Fiji. I would like to highlight a few issues from there, in particular on the Acts or on the legislation. The Housing Act 1955 which was amended by the Public Enterprises Act 2019, whereby it is amended in Section A – 32, inserting “responsible for public enterprise in writing, subject to the approval of the Honourable Prime Minister”. This is with regards to the board members - “The board shall consist of no more than six (6) members appointed by the Minister responsible for Public Enterprises in writing, subject to the approval of the Honourable Prime Minister.”

So the Housing Authority of Fiji Board is appointed by the Public Enterprises Minister, however, following are two of the principles of public enterprise as specified in the Public Enterprises Act 2019:

- (a) The principle of commercial objective where a public enterprise must operate on a commercial basis that is efficient and profitable.
- (b) The principle of measurable performance where public enterprise must identify its business goals, responsible management, competent, honest and accountable and transparent performance.

As I mentioned, there is probably conflict in terms of this legislation and as mentioned by the Honourable Minister, this is something that they will need to look at in detail.

Under the Housing Act, on “Conditions to be observed by the Housing Authority of Fiji in letting and selling houses: Section16(1) – in selling or leasing houses or providing loans or other facilities to assist workers to purchase, lease, build or otherwise obtain houses, the objective of the Authority shall not be to make a profit ...” So, what I am highlighting is, in the merger of PRB and the Housing Authority of Fiji which is also governed by the Public Enterprises Act, those three (3) pieces of legislation might need to be examined in detail and I suppose there needs to be widespread

extensive public consultation because it will definitely impact on them, how these organisations are governed and also the deliveries as you will need to reconcile the conflicting principles as I mentioned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned by some of the previous speakers and also the Honourable Minister, I also highlight from the five-year and 20-year national development plans a particular clause or strategy which I shall read out: “Annual review of government subsidies to housing providers and develop strategies to graduate residents of low income Housing Assistance and Relief Trust (HART) and PRB housing towards Housing Authority of Fiji programmes.”

The issue I have is, in the Annual Report there is no update on that. There is no separate section which updates us on that in terms of these strategies to graduate residents. That has been mentioned by the Honourable Minister and the question is, are there any strategies because those are neither in the Report nor have they been highlighted by the Committee. What are these strategies? Have they been implemented and what are the results? That was the 2016 Report, hopefully the Annual Reports which come in this year or in the next following years will contain that.

On the update regarding the programmes and projects, I have noticed that the Honourable Minister mentioned in terms of PRB renovation and construction the number of units: Kalabu - 36, Savusavu - 48 (have just been completed). I understand that was supposed to be completed in 2017 and 2018.

In Simla, that was the target objective that was supposed to be completed in 2018/2019 but yet that is still in progress.

In 2019/2020, Namaka - 57; 2020/2021, Raiwaqa/Suva - 150; and 2021/2022, Raiwaqa/Suva - 200. So we can see that the progress is not in accordance with the National Development Plans for various reasons which have been highlighted by the Honourable Minister regarding the constraints.

The other matters related to this particular Auditor-General's Report, on the unallocated Government subsidy, in 2016, the Board received \$1 million subsidy from Government to provide affordable rental accommodation to low income earners as they work towards home ownership. Our review for Government Subsidy Scheme revealed that the Board has not been able to allocate the subsidy promptly to the tenants.

As at 31st December, 2016, a sum of \$387,320 remained unallocated which included unallocated balances of \$44,618 for 2016 and \$342,702 from previous years. The Board agreed that subsidy has to be effectively allocated to qualifying tenants. The question is, how effectively has PRB worked on this recommendation on allocating these subsidies? What measures have been taken by the Board to ensure that the ongoing problem of unallocated balances of Government subsidy is allocated? What has happened to the previous balances? Of course, they have also highlighted the reminder notices, what operational changes have been done to address this? Those are some of the issues I thought I would raise. The other one was on IT systems in terms of access and some issues associated with that.

Mr. Speaker, thank you, Sir. Those are my contributions on the debate. *Vinaka.*

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

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to support the motion that is before the House. Given, first that this particular Report is signed with the consensus of the

Honourable Members of the Committee. I agree with the recommendation and we are debating here to note the recommendation and also the improvements probably that will be taken on board by the Government of the day.

Just a few things that I would like to raise probably for the Honourable Minister to take on board: in the recent flooding in Labasa, the water level came right to the third louvre mark in the PRB flats at Naodamu, and took them more than five days to be kept at the PRB Hall and they are slowly returning there after that clean-up. Probably in future, if you can look into relocating those flats to higher grounds or moving into double storey flats like the ones we have in Suva given climate change and other things that come in as climate mitigation measures. That is one of the things that we could consider on this.

Currently, we used to be paying \$20 subsidy, it has gone up to \$40 just recently and probably given the effects of COVID-19 plus the effects of the floods and also other climate conditions that are coming frequently now, if that could be reviewed too. On the other hand, we also need PRB to earn income for its maintenance and administration but these are some of the issues raised by some of the tenants and their welfare.

The other thing that was raised to me in terms of the facilities that they have, especially their halls at the rate they are paying now per tenant. If they want to use the current hall that is in their PRB compound it is about \$20 per tenant for those that are living in. The rate for those coming from outside is \$30 per night for any function. Given that they are living close to each other, that is the only option they have and those are some of the things that are in common use in those kinds of situations. Those are a few things probably the Honourable Minister can take on board.

We agree that there is work done. I think we cannot argue much in saying who has done more and who has done less but again it is a progressive thing and we are moving towards trying to attain them like any other country in the world is doing right now. As we move along, we can do better and make the changes, I think, with the innovations that are coming in to see that we actually achieve the mission and vision which this institution carries. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Bilitavu for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Aseri Radrodoro. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I also would like to join my fellow colleagues in thanking the Committee and I fully support the motion before the House.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to implore with the Minister for future Annual Reports of PRB. I think this is 2016 and now we are in 2020. Could the Minister further enlighten the House in terms of addressing the real issues which is the demand for housing. I was waiting to hear whether the Minister would state some figures in terms of the number of people who have applied for the flats that are available at PRB and for the period in which they have been waiting for. That will ensure and assist the Members of this House to see that the housing issue will be resolved by the National Housing Policy in which the Honourable Minister has also alluded to.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was not forthcoming from the Honourable Minister and maybe for future reports she could also inform the House on the progress in terms of the flats that are constructed. How many people will be catered in accordance with the applicants that are there? Are there 2,000 applicants on the waiting list or 3,000 applicants on the waiting lists? So, these is the information that will give confidence to this side of the House to ensure that the issue of housing is resolved.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of existing PRB flats, one of the existing issue there is the standard compliance in terms of safety and living condition in these respective flats. Most of the time they have been left unattended in terms of repairs and maintenance and this is something that probably the PRB needs to also look at.

In terms of merging the Public Rental Board and Housing Authority, these these are two different entities. The PRB if I read it correctly looks after low income earners and the HA looks after the middle income earners. The Honourable Minister can correct me on that one but in merging the two, these are two different organisations. One is looking after the low income earners and the respective roles and responsibilities that they carry out. Housing Authority gives out loan assistance to its customers while PRB does not. So, when they merge these two entities, what will happen to the PRB tenants? Will they be able to access the loan facility that are given by HA to allow them to fulfil that mission in which to promote migration to home ownership? If that is the basis of the merger, then well and good. We can be rest assured that this process of mitigating the housing demand will be met by this process of merging the two entities. If the merging is just to combining the two resources within the two departments then unfortunately this demand will continue to occur in future years, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other thing that also needs to be highlighted in this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the need for housing cannot be resolved alone. It has to go together with the development plan of the government because when you develop land, you will need infrastructure like water, sewerage, electricity and other economic entities that needs to be together with housing and also some other facilities that will ensure that people enjoy in their place of stay.

So, these are some of the things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that probably the Minister, in future PR B Reports or Housing Authority Reports would like to enlighten the House to ensure that the demand for housing is something that she is working towards to resolve in the years to come. Thank you very much.

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

Honourable Members I now give the floor to the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in his right of reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again commend the team of committed and motivated individuals who have worked together to bring the Public Rental Board to new heights. I also would like to thank all Honourable Members who have spoken on the motion. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson of the Standing Committee. Honourable Members, the Parliament will now vote to note the content 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.- I now call upon the Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

**REVIEW REPORT ON THE
OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL ANNUAL REPORT 2015**

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move that:

Parliament debates the Review of the Office of the Auditor-General Annual Report 2015 which was tabled on 13th May, 2019.

HON. A. M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

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

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Accounts Standing Committee (PAC) to move this motion, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion on the Review made by PAC on the Office of the Auditor-General 2015 Annual Report which was tabled in Parliament on 13th May, 2019.

At the outset, it is important to note that the report that is before the House for debate has been majority contributed by the previous Public Accounts Standing Committee and was further reviewed and endorsed by the current Public Accounts Committee.

Sir, the Office of the Auditor-General has been established under Section 152 of the 2013 Constitution with the primary role to inspect, audit and report to Parliament on the public accounts of the State, the control of public money and public property of the State and all the transactions with or concerning public or public property of the State.

Sir, the Audit Act 1969 further empowers the Auditor-General to audit the Whole of Government Financial Statements and the reports of all entities of the Government. It also empowers the Auditor-General to conduct performance audits of Government Entities and this assures Parliament that the entities are achieving their objectives effectively and in doing so economically and in compliance with all relevant legislation.

The Act also extended the scope of audit to include those that are specified under the Public Enterprise Act, comprising Government Commercial Companies, Commercial Statutory Authorities and agencies specified as Off-budget State Entities in the Financial Management Act. Also, the Environment Management Act required the Auditor-General to conduct a sustainable development assurance audit on natural resources managed by ministries, departments, authorities or local authorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee commended the efforts of the OAG on the work carried out so far in the areas of environmental audit and hope that it will continue to progress into other areas such as climate change, one extractive industries.

The Committee acknowledged the objective approach on gender breakdown by positions provided by the OAG in its recent reports which promotes SDG-5 on Gender Equality. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OAG had worked tirelessly and continues to send reminders and follow-ups on the respective Provincial Councils and Municipal Councils in relation to the issues of non-submission and late submission of accounts for audit. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OAG has in place measures to address those issues in consultation with all the affected entities and the recent reports shows improvement on actions that were taken.

To conclude, I sincerely commend the effort of the previous Public Accounts Committee in the compilation of this report and also the OAG in providing the necessary technical support towards the scrutiny of all the audited reports referred from the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these comments as a Member moving the motion on this PAC Report, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Deputy Chairperson of the Standing Committee for his motion. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on this motion and I give the floor to the Honourable Aseri Radrodro. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise as a Member of the Public Accounts Committee who prepared this report and speak in support of the motion and the recommendations therein in this report. We note that the OAG is a critical and a very important stakeholder in the public sector corporate governance. To allow them to carry out their work, they need to be fully resourced to enable them to conduct their work as an auditor of the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we note that their legal framework is registered under Section 151 of the 2013 Constitution with regards to their set up, and it is something that they have been challenged to conduct the audit of Ministries and Departments, Government Commercial Companies, Off-budget State Entities and Statutory Authorities of Government.

Some of these audits have been delayed because of limitations of resources they have. They have been requesting for more resources to ensure that they complete the audit on time. Not only that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the Ministries and Departments continuously delay in terms of submission of their Annual Financial Report for auditing purposes. During Public Accounts Committee meetings, they have always continuously raised about the laxities in some of the Ministries and Departments. They do not take the conduct of audit very seriously because they see it as not a very important element to address the issues within their Ministries and Departments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also there is a need for the OAG to have specialised skills within the Ministry. We now have climate change used by Government to highlight climate issues and the environmental Acts and regulations have also been implemented, passed before this House to ensure that they comply during the process of application for environmental assessment..

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an area that they lack and it has also been highlighted by the Office of the Auditor General. They do not have environmental specialists to assist them to carry out their environmental audit. At the moment, they are just staffs with finance and commercial backgrounds, so they lack the capacity to conduct environmental audits and this is an area that they wish to also have expertise on.

Also Mr. Speaker, Sir, in carrying out their audit work, there are ministries and departments, government commercial companies which they cannot conduct audits because they are limited by the Public Enterprise Act or the Articles of the Association of the respective commercial companies. Some of the institutions that they seem to not conduct audit on are Fiji Sugar Corporation; Fiji Pine Limited; Air Terminal Services; and Fiji Airways - these are entities which are majority owned by government. The minority owned entities by government are Amalgamated Telecom Holdings; Fiji Ports; and Ports Terminal Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the conduct of these audits are usually done by private entities and we all know fully well, that when private entities conduct the audit, at the end of the day, it is the bottom line that determines how they conduct the work, irrespective of how big the organisation is. It is

usually the bottom line that determines how they conduct the audit. When you compare that to how the Auditor General does the audit, it is pretty quiet different because they have roles and responsibilities to ensure that they report back to the House and they will be scrutinised under the Public Accounts Committee. Most of the times they used to debates with the respective entities on the issues that they brought up.

These are some of the things Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is recommended by the Committee highlighted in the report. Lastly, on the gender issues, we would like to also thank the Office of the Auditor General who have, in their annual report, also highlighted that they are working towards gender balance within the organisation to ensure that they comply with the requirements of Parliament.

Also of concern, is the delays of submission of accounts by municipalities and provincial councils. We had recommended that these entities need to be beefed up to ensure that audited accounts are submitted on time as per the Financial Act and most of these entities have delayed audited accounts dating back to 2007, 2008. We hope that the Honourable Minister will properly resource these institutions and also review the Audit Act to ensure that there are more audit firms available to conduct audits to address this backlog of audits.

Currently, there are only four major auditing firms plus the Auditor General's office. They need to review the current Act of the Fiji Institute of Accountants to ensure you open up the market to audit firms so that they can carry out and address these delays in submissions of audited accounts by municipalities and provincial councils. Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Aseri Radrodro for his contributions to the debate. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister, you have the floor, Madam.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion that is before the House. The teams of special administrators as well as the newly recruited CEOs of respective municipal councils have been specifically tasked to ensure the legislative provisions are complied by the councils. All 13 municipal councils have been directed to prioritise the auditing of their accounts and to submit annual reports to the Ministry of Local Government for the Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding progress on the submission of annual reports by municipal councils, I can confirm a total of 31 annual reports were presented in Parliament in the last sitting, 62 annual reports are ready for submission to the Cabinet, 18 annual accounts are with the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) for auditing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of strategies were adopted by the municipal councils to clear the backlog of pending financial statements and annual reports. These are recruitment of qualified personnel who can prepare accounts in-house rather than outsourcing. Outsourcing the preparation of financial statements by a few municipal councils, they do not have the expertise to do so. Procurement of accounting software that will bring about consistency in the preparation of financial statements across the 13 municipal councils and finally with the assistance of an independent consultant, a new finance policy manual was developed for the councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation by the OAG to train the staff of the municipal councils in preparing quality annual financial statements for audit, is welcomed. At the end of the day, the municipal councils will have the expertise to prepare the financial statements in a timely manner as required by the OAG. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for her contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, I now give the floor to the Chairperson for his Right of Reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments on the motion. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will go onto the next agenda item.

Honourable Members, the Honourable Member is not here to ask the question and the motion has, therefore, lapsed, as well as the question that is listed for this afternoon. We will move on.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

MSMEs Assistance – COVID-19 Pandemic & Tropical Cyclones (Question No. 02/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport explain what assistance is available for MSMEs in Fiji, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*?

HON. F.S. KOYA (Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Honourable O'Connor for his question. It is an extremely pertinent one because it concerns the vast majority of Fijians and the most vulnerable at that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a known fact that Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) actually play a critical role in progressing the economy as a catalyst for nation building. According to a 2019 World Bank Report it is estimated that MSMEs contribute more than 60 percent to employment in low and high income countries. In Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during pre-COVID times it was estimated that MSMEs contributed about 18 percent to GDP and 60 percent to the labour force.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has always and will continue to have our MSMEs and grass root communities at heart, this is actually clearly spelled out in our National Development Plan to promote entrepreneurial culture through sustainable micro, small and medium enterprises. MSMEs operate across all economic sectors whether formally or informally and they actually remain at the pulse of a nation. The pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, compounded with *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* have tested our resilience, our grit and our determination as Fijians like never before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that under the leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister we will steer clear of these turbulent waters and the revival and continued strengthening of the MSMEs will play a crucial role. Whilst we remain focused on achieving this strategic goal of

promoting entrepreneur culture amongst the MSMEs, we have remodelled and rethought ways to actually achieve this and these unprecedented times require unprecedented and innovative solutions.

In addition to our ongoing programme such as the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES), the National Export Strategy (NES), the Integrated Human Resources Development Programme (IHRDP) and the Northern Development Programme (NDD), the Fijian Government for the first time offered loan packages to MSMEs. These loans at very concessionary rates ranging from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent and this fills the void that was actually left by commercial banks and offers much needed cash injections of up to about \$21,000.

The loan packages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were also offered to Fijians who were actually laid off due to COVID-19 and wished to venture into entrepreneurship. This initiative brought together the public and private sector and public sector experts provided the much needed commercial input into the assessment process whilst the Government provided the actual funding. I thank the members of Business Assistance Fiji who laboured for free to ensure our MSMEs remained afloat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the 9,000 plus loan applications received, approximately 98 percent have been assessed with close to about \$30 million loan by the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is \$30 million of direct cash injection into the economy. This is a positive and a very remarkable achievement. However, I wish to remind this august House that this is actually a loan and meaning that this money will need to be repaid after a grace period about a year and we expect these MSMEs to honour this arrangement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the concession loans the Ministry through various MSME programmes has funded over 830,000 MSME projects in various sectors. The Ministry through the MSME Fiji and Co-operative Schemes offers business-savvy training which has helped more than 2,000 odd businesses in actually understanding their costs, pricing, the planning and forecast and post disaster business recovery, and we will continue to provide mentoring and guidance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also set up a dedicated Hotline/Help Line which is 9986014 to allow the public to access MSME related information and advice. In addition the business related guide is available on the BizFiji portal and we will continue to remain engaged with our MSMEs on a daily basis through routine visits.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Cooperatives team have just returned from Cicia. Last week they undertook business advisory and monitoring, and also registered a women based cooperative that actually processed virgin coconut oil and will diversify into retail soon. So we hope to further assist these cooperatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by locking them into the Fijian Made family to provide great market access.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what my Ministry is doing for MSMEs, we are not sitting in the comfort of our offices. We are actually here to serve the Fijian businesses and we will continue to do so and given our feet and heart is closely planted to the ground will make more meaningful impact and we cannot do this alone. That is why we will continue to dialogue with our development partners and relevant Ministries to assist. Just recently, the Ministry participated in the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation Country Programme and Framework review where we discussed new opportunities to strengthen agro tourism and these are new innovative ways to continue to evolve and MSMEs need to take stock and be ready for business and we actually open our borders.

The Ministry actually plans to submit more project proposals in conjunction with international aid division of the Ministry of Economy, to donor agencies emphasising the role of MSMEs in agriculture and tourism.

Our support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will continue and more so in light of the *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, especially in the North through the NDP will be processing applications and releasing funds soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been very proactive and once again have partnered with International Finance Corporation to conduct the business in fact survey, post *TC Yasa* and based on the preliminary results from more than about 1,500 respondents that is estimated that businesses have suffered around more than 25 million odd dollars in losses and damages.

All in all, despite our hard times, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will remain positive and forward looking with the right support in targeted areas will continue to create an enabling environment for MSMEs and the wider business community.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in going forward, we have a number of reforms that will continue to improve the business environment, especially for MSMEs and we are working on the finalisation of the MSME Investment Bill and the amendments to the Cooperative Act.

Mr. Speaker, I intend to make a Ministerial Statement later on this week, in which we will elaborate in a critical role the Ministry has actually playing in economic recovery. I thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his statement and reply to the question. Honourable Minister, I must welcome you back to the House. You are looking trim, slim but I leave it at that.

Honourable Members, the third Oral Question for today is supposed to be asked by the Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu but it will be instead, asked by the Honourable Tabuya. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I was hoping to have the opportunity for supplementary questions in the previous question by the Honourable Minister, I just want to clarify if that is still available, Sir?

HON. SPEAKER.- I think you should just take this question now. You have to be quick regarding this, to take the question that you have now.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the pleasure of speaking in place of the Honourable Leader of Opposition and you should take that.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Very well, Sir.

Fiji's Country Partnership Agreement 2020-2024
(Question No. 03/2021)

HON. L.D. TABUYA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications provide an update to Parliament on the arrangement of the \$1 billion loan from the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation under the Country Partnership Agreement 2020-2024?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM (Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the World Bank Group is actually a group of five international organisations namely the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), International Development Association (IDA) for grant funding, International Financial Corporation (IFC), the Multilateral Investment Credit Agency (MICA) and International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICID).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question actually somewhat misplaced because there is no \$1 billion loan to Government. There is the World Bank Country Partnership Framework (CPF), which is available, it is for public consumption. In that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will see that this Country Partnership Framework is of a period of four years and the World Bank is a billion dollar support of which US\$210 million is directly by way of loans to government and they are in the areas of Social Protection, COVID-19 Response and System Development Project, the Economic and Climate Resilience Development Policy Operation, the Catastrophe drawdown and the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Project. Even prior to the COVID-19, we believe that Vanua Levu was completely underutilised and indeed, it can serve as what we call 'second redundancy area' should something dramatic happen in Viti Levu and planes cannot land, we should have an international airport on the other island. Vanua Levu is not that much smaller than Viti Levu.

The second Economic and Climate Resilience Development Policy Operation, this is the US\$210 million which is about F\$400 million and then the balance is the \$300 million indicative amount that the World Bank through IFC has expressed for potential private sector funding where they participate by either way of equity in various projects or they actually can lend directly.

IFC as anyone who knows about the machinations within the World Bank Framework, IFC does not lend money to governments, it is the World Bank that does but IFC does actually lend to the private sector, IFC does participate in equity participation. For example, the Vision Group when it was listed, IFC actually participated in that, they actually held some shares in it and that is what they normally do, to prop up organisations.

So, that Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in a nutshell the \$1 billion Country Partnership Framework. There was in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an official press release that was put out by the World Bank and you will note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that again it reconfirms or reiterates what I have just said in respect of the facility that has been provided both to government and also to the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I sit down for any supplementary questions, we are constantly trying to get the World Bank to give us more funding through the International Development Association (IDA). The IDA entails very concessional loan terms incurring a service charge of 0.75 percent and a repayment period of 40 years, including a 10 years grace period. So, it is less than 1 percent. We can imagine a period of 40 years, obviously you may perhaps or in fact, paying less than what you borrowed.

The other loans are through the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and they are non-concessional and they charge variable interest rate, are liable which have been historically low with repayments over a period of 15 years. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Niko Nawaikula, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Will the government be using any of this money to help Fiji Airways with its loan repayments?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. With the experience regarding Fiji Roads Authority on the contract worth of \$40 million, which was cancelled due to non-compliance of the Suva Road Upgrading Project and also in terms of the capacity to implement documentation, et cetera. Can the Honourable Minister for Economy explain how the current capacity will be able to manage this particular arrangement? Thank you.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Members question actually is fundamentally flawed because it is premised on a notion that the funding was withdrawn from FRA because of non-compliance, which is completely incorrect. I actually did not want to comment on the previous motion regarding the Auditor-General's Office but there are a number of issues in respect of how they have been arriving at various conclusions. In that particular instance, if the Honourable Member stops reading the *Fiji Times*, the funding was through ADB and not the World Bank, and the reason why that funding was withdrawn was because FRA and ADB agreed for that funding to be withdrawn.

There is a particular challenge that we have actually been having, in particular with ADB and some of the other funding agencies where they go for the cheapest price. So just because a company comes along and puts in a tender, and says that they will build the particular stretch of a road at the cheapest price, but our argument is, it should not necessarily be awarded to them, because you have to look at the track record, the capacity to be able to deliver the particular project at a quality level, so we do not have to actually go back and fix up these roads within three or four months' time, or we get variations to contract which actually becomes a lot more expensive.

There is a particular project that ADB at that point in time, where if you meet the minimum qualifications, they do not look at other technical aspects, they give it to the cheapest one. So that is the reason why and we also said that the scope needs to increase or be widened when you do the technical assessments. We have agreed that we will not draw down those funds and that is the reason and unfortunately, the Auditor-General's Office again, hurried to a conclusion which is actually not correct.

In respect of the question regarding this, of course, as I have highlighted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Member, as I have highlighted earlier on, we are looking at drawing down funds for our social protection, COVID-19 Response and Assistance Development projects and we are also looking for the Climate Resilience Development Policy Operation. Please, remember, this US\$210 million is over the period of four years. The country partnership is over four years. Of course, the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Project, things have slightly slowed down there but we had been, as you know, talked about issues looking at finding a site with a longer run way, we eventually can land 737s. At the moment, our ATR-72 cannot even get on full load at the current Wailevu site. It just cannot take it, one way is not long enough, it is built between the bend of one river. Of course, we have the Economic and Climate Resilience Development Policy Operations. So we have the capacity to do so. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Tabuya, you have the floor for the supplementary question.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Minister for Housing had mentioned that in the difficulty with working with IFC was the lack of expertise that is currently

not in the country. Here the Honourable Attorney-General is talking about IFC having the bigger portion of this money for the private sector.

My question to the Honourable Attorney-General is, how are we going to guarantee that these loans are actually given out to the private sector, given that we have a lack of expertise to put together business proposals and to carry through the kind of work that will fit the IFC standards? How are we going to fill that void if we do not have the expertise to put together the business proposals that will fit the high requirements of the IFC in obtaining a loan?

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Member may not be aware but there is in fact an IFC office in Fiji, it has only opened about two years ago. There are IFC officials here. There is also a called technology which now days people are meeting over zoom and various other ways of communicating and that is how a lot of these projects are actually on foot and we continue to have those meetings. As we said, in respect of the IFC, for the housing projects, we need the contractors to actually come down, there would be investors and they want to see the site. So in that aspect of course, that has slowed down, but the work regarding IFC itself, the ability to do assessment and the ability to have the input obviously continues. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. We will move on.

Honourable Members, the fourth Oral Question was supposed to be asked by the Honourable Dr. Govind, who has reported sick today, but he has agreed that the contents of his question has already been answered in the Ministerial Statement by the Minister for Agriculture this morning. So, we will move on to the next question.

Current Status of TELS and NTS
(Question No. 05/2021)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I seek your leave in terms of, looking at the question on today's Order Paper. It is to do with the National Toppers Scheme. If allowance can be made for me to ask that question based on the National Toppers Scheme.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- He wants to change the question, Sir.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No, it is okay.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor. Do not listen to the others.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE asked the Government upon notice:

Can the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications update Parliament on the current status of the Tertiary Education Loan Scheme (TELS) and National Toppers Scheme (NTS)?

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member. That is pretty clear.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM (Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We had a discussion at morning tea time and

the Honourable Member does not want to ask about TELS as I did ask him what exactly he wanted to know. As he had indicated, he wants to know about the recent publicity surrounding the Toppers issue which we had resolved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Honourable Member is aware and was widely reported in the media that there was some, unfortunately, miscommunication by the TSLB management in respect of the administration of the Toppers Scheme. Fundamentally just to highlight some of the key issues, because we had to also look at it from a legal perspective. A Topper has to maintain a grade or a GPA of 3. If a Topper goes below that, the Topper is then put on a notice to say, "we are going below 3, please perform well otherwise you will be suspended." If they do not perform, then they are suspended. When they are suspended, then they go onto TELS. If they perform when they are on TELS, they can come back to Toppers, so the manner in which the notice was given to the individuals, the notice was actually not given to the individual students. The management of TSLB did a blast message and what we said it was administratively unfair to do a blast message.

Out of all you, four or five do not perform well, we should contact you individually. That was the main issue. Because some of the students argued and perhaps not necessarily appropriately, but they said, "If we had been given individual notices, we would have performed better." That was why we said that anyone that was suspended as a result of been given a blast message, they no longer will be suspended, they will be given the opportunity to carry on and all these Toppers will be given the opportunity to individually liaise with the management team.

That was one particular issue itself. The other issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just as an aside, that in fact emerged, is that the two Universities in particular have different GPA systems. For example, the GPA of USP, USP's maximum is 4.5 whereas FNU's maximum is 5. So if you say that 3 is applicable to everyone, then those whose maximum GPA is 5, obviously in a way is benefitting. That is one of the issues we have actually asked the Board of TSLB to look at how we can bring about some equity or level playing field in that respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they were the sort of key issues and I would like to thank, of course, the new TSLB Board for their co-operation. They met up with the students also. They have also asked the management to carry out some new changes. We also found that just in the recent past, the TSLB management had not necessarily applied all the contracts equally because when you are a Topper, you actually sign a contract and the contract does say that if you get suspended as a Topper, you are entitled to TELS. It still gets paid for but it is by way of a loan. If you are a Topper, you do not pay back anything. You simply have to work in Fiji for a particular period of time. You do not even have to work for the Government, you can work anywhere else. As long as you work in Fiji, you are contributing to your country. So, we found a couple of cases where the TSLB management, Mr. Speaker, Sir, had not applied the contract correctly, so that is also being rectified, that particular issue. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Attorney-General. Honourable Leawere, on a supplementary question, you have the floor.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In terms of labour market needs, is there a system in place to determine students who are applying for this particular area? Is there a training need analysis that the TSLB has established for the students to apply? Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Member for the question. As announced in the Budget, given the current economic situation, apart from this sort of financial imperatives, there is also the job demand imperative. So for example, if there is a glut in

doctors, we do not necessarily give any Toppers for doctors if there are too many doctors. For example, we have never given Toppers for lawyers, they can become a lawyer but they get TELS.

Obviously the tourism sector will take about three years to four years to get back to the state that we were in, hopefully God-willing, we get back the same numbers. So obviously we reduce the number of scholarships in the tourism sector because for them to do a course and then not to have a job because the tourism sector will not bounce back as quickly to the level it was. So that is how we make those adjustments.

In respect of the qualifying mark for TELS, for Year 13 for this year was raised from 200 to 250 marks to ensure people actually work hard and get those marks itself. So, assessments are done - the Ministry of Education, the economic planning people in the Ministry of Economy liaise with the Ministry of Employment, look at the market itself, what are the areas in which there are jobs or there are no jobs and that is how it is tailored to be able to ensure that people who are on these schemes actually get work easily.

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Can the Honourable Minister clarify for both Toppers and TELS, whether the full extent of what was promised by the Government still applies or has it been reduced or there is none at all?

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could please seek your indulgence. I actually do not understand what the Honourable Member is asking. If he can give a bit more clarification then I can answer it.

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- I am basically asking clarification for new applicants for both TELS and Toppers. Is the full extent still on or reduced or now, it is totally private for anyone wishing to apply?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Attorney-General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Toppers and TELS were introduced, the scheme is still there but as I highlighted, the numbers have changed. So, for example, in last year's budget we announced, going forward any new Toppers scholarships, the numbers have reduced, so we are giving to more priority areas. The numbers have reduced but those people who are awarded TELS or Toppers, they obviously have to continue, we are still paying for them. Just in terms of the statistics, I have the statistics here, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Since the inception of TELS and Toppers, we have a total of 48,579 students who have benefitted from the various scholarship programmes to date. This consists of 43,604 under the TELS and 4,095 under the National Toppers Scheme. There is about 880 who were beneficiary of various other schemes, some of the older ones, they had to continue and then finished. To date, Government has spent a total of \$747.2 million of which \$525.7 million was for TELS and \$165.9 million for the National Toppers Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are 10,004 inactive students are those who are currently not enrolled for any programme of study but can be re-activated when they return to undertake further studies. So there is an opportunity to reactivate the studies for those who have stopped. For example, Technical College students who took mechanical and electrical courses, they may have been given a full time

job during the attachment period. We have people like that. So when they do electrical course, they may go out on a work experience and people hire them, so they do not necessarily finish their course but they start working but they can come back and finish their course under the same programme later on should they wish to do so.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. The last oral supplementary question. You have the floor, Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa.

HON. RO T.V. KEPa.- In terms of policies and procedures on the Toppers Scheme, how is the review done on that, Mr. Speaker?

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- In the numbers or the policies?

HON. RO T.V. KEPa.- In the policies and procedures.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have mentioned earlier on, when we had a meeting with the new TSLB Board, they have undertaken to do a full review, it was put out also in the press release and do proper audits also. In respect of the implementation of the Government policies, I think it is not just necessarily peculiar to TSLB.

In some of the other agencies where Government has made a particular policy announcement, we find that people who are at the coal face of implementing it sometimes actually let us down. They do not necessarily follow it to its full let out to the full policy intent. So we have asked the Board to look at all the policies and ensure that it is in compliance not just only with Government policies but in terms of natural justice and procedural fairness. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, we will move on. The sixth Oral Question for today, I give the floor to the Honourable Rohit Sharma to ask Question No. 6/2021. You have the floor, Sir.

Damaged Schools and Contingency Plans
(Question No. 06/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament on the number of schools that have been damaged from *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* and the contingency plans that have been as a result of those damages?

HON. R.S. AKBAR (Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to answer Question No. 6/2021 on the Order Paper. I would like to thank the Honourable Member for this question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *TC Yasa* caused damage to about 126 schools in the Northern, Eastern and Western Divisions directly affecting 12,400 students and 890 teachers. To break it down, this includes 23 early childhood centres, 11 standalone EC centres, 73 primary schools, 90 secondary schools and of course this also included some of our teachers' quarters.

The survey and the assessment done brought to our forefront that most of the buildings that were affected by *TC Yasa* were very old in structures apart from Yadua Primary School that was built

in 2018. It could be said that most of the buildings were not in a state to withstand the gale force winds of any cyclone above Category 3.

The initial assessment was carried by the NDMO with the assistance of the Commissioner Northern and his team and the Ministry's own officers based in North and of course the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) of the Ministry of Economy. We have identified 59 schools sustaining more significant damage than the others. This included 41 schools in Vanua Levu, 17 in the Lau Group and one in the Lomaiviti Group.

Immediately after this, the Ministry and the CIU prepared a scope of works because it was decided that 30 of these schools could be quickly fixed and be ready for students before 19th January. As of today, out of the 30 schools, we have completed 27, two are currently in progress and we expect the following to be completed throughout this week: Lekutu Secondary School, Bua District School, Yadua Primary School and Dama District School (need rebuild of classrooms). We have already sent out Expressions of Interest for Lekutu Secondary School. Currently 1x9 classrooms was damaged and we had to put in temporarily learning shelters as we did for *TC Winston* but this time we make sure that these temporary learning spaces came with proper flooring so the children would not be subjected to the continuous rain that we are experiencing.

So, the expressions of interest are out and we have a preliminary meeting with the contractors next week to build a semi-permanent structure for Yadua Secondary School while the Government plans the next phase of work, that is the rebuild of it.

We have a contractor who has come on board to adopt Yadua Primary School and he is going to help us build 1x3 classrooms that was destroyed by *TC Yasa*. For Dama Primary School, the Ministry will build a 1x3 semi-permanent structure while we work on the rebuild process.

For Bua District School, the Ministry is also looking at building a 1x3 classrooms to house two streams of classes plus one ECE Center.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the funding for that came from the Ministry and, of course, we were assisted by the Australian Defence Forces who were here on the ground who helped us rebuild Galoa Primary School. So, Galoa Primary School was handed back to the Ministry on the 15th of January completed and fully fitted with new furniture.

In terms of other schools which were damaged, we had initially put in 80 learning spaces which we know as tents but these included tents for the teachers' quarters as well. We worked with the management to ensure that the teachers' quarters could be fixed, however there are some schools where the teachers' quarters could not be fixed and the teachers have found alternative housing. As of today, I made aware that there are three learning shelters used by teachers.

The way forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, assessments continue to be on the ground. We are continuing to carry out assessments. While we were doing that, came *TC Ana*. So, *TC Ana* did not do any structural damage but we had floods; 17 high schools in the Northern Division were impacted by the heavy rainfall during *TC Ana*. To date we have managed to clean the buildings but we are still awaiting clearance from the Ministry of Health as most of these buildings at the moment we feel need to be properly dried out and disinfected before we can allow the students.

There has been some damage done to furniture and the Ministry is working in arranging for new furniture to be provided to these children.

In terms of textbooks and stationeries, I have been saying this - we have had a lot of interest and assistance from our donor partners who have come on board but again, like I said, there are still some damages that *TC Ana* had done. We were ready to open schools on the 19th of January which we did but now with the damages by *TC Ana*, we are relooking at how we are going to assist these schools and students.

So, at this point in time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to put on record my sincere appreciation to the Australian Government, DFAT, the Commissioner Northern's Office, NDMO, Australian Defence Forces, our own Republic of Fiji Military Forces officers who were on the ground to see that the construction work was completed, UNICEF, Vodafone Fiji Limited, Telecom Fiji, Fiji Ports Terminal Limited - Yard Division, Fiji Teachers Union, TISI Sangam, TSLB and Markaz Janseva, Fiji Muslim League, Satya Sai Service Organisation, Labasa Muslim Sports, greater Brisbane Community, Nasinu Junior Chamber, Members from the SODELPA who came on board for the stationery assistance, Max Marketing, Aqua Fiji Limited, FRIENDS Fiji and a whole lot of individuals who came up. Through their assistance, we were able to assist more than 9,000 students with school bags and a full set of stationery.

Help still continue to flood in. Today, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji representatives also gave us some donations to assist these schools and we will continue to do that.

As of today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have four active evacuation centres and hopefully these families are able to go back to their homes which were affected by *TC Ana*. We hope to normalise things by next week but again that depends on the restoration of water, electricity, opening of access roads, et cetera, and we really want to start up the schools in the North but I can assure you, should we be delayed by another week, we can assure the House that the studies of these children will not be affected.

We will realign our school terms but we want the schools and the students to be safe along with our teachers when we reopen the schools for the North. Right now, we have had a good attendance turnout for those students who have turned up in the Eastern Division, Central, and Northern Division. I am yet to get a feedback as to what percentage of students have turned up but I would like to thank all the Fijian parents for making sure that education continues to remain a priority for our children. Thank you.

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

HON. S. KIRPAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Could the Honourable Minister, please, kindly explain the support provided by the Australian Defence Force after *TC Yasa*?

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I thought that the Honourable Minister has answered that, but I will give it to the Honourable Minister to answer the question. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you. I will just keep it short. Mr. Speaker, Sir, again I would like to put on record the assistance that the Australian Government and the Defence Force have provided. The personnel from the Australian Defence Force have helped us rebuilt Galoa Primary School and right now, the students at Galoa Primary are housed in a new building. Apart from that, DFAT committed \$4.1 million in terms of Educational Assistance, in the form of provision of water tanks, generators, furniture, school stationery, building materials and, of course, the biggest assistance they provided to us was allowing us to deliver the building materials for those hard-to-reach places.

One only has to travel to these islands to understand how remote our communities are and how difficult it is to ensure that supplies and other stuff reach those islands. So that was the contribution of the Australian Defence Force. Thank you.

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- For the cost of re-construction, is this fully Government-funded or is Government looking for private and overseas sponsors?

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

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you. Like I had said, there are seven schools that have been categorised as Category 4 and Category 5. This will require a lot of new structural buildings to come up, like I said, assessments are still being carried out and at this stage, it is too early to say, how much actually the damage assessment costs are for these buildings as these buildings were pretty old. So, yes, Government has plans to rebuild schools back to better standards like we did to *TC Winston* rehabilitation programmes.

We would be willing to work with donors and partners who would love to adopt the schools, if not then these schools will be funded by the Government. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on to the next Question. Honourable Members, the next question was supposed to be asked by the Honourable Inosi Kuridrani, who unfortunately is away on Bereavement Leave and our thoughts are with him.

I have agreed that this question - Question No. 7/2021 to be asked by the Honourable Jese Saukuru. You have the floor, Sir.

Identification of Alternative Crop to Marijuana
(Question No. 07/2021)

HON. J. SAUKURU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the work by the Ministry in identifying an alternative crop to marijuana that can be taken up by farmers?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am a bit baffled with this question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, marijuana is a drug, it is illegal for consumption in Fiji. You cannot find a perfect substitute as a crop. I really do not know what they are asking for? Whenever, you have got something that is illegal and it is a drug, the market value will definitely be very high and you cannot find an alternative crop which is for consumption to be of equivalent value.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I suggest that in the next Session of Parliament that they rephrased the question and then I am happy to answer. Thank you.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Minister may need to understand this better, if I can relate to the situation in Navosa and Nadroga, where at one time there were lots of marijuana up in the hills, and the Provincial people from Navosa asked the Province to create other products for the producers to help the farmers move away from marijuana to better crops.

There is a Collection Centre in Keiyasi, but the Agriculture Department has not helped to make the Collection Centre work, Mr. Speaker, so the question is quite valid. This is coming from the people - what can we do to move off farmers away from marijuana to something better? He should answer that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

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

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do follow the work that the Fiji Police Force is doing to eradicate marijuana and we have been working with the Fiji Police Force to see how it could engage these farmers into meaningful activity which will result in them earning an income for their households, their livelihood as well as pursuing the national interest of a growing national income. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for example, in Kadavu, we are developing a nursery. The alternative crops that we are looking at have demonstrated high value and also high return, both in terms of supplying the particular crop and the products developed out of this primary produce, both in the local market and the export market, are yaqona, fresh produce, cassava, dalo and ginger. Now we are also looking at turmeric.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment the turmeric that we are exporting from Fiji is going to US, we are not able to fulfil the demand for turmeric. The turmeric that we are exporting to the US market is branded as organic because all the turmeric that we are harvesting is wildly grown, so it is basically organic turmeric, and it is fetching very high premium price.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture is working very closely with farmers, for example, in Kadavu we are developing a nursery for yaqona, we are establishing one of the state-of-the-art nursery in Nausori and another one in Koronivia. We got funds from the Canadian Development Fund of CAN\$200,000 to establish a nursery at Koronivia Research Station, basically to provide seedlings at no cost to farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are working very closely in terms of developing nurseries throughout Fiji so that we can provide planting materials, in particular seedlings in cases of these high valued crops so that we can ensure that the germination rate is 100 percent. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Honourable Member is talking about crops that have demand in the local and export markets, with high value, high return and also we can develop products out of these primary produce, for example, kava pills, a product out of kava. There are other products that we develop out of the primary trees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Honourable Member had listened to my previous speeches, I said that we need to move also towards developing products for various reasons. For example, when you develop a product out of a primary produce then the self-life can be extended, when you have a product, you can also have no issues of transportation, when you have a product, you do not have any issues with biosecurity, when you have a product, you can fetch higher price than what the produce is fetching. For example, cassava flour from the cassava produce, cassava flour is a product.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also simultaneously looking at how we can develop numerous products which can also give us additional market. To grow the market, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to shift our focus also from produce to products. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are doing work in this area so that we can create the market for our farmers so that the market is not an issue and therefore, limited market does not discourage them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you talk to anyone, the single most factor that bothers a farmer is whether there is a market for their produce or that they will be able to really get their produce out when they harvest. With regards to primary produce Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are perishable in nature so when they harvest, they need to immediately get it to the market or move it to a processing plant to process the produce so we are working very hard on that Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

I give the floor for the eighth oral question for today to the Honourable Veena Bhatnagar.

Combatting Outbreak of Diseases – Post-TC Yasa & TC Ana
(Question No. 08/2021)

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Given the threat of increased diseases following tropical cyclones, can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services advise Parliament what steps has Government taken to combat the outbreak of diseases such as leptospirosis, typhoid, dengue and diarrhoea after *Tropical Cyclone Yasa* and *Tropical Cyclone Ana*?

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these diseases are climate sensitive and certainly after the major cyclone with the water tables being up, the flooding; it is very common that they can actually cause outbreaks to happen. This has happened very significantly in the past.

In the flooding of 2012, we had more than 40 deaths from Leptospirosis alone. We have had dengue in some years that were up to 30,000 of our community in Fiji and about 10 to 15 years ago, up to 30,000 had dengue. This year, it is so important for us, not necessarily because we want to obliterate outbreaks, but certainly because we have this pandemic of COVID-19 that is lingering offshore. Because it is lingering offshore, this year is also about vaccination. One thing we do know about the vaccination for COVID-19 is that when someone has a vaccination, he or she may not necessarily be infected with the virus, but they can still transmit the virus. It is also a very vulnerable time when we begin our vaccination for COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the proxies that we use for our surveillance for COVID-19 is fever and I have discussed that in my Ministerial Statement today, but fever is also caused by Leptospirosis, Typhoid and Dengue. What we intended to do was to work very hard with the NDMO during these times of emergencies that have been declared, to try and obliterate all the possible outbreaks from happening. When we have actually minimised this to a certain level and then we begin on this large scale vaccination programme that we will begin this year, if God forbid, we have fever that pops up in the community we know that we are dealing most probably with COVID-19 and nothing else, because we have worked very hard to try and reduce the likelihood of the outbreak.

What we have done is even before *TC Yasa*, there has been a very strong public health awareness that is happening in the media whether it be printed or also on social media, working with the Commissioners, Turaga ni Koros, Rokos, PA's, DO's and also the District Advisory Counsellors on a daily basis, around the awareness campaigns that were being done.

You may be aware Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the middle of last year in between the lockdowns there was also *TC Harold* and the many clean up campaigns that have happened since. Since *TC Yasa*, we concentrated on the North but we had the comprehensive work done all throughout Fiji. Our northern teams working with the NDMO began the initial assessment, the initial awareness straight after the cyclone. I went across with the FEMAT team just before Christmas and who spent three weeks there - there was a team in Nabouwalu, a team in Wainunu and there was a team set up in Nakorovatu and we had two teams in Lekutu.

One of the FEMAT teams was specifically looking after the COVID-19 quarantine corridor that was made possible for *HMS Adelaide* when they came into Fiji and the other team worked with us. Basically what happened was - there was a comprehensive screening of all the communities on Vanua Levu beginning from one end, all the way to the other. We did Cakaudrove in three days. I was there personally with the teams, beginning on the first, second and third, all through the communities, villages and settlements in Cakaudrove and including Macuata. We went across to Rabi and worked through the whole island of Rabi. It did many things, and this is something that we saw with *TC Winston*, Mr. Speaker - that many people suffered from the trauma of the cyclone, they were sick or injured but they just decided to stay home - they were more concerned about making sure that they had a roof over their head, more concerned about getting food, so we picked them up from the community. We brought them across.

There is a great story about a lady, who was basically gasping for air in Rabi; we picked her up, got her evacuated quickly to Labasa and now she is back home in Rabi and she is well. So, we picked up those who were sick and those who were injured - that was the whole aim. The other thing was actually working with the community leaders in identifying hotspots, getting it sprayed so our health inspectors did spraying. We also talked with them about what we wanted in terms of moving forward, in terms of reducing the sources of leptospirosis, typhoid and dengue. With *TC Ana* because it involved the whole group, we also ran this programme and because of the difficulties of access, there is a hospital team with operative capability in Nabouwalu; a hospital team with operative capability in Savusavu, there is a team in Rakiraki and a team in Sigatoka. Apart from that, we have also sent minor teams into other areas, so there is a team based in Nadarivatu, there is a team based in Korovou, there is another team based in Navua, there is a team based in Vunidawa and there are other teams elsewhere that have come from the hospital system.

The hospitals are a critical mass of staff that we can repurpose to be able to push out on the public health campaign. Mr. Speaker, before I sit down, I just saw that the Meteorological Office has sent out a statement to say that there is another tropical disturbance. I would like to remind all of us today that it may seem like a never-ending fight but we must not lose hope. Though we have these climate sensitive diseases, though we are faced with climate change and the disturbances that it brings us, we must work together to ensure that we keep these climate sensitive diseases obliterated as much as we can. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Can the Honourable Minister clarify whether or not the Australian Defence personnel were quarantined and what process of quarantine did they go through?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. They met all the requirements of quarantine. They were tested before they came. When they arrived they were tested again. They were negative and they were tested again before they went out into the community and they were negative. They met all the requirements including the 14 days.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leawere.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In terms of moving forward, as alluded to by the Honourable Minister, when schools reopen in the north, are there plans to immunise the students in terms of this outbreak of diseases, as per the question today. In terms of immunisation, are our students going to be immunised, in terms of trying to avoid these diseases in future when the schools reopen in the north, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- That is three questions. Honourable Minister, you have the floor.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you. I thank the Honourable Member for that question. Going back to the schools, Mr. Speaker, the schools have been used as evacuation centres and we work hand-in-hand with NDMO and also the Ministry of Education in ensuring that all schools, before they are handed back, are actually disinfected. When they were being used an evacuation centre, our teams visited the schools on a regular basis, they gave advice and guidance to those who were sheltering in the schools to ensure that they do not have an outbreak within the school. They give advice on OHS issues so that we do not have schools that burn down because of the place that we may be cooking.

We also disinfect the schools during that period, and when they are actually evacuated we disinfect the schools again. The immunisation programmes that we have in place for the schools, for example those who are within the schools that will happen. The normal functions of immunisation, the normal functions of vaccination, of visiting the students, of making sure that we're checking on them, the awareness - those programmes will continue. We have made sure and this is happening because of the increase that has happened to our budgetary provision which allows us to ensure that we do a normative functions well and deal with the extra normative functions of COVID-19 and in this aspect, the *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you Honourable Minister. Are there any supplementary question? Honourable Member, you have the floor.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, a quick supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the work done so far in the community and the teams that are coming around to make those tests and also distribute medicines working with the *Nasi ni Koro* and the *Turaga ni Koro* at post disaster time. My question will be just an assurance from the Honourable Minister to clarify works on the current measures put in place in terms of the disconnection or isolation of Cakaudrove from Labasa, given the road conditions, and just to give an assurance to the general public on what developments have taken place in Savusavu Hospital to become functional, given the referrals that are normally done?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- I thank the Honourable Member for that question and it is a very relevant question. What we have done, we have made Savusavu Hospital in many instances as of today, similar to Labasa. We did that after *TC Ana*, as soon as the road that went through

Nayarabale to Korotasere, we were able to move our team across. So now we have an obstetrician in Labasa, we have a physician, we have a very senior surgeon in Savusavu, we have also moved across a paediatrician looking after children and a physician from Lautoka Hospital. They have their nurses and they have been able to operate on all the emergency caesarean sections, the urgent cases that are moved through the greater Cakaudrove area and also from Taveuni that comes through to Savusavu.

When we were in correspondence they were quite happy with what is happening within the hospital, the ability of them to be able to meet those needs. As I have alluded to, we want to ensure that the access is not an issue. The same format of the team exists now at Nabouwalu, so we have a surgeon, an obstetrician, an anaesthetist, a paediatrician and a physician from Suva. They are all based in Nabouwalu as we speak – the same in Rakiraki and same in Sigatoka. We will reflect on them - the thinking is that hopefully by the end of this week, we can get the Rakiraki and the Sigatoka teams back to their bases but it seems like what is happening in the North, it might be mid-term to long term given the challenges that we have in accessibility. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move to Written Questions and I call on the Honourable Ratu Matanitobua to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

Written Question

Police Officers and Police Vehicles – Central Division
(Question No. 09/2021)

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management inform Parliament of the following:

- (a) the total number of Police Officers posted/based at each Police Station in the Central Division; and
- (b) the number of vehicles allocated to each Police Station in the Central Division

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 will table my response at a later sitting date, Sir, as permitted under the Standing Order 45(3).

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Members, question time is now over.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting and I thank you all for your attendance and your cooperation. We now adjourn until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. The sitting is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.15 p.m.