

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 26TH MARCH, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 26TH MARCH, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.36 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Honourable Members were present, except the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications; the Honourable Minister for Forestry; the Honourable Dr. S.R. Govind; the Honourable Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu; the Honourable M.D. Bulitavu; the Honourable N. Nawaikula; the Honourable S.V. Radrodro and the Honourable P.W. Vosanibola.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 25th March, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

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

Parliament Website – Inaccessible of

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I kindly inform all Honourable Members that the Parliament website is inaccessible at the moment due to some technical issues. Please, rest assured that the secretariat is working closely with Web Media and the ITC to rectify the issues. It is envisaged that the website should be accessible again within 24 to 48 hours.

Honourable Members, I thank you in advance for your forbearance and your understanding. Thank you, Honourable Members.

On the next item on the Order Paper, the first Oral Question for today, I call on the Honourable Qereqeretabua to ask her question. You have the floor, Madam.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Rehabilitation Grants for *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* Victims (Question No. 81/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management inform Parliament if victims of *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* will be receiving any rehabilitation or rebuilding grants?

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. Firstly, I need to thank the Honourable Member for the question this morning concerning victims of *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. However, I do apologise for the answer that I will give to the House and I will also justify, to help the Honourable Member and, of course, all the other Honourable Members of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honest and forthright answer to this is, I do not know. Of course, the National Disaster Management Council is mandated under the National Disaster Management Act 1998 to oversee disaster management in the country. Let me refer to what Section 35 of the Act says, and I quote:

- “(1) The Council, through the National Disaster Controller and the National Disaster Management Office, will be responsible for disaster rehabilitation programmes.
- (2) The National Disaster Management Office shall hold consultations with all Divisional and District Officers and Disaster Service Liaison Officers of all agencies when identifying areas for rehabilitation planning.”

We work according to the National Disaster Management Act 1998, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the Disaster Management Plan 1995 and let me read on what the Plan says under the title ‘Rehabilitation’, and I quote:

“RESPONSIBILITIES

The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) will coordinate the preparation of a comprehensive disaster rehabilitation plan. The office will cooperate closely with the Planning Department in order to link the rehabilitation plan to ongoing development planning. DSLO’s of all relevant Agencies will contribute to the rehabilitation plan by holding consultations within their agencies on required rehabilitation needs.”

This is why I said, I do not know as yet, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

It continues, and I quote:

“NDMO will submit the plan to NDMC within three months after the end of the emergency period.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have just concluded the emergency period in Vanua Levu on 6th March, 2021, but the Plan further explains the requirement in the Act by saying that NDMO will submit the Plan, meaning the Rehabilitation Plan, to the National Disaster Management Council within three months after the end of the emergency period.

The Plan continues to say, and I quote:

“The NDMS will evaluate the proposal and prepare a recommendation to Cabinet, including proposed funding.”

That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are yet to go through that process.

But at the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me assure this august House that there is always a thin line between recovery and rehabilitation, and most of the work, I would say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have been started and are still in progress. When we will come later to the recovery framework, we have yet, Honourable Member, to do a report and then that will lead to the recovery framework or the rehabilitation plan.

But usually, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the benefit of the House this morning, rehabilitation will always focus on four major areas. Firstly, home rebuilding. We have started with that, Mr. Speaker. Although there has not been any grants, we have deployed portable saws all over Fiji. In Vanua Levu, currently we have two of the portable saws because the other 11 portable saws are still in Lau and in Kadavu. But we are thankful to the Australian Government, that through consultation on aid coordination, we have now received four additional portable saws. It was just handed over to the Ministry last Friday and it will be deployed soon once training is conducted.

I will not go into the details but say, for example, right now in Cogeia Village where Honourable Sigarara comes from, they have already prepared frames for about eight houses. There is a portable saw now in Dreketi because there is a lot of pine in Dreketi. The Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party knows this area well and the Honourable Member also accompanied her to Vanua Levu, thankful for that. They are using all the pine in Dreketi Station so that they can also assist in the livelihood recovery. That is the other major focus of rehabilitation.

Homes rebuilding – livelihood – because farmers lost their goat sheds, farmers lost their chicken sheds, thankful to the Minister and 50:50. He will use 50 percent of the sawn timber for the benefit of the farmers including their fencing posts and so forth, and hopefully some of those will also be used for the rehabilitation of the homes.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is critical infrastructure. Again, we know the damage in the education sector but thankful to all the stakeholders. We have managed to commence the school term on 19th January, 2021. That was a big achievement, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

There are some schools that are still in tents - I think only about three or four for now. The Honourable Minister is going back there next week and the engineers are working on two of those schools right now, the RFMF engineers, and we are thankful. Now, I share the thin line, Australia is now offering \$12.5 million for the rehabilitation of schools mostly in Vanua Levu, so that is critical infrastructure.

Thirdly, on roading, the big challenge now is the Korosomo Slip and we are already going into the rehabilitation from the recovery. As I have said, there is a thin line.

Fourthly and lastly, resilience building. Those will be the four major focus areas when we will bring the recovery and rehabilitation plan but first through the Council, Mr. Speaker, Sir, then through the Cabinet and then the rest of the work will be factored into respective programmes of the Ministries. Whatever is left in agriculture, will be taken over by agriculture. Whatever is left in critical infrastructure, will be taken over by education, will be taken over by health, will be taken over by waterways and FRA and the rest goes on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that I cannot give a definite answer for now but that is the process that will go through. I have got the first draft of the final report and hopefully, we will be able to convene the Disaster Council in mid-April, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that we can proceed with the rest to Cabinet and then through the budget cycle, and the rest of the programme continues from there. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Qereqeretabua?

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the Honourable Minister for a very succinct and honest answer. The reason I want to follow-up on this question is that, I am using *TC Winston* as a benchmark because following *TC Winston*, Government gave out big grants to victims. I just want to know on behalf of the Tikina Navakasiga and Lekutu, who call me up every week asking when they might see some help. Just through you, Mr. Speaker, I am just asking if the Honourable Minister would, please, push the Council to, at least, think about food, especially for the people in the affected areas in Vanua Levu.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. All disasters are different and, again, the Council and Cabinet will decide. Let me just refer on say, homes - what was in the recovery and the rehabilitation framework way back in 2016 - the building of homes, permanent repair and rebuilding of houses in areas identified as affected by *TC Winston*. This will ensure houses are more resilient and liveable.

Recovery programmes in this area encompass both, rebuilding, including proper sanitation and the provision of necessary skills to make houses more resilient. The Government will support this priority through the Help for Home Programme, an initiative which is designed to assist families to rebuild homes that were damaged or destroyed.

A total of 30,369 homes were reported, damaged or destroyed and affected families with annual household income of less than \$50,000 are eligible for a grant of \$1,500 for partially damaged homes; \$3,000 for seriously damaged homes; and \$7,000 for destroyed homes, sufficient to build a one-room 15 square metre dwelling to withstand Category 3 winds.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation will disperse the grants so whatever came out during *TC Winston*, again, subject to the recommendation of the Council through Cabinet, was reflected in the framework and that was the implementation. It is one-off, it does not mean that, that was done only in *TC Winston*. It will be continued because it depends on the recommendations of the Council and, of course, the environment that we are in.

If other Honourable Members want to know more about the situation in Vanua Levu, they can ask Honourable Ratu Matanitobua and Honourable Saukuru. They were both in Bua and, of course, Honourable Salote Radrodoro. They have more information too about the situation in Vanua Levu.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I was always led to believe that you were the authority on Vanua Levu. I am now surprised at this new information.

(Laughter)

We move on to the second Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable Nath to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

Roadside Stalls Initiative
(Question No. 82/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport update Parliament on the impact of the Roadside Stalls Initiative since its launch?

HON. F.S. KOYA (Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to respond to the question by the Honourable Member.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Roadside Stall Initiative was actually launched in 2018 by the Honourable Prime Minister. Since the launch, we have constructed about 102 permanent, strong and durable roadside stalls throughout the country and this has actually been an investment of over \$2 million by the Fijian Government to provide Fijians with clean and standardised stalls.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Fijian knows how important our roadside vendors are to Fijian lives and everywhere in the country. They are the ones who actually sell, feed and sustain Fijian families in the communities, so running a roadside stall is not easy. It is not easy work, it is not easy to bring the goods to stalls and it is certainly not easy setting up these stalls, maintaining and running them as a profitable business. It actually takes a lot of commitment, Sir, and it takes resilience, especially in bad conditions and during severe and unfavourable weather. The Fijian Government actually ensures that these roadside structures are constructed along our highways and located in villages and settlements that fall outside the urban areas.

The Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is actually committed to promoting an entrepreneurial culture throughout the sustainable micro, small and medium enterprises. The growth of the MSMEs, as you all know, Sir, is essential for job creation and income generation, rural development and poverty alleviation, and empowerment of our grassroot communities, Sir. Roadside stalls is one of the many initiatives infused by this Government to promote on MSMEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the 102 roadside stalls constructed, 31 are located in the Central Division, 52 are located in the Western Division and 19 in the Northern Division. Most of you would have seen these stalls when driving around Viti Levu or Vanua Levu. I am happy to say, Sir, that all 102 stalls are in good condition and even during the recent cyclones and floods, have not sustained any significant damages. Why? Because we made sure that these particular structures would be build Category 5 cyclone proof, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main objectives as I had mentioned of all these stalls, Sir, need to empower the grassroot communities and provide better facilities to market their produce and we also want to gradually phase out all informal roadside stalls along the highway, Sir. So we built the 102, we have not stopped, there is a continuation with respect to these stalls. The mainstream informal operators also into the formal sector is another issue that we want to resolve and it actually creates further opportunities for business development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our Government, that actually saw the importance of these particular objectives, this Government that truly is a grassroot government and livelihood and MSME development is actually at the heart of our policies. Previous to this, I know governments actually cared enough about Fijians to bear the weather elements, the sheering heat and rain, sitting in crudely constructed stalls in some cases, with children to earn a living. This Government did, Mr. Speaker, Sir, moreover, these stalls are more than the actual structure, they motivate ordinary Fijians and give them opportunity to sustainably earn an income and harness their entrepreneurial spirit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I get calls on a weekly basis about these particular stalls ever since we started building them. The Ministry actually has been actively monitoring and evaluating the success of the implementation and the socio-economic impacts it has on Fijians. From a survey that was conducted by the Ministry Sir, and I repeat, by the Ministry, Sir, 62 percent of the vendors revealed that they earn up to

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I will get to you in a minute, Honourable Gavoka, you misled Parliament yesterday again.

From a survey conducted by the Ministry, Sir, they earn up to \$50 on a daily basis and 19 percent to up to a \$100 daily and an additional 19 percent more than \$100 daily. So that is pretty good income, Sir, from these stalls.

Majority of these vendors operate from Thursday to Sunday in selling agricultural and fisheries commodities. In the earlier part of the week, these vendors spend most of their time on their farms so by providing these stalls, we are also ensuring direct access to markets and cutting out the middlemen, meaning those farmers who toiled the land are able to reap the rewards of their labour through some maximum profit, Sir.

Through this initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to say that we have actually directly supported the livelihood of approximately 1,300 Fijians, and approximately 56 percent of the beneficiaries are women, who co-share the stalls with other women vendors or are in the same household. These stalls can be occupied by a group or actually by an individual.

An example of communal use is demonstrated in Nabouva Village in Wainibuka, Sir. The village population is just over 200 and there are 71 households. The village headman is the representative of all the farmers in Nabouva Village and households can take turns to sell their produce from the stalls located within the village, Sir.

Most vendors, Sir, have highlighted that the provision to have all the stalls has led to benefits such as:

- (1) reduction in the cost and time of travelling;
- (2) selling produce from a municipal market gives them an alternative venue;
- (3) increased sustainable income because they have more time to work on their farms rather than actually travelling to an urban centre;
- (4) increased access to market as they are located close to the highway or an area where there is ample traffic on the road; and
- (5) greater access also to fresh produce by the commuters on the highways, as it is hygienic and safe place to sell their commodities from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has embarked also (and this is important) on a Public Private Partnership (PPP) model, constructing more of these roadside stalls with the support of our partners and friends in the private sector and development partners.

Just last week, Sir, the Indian Government came on board, and I take this opportunity again to say 'thank you' to them for their partnership in constructing two roadside stalls and we will be constructing these stalls in the Western and Central Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this august House, I call on our friends and our partners in the Diplomatic Corp and private sector partners to assist as much as they can so that we can reach out to many more Fijians, especially at the time when they actually need us. This not only gives us an ideal marketing opportunity but the opportunity to make a difference by economically empowering Fijians in sustaining their long-term liability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, quickly just to clarify, Honourable Gavoka stood up yesterday to clarify some issues, when he got it wrong once again, Honourable Speaker, Sir, and I need to say this, Sir, because this information goes out to the general public. He made reference yesterday to the website: electionguide.org which apparently gives a rundown of all Election results in Fiji since 1999.

The Website that the Honourable Gavoka referred to showed that the voter turnout in 2014 was 83.97 percent. This is incorrect as the turnout in 2014 was 84.6 percent. International Development Association (IDA) maintains an Election records database that is actually referred to by electoral practitioners and researchers around the world. It is called the voter turnout database and among other countries, this maintains the statistics on Fijian Elections 2014. The database shows the voter turnout as 84.6 and for 2018 shows the turnout is 71.9 - both of these figures are accurate.

The statistics for the 2006 General Elections showed that the voter turnout was 64 percent. What Honourable Gavoka said was incorrect. The Electoral System used at that time was the alternative voting and there were 479,674 voters registered and 307,004 votes were cast according to the IDA.

Honourable Speaker, Sir, further to that, the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) also reports that approximately 64 percent of registered voters turned out to vote.

Another source of information is *Wikipedia*, Sir, and the statistics on *Wikipedia* shows that the turnout for the 2006 General Elections was 64 percent. As a rule, and I do not want to rely on *Wikipedia*, Sir, but as a source of information, it does corroborate with the other two websites so based on the data from IDA, ElectionGuide.org has now actually updated its record to be exactly what we were saying, so it was 100 percent incorrect, Sir.

International Development Association's voter turnout base is an accurate and reliable source for information and its data is correctly reflected on *Wikipedia* as well. As any other website that has been referred to, Sir, it must be checked for its accuracy, and this applies across-the-board for everything that we actually come and say in this House, Sir. Get your facts correct, get your data checked for accuracy.

HON. MEMBER.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Take a seat, all of you.

Honourable Members, we are on question time. The normal procedure is, if you want to make a clarification like this, you should clear it with the (Honourable) Speaker. You have already

done it so I leave it at that, but that is the normal procedure because we are still into this question and there might be an alternative supplementary question to be asked. Is that what you want to do, Honourable Bulanauca?

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. Are there any plans to build a temporary market in Nakasi for those who have been displaced?

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If the Honourable Member is talking about the market he is asking the wrong Minister, Sir. The Honourable Member needs to ask the Honourable Minister for Local Government respectively.

HON. SPEAKER.- We move on. Honourable Member, take your seat.

The third Oral Question for today, I give the floor to the Honourable Ratu Navurelevu. You have the floor, Sir.

Efforts to Combat Endemic Diseases
(Question No. 83/2021)

HON. RATU T. NAVURELEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on efforts to combat the spread of typhoid, leptospirosis, dengue fever and diarrhoea in the aftermath of *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*?

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

Mr. Speaker, whenever leptospirosis, typhoid and dengue is brought up in this august House, I am pleased that we are raising the awareness on this endemic disease. This has been in Fiji for decades and we cannot run away from it. It is climate sensitive, we cannot change our coordinates and we are locked in at the 180 degree meridian.

These climate change sensitive diseases will continue to be with us and we need to continue to work together day in and day out, to make sure that we are on top of it. I was talking to a colleague from the Caribbean last year, Mr. Speaker, I believe it was Granada, and I stand to be corrected, and he said normally with dengue they would have it within the three months during their rainy season. In the past four years they had dengue in and out for four years because it was just absolutely wet and rainy all throughout. Again, as I have said I am thankful that we are raising awareness about this.

Mr. Speaker, the phenomenon of this disease outbreaks has, I have alluded to, is because they are climate sensitive and naturally we will have these cases but instances of extreme weather events or natural disaster, the intensity, the magnitude increases the risk drastically. Studies have found that long term climate warming tends to favour the geographic expansion of several infectious diseases and the extreme weather events helped create opportunities for more cluster disease outbreaks. *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* brought damaging winds, storm surges and volumes of rain that decimated and affected significant parts of the country.

Mr. Speaker, from the public health perspective this means that the impact creates new breeding habitus for disease vectors. In addition, existing WASH facilities were at risk and this can often lead to damages such as power supply which often leads to deterioration of food quality and food spoilage.

Mr. Speaker, with *TC Yasa* we recorded 207 cases of leptospirosis with four deaths; 505 cases of dengue fever, 1 death; 65 cases of typhoid and no deaths and 3,019 of diarrhoea diseases. With *TC Ana* there were 332 cases of leptospirosis with nine deaths, 1,242 cases of dengue with one death and 34 cases of typhoid with one death.

Our Ministry has been prepositioning itself so when the disasters were coming and we were meeting, we made sure that we actually preposition not only in terms of our asset but also in our terms of our human resource in having FEMAT put into these places before the disaster actually struck, but also the WASH capabilities in readiness when the disaster is finished. Our strategy is awareness and advocacy with the health teams which constitute doctors, nurses and specialist staff from even the three main hospitals that have been deployed into the team. Mainstream media, social media and as I have alluded to earlier, the FEMAT deployment both before and after disaster.

As you aware, Mr. Speaker, one or two of the cyclones did not actually follow the track that was intended so, afterwards we had to reposition the FEMAT team that was on the ground. From a clinical perspective the clinicians in these divisions have advised all the health facility professionals to have a low index of suspicion for persons presented with symptoms such as fever, body ache and headache. They were also having line lists, so when a person actually came with these symptoms and they were, for example, mild in nature, they wrote their names and phone numbers, whereas those that had moderate to severe symptoms were actually admitted into the health facility. The next morning they would actually call them or ask them to come back for review and that is what we mean by line list.

Our infectious disease specialist physicians based at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) continuously during this period, and up until now, do regular weekly lunch hour zoom sessions with these clinicians in the periphery and this enables continues awareness of these diseases.

To conclude, I urge all of us in this august House and members of the public that we should all be aware of the presence of this climate sensitive disease in Fiji. We also have to recognise their proliferative outbreak levels especially after natural disasters, and we all have our roles to play in terms of source reduction. We need to make sure that our surroundings are clean. We need to make sure that our crucibles that can contain water are overturned or put away so that we can be able to get on top of it. Also when someone is feeling sick at home especially leptospirosis with young men, when they are sick they need to actually go straight to the hospital as quickly as possible.

Mr. Speaker, I want to finish by saying that it is also disconcerting that during this period we saw pictures of young children actually jumping into flooded rivers and drains. You know it is important to understand not only the risk of drowning but by doing that then they run a risk of getting leptospirosis and other climate sensitive diseases.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi, you have the floor.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for his response to the question raised this morning. We know that these diseases are on the rise and can have deadly impacts in our rural communities. My question is; what action is being planned by

the Ministry to ensure that our rural community nurses and *Turaga ni koro* being informed on what preventative measures the community should undertake to ensure lesser spread of these diseases?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The widespread communications strategy includes visiting these villagers, for example, in your village in Verata yesterday, I just saw our staff doing Perifocal Spraying. So, we actually visit them and I have been involved with quite a lot of them. We sit down and we talk to the *Turaga-ni-koros* and community health workers.

After *TC Yasa* up in Vanua Levu we gave them a sheet of A4 paper which included the important things they need to watch out for and the phone numbers of health staff that they could contact. The phone number were both in Vodafone and Digicel so that they are able to contact them.

What is becoming very apparent is that there are some settlements, communities and villagers which, despite the many visitations, do not have the urge as other villagers have done. You know again I ask us all in this august House to be able to help the Ministry of Health because the Ministry of Health staff are continuously going out into the community providing awareness, helping with sanitation in terms of building latrines, but we need to be able to ask the leadership within the settlements and the communities to take heed of the advice.

One thing that the community health workers have raised with me is that women feel that sometimes their voices are not heard. I think it is important that we encourage our village leadership to understand that they are the point of contact for the Ministry of Health and the advice that they give, they give not because of themselves, but they give it on our behalf. We have trained them, we provide ongoing workshops for them and they are our focal points within villages and the settlements and they must also listen to the advice and do what is necessary in terms of source reduction. Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I hope the Honourable Member will help us in this regard. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you we will move on to the fourth Oral Question for today. I call on the Honourable Rohit Sharma to ask Question 84. You have the floor.

Biodiversity Park at Kalokolevu Village
(Question No. 84/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the recent establishment of the Biodiversity Park at Kalokolevu Village?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, some three decades ago at the global level an alarm was raised that our biodiversity was under threat. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1992 noting that, Fiji government joined 190 countries in signing the Convention on Biological Diversity in Rio, Brazil.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Environment is a focal point for the Convention on Biological Diversity. It aligns and adheres itself to three core objectives of the Convention, which is the conservation of biological diversity; the sustainable use of its components; and fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilisation of genetic resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, here at home, while there is not an alarm in that sense with regard to loss of biological diversity, but you will see spots where we have lost diversity in our natural resources, in

our flora and fauna. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you must have read about the fires in Amazon and in Australia which resulted in massive loss of the biological resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are species in Fiji which are endemic and are only found in Fiji and we need to ensure that we protect them and protect other diversified biological resources of flora and fauna. There are threats here as well which are man-made, induced by us as well as induced externally beyond our control such as climate change. Now, the climate change is a global phenomenon, therefore, we need to tackle it as one family, the global family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are issues generated by us, the farmers, the household sector, the commercial and industrial sector. Rising population is putting pressure for land to be converted from virgin forest for agriculture or for residential area. That is threatening our biodiversity or biological resources. Pressure for food, to source food, pressure to source timber and non-timber products is also putting pressure on our biological resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the Ministry of Environment did last year, we announced a 50-50 target on biodiversity. The 50-50 target looks at establishing 50 biodiversity parks at 50 sites. Kalokolevu Village is the first biodiversity park that we have establish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 1st March, 2021, we launched this Park where we established sitting spaces. We have established native forest trees such as Kadamu, Dakua, Kuluva, Kavuva, Yasi, et cetera. We are establishing the other 49 progressively. This will provide a place where students can go, researchers can go and tourists can go and enjoy our biodiversity and enjoy our diverse natural resources. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this biodiversity park would also become a reserve to hold our native species, our native endemic species and our native forests resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, next week, we will be launching the Biodiversity Park at Abaca Village in Lautoka. I want to call upon all the Members of this House to be ambassadors or environment champion for our course to protect our biological resources, protect our natural resources, protect and keep our environment clean, and I urge them that in their own areas and villages etcetera, they do talk to people when they have social gatherings and religious gatherings, they talk about it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the more you talk about it, you will be able to convince people to protect our biological resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are lot of sessions that we will be having next week during Easter, where we will be meeting different people and different areas, and we all, each one of us can count ourselves to be the champion for protecting our biological resources. Thank you.

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

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A supplementary question to the Honourable Minister. I understand that your plan is to establish about 50 biodiversity parks around Fiji but my question is, whether there has been any study done to determine the opportunity cost and the level of economic return on the said land against other potential economic activities, to ensure that this is the best option for the landowning units? If so, were the landowning units consulted and how can we access the report? Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the second part of his question, whether the landowning unit was consulted, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We just do not enter into someone's property and start the development there.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- I am answering the second part, I am going to come back to the first part in a second.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, our staff will visit the village and talk to them, that there is a particular area which is suitable and we are interested in participating in this programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say, that since we launched the first site outside Lami, and when it went into the media, people have started calling us, the members of the community in interior villages, asking if they could offer the space for us to come in and establish a biodiversity park there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the first part of his question asking whether that is the best use of that particular land. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we just do not choose a site where we do not or cannot have this kind of setting. It has to be a natural place where already the natural forest is there. Then we look at how we could establish where we can have tracks, we can have access to that place, whether it is a natural serene environment, whether we have that necessary required based flora and fauna.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you cannot go to a barren land and establish a biodiversity park, it will take a lot of time and resources. So, there is an initial paper done to look at what is the based natural resource there and whether they would want to utilise it for non-biodiversity park uses, agriculture or residential etcetera. If you look at Abaca Village right in the interior, it is about an hour's drive in the interior, there are two lodges there, and we are enhancing this place so that when tourists come to those lodges, they will enjoy this biodiversity park and take a good memory of that. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the villagers will benefit. But I suggest to the Honourable Member to go to the homepage of Abaca Ecological Site and then see how excited they are. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. I am just surprised that you have answered both questions. The Honourable Member is only entitled to one supplementary question, but you have done that.

Are you asking a supplementary question?

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker.

I thank the Honourable Minister. Sir, Is Namosi included in that list as well?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would be happy to get an indication of the area and the contact person and our environment staff can visit and have a *talanoa* with them. Then we would be very excited to have a biodiversity park in Namosi. Thank you.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the Honourable Minister; can you just inform this House on the sort of arrangements that you have with landowning units in terms of making sure that the biodiversity park in Kalokolevu is properly monitored to maintain that flora and fauna that you have highlighted in this House, and that it is not disrupted with pressure for food sources, et cetera, from surrounding villagers?

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

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, we do have a kind of a written understanding, with the villagers that they will protect the site. It is not binding, but a sort of Memorandum of Understanding, but there are certain things they need to do because we are investing in that particular site where we have established a small bure there. It costs us a lot of money. Overall, we spent about \$10,000 for stage one.

There are a number of stages, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of developing that park. For Stage 1, we planted native forest species, we constructed a long track of about 2 kilometres, so a lot of work was done. The casual labourers spent a month there and the architects were there as well. We planted those native trees, so there are certain requirements that the villagers need to play in terms of ensuring that we protect those trees as they grow, protect the site, no one to damage the infrastructure that we have constructed, et cetera.

There are also other issues that villages are required to deal with because when we are coming in as a Ministry and if we find that there is an issue with that village, we need to do an undertaking. I will tell you, with Abaca Village, there was a major complaint about how they are treating their dogs that are used for pig hunting. There was a major complaint to our Ministry that we are going and investing, but the villagers are mutilating the dogs and using them for pig hunting. So, they gave a written understanding.

We said that we do not want to be party to a place where we find that there is abuse of animal rights.” So there are certain things that also fall outside, that they give an undertaking before we go in and partner with them. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on to the fifth Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable Bulanauca. You have the floor.

Update on the Mining Act 1965
(Question No. 85/2021)

HON. M. BULANAUCA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the review of the Mining Act 1965?

HON. J. USAMATE (Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources).- Thank you. Mr. Speaker, Sir. The mining legislation in Fiji dates back to around 1908 and between 1908 and 1965, the Mining Ordinance was updated for about five times. In 1965, there was a new legislation that came in and this legislation transferred the administrative control of mineral resources from the old Mining Board to now the Mineral Resources Department (MRD). That Act was then amended in 1977, 1978 and 2016, and the Mining Regulations of 1966 was amended in 2018.

In 2002, Cabinet agreed to revise the Act. There were a lot of consultations, feedbacks were taken, there was a draft Bill that was put together in 2006 but then that did not proceed and then, again, in 2013 that draft Bill was then revised again by the American Bar Association on a *pro bono* basis and that report was presented in 2014.

Since then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the events and also given the fact that in our 5-Year and 20-Year National Development Plan, one of the goals there is, there is a sustainable mining industry and that calls for this particular sector, the sustainable mining sector that continues to drive employment, income generation, foreign exchange earnings and revenue for Government and the

NDP sets targets and timelines for this sector. Targets and timelines from 2018 to 2022 and we are very mindful of the NDP set timelines for the review of the mining legislation and in the process of doing this, we intend to be as inclusive as possible, taking into account all the significant changes and developments in the global mining sector and also the evolving dynamics of the local sector, the mining sector that we have here in Fiji.

We want to end up with a modern mining legislation which the Ministry has collaborated and consulted with the relevant donor agencies, development partners, international experts in this area and also local stakeholders. So with that in mind, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in December 2020, Cabinet was informed of the progress to review the Mining Act and Fiji's Mining Policy of 1997. It also endorsed the review of the old Act and also to look at the Bill that was proposed in 2006 and, again, reviewed in 2013 and also to relook at Fiji's Mineral Policy.

This review will be assisted by an organisation called the Inter-Governmental Forum (IGF) on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development, that is often referred to as the IGF. The IGF which is assisting us in this work is a leading global intergovernmental policy forum on mining and sustainable development. They will also assist in capacity-building our Ministry staff in the area of resource governance. We are very grateful to IGF for coming on board to provide their technical expertise.

Following Cabinet approval, we have set the following timelines in the Ministry:

- Consultations and review to commence from December 2021 and you would have seen our staff have already done that. Some of that has appeared in the papers already.
- The reviewed Act to be enforced and the enactment process should commence by December 2022. That is also a target that we have in our NDP.

There is already a three phase workplan in the Ministry that the management staff of the Ministry have put together. These are:

- Phase 1 includes sending of formal notification to our consultant, IGF, which was already done in February 2021. A letter of agreement has been executed and signed by both parties. That letter summarises what needs to be done as part of this exercise and we have also commenced the carrying out of stakeholders consultations that was carried around Viti Levu and also in Vanua Levu.
- Phase 2 will be the publication stage where IGF provides its report. The draft Bill is revised and finalised and then it goes to the process of going to Cabinet and ultimately to Parliament.
- Phase 3 will be the capacity-building stage or the implementation stage once the Bill has been completed and the Act has been enacted. There will be training that has to be undertaken, awareness that needs to be undertaken for all the stakeholders in the country.

All these works are part of the Government's roadmap to democracy and sustainable socio-economic development. It will see an overhaul of the environmental provisions of the Mining Act and this should do two things; first of all, to try to reduce the regulatory burden on the tenement holders or those that have areas in which they do mining while at the same time, strengthen and improve environmental management in the mineral exploration and mining industry. We want to vigorously promote the mining sector and provide potential investors with a clear, stable and transparent guide to investing in Fiji's mining and mineral sector. We aim to provide a secure, stable and friendly investment platform.

Mining brings benefits, including direct and indirect employment, foreign direct investment, foreign exchange and tax revenues to Fiji and the updated Mining legislation will strengthen the sector and also provide stabilities to landowners and also to investors, and during this COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the mining sector is one that has been stable, has continued to thrive and boomed, despite the conditions we found ourselves in. It has brought in much needed employment and income for our local people, tax revenue and just boosted our economic activities in Fiji today.

Just the last point to the Honourable Ratu Matanitobua in relation to that last question, I think he can take a bit of that, to be happy, that at least Kalokolevu is right on the border of Namosi. So even if you do not get something in Namosi, you can count Kalokolevu to be part of it.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- One supplementary question, Sir. I note that there has been some private consultations. Will there be any public consultation because it is important that those who miss out on those private consultations can air their views, particularly on environmental issues, on fair return to the landowners and how royalties are being paid, et cetera, in the public arena?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consultations that were undertaken, they were advertised in the papers. People were invited to come and meet the team. It happened around Viti Levu, it happened in Vanua Levu and I think that is a preliminary stage of consultations. People raised some of the issues, even though there was a draft Bill that had been developed in 2006 and that had been revised in 2013, I believe there is that draft Bill but this process will see this new agency, the IGF, come in and look at the whole thing again. But in that process, consultations were taking place, they were done in public. People were invited and they came and gave their opinion. I think as the process from now until 2022 when the new Bill is in place, there will be other opportunities for consultations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the sixth Oral Question for today was supposed to be asked by Honourable Dr. Govind but I have allowed that the question be asked by Honourable Bhatnagar. You have the floor.

Border Closure - Medical Treatment Abroad
(Question No. 86/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the measures taken to manage patients who need medical and surgical treatment abroad due to border closure?

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

Mr. Speaker, the overseas medical referral scheme has been one of the victims of the border closure that many countries including Fiji have put in place to protect our population from COVID-19 global pandemic. As I have alluded to, it is not only Fiji but many countries around the world that refer on the overseas medical treatment scheme.

We traditionally send our patients to New Zealand, Australia and India for high-end specialist medical services that are not available in Fiji. These arrangements ensure that Fijians who are eligible under the scheme get their assistance from Government to access these services at no cost or at a fraction of the total cost of this treatment. This is also in addition to those who are going through private providers. As we know that it is estimated that anywhere in between 15 percent of working

Fijians have private insurance. So what I am talking about specifically here is those who are going through the Fijian Government Scheme.

Since the pandemic, we worked hard to negotiate with overseas hospitals, Ministries of Health in overseas country missions, in Fiji the avenues to facilitate the transport patients to target hospitals overseas that can treat our patients safely and effectively. A lot of these countries that we have been discussing, in the interim they stopped us from being able to go across and then when that became available, the opportunity to go, there were certain restrictions including the need to actually go into quarantine. These referrals are made with due consideration of the severity of the patient's disease and the requirement for timely treatment and medical intervention to ensure maximum benefit. While balancing the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus, to the benefits of the treatments sought.

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I would like to highlight that what happens is, when someone is referred for an overseas treatment then that referral, when it is addressed to the Permanent Secretary is then put across to a multi-disciplinary team of specialists who actually go through it and discuss with their colleagues overseas, to ensure that the referral actually has a benefit. We have had in the past, for example, patients who already have cancer that has spread to many parts of the body who have been denied on the basis so that the going across overseas will not actually lengthen their time of survival. So there is a particular process that has to go through.

We are grateful that the New Zealand Government since 2020 has been accepting our patients after initial hold ups and in spite of its strict border restriction policies in place, and in particular for our babies and children who need urgent treatment overseas. These patient transfers have been made possible through the New Zealand Medical Treatment Scheme and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAT) that funds the cost of this treatment in specialist hospitals in New Zealand.

We are also grateful that we are working with the New Zealand Health Ministry and they have approved some of our patients, due to the severity of the illness to spend their quarantine in the hospitals in New Zealand while they are undergoing treatment instead of the mandatory 14- day quarantine in the managed isolation facilities at the New Zealand border.

Again, I just want to highlight what happen is, we actually have to apply for a quarantine space. That is what happens. You have to apply to New Zealand for a quarantine space. They will then tell you back that the space is available, for example, next month at this particular time. Then you can then work on your itinerary, so you can see, for critical patients, that is not going to work. So we are very thankful that the Ministry of Health in New Zealand allows us to send these critical patients directly into their hospital system and quarantine them.

From January 2020 to March 2021, we transferred 10 patients to New Zealand and also from February 2021 after regular assessment of the global COVID-19 pandemic, with ongoing negotiations, the Ministry has started to transfer patients to India. We managed to send two across and we have another 11 patients that we are now organising to send across to India.

The Ministry is also currently organising for the transfer of another two patients to India and the total cost of the overseas transfers to both India and New Zealand is about \$110,000. The majority of these patients that are sent overseas are for specialist treatment for congenital heart disease, cancers and chronic heart disease. It is the intention of the Ministry to ensure that all overseas transfers organised by the Ministry are safe and efficient given the many challenges brought on by the global pandemic.

For patients who for various reasons cannot be transferred during this time, they are continually followed up and treated in our hospitals by our local specialists and would be considered

for overseas transfers once there is a favourable assessment of the global pandemic situation and their physical condition allows for long term travel. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister.

We move on to the seventh Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable Rasova to ask his question. You have the floor.

Impact of COVID-19 on IUU Fishing
(Question No. 87/2021)

HON. S.R. RASOVA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Fisheries inform Parliament on how COVID-19 has impacted Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing in Fiji waters?

HON. CDR. S.T.KOROILAVESAU (Minister for Fisheries).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I would like to thank the Honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to inform this august House that Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is a broad topic as it covers the whole spectrum of fishing and fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know the extent and the implications of COVID-19. Apart from losses of jobs, many have toiled land and looked towards our marine resources for sustenance and basic livelihood. At a global scale, the limitations from these restrictions have brought new considerations with regard to social distancing and travel restrictions. This has significant impact on fisheries activities in the areas of monitoring, control and surveillance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the offshore fisheries sector, this is a particular worry for small and developing countries across the region that is vulnerable to IUU fishing.

Honourable Speaker, lockdowns have resulted in reduced capacity for effective monitoring, control and surveillance of fishing activities. Global reports indicate that fishing operators are able to keep operating, are well-versed with these limitations and there are risks that may adapt their operation to engage in illegal activities.

In Fiji's case, Mr. Speaker, we are fortunate to be aware of these challenges due to the regional and sub-regional arrangements with the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). Generally, as a region and with legislative and operational procedures that are being implemented in Fiji, we are able to mitigate and adapt efficiently to COVID-19 and effectively deliver our roles in combatting IUU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on illegal component of IUU which includes offences such as fishing without a licence or conducting illegal transshipment at sea, our reports and assessment indicated that with the offshore sector, there has not been any illegal fishing activity recorded throughout the COVID period. Mr. Speaker, this is through the mandatory compliance measures that are enforced within the region in which Fiji is a key player. This message includes:

- (1) being equipped and updated robust and fit-for-purpose offshore legislation with substantial fines that act as deterrent.
- (2) Having the needed workforce capability to implement and enforce these laws.

- (3) Ability to monitor fishing fleets in Fiji Fisheries waters and in the region through the Vessel Monitoring System and IAES.
- (4) Ability to implement stringent Port State Control under clear guidelines of the FAO Port State Measures Agreement.
- (5) Use of electronic monitoring system or cameras on board vessels to monitor fishing activities and the monitoring of vessels through the FFA Regional Surveillance and the Fiji Navy and Fisheries.
- (6) Our ability to seize, detain and investigate any vessel suspected of conducting illegal fishing in Fiji.
- (7) Our ability to exercise these control measures has become a deterrent to illegal fishing fleets.

Honourable Speaker, under the unreported component of IUU, the Ministry continues to implement 100 percent reporting for all of Fiji and foreign fleets that either enter, exit Fiji's fishery waters for fishing or innocent passage, enters Fiji's waters with the intention of using Fiji's ports, facilities and for those that enter Fiji's waters due to emergencies.

Apart from these reporting tools, there is a 100 percent boarding and inspections on all fleet visiting Fiji ports. Under this activity, mandatory reporting requirements are inspected and verified by our port inspectors. This includes inspection of fishing logs, engine logs, electronic equipment and a sweep of the vessel.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was highlighting the two components of IUU, I have touched on Fiji's ability as a sovereign State to regulate and control the fishing activities within our waters, and the extent that we have on our fleets that fish outside Fiji's waters. These are regulatory mechanisms that are in place to ensure that we eliminate the white subject of IUU.

I would like to clarify that we have tools and measures in place to track all fishing vessels that operate in Fiji's EEZ and throughout the region, contrary to the comments by Honourable Rasova yesterday in this august House. This is made possible through the innovative technology such as the Vessel Monitoring System. Secondly, the joint regional surface and aerial patrols. Thirdly, having the ability to view fishing activities on board vessels using electronic cameras.

Mr. Speaker, I am highlighting this because I have been in these surveillance centres and I know what is involved. All vessels are monitored and analysed in three different centres, namely:

- (1) Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) in Honiara;
- (2) Control Centre in the Fiji Navy; and
- (3) Control Centre in the Ministry of Fisheries.

All vessels have mandatory requirements internationally to install and approve tracking systems and these are monitored through all the three centres. As soon as the vessel approaches an area which is not licensed, the colours that indicate the vessels' positions change from green to ember, when the ember alert is sent out, further analysis is conducted on the vessel and the vessel is monitored until it exits or arrives into a port facility for further inspection. If the vessel is suspected to have conducted an illegal activity then the colour would change from ember to red, at which the vessel will be flagged and investigated by enforcement agencies.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, when we see the US, Australia, New Zealand, French patrol vessels come alongside our ports, these are whole part of joint patrols that ensure that effective surveillance is undertaken. I would recommend that if any Member of this august House wishes to visit any of these surveillance centres, I would be more than happy to organise that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I am confident to say that with our effective monitoring control surveillance activities, we are able to efficiently regulate the work that we undertake, supported by our ability to enforce our national laws. Having this ability, Fiji is the leader in the region. We are effectively able to regulate fishing activities that occur within our area of sovereignty.

Mr. Speaker, for our inshore fisheries, it is of the same but basically it is just within our local areas so it is treated differently. A recent study conducted in Bua, Cakaudrove, Lomaiviti and Ra Provinces indicated that out of the 26 villages that were assessed, 38 admitted to having committed illegal fishing. This is evident in most areas where job losses have resulted in an influx of individuals resorting to fishing for sustenance.

In being considered, Mr. Speaker, intensive compassionate, compliance operations were undertaken, which basically means that the Ministry of Fisheries does not go out and dish fines. We basically give them a warning knowing the situations that Fijians are going through at this very time. To guarantee that we continue to regulate the increase in fishing effort, the Ministry's Inshore Fisheries Management Division conducted 1,140 inspections from January to December, 2020.

The finding indicated that out of 297 infringements documented, the percentage or compliance rating was 74 percent. This showed that despite the impacts of pandemic, Fijian showed voluntary compliance with existing regulations.

Mr. Speaker, in summary, Fiji's domestic fisheries has its own challenges. While we are successfully addressing the vast impact of IUU and COVID restrictions are affecting our ability to assess main markets, this is evident with our small scale coastal fisheries and the offshore tuna sector. Our goal is to mitigate and identify suitable option to gain access to domestic and international market. This will further allow us to grow our economy.

Mr. Speaker, in concluding, the Ministry of Fisheries will advance our efforts in ensuring balance in the sustainability of our marine resources. We are determined to maintain food security and energise the domestic economy through a well-managed fisheries. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on. The eighth Oral Question for today, I call on the Honourable Selai Adimaitoga to ask her question. You have the floor, Madam.

Aids to Navigation (AtoNS) for Maritime Islands
(Question No. 88/2021)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport update Parliament on the Aids to Navigation (ATONS) for the maritime islands?

HON. F.S. KOYA (Minister for Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport).- Thank you , Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the Honourable Member for the question, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, about 90 percent of the world's commodities are actually carried by international ships, there is actually no second guessing as to how important our maritime shipping sector is, Sir.

Domestically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we rely on Inter Island Shipping as our main means of transport connecting outer islands to the main ports, towns and cities encouraging movement of people and economic activities and actual movement of cargos.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot emphasise how important shipping is to the livelihoods of the people in the Pacific, particularly here in Fiji.

According to the Safety and Shipping Review in 2020, there are about 1,036 total losses over the past 10 years and 30 ships lost were caused by foundering or sinking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can see that shipping safety is paramount and what I am actually discussing is really important, which is Aids to Navigations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you can see that Wednesday is actually a most common day for shipping-related losses, about 169 vessels in the last 10 years globally.

For the benefit of everyone in this august House and for everyone watching today, Sir, the term 'Aids to Navigation (AtoNS)' is actually used to refer to devices that come outside the actual vessel - external capacity, Sir.

AtoNS include the buoys everyone will see, beacons, lighthouses, light ships, radio beacons, folk signals, marks and other devices that are used to provide what we would commonly refer to as street signs on the waters. They are actually designed to operate hand-in-hand to safe and effective navigation of vessel traffic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before, Fiji being the regional leader for maritime safety, is actually committed to complying to international best practices and this is because we are serious about our responsibilities under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).

The International Association for Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) and the international organisation responsible for standardising AtoNS, Sir.

In Fiji, as provided in the Maritime Transport Act, 2013, Sir, Aids to Navigation include about four things. Any light ship and any floating or other light exhibited for the guidance of ships, any description of a signal not carried on a ship or marks, beacons and signs, aid safety of navigation and any electronic or other aid to navigations not carried on board or any ship.

The Maritime Transport Act, Sir, and its corresponding maritime regulations set out the standard and also the requirements for the establishment, the maintenance, their operation, alteration, removal or relocation of this particular Aids to Navigation within Fiji waters.

The laws also in Fiji allow private owners to install Aids to Navigation but oversee with the approval of Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji we have 1,140 Aids to Navigation around the country and these include 71 lighthouses, 60 navigation buoys, 15 life beacons and 1,012 day beacons that provide marine navigation for all the ships in the waters.

These are strategically located, Sir, at Lami, Navula Passage, Vio Island, Momi, Levuka and particularly, the lighthouses, buoys and beacons that are mainly located in harbours, ports and jetty areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the safety of each maritime traveller is of paramount importance to the Fijian Government and we continue to make sure that we repair and maintain this particular Aids to Navigation and it is actually critical to our work.

The Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, through the Government Shipping Services, Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF) and NFR also work in collaboration to rebuild and actually repair these Aids to Navigation that were damaged during tropical cyclones and those that are due for maintenance.

The Government Shipping Services (GSS), through Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji and Government actually ensures continued budgetary support for the up-keep of these Aids to Navigation, Sir.

Our seas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, unlike the roads and highways, we do not have any actual signs to show locations or the route or distance to a destination - all the hazards along the way therefore these Aids to Navigation were actually required to determine a safe course of navigation.

They play a critical role in our domestic economy and obviously provide safe passage to Fijians in maritime and communities to connect them to the markets and to ensure that help and relief reaches them quickly and safely, especially in times when they need it the most, Sir.

One other example, Sir, are the kava farmers from Kadavu who are able to load their commodities at night, which reaches the main town centres in the morning, and additionally these AtoNS ensure that our fisherfolk are able to go out and fish confidentially at night.

During *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, we were able to quickly deploy relief assistance and essential services at night to these affected areas and all these critical services, Sir, (Sorry, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister just cracked a joke, which I understood) would not be possible without these AtoNS. This is actually a commitment by the Government, Sir, it is actually enshrined in our National Development Plan. I hope that answers the question and gives the House some information.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable O'Connor, is that a supplementary question?

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Can the Minister explain the recent accident involving Goundar Shipping and the fishermen on the fibre boat at Nabouwalu? Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you, Honourable Member, for the question. The accident did not relate to AtoNS. There is a difference between AtoNS and navigation aids. If you are talking about AtoNS, AtoNS are guidance devices that are outside the vessel and the navigation aids are within the vessel, which actually master to navigate the vessel. So this particular

incident is still currently under investigation, Sir. We have to be very thorough when these things happen and we will have a report shortly, Sir, and I will let you know.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. One more question. The Honourable Veanathan.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Looking at the number of AtoNS we have that are to be looked after by Fiji, my question is: Is the allocated budget sufficient for the upkeep of these navigational systems?

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is where we are planning, and prioritisation is actually very important, Sir, and that is what the Government is actually doing, to address and ensure that there is maximum utilisation of the allocated budget to the priority AtoNS. We continuously upgrade and the Ministry of Economy is quite well aware of the safety issues that need to be paramount with respect to this particular area, and we do generally end up getting what we want because it is the safety issue that is paramount. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, that brings to an end the Oral Questions. At this juncture, we will take a short adjournment for refreshments. We will resume in half an hour's time. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.03 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.31 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue.

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, each Member may speak for up to 10 minutes, with the 10- minute response for the Minister or Ministers responsible for the subject matter of the Member's speech. No seconder is required and there will be no other debate.

I now call on the first Member for his End of Week Statement, the Honourable Professor Prasad, to deliver his Statement. You have the floor.

Medicine Shortage and Procurement Processes

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Over the last few years, patients visiting our public health and medical facilities, have repeatedly been told of lack of basic medicine. They have been told to buy them from private pharmacies. We have evidence of patients even those with serious illness, being told to buy medicine from private pharmacies before they can get treatment. This is also true for patients who need blood tests. Only a handful of blood tests are successfully done.

Three weeks ago, Mr. Speaker, a taxi driver was told to have a basic kidney function test. The doctor who treated him said he should have done it privately because it would not be done at CWM Hospital. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very prominent private practitioner messaged me to say that there has been no CT Scan at the Lautoka Hospital since October last year, and all cases are being referred to the Zen's Medical Centre. Out of curiosity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the taxi driver went to CWM Hospital and, yes, he was told that they could not do the test, and I am told that cases are referred to the Oceania Private Hospital.

Two weeks ago, a mother took her son to the Tamavua Health Facility. He had tonsillitis and an injection, but the doctor told the mother to buy penicillin benzathine medicine from a private pharmacy as the health facility had none in stock. Penicillin benzathine is commonly referred to as 'benza' as some of us know. It is used to treat a wide variety of bacterial infections, including rheumatic fever, but it is not available.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why are basic medications not available at all times? Why are our citizens told to buy medication that should be on the essential drug list of Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services. This lack of basic medication is also affecting those on Free Medicine Scheme. There are supposed to be 142 medications on the free medicine list, but how many are available? Are all our health and medical facilities, including private pharmacies, who are supposed to disburse free medicine from this list lack basic drugs?

For some time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the three of us in the National Federation Party as Members of Parliament, have been inundated with complaints about the lack of medication and basic care at hospitals. We have heard and seen for ourselves of family members and relatives taking pillows, blankets, linen, bandages, plasters and other basic consumables, Mr. Speaker, that normally should be available at our hospitals at all times. The latest is the case of metformin, a basic drug used to treat Type 1 diabetes. It has not been available now for some months.

Last year, there was a shortage of another diabetes medication, glipizide. We are told of a worldwide shortage of metformin, we are also told that there are alternatives to metformin.

Scientifically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, metformin has proven to be the most reliable and safest drug to treat Type 1 diabetes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no alternative to metformin in our public hospitals and health centres, as claimed by the Permanent Secretary. Glipizide and metformin are two different drugs. Metformin is the vital component in almost every diabetes tablet available here. We have discovered that four types of medication cannot be accessed on repeat, that is, only once. Then how then they have to be bought? For example, Mixtard retails at more than \$22. How can people who are unemployed, those living in poverty and diabetic persons afford such medication?

Then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is metformin-based tablets like, saxagliptin, a generic drug, but also effective. It costs \$1 a tablet for \$20 in a packet. A diabetic person will have to spend a minimum of \$30 per month if he or she takes a single tablet per day. There is Sitagil brand also costing almost \$1 a tablet for 18 tablets in a packet.

So you can see, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that these are highly expensive tablets beyond the reach of even decent income earners, as they all cost over \$100 per packet. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it does not stop here, our investigation has established that surgeries and palliative care for patients have also been affected due to the lack of opioids or drugs, like morphine and pethidine. The lack of these drugs that are imported under licence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is unacceptable. These are used for palliative care, mostly for terminally-ill patients, as well as those with severe pain symptoms.

We have also discovered that patients suffering from cancer are not treated at CWM Hospital because of no stock of chemotherapy drugs. We have found out that recently, eight cancer patients were given prescriptions to buy their drug privately and then come for treatment. Each patient spent more than \$800 for a single treatment. They had to pay a private pharmacy to get the chemotherapy medicine. Basic antibiotics, like doxycycline, are not available.

A few weeks ago, a patient forwarded a prescription from Lautoka. A patient was treated at Kamikamica Health Centre but told to get the antibiotic from Lautoka Hospital, it was not there. Mr. Speaker, this is a sad state of affairs, at a time when people try to save every cent, they are forced to pay for medicine that should be available at a click of a button at our facilities.

The Government repeatedly tells us that in the 2013 Constitution, people have more rights than ever before. Section 38 of the Constitution stipulates and I quote:

“The State must take reasonable measures within its available resources to achieve the progressive realisation of the right of every person to health, and to the conditions and facilities necessary to good health, and to health care services, including reproductive health care.”

These rights, Mr. Speaker, look good on paper, but what is the reality on the ground?

The rot has well and fully set in - broken washroom doors held by intravenous tubes, torn mosquito screens, lack of beds forcing patients with severe problems to stay in wheelchairs, dirty and smelly hospital interiors, lack of diagnostic and basic blood tests, shortage of medicines. Mr. Speaker, this is a Government that cares for its people or is this a Government that cares for people as claimed?

Mr. Speaker, while looking at the final appropriation statement for the financial year ending July, 2020, it surprised me that millions of dollars are being redirected from health towards other sectors or heads like FRA and LTA. These included funds for COVID-19 response, Public Private

Partnership for hospitals and even \$15 million from the Ministry of Health allocation itself. I lost count of the virements that they easily exceeded, \$50 million. This means that for Government, operational matters are more important than health and medical services.

More importantly, why was the Ministry of Health not thinking ahead, knowing that there would be drugs shortages during a pandemic? Why was this not a matter of highest priority, especially at a time when poverty and unemployment is skyrocketing? Why were funds redirected via virement to adequately stock our hospitals and health centres of essential medication?

Mr. Speaker, I can tell you why. It is because this is a Government that does everything to show. They want the Ministers and the Prime Minister to be opening a bridge or a new building. Is this what they care about? The poorest and the most vulnerable people in our society are invisible. They do not make the television news or the *Fiji Sun*. That is why sometimes I feel that this is not important for the Government.

Mr. Speaker, this Government cannot look after even the basic health of our most vulnerable people. The question people are asking, why is this Government there, what is this Government for? If this Government cannot do this, Mr. Speaker, I would say that they do not deserve to stay in the office anymore, they need to go.

Before I resume, Mr. Speaker, I also want to make a point about important stakeholders in our sugar industry. Cane growers are still awaiting announcement of the third cane payment which used to be normally paid on the last Friday of the 31st of March which is five days' time. Apart from ...

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, your End of the Week Statement is on one subject, not on two.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- It is related to that, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- No, ...

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- It is farmers waiting for the payment to be made.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- You are not the Speaker, Prime Minister. I will listen to the Speaker. I will listen to the Speaker. I will listen to the Speaker.

HON. MEMBER.- Sit down, you're wasting time.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- If the Speaker tells me to sit down, I will.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, what I am reminding you is that, your End of the Week Statement is on medicine, not on sugar.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I was just relating the final point today. But if you do not allow me to do that, I will end there, Mr. Speaker. Thank you very much.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his End of the Week Statement, and I give the floor to the Minister responsible. You have the floor.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As the Honourable Member was speaking, the Director of Fiji Pharmaceutical & and Biomedical Services (FPBS) and his Team were sending me back the replies on certain areas that he was mentioning. I want to read them.

The tracer products which comprise of the vital items that make or break the services, as I speak, stands at 88 percent. Chemotherapy drug that you were talking about is paclitaxel.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Listen! Paclitaxel has arrived this week. Listen, mixtard insulin is available in the hospital and also it is free in the Free Medicine Scheme. Benzathine Penicillin is available and next, I have said in this august House, Mr. Speaker, for metformin, there was a global shortage. He says metformin is safe, metformin has its side effects. If somebody in this House has a heart problem, please, do not take metformin, it will make it worse.

Honourable Member, if you know anybody who has a problem in this House, please, do not take metformin long term because it can actually cause them to have a significant massive heart attack and die. The safer medicines to take are glipizide and insulin which is available in our health centres, hospitals and in the free medicine scheme.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Honourable Member, this is my turn so please allow me to continue.

The impact of COVID-19 in certain manufacturing countries has had a ripple effect. Stages of supply chain such as manufacturing, distribution and shipment have also struggled. The new normal in supply chain and procurement of medical supplies have brought changes such as:

- (1) Logistic is affected to restriction in movement;
- (2) Production of pharmaceutical items that have been affected due to labour numbers and working hours because of lockdowns;
- (3) Supply chain is affected as products are retained for their own country's use and every country has its own sovereign rights.

A good example of this is the 250,000 dozes of AstraZeneca vaccines that Italy has stopped at their border and refused to release to Australia.

Freight costs, Mr. Speaker, have increased three to four times the normal cost which is very prohibitive. Certain products are no longer manufactured which are mostly sourced from India and China and Fiji only uses quality certified products and hence is facing challenges in sourcing some areas. Some tenderers have withdrawn. Contract obligations either due to downsizing of company or inability to provide services. Sir, 90 percent of our suppliers are based abroad and as they face reduced working hours, contracting them gets difficult at times; congestion at wharves.

Mr. Speaker, I can go on and on but this is our response. We have organised a procurement strategy by approaching the nearby markets and aligning the treatment regiments to allow for easy access. We have also used our diplomatic positions all over the world and talking with them so that we can have individual discussions with companies that are manufacturing this. Even though it has

its own challenges, stock levels, this country may restrict the movements outside of their country but we continue to work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the High Commissioners.

The other important thing that has worked well for us, Mr. Speaker, is Fiji Airways. During this very difficult time when we normally had containers of drugs and medicine that we wait for and being held up, Fiji Airways has been very useful in bringing that straight over to us. As long as we get it to a port in which they are travelling to with their cargo flights and we are very grateful for them. For example, with the kidney medicines that we currently use. We continue to consult with the doctors and the National Drugs & Therapeutics Committee and Medicinal Boards to alternative medicines in concurrence with the Clinical Guidelines.

Negotiations are made on a daily basis. Mr. Speaker, if the Honourable Member would watch my tweet he will see that nearly every day I tweet our Fiji Pharmaceutical Bio Medical Services travelling all around the country, into the highlands 24/7, seven days a week.

When he says that it is not working and these people are not doing their jobs, it hurts me. It hurts me because I know these people. These are people like Kalo, Jone, Watisoni; these are people who give their lives every day to ensure that our drugs and supplies are being given.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- And you just rubbish them by saying things like that. You do not even visit them. You do not even know them. You do not care for them. Procurement Officers are staying back to ensure that we contact supplies. As you know these are overseas - during our working time is their sleeping time. So they stay back after hours to actually contact them.

The current stock availability is at 88 percent I have just alluded to. So, if there is an issue of a health centre or nursing station then it is an issue of that particular leader of that nursing station or health centre in liaising with the Fiji Pharmaceutical Services in being able to get its supply to itself.

The Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services (FPBS) and the Ministry of Health continues to implement its new information system and I have talked about it. The installation of dashboard reporting through digital platform for the 227 facilities has now been completed with trainings organised for roll-out. We anticipate that the above measures will mitigate the supply chain challenges we currently face and we look forward to the restoration of a global supply chain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to again say this, two other important things that happened. In the past, we used to supply retail pharmacies; we used to buy at a very low price and they used to purchase from us for their own supplies. We have stopped that so that we can beef up the public health system. The other thing that we have done is, we are buying to stock, to try and actually increase the stock that we have and to that extent, we have actually had discussions, we are expanding our Fiji Pharmaceutical & Biomedical Services warehouse, the one based in Vatuwaqa.

We are also looking at putting a warehouse with development partner support in Labasa so that we can stock as much as we can. We realise that there is a struggle with this in terms of the likelihood of wastage beyond 5 percent but we accept that in this difficult climate that the whole world is facing, this is one of the mitigation measures that we would do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to say that there are many countries around the world that are better than us GDP-wise that have lesser medicines than us because of the significant problems of COVID-19 that is placed upon them with their community transmission, and also because of the

significant problems that is placed upon them because they do not have an airline willing to fly for them. They do not have ships willing to take their medicines there.

I was in a meeting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and a very senior doctor from another country said that there were discussions happening for their hospital to actually close because they just did not have any supplies. That is the state of affairs around the world. We, in this nation should be grateful that despite this difficult time, we are able to offer basic medicine to all Fijians free of charge.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

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

Importance of Regional Co-operation

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present my statement on the importance of regional cooperation, regionalism, which is the creation of institutions and processes at the regional level. The goal of regionalism is to strengthen ability of Pacific citizens and governments to identify and tackle such challenges, addressing capacity constraints, getting us working together closely and reducing our vulnerability. Regionalism as opposed to unilateralism which is basically the refusal to involve other countries in its policies and strategies especially in foreign policy matters.

There are various types of regionalism we can see today. Regional cooperation, dialogues and agreements between governments, for example Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Meetings, declarations, treaties, regional provision of public services that pull in together national services at the regional level, for example FFA, USP, et cetera, regional integration, lowering barriers for goods and services, movement of people between countries, quarantine measures, import taxes, passport requirements and other agreements such as agreements such as PICTA and PACER.

Each type brings different cause and benefits, regional cooperation, we could setup forums or dialogues as is happening or coming up with regional strategies means moving people around the region. This can be expensive especially as more and more countries participate or these economies of distance, but it also allows for increase consensus building, mutual coordination and trust and is an essential part of the Pacific way as we have known since the early 70s.

Regional provision of public services like co-operation, providing regional services requirements including movement, as I mentioned, goods, people, but it also provides high level of services with less money, more efficiency and high degree of shared knowledge, economies of scale, leaving governments to focus on policies that suit their country's needs and freeing resources to invest in their people.

In terms of regional integration, as we have experienced in the last decade or so, breaking down market barriers can mean stronger competitive pressures for Pacific companies but it also enables a larger market for Pacific firms with more production at a lower cost, more choice for Pacific consumers and more jobs and economic opportunities for Pacific workers.

When regionalism works, its benefits outweighs the cost. We can build on what have. The Pacific already has many forms of regional corporation whose benefits are an essential part of the Pacific Way. Since 1971, the Pacific Islands Forum and its Secretariat coordinated meetings of leaders, economic ministers and other meetings on foreign affairs, aviation, commerce and communications and trade.

Our existing regional architecture also incorporates an advisory council; a Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) made up of 10 inter-governmental organisations which already demonstrate the value of regionalism for Pacific Island countries such as organisations as FFA, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, SOPAC, SPBA, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, SPTO and USP. We can look at deeper regionalism where it has benefitted us already, as mentioned by the Honourable Minister of Fisheries.

Forum Fisheries Agency is a good example of how providing services at a regional level has enabled the voice of the Pacific to be heard more widely. Joint advocacy gave us 200 nautical EEZ covering one-sixth of the globe and creating the largest fisheries in the world. Co-operation with Australia has enabled us through the Pacific Patrol Boat Programme to police these fisheries, Co-operation with the US and Distant Water Fishing Nations Recognition or Pacific Fisheries, not only that, but also security. We have seen the enactment of the bigger declaration in 2000 which provided the regional mandate for RAMSI in 2003 and the Pacific Regional Assistance to Nauru.

There are other types of benefits as we are currently seeing in terms of movement of labour. Cook Islands and New Zealand have access to New Zealand market. Already, Australia has 74,000 annual working holiday visas for those from non-Pacific countries that could also be expanded and, of course, with the current Pacific Labour Scheme, which is another area which could be expanded.

I share the Pacific Plan, the Pillars - Good Governance, Economic Growth, Sustainable Development and Security. We had seen the development of various Pacific Regional Plans including the Pacific Plan, the Framework for Pacific Development and currently, in the state of Pacific Regionalism Report 2019, it is proposed that the Pacific Islands move to a 2050 version for a Blue Pacific Continent. Various scenarios have been presented, including a region of regions, multiple circles of influence which collide in a politically-divided and specially demarcated set of Pacific zones.

Pacific countries have increased the emphasis on bilateral relationship with specific global powers. These relationships define respective climate change responses with different degrees of success. Some countries face pressure to accelerate the integration with global powers and act to align just individual interests. The cohesiveness of Pacific identity and the Pacific way is eventually replaced by a further fracturing of the Region into distinct economic and geo-political zones of influence.

Another scenario, autonomy without solidarity, climate change impacts continue to propel Pacific Island countries towards an array of partnerships, overlapping years of influence to vie for recognition, including the competition for funding.

The other third scenario, Pacific commodity economic independence, conflict and geo-politics lead to a shift in Pacific alliances. These first three, Sir, are seen as negative to Pacific regionalism and solidarity which is why the Pacific Blue Continent is proposed through shared efforts to protect sovereignty and leverage benefits through collectivism, identity and gain strength overtime, including environmental and political regime shifts.

On that note, including that particular strategy as we are moving and encouraging that kind of strategy rather than unilateralism or being broken up into regions, maybe under the US and China, it is very important for Fiji to move forward under that strategy and also keeping in mind Fiji's role in the 1970s as the initiator of regionalism and also the Pacific way, working together, consensus in the essence of *veitalanoa* and *veilomani*, and that is what I would like to emphasise today, given that Fiji is now the current Forum Chair.

The particular case in point I would like to raise is the situation with the Pacific Islands Forum and Micronesia. The decision of five Micronesian States to withdraw from the 18-member Forum in the wake of the former Cook Islands, Prime Minister Henry Puna's controversial selection as Secretary-General has splintered the grouping and my concern about the wider geopolitical ramifications. This, Sir, is an opportunity for Fiji to exercise initiative, in particular as Fiji is the Forum Chair and an opportunity for it to regain its regional leaders status. We used to have a roving ambassador and it is suggested today that a Pacific solidarity special envoy with the objective to address the Micronesians concern and rebuild Pacific solidarity as a solid regional political bloc, given the challenges we are facing.

The other case in point is the USP situation and I would like to say in particular, the regulations in terms of migration and the deportation of the VC, which led to the current impasse particularly, the amendments to the Immigration Act. If you look at that Act, some of the provisions have been carried forward from the Decree which was enacted in 2007 and 2008. We need to pursue the amended Section 32 (2)(g) of the Immigration Act to repeal the paragraph that was inserted and promulgated which is seen as draconian and have been used ever since.

The other issue is for expatriate employees to review the Fijian Employment Contract templates to include safeguards given the existence of those provisions in the Act. Fiji has to consider practical ways to reach an amicable solution to the USP situation and a structured and agreed way forward rather than the current adversarial tendency needs to be looked at. But in the meantime, given that we are now the Forum Chair, it would be a good will gesture to immediately pay our contribution to USP in order to set the positive tone for our moving forward.

Finally, Sir, again given our position as Chair of the Forum to bring to the attention of the House the situation regarding West Papua. On 8th October, 2020, the Forum Chair had announced that in line with forum leaders decision in Tuvalu in 2019 the Forum Chair has written to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, requesting an update on the consultation with the Government of Indonesia concerning the invitation for a mission to West Papua, the Forum Chair reaffirmed the Forum leaders call for all parties to protect and uphold the human rights of all residence to work and address the root causes of the conflict by peaceful means.

This comes following the recent escalation in West Papua including the shooting and death of Pastor Eremaia in the last week. The Pacific Islands Secretary-General echoed his concern about the recent reporting and fresh allegations of abuse and violence against protestors and the ongoing human rights situation in West Papua. Without the appropriate access of independent media, civil society or human rights groups in West Papua, it is difficult to verify the reports from those opposing. Fiji needs to be more active as the Papua issue is given ongoing concern and also to follow-up urgently, given the position as Forum Chair on that letter and the actions which needs to take regarding the independent mission to monitor the situation in West Papua.

Finally, Sir, given Fiji's re-entry to the Pacific Islands Forum and into the Pacific Islands Regional Framework as a key player, it is time to synergise the Pacific Islands Development Forum which is established by the Fiji Government and its various partners into PIFS and also the Secretariat of the Pacific Community in order for us to move forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on to the Honourable Minister responsible. I call on the Honourable Minister for the response. Honourable Prime Minister, you have the floor.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My Government is clear about Fiji's place in the Pacific and our regions importance to the world. Alongside our fellow Pacific nations, we have alleviated our interests on the global stage to a level never before achieved.

There was a time, Mr. Speaker, when our region was written off as a testing ground for hydrogen bombs when our voices were small and our interests forgotten, no more, never again.

Today, when we speak, the world listens. Indeed, it takes the shallow and narrow view of history to suggest that Pacific Regionalism is winning and Fiji's deep bond with our fellow Pacific Nations have grown in strength in recent years.

As never before, we have leverage that cooperation in pursuit of the global change to the planet so desperately needs, because we have spoken loudly and together. We are global champions on the most important issues affecting our people.

We defend our fellow Pacific Nations, they defend us and together we speak in defend of humanity against serious threats like climate change.

Under this circumstances, Mr. Speaker, the Regional Cooperation not only presents an opportunity for us to overcome our problem that is absolutely essential.

We need to go beyond our shores, Mr. Speaker, to explore options, to share ideas and experiences and to find innovative solutions to our challenges. We have done that and we are doing that.

As a rising seas, it is closer to the door of our Pacific homes, Fiji has offered permanent refuge to the citizens of Tuvalu and Kiribati, should they need it.

Mr. Speaker, look anywhere in the world and you will not find a more powerful show of solidarity then that.

Mr. Speaker, most of the people in this House do not know that it was the Suva Declaration signed down the road at Grand Pacific Hotel (GPH) the first formalise national commitments to the 1.5 degree Celsius target for global warming.

Of course, we all know that it went on to become a pillar of the Paris Agreement an effort born from Pacific Cooperation is now guiding the world through the next three decades to a net zero future in 2050. Never before, Mr. Speaker, never before.

Our bonds within the region are strengthening our South-South Cooperation Programmes is a case in point, through the Fiji Volunteer Scheme that we have developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Employment. We have been able to deploy retired teachers and nurses to help some of our Pacific Island neighbours develop their education and health sectors.

Previous generations of Pacific Leaders understood this well and we established together a number of regional institutions so that we could cooperate regionally on common concerns and make the most of the resources we have.

Fiji has given much, Mr. Speaker, but we have also benefit greatly from this regional engagements. Our engagement in organisations like the Pacific Islands Forum(PIF) that has been mentioned, Pacific Community (SPC) and the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) to name just a few, have expanded our opportunities, trade and investments, Fisheries, Environment, Forestry, Agriculture, Women's Empowerment and Education.

Fiji is also party to a number of beneficial Regional Trade Agreements and Fijian products can be found in shops all around the region.

These exports are possible because of the positive trade relationship we have built with our Pacific family which create a larger market for our Fijian businesses.

Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 has taught us that every nation large or small stands a better chance at achieving or best future by acting in solidarity with others.

Fiji responded swiftly to contain COVID-19 and to keep it from entering our country. In the same manner, the Pacific Region mobilised urgently the establishment of our Pacific Humanitarian Pathway for COVID-19 (PHPC). This mechanism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, provided an avenue for the quick movement of a much-needed assistance into the region. Fiji played an important part in this. We were able to assist our Pacific Island family, not only get their nationals home and reunite them with their families but also to move much needed PPEs and other equipment out into the region. It has been a learning experience, one that shown us that we will only be able to successfully weather this crisis through our joint efforts.

Our regional organisation such as the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Community have played a huge role in this, as did our well-known international partners such as the World Health Organisation, (WHO). Mr. Speaker, we rightly regard ourselves as the leader in the region and as the hub of the Pacific, our regional partners often acknowledge our leadership role, which stamps from the fact that we are large and more developed than most of our neighbours and have a more diverse economy.

However, this role, Mr. Speaker, Sir, carries responsibilities, especially our smaller island brother islands and sisters. We need their support as they need ours. We have an obligation to provide leadership and resources that will help raise the entire region. The Pacific region is not just our neighbourhood, it is our home and a home of our fellow Pacific Islanders with whom we are forever bound and with whom we must work closely with to ensure our common future.

When our neighbour advance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know Fiji advances. Recent tragedy across the region has made it clear that we are some of the most vulnerable in the world to external shocks. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I met with Pacific Island Leaders in Tuvalu in 2019, we talked about the future of this Blue Pacific Continent that we share and the need for strong political leadership and solidarity to secure that future. As Pacific leaders, we argued that we needed to diverse a strategy that will take Fiji and the region to 2050.

The 2050 strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, Mr. Speaker, will set the future strategic direction for the region. A direction guided by sustainability, economic growth, environmental stewardship and equality. I am happy to report that this is currently under development and will be presented back to the Pacific leaders at the Pacific Island Forum Leader Summit scheduled to be held later this year.

In regional politics, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the world-over you can expect disagreements between nations but French trusted we will be able to overcome our disagreements. In the Pacific, our special way of communication, has resolved many differences throughout our history. We are a family and our common bonds, our common experience and our shared destiny will always win out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have heard Honourable Tuisawau mentioned that USP issues. Fiji's position on what should happen next for USP as for Honourable Tuisawau's comments on USP is well aware, that has nothing to do with the PIF or the actions taken by the Micronesian country but I will address those comments.

As the host country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, Fiji has invested in the success of the USP students. We are the University's largest shareholder contributing around \$27 million in grants and around \$20 million in TELS annually.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order! Order

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- In total, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian government has invested around \$315 million into USP over the last 10 years. Not to forget the 100 acres of property that the University sits on. We are so invested because we want to see the students of USP have the opportunity to do well. We want the same for all students in Fiji and throughout the Pacific as a nation with a single greatest interest in the University we have and we will always put a high value on USP's good governance. Ultimately, that is for the benefit of the students, the nation and the region.

HON. GOVT. MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- When issues were raised two years ago about some alleged mismanagement, Fiji strongly supported the Council's decision to have the allegations investigated by an independent body, BDO. Similarly, when more issues of mismanagement were raised last year, Fiji strongly recommended an independent investigation.

The University, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is bigger than any one individual. The sooner we will accept that, the sooner the institution can move forward on the path towards good governance in the service of the regional students. That is why yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the FICAC statement, I had said that it would be good for FICAC to get into the University corridors because of the corrupt practices that has ravaged the corridors. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Prime Minister. We move on to the third End of Week Statement and I give the floor to the Honourable Alvick Maharaj. You have the floor.

Impact of TC Yasa and TC Ana – Education Sector

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise in this august House to give my End of Week Statement on the impact of natural disasters in the education sector. Natural disasters and natural occurrence is becoming a common phenomenon in Fiji and around the globe.

In developing countries, such as Fiji, natural disasters have drastic effects on all sectors. The socio-economic status of the country is stretched just like a wooden house not built to standard gets blown away by a Category 5 cyclone. Fiji has been hit with so many cyclones since 2012, which is by far, totals more than the number of cyclones that has passed Fiji since independence until 2012.

While we gave so much importance to socio-economic status of the country, one tends to forget that one of the most of severely affected sectors by any cyclone that enters Fiji waters, is the education sector. Not only are the schools blown away in a cyclone causing infrastructural damage, but a chain of negative effect is passed down to the students and their learning process. While people are busy trying to rebuild their houses and use schools as evacuation centres, no one realises what the Ministry of Education goes through while rebuilding these schools for students to return to schools.

In the past one year, a number of schools were damaged in cyclones. While some see it as just building the classrooms, there is much more to be done before and even after the return of the students to the classrooms. It is the common belief that classrooms have been rebuilt so everything is back to normal, but no one accounts for the fact that while the schools were closed or used as an evacuation centre, students were lacking behind in completing the curriculum. Not only that, but these are the same kids who have just seen the devastation of a cyclone and are not mentally, physically and financially prepared for school and to be educated as they were before the cyclone devastated their homes, their villages and their families.

How do teachers react to the fact that they have lost a good number of days and weeks, yet they are expected to complete the syllabus on time, and prepare the students for the exam without compromising on the quality of education. Most teachers are from nearby areas of the school. They also get affected by the cyclone, yet they move on and give importance to the education of a child. While on one side, parents send their children to school after the cyclone and get on to rebuild from whatever is left, teachers on the other hand, continue to struggle to get into a position to see that they rebuild their houses and at that same time ensuring that school gets back to normal. This is not an easy task, as at times, it becomes mentally challenging for these teachers and yet they still continue to provide education.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the teachers around Fiji for their dedication towards ensuring that education for students is not affected. While some residents try to spend a number of weeks at school using it as an evacuation centre, they do not realise that their children's education is affected. But in such scenarios, what can the Ministry of Education do when the evacuees do not have a home to return to soon after the cyclone?

Firstly, most of the schools in Fiji were never built to sustain Category 5 cyclones. Whenever there is a cyclone warning or flood warning, people resort to the nearest school as an evacuation centre. This was very evident in the recent Category 5 cyclones, such as *TC Winston* and *TC Yasa*. The amount of infrastructural damage done to schools during these cyclones was massive, despite all, education of the child needs to continue. How did the Ministry of Education manage during cyclones, such as *TC Winston*, *TC Sarai*, *TC Harold*, *TC Keni*, *TC Yasa*, *TC Ana* and *TC Bina*?

Because the infrastructure is ageing and widespread throughout Fiji for the Ministry of Education, any cyclone entering Fiji waters does bring devastation to school infrastructure. Regardless whether the school is community-based or faith-based, everyone resorts to the Ministry of Education for their assistance to rebuild their school. Almost all schools damaged in cyclones are built through the coordination and funding provided by the Ministry of Education. The schools that were once built by Government-funding, are they handed over to school committees? If so, does the Ministry has plans to ensure that school committees do regular maintenance of the school so that the new classrooms that are built can sustain future disasters? Are these classrooms built to sustain Category 5 cyclones?

One needs to wonder for how long can the Ministry sustain rebuilding the schools giving schools as evacuation centres; remaining closed for weeks; and yet the Ministry is expected to ensure that the education of students is not affected. Some schools were totally destroyed and built by Government. Are these schools managed by Government or by committees? After *TC Yasa*, *TC Ana* and *TC Bina*, we have seen some schools totally gone and nothing was left.

What is the strategy to rebuild those schools? During these trying times when the effects of COVID-19 are felt by us, how is the Ministry of Education managing to rebuild the schools? The yearly grant given by the Ministry of Education, can the surplus grant be used to, at least, upgrade one classroom per year to withstand a Category 5 cyclone? How is the Ministry ensuring that

education is not affected, while these strategies are put in place to rebuild the school? These are some of the things that one needs to look at.

Climate change is real, and it is here. The impact of it is felt by us all. The cyclones are getting stronger. It does not seem like things will improve, it will only get worse because of climate change. How is the Ministry of Education positioning itself to deal with climate change and natural disaster in future, in ensuring that such catastrophic events do not hinder the future of our students?

With those words, I would also like to wish a Happy Holi to all Fijians here and abroad and enjoy the festive of colour. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts. You have the floor.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to address and respond to the End of Week Statement delivered by Honourable Maharaj on the impact of cyclones on the education sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am in agreement with the statement made by the Honourable Member in Parliament this afternoon. I would like to share the work undertaken by the Ministry and the Government in ensuring our children and delivery of education remains paramount during and after natural disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also acknowledge the statements made by the Honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management and the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services on the work that was carried out by their Ministries in assisting, not only the people who were affected by the cyclones, but also our work within the education sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the devastating power of cyclones, storms, hurricanes, droughts and any other form of natural disasters that has hit our country are alarming and are examples of harsh realities of climate change. In the last few years, we have experienced cyclones, such as *TC Winston*, *TC Gita*, *TC Keni*, *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa* and the latest one being *TC Ana* which brought about a lot of flooding and, of course, these had impacts on our infrastructure.

The infrastructure was damaged, schools and other public buildings, teachers quarters, there was widespread destruction of homes, farms, livelihood and even caused serious injuries and deaths. These cyclones and natural calamities have reminded us that our fight against climate change is essential for our survival. COVID-19 on the other hand has also impacted thousands of lives and we continue our fight against these as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we continue to be at the receiving end of the impacts of Climate Change and COVID-19, we are certainly not responsible for that. The rest of the world often fails to see the impact it has on our people and our nation, of course, our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin with *TC Winston*. *TC Winston* caused damage to 206 schools and impacted thousands of families and tens of thousands of children in 2016. It destroyed homes, destroyed schools, livelihood, caused emotional trauma and left behind deep traumatic scars of loss and sufferings on our people. Majority of the schools, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have been rehabilitated and rebuilt. As many as 395 new classrooms and buildings have been constructed since *TC Winston*. Work is still ongoing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Construction and Implementation Unit we have utilised \$230 million in rebuilding and rehabilitating schools that were damaged by *TC Winston* and the amount of contractual agreements stands at \$259.6 million as I mentioned that some school buildings are yet to complete.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, schools are now built under rehabilitation programmes, are built to withstand Category 5 cyclones and are all Category 5 certified. Schools that have been built under the CIU rehabilitation programmes have not sustained any damage from the cyclones that have entered the Fiji Group after *TC Winston*. After *TC Winston*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji was affected by *TC Geeta*, *TC Keni*, *TC Harold*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. The damage caused by these cyclones are still continuing to be rehabilitated under our rehabilitation programme and I would like to thank the Minister responsible for National Disaster Management Office (NDMO), for providing us full support in ensuring that our rehabilitation programmes are successfully ongoing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our swift response and facilitation from the Ministry, we were able to welcome students to school for the 2021 academic year as planned on 19th January, 2021. I do agree that some students are still in learning spaces while the rehabilitation works are continuing through the assistance of our RFMF engineers. As mentioned by Minister Seruiratu yesterday, we have received a \$12 million commitment from the Australian Government to build new classrooms for about 12 damaged schools in the Northern Division affected by *TC Yasa*.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these new rebuilds will take into consideration the structural damages that have been made to these buildings. We will definitely work, as mentioned by Honourable Maharaj, with the managements to ensure that the Government comes into some sort of an agreement with the school managements about the rebuild and of course, the continuous maintenance of the schools. But, I would also like to thank all the managements who have very proactively worked with us to ensuring that they, with us, got the schools ready for this academic year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have three new school buildings coming up in Kadavu through the assistance of our Japanese Government. Kadavu Provincial Secondary School, I think I mentioned, Vunisea Secondary School and Richmond High School. We hope that these schools are completed by the end of December and of course these schools were badly hit, not only by *TC Winston* but previous cyclones that impacted Fiji over the many years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a point to be noted here is, when we do a damage assessment, sometimes we fail to see the structural damage left to buildings that do not get blown away. We might have a lot of buildings where damage is not done during one cyclone but these buildings have been continuously hit by previous cyclones so a thorough infrastructure audit is the next phase of work for our Ministry so that even though some of the buildings do not get blown away or damaged by cyclones, we need to understand and plan the rebuild of this. Of course, we cannot build all the 975 schools in Fiji. They require a lot of planning, they require a lot of Government investment, so the infrastructure audit will allow us to see the standards of the buildings that are currently there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, life goes on for people. Flood waters recede, the power is restored, water and buildings are repaired, our normal daily lives but the impact this has on our school children.

I recall a week after *TC Yasa* when I went to visit Dreketi Primary School, there was a group of little children sitting outside on the verandah of their building at about 6.00 p.m., I do not know whether they knew me or not, but they saw a new face and they quickly held my hand and took me to the building that was damaged. They showed me the walls where their paintings were held. That is the impact natural disasters have on our children. Some of the children did not know what a

cyclone was. It was the first time for them to see the buildings, their homes gone but the happiness that I saw on their faces actually triggered us to make sure that we got the classrooms ready for them. The children are always excited to be in school and I must thank the parents and the community once again, for helping us clear the buildings. Widespread, massive damage done.

One example is the Lekutu Secondary School where the community got together, our engineers got together and we managed to clear the buildings, the debris and, of course get whether it was a learning place or whether quick fixes done for all these children to go back to their schools. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was no easy task and this would not have been possible without the generosity of all our donor partners.

I also would like to use this platform to say ‘thank you’ for the support and the love that the Ministry of Education received from a lot of people across the country, our NGOs, our corporate bodies, our private sector organisations, the donor partners, individuals who actually helped rebuild homes, who provided food and ration and clothes, who came on board and everyone and said, “We will give the students school books, stationeries, uniforms and shoes”.

I think that is the unity that we showed during natural disasters that actually unites us as one. So nothing is impossible if we all work together. The passion that we have seen for parents in sending their children back to school, I do understand times are hard and I once again urge parents, “Please, talk to us.”

Yesterday I was asked the question about some parents who said that children will not go to school because there is no food. I have made arrangements with heads of schools who have been advised to ensure that no child remains hungry in school. A lot of avenues and answers are there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way forward for us is to ensure that we strengthen our e-learning modes of teaching when such things happen. I would like to thank *Walesi* for coming on board with us. They have taken the responsibility of connecting 51 schools that are still without internet access and work is progressing well there. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a special “thank you” to the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT), who has come on board now to assist 55 schools in the Western Division for a six-week school feeding programme and 23 boarding schools in the Northern Division as well as 35 other schools. So DFAT has been a good partner to us and let me correct myself, the feeding programme is for 12 weeks while we allow communities to normalise their farming resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of things go behind the scenes and I have a very good team in all the divisions, and they have been instructed to work with parents, communities and managements and ensure that students do report to school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally like I said, I need to thank everyone and I can assure the House, a lot of work is going on and, we, as a Government are making children our priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would just like to say a big “thank you once again” to the Honourable Prime Minister for his leadership and all the other Ministers for the continuous support they provide us.

As Honourable Alvick Maharaj mentioned, yes, we have *Holi* celebrations going on around the schools, and on Monday, all Hindu faith-based organisations will remain closed as has been a usual practice.

To the teachers, I know if you are not teaching in these schools and would also wish to celebrate, I suggest you make arrangements with your heads of school who, I am sure, will allow you to attend these celebrations.

I take my seat by saying, may the colours of this festival fulfil our lives and bring us much happiness and joy, and wishing you all 'Happy *Holi*' and thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 26th April, 2021 at 9.30 a.m.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank you all for your participation and contributions during the Parliamentary proceedings in the course of this Sitting week.

Until Monday, 26th April, 2021 at 9.30 a.m., I now declare Parliament adjourned *sine die*.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.35 p.m.