

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 25TH MARCH, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	940
Communication from the Chair	940
Presentation of Report of Committees	940-946
(1) Review Report – Performance Audit on the Administrative & Management of the Bus Fare Assistance Programme through E-Ticketing – SC on Public Accounts	
(2) Review Report - Consolidated 2011-2013 Ministry of Lands & Mineral Resources Annual Reports – SC on Natural Resources	
(3) Consolidated Review Report – FSC 2007-2009 Annual Reports – SC on Economic Affairs	
Ministerial Statement	946-953
(1) Update – COVID-19 Strains and Current Vaccination Process	
Point of Clarification	954-955, 1019
Review Report – 2014 General Election Joint Report by the Fijian Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections	955-985
Review Report – Ministry of Fisheries 2016-2017 Annual Report	986-1005
Suspension of Standing Orders	1006
Questions	1006-1018
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Grievances –Labasa Municipal Market Vendors (Question No. 73/2021)	
(2) Quality and Safety Standards of Construction Materials (Question No. 74/2021)	
(3) COVAX-COVID-19 Vaccine (Question No. 75/2021)	
(4) Plans to Mitigate Flooding in Rivers and Creeks (Question No. 76/2021)	
(5) COVID-19 Biosecurity Measures (Question No. 77/2021)	
(6) Reticulation Water System – Rewa Delta (Question No. 78/2021)	
(7) Cash for Cultivation Programme (Question No. 79/2021)	
<u>Written Question</u>	
(1) Work Permits (Question No. 80/2021)	

THURSDAY, 25TH MARCH, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.33 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; and the Honourable Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 24th 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.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE CHAIR

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 home, their offices and electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament. Thank you Honourable Members.

Honourable Members, I now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to table his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report - Performance Audit on the Administrative and Management of the Bus Fare Assistance Programme through E-Ticketing – Standing Committee on Public Accounts

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present this Review Report on the performance audit on the administrative and management of the Bus Fare Assistance Programme through e-ticketing for the school children, the disabled and the elderly.

The bus fare assistance, through electronic ticketing, was implemented in 2017 to assist students from low income earning families to attend school, and the elderly and the disabled to be able to travel when required. This programme is aligned to the 5-Year and the 20-Year National Development Plan of the Government.

Given the sustainable development objectives of the Fijian Government as prioritised in the National Development Plan, the provision bus fare assistance through e-ticketing is a Government

initiative targeted at providing and promoting quality education for all, social inclusion and empowerment, youth development and women and gender equality.

The Bus Fare Assistance Programme through e-ticketing to school children from low income families attempted to ensure that all school children have access to quality education. However, the scope of the audit did not cover the acquisition of the services of the e-ticketing provider.

The Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and the Department of Social Welfare through the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, are the two Government Departments involved and they administer and manage the Bus Fare Assistance Programme through e-ticketing for school children, the disabled and the elderly.

It is important to note that the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts administers and manages students' bus fare assistance whilst the Department of Social Welfare of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation administers and manages the elderly and disabled's Bus Fare Assistance Programme.

The performance of these two Ministries were thoroughly scrutinised but due to COVID-19 restrictions that were still in place at that time, the Committee requested the two Departments to forward their written responses to the Committee.

The Committee also sought formal clarifications from the Office of the Auditor-General regarding updates on the audit issues and the audit recommendations. The Committee deliberated on the Audit Report using the Parliament virtual platform and the written responses, and formulated recommendations to address audit issues that were identified.

It is also important to note that the Office of the Auditor-General had conducted performance audit to ascertain the efficiency and effectiveness of the Government's Bus Fare Assistance Programme through E-Ticketing for the school children, the disabled and the elderly.

The audit examined the various functional roles of the Ministry of Education and the Department of Social Welfare and how they managed the E-Ticketing Programme. The audit also looked at the monitoring and reporting aspect of the programme and how the information maintained by the e-ticketing services provider were scrutinised, analysed and reported to the respective Ministries and Departments.

The Committee noted that a total of 88,579 students received transport assistance vouchers in 2009 when it started, while 80,879 elderly and disabled persons received 50 percent concession vouchers in 2011. In 2017 the e-ticketing process for bus fare was implemented and by Term 3 of 2019, a total of 66,674 students and about 51,444 senior citizens and persons with disabilities, received e-transport cards to utilise e-ticketing.

The elderly and disabled persons received full 10 percent assistance for their fare at the maximum value of 40 percent per month in 2018. Students living in rural areas who have no bus services, still use vouchers to travel on carriers, mini buses and punts. Public funds amounting to \$100 million have been spent over three years since assistance was delivered to e-ticketing platform in 2017.

The Bus Fare Assistance Programme through e-ticketing, has sufficient mandate under the Constitution to enable it to be functional and effective in providing the required assistance to deserving school children, elderly and persons with disabilities. However, anomalies were found

given the poor internal controls, including lack of monthly reconciliations of records between the two Departments and the e-ticketing service provider.

There is also a need to work towards mitigating risks identified, which can cause over-payment. These includes the risk of over-payment of assistance through excessive top-ups, school fares paid beyond the school zones, payment of assistance to ineligible recipients, lack of declaration of interest by processing officers, and continued top-up of cards for deceased senior citizens. The risk of fraud for unused balances in cards also exists.

Generally, the system has been effective in providing bus fare assistance through the e-ticketing platform. However, utilisation of resources could be improved with an effective and accountable internal control system.

Given the review findings, the Committee recommends that:

- (1) The Ministry of Education to expedite the finalisation of the current Transportation Assistance Policy which is under review and relook at its SOPs in consultation with the relevant stakeholders to align it with the Electronic Fare Ticketing Act 2014.
- (2) The Department of Social Welfare develops a policy and finalise its SOPs in consultation with the elderly and persons with disabilities.
- (3) The Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts signs a Service Level Agreement with the external service provider to include reporting requirements to ensure any gaps identified in the Agreement, be addressed and vetted for legal compliance.
- (4) The Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and Department of Social Welfare strengthen their Complaint Management System.
- (5) The Department of Social Welfare examined the seven recommendations provided by their Monitoring and Evaluation Team in 2018 and where practical, implement it as soon as possible.
- (6) Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and the Department of Social Welfare strengthen the reconciling of records with the e-ticketing service provider on a monthly basis.
- (7) By 2030, the two Ministries with the relevant stakeholders, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations which includes, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons in line with SDG 11-Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Overall, the Committee commended the Government for this initiative in supporting the vulnerable communities and groups as this Bus Fare Assistance Programme has addressed Fiji's commitment towards the relevant 17 Sustainable Development Goals Targets such as: SDG1- No Poverty; SDG4 – Quality Education; SDG5 - Gender Equality; and SDG 10 – Reduce Inequalities, which aims to ensure that no one is left behind and endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.

At this juncture, I wish to extend my appreciation to all the Honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of the bipartisan Report namely; Honourable Joseph Nand, Honourable Virendra Lal, Honourable Aseri Radrodro and Honourable Ro Teimumu

Kepa. Further, pursuant to Standing Order 115, Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi stood in as an Alternate Member to Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu and Honourable Mikaele Leawere who stood in as an Alternate Member to Honourable Aseri Radrodro.

On behalf of the Committee, I also extend my appreciation to the Secretariat staff for their timely support on research and liaison with the two Ministries and compilation of this Report.

With those words, Sir, I now commend the Public Accounts Committee Report to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Acting Secretary-General)

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

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

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

HON. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to table his Report.

Review Report - Consolidated 2011-2013 Ministry of Lands
and Mineral Resources Annual Reports - Standing Committee on Natural Resources

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee commended the Ministry on its targets and achievements in relation to Key Output Areas/Key Performance Indicators achieved from 2011 to 2013.

The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources is a key facilitator and contributor to the nation's socio-economic development within Government's vision of building a better Fiji for all. For the period under review, the Ministry continuously aligned itself to Government's overarching objectives which were explicitly defined in the People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress – the Strategic Framework for Change and the Roadmap for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development 2009-2014.

It was worthy to note that in 2011 in its Annual Corporate Plan, the Ministry progressed towards achieving Government's Land Reform Initiative and continued to facilitate the development of the country's minerals and groundwater resources that makes significant contribution towards the nation's economic growth.

For the period under review, particularly in 2012, the Committee noted that the Ministry had undergone re-structural adjustments within the organisation but nonetheless, a significant achievement rate of 82.29 percent was the highlight during the said period.

Thus, for the 2013 Annual Corporate Plan, the Committee noted that the Ministry enhanced its working environment and networking with other agencies to improve service delivery and increase achievements on Government developments in land reforms. All was made possible through the support of the 2013 budget that outlined the key outputs of the Ministry's two core departments.

At this juncture, I wish to thank the Permanent Secretary, Ms. Rajeli Taga, and her staff for their assistance in this review process. I also extend my gratitude to my Committee colleagues namely; Honourable Jale Sigarara (Deputy Chairperson), Honourable Alexander O'Connor, Honourable Mitieli Bulanauca, Honourable Peceli Vosanibola and Honourable Jese Saukuru (Alternate Opposition Member).

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, I commend the Review of the Consolidated Annual Reports for the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources as at 2011, 2012 and 2013 to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Acting Secretary-General)

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

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

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, I second the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to table his Report. You have the floor, Sir.

Consolidated Review Report - Fiji Sugar Corporation 2007-2019 Annual Reports -
Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity. The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament, the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Sugar Corporation Annual Reports from 2007 to 2019.

The Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) is the largest sugar milling company in the South Pacific. It has a Board of Directors which is the policy-making and governing body. The FSC was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1972 to take over the milling activities from South Pacific Sugar Milling (SPSM) and Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) in 1973.

The FSC operates three sugar Mills, two of which are in Viti Levu (Lautoka and Ba) and the third in Labasa in Vanua Levu. The fourth Mill which was the Penang Mill in Rakiraki, ceased operations in 2017 due to its inability to cope from the devastations caused by *TC Winston*. The FSC is one of the largest private sector employer with a workforce exceeding 1,000, especially during the crushing season from May to December.

Earlier in 2020, the Committee conducted a site visit to FSC Headquarters in Lautoka, as well as all the three Mills in the Western and Northern Divisions, in order to better understand its functions and operations. During the visit, it met with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and his team, who provided a thorough update on the sugar industry, as well as the various initiatives the FSC had undertaken in recent times to ensure the sustainability of the sugar industry.

The Committee noted that FSC faced various challenges throughout the period under review which includes but are not limited to the decline in active growers, low yield, lease renewal issues including short term leases, damages and losses caused by natural disasters, ageing farmers and shortage of labour.

During its deliberations, Honourable Members of the Committee agreed that the significant decline in the number of active growers need to be addressed and would require a holistic effort from all stakeholders in the industry to formulate marketing strategies to revive inactive farmers, as well as entice new farmers into joining the sugar industry.

The Committee Members were also made aware of the detrimental impacts of climate change on the sugar industry over the years with natural disasters, such as cyclones and floods destroying farms and infrastructure. *TC Winston* in 2016, as well as *TC Keni* and *TC Josie* in 2018, are such examples of what the sugar industry have to go through over the years.

Furthermore, the Committee would like to extend its appreciation to the Fijian Government for stepping in and assisting the sugar industry during natural disasters, in its capacity as the largest shareholder in the FSC. The Committee is of the view that other stakeholders must closely work with FSC to identify potential opportunities for the organisation. The Committee believes that commercial banks must also be encouraged to develop incentive packages to assist farmers.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our sincere appreciation to all stakeholders for their valuable input. The Committee would like to especially acknowledge the CEO of FSC and his team members in the Western and Northern Divisions, for taking out time from their busy schedule to give the Committee a tour of the Mills, as well as for being prompt in answering the various queries and questions raised by the Committee.

Finally, I would like to thank our Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this Report: Deputy Chairperson - Honourable Veena Bhatnagar, Honourable George Vegnathan, Honourable Inosi Kuridrani and Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the Parliamentary staff who had given us invaluable support. On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the review of the Fiji Sugar Corporation 2007 to 2019 Annual Reports to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Acting Secretary-General)

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

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

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

HON. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members the Minister for Health and Medical Services has given notice to make a Ministerial Statement under Standing Orders 40.

The Minister may speak for up to 20 minutes, followed by the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will also be a response from the Leader of the National Federation Party or his designated speaker to also speak for five minutes. There will be no other debates.

Honourable Members, I now call on the Minister for Health and Medical Services to deliver his statement. You have the floor.

Update on COVID-19 Strains and Current Vaccination Process

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and also for those from around Fiji, who are listening in and watching today's proceedings; I rise to give a Ministerial Statement on the COVID-19 update on the strains and our current vaccination process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is now been exactly one year and six days since Fiji recorded its first case of COVID-19 on 19th March, 2020 and we look forward with anticipation for 19th April, which will be one year since we last had a case picked up in the community. Since our first case was reported, Fiji has now had 67 cases, 64 have recovered and two deaths.

As we are all aware, the two deaths were border quarantine cases, our fellow Fijians who have come back and, unfortunately, been succumbed to COVID-19. The last 49 cases have been international travel associated cases detected in border quarantine. It has been 341 days since the last case was detected outside border quarantine on 18th April, 2020.

As of today, we have conducted a total of 35,986 laboratory tests, with a daily average of 234 tests per day over the last 7 days, and a weekly average of 1,609 tests per week over the last 2 weeks. Our testing capability now stands at 484 tests per positive case diagnosed, with a ratio of 40 tests per 1,000 population. We are seeing the continuing increase in testing ratio as our capacity to test continues to improve.

Since my last update in this august House, we can now test for COVID-19 at the Lautoka Hospital and Labasa Hospital, in addition to the Fiji Centre for Disease Control at Tamavua. However, the good news is, a year down from our first case, Fiji still remains COVID-contained.

As of yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total number of cumulative cases in the Pacific was over 30,000 with the following countries continuing to be worst affected:

- French Polynesia with 18,500 cases and over 140 deaths;
- Guam with over 7500 cases and 134 deaths; and

- Papua New Guinea recorded a 20 percent increase from my last update with over 3,700 cases and 37 deaths.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a worry for us and the challenges Papua New Guinea is going through, especially as we have Fijians still in Papua New Guinea.

I note that a repatriation flight has been organised and I make a call for all Fijians who are in Papua New Guinea, if they are able to, to come back home to Fiji. There continues to be large community transmissions in those countries while Wallis and Futuna, like Fiji, has imported cases totaling 338 and two deaths.

Just recently also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen that New Caledonia which has had a fantastic COVID-19 containment period similar to Taiwan and Fiji, had also had COVID-19 picked up within the community. The Ministry continues to closely monitor the global and regional scene of the pandemic and regularly engages with experts in the country and abroad to ensure that we are well informed of developments.

Over the last four weeks, there has been another surge globally in the number of cases with over 123 million cases of COVID-19 with more than 2.7 million deaths reported to date. Cases continue to increase with almost 400,000 cases and over 7,000 deaths reported over 24 hours. Daily case numbers range from 300,000 to 400,000 per day while daily deaths range from 7,000 to 10,000 globally.

For infectious diseases, every time there is community transmission the likelihood of the virus mutating increases. The longer the virus lingers within a community, the likelihood that a mutant form of the virus can form, and that is a continuous worry because we have obviously, as you will understand, been repatriating our fellow Fijians from all over the world.

There are concerns with some of the countries in Africa and as you know, that variants which I will talk about soon. Most viral mutations have little to no impact at all on its ability to cause infections on people. But depending on the changes to the virus properties, as a result of the mutation, it may change the virus transmission rate, and its severity.

There are many variants of SARS COVID-19 as a result of mutation, but three are currently variants of concern - the UK variant, the South African variant and the recent Brazilian variant. I was reading early this morning that there is a double mutant variant picked up from India and that is one of the reasons why the Indian Government has also indicated that they want to lower the exports of Covishield which is the AstraZeneca vaccine that is being produced in the Serum Institute in India.

We have also noted reports that France has variants and also, as I have alluded to, the Indian variant. Studies show that these variants spread more easily, are more transmissible - up to 70 percent more transmissible than the actual or original virus and they may be associated with an increased risk of death compared to other variants, essentially because more people can get infected and more people are getting infected. The likelihood of more people being very sick is higher and the likelihood of more people dying, is high.

The COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved and those currently in development are expected to provide, at least, some protection against new virus variants because these vaccines show a wide immune response. Therefore, changes or mutations in the virus should not make vaccines completely ineffective. The authorities in the affected countries are conducting epidemiological and virological investigations to further assess the transmissibility, severity, risk of reinfection and antibody response to new variants.

While science has proven that the new vaccines will provide some defence to the COVID-19 virus, rigorous and increased compliance with public health mitigation measures, such as physical distancing, use of masks and isolation remains the top defence mechanism and is essential to limit the spread of the virus and protect public health.

Fiji has been preparing well before the virus reached our shores, and was one of the very first nations to introduce the supplementary health arrival card. We have found this intervention to be extremely valuable. We used it in the measles campaign and in our ability to quickly identify and track down all contacts of suspected cases.

In sequential manner and guided by the expert health advice on the global pandemic, the Department of Immigration placed border restrictions that banned the entry of non-citizens into the country, initially from China, then eventually from all parts of the world, whilst Fijians were exempted. Those returning from these countries were required to undergo a 14 days quarantine at the Government designated quarantine centres. These measures were subsequently followed by the banning of all cruise liners from entering Fijian waters and docking at any port in Fiji. The international airports and seaports were shut down on 26th March, 2020, and only returning Fijian citizens and international trade remained open.

Following the community transmission, members of the Disciplined Forces joined the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to assist in contact tracing and community surveillance through fixed and mobile fever clinics in each Division. The mobile fever teams conducted house to house visits and reached 97 percent of our population. This massive undertaking has become a feature in the whole of Government COVID-19 surveillance response and is a testament to the truly national co-ordinated response to the pandemic.

A major marker in our success in this fight is the ability to do COVID-19 testing locally. Fiji commenced testing for COVID-19 at the Fiji CDC on 11th March, 2020 using molecular based Real Time Quantitative Reverse Transcription PCR testing – RT-PCR in short. This is a globally recognized and approved standard of testing for this virus.

Our testing capacity was further enhanced with the introduction of GeneXpert testing capability, also a molecular based test but with a shorter turnaround time of less than one hour for results. This has enabled Lautoka and Labasa, as well as the Central Division, to increase its community surveillance through the GeneXpert test kit.

Mr. Speaker, this is important. When we say there is no community transmission, it is not because of the people they test in border quarantine, it is because of the number of tests that we are doing outside of border quarantine. We are testing those that present with cough in the health centres, those who were admitted with pneumonia, we randomly testing our staff right throughout Fiji, and that is how we know that there is no community transmission of COVID-19.

Our quarantine facilities were busy from last year and we have identified key isolation centers and 17 facilities to provide surge support for COVID-19 if required. Today, there are 855 Fijians who recently arrived into the country and are undergoing the 14 days mandatory quarantine in the Government designated border quarantine facilities under supervision. The Government has been forthright and transparent with information on COVID-19, with regular press conferences to update the public on the progress of the disease in Fiji and the response measures implemented.

We developed the comprehensive communication plan which included a community awareness package on COVID-19 that was delivered to 100 percent of villages and settlements in Fiji. All media outlets were engaged through media releases, press statements, press conferences,

social media posts, frequently asked questions, posters and videos that included one by the Fijian men's 7s Team. Through the Ministry of Communications, we also put in place a toll-free number - 158 - which has received nearly 10,000 calls, averaging 150 to 200 calls per day. Apart from that, we have our contact tracing app, the careFIJI App and also the case management tool (SORMAS) which we have in place.

I can go on to describe the commitment Government has towards ensuring a COVID-contained Fiji and it surely comes with sacrifice of many dedicated and loyal Fijians including the discipline forces, front-line workers and staff of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. I also pay respect to the Fijian Government and the Honourable Prime Ministry for the immediate decisive actions from the initial stages through many policy decisions, budgetary support and nation-wide actions. As I speak today we are mostly probably the only country in the world to have had COVID containment for more than 330 days.

Our attention is now focussed on the major vaccination campaign ahead of us. The COVAX Facility initiated by WHO has allocated to Fiji 100,800 doses early this year, a portion of the 20 percent which it has committed to Fiji. Of this, we received the first batch of COVID-19 Vaccines on 6th March, 12,000 doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine for two doses each for the targeted 6,000 individuals. The months of April to May will see the additional 88,800 doses arriving. Thus, before June, we can anticipate that the country's frontliners and other vulnerable individuals with comorbid issues would have been vaccinated.

Fiji has developed and submitted its National Deployment and Vaccination Plan which had started in November last year. This plan is a comprehensive document, outlining the:

- (1) regulatory processes;
- (2) target population;
- (3) phased-out approach;
- (4) cold chain systems in place;
- (5) supply chain and healthcare waste management;
- (6) effective vaccine management;
- (7) digital platform with both the registration and monitoring systems;
- (8) systems and processes for any adverse event following immunisation;
- (9) monitoring and evaluation of the deployment and vaccination;
- (10) human resource management and training;
- (11) disease surveillance;
- (12) communications; and
- (13) financing.

Because we did it, answered the forms and filled it in comprehensively and presented it to COVAX is one of the reasons why we were the first country in the Pacific outside of the United States Territories to actually receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

This planning has taken place in all the four Divisions with a significant amount of micro-planning specifically for the arrival and deployment of vaccines, to the monitoring. While this level of planning is taking place, a significant amount of work continues to instil preparedness and anticipation in our vaccination teams as we get closer to operationalising the deployment.

The initial planning has involved Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations from all spheres and as we speak, we continue to develop relationships and work together with this one common goal of protecting all Fijians from COVID-19 when the borders open. Thus, as a Ministry, our targets are as high as more than 95 percent of all eligible individuals which

is individuals above 18 years of age. I thank the Honourable Members of the House who have registered, showing leadership and responsibility as we move forward with the vaccination programme.

The first 6,000 frontline workers have been from Health, all of the Western Health Staff, other frontliners from the Central and Northern Divisions, including the Blue Lane personnel to start soon in Savusavu, those working in sea ports and airports, hoteliers, those working in quarantine facilities and a few other associated individuals who work closely at the ports of entry, including our Defence Forces. The deployment of the first batch of vaccines has provided an excellent opportunity to test our plan, identify potential gaps in our processes and put measures in place to address our systems and processes before the bigger vaccine deployment exercise commences.

We vaccinated 6,278 individuals in the first batch as some vials had more than 10 doses. These are often done by manufacturers to mitigate against wastage during vaccination. Our vaccination teams were very efficient in making the most of this opportunity to vaccinate 105 percent of our target population for 6,000. I am pleased to inform that a total of 4,821 individuals have been vaccinated in the Western Division, 1,137 in the Central Division and 320 in the Northern Division.

I am also happy to report, Mr. Speaker, that out of the 6,278 there were no adverse event following immunisation. Some individuals developed mild side effects which were temporary and adequately managed with symptomatic care which included antipyretics such as panadol and hydration. As per our Vaccination Deployment Plan, Mr. Speaker, the next batch of vaccines would target the rest of the health care workers, including Private Practitioners, across Fiji.

Apart from these targeted population we want to protect our most vulnerable population which are those individuals with comorbid conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiac issues, renal diseases, including persons with disability. When you register on to the Online Registration Platform, it does ask you if you have any comorbid illnesses including, for example, high blood pressure. You indicate that there and you may wish to actually put in your national health card number and what happens is that our staff (Data Managers) will go through that and pick out those who are in the vulnerable groups and then you will receive your invitation either by text. That is how it works. The Data Managers that are sitting behind go through the detail and identify the groups as they come next.

So, as you may have seen in the papers recently last week we were told that we were next on the list so we just went and had our vaccination done. Apart from this, we are also anticipating on vaccinating, at least, 145,400 individuals in the coming few months. While we focus on this target population, we also working to ensure vaccine for all individuals above 18 years old in Fiji. This is required for at least 650,000 individuals, which equates to 1.3 million doses of the vaccine.

Apart from COVAX support which covers an initial 20 percent of the population, Government is also actively involved in bilateral and multilateral discussion with partners who are willing to support Fiji in acquiring initial doses of vaccine for the rest of the population and also in places where Fiji will actually acquire using its own appropriation. The Government and the Ministry are following closely the processes for approval by WHO for the other vaccines in a not too distance future.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN Resident Coordinator for Fiji, Mr. Sanaka Samarasingha, provided an excellent perspective of our efforts a few days ago when he said:

“Fiji and the Pacific’s handling of COVID-19 is one of the best kept secrets that I know off. It really is an amazing story in some ways not surprised, but I am disappointed

that Fiji and the Pacific countries that have managed to contain COVID for so long have not got the credit and the people have not learnt their lessons from these countries, and look at us, we are able to walk around and not wear masks.”

We are happy with what we have achieved as a nation so far, but we are not resting on our laurels. We remain vigilant and focussed and we will not lower our guards soon because the virus is still pandemic, the virus continues to mutate in countries that have never had mutation before, despite vaccination have begun.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel but the end of this pandemic for the world is still out of sight. Our experience so far have taught us that when we come together as a nation, we rally together, a whole of society and whole of government approach, and we commit to act together and respond in the same way with the same fervour and commitment, we can overcome this global threat and any other threat that stands in our way.

I thank the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the civil servants and the many others in the community including members of this august House who are showing leadership and responsibility with us. I thank all Fijians for your effort in keeping Fiji COVID-19 contained, we cannot drop this ball, we must continue and I ask you to stay with us as we complete this difficult journey. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. With your permission, Sir, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement by my fellow colleague on the COVID-19 vaccine.

First and foremost, I thank the Honourable Minister and congratulate him and the Ministry, frontline health workers, as well as the Permanent Secretary and the Multi-Sectorial Team he has led in our national response to the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also recognise the support from development partners who have generously donated ventilators and other necessary equipment to aid our national response to protect our people over the last one year period. I also express gratitude to the frontline workers, doctors, nurses, who have looked after patients and ensuring our quarantine protocols are enforced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the substantive subject at hand. Although each COVID-19 vaccine is unique, all of them may help with herd immunity. On this subject, Sir, I have already said the following; “a collective effort is required, where we all work with government to ensure the COVID-19 vaccine is available and accessible to all the people of Fiji”.

The registration process is underway both face-to-face and online. The question then is about those who do not use the internet on a daily basis due to connectivity or do not have a smartphone. I hope the registration process, especially face-to-face is rolled out to the rural areas where 44 percent of our population reside.

We urge government to continue to work and consult closely with competent authorities such as WHO. We are glad that Fiji is currently following WHO guidelines for frontline workers to receive the first round of vaccination and thereafter other vulnerable groups.

We must ensure that it is the right dose for our people and we must take a precautionary approach rather than rush into accepting free vaccines. The Honourable Minister has mentioned some vaccine and also the various strains of coronavirus and the Government strategies in combating it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, three vaccines have been approved for emergency use in the USA which is Moderna, Pfizer and the Johnson & Johnson while AstraZenica, which was developed in the United Kingdom (UK) is currently being used in the UK, the EU and many other parts of the world, including Fiji.

While all four vaccines mentioned have efficacy rates in the 70 percent to 90 percent range, it is the endpoint that matters, in that, all four vaccines give you protection against severe symptoms, hospitalisation and death.

I note that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine entered the market a bit later than the other three vaccines. It has been tested and found effective against some of the variant strains of COVID-19. It is also a one-shot vaccine and storage is in the range of 2 degrees to 8 degrees Celsius. To me, Mr. Speaker, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine appears more appropriate for Fiji because it is easier to store and transport, and is a single shot vaccine. With that being said, Mr. Speaker, most of the people who are leading this vaccination programme are saying, "Get the vaccine which you have."

In terms of the rollout of the vaccine, I have every confidence in the Ministry's vaccination programmes. The only concern I would raise, Mr. Speaker, is the reported requirement by vaccine companies that extensive personal information is collected by Government and given to them, in addition to information on side-effects. So that privacy concern, Mr. Speaker, must be addressed by Government.

Other than that, Sir, I congratulate the Honourable Minister on securing the first batch of vaccines through COVAX, and urge caution on the free vaccine, we must only accept those that have been widely tested and certified by the WHO, the US FDA, and Australian or European Authorities. I thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Dr. Lalabalavu for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Leader of the National Federation Party. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the Honourable Minister for his comprehensive statement and for his very useful account of the statistics and processes involved in the vaccination process. I support his view and statement that all of us should take the vaccine when it is available and when it is our turn to do so.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I also want to suggest (I think Honourable Dr. Lalabalavu referred to that) and this is in relation to the registration for the vaccine, we did it here very well, I mean, the staff actually had their birth certificate numbers but I am told that people who are registering outside are required to have a birth certificate and if they do not have one, then they will have to get it for \$15. I suggest that the Ministry look at the availability of other ideas, like passport, election registration cards, if that is what is being said to the people. So, I would urge the Honourable Minister to look at that as well.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, and this is what the people are telling us....

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, I did, but they are being told that they are required to have the birth certificate. This is a very important point, Mr. Speaker.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, is that, the Honourable Minister did not outline very clearly as to when the vaccine is going to be available in terms of the various stages and the various groups of people who are going to get the vaccine. We already know that there are issues with the global supply chain, for example, India had just announced that they are slowing down on the export of AstraZeneca vaccine. I am wondering whether we are getting that from India, whether we have requested it from India or we are getting it from other sources. We need to be very clear about the process through which we are acquiring the vaccine and from where, because as I said, there are serious problems within the global supply chain.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is, while we appreciate that COVID-19 has been contained and we appreciate the work that has been done by the Ministry of Health and those involved in it, we also need to look at how we are going to deal with the impacts of COVID-19 on the economy, which is the other side of the big problem that we have. Obviously, we are already seeing difficulty when we look at the bubbles opening, whether tourists from Australia and New Zealand, these are all uncertainties that are there.

I would like to suggest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we need to come out more clearly in terms of the statistics, for example, the number of flights that are coming, the number of passengers that are coming, the numbers who go into the quarantine, and I think the Honourable Minister provided some aspect of those statistics. But for us as a country, we need to have those statistics very clearly laid out because when we say to Australia, New Zealand or when we say we are pushing for Australia and New Zealand to include Fiji in the bubble, then we need to have ourselves armed with these very clear statistics as to how we are dealing with this, how many people are coming, what is happening, and we can show that we have and very clear plan so that when the Bubble does open, this is what we have. It is also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, very important for our arguments when we are presenting ourselves as COVID-free country or COVID-contained country, because otherwise, there will be questions about what we have.

The final point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that the economy is bleeding every day and we have to understand that while we focus on COVID-19, while our donors are focused on COVID-19, we also need to focus on providing for those who are suffering as a result of the COVID-19 and those who need income support, who need enhancement of the social welfare positions and those who need to be supported in other aspects. So we must not lose sight of that aspects as well, because the impact of COVID-19 is creating that great social and economic impact on the lives of our people. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Leader of the National Federation Party for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, on that note, we will now suspend proceedings for refreshments, which is being served in the Big Committee Room.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.29 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.03 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members before we proceed with the next agenda item, there has been a request by the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport for a point of clarification. You have the floor, Sir.

POINT OF CLARIFICATION

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I just need to clarify the issue that was raised by Honourable Professor Prasad regarding a member of the public being charged \$15 for a birth certificate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you were making the announcement on Monday, 22nd March, 2021, you had clearly stated to all the Honourable Members that they were requested to have their BRN which is the Birth Registration Number, which comes on the corner of your birth certificate and a valid photo ID. There was no requirement for a birth certificate *per se*. All we needed to do was have that particular number and they would pull the details.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- He did not have a birth certificate.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Let me finish, Honourable Member.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This is what happens, Sir. We come here, we need to make sure we get our facts correct because what you say here disseminates out to the public of Fiji very quickly and this needs to be put to rest. There is no \$15 charge. Honourable Professor Prasad said that someone told him they were being charged \$15 for their birth certificate, so if you are going to go and get registered, Sir, ...

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- A point of order, Mr Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- At no time, Mr. Speaker, did I say that the public is being charged \$15. All I said was that members of the public have told us that they are required to have the birth certificates. I said that if they are required to have a birth certificate, if they do not have one then if they go and get a birth certificate they will need to pay \$15. That is what I said. I did not talk about the charge for registration. I think we need to have that clarified.

HON. SPEAKER.- \$15 - it was mentioned. You have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir. He has said it in a way that a citizen will have to go and pay \$15. You do not, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all that needs to be done for any citizen, is to go to the BDM Office and get your BRN - that is given for free. It is not a charge - all you need is your BRN and for information sake, all of this is actually being disseminated on the necessary websites, et cetera. If you go through the COVID-19 registration checklist, it will show you a copy of the birth certificate and at the top it has your BRN.

I am taking my time to explain this, Sir, because this goes out to the general public. You do not need to go and get a birth certificate out, to go and get registered. All you need is the BRN. It does not cost you \$15, so to the general public and to anyone else in this House, you need to say it correctly, Sir. There is no requirement for \$15. As a matter of fact, even Honourable Professor Prasad himself did not have his birth certificate - he had to go and get the BRN. It did not cost him any money on the day and that is the point, Sir. Thank you for letting me clarify that, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on.

REVIEW REPORT - 2014 GENERAL ELECTION JOINT REPORT BY THE FIJIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND THE SUPERVISOR OF ELECTIONS

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

That Parliament debates the Review Report of the 2014 General Election Joint Report by the Fijian Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections which was tabled on 16th May, 2019.

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

HON. SPEAKER.- I now invite the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to speak on his motion. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I take this opportunity as the Member moving the motion to make a contribution on the Committee's Report on the 2014 General Election Joint Report by the Fijian Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I briefly would like to give some background to the Committee's review on the 2014 General Election Joint Report that was referred to the Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee in the last term of Parliament and then reinstated in this new Parliament and referred to the current Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Chairperson, I would like to highlight that the Committee's mandate was fulfilled by reviewing the Joint Report (as it was then constituted) and the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) Report on the 2014 General Election.

The Committee also considered the previous Committee's consideration of the submissions from the public and key stakeholders that were relevant to the contents of the Joint Report. The Committee does not see this process as a review of the entire electoral system but the specific issues raised in the Joint Report.

The Committee thoroughly deliberated on the Joint Report and the review findings by the previous Committee which highlighted a few pertinent matters, which were discussed with the representatives of Fiji's electoral management bodies. If I may Mr. Speaker, some of these pertinent matters include the:

- legal challenges that were encountered by the Electoral Commission and the Fijian Elections Office;
- confusion caused by pre-poll; and
- issues regarding the counting process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Committee noted that the discussions with the SOE and the FEC was

SOE and the FEC was beneficial since it allowed for clarification of the issues identified from the review and also enabled the identification of progress in the work carried out by the Electoral Management bodies. My Committee, therefore, reiterated the previous Committee's sentiments, in that the clarification provided on the issues noted from the Joint Report, was satisfactory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the review, the current Committee noted the previous Committee's deliberation on the Report and the issues that were noted. Some of the issues were the aspect concerning the legal challenges that were encountered by the Fijian Elections Office (FEO), and the concerns about the confusion and aspects of counting processes. In the face of the Joint Report, it is the position of the current Committee that the mandate was fulfilled by reviewing the deliberation of the previous Committee when it reviewed the Joint Report.

The current Committee reviewed and considered the submission received by the previous Committee from the public and key stakeholders that were relevant to the contents of the Report. The current Committee does not see this process as a review of the entire Electoral system as well. Having noted the Committee's mandate with regards to this Joint Report, the Committee also recognises that such a comprehensive review of the current system should be okay after the 2018 General Elections.

The Committee noted that progress has been made with regards to addressing many of the concerns raised in the Joint Report yet every system has room for improvement. After the 2018 General Elections, Fiji has completed two election cycles under the new Electoral System and this will allow for a fuller understanding of the challenges in the new system and an opportunity to gather and consider lessons learnt.

At the conclusion of the 2018 General Elections, it would be right time for the Parliamentary Committee to conduct a full review of the Electoral System through the Election Report to ensure all aspects of the system are considered. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to inform that this review is currently underway by the Justice, Law and Human Rights. We are actually going around collecting submissions on the three Electoral Bills and the Joint Report that is before the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now give me time to discuss 38 MOG Recommendations that were part of the Joint Report of 2014 General Elections. For the review of the 2014 General Elections Joint Report, it was noted that there were 38 Recommendations highlighted by the MOG. From the Review, it was also noted that 19 of the 38 MOG Recommendations had been accepted by the FEC and acted upon in some progressive manner.

If I may, Mr. Speaker, I would like to humbly appraise this august House of the review regarding the MOG Recommendations on the 2014 General Elections. The first recommendation was on the legal framework for Elections.

Recommendation 1

Fiji should consider becoming party to the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights. The comments from the Supervisor of Elections and the Fijian Electoral Commission at that time after seeking clarification in 2017, was that it did not have any jurisdiction to deal with this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 2

To ensure credibility of the electoral process, it is necessary to also include the participation of domestic accredited non-partisan election observers. Again, Mr. Speaker, it was recommended

that it was not under the jurisdiction of FEC or SOE to abide by this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 3

Political Party Identification should be included on a national candidate list or voter should be permitted to bring “How to vote” materials inside the polling station or the ballot paper should be redesigned to include candidate names and parties. At that point in time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, back in 2017, it was informed and submitted that it does not have any jurisdiction to deal with this recommendation, but currently the Committee is reviewing this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 4

The National Candidate Listing should be arranged in both numerical and alphabetical order. This recommendation was rejected by the Commission.

The FEC and the FEO submitted that the order to maintain consistency and simplicity, one list is enough.

Recommendation 5

The range of penalties for electoral offence should be proportionate and appropriate and comparable to international standard and practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this recommendation was also rejected, as FEC and FEO submitted that the Court has the discretion on the penalty to impose depending on all the circumstances of the case including any aggravating factors of the case and the gravity and seriousness of the offence. The Court will apply judicial principle when exercising its powers of sentencing.

Recommendation 6

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government of Fiji should review and finalise all existing electoral laws and regulations governing elections well in advance of the next election.

The FEC and FEO submitted that it does not have the jurisdiction to deal with this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 7

The division of responsibilities between the FEC and FEO should be clarified.

The FEC and FEO submitted that the amendment to the Electoral Act in February 2017, has clarified the roles of the SOE and the Commission. It has established that both organisations have to work together to deliver the election. The SOE is bound by all decisions of the Electoral Commission.

Recommendation 8

Mr. Speaker, Sir, consideration should be given to reducing requirements for party registration and activities. This recommendation was rejected at the time of seeking the clarification.

The FEC and FEO submitted that, despite Fiji being a single constituency, it is necessary that Political Parties have national reach and approach in terms of their formation and policy to ensure balanced policy-making approach. It was also noted the number of Political Parties.

Recommendation 9

Public office holders, including trade union officers, should be allowed to be political party members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FEC and FEO submitted that it does not have jurisdiction to deal with this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 10

The FEO and FEC should consider implementing electoral and campaign calendars, to ensure political parties and other election stakeholders have adequate time to prepare for the election cycle.

The Electoral Commission will publish a calendar of event and key dates for the next General Elections.

Recommendation 11

The Public Order (Amendment) Decree (now Act) should be revised to allow groups, including political parties, to gather without requiring a permit. It was advised that the Public Order Act 2012 has been amended by Parliament to allow political parties to conduct meeting without a need of permit.

Recommendation 12

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national candidate numbers should be drawn earlier, to allow parties sufficient time to publicise these ahead of pre-polling. This recommendation was also rejected.

It was advised that this time around, parties will have sufficient time to campaign and inform voters of their candidate numbers. The period between the Writ of Elections and the polling will be sufficient time for the candidate. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, once the Writ is filed, there would be no government for, at least, seven weeks. We cannot actually increase this time to allow the country to go without a government.

Recommendation 13

The next recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is on Political Party Polling Agents. Rules regarding the use of paper in the polling station should be clarified and observers and the party polling agents should be able to carry paper into polling station. It was advised that amendments to the Electoral Act in February 2017 has clarified that Political Party agents and Observers can take materials approved by the Supervisor of Election inside the Polling station.

Recommendation 14

The FEO should provide clear information materials in advance of the election, which includes the role of political party polling agents in the polling process.

Recommendation 15

More comprehensive training for party polling agents on their roles and responsibilities in the electoral process should be provided by political parties or other responsible bodies.

Recommendation 16

The media accreditation process should be simplified and all media outlets, including international media, should have sufficient advance notice of deadlines and timelines.

Mr. Speaker, for Recommendations 14, 15 and 16, it was advised that the FEC will publish a handbook for polling agents and the media. The handbook will explain the roles, responsibilities and restrictions for polling agents and observers. It also gives guidance to agents and observers on how to deal with particular issues in the polling place. It is anticipated that the political parties can use this handbook to develop their polling agent operational procedures.

Recommendation 17

The Media Industry Development Authority should issue clear, timely and practical reporting guidance. It was advised, Mr. Speaker, that FEC does not have jurisdiction to deal with this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 18

Penalties and breaches election-related reporting rules should be reviewed. This recommendation was rejected.

Mr. Speaker, the FEO or FEC submitted that the Courts have the discretion on the penalty to impose, depending on all the circumstances of a case including the aggravating factors of a case and the gravity and seriousness of the offence. The Courts will apply judicial principles when exercising its powers of sentencing.

Recommendation 19

Should the Media Industry Development Authority continues its role in future election, there is a need for an independent institution to adjudicate complaints about its actions, consistent with Fiji's legal and constitutional framework.

Mr. Speaker, this recommendation was also rejected, it was advised that the FEO or FEC submitted that the MIDA is a statutory body and the High Court has oversight of the activities of MIDA. Therefore, no further changes are required in this framework.

Recommendation 20

There is a need for a regulation as well as an independent institution to prevent media biases, thus ensuring a level playing field among election participants.

Mr. Speaker, this was also rejected, it was advised that MIDA is a statutory body, and the High Court has oversight of the activities of MIDA. Therefore, no further changes are required in this framework.

Recommendation 21

To facilitate prospective voters in remote areas to vote, the duration to apply for postal voting could be lengthened and the Fijian Elections Office should be more active in providing support and amenities.

Mr. Speaker, it was advised that Parliament has amended the Electoral Act in February 2017, to allow the SOE to distribute postal ballots by the best practical means. This should allow voters in rural areas to receive the ballot well in time. The MOG Recommendation 21 is, therefore, accepted, but we have developed an alternative solution.

Recommendation 22

It is important for voters and political parties to be informed of the national voter roll through all accessible means. We were informed, Mr. Speaker, that the printing and display of the National Register of Voters is now an annual exercise, and to enhance the sense of citizen ownership of the Register, the FEC has approved rules that will allow a voter to object to the registration of another voter. We believe that this will promote greater involvement of Fijians in the electoral process. Each registered political party was given a copy of the register free of charge.

Recommendation 23

The FEO should continue and expand its efforts to reach remote areas within person Voter Education Programme.

It was advised that the awareness and the outreach programmes from the FEO will intensify as we approach the 2018 General Election. The FEO already has an awareness session built into the registration drive but a more formal and direct face to face awareness programme will be undertaken and that was from 15th January, 2018 to 15th April, 2018.

A Publication Guideline has been established to ensure that all voters have access to necessary basic information about the election and the process of voting.

Recommendation 24

Voter and civic education should be introduced in the secondary school curriculum in order to raise voter awareness in future elections.

We were informed, Mr. Speaker, that the FEO has advertised globally and secured the services of Ms. Yvonne Gouldie, an Electoral Expert to develop the Secondary School Electoral Awareness Curriculum. It was anticipated that the Curriculum will be ready for implementation in schools by 2018.

Recommendation 25

The FEO should create a mechanism to respond to reports of inaccuracies of information provided by the SMS voter registration checking service.

We were informed, Mr. Speaker, that for the 2018 General Elections, a call centre will be established to assist voters with election queries. This call centre will action queries on the check your polling venue SMS and online platform.

Recommendation 26

Section 115 of the Electoral Decree, 2014 and now an Act should be revised to encourage civil society engagement in the election process, including removing restrictions on organisations receiving foreign funding.

It was advised, Mr. Speaker, that the FEC and FEO submitted that it does not have jurisdiction to deal with this recommendation.

Recommendation 27

The Government of Fiji should engage with civil society organisations and actors to help support its civic education efforts.

It was advised that the FEC and FEO submitted that it does not have jurisdiction to deal with this particular recommendation.

Recommendation 28

The Multinational Observer Group (MOG) respects Fiji's national laws. However, the MOG suggested that the FEO provide clarification on the reasons for rejecting civil society applications.

This recommendation was also rejected, Mr. Speaker. It was advised after verifying from file records that all reasons for rejection of applications under Section 115 was properly given, therefore, the MOG has made an inaccurate observation in this recommendation.

Recommendation 29

'Pre-polling' should be re-named 'early voting'.

This recommendation was also rejected. It was advised that the FEC believes that it is unnecessary to make semantic changes to the electoral system from one election to the next. We prefer to maintain consistency in the electoral process so that voters can become more confident about the system.

Recommendation 30

Pre-polling location should be determined earlier and local officials should be consulted in their selection.

It was advised that the FEO launched its first edition of the Fiji National Polling Venues Directory in March 2017. The purpose of the Directory is to allow Fijians to locate and learn details about individual polling venues. This Directory was developed after thorough consultation with various agencies. An online version of this Directory is also available.

Recommendation 31

Information on timing and locations for polling should reach all voters, with special efforts made for voters in remote locations.

It was noted Mr. Speaker, Sir, that having established those areas where pre-polling will take place, it will now be much easier for the FEO to inform voters in these areas about the exact timing for pre-poll in the polling places.

Recommendation 32

The reason behind the regulation to ban pen and paper for observers should be clarified and reviewed, as it could raise questions on the openness of the voting process. We were informed, Mr.

Speaker, Sir, that the Amendment to the Electoral Act in February 2017 clarified that political party agents and observers could take materials approved by SOE inside the polling station.

Recommendation 33

Consideration should be given to simplifying the voting process inside polling stations. This recommendation was rejected, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

At the time of seeking the clarification it was advised that Fiji's polling process inside the polling station is one of the simplest in the world and will not be changed.

Recommendation 34

A chronological list of procedures for each phase of Election Day should be made available at each polling station as a guide for party polling agents and observers.

It was noted Mr. Speaker, Sir, that an important part of the polling agent handbook is a detailed explanation of the process for voting, counting and results transmission. A diagram is also included that explains the process on a polling day.

Recommendation 35

Ensure sufficient training for polling station staff.

The training of election officials would be conducted in phases for 2018 as well as 2022 General Elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is an ongoing process now. There will be a refresher programme organised following an announcement of the election date. With elections more than a year away, at that point in time the FEO did ensure that recruitment would be done early to allow sufficient time to train the officials.

Recommendation 36

Consideration should be given to simplifying the counting process. It was advised that the counting process has been adjusted to allow staff greater convenience in undertaking this important role. The Commission has once again limited the total number of voters to 500, which will mean that staffs who are doing counting will not be overburdened. The reconciliation book and the protocol of results book have been modified to allow ease of use.

Recommendation 37

Observers and party polling agents should be allowed to maintain a continued presence in polling stations, including throughout the voting, counting and packing processes.

It was advised that a training manual has been prepared keeping in mind that observers and agents must be allowed to remain inside the polling station throughout the whole process. Special emphasis has been placed on ensuring that this is conveyed to election officials during training. The polling agent handbook by FEO also makes specific reference to this.

Recommendation 38

Voters with disability and elderly voters should be allowed to receive assistance, if they so wish, from friends/family members.

It was advised that the EC and FEO does not have jurisdiction to deal with this particular recommendation.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the review of the 2014 General Elections Joint Report saw the Committee also paying careful consideration to the MOG Report and the recommendations that were put forward in the Report.

As alluded to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of the 38 Recommendations put forward 19 Recommendations were accepted by the Electoral Commission and acted upon in some progressive manner. Nine Recommendations were said to be beyond the jurisdiction of the Electoral Commission and these were Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 17, 26, 27 and 38. However, 10 Recommendations were rejected by the Electoral Commission with reasoning, as I had alluded to earlier, and those were Recommendations 4, 5, 8, 12, 18, 19, 20, 28 and 29.

The Committee also noted the deliberation on the principles of gender equality and appreciates the apparent gap in placing emphasis on such requirements when the Joint Report was drafted and tabled in Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, having noted the Committee's mandate with regard to the Joint Report, the Committee also recognises that such a comprehensive review of the current system should occur after the 2018 General Election. The Committee also notes that since the tabling of the Joint Report, that progress has been made with regard to addressing many of the concerns raised in it, yet every system has room for improvement.

With those few remarks, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity for making my contribution. *Vinaka.*

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In terms of the electoral process, a concern with SODELPA is the declining number of our people turning out to vote. If I can go back to our history, Mr. Speaker, in 1999, 89 percent of our people who registered to vote came to vote. In 2006, it was 87 percent; in 2014, it was 83 percent; and in 2018, it had fallen to 71 percent. This is a very serious concern to us, Mr. Speaker, and we believe that every effort must be made to get our people to exercise their right which comes to them once every four years, to decide on the kind of government they want over the next four years.

I have spoken in this House, Mr. Speaker, about that moment of truth, that whatever we do, it points to that particular time when a citizen of this country or when a Fijian, enters the privacy of that voting booth and decides on who is to form the government they want for the next four years. Everything we do, Mr. Speaker, points to that moment of truth.

Mr. Speaker, it would appear from the turnout at the last General Election that we are failing in that area. Too many people did not come out to vote and in quantum, that was 171,000 people in 2018 and 90,000 or so in 2014. For a small country like Fiji, where the connection is pretty intact, it is quite a worry that many people are not exercising their right.

What we see, Mr. Speaker, is that political parties are not being empowered to play their role to help in this process. Too often, we come up with so many restrictions as we have today, affecting the work of the political parties. Let me just say here, Mr. Speaker, that electoral systems and

political parties are both critical to enhancing electoral integrity and achieving more genuine representation. Without political parties, the electoral system is merely a system that does not deliver people's representation.

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is almost inconceivable to have a functioning democracy without political parties. Political parties serve a wide variety of functions, such as aggregating and articulating interest, developing policies that provide voice and choice, selecting candidates for elected office, organising legislatures, coordinating information and activities of government, recruiting and linking leaders and supporters and conducting electoral campaigns. None of these are achieved just by having an electoral system in itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important to have political parties functioning in full. Being at the heart of democracy, political parties require financial resources to perform their functions. Money is the all-important oil that keeps the party machinery going.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday we heard from Honourable Professor Prasad about how unfair the system today is in providing the funding to the political parties. We are badly handicapped in the way it is done and one asks the question on what FijiFirst does with all the funding that has been provided over the years. We are told to use the funding only for parliamentary purposes. We wonder if the same instructions have been given to FijiFirst.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about funding, we are the people who come to Parliament on the back of those who can only contribute \$2. If you look at this side of the House, there are 21 of us. Those who brought us to Parliament are the people who pay \$2 membership fee and on the back of that, we made it into Parliament. Now, we have some plans to make it difficult for these people to contribute to the party. If you want to sell roti parcels, you have to process it in the way that someone contributes \$10,000, like the other side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our model as a people is on *solesolevaki*. We have the *solu*, we have the *kati*, we have the barbeque, et cetera, and to expect our people to process their contributions in the same way the FijiFirst collects their \$10,000 per person, is very grossly unfair. We want our people to be engaged in politics and engaging in politics is to help keep your political parties functioning alive, so do not make it difficult for our people to engage in politics. Remove all those fixtures that FijiFirst is cooking up because people have to exercise their right and they need their political parties so that they can get the government of the people, by the people and for the people.

That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what concerns us about the way we are today, the way it was in 2014 and 2018, and we are very concerned. If it is not corrected, the numbers will be worse in 2022. I have spoken, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about confidence building measures to help our people have the confidence to come out and vote.

The system today is very intimidating, it is too restrictive. If you look back into 1999, why was it and how was it that 89 percent of the voters came out to vote? In 2018 why was it that only 71 percent came out to vote? Because, Mr. Speaker, Sir, people were empowered, the system was made user-friendly and people came out to vote. Political parties must be part of the process.

All these, Mr. Speaker, we are now told as the 2014 and 2018 that 48 hours before the day of election is a black out. Yet in the last General Elections, would you believe from the other side, some people had propagated that some fake news about Diwali, et cetera, came from SODELPA and affected the outcome of what would have been ours. So, Mr. Speaker, we get rid of all those restrictions, make our people come out and vote. Make it user-friendly.

I am happy, Mr. Speaker, when I presented to the Committee that in 2022, at least, we will have the symbols of the parties, the photograph of the candidate and their number. That is a step in the right direction and I commend the Committee for providing that, Mr. Speaker. That is part of confidence building measures that we continue to highlight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the danger here is that, the people will lose interest in their Parliament, and it is already happening. As I said lately, the Sessions of Parliament used to be the highlight of the month. We used to sit once a month, it used to be the highlight of the month and the questions were the highlight of the day. It was at prime time and it used to be viewed across the country when people knew that their questions were being asked in this Parliament at that hour. Now, it is being relegated to the end of the evening when everyone is tired and no one is watching.

As much as I respect the Ministerial Statements, please, put them to the end of the day because the Ministers are reading monotone and they can put everyone to sleep. Let us have that robust part of the morning to come back when people expect their Parliament to be in full operation and they see that freedom of speech that is fundamental to democracy being practised in their Parliament. The way it is, Mr. Speaker, is all one way and as I said, it is killing the interest of the people in their Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for us, we are in campaign mode. I know there are restrictions, we can only carry out awareness, but we need to start levelling the playing field. In some jurisdictions, the Government provides funding to all political parties on an equal basis to carry out their work. If we want our people to participate, to be fully engaged in politics, that is something that we should also consider and we would be all for it.

When we become government, SODELPA will make sure that everyone is treated fairly. We will give a sum of money to FijiFirst, we will give a sum of money to NFP and a sum of money to SODELPA.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- We will treat everyone equally. The people of Fiji know that change is coming, that a new world is emerging after 2022. They will see democracy being practised to the highest level that we have ever seen in this country. Change is coming!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, the time is coming when the tyranny of FijiFirst becomes the past and they will become a small footnote in the history of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are exciting times for us on this side of the House as we head towards forming the Government in 2022 and we want people to be engaged. We believe that if the 171,000 people had voted in 2018, some people could have been sitting on this side of the House and we will be sitting on that side of the House. Mr. Speaker, we know that and that is what political leaders, need to do to engage their people in the fullness of their rights in a democratic community that we have like Fiji.

I commend the work of the Committee, Mr. Speaker, they are doing a good work. As they consulted people across the country, I wish they would be given all the support and then implement what we are hearing from across the country. The word is very clear, make it user-friendly so that we can all participate.

Mr. Speaker, a new dawn is happening and if we make these changes, we will see a greater participation by our people. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Gavoka.

Honourable Members, just stick to the content of the Report, make that generalisation, just the content of the Report as presented. I do not want to hear about the history of all the other elections that had taken place but the content of the Report put today, let us stick to that. We do not have all the time right now.

Next on the list is the Honourable Professor Prasad. You have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. While I thank the Chair of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for his Report, I was kind of baffled as to why the Committee did not make any recommendations like it did in this Parliamentary Paper. 73/2019. That was the review of the Electoral Commission and MOG reports into the 2014 General Elections and what we debated and noted last month, Mr. Speaker, the recommendation in this Report is and I quote:

“After reviewing the 2014 General Elections Joint Report by the Supervisor of Elections and the Fijian Electoral Commission, the Committee has no contentious matters to bring to the attention of the House. The Committee recommends that the Parliament take note of the contents of this Report.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is in my view, a far cry from the recommendations contained in the Parliamentary Paper No. 73/2019 where the Committee actually recommended for the setting up of a special parliamentary committee to carry out a comprehensive review of elections systems and I want to quote this recommendation as well:

“For a number of the recommendations noted in the FEC Annual Report 2014 and the MOG Report 2014, the Committee notes that there will be more evidence upon which to determine if there are still challenges after the 2018 General Elections which will be determined from the Commissions’ Annual Report, therefore, after the upcoming election, Fiji will have two electoral cycles completed and that will be a good time for Parliament post-election to do a comprehensive review of the system, to gather lessons learnt from previous two elections and to compare with best practices in election management with the goal that Fiji has the best electoral system possible.”

So, Mr. Speaker, I heard the Chairman talked about the 38 Recommendations and I am glad he did that because it actually shows why those recommendations were important.

The Recommendations, Mr. Speaker, fell into two parts; one could have been entertained by the FEC itself and the other required legislative changes. So and so the statement from Honourable Maharaj that for some of those recommendations the FEC or the SOE did not have the jurisdiction, is actually correct. They do not have the jurisdiction to make legislative changes. The legislative changes will have to come to Parliament, it will come through a special parliamentary committee or an Act of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, you know it does not make any sense to say the FEC does not have the jurisdiction. Yes, we understand if it is a legislative change recommended by the MOG or FEC, then it will be for Parliament to consider.

Mr. Speaker, the same Committee also recommended for a review of the penalties in the Electoral Act to reflect international standards, and my question is; why did the Committee not reiterate the same recommendations in respect of the Joint Report of the Electoral Commission and Supervisor of Elections. I mean it is not a million dollar question, it is simple.

The Committee may have decided that after making substantial recommendations, it would not repeat those for the risk of something like a broken record to the Committee may have just reviewed the work being done by its predecessors before the 2018 Elections and to avoid time wasting relied on the outcomes of the Committee before its dissolution before the 2000 Elections.

The third reason is most likely a contributing factor to the absence of any recommendations and that is the change in the composition of the Electoral Commission in early 2017. From the expiry of the three-year term of the former Commission and his Chairman, which made it wide-ranging and I repeat, wide-ranging and sensible recommendations in conformity with the Multinational Observer Group.

The new Electoral Commission appointed in early 2017 adopted a different approach to the former Commission's Report basically ignoring major recommendations as well as that of the MOG. They are also not reflected in the current reforms being proposed through amendments to the Electoral Act and I might add, the Political Parties (Registration, Conduct, Funding and Disclosures) Act which Parliament still has to consider.

Ignoring the recommendation of the former Commission, Mr. Speaker, is captured in the Verbatim of Proceedings before the Committee perceiving the current one. This is available as Appendices to the Report that we are scrutinising and taking note of. In particular, Mr. Speaker, I refer to the Verbatim of 5th October, 2017 when the Supervisor of Elections, FEO's Legal and Compliance Officer and Media Officer appeared before the former Committee.

The Supervisor of Elections and Legal and Compliance Officer still hold their respective offices while the Media Officer has gone back to Fiji Broadcasting Commission (FBC), the same organisation and the News Room from which he had graduated to the Fijian Elections Office.

Mr. Speaker, to illustrate the change of position from the former FEC to the newly appointed one, which is still chaired by the same person, and I will quote portions of the Verbatim:

“The Supervisor, in his brief submission, made it abundantly clear that what he was saying was the position of both the Commission as well as his intents of the former Commission's recommendation and Report whose term was not renewed.”

It must be recalled, Mr. Speaker, for record purposes, that the former FEC, chaired by a prominent lawyer from a reputable firm in Lautoka, had taken the Supervisor of Elections to Court for disregarding the decision on upholding a successful objection against a FijiFirst candidate in 2014.

Just because the FEC's ruling came after 4.00 p.m. on a Friday, Mr. Speaker, the end of working week of the three day period, but still within the calendar day, the Commission first challenged the decision of the Supervisor of Elections in the High Court which was rejected by the

Judge, but then in the Court of Appeal, Mr. Speaker, where all the three Judges unanimously ruled that the Supervisor of Elections was wrong to disregard the decision of the Commission.

However, Mr. Speaker, amongst changes to the Electoral Act in February 2017, came the stipulation of the timeframe of 4.00 p.m. as deadline for decisions and objections which the Court of Appeal had ruled to be wrong.

Mr. Speaker, in what is termed as a brief submission by the Supervisor, he told the Committee, amongst other things, the following (because this is very important) and I quote from Page 2 of the Verbatim Report of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law & Human Rights on 5th October, 2017:

“The way to interpret that the Electoral Commission’s approach to the reports as well as this submission and everything is that the Commission noted the report by Multinational Observer Group (MOG) and previous Commission was and they made their own position; they decided what they wanted to do about it.

They approached the Committee to inform the Committee that this is what the Commission believes should be made out, based on that recommendation, against what the Commission thinks.

The Chairman also clarifies to me that and I can convey to the Committee that because we are the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Commission does not want to get engaged into a political exercise of rebutting and then commenting on political parties’ statements as this submission, as well as further statements, have been used by political parties in campaigns, et cetera, et cetera. So, the fact of the matter is in Fiji, the political system is now using the electoral system as a campaign tool.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the paragraph later in the verbatim, the Supervisor makes his incredible statement and I quote,

“Usually the electoral authorities are not politicised indirectly. However the case in Fiji, the moment is different and we acknowledge that and we are working within our legal framework to ensure that we do not cross any boundaries.”

What did the Supervisor mean here, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Was appearing before a Parliamentary Committee politicising the Fijian Elections Office? If you have an electoral change, an Act that is considered by the Committee, if you appear before the Committee and make these statements, it is not politicising the Fijian Elections Office or the Electoral Commission or the office of the Supervisor of Elections. Was the Supervisor referring to a joint statement or submission by the parties in Opposition and outside Parliament for changes to electoral laws based on what the Multinational Observer Group and the Electoral Commission, soon after the 2014 election, recommended?

Clarifications about these statements in the verbatim lead to perceptions. We do not want to believe in perception, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but the fact is that the former Commission’s recommendation in our view, has been railroaded and raises a lot of questions and eyebrows.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want leave it at that, but suffice it to say that the laws governing the conduct of elections as well as those of political parties and the media, in my view and in our party’s view, remain very, very regressive. Unless we address those regressive laws and make those legislative changes that was recommended by the Multinational Observer Group, that was recommended by the 2014 Electoral Commission, we are not going to create a level playing field because that is what democracy is all about.

Political parties and the laws governing political parties and the electoral system must provide that space, freedom for political parties and voters to engage in the political processes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would just like to make a short contribution.

Let us go back again to the recommendation. After reviewing the 2014 General Election Joint Report by the Supervisor of Election and the Fijian Electoral Commission, the Committee has no contentious matters to bring to the attention of the House. The Committee recommends that the Parliament take note of the contents of the report.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have three Electoral Bills that have been brought to the House and is going through its process through the Parliamentary Committee. It will be interesting to see what happens and I think it will address some of the concerns that have been raised currently in the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to finish by saying that the Honourable Gavoka keeps on talking about change and changes happening, this will happen. I do not want to dwell a lot into it, but the people in 2018 have spoken and the constituency of the House, how it constitutes now, we on this side, and they on that side is because of the grassroots people that he talks about, which are people, my relatives, Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Minerals Resources' relatives, Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport's relatives, they picked us and that is why we are here. I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the motion before the House. I thank the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and the Members of the Committee for the Report.

I note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they have not made any recommendations. In reading through the Joint Report by the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections. They also did not make any recommendations in their report. However, I would like to read the conclusion of their report which states, and I quote:

“The 2014 General Election was a testament to the collective will of the people to return the country to democracy.”

It was indeed Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji had looked forward to the 2014 General Election because we all wanted to have our democracy back. Be that as it may, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the political parties had identified shortcomings in the 2014 General Election. They made concerted efforts to bring these to the new Electoral Commission but it was to no avail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is well known that if authorities do not consult the people, it does not matter how well a law is written. Its implementation will be hampered by the notion of its imposition on the will of the people. We have had two general elections in Fiji and the people remain doubtful on the system of election. The doubts are represented by the people who had voted the Opposition

candidates, the 2014 and 2018 General Elections. The numbers had increased and will continue to increase Mr. Speaker.

The doubts are contained in the joint Opposition parties submission to the Fiji Electoral Commission after the 2014 General Election and whilst preparing for the 2018 General Election, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I wish to highlight just seven of the recommendations:

- (1) That a total review be conducted on the IT system used in the Election's Office in particular all computers and the software used in the counting of votes.
- (2) That the count at the polling stations to be taken as a final count unless there is a dispute and an audit of recount is to take place or a recount at the National Tally Centre.
- (3) That all *Turaga Ni Koro*, advisory counsellors provincial councils, *tikina* councils, town councils, rural local authorities, be notified by telephone, email and letter by the Fijian Elections Office in order to inform their communities about voting, and not just to be informed through the media or a press conference as most are not available to this medium of communication.
- (4) That Section 119 of the Electoral Act be amended in order for the Electoral Commission to approve observers and not the Minister for Elections.
- (5) That the Electoral Commission be granted its own separate budget and to employ their own employees including their own Secretary. The underlying philosophy has to be that the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections primarily objective is to facilitate free and fair election rather than to defaults to a restrictive and forbidding environment and rules.
- (6) That the Minister responsible for Elections should be the Honourable Prime Minister as has been the precedence. The people of this country are asking for fairness, and that is all. We simply ask for fairness so that all political parties compete on an even playing field.
- (7) That our prayer for true equality be imposed by the Electoral rules so all political parties send an equal chance under the system rather than a system that is designed to deregister parties and punish politicians.

I would just like to refer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to an example of how rules operate against opposition parties. I turn to the specific provision that has greatly handicapped opposition political parties. I speak, Sir, about the 48 hours blackout before the day of election. First, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the blackout does not apply to pre-poll voting which begins two to three weeks before voting day. So in fact one day voting is a myth because elections actually take place over a month in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the experience of 2014 and 2018 the 48 hours blackout is designed to enable the ruling party to silence opposition parties. I say that because in 2018 internet trolls established fake pages mimicking the *Fiji Times*, the *Fiji TV News*, et cetera, and spread fake posts, for example, in falsifying SODELPA policy to abolish Diwali.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be interesting to investigate and find out who really was behind the fake post. Due to the requirements of the blackout period and draconian penalties meted out to those who breached the blackout period, the Opposition Parties could not go mainstream or through social

media to correct these lies which were detrimental to our final voter count. Even the mainstream media could not point that these are fake stories and fake pages.

I now wish to address the exclusion of the judiciary and need for an effective remedy redress, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when there are problems experienced with the electoral process, as we did in 2018 with our Court of Disputed Returns, it is unfortunate to, say the least.

As I have said in my contribution in the last session in February, the Court ruling on the administrative evidence from certain witnesses basically collapsed the electoral petitions that were filed as the key witnesses were withdrawn. There was no point in continuing with the exclusion of key witnesses. A ruling that could not be appealed and appealed effectively frustrated the judicial challenge and the rights of parties and citizens to redress.

There is a need, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for a holistic review. In our view given the many flaws in the current system, and already publicised by the political parties and individual members of the community, a holistic review of the whole electoral framework is required to look in detail at the issues identified.

The proposed amendments in Electoral Legislations will not bring about electoral integrity, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is easy to label any process free and fair but we noticed the lack of transparency and different interpretations of rules in the last two General Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Electoral Commission had recommended the following in 2014:

- That the Electoral Commission should be empowered with independent legal advice instead of solely relying on the Solicitor-General.
- The provision of symbols on ballot papers and not only on candidate booklets freeing up the media in respect of the elections process.
- Making observation of elections less restricted.
- Removing draconian provisions in the Political Parties Act.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a need to improve the process to ensure a fair system and a level playing field. If Government considers the view of the people please withdraw the three Bill to amend the Electoral Provisions. What is needed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the appointment of an independent commission from both sides of the House to carry out a holistic approach and the review of the whole legislative framework for elections.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we from this side of the House make these recommendations in the public interest so that the will of the people is truly heard and implemented. I thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to speak on this motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports, you have the floor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to speak on the Report by the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights on the 2014 General Elections Joint Report by the Fijian Electoral Commission (FEC) and the Supervisor of Elections (SOE).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Gavoka, in his contribution, said that because of the fake news they lost some votes but he forgets that just last year, the Opposition Whip made a very damaging statement in regards to Diwali. Sir, I want to put that matter to rest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I wish to briefly speak on the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) summary of findings. The outcome of the 2014 Fijian Elections broadly represented the will of the Fijian voters. The conditions were in place for all Fijians to exercise their rights to vote freely, Honourable Prasad. The political parties were free to campaign and the campaigns were peaceful. This is the report that I am referring to.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- This the summary of the findings.

Number three will hurt them because this is the truth. The media made good effort to cover the elections. The Fijian Elections Office and polling officers were all well prepared and voting procedures were correct. Police played in a neutral manner when needed. Voter information campaign by the FEO and the EC was extensive. Counting processes was well organised and lastly the group also observed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the election was conducted in an atmosphere of calm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the short timeframe in 2014, the Supervisor of Elections, Mr. Mohammed Saneem conducted the 2014 General Elections in one day with high polling under the new electoral system with single constituency. Sir, there were 248 candidates. This system, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has brought Fiji into the modern era and in line with principles of equal votes for equal representation with the one person, one vote system.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- It has enabled, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a fair and a transparent system with the national lines of voting where each voter casts her or his vote for one candidate of their choice. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2013 Constitution removed the racial voting that we had since 1970.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the 2014 Elections, there were a lot of talks by the Opposition parties that the voters will find difficulty in the new system and Mr. Saneem was not well qualified. Only 0.75 percent was invalid votes. This shows that the electoral system is not only fair but results in maximising the value of the votes for voters. Mr. Speaker, the SOE, Mr. Saneem proved all critics wrong and at this juncture I wish to thank him and his team for a job well done before, during and after.

In the previous elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the communal-based constituency system, this percentage of invalid votes was much higher resulting in the loss of the democratic rights of the voter to have their votes validated and not invalidated. I am very hopeful with more awareness programmes and with voters learning from past mistakes, I am confident that this percentage will decrease even further in 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the electoral system starting from the Independence period until 2013 was on a communal base. This system encourages the divide and rule tactics from the Colonial period. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to state that in fact, the old system prolonged the national division and lack of essential developments like health, education and infrastructure. Had the SVT or SODELPA or anyone would have done that at that time, we would not be doing that. That fund could have been used and utilised somewhere else but you have failed, so we need to do it and we are doing it. It is well documented that during that era, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national development was compromised

because politics favoured province-based handouts rather than sustainable development due to the votes along racial lines held in the constituencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reaffirm that the present electoral system looks after the welfare of all Fijians and leads to parliamentary representations that results in mature and fair decisions to build a better Fiji. This is very clear, Sir, under the FijiFirst Government and its election victories in the past two General Elections and the law made for a better Fiji for all Fijians to continue. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the debate at hand on the Review of the Fijian Electoral Commission Annual Report 2014. I note in the Report there is an issue on independence, accountability and budgetary independence. There are eight Recommendations there in the report but they do not mention any issue on the independence. So, I will briefly touch on that based on the submissions already made by this side of the House.

The Fijian Electoral Commission (FEC) must be independent as the Constitution provides, it must also be adequately resourced to effectively discharge its constitutional responsibility to deliver free and fair elections. The Electoral Act provides the performance of its functions, exercise of its powers. It is not subject to the direction or control of any person or authority. However, section 4(2) provides notwithstanding section 1, the FEC may consult the Minister on any matter.

It also provides the Commission must make an Annual Report to the President concerning the operations of the Commission and must submit a copy to Parliament as we have received. We wish to highlight that the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) makes specific recommendation to ensure the independence of the Electoral Commission as well as the Elections Office on page 9 of the Report.

The division of responsibilities between the FEC and the Fijian Elections Office (FEO) should be clarified. The FEC in 2014 expressed to the Attorney-General and the MOG that it lacks sufficient staff. It saw itself under the Electoral Act in Section 75 of the Constitution, as a separate office therefore, with its own complement of staff independent of the Supervisor of Elections Office.

The Report also states to ensure that its complete independence the FEC must have a completely separate budget allocation. It must have an independent legal advisor, as already stated, repeated request for an independent legal consultant to the Minister remains unanswered.

The Annual Report 2014 further recommended amendments to the Electoral Decree 2014 to clearly reflect how the two institutions should be functioning to actualise their respective responsibilities under the Constitution. The FEC further stated that there is lack of good governance structure between the FEC and the SOE. It further hoped with the help from development partners that rules of engagement, electoral policies and other corporate operating guidelines and regulations would be completed by mid-2006.

In its conclusion in the Annual Report 2014, the short period of separation within a six-month period meant that certain areas such as policies and clarity on government issues between the institutions of the FEC and the Office of the Supervisor of Elections were not given the attention they deserved. To report further, while Section 76(2) of the Constitution clearly enables the FEC to direct the Supervisor of Elections on matters concerning his or her performance, the current Government's arrangement limits the FEC's role.

The FEC remained understaffed in 2015 and donor partners were concerned about this, which is also quoted in the MOG Report - paragraph 4 on page 15. This was further clarified by the November 15th Court of Appeal Judgement against the SOE.

The independence of the FEC under the Electoral law, the Electoral Act 2014 in section 4 and section 8 elaborate on the independence. The SOE has the same independence but must comply with the directions or instructions of the FEC gives him or her as an officer or clarifies that as a subordinate to the Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 14 of the Electoral Act outlines the requirement for transparency in all activities of the FEO, including the requirement to meet with political party candidates, observers, and media to update and discuss matters relating to the administration of elections and campaign process. The MOG made specific recommendation to ensure the independence of the FEC, as well as the FEO on page 9 as outlined earlier.

We do support the recommendation on the following reason, that Opposition political parties and civil society organisation had in 2014 expressed to the MOG the lack of confidence in the independence and impartiality of the FEC and the FEO, which is borne out again in the MOG and the FEC Report.

Further, a meeting of the FEC and Opposition Parties on 3rd April, 2017, the Political Parties were promised the data and statistics, and I believe that there has been an improvement in this. The new members of the FEC should gain experience and confidence to independently carry out their critical responsibility for the 2018 Elections as envisaged under the provisions of the Constitution.

The new Chairperson of the FEC, Mr. Suresh Chandra, publicly stated that the Commission will follow the law as it is and not what it should be, which maintains the status quo which is a concern. The political parties hoped to be convinced that the FEC will fully effect a wide-ranging powers given to them under section 3 of the Electoral (Amendment) Act, 2017.

The separate functions, as already mentioned, are also clarified under Sections 75 and 76 of the Constitution. The Government's response to the above recommendation of MOG Report is the new subsection in section 5 of the Principal Act, the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2017 reads:

“The Supervisor shall act as Secretary of the Electoral Commission and must attend all meetings of the Commission.”

Again that is a positive improvement.

“The directions and instructions that the Electoral Commission gives him or her of the performance of his or her functions.”

I believe this is an improvement from the set up from 2014. This was further clarified as mentioned by the Court of Appeal.

In terms of under staffing, the Electoral Commission Report said the consequence of under staffing, the Commission had to review and attend to electoral matters that could only be done in their private time. So, the issue remained under staffed, even in 25 and donor partners were concerned about this.

Again, that is expressed in the MOG Report. It is unclear why the SOE or the Honourable Attorney-General could not have allocated the budget of FEC from the \$21 million it had received

from donors for the election. After the Election, about \$15 million or 40 percent of the budget remained unspent and the FEO has been surviving on that since.

The Electoral Commissioners also recognised in the 2014 Report, to ensure it is completely independent as mentioned, it must have a, again I reiterate, separate budget allocation and a legal advisor. We, on this side of the House, support the recommendations of the MOG, specifically the recommendations of the FEC in the 2014 Annual Report, that the Electoral Act be amended to reflect clearly how the two institutions - FEC and FEO should be functioning to actualise their respective responsibilities under the Constitution. As mentioned, allocate separate budget to determine the number of staff, setting up of the office, securing legal advice and representation as and when it deems necessary.

Again, I am referring here to the situation then, as explained by the Chairman of the Committee, we have moved forward now, it is 2021 and there could be improvements in this with the Bills which are coming before us.

The other issue, which I would like to express today, which was also a concern. The dual role of Attorney-General as the Minister for Elections and also the General Secretary for FijiFirst, political parties and their supporters also perceived a conflict of interest because of the dual roles. Even though the MOG and Electoral Commission did not make any specific recommendation on this, we feel and believe and recommend that the Honourable Attorney-General should not be the Minister responsible for the elections. The Minister responsible for the elections should be the Honourable Prime Minister in accordance with past legal precedent.

In addition to that, as a conclusion, from 2014 up to now, we note that the 2014 Annual Report, we are just discussing it now, it would be prudent to discuss it before the next General Elections, for example, 2014 Report, we should discuss it in 2015 and 2016, and the 2018 Report, we should be discussing it now and implement its recommendations before the next elections in 2022.

When we come into Government in 2022, that is what we will be doing. Also to make the work of Parliament easier, I would like to request the Committee to draw up a matrix on all the issues from 2014 up to now. There are so many recommendations and also submissions from various political parties which are good submissions and which have made very substantive and credible recommendations. Do up a matrix on what was recommended by the Commission, by the Supervisor of Elections, by MOG and what has been actioned since 2014 and 2018 and also the submissions from the political parties on what has been actioned, what needs to be done. In that way, if we had that book, we can trace the improvements as we go along. And even before the next elections in 2022, we will know, “Okay, this has been decided, these are the recommendations, these have not been done” so that we can take over the implementation on the recommendations when we become the Government.

The other issue mentioned by Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports, Sir, he went on a whole lot of things which was not even in the Report on condemning the past governments, condemning the past elections and one point he mentioned was that the current electoral system ensures equal vote for equal value. I would like to clarify to you today that what is happening today is the total opposite of what he is saying because before you used to vote for your constituency candidate and the one person and your vote is attributed to you. But here the Honourable Prime Minister with 180,000 votes is able to take with him about half of FijiFirst into Parliament. That is not one vote of equal value, that is totally the opposite of that concept.

Thank you, Sir, I would like to commend the Committee for their work and also commend them for the Bills which are coming up on the consultations being done around the country and we look forward to their report for 2018.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member. Honourable Tabuya, you have the floor.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to make a small yet important contribution to the debate before the House.

Mr. Speaker, as noted in the 2014 General Elections Joint Report, there have been numerous concerns raised and my colleagues have highlighted these concerns and complaints raised with the then Electoral Commission regarding the 2014 General Elections process. There were legal challenges that came to court including a legal challenge against the Supervisor of Elections, Mr. Mohammed Saneem which I was involved in when we objected to the candidacy of the current Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports, who, at the time of nomination, was a public officer. If the Supervisor of Elections had respected the Electoral Commission and their decision, he might not be sitting here.

By the way, the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports berates the provincial administration (just responding to him) set up by previous Governments, yet this Government is using that same administration. Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports is politicising the Provincial Council's appointments and the like.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Do not converse with the other side.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He is the one conversing with me, Mr. Speaker. I am disregarding him.

HON. SPEAKER.- Forget about him.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I will speak to you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- You just address the Speaker. I am a better looking guy than him.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are never ending complaints against the Supervisor of Elections. This include what has been raised as questions of conflict of interest being the Secretary to the Electoral Commission and also the Registrar of Political Parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been criticised several times by political parties and also the voters. But, Mr. Speaker, I wish to refer to a recent event and this shows the extent of the Supervisor of Elections and his disregard for authority as was evident by the Fiji Court of Appeal's decision when he disregarded the Electoral Commission. This is important, Mr. Speaker. The Supervisor of Elections has now taken a step further and impeded the work of Parliament.

I refer to the recent incident, Mr. Speaker, where a citizen was participating in a hearing of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights in Wailotua. She was expressing her concerns about the conduct of the last two elections and this was reported in the *Fiji Times*, who were also present at the hearing. The Supervisor of Elections got wind of this from the *Fiji Times*, took it to the media to condemn this citizen and even to the extent to report her to FICAC and berating the *Fiji Times* for printing it.

Mr. Speaker, the very article he condemns, he relies on to make his decision to report this citizen. Now, Mr. Speaker, this is very concerning, yes. What the Supervisor of Elections should have rightly done, Mr. Speaker, as a lawyer that he is, he should have sought out first what actually happened in that hearing. He should have contacted Parliament, who would have put him in touch with the Chair of the Standing Committee and the Members, and then referred to the proceedings in the verbatim or the evidence of what transpired. Instead, Mr. Speaker, what did he do - he went to the media.

Mr. Speaker, the Standing Committee of Parliament has requested further consultations on the proposed amendments to the laws, and this is the very parliamentary work that had taken the Committee to that village and yet the Supervisor of Elections, acting on his volition has undermined this important parliamentary process and the public consultations normally conducted where there is protection of parliamentary privilege.

Mr. Speaker, we need the public to attend these hearings and with it comes the trust and confidence for members of the public to be candid and forthcoming, and this premature, disrespectful behaviour by the Supervisor of Elections, by crucifying a citizen for being candid and for being frank for giving her view, Mr. Speaker. This creates mistrust and a lack of confidence from the voters and non-attendance at these hearings.

I am defending the parliamentary process. This concerns all of us here in this House including yourself, Mr. Speaker. Yes, we all work hard so that the voters can have confidence in us. We work for them, so Mr. Speaker, we recommend that this Parliament should condemn the behaviour of the Supervisor of Elections.

How dare he interfere with this process? How dare he crucify a member of the public? He needs to follow the right channel, come to Parliament and consult the Chair of the Committee, Mr. Speaker. He is there to serve the public, not the other way around.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Point of Order.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He should withdraw his complaint.

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Mr. Speaker, you have already stated that we need to stick to the subject matter at hand and she is attacking the Supervisor of Elections, who is not here to defend himself. That in itself is unfair.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Member, you have heard the Point of Order so just stick to what we are supposed to discuss.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the Minister for Women, who is also a lawyer, that the Supervisor of Elections is the subject matter of these reports whether it is 2014 or 2018, it was his behaviour. It shows a consistent blatant disrespectful behaviour for the voters and for the political parties and for all of us who sit here, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you are starting to repeat yourself.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In conclusion, I would just like to say, Mr. Speaker, that the Supervisor of Elections needs to stay in his lane and let us do our jobs for the people. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, you have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I have not started yet. You are already scared, Honourable Gavoka.

Mr Speaker, Sir, Sir, thank you for allowing me to speak and I want to thank the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights with respect to this particular Review of the 2014 General Elections' Joint Report by the Fijian Electoral Commission and Supervisor of Elections.

Just to let the Honourable Tabuya know the Report is on the Review of the 2014 General Elections Joint Report by the Fijian Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections. It is not about the Supervisor of Elections *per se* so attacking him personally with respect to something that happened....

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Forget about the other side, just continue.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I think we have all heard, Mr Speaker, Sir, with respect to staying relevant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to address a few things with respect to today's motion. The 2014 General Elections marked the country's return to parliamentary governance but more than that, Sir, it actually invigorated the custom of voting and electing representatives into the highest office of the land.

In 2014, Fiji not only had to prepare its citizens to vote, it also had to prepare itself. We had to prepare ourselves to hold an election under a new electoral system to implement processes to register thousands of voters and ensure the dissemination of information that would not only enable but also motivate a voter to cast his or her ballot in a non-compulsory voting system. That is quite a phenomenal task when you have to motivate, especially against the time of non-motivation that comes from SODELPA when it comes to election time, Sir. They go through this process of discouraging people, et cetera, and then they come here and complain that the voter turnout was not good enough.

The Fijian Elections Office, Mr Speaker, Sir, is an independent body. It was established on 28th March, 2014 and it was given six months since its formation to prepare and take the country into a General Election in the new electoral system, the modified, open list proportional representation system.

Sir, I hear Honourable Members on the other side mocking this particular system but this system has given you 21 seats. Why are you mocking it? It has given you an opportunity to sit there

and make your voices heard, why are you mocking it? The point is, if you want thirty, you might have to work hard enough, you have to beat us first.

(Hon. V.R. Gavoka interjects)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, the point is that just for a moment, if it is so happen and God forbid it does, if it is so happen that they were sitting on this side of the House, they would not utter one word about this; they will not do that, not at all.

One of the most important elections in the history of this country was the 2014 Elections, and I will tell you why this 2014 Elections was such a historical elections for our country, Sir. The whole country formed a single constituency and it was based on the principle of one person, one vote, one value, and that was what was adopted, Sir, and that is the freest, fairest elections that this country has ever had. There was actually groundwork that was needed particularly to streamline the elections operations to reflect this new voting system.

The FEO, Mr Speaker, Sir, in 2014 registered 591,101 voters and recorded a turnout of 84.6 percent and Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports is correct, Sir, - only 0.75 percent of the votes cast were actually invalid, which was a record low for any elections in Fiji, we did it correctly, Sir. Over 10,000 Fijians were actually involved and delivered that particular Elections, and we need to take our hat off to all of those people who gave us that election.

The 2014 General Election was deemed a credible election by the Multinational Observer Group (MOG). It was the MOG that declared and I quote: “The outcome of the 2014 General Election broadly represented the will of the Fijian voters. The conditions were in place for Fijians to exercise their vote freely.”

You cannot tell me that, that is not enough for us - it is. And of course, there are things that they will ask us to change, that we will do. There are recommendations that have already been attended to and I will address those, Sir.

Following the 2014 General Election, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time in Fiji, the election management body had remained operational in between elections which meant that voter registration was continuously done right up until the day the Writ for the 2018 General Elections was issued. Because of that Sir, we had 637,527 Fijians who were registered to vote in 2018. The FEO was adequately funded also since 2014 to take on new innovations and further streamline its processes as per international best practices in elections to be implemented in Fiji.

In line with international best practices, Sir, the FEO actually developed its five year strategic plan (2015-2019) and this plan presented a comprehensive operational plan that resulted in a realisation of all the innovations that we currently experience when it comes to elections in Fiji. We took it to a new level, Sir, amongst its top innovations was the FEO results app; a first of its kind which allowed the public direct access to the 2018 General Elections in real times. The app was developed in house and showed the results by party, by candidate and polling venue. In fact, the app is still available and comes in very handy.

Moreover Sir, the FEO launched its website in 2017 and that was actually to improve information dissemination to stakeholders and the most significant change was the introduction of disability friendly features to promote inclusivity and greater engagement. First of its kind, Sir, the users with visual impairments can actually increase the size of the font or even enable an automated readout of the text on the particular page, Sir.

In 2018, Sir, the FEO introduced its ten year election module. This module introduces high school students to elections and gives them a hands on experience on the voting process. This is the first comprehensive program at school level in the region and will definitely deliver results in the upcoming general election, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to make it easier for votes, the FEO had launched the 1500 call centre in 2018 and this is a free platform which voters could call to ask questions relating to elections and call centre staff were actually trained to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs). There was also the 1500 SMS text platform which was activated in February, 2018. The service was available free of cost and it helped voters find their particular voting venue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my firm belief that the foresight of the Government to invest in the continuous operations of the Fijian Elections Office has actually produced noteworthy results. One just has to take out the 2006 General Election Observer Mission Reports to draw some simple analogies on the vast improvement in the capabilities of the office and now, Sir.

Sir, in its report following the 2018 General Elections, the MOG actually noted that the Fijian Elections Office prepared for the election thoroughly, implementing a long term strategy of improvement through the electoral cycles. The 2018 process was actually transparent and a credible overall and the outcome broadly represented the will of the Fijian voters. That is exactly what has been expressed Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we keep talking about that. They somehow seem to insinuate that everything is skewed towards FijiFirst. It is not, Sir, there is a level playing field for everyone. The rules that they are talking about and no use laughing about it, Honourable Gavoka, it is not a different set of rules for us and a different set of rules for you.

It is absolutely not, it is the same set of rules that we are governed by. It is the same set of rules that we are actually live by, it is the will of the people that has put us here and it is the will of the people that actually come out because we have got a phenomenal system. So, you cannot stand here and actually complained and say that 'oh, you know this is unrepresentative, it is not right and everything is secured'.

I want to correct some of the numbers that have actually come out, Honourable Gavoka has actually said that the percentages were wrong. The voter turnout in 2018, Mr. Speaker, was 71.92 percent. The voter turnout in 2014 was 84.6 percent. The voter turnout in 2006 was 64 percent. It is wrong. If I could also break down the numbers for you, in 2018, the total votes cast was 458,532. In 2014, the total votes cast was 500,078 and I will tell you why in minute. In 2006, it was 307,004. Of that, Sir, if you go back to 2018, the registration, as I said earlier, was 637,527, the registration in 2014 was 591,000.

Now, if they say that there was less voter count and we can see that there is, they have to also look back at their own process, they are the ones who actually go and discourage people at the end of the day with respect to when voting comes out. We do not, there is a proper process that goes on, there is educational programme in the Elections Office, et cetera, they go out to the communities, we do it if they seem to see that there are numbers for them, is that our fault?

It is not, it is their own problem. You create the monster at the end of the day when you are asking people certain things and you are not telling them the truth. This is actually what happens. You cannot turn around just because you are sitting on the other side and blame us, we are not to be blamed. Let us be real, we are not to be blamed. It is you, it is your policy that puts you in that particular seat. What policies? Go and look at your own policies, do not ask me.

Sir, there is a lot of work that actually gets done. We have the FEO doing community visits. So in terms of education, FEO has actually gone and done a lot of community visits so that people can be aware.

Honourable Adi Litia Qionibaravi also raised some issues regarding fake news, et cetera. They have been amended, the SOE actually has amendments in place and to remove fake news and breaches during the blackout. This is actually good, we do realise when there are issues that needs to be resolved and taken care of we do.

In conclusion, Sir, in its report following the 2018 General Elections, the Multinational Observer Group, again, said that the Fijian Elections Office prepared for the election thoroughly, implementing a long-term strategy of improvement throughout the electoral sites. The 2018 process was transparent and credible overall and the outcome broadly represented the will of the Fijian voters.

Sir, once the Multinational Observer Group gives you a tick off, I think everyone should take note. You have to take note, that is an independent body, it is completely independent, we have no influence, nothing over it. But, obviously, it is not good enough for them because it does not align with the way they think.

Also note, Sir, we want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all our donor partners who are actually supported Fiji during the 2014 General Elections, I also extend our sincere gratitude to the leader of the MOG and indeed it was one of the largest observer missions at any elections.

Also I want to thank all the Election officials and the Electoral Commission and also I want to join Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports in thanking the Supervisor of Elections for the extremely hard work that he has actually put in and the entire Elections Team for 2014 and 2018, have actually done the nation proud. They put a firm footing, they make sure that they have done a lot of hard work and we acknowledge the work that they have done.

I want to acknowledge the Committee also, Sir. They have found no contentious issues to report and I hope that this Parliamentary Report will put to rest the many unsubstantiated, politically motivated rumours and claims about the 2014 General Elections.

I just want to point out briefly too that this particular report, Sir, is a bipartisan report and they have come up and say there is no qualifications and the signatures here are not just FijiFirst members, the signatures are also from the other side. So, they have sanctioned it. So, no use coming here and saying things contrary to this report at the end of the day, nothing came out. There are no recommendation as such.

There are members of the Opposition on this particular report who have signed off. It is a bipartisan report. I do not understand how they actually think. So, again, Sir, it is what everyone needs to be reminded though it is everyone's duty to build confidence in the constitutional offices. We do it on a daily basis.

The findings by the Standing Committee actually vindicates any claims and allegations of wrong doing by any person. I think it is not fair that we start raising things that are not in this report like the Honourable Tabuya has done. She ought not to do that. It is for another forum, maybe, she should write to him and ask.

I want to thank, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to stand here and support the motion on the floor, Sir.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to speak in support on the motion before the House by the Honourable Maharaj and I commend the work of the Chairperson and the members of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, in their deliberations over the joint report.

I also commend the Supervisor of Elections, staff of the Fiji Elections Office and the Electoral Commission, for the successful management of the 2014 General Elections. We cannot thank them enough for that effort.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to add on to say that Fiji is ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on 16th August, 2018. This happened after the last Committee completed its work on the report.

I make this point, Mr. Speaker, because, all nine core Conventions have been ratified by the Fijian Government.

I just want to add on, that there has been a lot of complaints from Honourable Gavoka about their money. He wants to know how we spend our money but I want to tell him that it is none of his business. He should be worried about their money which is stuck because of Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka. He knows that. Everyone in that group knows that.

Their internal dispute, Mr. Speaker, is the cause of them not having money. He should ask his leader. Honourable Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu told the Party he will not give Parliament funds to the Party, so he should not be talking to us about our money. We know how to spend our money.

Well, I see Honourable Tuisawau holding up and I am very surprised to see him here in Parliament this morning because it shows to me he is a hypocrite.

The Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport talked about the figures that Honourable Gavoka had come up with but I just want to say again Mr. Speaker, Sir, how Honourable Gavoka always bring up these sorts of lies in Parliament. It is not right. We are talking about the turnout, he keeps harping about the turnout in 2006 was 89 percent when it really was 64 percent. I do not know where he plucked that figure from but it was the lowest turnout in Fiji elections and then again, it was a compulsory voting, so there you go.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Elections Office, and the Supervisor of Elections have established the standard of fairness, impartiality, and transparency that will stand for generations as we guaranteed the right of free and fair elections for every citizen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the free, fair, and credible elections required by the Fijian Constitution are the foundation of the genuine democracy that our people cherish. The Electoral Commission is mandated under the Fijian Constitution as an independent authority responsible for the registration of voters and the conduct of elections in accordance with relevant laws.

There are extensive preparations ahead of the Elections in 2014 as you have heard, mentioned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ushered in our genuine democracy and established the Commission as a credible

and impartial institution capable of managing our 2018 Elections that is largely responsible for the fact that each of us is serving this Parliament today.

As we know, one election does not make a democracy. The democracy is strengthened and solidified with its subsequent election as the people choose their leaders and state their views through their vote. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is clear from the Committee's deliberations on the report that there were no contentious matters to bring to the attention of the House. Let me say that again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were no as in zero contentious matters to bring to the attention of the House, with regard to the conduct of the 2014 Elections.

Simply put, the capable implementation of Fiji's electoral process ensured that the 2014 Elections was free, fair and credible. It was declared as such by the Multinational Observer Group that oversaw it. Thanks to those strong and independent institutions that managed it, it was the most successful elections that was ever conducted in Fiji at that time. It was in fact, the first genuine elections in the Fijian history.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is because our Fijian Constitution which some people do not seem to accept, enshrines true democracy and not the pay limitation we once suffered as a nation. It guarantees equal votes of equal value without any form of discrimination along the lines of gender, religion or ethnicity. Without those protections, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's past political system fell short of genuine representation, well short in fact, instead they were shackled by their backward notions of ethnic supremacy.

It was undemocratic, it was unjust, it entrenched class and privilege of a truly representatives system. With the 2014 Elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we finally brought an end to that era by delivering the new and true democracy that Fijians had long sought and always deserved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this report represents a bipartisan assessment of the facts once and for all. It has casts into the rubbish bin the ridiculous claims that the 2014 Elections was not fair or lacked credibility. That election was indeed a true reflection of the will of the Fijian people and today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Member of this House, have to recognise what was obvious to the rest of the world seven years ago because as I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the credible, free and fair 2014 Elections brought us more than a genuine parliamentary system and it helped propel Fiji on to the world stage like never before.

This is important, especially for the other side of the House to know. Not only did we re-join the Pacific Islands Forum and Commonwealth, we went on to assume global roles such as the Chair of G77 plus China, UN Oceans Conference Co-Chair, MSG Chairmanship role, UNJ presidency, COP23 presidency, the current UN Human Rights Council presidency and there is the incoming Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum as well as a host of other regional and international positions of leadership.

None of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would have been possible had the other democratic nations of the world believed that our elections were credible and Fiji was permanently on a true democratic path. This shows the level of trust other neighbouring Pacific Island countries and the world leaders placed in Fiji and the institutions that managed and supported our elections and in this Government. The nations of the world have not only worked with us, they have looked to us to lead on issues like climate change, oceans preservation, biodiversity protection, disaster resilience, human rights, energy, food security and sustainable development. None of these would have happened if the world believed one word of the discredited claims of other fairness of the 2014 Election.

But for me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most important way to gauge trust in a democracy and in our elections, is the faith that lies in the hearts of the Fijian people. Fijians know that they have the right to vote, they have faith that their votes and their voices matter equally and they have used both to choose their Government twice, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They have chosen the Government I lead and the only genuine parliamentary elections in Fijian history.

Preparations are now underway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the next election, the third consecutive election that will give all Fijians equal representation. Again we will entrust the Electoral Commission and the Fijian Elections Office with ensuring that the writs are returned and receipted, voter registration is updated and maintained, candidates are registered, electoral disputes are settled and other electoral elements that need to be addressed are addressed fairly. That includes monitoring and compliance with any written law governing elections and political parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2014 was only seven short years ago. With every election, our democracy grows stronger because people's faith in their system grows stronger when they know that their voices and their votes matter. So we must guide this democracy of ours. We must guard our democracy as the precious treasure that it is. It must never be taken for granted, not today, not 10 years from now, not ever.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government will continue to financially and legally support the Electoral Commission to pursue its independent function. In addition, the Government will allocate resources to enable the Commission to perform its constitutional roles ably and carry out its responsibilities professionally. They must have the staff, they must have the training and the technical capability and capacity to conduct these kinds of elections that the Fijian people deserve and trust. Based on these remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore support the motion. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister. Right of reply, you have the floor, Chairman.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will try to make it short. The whole concept about the 2014 General Elections has been very well-explained by the Honourable Prime Minister and I do not need to elaborate any further but just a few comments that were made and I would like to actually elaborate on.

Honourable Gavoka rightfully mentioned about the decline in the number of voters. The Committee under the current review of the Electoral Bills, we have come across that and discussed this at length. We cannot blame anyone with regards to the number of voters going down. It is the choice of individuals; if they do not want to vote, they do not turn up to vote. But what we need to do is, we need to work together with the Supervisor of Elections, Electoral Commission, political parties because the interest is going down. People are not interested in voting and that is a concern. How do we increase the interest of our people in the electoral system itself? That is very important for us to actually work together with the Supervisor of Elections. He has also called in for the political parties to work with them to ensure that this interest improves in the near future.

I also want to elaborate on the figures of 2006 but it has been taken care of by Honourable Koya, so I will not touch on that. With regards to some of the comments that came from Honourable Professor Prasad, I need to inform him that we actually give progressive reporting and scrutiny. That is why when we actually did this particular scrutiny of the 2014 General Election Joint Report, we did not have the Electoral Commission Report at that point in time. They came before the Committee and informed us that there are recommendations on which they are working on, so after a couple of years when we kept getting the annual reports, after discussions, that is when those recommendations will come into place.

The other thing, I believe you also mentioned and I stand to be corrected was the recommendations in this particular Joint Report from the Committee does not have, because of the change in the Commission members. It has nothing to do with that because there are recommendations in the Joint Report itself but it is the Committee's Report which does not have any recommendation, so that is another one.

Honourable Qionibaravi has called to recall the Bills. I would just like to inform that most of these changes that I mentioned were not under the jurisdiction of the Electoral Commission, are part of that particular Bill. Most of the suggestions they have taken on board but just because they do not have the jurisdiction, it has come before the Parliament and we are trying to scrutinise at the moment.

There have been political parties that have come before the Committee to present their submissions with regards to those three Bills. We had individual SODELPA Members, thank you very much for coming before the Committee and doing your submission. I urge other Members as well, if you have anything to do with regards to those three Electoral Bills, please come forward and give your submission. We are still collecting submissions. We are doing that on a bipartisan approach.

The Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee consists of three Government Members and two Opposition Members and we are scrutinising this Bill along with the Joint Report so that we can present a more comprehensive report back to the Parliament for us to debate. With these few words, I would also like to thank the Supervisor of Elections and the Electoral Commission for conducting a credible General Election in 2014. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your time.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Chairperson for his right of reply. Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note we will break for lunch and during the lunch break, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Fiji Group will have a meeting in the Big Committee Room straight after this. Only the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (Fiji Group), not others. We break for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.14 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.47 p.m.

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

REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF FISHERIES 2016-2017 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Report of the Ministry of Fisheries 2016-2017 Annual Report which was tabled on 16th May, 2018.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

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

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition who is not here, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament.

Sir, I, as the Chairperson of the Natural Resources Standing Committee who moved the motion. I take this opportunity to speak on the motion with regards to the Natural Resources Committee on the Review Report on the Ministry of Fisheries 2016-2017 Annual Report.

The Report contains the findings of the Committee and the establishment activities, major achievements and performance of the Ministry from 1st August, 2016 to 31st August, 2017.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee undertook a three-day site visit on 11th to 13th April, 2019. A few of the Ministry's operational areas namely the Ministry's headquarters in Toorak, the Makogai Fisheries Research Station, the Naduruloulou Fisheries Research Station in Nausori and Galoa Research Station in Galoa and also visited the PAFCO in Levuka.

The objective of this site visit was to provide the Members an insight regarding the internal work sites and in particular, the sites stated above. Furthermore, the Committee reviewed the ministerial documentary evidence provided for in its Annual Report for the period under review. The evidence collected from the site visit supported the Members in terms of verifying their findings on the Report of the Ministry of Fisheries for the period under review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report encompasses the holistic review of the Ministry's operations, challenges faced by the Ministry during the period under review. The Committee valued the Ministry's effort in recognising women participation in areas of operation in line with SDG 5 as captured in the Annual Report under gender. It was worthy to note that the Ministry strives to improve its research and development competencies to assist resilience of coastal-based villages and settlements to natural disasters.

Another achievement of the Ministry in 2016-2017 as noted by the Committee, was the drafting of the National Fisheries Policy during the year and is awaiting legal vetting from the Solicitor General's Office. The Ministry reviewed and developed the Fisheries legislations namely the Aquaculture Bill (Bill No. 9 of 2016) that was presented on 13th April, 2016 during the information session of Parliament.

The way forward for the Ministry is to ensure that it considers implementing the recommendations put forth by the Committee for improvement. The Committee hopes that the Ministry achieves the National Fisheries Policy.

Finally, I commend the effort of the Natural Resource Committee Members in the compilation of this Report and the Ministry of Fisheries for considering the Committee's recommendations in working towards improving its operations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments, as the Member moving the motion on this Natural Resources Committee Report, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Chairperson for his motion. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Fisheries, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to speak on the Annual Report of the Ministry of Fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, at the outset I would like to highlight that the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report of 2016-2017 is somewhat special. This is due to the fact that the Ministry of Fisheries became an independent Ministry on September of 2016.

Like any other agency that was part of a larger entity, the Ministry of Fisheries faced its own share of organisational and operational challenges that needed to be addressed.

Mr. Speaker, as a responsible Ministry, we took out the challenge with the aim to improve the work and services we provided to the Fijian people and help grow Fiji's Economy.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the efforts undertaken by the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, in assessing the Ministry of Fisheries' 2016-2017 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, we, at the Ministry, recognise the recommendations of the Committee and since 2016, have worked collectively to address these key areas of development.

I would like to touch briefly on the 15 recommendations that were highlighted.

Recommendation 1 - The regularisation of the National Fisheries Policy, as alluded to by the Chairperson, in 2017, 2018, the Ministry of Fisheries commenced work on the National Fisheries Policy. To achieve a collective and holistic approach, extensive stakeholder consultation was conducted with the final document currently being finalised for endorsement.

Mr. Speaker, in the coming months, we look forward to publishing this important policy document that would be shared with all the stakeholders for an effective awareness and implementation.

Recommendation 2 - Facilitate the promulgation of the Aquaculture Bill; Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Fisheries values the aquaculture sector and would like to highlight that the work on the Aquaculture Bill have been picked up with the assessment of content currently undertaken by the Ministry of Fisheries which would be later submitted to the Office of the Solicitor-General. The passing of this Bill will allow the aquaculture sector to grow as we will be able to address the legal parameters that enable the operationalisation of a fully-commercial aquaculture sector.

Recommendation 3 - Prioritising Existing Fisheries Research Centres; Mr. Speaker, in 2016, we identified that there needed to be more effort put in to develop our Research Centres. During this period our Research Centres were either lacking in equipment or without technical and financial support to operate at a level that met the Ministry's goals and expectations.

To improve this, Mr. Speaker, we first began by undertaking restructure within the organisation. This included placing well-qualified officers in areas that needed immediate improvement. This work, Mr. Speaker, was not only undertaken for our research centres but through the whole organisational structure. I am confident to say that this continues to be carried as the Ministry steadily addresses Recommendation No. 4, which is the Review of the Ministry's Organisational Restructure.

Mr. Speaker, since 2017, the Ministry of Fisheries established critical units and divisions within our organisation. This includes the Inshore Fisheries Management Division, the Electronic Monitoring Unit under the Offshore Division and the Corporate Division which houses our Administration and Accounts Section.

Through the regularisation of these units and divisions, we are able to operationalise and make significant progress towards the Ministry's internal and external goals.

Recommendation 5, Mr. Speaker, in centralisation of survey data inventory and assessment of new species, again I am confident to say that through the Ministry's restructure and partnership we were able to build towards this recommendation.

Mr. Speaker, by establishing the Inshore Fisheries Management Division, the Ministry has recruited dedicated data collectors that send in collated information to a centralised depository at which data are assessed and housed.

Additionally, through our bilateral partners and regional organisations such as the South Pacific Community (SPC), the Ministry of Fisheries is finalising the development of an Information Management System (IMS). The system will house all data and will assist in the development of management measures aimed at sustainable practices.

Recommendation 6 - Creating Awareness within the Communities on the Importance of Marine-Protected Areas (MPAs). Mr. Speaker, since 2016, the Ministry's approach to our communities have been focused on raising awareness. This is important as we continue to educate our communities on the importance of harvesting at sustainable levels to ensure that our marine species are protected from over-exploitation.

In 2018, through this approach, we were able to gazette two Community MPAs, namely the Kiuva and the Naiqoro Marine Reserve. This was achieved through the support rendered by the Customary Fishing Right Owners who gave their consent which enabled the MPAs to be legally-protected through demarcation.

The work continuous to grow and in addition to the two community MPAs, we are currently working with communities and civil societies in supporting around 240 other traditional MPAs that have been established around the country.

Mr. Speaker, in noting Recommendation No.7 as highlighted by the Committee, the Ministry of Fisheries has strengthened its internal operating procedures to ensure that we are fully aware of the scope and the requirements of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). This includes taking

the message right down to communities, so to say, to ensure that they are fully aware of the EIA requirements.

We also work closely with the Ministry of Environment through the exchanges of Fisheries projects and Inter Agency Site Assessments to reduce delays in assessing EIAs. This help ensures all parties with their mandatory legislative requirements. As the Ministry's role is one step towards the finalisation of shore-based developments, we continue to work closely with line agencies to see that the needed work is completed as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, under the recommendation of the Committee for Makogai, I would like to acknowledge Government's assistance in allocating funds to rebuild the Makogai Infrastructure after being devastated by *TC Winston*.

With the allocated funds, the Ministry has been able to rebuild the hatchery, office building and staff accommodation. In addition, we have also managed to hook up communications and utilities to operationalise Makogai Mariculture Station.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to further develop Makogai Research Station, the Ministry of Fisheries is working with our bilateral partners to assist in additional projects, which include the building of the Station's Jetty. We are fortunate enough to have signed an MOU with the Korean Government and discussions are ongoing to secure the needed assistance who have finalised work in Makogai.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the fisheries sector services a wide range of stakeholders, Recommendation No. 9 on the dissemination of information and decentralisation of services, have been part of the work undertaken by our Fisheries Service Centres. Through this, Government, have been able to establish two new Service Centres in Moala and Cicia. These Service Centres, which are equipped with ice plants, now cater for the needs of these communities and neighbouring islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same is currently being developed in Koro and we hope that this will contribute to the growth of our ability to serve the wider public. In addition, the Ministry has continued collaboration with line agencies and partners to disseminate information and strengthen our ability to serve our communities. One such way in which this is implemented is through road shows and attending Provincial meetings.

The Ministry of Fisheries believes that these are viable platforms to disseminate information and more importantly address immediate needs received from the general public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Recommendations 10, 11 and 12 (on aquaculture), I would like to thank the support of the Fiji Government in allowing for this important sector to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aquaculture continues to develop globally and since 2016, the Ministry of Fisheries has focused on key components within the aquaculture sector that needed to be improved. In addressing these recommendations, the Ministry of Fisheries was fortunate to have worked with our bilateral partners, namely JICA, under the Japanese Government in the refurbishment of the Naduruloulou Research Centre, and the Taiwan Technical Mission in the upgrade of Caboni Multispecies Hatchery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the assistance is inclusive of hatchery equipment, feed and feed production materials, in addition to pond and infrastructural repairs.

To address capacity-building needs, the Ministry of Fisheries has been able to secure technical experts from bilateral partners, who are based within our aquaculture centres to provide hands-on training with our officers or improved culturing methods to help boost overall production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a result of this initiative, the Ministry is able to increase production of;

- Sandfish or *dairo* in Galoa;
- Prawns and tilapia in Naduruloulou, and
- For the first time, efficiently breed shrimps and four other viable species namely, milkfish, rabbit fish, grouper and trout in the Caboni Multispecies Hatchery.

In recognition of these efforts, the Ministry of Fisheries is optimistic that the development in aquaculture will continue to grow. Mr. Speaker, Sir, to promote Fiji's offshore fisheries brand in the export market under Recommendation 13, the Ministry of Fisheries have continued to work closely with the tuna industry, in understanding the global market and fishing trends that constantly change due to global demands.

Since Fiji is at the tail end of the path followed by migrating tuna stocks, Fiji's fishing fleets will always have a limit to what they are able to catch. In addressing this shortage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we assist our Tuna Industry to achieve labels aimed at selling Fijian products within niche markets. These investments allow our companies to get the most value out of the products that are sold at high and export markets.

Some of these labels being certified under the Marine Stewardship Council or MSC having gain access to the European Union, both of which have proven viable to the offshore sector as the sector is able to access stable markets while receiving more value on Fiji-labelled products. Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to these developments, we are able to access major markets in Japan, USA, the European Union, Australia and New Zealand and the Ministry of Fisheries is determined to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in realising Recommendation 14 of the Standing Committee, I would like to update this august House that the Ministry of Fisheries have finalised bilateral arrangements with Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. The development of this work has been delayed due to the impact of COVID-19 and these bilateral arrangements will be completed once the global restriction of COVID-19 is eased.

Additionally, the Ministry continues to collaborate with our neighbours through regional body such as Forum Fisheries Agency, SPC, Forum Secretariat and the Pacific Island Forum. These platforms allow the Ministry of Fisheries to work with our neighbours in achieving Fiji's needs at the national and regional level.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to recognise the assistance from our neighbours, New Zealand. The Ministry of Fisheries was fortunate enough that when we became a standalone agency, New Zealand's assistance enabled us to effectively train our officers and conduct joint patrols with the Fiji Navy. This helped us address areas that we were not effectively able to cover due to our limitations. The Ministry of Fisheries continues to develop close ties with New Zealand and through this collaboration, we look to improve our ability to deliver the services needed to address fisheries priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Recommendation 15 is to strengthen the establishment and registration of Fishing Associations. I am pleased to update this august House that we have been working to achieve this throughout our four Divisions. In implementing this recommendation, Fisheries Service Centres are those that implement the work on the ground. Due to the remoteness of some communities and

areas that need assistance, the establishment of Fishing Association has enabled the Ministry of Fisheries to effectively introduce fisheries initiatives and programmes at the community level. These programmes include, fish warden training, sea weed and oyster programme, post-harvest, training on market and financial literacy and raising awareness on Fisheries laws and threatened species.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Ministry's experience, we noted that the establishment of Fishing Associations has helped boost voluntary compliance within our fishing communities. Additionally, through this Association we are able to identify suitable communities that are provided with solar power freezers and Association vessels to help them with the ability to conduct surface patrols within their customary fishing areas. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these all build towards the collective efforts of building partnerships and help foster community resilience within our fisheries sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, guided by our Ministry's motto; Sustain, Manage and Protect, we are a natural resource centred Ministry. One of the most critical elements of our work is to ensure sustainability. Our marine resources are not unlimited and if we fail to put a control measure on this harvest, it will run out. Eventually, we will not have enough to share, thus depriving our future generations.

My *tauvu*, the Honourable Gavoka and Honourable Kuridrani have been grandstanding and tried to force Government to lift the ban on beche-de-mer or sea cucumber. I had personally advised Honourable Gavoka, with the other Members of the Opposition, Honourable Saukuru, Honourable Leawere, Honourable Rasova and including other Members of Parliament, that the decision to lift the ban will depend on Fisheries presenting a sustainable system of harvesting to ensure that future generations are looked after.

Yesterday, Honourable Matanitobua stated that the SODELPA Government will ensure the sustainability of natural resources. The FijiFirst Government is doing that now and that is the reason for the delay in the harvest of sea cucumber. I believe that my *tauvus* are appealing to their voter base who used to work in hotels. Do they ever consider others who do not have *qoliqoli*? We must consider those who come from landlocked areas, provinces, *tikinas* and villages in Nadroga, Navosa, Namosi, Naitasiri, Ra, Wainibuka and Serua. In Vanua Levu, the interior areas of Cakaudrove, Macuata and Bua, are basically appealing to the coastal communities in Coral Coast, Vatulele, Mamanuca and Yasawa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more importantly the Members from SODELPA are forgetting our future generations - the future generations who are yet to be born. Our grandchildren, our great grandchildren and their grandchildren. In addition, Mr. Speaker, some hotel workers do not have any *qoliqoli* at all. This is through no fault of theirs but the fact that their forefathers chose to settle in the interior areas of our beloved Fiji. The moral of the issue, Mr. Speaker, is that we cannot push to lift the ban on sea cucumber without consideration of the current stock and the extent of how sea cucumber can be used to help sustain us now.

To our coastal communities, please have patience while the Ministry tries to work out a sustainable system of harvest to ensure that our grandchildren and their grandchildren will also enjoy it. I also think of our brothers and sisters and cousins who live away from the coastal areas and islands, let us move away from the greed of being self-centred. At this critical time, the statement by the former U.S President John F. Kennedy is important and I quote; "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

In concluding, Mr. Speaker, much has developed in the Ministry of Fisheries since becoming an independent ministry in 2016. We acknowledge the Government in assisting the Ministry with additional budget allocation. This has enabled us to grow as an organisation and as a sector. Mr.

Speaker, as a Ministry, we are determined to push on. We have the nation's interest at heart and more so the interest of our communities that are shared owners of Fiji's fisheries resources. I thank you for your indulgence.

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

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As a Member of the Committee, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Review Report of the Ministry of Fisheries 2016 & 2017 Annual Report which was tabled on the 16th of May, 2019.

I further wish to advise the House that the Committee is currently deliberating the Ministry's 2017/ 2018 Annual Report. Chair, I wish to thank your office and the parliamentary secretariat most sincerely for facilitating the site visits for the Committee. It is noteworthy that the Minister for Fisheries and his executive management are already addressing the recommendations of the Committee and it is making the work of the Committee more meaningful and worthwhile.

Whilst deliberating on the Annual Report, Sir, the Committee was aware that the Ministry endeavoured to improve its research and development competencies to assist resilience of coastal-based villagers and settlements to natural disasters through adaptation, coastal strategies by restocking the reefs, re-establishing the Makogai Mariculture Station and improving the enforcement to minimise illegal, unregistered and unregulated fishing and better management of their customary fishing grounds.

Interestingly, Sir, the Ministry made efforts to have an inclusive and united society and involved the women, youth, the elderly and the young of the communities to income-generating fisheries activities to benefit the disadvantaged people. These activities were carried out through the various aquaculture and coastal fisheries projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fisheries sector contributed 1.8 percent of GDP and we should be thankful to the development partners like Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Foreign Fishing Agencies and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community for their continued assistance.

Sir, allow me to very briefly discuss some of the important findings of the Committee that is worth discussing in this august House. On Makogai Mariculture Research Station, Sir, the location of the bay itself makes Makogai Island ideal for research and mariculture, and it is also ideal for an ocean nursery.

Makogai is well known for its giant clam hatchery that was established in the 1980s. Giant clams are hermaphrodite where one animal releases both the sperm and the egg and the clams can grow up to 1.5 metres. There are eight giant clam species in Fiji, Sir, and they are *vasua matau*, *vasua dina*, *cega*, *katavatu*, *teveroa*, *tekeniose* and two others that do not have local names. The ecosystem benefits of giant clams is enormous. They act as shelters for coral reef fish; food for predators and scavengers; productivity and biomass; and they are a host for bacteria.

In terms of the economic and social benefits, giant clam is a source of food security and the Ministry has projects where giant clams are used as attractions through eco-tourism. Sir, when we visited Makogai, we were ascertained by the fact that the station was still recovering from the aftermath of *TC Winston* and we are pleading with the Ministry to restore Makogai. They should start first by fixing the jetty. I called yesterday and the jetty is yet to be fixed.

Sir, Naduruloulou Fisheries Station: Naduruloulou is the main hub for aquaculture activities that disseminate fresh water activities to Dreketi in Vanua Levu and Ba and Caboni in the Western Division. The Ministry has about 450 farmers covering both tilapia and freshwater prawn farming and they aim to produce 200 metric tonnes tilapia and 12 metric tonnes of freshwater prawns annually.

Aquaculture is one of the mitigating factors for climate change as well Sir, and is a very good source of food security. With that being said, Sir, we call on the Ministry to kindly address the manning of this station as there are only 19 staff that look after all the freshwater activities in Fiji.

Galoa Fisheries Station: This is another engine room for the Ministry's aquaculture activities in Fiji and a hatchery for shrimps and sandfish. Its core role is research for farm development activities and seed supply. The station technicians are working very hard and encourage shrimp farming and to restore the fast depleting sandfish stocks. Sandfish as you know, Sir, is a commercially valuable species of tropical sea cucumbers. There is widespread interest in restoring populations of sandfish particularly where this can deliver benefits to coastal fishing communities with few other livelihood opportunities.

The Galoa Aquaculture Station offers potential to help restore production of these valuable species in three ways through production and release of cultured juveniles in areas close to fishing to increase the spawning biomass; sea ranching operations where cultured juveniles are released to supplement fisheries catch; and through farming of cultured juveniles in earthen ponds and sea pens.

Sir, we have been importing shrimps worth \$25 million and sandfish is currently fetching \$1,600 per kg in the international market, hence the Ministry should be encouraged to explore these economic opportunities further. Sir, I am suggesting that the executive management of the Ministry should consider regularising employment of those manning the Galoa Aquaculture Station that are still classified as project officers.

I will not touch on the recommendations that has already been elaborated by the Honourable Minister for Fisheries. Sir, when talking about the Ministry's challenges, I wish to raise the concerns of our Chiefs and *qoliqoli* owners that is not part of this report. Their concerns were on the decision made with regard to the fishing permit and licensing process.

The Director of Fisheries has indicated that the legal powers vested with the Divisional Commissioners, as the issuing authority for fishing permit granting access into customary fishing rights areas as stipulated in the Fisheries Act 1941, as opposed to the current practice.

Sir, to deny the *qoliqoli* owners the granting of permits is to deny them their right to self-determination as the Vanua. I am pleading with the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Fisheries to please maintain the status quo and make wider consultations first with the Chiefs and *qoliqoli* owners. Sir, we will need them in this partnership and more importantly, we need their blessing to enhance more activities in the fisheries sector.

Sir, to conclude my contribution to the motion, the Ministry of Fisheries has the potential to strengthen its coral and to improve its contribution to the GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Qereqeretabua. You have the floor, Ma'am.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I just want to thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, also the Minister and the Ministry of Fisheries for this 2016-2017 Annual Report.

I just had a quick read through the recommendations and also the conclusion and the challenges that are faced by the Ministry. I noted the environment of ecosystem in which the Ministry operates present a challenge in respect to climate change. If I may just read this a little bit it says “climate change, it is an issue for the Ministry to mitigate and to focus on aquaculture coastal fisheries management that is sustainable and protect resources and work towards a new fisheries development. This will improve on the Ministry’s work on research, science and development”.

I notice what the Honourable Minister said about the inshore fisheries, management division, as well as the research and marine conservation division. I am so glad they have those two divisions, as well I note in the report the Ministry’s work with Women’s group around the country.

I just want to ask, I understand from Honourable Saukuru that the 2017-2018 Annual Report is before the Committee now and what I noted in the report that there is no mention of looking up river as affecting what happens in coastal communities and inshore fisheries. As we know, there is a lot of silting, deforestation, wrong deforestation activities upriver which impacts severely on coastal fisheries.

While I thank the Honourable Minister and the Standing Committee, I would just like to perhaps, ask the Committee that when they are doing the deliberation on the 2017-2018 Reports, they should be looking upriver as well. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I now give the floor to the Honourable Anare Jale, you have the floor, Sir.

HON. A. JALE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to make a short contribution to the debate on the Ministry of Fisheries Report for the period August 2016 to 31st July, 2017.

I wish to thank the Chairman and the Honourable Members of the Committees for the report. I noted the recommendations and other findings, I think it is a very important document for the Ministry to work on to improve some of the things that need to be taken abroad and improved.

The Report is out-dated but provides important indicators. I noted from the 30 page report did not include the financials statement; 15 pages of the report concerned training, meeting, survey, learning and capacity building, that is excellent. That is really great. I hope that the Honourable Minister will see that whatever transpired from those meetings and survey are translated to outputs and results.

The Ministry needs to improve each contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is \$1.8m in that year during the period under review and I am sure it has a potential to improve its contribution, the percentage of contribution to GDP.

The maritime province depend a lot on fisheries, what they get from the sea. Their livelihoods and their economic generating activities depend a lot on what they get from the sea and it really address Output 5 of the Ministry’s Corporate Plan, which is food security and income generation.

The Household Income and Expenditure Survey Report has identified that the Eastern Division is the poorest of all the Divisions in Fiji. I think that should be something that need to be taken on board by the Ministry when it plans its work in the future. We are not talking about the

Eastern Division only but to look at the Maritime Provinces and how it can improve the fisheries performance there.

The poverty headcount in the Division has been a concern. It has been a concern for some of us that come from the maritime division, particularly the Eastern Division. Our concern now is the people leaving the villages and come in to Suva.

The rural urban drift is a big concern to us. We need to find economic activities and income generating activities for people in the islands so that they can live in the islands and be able to earn and meet their requirements of life.

Seaweed farming used to be very productive and very successful in maritime province in the past. I note there were only 3.9 metric tonnes of dried seaweed produced during period of the report. The target lost about 100 metric tonnes. I am not too sure whether I am right but that is my reading from the report, Honourable Minister.

Outcome 19, fisheries resources and climate adaptation - mangrove planting is the output that we want to achieve. This is a very important issue for the Maritime Provinces because we depend on mangroves as a nursery for the fish. They have a place that provides a nursery for them and other living creatures in the sea to be able to grow and reproduce.

I hope that the Ministry will try to strengthen each work in that particular area and with the cooperation of the Ministry of Forestry in looking at areas that need mangrove replanting or the introduction of planting of mangroves in some areas.

I wish to conclude by referring us to the values of the Ministry. There are five values of the Ministry with the set of 5Rs.

- (1) Responsible;
- (2) Resolute;
- (3) Respectful;
- (4) Resourceful; and
- (5) Reliable

They have termed “reliable” as, we will do and deliver what we have committed and promised to our customers. I wish to remind the Honourable Minister that the people of Susui, Yavea, Tuvuca and Namalata in Vanuabalavu are still waiting for your promise for solar freezers, which were done six years ago and months ago. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Salote Radrodoro. You have the floor.

HON. S.V. RADRODORO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report 2016 and 2017 by the Standing Committee on Natural Resources. My response will mainly seek to give a broad overview of the Report before I focus on some key recommendations.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I highlight that Fiji and other Pacific Islands are most times being referred to by our development partners as “Small Islands States”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must change that narratives now to something that is more positive, more inspirational like Fiji is a small island state but we are ocean rich and that we look to the

Minister for Fisheries to take the lead role, particularly at a time such as this, when we are faced with economic challenges brought about by COVID-19. We must review, renew, diversify and reboot our economy. For example, investing more in the development of our fisheries sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee for the report and particularly the 15 recommendations listed in the report which have been elaborately articulated by the Minister for Fisheries. The recommendations are very substantial and timely and must be taken on board by the government as the basis and foundation to our diversification, conversations, consultations for economic policies, programmes and strategies in the development of the Fisheries sector.

Whilst we continue to hear about the efforts in reviving the tourism sector, we must, Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfreeze our mindset from tourism, reset our vision and aggressively pursue the development of our fisheries sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the situation on the ground and the huge number of our people that have lost their job due to COVID-19, there is a strong need for diversification focus on resource-based sector such as fisheries. We can start with the implementation of the 15 recommendations, as alluded to by the Honourable Minister.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- This is my own work, Honourable Minister for Health. We are quite capable of doing our own speech unlike your side have to rely on your government officials to give you the script Honourable Selai.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had actually picked up three recommendations but the Honourable Minister for Fisheries had passionately alluded to all those 15 recommendations. So, I will just focus on Recommendation 9 and I remember yesterday that we, on this side of the House had been accused by the government side that we selectively read the report.

I followed quite closely with the Honourable Minister for Fisheries speaking on the recommendations which was very good but when he came to recommendation 9, he selectively omitted to finish that recommendation and the last part of that recommendation reads, “hence the need to increase the Ministry’s annual budget allocation”. And when speakers on this side of the House were giving their contributions, we were been given the sign that we have to look to the budget which is coming up very soon.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Member is suggesting that our allocation in our budget has not increased, it has increased from \$16.5 million to \$23 million during the period of the report.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Minister for Fisheries must note that his annual budget allocation for 2019 to 2020 was only \$15.4 million and that only increased to \$15.5 million in 2020 to 2021; that is his current budget right now. So, he cannot say that we do not know the budget. We know your budget is \$15.5 million, Honourable Minister, and with only an increase of \$0.1 million, how do you think you will be able to implement all those 15 recommendations? Those 15 recommendations, as alluded to by the speakers on this side of the House, they need money, they need money to be able to carry them out, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In conclusion, we are only about three to four months to the Budget Session and I really hope that the Honourable Minister for Fisheries will support our recommendation because we, on this side of the House, will support. We will put on the floor the recommendation for an increase in the budget for the Ministry of Fisheries. The least he can do is to stand up and support that recommendation when we come to the budget session. We look to you, Honourable Minister, to honour your works on the recommendation, support the increase of budget in the Ministry of Fisheries during budget debate so that you will be able to implement all those 15 recommendations. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Rasova. You have the floor.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Ni bula vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to respond to the Ministry of Fisheries Annual Report for the period 2016 to 2017. Before I go into reading my response, I would like to acknowledge the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs in its involvement with the Kadavu Provincial Council Meeting that is currently happening now in Tavuki, and the chief guest is the Assistant Commissioner of Police, given that the Police has been in Kadavu for the last three phases of their clean-up of the island.

I would just like to go to the Honourable Minister's response in regard to the beche-de-mer. Given that he has never explained to us in detail why the beche-de-mer is not being accepted, even though that we want the people of Kadavu or even all around Fiji to dive for beche-de-mer. But I will go into the nitty gritty of what took place in the verbatim of the report. It says that, if you take it back a couple of decades ago when we had the British coming over, the economy was then run by *sucuwalu* itself.

It was a boom bust industry and it took about a hundred years for it to recover, as it is right now. We have had science done over the 10 years with partners from our researchers from across the universities, from the Fisheries Research Division as well as Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). So it was just not fisheries take on this, it was a multi-regional approach and the status not just for Fiji but across the Pacific, is that we are in dire straits when it comes to our resources like *sucuwalu*.

In Fiji, as per the status right now that the white tinned fish, prickly red fish and black fish were very high sought after but the state right now, our fishermen or our communities are harvesting fish, beche-de-mer that are of the lowest quality and the sizes that have been exported right now are very very small. These are the fishermen that are going out more than used to be but they were fishing in the sand tracks 15 metres, 20 metres and are now diving 60 metres across. We had taken the precautionary approach to stop it internally but then we got the science to it saying, "look this is what is happening, if you continue in the next five years, you will have absolutely nothing on the fish floor." So, let us take it for a while for fish to recover.

Also in saying this, this was just not the fact that as fish managers, not as just science behind what is happening on fishery itself but it is happening to our communities. We were being ripped off,

the communities were given \$30,000 but in overseas markets, they were being sold 10 times or 20 times more. Additionally to this, there are a lot of fatalities associated with this because the resources are limited. The fishermen have to go out to dive 60 metres further down which is not sustainable. Our human bodies are not actually developed to sustain the level of pressure within a certain time.

We have a lot of cases now reported as mortalities, death and a lot of cases now with the bench which are not reported, hidden within the communities. These cases are well-known to our fishermen, our officers and even the police. So, of these cases have arrived to the complete ban of beche-de-mer harvest until we have a regional approach on the size limits, on what species to be harvested and on the baseline prices that provide the right value for our communities.

Once we have sorted that out and our fisheries have recovered then the onus will come back to Government to reassess the opening. I think that explanation in the verbatim should have come from the Minister to tell us the real strategy behind the ban, but then taken the economic climate in Fiji, if the Government or the Minister can review.

As we know our fisheries sector is very important to the community since it provides food security, employment opportunities and export for foreign exchange earnings. The Ministry of Fisheries has an aspiring vision, that is to have the best fisheries in the Pacific region and a challenging mission which is to sustain, manage and protect Fiji's fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today I stand to share my disappointment on the Ministry that has been mandated by Government to manage and protect one of Fiji's natural resources sustainably that has raked in millions of dollars for our economy over the years and yet the only available annual report of the Ministry is 2016-2017 and the recent 2017-2018 that was just tabled in February sitting this year.

Mr. Speaker, I beg to question, how are they measuring the efficiency of their programmes and activities if annual reports pre-2006 has not been prepared and tabled in this august House? I am sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is fully aware of the requirement under section 69 of the Financial Management Act 2004, that each agency must prepare an annual report for submission to its Minister by 30th May the following year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the 2016-2017 Annual Report under the Aquaculture Division, a total of 323,645 megatons of tilapia fries were produced and distributed from the hatcheries from the one million megatons targeted. A total of 10,965 tilapia was produced from commercial and subsistence farms from the 150 megaton target. A total of 265,120 prawns post larvae was produced from these hatcheries from the 750,000 target.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other targets and outputs, too ambitious or is there poor management and monitoring within the Division? On a similar note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the newly established division within the Ministry of Fisheries, the Inshore Fisheries Management Division was established due to the limited information available on coastal fisheries.

I would like to ask the Honourable Minister for Fisheries on the progress of collating coastal fisheries data and what approach has been adopted in terms of fisheries monitoring for inshore and coastal fisheries. Though inshore fisheries will depend on the support of the geographic divisions for the provision of data and also their role as implementers of inshore fisheries programme initiatives. How is the Ministry monitoring the compliance and the progress of this new and important division?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with more and more people losing their jobs and those on reduced hours of work, the need to divert focus on resource-based sectors such as fisheries is crucial. The Aquaculture

Research and Development Division of the Ministry of Fisheries needs to be strengthened to address and assist in this aspect.

Increase in budgetary allocation as alluded to by the other Honourable Members, recruitment for more skilled human resources, investment of technical expertise are some of the areas in which the work of the division can be strengthened. Over the past two decades, the Ministry has been concentrating on a few species of freshwater, brackishwater species, such as tilapia, grass carp, silver carp, milkfish, prawns, shrimps and sandfish, to assist with food security and a source of livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say the need to strengthen this division is because there is a need to explore the culturing of species of special interest such as sea cucumber, sea urchins, eels, to name a few. This development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, can assist the unemployed, the people who are seeking an alternative livelihood to support their families during these trying times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Offshore Fisheries Management Division, the technical advisory arm of the Ministry on matters relating to Fiji's offshore fisheries sector, whose main objective is to conserve, manage and develop Fiji's Offshore Fisheries Resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note that the total tuna export from 2017 to 2019 was approximately US\$142 million. Tuna catch in national waters was US\$47 million and tuna catch from national long line fleet was US\$74 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of COVID-19 on tuna exports in 2020 to-date has been most severely felt by long line vessels and processes supply the fresh tuna market as a result of the reduced airfreight capacity and a significant increase in airfreight cost. What is the Ministry's plan in assisting long line fishing vessel operators? Processing facilities and the local crew of vessels, if there is any.

I noticed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Offshore Fisheries Management Division rakes in a lot of money into the economy through tuna exports and license fees and is very structured in terms of its Monitoring Control and Surveillance (MSC components). However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the biggest threats to the management offshore fisheries is the Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji and the Pacific island countries are the custodians of last remaining healthy tuna stocks in the world and manage a marine area of 300 million square kilometres. Sir, IUU fishing remains one of the greatest threats to marine ecosystems due to its potent ability to undermine national and regional efforts to maintain fisheries sustainability and represent up to 26 million tonnes of fish caught annually, valued at \$10 million to \$23 billion a year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, IUU fishing undermines fisheries conservation and management measures in place, affects the nation's economy and the people depend on fishing industry as a source of livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the efforts to deal with the problem are hampered by a number of factors. The large area ocean space relative to the land area, the nature of fish and fisheries resources, lack of financial and technical resources and skilled manpower compound the problem of dealing with IUU fishing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji the national fleet which comprises the Fiji licensed and Fiji long line fishing vessels which fish in Fiji fisheries waters have mandatory requirements of installing a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) on board so that the fishing activities out at sea is closely monitored.

However, the Ministry of Fisheries is only able to monitor these licensed vessels out at sea. Other fishing vessels which enter our waters illegally are not monitored as Fiji does not have adequate infrastructure for aerial or surveillance to monitor the illegal fishers who enter our water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are few occasions where Australia and New Zealand Navy assist Fiji's fisheries in aerial and surveillance and if they detect activities suspected of illegal fishing, otherwise they are undetected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir the Fiji Navy also conducts services every once in a while, an expensive exercise to patrol and police the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a 1.9 million square kilometres on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the degree of this problem and the importance of ensuring that Illegal Unreported Unregulated (IUU) Fishing is addressed, the Government needs to seriously consider ways it can assist the Offshore Fisheries Division by investing on securing the necessary equipment to enable the efficient and effective MSE of effective fisheries activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I urge the Government:

- (1) to strengthen the Research and Development Division of the Ministry.
- (2) More emphasis should be placed on the Fisheries Research Centres to assist the food security, creation of employment, source of alternative livelihood for people and hopefully contribute to GDP, noting that in 2014 we had 2.8 percent GDP, 2015, the highest was 8 percent to GDP, 2016-2017. We note that there is only 1.8 percent, and in 2018, 2019, was still 1.8 percent
- (3) Strengthen exercise to conservation and management initiatives currently placed, for example, Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)
- (4) Increase awareness and strengthen communities on the importance of conserving marine resources, BDM ban is to be lifted for source of livelihood on unemployed and imposed catch coder for monitoring purposes.
- (5) Lift the ban for Group Line Coral, *Kawakawa*, *Donu* as sources of food and livelihood.
- (6) Increase issuance of offshore long line fishing licence which has been set at 60 only from 2014, need to create employment for our locals, therefore an increase in the issuance of long line licence is highly recommended.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I urge the Government to refocus its attention on resource-bases sectors, such as fisheries and invest a lot more funding to enable the efficient and effective operations of its programmes so that it can deliver to the people who benefit through employment, food security and alternative source of livelihood. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you very much. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member. I give the floor to the Honourable Tikoduadua. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will try to be short. Much of the issues that I wanted to raise have already been raised by my friends.

First of all, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for this Report and also I want to thank the Honourable Minister for Fisheries for that very informative presentation that he made earlier in terms of the intentions of the Ministry.

There is a lot of opportunities within the fishing industry and it is almost unthinkable that we have such a big vast sea resource that we are not getting as much from the sea as much as what tourism is bringing to Fiji. There is this realisation that tourism is almost like an impediment to the use of sea resources by people who could use that for living and also improve on our exports in terms of aquaculture and other fisheries related-areas that we could use for export.

Today, Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to speak a little bit on this issue about fisheries and that is fresh water fisheries, I suppose, if you want to call it, as opposed to inshore and offshore where the majority of the speakers have sort of concentrated their efforts today. I say this because obviously I come from the inland where there is opportunity for this to occur.

I recognise there is a lot of work been done by the Ministry with regards to aquaculture and in places like Naduruloulou and Caboni in terms of the development of freshwater aquaculture in these places, to help villagers and communities who depend on aquaculture in our local waterways for food and also to earn a living by what they get themselves.

I would like to say, Mr. Speaker, that there is a lot of opportunities. I believe I am not sure but I would like to ask the Honourable Minister as to what percentage of the Ministry's Budget goes to freshwater because I believe it is probably the lowest of them all, compared to what goes in to inshore and offshore, but there is a lot of opportunities there.

Now, post COVID-19, when we talked about poverty alleviation yesterday and some of the debates that we took part in, when we talked about poverty and people, we realise the movement of people that have come from the West to resettle in Tailevu, Rewa and Naitasiri, and some of these people come with no *i teitei* or farms. So, the easiest place they go to is the river, they go and get *kai* (mussels), *ura* or whatever else is available within the rivers. These rivers themselves, I am sure you know Government Ministers and Members of Parliament that as you go into the country, you see the exploitation of our river resources.

So when we are developing other industries, it is coming at a great cost to fisheries in our inland water sources in the rivers. A case in point is Dawasamu if I can recall, Ba River you know in certain areas, also the Lodon River. These people cannot exploit these resources any more. I am talking about rivers and the Honourable Qereqeretabua referred to this earlier. So some resources need to be put in to this, either for climate mitigation so that when this kind of resources is put into it, at least this initiative that the Honourable Minister is talking about can be there and used not only for aquaculture but also for the development of our waterways that are already there.

I was talking to one of the scientists and I spoke to the Honourable Minister about Caboni on this project that we want to establish and start breeding fresh water prawns in my community. When he came he said, "Oh, you have such a beautiful river here, what have you done and what are you planning to do about it?" For instance, like the Ministry of Fisheries in Tailevu in Korovou has almost low capacity to be able to deliver this advice to the people who have such good waterways - the inlets of Wainibuka and Ra.

I mean, this is a completely neglected area that I want to bring to the attention of this House because, unfortunately, the development in other areas of our economy, our water resources inland which are the sources of food security and, of course, economic opportunities for these communities cannot be used properly because timber, gravel extraction and the many others that exploited these

resources that have come at the cost of this inland water resources. We all know it. We go to these major rivers and we see they are all dried up. Why? Because of a lot of deforestation before, there used to be a Ministry of Forests and Fisheries.

The Honourable Minister today said that it is now a separate Ministry of its own, of course, that is good but one of the things there though is that there can be a disconnect, we talked about poverty yesterday. So, when we tried to gain one area, we exploit and it comes at the cost of another resource and on most occasions, it is the marine resources, the fish, it is that which lives in the river that people feed from and live from, I suppose becomes the victim at the end of the day.

So, I would like to ask here, Mr. Speaker, that the Honourable Minister, under his Programme, particularly in dealing with aquaculture, must also consider our major waterways and through something about them so that people can always go back to it for poverty alleviation, for food security, use these resources to make their own living, particularly now, when there is no jobs. I know there is a joke that goes around with the iTaukei “*Sega tu nomu i teitei, levu ga nomu uku*”, but this is actually true because people that have lost their jobs go back to their communities and they have no *i teitei* to feed from and where do they go? They go straight into the river and they find *kai*, fish, and whatever they can catch, they take it to the market.

So, I would just like to ask in that regard because of climate change and because of poverty, perhaps the Ministry could consider in the future, how to try and refresh and rebuild these resources so that it can protect the resources that are within it from the sustainability of the livelihood of our different communities.

I just recognise from the presentation of the Ministry that is here, Honourable Speaker, that there are so many opportunities for aquaculture in Fiji. There is very little being done about it and in fact I would like to implore upon the Minister, please, I know you are doing a lot of work and I am not going to deny that on it and I know every once in a while I see you driving down to Caboni and that is something that has been captured and I would like to commend you for that but obviously there is still a whole lot more to do. Of course, there is more for our people to gain from, from their own livelihood and, of course, share a little bit more that they can raise for the sustainability of their own family and, of course, through the local community. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. RATU T. NAVURELEVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity to stand before this House and contribute to the motion before the House. I would like to say a few words in response to the Ministry of Fisheries 2016-2017 Annual Reports.

Before I proceed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to commend the Standing Committee for providing a comprehensive Report. I note that the Ministry of Fisheries’ vision, which is to have the best fisheries in the Pacific region and its mission, which is to sustain, manage and protect Fiji’s fisheries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Ministry has a legislative mandate to manage and protect one of Fiji’s valuable natural resources. I note, Sir, that there are some impediments that hinder the successful implementation of the programmes and activities in place. May I ask for your permission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to let me outline the challenges.

Most of the challenges have been highlighted by the Honourable Minister for Fisheries and other speakers, one is yet to be regulated is the National Fisheries Policy, the overarching document

that sets the foundation for all Ministry policies with our land, the incomplete review of the Tuna Management Development Plan, the pending Aquaculture Bill which was gazetted as No. 9 of 2016, the low support for the existing Fisheries Research Centres leading to the dragging performances, lack of awareness and engagement with communities on the importance of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and conservation of marine resources, poor turnaround time on Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) on fisheries programmes by the Ministry of Environment, non-availability of hatchery fields locally, the poor condition of aquaculture facilities and the poor infrastructure of the Makogai Mariculture Station, including the jetty, transportation and communication, in these trying times, thousands of our people in the Tourism Ministry have lost their jobs and are struggling, the latest support from the Western Division for the civil society is that thousands are struggling to put food on the table because the FNPF assistance is simply not enough to feed their families and pay their bills.

For us in Northern Division, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the maritime province, the recent *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana* have devastated our communities. It is a tough lesson we are learning as the nation is relying solely on tourism. Government put most of its eggs in one basket and overinvested in our national airline which is struggling to repay its loans for the airlines. The Government needs to redirect its focus to the primary or resource-based sectors like the fisheries sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is my humble plea to the Government.

As the Honourable Minister strongly objected on the lifting of the ban, I join my colleagues to plead the Government to lift the ban on beche-de-mer, it is now four years since the ban was imposed and the beche-de-mer population would slowly have recovered. This is an important source of livelihood for the unemployment considering the sustainability issues.

With the absence of a management plan, a catch quota can be imposed for monitoring purposes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to assure this House, sea cucumbers also known as beche-de-mer has been in Fiji for the past two centuries. In the 19th century, sea cucumbers replaced sandalwood and became Fiji's major export earner. Since 1980, elevated export prices and demand from Asian markets have a catalyst for increased fishing. This trend of inheritance from generation to generation until today continues.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the existence of marine resources is not a business but rests entirely with our supreme Creator, God who is the provider and He exactly knows what is adequate for a person or for us to catch to meet our daily task. We cannot be 100 percent and that beche-de-mer now is not enough to provide for our future generation. Our fishing grounds are very rich of marine resources, and they are there for the provision of our daily needs.

On behalf of the communities in the Northern Division, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly request the Government to consider, maybe four months lifting of the ban on beche-de-mer and catch quotas to enable communities to rebuild their homes in the aftermath of *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. May I recommend the Honourable Minister to consider more emphasis be placed on the existing fisheries research centres to improve the standard and provide better alternative sources of livelihood for the people, increase awareness and engagement with communities on the importance of conserving marine resources and having marine protected areas.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Minister and the Ministry for their report and continue work in this important sector and I thank the Honourable Chairman and Members of the Standing Committee for their Report. *Vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to speak on the motion by Honourable Kirpal. I thank the Chairman and Members of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for their deliberations on the Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, access to adequate food is a constitutional right for every Fijian. One way we meet that mandate is by looking to the bounty of our ocean ecosystems just as we have for centuries past.

The development of sustainable domestic fisheries to supply healthy and nutritious food is a critical pillar of Fiji's food and nutrition security, but the protection and sustainable management of our fisheries sector, as you have heard, is full of challenges, is fraught with challenges.

Some are familiar like the threat of overfishing, others like worsening climate impacts we had never imagined. In response, Fiji is building a resilient blue economy, as you may have also heard that can sustainably keep food on the table for Fijian families, generate income for our fishermen and inspire the world to seek a more harmonious balance with the marine ecosystem.

Fiji can and should be home to the most prosperous and sustainable fisheries sector in the Pacific. With that aim, the Ministry has reviewed and implemented rigorous strategies in the three key fisheries areas – the offshore fisheries, coastal fisheries and aquaculture, taking into account the unprecedented impact of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate emergency, both of which have challenged how we view fisheries as part of our economy and our one connected global ecosystem.

These strategies, Mr. Speaker, which are guided by a fit for purpose legislative framework have enforced compliance allowing for the review of the licensing system, the provision of better advisory and support-services and of course the conduct of appropriate research and marine conservation activities, all of which are aligned to the Government's national priorities and to Fiji's commitment to national conventions.

Mr. Speaker, not only did the Committee make recommendations to improve the services to be delivered by the Ministry, it has also addressed how we can better empower ordinary Fijians who rely on the fisheries sector for sustenance and as a source of income. There is an entrepreneurial drive within every Fijian, we know that, we have not always had the society that recognises and rewards that ambition but in recent years we have worked to empower innovators across society including in the fisheries sector to turn resource owners into business owners.

As the Minister responsible for iTaukei Affairs, I am very keen to see this work continue especially in light of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We must seize every opportunity to spur sustainable domestic growth that we can. Through this initiative, customary fishing ground owners have a pathway to collectively collaborate in raising and realising their business potential.

Mr. Speaker, by permanently enshrining the *iTaukei* people's ownership of their land and fishing ground in the Constitution, this Government has done more to protect the sacred rites of the *iTaukei* than any other and we have done more for *iTaukei* fishing ground owners with regards to the equitable distribution of rental income for *iqoliqoli*, royalty payments and widening access rights to waters. Since day one, Mr. Speaker, this Government has held an open door to all Fijians, we listened to our people's ideas, we noted concerns, we gave an honest accounting of what would be done and then we did it. We implemented changes to address the concerns of resource owners as you will have heard and we have delivered or we are delivering development that changes lives for the better.

Mr. Speaker, just like so many budding business owners in the fisheries sectors, the Government has its sights on greater ambition. Fiji has the potential to become a model blue economy. We are leading the world, we are leading the world's ship towards ocean action. We have led by example towards the 2030 goal of 100 percent sustainable management of our ocean with 30 percent to be declared as marine-protected areas as you have heard from the Minister for Fisheries.

That commitment, Mr. Speaker, is upheld by our recently introduced National Ocean Policy which I hope we will all be familiar with by now. The sustainable management of our fisheries obviously plays a key role in that effort. My Government will continue to ensure that the Ministry is financially supported to play its key role in delivering on Fiji's Ocean Action commitments for the benefit of fisheries businesses and the communities that count on them.

These efforts, Mr. Speaker, Sir, involve combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, supporting fisheries sector trade subsidies, maximising resource rent, building Fiji's food security, harnessing the full potential of Fiji's aquaculture and inshore industries through import substitution and diversification, blue carbon trading, marine biodiversity, conservation and disaster management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's work as you have also heard, is deeply connected to the industry, to the community and its development partners. I also commend the Ministry's efforts to preserve the cultural significance of fishing for our people. As we all know our culture, our tradition, values and customs are intimately linked to marine ecosystems. There is great wisdom in the cultural practises of our marine communities, some of these practises protect vulnerable species and allow for them to sustainably reproduce. Where it make sense, these practises are being recognised and formalised as part of our sustainable management framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to decades of ocean degradation, the world's marine ecosystem do not produce the same boundary they once did. I worry that this generation of young people will not fully understand the riches that the ocean can provide them, because they have not seen the full extent of its offerings. But through the sustainable of our fisheries and all of Fiji's 1.3 square million kilometres of ocean, we can do more than stop the degradation. We can do more than reverse course, we can build the strongest and most sustainable blue economy Fiji has ever known, and I look forward to working with our resource owners and fisheries businesses to bring that better bluer future within reach.

Based on those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I therefore do support the motion.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Prime Minister. I now give the floor to the Chairperson of the Standing Committee to speak in reply. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Members for their contribution to the Ministry of Fisheries 2016-2017 Annual Report. I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Fisheries for his valuable contribution where he explained splendidly his hardworking staff at the Ministry. I also would like to thank the Honourable Prime Minister, who has explained the other aspects of the Ministry of Fisheries. Thank you.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move under Standing Order 6:

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Very quickly, we have Schedule 2, the seven oral questions plus the written question, thus the request to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today. *Vinaka*, Sir.

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

Since no one wishes to take the floor, do you have anything further to add Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- No, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we move on.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Grievances - Labasa Municipal Market Vendors
(Question No. 73/2021)

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development inform Parliament on the actions in response to the grievances raised by the Labasa Municipal Market Vendors in a petition to the Honourable Prime Minister on 6th January, 2021?

HON. P.D. KUMAR (Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Member for his question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to advise Parliament that my Ministry, Ministry of Local Government is not in receipt of any petition send by the market vendors association. Because we did not receive the petition I do not know what is in the petition and therefore, I cannot answer this question. I have checked with the Prime Minister's Office, I have checked with Commissioner Northern, I have checked with Labasa Town Council and none of them are aware of this petition, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on. Honourable Professor Prasad, you have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker. Just to inform that I received a copy of that petition. It was copied to me and members actually raised it with me. So that is why I put the question. I can give the copy of this petition to Parliament.

(Hon. Government Members interject)

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- No.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

(Hon. Government Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

Honourable Members, when that petition gets to the Honourable Prime Minister, he will be able to look at it and then you probably be able to ask the ask question on that at some later time. But as of today, the Honourable Minister said she has not received it and she has also asked around. We will move on.

The second Oral Question for today, I call on the Honourable Lal to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

Quality and Safety Standards of Construction Materials
(Question No. 74/2021)

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

Given that the building and construction sector is very important for the growth of economy, can the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport explain to Parliament how the Ministry is ensuring that building and construction materials imported or manufactured in Fiji are compliant to quality and safety standards?

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the building and construction sector in Fiji is actually critical for the growth in Fiji and the rest of the world. It is critical for the growth of any economy. During pre-COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's building constructions sector was actually booming and employing thousands of Fijians. As this august House has heard over this week, Sir, despite the pandemic in 2020, we still have 1,458 building permits issued, which means investors' interest in Fiji still remain.

Now as a sector grows, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a growth importance of high standards and high quality buildings that actually comply with standards. The Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport through the Department of National Trade Measurements and Standards is actually responsible for setting standards for all goods and services in Fiji. We even have a brake check by this particular Department, Sir.

The Department has actually developed relevant building materials standards which ensures that the building materials are actually fit for purpose and more importantly, fit for our condition. There are over 24 odd building related standards adopted as Fijian specifications and some of the building material standards that were in place are for materials such as roofing coils, cyclonic screws and steel reinforcing materials, such as deformed bars and welding mesh, et cetera. These mentioned materials are actually critical components of any building that is being built, whether it is a home or whether it is a multi-storey building.

I wish to highlight that since *TC Winston*, the Ministry is actually focused primarily on ways to ensure that the Fijian public and the private sector are fully aware of the current standards for building materials.

Most importantly, we have actually worked hand in hand with stakeholders to look at how we can actually make buildings more resilient and most importantly, Sir, more resilient to Category 5 cyclones.

One of the major causes of the destruction of buildings is actually non-compliance, Mr. Speaker, with the Fijian National Building Code (FNBC).

Now, in order to minimise this non-compliance issues with Fijian National Building Code (FNBC), the Ministry in collaboration with the World Bank Group developed the guideline for improving building safety and resilience for new single-storey houses and schools in rural areas throughout Fiji, Sir.

The Ministry and the World Bank Group worked with the relevant agencies, such as the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Provincial Offices, Ministry of Infrastructure, Ministry of Economy, Construction Industry Council and Fiji's Institute of Engineers and Fiji Architects Association to develop this easy to use guidelines. Guidelines have been translated into three vernacular languages and is available on the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport website, with the exception of the Hindi version which is actually currently been finalised. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Building Standards Committee also which was established in 2016 to specifically look at the realignment and modernisation of standards to current international best practices.

In this regard, the standards for roof sucking foils, steel coils, grading for steel coils and reinforcing materials were actually put in place. Now, the Ministry is actually working on two more critical standards so that standards for wind blow and plywood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of its responsibility, the Department also monitors the standards and quality of building materials that are actually manufactured here in Fiji and imported into the Fijian market. This is undertaken through markets surveillance methodology and confirmative assessment, third party or independent clarity laboratory to demonstrate the compliance of products against standards. We do not let anything get through, Sir, that does not actually comply with the standards.

Market surveillance methodology includes premarket and post markets surveillance which actually incorporates testing and inspection of the building product before and after the product enters

the Fijian market. This is a globally accepted good practice which enhances protection for all our consumers and builds the trust of investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the Ministry also issues import permits for materials, such as roofing coils and cyclonic screws. In over the past three years, we have actually issued 80 import licences for cyclone screws and 605 licences for roofing coils. We also work with other agencies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, such as Fiji Revenue and Customs Services to monitor these products at the border or at the point of entries.

In terms of compliance, the Ministry undertakes investigation of any complaints also of possible violation of these respective standards under the Quality Control Act 1992 and whilst monitoring and enforcement is important to maintain these standards, a continued awareness and advocacy also is equally important. This is where we work actively with the public and private sectors to create awareness on this particular standards, Sir.

I have highlighted a key initiative that the DNTMS under the Ministry undertakes to ensure that the standards are updated and meet our ever challenging market demands and in case of building material standards, the Department actually ensures thorough compliance so that we have buildings that are resilient to elements of nature and user friendly for all Fijians, Sir. I hope that answers the question, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. We move on to the third Oral Question for today and I call on the Honourable Nawaikula to ask question his question. You have the floor.

COVAX – COVID-19 vaccine
(Question No. 75/2021)

HON. N. NAWAIKULA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on plans to vaccinate the remaining population who are not covered by the first COVAX donation of the COVID-19 vaccine?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the Honourable Member for that question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been having discussion with multilateral partners also with bilateral partners. As you know there are countries around the world that have actually ordered vaccines more than their needs within their own country. Nevertheless, countries like Australia, New Zealand have indicated to us that they are willing to help us in our procurement but we have also as a government, we have made it very clear to COVAX that we are willing to purchase the vaccines ourselves.

We are very clear also that we want to vaccinate 650,000 Fijians and the first 20 percent as we have heard from the Ministerial Statement is coming through the COVAX facility, 15 percent free and 5 percent subsidized which the Fijian Government is paying for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, there are few vaccines that have been certified so as to speak by the WHO. They are the Pfizer vaccine which is requiring the ultra-cool chain pre-dominantly being used in America and also initially in Israel and some other countries.

The AstraZeneca which we have used here in Fiji, it is safe for us and safe in many other countries around the world and the ones that are manufactured in India AstraZeneca is called Covishield. We also have the Moderna vaccine and also just recently the Johnson and Johnson

vaccine which is thought to be a game changer in a sense that you will only require one vaccination instead of two. So, the other vaccine that required at least, initially 21 days but now they are talking about anywhere between 8 days to 12 days between the vaccines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, every country in the world at the moment, want to be able to access vaccine. The other night when I left Parliament here at about 12 midnight, we are part of what is called the Access to COVID-19 tools Facilitation Council. Fiji is represented on that council. So, we had a meeting and one of the issue at the moment is access to vaccines. Access to vaccines is an issue that a lot of country around the world are having.

It was interesting because also in that discussion, there are countries around the world that are wanting oxygen, they are wanting steroid for the treatment of people with COVID-19 because there are community transmission and so whilst all the countries in the world want access to vaccine, there are countries in Africa, for example. There are countries in other places where they have community transmission of COVID-19 where they are really wanting other medicines and oxygen, apart from the vaccine itself. Then that is in itself is like what you might say a “triple burden” in a sense because they not only wanting vaccine but also the ability to be able to treat those that have COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have made it very clear in our discussions with COVAX, they were going to supply the first 20 percent within the first quarter. As we have alluded to, we are hoping that 88,000 doses will arrive very shortly. We are also talking with our ability to be able to get the whole vaccine, so we have penned out for the whole of this year, in essence will be about getting vaccines.

We have also seen with what is happening with vaccine hoarding. These are first world countries that are hoarding vaccines from one another. I have just read in the news very early this morning, it was found in Italy that there was a couple of millions of doses of the vaccine that the rest of the European Union did not know, and it is becoming a grab across the world. That is something that countries such as ours are really pushing on the diplomatic and all the global states that we cannot have that.

Every country is affected, whether big or small, therefore, it is important that vaccine equity is something that we all push for. I think one of the things that is becoming very clear and that is one of the reasons and I have alluded to you in the Ministerial Statement today, that we received the first doses of vaccine in the Pacific is because we have our house in order, because we got the paper work in place and because we are COVID-19 contained. That is why I also encourage us, and I thank the Honourable Members who have registered in the last few days, it is important that we do our registration, that we are ready, that we show to COVAX, we also show to those who would be able to give us the vaccine that we are ready to receive the vaccines as they come.

I want to make it is also very clear to this august House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and to the nation at large, that the Fijian Government, just like it has been doing with all the vaccinations that we use for our children will only bring vaccinations that have been certified by WHO.

Lastly, Honourable Dr. Lalabalavu raised the issue in his reply to the Ministerial Statement this morning, the concerns about the data that was taken from the individuals in terms of registering for the vaccine. I want to also make it very clear that that information, as I have said in the Ministerial Statement, is only important for the data managers to actually do this stratification. That is the importance of information that is put in for the data managers to be able to help us with the stratification.

The first cab of the rank is the frontline health workers and their families, followed by the vulnerable groups, then followed by all of those who are above 60 years, then lastly at 18 to 60 years old. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Does the Government have the money to buy what is needed to vaccinate the remainder of the population?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Firstly, yes, we do have the money, Secondly, it is free. Thirdly, you do not have to pay \$15 to get your registration done. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Supplementary question, Honourable Member.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There are lots of misinformation out there. What is the Ministry doing with regards to awareness in staying ahead of the misinformation and the other information out there with regards to vaccination?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- I thank the Honourable Member for that question. As I have alluded to, we all have to show leadership and responsibility in awareness. I think it is imperative upon us, we have seen how it is important that we actually support one another in economic recovery. I think it is important for us to understand that when we are all vaccinated, then we are in a position to be able to open up our borders so that we can get the tourism industry on track.

Already that is beginning with the “Blue Lanes” that is happening and that is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I hear “no” coming from the other side, we cannot do that, we all know that the tourism industry has so many back end industries that it supports. So when the tourist comes, it is the airline, it is the flight attendants, it is the pilots, it is Airports Fiji Limited, it is the transport, it is the taxis, it is the curio handicraft, it is the famers and so many back end in the industry.

I think it is important that we all as Members of this august House participate in being able to rebut those fake information. The Ministry of Health working with digitalFIJI and the Ministry of Communication and development partners have rolled out a comprehensive information package similar to what was done with COVID-19. But I think it is important for us, for those of you who have *Facebook* inside this noble House, please pick it up and share it on your *Facebook* pages.

Let our Fijian people know that this is the way forward for us. It will not only help us to open borders but more importantly protect lives. See what is happening in Papua New Guinea, see what is happening in French Polynesia, see what is happening in countries similar to us or all around the world, that can happen here. Your family can pass on, my 99-year-old grandmother is at risk of dying if COVID-19 goes through the community. That is why we need to support each other with vaccine registration programmes and spreading the good word about protecting our nation. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. We move on to the fourth Oral Question for today.

Plans to Mitigate Flooding in Rivers and Creeks
(Question No. 76/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the Ministry's plans to mitigate the impact of the frequent flooding of smaller rivers and creeks?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this week I gave an update on what our plans were with regard to dealing with flooding in Ba Town, in particular, for Ba River. Often we talk about these bigger rivers - Ba, Nadi, Rakiraki, Rewa, Labasa, Qawa and Navua. Sir, but we also sometimes forget that there are other small waterways, creeks and rivers that are threatening during heavy rain; threatening our infrastructure, crops, livestock, settlements and therefore, we also need to clear them. They are, over time, have been silted due to what is happening upstream in the catchment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have identified those rivers, about 150 of them and divided them into three-phases. The first phase is about to start on Friday next week, we will give it out to the Central Division. In the first phase, we are going to desilt 25 creeks in the Central, Northern and Western Divisions. In the Central Division there are three creeks that we need to desilt, nine in the Western Division and 13 in the Northern Division. The total number of kilometres that we will be desilting is 56 kilometres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, desilting 56 kilometres is a lot of work. What we have done, 56 kilometre would mean close to \$120 million to \$150 million. But what we have done is, we work smartly, we are working with the private sector, where we pick up the part of the cost of working with the *mataqali*, the landowners and getting their fishing rights in liaison with the Ministry of Lands. We have picked up the cost of undertaking the Environmental Management Plan, so the Ministry is picking that up.

So for each creek and river, we do the Environmental Management Plan so that the desilting work would go according to that plan so there will be no destabilisation of the river bank and the flora and fauna will be intact. How many metres from each of the banks they need to desilt? What volume they need to desilt, all those too are defined in the Environmental Management Plan. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the private sector pays the royalty to the Ministry of Lands and then picks up the material sales and the private sector then gains from that.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of the 25 creeks that we are doing in phase one, that we have got the entire paperwork ready and we are going to start from next week Friday. Nine in the Western Division – Solovi, Saru, Navolau, Narewa, Nakorotubu, Nadele, Draunivi and Malakua. That is 16.9 kilometres. The three in the Central Division – Wainibuabua, Wainadoi and Nabukavesi. This is a total of 17 kilometres. The 13 in the Northern Division - Tacilevu, Nabia, Navidamu, Vatudova, Wavuwavu, Vuniyalayala, Vunivutu, Nasealevu, Nakelikoso, Korotari, Dogoru, Nakama, Nubu, so a total of 21.5 kilometres. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this way we are able to save a substantial amount of money the State otherwise would incur and we are able to work in partnership with the private sector and assist these communities, protect the infrastructure, protect the crop and livestock and we are able to ensure that the access water is discharged very quickly. Thank you.

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

HON. RO T.V. KEPÄ.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. For the Central Division, I did not hear Mr. Speaker, Sir, mentioning the Toga Crossing. What are the plans for upgrading the Irish Crossing because right now with this heavy rain, it will be flooded. That Irish Crossing serves four villages and settlements, so the question is, what are your plans for that crossing?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Honourable Member, the crossings are done by Ministry of Infrastructure. We do not deal with the crossings, but if you are talking about the river, as I have said, this is phase 1. Phase 1 we are doing 25. There is a total of 150 that we have identified.

So Phase 1 we are doing 25, now once this has started, then we will work on Phase 2, a list of rivers and creeks where we need to do a lot of work where we need to come to the *mataqali*, they give their consent, they agree on how much they will be paid and go through the Native Lands Commission and through the Ministry of Lands to get the waiver documents all in order, and then the Ministry of Environment, at the same time, will be doing the Environmental Management Plan. So the crossings are under the jurisdiction of the

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- No, no, we do not do crossings.

HON. SPEAKER.- We move on to the fifth Oral Question for today. I give the floor to the Honourable Rasova to ask his question. You have the floor.

COVID-19 Biosecurity Measures
(Question No. 77/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the COVID-19 biosecurity measures at our ports of entry?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know why this question is directed to me because biosecurity does not come under my Ministry, it comes under the Ministry of Public Enterprises.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will relook at that question at some future time, so we will move on to the next question. I hope the next person is ready.

The sixth Oral Question for today, the Honourable Vegnathan to ask his question.

Reticulation Water System – Rewa Delta
(Question No. 78/2021)

HON. G. VEGNATHAN asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Minerals Resources inform Parliament on the plans for the reticulation water system in the Rewa Delta?

HON. J. USAMATE (Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Minerals Resources).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and thank you to the Honourable Member for his question.

In the earlier part of this year, in the aftermath of *TC Yasa*, there were a lot of issues raised about water in the Rewa Delta by the people who were living there and as a result of this, the Water Authority of Fiji had to undertake some investigations and some repair works on the water system in the Rewa Delta in response to the complaints of low pressure and also in some cases of not getting water at all. There was intermittent supply to the chiefly village of Lomanikoro, that means sometimes they were getting water being supplied late in the evenings or the early morning hours, so not water all round.

In this particular zone where there was intermittent water, WAF had to mobilise its teams to walk the lines, to follow the pipelines where the distribution lines, whether the water is being supplied and look at the areas that needed to be repaired and attend to them. As we speak now, water supply has been restored at Lomanikoro Village.

The WAF teams also had to go and identify areas on which the mains in Lokia Village had burst. The water that comes through the Rewa Delta comes across from Narere and flows down from Narere to Debulu, goes through the swamp areas down to Lokia, then it goes underground from Naililili, goes underwater and across to Lomanikoro then it is distributed further down to the Delta.

So they had to identify the burst mains at Lokia Village, also at Debulu, just at Narere and also at Vunuku. Even though after they had repaired all these mains, they found that there were still some areas in the Delta area that continue to receive low pressure and intermittent supply, meaning they have water sometimes but at other times they do not. These include villages of Nasigatoka, Nadoi, Nasilai, Vutia, Tavuya, Nakaulau, Nabua, Drekena, Vunuku, Narocivo, Nukui and also some informal settlements such as Nariri and Naroro.

Mr. Speaker, what WAF had to do at that time is to get a barge and the areas that could not be reachable by roads, to make sure that they could cart water to some of these areas. I am aware that there were also water tanks placed at Nasali Landing for our villagers to also come up and take water from that landing to take it down to their areas, while at the same time, we had to come in as it was suspected that the fault was in the submarine lines - lines that come across from the Lokia Landing across to Lomanikoro. So in order to carry this out, WAF had to walk the line from Debulu all the way down to Lokia, this means walking through swamps.

I actually tried to walk along with them and it is not easy to walk along those swamps because it is very hard to identify where the leaks are when you are taking the pipes through the swamps because it is full of water. They also had to follow it all the way down to Nukui Village which is right down at the mouth of the Rewa River where it meets the sea to identify and rectify the significant leaks that were contributing to the water loss.

By a method of elimination, the WAF Team also carried out flushing works of the submarine pipes, those on both ends of the river - the Lokia side and they were to identify the pumps and flush it up to make sure that you get all the silt out of the system and then go across to the other side of the river, through Lomanikoro, they initially had to get the digger to dig it out because it was a big excavation that they had to do, and because of the difficulties in getting their digger, they had to get actual workers to actually do the job, it was a big job. I went there and saw what they did. I mean I tip my hat off to the workers of Water Authority, it is hard work, it is dirty work but they still managed to do it.

They carried out the flushing works to get rid of the silt to make sure that these are not the cause of intermittent water supply. The flushing means that you are removing the air pockets and if they are in existence, they will significantly affect the water pressure to the customers. In parallel with the flushing works, WAF also installed a number of new isolation valves along the way, that

will allow for the removal of silt built up in the future because the silt also will affect the quality of the water, the dirtiness or the cleanliness of the water, and also the pressure of the water that is received by the customers.

In addition to these measures, WAF has completed the reactivating of the Lomanikoro Header Tank. There is a big tank that sits in Lomanikoro Village. This tank will allow them to provide the different storage for areas within the Delta, the pressure and the flow is now being monitored through the WAF National Control Centre. So they have to look at the amount of water when you have pipes that are connecting, how much is open to go to one distribution line and another one that goes to another distribution line, and at the same time make sure that there are some water going into this tank that sits in Lomanikoro Village. There is another similar tank I think in another village down in Noco so these are tanks of water that you build up and when there is lack of supply, they can feed off into those particular tanks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now water supply has been restored to Lomanikoro, Nasigatoka, the Vutia area, Drekena Village, Nabua Village, Nadoi Village and Nasilai. As a way forward, WAF will also continue to work on identifying leaks in Lomanikoro Village Reticulation System. There will be ongoing verification of the distribution network and also reconfiguration of the system to get the best out of the Lomanikoro Head Tank, reconfigure it - how much more water goes into the different pipes and lines that are in that area. They will also continue to work the lines within the Delta to identify and address any additional leaks within the Delta area. This is something that the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) opts to work with, especially with the *Turaga Ni Koro* and the Water Committees in each of the villages. So if they do find leaks, Water Authority of Fiji can be informed quickly so that they can try to address that.

Also the cleaning of domestic customer meters, there has been a lot work there, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A friend, a school mate of mine at the University of the South Pacific (USP) sent the message thanking me but I think I am not actually to be thanked. The people to thank are the:

- (1) Water Authority of Fiji's Management Team and Staff (I actually visited the Rewa Delta three times during this operation and I just like to specifically mention the Team members that worked very hard on this particular operation)
- (2) Board of the Water Authority of Fiji
- (3) New Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
- (4) Mr. Lee Chang, the Manager for Infrastructure & Service Delivery
- (5) Mr. Patrick Pagkale, Central & Eastern
- (6) Mr. Semisi Nakaulevu, Assistant Manager
- (7) Mr. Jimilai Tubua, Project Manager, Team Leader for Water Operations
- (8) Three Supervisors: Ratu Filimoni Seniloli, Mosese Maivunidawa, Netani Kubunavanua
- (9) Technical Officer, Mr. Jo Kuinisivo

Seeing the amount of work that they had to do in difficult conditions, I appreciate the work that is done by the Water Authority of Fiji.

There have been a lot disparaging comments about Water Authority of Fiji but seeing how they have worked, I think I am very thankful that they have been able to restore water to the Rewa Delta. There are still other challenges that are before us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I am grateful that the water can be extended down to the Rewa Delta. *Vinaka Vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the Honourable Minister for restoring the water into the Rewa Delta and he has been as he said. A few times in the past three weeks, I even got

pictures being sent to me of the shower in Vutia which they have not been able to use. So I thank him and the Water Authority of Fiji, and that he should appreciate also working through the silt and the swamp because that is our environment. It is a beautiful environment, as you know, Honourable Speaker, *'Me da gole ga yani e na vei dabibi'*. *Vei kemuni na Turaga* Prime Minister, I would like to thank you and we look forward, Honourable Minister, to the two reservoirs: the one in Lomanikoro and the one in Navaka that were being filled.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member.

Cash for Cultivation Programme
(Question No. 79/2021)

HON. A.T. NAGATA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the progress of the 'Cash for Cultivation' Programme announced recently?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Honourable Member for asking that question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2019, the Ministry of Agriculture released our strategic plan with five strategic objectives and food and nutritional security is one of the key strategic objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would have noted that following COVID-19, food and nutritional security became very important, very critical for all countries because for every country, when borders were closed, we were looking to ensure that the Governments were able to secure their households with respect to food and nutrition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, noting this, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Antonio Guterres, has declared that this year, they will hold a Food Systems Summit as part of the Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030.

The Summit will launch bold new actions to deliver progress on all 17 SDGs, each of which relies, to some degree, on healthier and more sustainable and equitable food systems. The Summit will focus on the fact that we all must work together and transform the way the world produces, consumes and thinks about food. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Summit is about re-looking at our production and consumption systems, if we are to secure our households in all parts of the country and the world with regard to food and nutrition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is meant to be a people's Summit and a solution Summit that will require everyone to take action and transform the world's food system. The primary objective or aim of the Summit is guided by five action tracks, which are as follows, to:

- (1) generate significant action and measurable progress towards the 2030 Agenda versus sustainable development;
- (2) raise awareness and alleviate public discussion about how reforming our food systems can help us all achieve the SDGs by implementing reforms that are good for people and the planet;
- (3) develop principles to guide governments and other stakeholders look into leverage the food systems and support their SDGs; and lastly

- (4) create a system of follow-up and review to ensure that the Summit's outcomes continue to drive new actions and progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad to inform this House that Fiji is actively involved in the national dialogue in the lead-up to the regional Food Summit planned for June 2021. So, there will be a National Food Summit in June, Sir, followed by the Global Food Summit which is planned for September this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also quite pleased and happy to announce that our Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Agriculture, Mr. Dass, will be the national convenor as appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for dialogues. Through this mechanism, we will be engaging a broad range of stakeholders across Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by convening our own independent national dialogue, we will be able to have a seat at the table and contribute directly to the Summit's ambitious vision, mission and objective. Whilst we are working purposely on the ground to achieve our objectives, we are actively participating in the regional and global levels to ensure the mission and our approach Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we move towards the June's national Summit, we have, apart from the existing programmes for Food and Nutritional Security launched this Cash for Cultivation Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In the first round, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are looking at about 2,500 participants in this Cash for Cultivation Programme. In the Cash for Cultivation Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, each farmer will get \$200 if they cultivate the minimum of one acre of land for agricultural crops. As of now, we have registered and approved 1,150 farmers to spread across the four Divisions to get these \$200 per farmer for cultivation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have pretty good spread and these farmers will be receiving this cash:

- (1) Northern Division: Macuata - 200 farmers; Cakaudrove - 76 farmers; Taveuni - 24 farmers and Bua - 50 farmers.
- (2) Western Division: Nadroga & Navosa - 80 farmers; Ba - 75 farmers; Tavua - 50 farmers; Nadi - 40 farmers; Lautoka - 40 farmers; and Ra - 150 farmers.
- (3) Central Division: Tailevu - 75 farmers; Naitasiri - 75 farmers; Serua - 30 farmers; Namosi - 20 farmers; and Rewa - 50 farmers.
- (4) Eastern Division: Lau - 20 farmers; Lomaiviti - 50farmers; and Kadavu - 80 farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the 250,000, we are looking at 2,500 farmers; 1,150 have been approved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are expecting some more money, we are looking at another \$200,000 coming from another development partner, and quite likely, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we might be getting another half a million dollars. So, it means the more money we get for this Cash for Cultivation Programme, more farmers will benefit. We are putting caps in areas so that all farmers from different areas participate in this Programme.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are four objectives we have discussed for the Cultivation Programme:

- (1) Households are motivated to grow their own food.
- (2) Their livelihood will be supported because they will have cash in their hand.
- (3) Rural economy will benefit because they will be spending in the nearby shops and the suppliers.
- (4) Agriculture will expand for national interest.

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

HON. N. NAWAIKULA.- Can the Honourable Minister clarify to the House who are the people or which institution will be funding this?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the quarter million that we have received is through New Zealand Government through ADRA. We have got \$200,000 from another development partner and we are in talks with another development partner from one of the countries but at the moment it has not been confirmed so I do not want to reveal the name, but they are saying that they want to come on board because they have seen how these four objectives are being served.

It is an output-oriented programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, given that you deliver this output and you will be given that particular cash. We are in a totally win-win situation, households have food security, livelihood is improved, rural economy benefits and we are pushing and expanding national agriculture. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, Oral Questions is over and we have one Written Question for today, and I call on the Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau to ask Written Question 80/2020.

Written Question

Work Permits
(Question No. 80/2021)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs update Parliament on the following, the:

- (a) current number of individuals on work permits;
- (b) industries in which these permits are being issued; and
- (c) countries from which these work permit holders are citizens?

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA (Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will table my response at a later sitting day as permitted under Standing Order 45(3). Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, question time is now over. Before we adjourn, there has been a request for a point of clarification to be made. The request has been asked by the Honourable Viliame Gavoka. You have the floor, Sir.

POINT OF CLARIFICATION

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This morning I was berated by the Honourable Acting Attorney-General and the Honourable Prime Minister for providing wrong figures on the election results for 2006.

I have here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Election Guide.org which gives us the rundown of all the election results in Fiji since 1999, and it says that in 2006, 87.87 percent turned out to vote. You can see that on the graph here, where 2006 is higher in terms of voter turnout compared to 2014 and 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps, they have another website. I think the Honourable Prime Minister said 64 percent and the Acting Attorney-General said 66 percent - maybe you have something else that you got your figures from, but people of Fiji heard this today and I was given hell by my wife when I went home for lunch, but this is the figure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I shared today and in my view, it is absolutely correct. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members an explanation is an explanation and you do not have to hand anything over.

(Honourable Members interject)

It is a clarification, it is done and that is it. Honourable Members, we will now adjourn until tomorrow morning. I apologise for working a bit hard today, but I have an appointment between 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. - the virtual conference with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which I have to fulfil so we adjourn until tomorrow morning.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.10 p.m.