

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 16TH AUGUST, 2021

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 16TH AUGUST, 2021

The Parliament met at 9.53 a.m. pursuant to notice.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

Hon. Ratu Tevita Navurelevu
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand
Hon. Professor Biman C. Prasad
Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua
Hon. Adi Litia Qionibaravi
Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro
Hon. Salote Vuibureta Radrodro
Hon. Simione Rokomalo Rasova
Hon. Jese Saukuru
Hon. Rohit Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya
Hon. Lt. Col. Pio Tikoduadua
Hon. Ro Filipe Tuisawau
Hon. Peceli Waqairatu Vosanibola
Hon. Tanya Waqanika

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 30th July, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR

Welcome

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

Pending Bills for Debate

Honourable Members, please be advised that there are four Bills pending with the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights and these Bills are still at the consideration stage. These are:

- (1) Trademarks Bill 2020;
- (2) Patents Bill 2020;
- (3) Designs Bill 2020; and
- (4) Heritage Bill 2021.

Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament, the Standing Committee was to report back on the four Bills in the April and May Sittings respectively. However, due to the situation surrounding the pandemic, this has not been possible. Therefore, Honourable Members,

with the concurrence of the Business Committee, I now seek your indulgence to allow the Standing Committee to table its report at a later sitting.

SPEAKER'S RULING

Seat Deemed Vacant - Honourable Mosese Bulitavu

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I will now address Parliament on the issue of Honourable Mosese Bulitavu's seat in Parliament.

Honourable Members, on 6th August, 2021, I received a letter from the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) purporting to notify me under Section 63(3) of the Constitution, that the seat of Honourable Bulitavu as a Member of Parliament, is deemed to be vacant since the Honourable Bulitavu allegedly failed to follow the directives of SODELPA in voting against the 2021-2022 Budget and the iTaukei Land Trust (Budget Amendment) Bill 2021 (Bill No. 17), that were tabled in the July 2021 Sitting of Parliament.

On 7th August, 2021 and 10th August, 2021, I also received a letter from Honourable Bulitavu stating that he questioned the validity of the directives that were issued by SODELPA.

Honourable Members, Section 63(1)(h) of the Constitution provides that the seat of a Member of Parliament becomes vacant if the Member –

“... votes or abstains from voting in Parliament contrary to any direction issued by the political party for which he or she was a candidate at the time he or she was elected to Parliament, without obtaining the prior permission of the political party.”

Honourable Members, Standing Order 142 specifically provides that a notice given to the Speaker for the purposes of Section 63(2), 63(3), or 63(4) of the Constitution must not be treated as having been received by the Speaker until the Speaker has confirmed, to his or her satisfaction, that the contents of the notice is accurate.

On 26th March, 2020, I decided, in accordance with Standing Order 20, that all voting will now be done by acclamation. This position on voting was reaffirmed by the Business Committee of Parliament at their meeting on 24th May, 2021. Consequently, on 25th May, 2021, I conveyed the decision of the Business Committee to Parliament that voting on questions in Parliament will be done by acclamation.

On 22nd July, 2021, the SODELPA Whip wrote to me and requested a vote by division for matters to be decided by Parliament in the July 2021 Sitting. On 27th July, 2021, I responded to her letter and upheld the decision of the Business Committee and stated that there will be no changes to the process of votes by acclamation in Parliament.

Therefore, given that I am unable to determine how Honourable Bulitavu voted on the 2021-2022 Budget and Bill No. 17, his seat as a Member of Parliament cannot be deemed vacant and he remains a Member of Parliament. Therefore, from the respective letters sent to my Office by SODELPA and Honourable Bulitavu, there appears to be an internal dispute as to whether the directions issued by SODELPA were valid.

Honourable Members, therefore, in accordance with Standing Order 142 of the Parliamentary Standing Order, given that I am not satisfied that the contents of SODELPA's 6th August, 2021 letter

is accurate, the letter is treated as not having been received by my Office.

However, if SODELPA believes that Honourable Bulitavu has acted contrary to Section 63(1)(h) of the Constitution and, therefore, was indeed a directive which he did not follow by voting or acting contrary to the directions, then SODELPA is at liberty to itself, file proceedings against Honourable Bulitavu in the Court of Disputed Returns, for the Court to adjudicate on whether Honourable Bulitavu's seat in Parliament is vacant.

I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to table his Report.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report - Performance Audit on the Access for Persons With Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present the Public Accounts Standing Committee Report on the review of Performance Audit on the Access for Persons with Disabilities to Public Offices and Public Transport (Parliamentary Paper No. 268 of 2020).

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was signed by Fiji on 2nd June, 2010, and ratified in 2017. Mr. Speaker, furthermore, the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji clearly outlines the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and establishes the right to equality and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of an individual act or supposed personal characteristics or circumstances, including disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, provisions in the Constitution even stipulate, under Section 26(6) that the proprietor of a place or service to shops, hotels, lodging-house, public restaurants, place of public entertainments, clubs, education institutions, public transport services, taxis and public places, must facilitate reasonable access for persons with disabilities to the extent that is prescribed by law.

Mr. Speaker, it is pleasing to note that access for disability in Fiji have made considerable progress towards the realisation of issues facing persons with disabilities as a human rights issue rather than a welfare issue. Fiji is becoming signatory to international and regional agreements relating to disability development and has declared its commitment to take ownership and be responsible for aligning national legislations and policies for the successful achievement of agreed targets and goals. Sir, these are in line with Government's commitment articulated in the National Development Plan (NDP) on "Transforming Fiji" and the Government's pledge of "Leaving No One Behind".

Mr. Speaker, the performance audit that was conducted was based on the release made by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics on the 2017 Population and Housing Census dated 5th January, 2018, which recorded a total enumerated population of 884,887. Out of this number, 829,907 were reported as being at the age of three years and above of which a total of 113,595 persons were reported to have had, at least, one functioning challenge. The number equates to a rate of 13.7 percent which is close to the international benchmark of 15 percent. The percentage was highest in Rotuma with 21.1 percent, followed by Lau Province at 18.2 percent, with the Province of Nadroga/Navosa recording the lowest rate of 10.4 percent.

The audit that was conducted focused on whether strategies, action plans and processes for the provision of access for persons with disabilities are effectively and efficiently administered by the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (FNCDP) and relevant stakeholders, in order to

ensure ease of accessibility to public offices and public transport. Stakeholders include the:

- Department of Transport;
- Land Transport Authority (LTA);
- Fiji Roads Authority (FRA);
- Department of Civil Aviation;
- Department of Buildings of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services;
- Municipal Councils;
- Department of Town and Country Planning;
- Construction Implementation Unit of the Ministry of Economy; and
- Stakeholders such as the NGOs, CSOs and the DPOs.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee scrutinised the five main key focused areas of the audit and these include:

- (1) Legislation and Policy Framework;
- (2) Stakeholders Arrangements and Engagements;
- (3) Policy Implementation on Access for Disabilities;
- (4) Disabled Accessibility to Public Transport; and
- (5) Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting.

The Committee noted that the audit findings require serious consideration by the NCPD with relevant stakeholders to expedite the implementation and facilitation of access for persons with disabilities in public offices and public transport respectively. In this regard, the Committee recommended that:

- (1) The National Council for Persons with Disabilities ('NCPD') honours its international and regional commitments through national policies and action plans that are recognized and acknowledged by its stakeholders, adequately resourced, implemented in a timely manner and using reliable, comparable and current and relevant disability data to support its policies.
- (2) The NCPD carry out periodic reviews of such commitments for the purpose of determining its continued relevance to local, regional, and international realities on disability issues.
- (3) The NCPD work more closely with LTA and DoT to have a better working knowledge and understanding of the 2015 legislative amendments to the LTA Regulations and PSV issues on access for persons with disabilities.
- (4) The NCPD ensures that the Housing Transport & Environment Advisory Committee (HTEADCOM) have more regular meetings to expedite the timely execution and monitoring of the Implementation Plan to minimize delays to disabled access inclusion in legislation and policies.
- (5) The NCPD considers some of the following Sustainable Development Goals ('SDGs') –
 - (i) SDG 1 – End Poverty;
 - (ii) SDG 4 – Quality Education;
 - (iii) SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth;
 - (iv) SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities;
 - (v) SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities; and

(vi) SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals.

With the view to improving access and mobility which are two important factors in reducing poverty, and can facilitate the participation of people with disabilities in economic, social and political processes:

- (6) The NCPD be adequately resourced for a more conducive environment to co-ordinate and consult with stakeholders; and
- (7) The NCPD considers the schedule of meetings of the ADCOMS to minimize delays and to ensure timely implementation of its policies.

Overall, the Committee commended the work done so far in terms of awareness and the commitment made by the Fiji National Council for Persons with Disabilities with relevant stakeholders, in coordinating the removal of barriers to accessibility for people and persons with disabilities in Public Offices and Public Transport.

Mr. Speaker, with those words, I wish to extend my appreciation to all Honourable Members of the Committee who participated successfully in the compilation of this bipartisan report namely: Honourable Joseph Nand (Deputy Chairperson); Honourable Virendra Lal; Honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa and Honourable Aseri Radrodro.

With those words, I now commend the Report to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, 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 later sitting.

HON. J. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, I beg to 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 Justice, Law and Human Rights to table his Report.

Review Report - Patents Bill 2020

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, the Government of the day has put in remarkable efforts to undertake reforms and the review of its legislative framework to create an inclusive business environment both, in the public and private sector. Through this undertaking, a review was carried out on the Intellectual Property Regulatory Framework, including the current Act that governs patents in Fiji. And from this, it was identified that the current Intellectual Property Regulatory Framework needs substantial changes.

Mr. Speaker, the Patents Bill 2020 is the realisation of this reform work carried out by the Fijian Government and this Bill was referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights, by the Parliament following the first reading by Honourable Attorney-General, for it to be scrutinised and reported on.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill aims to ensure that a patent is granted for an invention only in appropriate circumstances by establishing appropriate criteria for the granting of a patent and providing for procedures that allow the validity of a patent to be tested. At the outset, the Committee made preliminary deliberations on the clauses of the Bill and noted that the key objectives of the Bill included providing an efficient and effective patent system, ensuring that a patent is granted for an invention only in appropriate circumstances and moreover, by providing greater certainty for patent owners and the users of patented inventions that patent will be valid after they are granted.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill seeks to modernise the laws of Fiji relating to patents and repeal the current Act, which is the Patents Act 1879. Mr. Speaker, the Committee was also committed to upholding public trust in Parliament, by ensuring that there is public participation and that all such participant is given due consideration. The Committee was mindful of the provisions in Standing Order 111(1)(a) and ensured that its meetings were open to public and the media, except during such deliberations and discussions to develop and finalise the Committee's observations and this Report.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee had extensive discussions on the provisions of the Bill and resolved that given the time provided to the Committee to review the Bill; that it be prudent to firstly hear the views of the public on this very important piece of proposed legislation. The public consultation would then allow the Committee to gauge the public's perspective on the Bill before deliberating further, whilst also bearing in mind the requirement as set down by Parliament in referring the Bill to the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, there were certain key issues raised during the submission by the general public, one of which was that there were certain provisions of the Bill that raised questions of consistency and alignment when comparing the Bill to the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (also commonly known as TRIPS). It was highlighted that the Bill was designed to contribute to the development of the economy.

I would like to provide more details on these issues I have mentioned and I will begin by highlighting the main clauses of the Bill that drew criticism from the submitters.

Firstly, the submitter commented on Clause 9 specifically with regards to the provision that the "... computer program is not an invention for the purposes of this Act." The submitters queried how this clause was consistent with Clause 27.1 of the TRIPS Agreements, which requires that the patents "shall be available for any inventions, whether products or processes, in all fields of technology, provided that they are new, involve an inventive step and are capable of industrial application".

Mr. Speaker, comments were also provided on Clause 14 in relation to the provision that provides that the "methods of doing business" are not patentable inventions. The submitter queried how this clause is consistent with Clause 27.1 of the TRIPS Agreement, which requires that patents "shall be available for any inventions, whether products or processes, in all fields of technology, provided that they are new, involve an inventive step and are capable of industrial application".

There was also a suggestion put forward on Clause 16, regarding the provision that states that the patentee has the exclusive rights, during the term of the patent, "to exploit the invention and to authorise another person to exploit the invention." The submitter recommended revising the Clause

to align with the text of Clause 28 of the TRIPS Agreement, which provides that a patent gives the patentee the right “to prevent third parties not having the owner’s consent from the acts of making, using, offering for sale, selling, or importing for these purposes that product or process”.

Furthermore, there was a comment on Clause 91 relating to suggestions for ensuring against double patenting by stating that the subject matter sought to be patented must be sufficiently different from what has been used or described before, that it may be said to be non-obvious to a person having ordinary skill in the area of technology related to the invention.

Also, submitters commented on clauses 152 to 171 and queried how the proposed laws intended to comply with the procedural requirements of clause 31 of the TRIPS Agreement, including, but not limited to Clauses 31(h) to (j) of the TRIPS Agreement. The submitters drew attention to Clause 154 regarding the provision that states that a court may grant compulsory license for export of pharmaceutical products to certain countries if the pharmaceutical product is “needed to address a serious public health problem”. It was suggested that the clause be revised to align with the text of Clause 31 of the TRIPS Agreement and clause 1(b) of the Annex to the TRIPS Agreement, including providing a definition of public health problem as a “national emergency or other circumstances of extreme urgency.”

Mr. Speaker, apart from the consultation, the Committee was also mindful of the Bill’s impact on Fiji’s efforts in achieving the targets set out in the national development plan, which in turn contributes to Fiji’s overall commitment and obligation towards the global agenda, which are the sustainable development goals.

Mr. Speaker, as a starting point, the objective of the Bill aims to put in place a modern regulatory framework for patent, which provides an efficient and effective patent system. This objective relates to the development plan and goal set out by the Fijian Government in reviewing and modernising the business sector regulatory framework, which aims to develop the economy. The Bill will bring about the necessary regulatory framework, which is envisioned to boost business activities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee was also mindful of the requirements of the Standing Orders of Parliament regarding the promotion of gender equality principles, which is also a key goal of the sustainable development goals. The Committee ensured that all matters are considered with regard to the impact and benefit on both men and women. It was evident from the deliberations on the Clauses of the Bill that it was designed to impact all Fijians and the people living in Fiji, irrespective of gender.

Mr. Speaker, coming to the final stage of the review, the Committee placed reasonable emphasis on all the contentious issues highlighted from the submissions. The Committee weighed all options concerning the issues that had been identified and had extensive discussions on these. The Committee, in consultation with the Office of the Solicitor-General, also sought legal clarification on the implication of these issues, so as to ensure that all these relevant issues were appropriately addressed and that the objectives of the Bill were preserved. After extensive deliberation, the Committee came to a consensus on its stance on the key issues that had been identified from the review.

In regard to the issue relating to Clause 9, the Committee identified that the interpretation of the provision has been the subject of reports of the World Trade Organisation Dispute Settlement Body and there are certain points to take note of when dealing with exclusion from patentability and complying with the TRIPS Agreement.

Firstly, it is inappropriate to interpret a treaty literally as a statute. Interpretation of an article of the TRIPS Agreement must take into account the relevant context, which includes Article 10 - the only direct reference to computer programme in the TRIPS Agreement. Article 10 provides that computer programme must be protected as copyright literary works. This suggests that if the TRIPS Agreement had intended that, in addition to the copyright protection, patent must be available for computer programme, the TRIPS Agreements would have expressly said so.

Secondly, the TRIPS Agreement allows exclusions from, and exceptions to, patent protection. The Convention on the Grant of the European Patents (EPC) includes a computer software exclusion, which was in force when the TRIPS Agreement was negotiated. The European Union was not required to revise its exception, and some have argued that it cannot therefore be said that the TRIPS Agreement confirmed computer software had to be patentable and could not be subject to an appropriate exclusion.

Thirdly, Fiji's exclusion, which is the same as New Zealand's exclusion, is from the concept of invention. Article 27 does not require that everything is an invention. The threshold of invention has to be met before the rest of the Article 27 can come into play. Fiji has the potential to benefit from the New Zealand's and the European Union's litigation in interpreting the exclusion.

Additionally, in regards to Clause 14, the Committee noted that there was no formal definition of business methods, but with such terminology, we currently referred to a particular way of doing business. On the patentability of business methods, two main approaches can be adopted. According to one approach, these methods do not present the technical character needed in order to qualify as an invention. Therefore, they should be excluded from patent protection. The majority of the jurisdictions around the world include such an exception into their patent law.

On the other hand, another approach acknowledges their patentability if certain criteria are met. For example in Australia, a patent may be granted for a business method where the method directly involves a physical form or device to bring about a useful product. The application of technology for conducting a business method must be directly involved in a substantial way, not an incidental way. In other words, technology used to implement a business method should be improved in some technical way. As another example, in the United States of America, where patent on business methods may be granted under certain circumstances, the approach of the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) is to check on a case-by-case basis if a business method presents patentability requirements which includes inventiveness, novelty and industrial application.

In respect of the issues on Clause 16, the Committee noted that Clause 16(1) of the Patents Bill 2020 gives the patentee the exclusive rights, during the term of the patent, to exploit the invention and to authorise another person to exploit the invention. Clause 16(1) of the Patents Bill is not inconsistent with Article 28 of the TRIPS Agreement. Therefore, the wording in Clause 16(1) of the Patents Bill should remain as it is.

Furthermore, regarding the issue on Clause 91, the Committee noted that patents of addition are a form of protection that has been introduced in many jurisdictions, mainly Common Law countries, following the model of the ancient version of the United Kingdom (UK) Patents Act. This type of patent gives the opportunity to the patent applicant or patent owner to ask for protection or further improvement(s) on the invention within the scope of the patent application filed/patent granted for their first invention.

Nowadays, Mr. Speaker, even if the current patent legislation of the United Kingdom does not contemplate anymore patents of addition, the latter are still granted in many Common Law countries, for example, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The inventive process is, far from

start to finish, in one single moment. On the contrary, it is an ongoing process which often continues after the application for a patent. For that reason, it could happen that the inventors manage to improve their own inventions which are already the subject of a filed patent application or granted patent.

Patents of addition aim at targeting these incremental inventions and provide them with a form of protection. Therefore, we can say that the main requirement in order to apply for a patent of addition is that the invention has to consist of an improvement of a previous invention for which patent protection was already requested or granted. The patent of addition depends on the main patent and this is reflected into three main aspects of patents of addition protection which include the:

- (1) person entitled to apply for a patent of addition;
- (2) period of protection; and
- (3) prescribed fee.

Regarding the patentability requirements of patents of addition, the main approach is that the object of the invention should be an increment or modification of the main invention for which patent protection has already been requested or granted. Inventive step is often explicitly not required. This is the approach used in the Patents Bill, and for instance in New Zealand where section 111 of the New Zealand Patents Act 2013 mentions that the lack of inventive step could not be a ground to refuse a patent of addition. If the subject of a patent of addition meets all patentability requirements, it could be also the object of the new, different, patent application.

Moreover, in respect of the issue on Clauses 152 to 171, the Committee notes that at the Doha Declaration in November 2001, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) reaffirmed that a member could grant compulsory licences to a manufacturer, and that each member country of the WTO had the right to determine what constitutes a national emergency or other circumstance of extreme urgency. A serious public health problem constitutes a national emergency or circumstance of extreme urgency.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to conclude by highlighting that after adhering to due process and the requirements of the Standing Order of Parliament, the Committee in its deliberation and review noted that there was great support for the Bill.

Indeed, the review also highlighted a few issues on the Bill, and these were considered extensively by the Committee through the internal deliberations and necessary consultations with the legal team from the Office of the Solicitor-General. The Committee, therefore believes that all issues identified have been adequately addressed and thus recommends that the Bill is sufficient as it is and that no substantive amendment be made. The only amendment made to the Bill are those grammatical in nature and these are captured in the magenta colour text in the copy of the Bill tabled with the Committee's Report today.

The Committee is also of the view that this piece of legislation needs to be reviewed periodically and the business environment relating to patents continuously changes with time and circumstances. An update business environment is vital for the economy of the nation, therefore the legal framework governing such business environment should be on par at all times to ensure economic development in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, at this juncture, I would like to acknowledge the UNDP Fiji Parliament Support Project, for its financial support, which enabled the Committee to conduct extensive awareness on its public consultations. The awareness included advertisements in the daily newspapers.

Also, I would like to give my sincerest appreciation to your Office, Mr. Speaker for recognising the vital aspect of public participation in the legislative making process, and for supporting and encouraging the Committee to conduct extensive public consultation and meeting at very odd hours, including Sundays and public holidays. Furthermore, the Committee would like to acknowledge the Parliament IT Team for its support, which enabled the Committee to have virtual meetings and continue to carry out its constitutionally mandated functions, despite the impacts of COVID-19.

Finally, I would like to thank the Honourable Members of my Committee: Honourable Rohit Sharma (Deputy Chairperson); Honourable Ratu Suliano Matanitobua; Honourable Dr. Salik Govind and Honourable Mosese Bilitavu for their input. The Committee acknowledges the public, key stakeholders and entities that provided their views on the Bill and for taking an interest in the proceedings of the Committee. I also would like to thank my Secretariat Team for compiling this particular report.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee, through this bipartisan report and consensus commends the Patents Bill 2020 (Bill No. 46 of 2020) to Parliament.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, pursuant to the resolutions of Parliament on 11th December, 2020 and earlier today, the Standing Committee has now tabled its report accordingly, and the Bill is now ready for debate and be voted by Parliament at a later sitting day.

Thank you, Honourable Members. On that note we will now suspend proceedings for a break. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.36 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.07 a.m.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications; and
- (2) Minister for Health and Medical Services.

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

Honourable Members, I now call on the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications to deliver his Statement.

Expanding Connectivity to Fiji's Unconnected Regions

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to update Parliament on Government's efforts in providing connectivity to the unconnected regions in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it has been said that digital connectivity is the greatest dis-equaliser but our philosophy has also been that if we do not have connectivity for everyone, it would be the greatest dis-equaliser.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated previously in Parliament, the telecommunications sector prior to 2007, was an exclusive sector in the sense that only three companies had exclusive licences over long-term period and were monopolies in their line of business. Vodafone provided mobile phone services, Telecom Fiji Limited (TFL) provided landline services and Fiji International Telecommunications Pte. Limited (FINTEL) provided international gateway services. This meant that no telecommunications company or no other telecommunications company could enter the Fijian market and there was no competition. Pricing seemed to be fixed. This ultimately stifled innovation and meant less choice for Fijians. It meant exorbitant costs for Fijians and we, of course, had to change that and which we did.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address that issue, we did a comprehensive reform of the telecommunications sector through the World Bank and introduced the Telecommunications Act 2008 and executed the Radisson Accord after three days of negotiations in 2008. I remember the Honourable Prime Minister sending us there saying that we should not come back without a resolution. That decision was made at roundabout 3.00 in the morning.

Just to put it into perspective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the deregulation, a peak period cost on a mobile phone was 99 cents per minute. Today, the maximum you pay is 20 cents a minute. The Radisson Accord is a Deed of Settlement with Vodafone, FINTEL and TFL to remove exclusivity in exchange for open licences in the provision of telecommunications services. This, of course, deregulated the telecommunications sector and also allowed new telecommunications companies to enter the market, such as Digicel Fiji Ltd.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also introduced a fair and transparent process of allocating spectrum through a tender bidding process which allows an open and fair, competitive playing field for all the

operators who obtained spectrum. The spectrum, of course, is limited real estate and is the means through which wireless signals from our mobile phones travel over.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the implementation of the Suva–Savusavu cable system, the Fijian Competition & Consumer Commission (FCCC) had issued an interim authorisation on 7th June, 2019, for FINTEL cable landing station charges and ICT Data Levy Fee where the telecommunications sector had to pay or were paying \$4,000 per gigabyte, VEP per month based on lit capacity for all the facilities interconnect service.

On 16th September, 2019, FCCC issued a final authorisation for prices for national interconnection and access to international submarine cables using Fijian cable landing stations whereby the facilities interconnect service was replaced with a cross-connection service. Under this authorisation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the telecommunications operators paid \$640 per service per month. This fee was comparatively much lower to what the telecommunications sector operators paid previously.

This led to a massive reduction in data prices and the savings achieved could be directed to increasing innovation and providing competitive pricing and services to the customers. This is evident in the data plans advertised by the various operators. Data prices have plummeted from approximately FJ\$2 or US\$0.94 to approximately FJ\$1 or US\$0.47 for 10 GB of data – the lowest in the region, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the culmination of these reforms have resulted in 95 percent of all Fijians which is 817,425 Fijians, who now have access to mobile internet connectivity across 3G, 4G and 4G Plus networks. This is significantly higher than the 70 percent mobile internet coverage data reported in other Pacific Island nations. With an unparalleled programme of administrative reforms across government, deregulation of the telecommunications sector, the establishment of a modern and inclusive Fijian Constitution, the establishment of the National Internet Exchange Point in 2017, substantial and consistent public investment in infrastructure such as connecting Viti Levu and Vanua Levu in July 2018 to the Southern Cross Fibre Cable Network, tax and socio-economic development reforms and a consolidated effort to position Fiji as a communications hub of the Pacific have contributed to bridging the digital divide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, Vodafone, had recently stated that the digital wallet or the M-PAiSA as we know it, Quick Response (QR) Pay had recorded a 2,000 percent growth in the last 12 months, compared to a year ago. Sir, M-PAiSA digital platform now processes over \$100 million in transactions every month. In other words, \$1.2 billion every year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the upsurge in the adoption of digital technology and the push towards interactions and economic activity into online spaces has seen 300 percent surge post-COVID and we expect that trend to continue. From the 95 percent of Fijians that have mobile and internet connectivity, the remaining 5 percent of Fijians who are not connected and are located in isolated locations that are widely scattered on the fringes of the current connectivity coverage map or what we call “brown spots” and, of course, there are black spots too.

The connecting the unconnected programme which utilises universal service obligations is mapping out these areas and creating a plan to progressively expand connectivity. The collaborative approach that we are focussed on with the mobile operators is infrastructure sharing of backhaul services, an onsite towers which is commercially sustainable for operators and ensures that Fijians and uncovered regions have access to mobile internet and voice connectivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned last year for the Telecommunications (Amendment) (No. 2)

Bill 2020, the Ministry and the Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF) have been working very closely with relevant stakeholders through a series of consultations to progress work on expanding affordable connectivity to the unconnected regions and the promotion of sustainable business models. Relevant stakeholders have included; Vodafone Fiji Limited, Digicel Fiji Limited, TFL, FINTEL, Fiji Television, Mai Television, Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), Communications Fiji Limited and Amalgamated Telecom Holdings.

One challenge identified from the consultations was whether the multiple service operators would compete with each other to construct a service tower at the most desirable elevated site in a particular area. For those who are unsuccessful in obtaining a best site, this meant building a tower on the hillside which had a smaller coverage footprint or abandoning the site which meant fewer services being available to the residents on that particular site or around that site. Infrastructure sharing or co-location arrangements addresses this issue and in that, service operators share the same service tower but install separate antennas, cabinets and backhaul.

Another challenge that was identified was providing internet and voice connectivity services in rural and remote areas where deploying infrastructure is costly and the potential return on the investment is low, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is one of the key issues. In our assessment, in some of these villages and settlements, there are only two or three people who live there. Other villages or settlements have only 200 people, for example, others may have only 20 people.

For those remote locations, public sector intervention is required as none of these mobile phone companies will go there. The reason for this is because, to put up one tower will cost the mobile phone company at least half a million dollars depending on the technical and operational requirements. Now, there are going to be only 20 people in a village and they spend \$10 a month, that is \$200 a month which they will spend and the tower will cost half a million dollars. The mobile phone operators are not going to get a rate of return on the investment. In fact, at \$2,400 a year, it will take 200 years to get back the half a million dollars.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is where the Universal Service Fund will come in and I will elaborate on that shortly. With the Fund, we intend to build what we call “tower sharing arrangements” - put up one tower and everyone shares it and places their equipment on it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure sharing co-location arrangements have many benefits including:

- (1) The efficient, non-duplication of placement of infrastructure.
- (2) Reduction of overall cost of all underground work.
- (3) Reduction of construction, waste with one universal service tower being built for a number of service providers as opposed to separate towers being built.
- (4) Savings achieved can be redirected by licensees to improve network service, deploy more product offerings and of course, bring down the cost to the ordinary consumer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Universal Service Fund is trust fund established under section 53 of the Telecommunications Act 2008 and is one of the key financing mechanisms to connect the declared universal service area where there is neither the density nor the capital for telecom operators to justify private sector infrastructure investments. Under the law, each telecom operator pays a levy of 0.5 percent of the annual gross revenue towards the Universal Service Fund which is paid to TAF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Government’s ongoing effort to connect the remaining 43,022 Fijians or 5 percent of the unconnected Fijians, we have identified 317 sites nationwide as either unconnected or poorly connected. These proposed sites cover 4.02 percent of the 5 percent of the unconnected

Fijians. In other words, 34,590 Fijians out of the 43,022 unconnected Fijians. The coverage balance which is 8,432 unconnected Fijians make up the remaining 0.98 percent of the unconnected population.

The sites whereby these unconnected Fijians are in, is yet to be identified. This will be the final phase of connecting the unconnected programme. There will be an ongoing monitoring to access where the 8,432 unconnected Fijians move to an area that has internet and voice connectivity, which will then decrease the coverage balance. In any event, once the 317 sites have been completed, a comprehensive assessment will be undertaken to establish the number of unconnected Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the current framework, the Ministry of Communications has formed a technical working group with key stakeholders, such as TAFE, Vodafone, Digicel, TFL, NDMO and EFL. The Technical Working Group mandated is to design the innovative, cost effective and sustainable solutions in determining the operational modality unique from each site. The Working Group has had several meetings to work on the 317 identified sites. There is a project position with the Ministry of Communications to coordinate the work of the Technical Working Group and ensure all outlined activities are conducted in a timely manner. The Technical Working Group is currently collating information, such as geographical coordinates of the sites, which would outline the exact localities, the availability of electricity and other amenities, such as road access, school, health centre, post office, government station and police post presence. These factors will assist in identifying the appropriate methodology for each of the 317 proposed sites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you will imagine, this is an intensive exercise and once the Technical Working Group has completed the above process of the 317 sites, a report would be submitted to us outlining which of the proposed sites will be suitable for constructing a universal service tower, pursuant to the legal framework and which of the proposed sites would be suitable for the deployment of the appropriate alternative technology. Once declared as universal service area, the Universal Service Fund will then be utilised for the installation of networks, provisional services and operating costs in the universal service area as provided under the law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 317 sites cover the 34,590 Fijians in the remote, maritime and low-lying areas and will progressively empower them to access the life enhancing e-services, such as registering the birth of the newborn online or starting an online business. This also means that 34,590 Fijians will progressively have timely access to critical information and alerts regarding health and other emergencies, such as natural disasters. These Fijians would be able to communicate through video conference platform with their families and friends abroad. This also means that through the *Walesi* App, 34,590 Fijians will have educational content, sports, entertainment and the business of this august Parliament at their fingertips.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to further complement the Connecting the Unconnected Programme, the Ministry of Communications has introduced a Northern Connectivity Project, which aims to increase the availability of internet services in 40 sites in the Northern Division and to provide emergency communications equipment. Out of the 40 sites, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 16 schools that do not have internet connectivity will now be connected and these sites are:

- (1) Qumusea District School;
- (2) Lutukina District School;
- (3) Naivaka Primary School;
- (4) Navakasiga District School;
- (5) Koroinasolo Village School;
- (6) Dawara District School;
- (7) St. Paul's Primary School;

- (8) Qalitu District School;
- (9) Nukubolu Primary School;
- (10) Viani Primary School;
- (11) Vuanisiaki Primary School;
- (12) Natadra District School;
- (13) Galoa Island School;
- (14) Vatuvula Primary School;
- (15) Cikobia Primary School; and
- (16) Kocoma District School.

The 10 schools that have a minimal level of internet connectivity and will now be connected are:

- (1) Kabu Kei Nailoca Infant School;
- (2) Lekutu District School;
- (3) Bua District School;
- (4) Bua Primary School;
- (5) Immaculate Conception Primary School;
- (6) Adi Elaine Primary School;
- (7) Wailevu East Primary School;
- (8) Vunisalusalu Central Primary School;
- (9) Volivoli Primary School; and
- (10) Qilo Island School.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further to those schools, 14 health facilities that have limited or no access to internet connectivity, will now be connected also:

- (1) Coqeloa Nursing Station;
- (2) Bua Nursing Centre;
- (3) Kubulau Nursing Station;
- (4) Nakorovatu Health Centre;
- (5) Naweni Nursing Station;
- (6) Bagasau Nursing Station;
- (7) Dogotuki Nursing Station;
- (8) Lagi Health Centre;
- (9) Visoqo Nursing Station;
- (10) Bouma Nursing Station;
- (11) Vuna Nursing Station;
- (12) Kioa Nursing Station;
- (13) Qamea Nursing Station; and
- (14) Yacata Nursing Station.

Through the implementation of improved connectivity solutions in those 14 sites, Mr. Speaker, the health facilities will be able to position themselves to pilot e-health services also.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, community accessible *Wi-Fi* hotspots will also be installed in 26 of those 40 locations, to enable internet access. Those *Wi-Fi* hotspots, which is a combination from the above schools and health centres, will facilitate continuous internet accessibility for the benefit of the local communities. In other words, near a health centre there is a village around it, people will be able to access that connectivity to the health centre through the *Wi-Fi* hotspots and those are:

- (1) Kabu kei Nailoca Infant School;
- (2) Qumusea District School;
- (3) Lutukina District School;
- (4) Naivaka Primary School;
- (5) Navakasiga District School;
- (6) Koroinasolo District School;
- (7) Immaculate Conception Primary School;
- (8) Adi Elaine Primary School;
- (9) Dawara District School;
- (10) St. Pauls Primary School;
- (11) Nukubolu Primary School;
- (12) Viani Primary School;
- (13) Vuanisiaki Primary School;
- (14) Vunisalusalu Central Primary School;
- (15) Natadra District School;
- (16) Volivoli Primary School;
- (17) Bouma Nursing Station;
- (18) Vuna Nursing Station;
- (19) Galoa Island School;
- (20) Kioa Nursing Station;
- (21) Vatuvula Primary School;
- (22) Cikobia Primary School;
- (23) Qamea Nursing Station;
- (24) Qilo Island School;
- (25) Kocoma District School; and
- (26) Yacata Nursing Station.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government will also procure and install internet services, including one year of bandwidth. These are being funded at a cost of \$556,761. The supply and installation of electrical solutions, including solar power at the 40 sites will cost us \$630,000 because they do not have any electricity. The procurement of the necessary ICT equipment, including desktops, printers, headsets and webcams, to facilitate connectivity for the 40 sites will cost us about \$254,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with regard to the operational cost of the 40 sites, the negotiated monthly recurring cost to be paid by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts after one year of engagement, should be the same vendor as has been engaged. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 14 sites on the satellite internet by Telecom Fiji Limited at a rate of \$321 per site and 26 sites on the satellite internet by Vodafone Limited at \$486.35 per site. Sir, out of the 40 sites, only four are being powered by Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) and this electricity cost is being catered for in the normal operating cost of the four sites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second component is to provide connectivity and coverage across low-lying terrain and maritime areas in the Northern Division to support emergency response efforts during times of natural disasters. These areas often suffer from loss of communication during periods of adverse weather, which severely impact the dissemination of weather warnings prior to natural disasters and the immediate coordination of relief efforts.

The emergency portable solutions will be stored centrally within the Ministry and deployed as needed in the areas affected by the occurrence of natural disasters. The portable emergency solutions are expected to considerably enhance Government's capacity to respond to emergency situations, reduce response times of completion of impact assessments and facilitate faster coordination of relief efforts across isolated and marginalised communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, having

a portable solution will also ensure that the equipment is allocated to areas where there is a need which, in turn, will promote an economic use of their resource.

The Northern Connectivity Project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will provide a means of connectivity to over 2,000 primary and secondary schools students in the Northern Division. A further 15,000 Fijians living in communities near those schools are also expected to utilise those facilities. Improved connectivity in the health facilities located in the Northern Division will also significantly improve the Ministry of Health's ability to disseminate critical information relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its efforts to reduce Non-Communicable Diseases in the community. The tenders for these projects have already been advertised, evaluated and awarded, and the selected candidates are: A1 Electrical Services, Vodafone Limited, Telecom Fiji Limited and Datec, and Vodafone and Telecom for the *Wi-Fi* hotspots. Mr. Speaker, Sir, notwithstanding COVID-19 travel restrictions, the Northern Connectivity Project is expected to be completed within the next four months.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, high quality and affordable voice and internet services for all Fijians is essential to further facilitate innovation, economic growth, economic participation and development and, of course, social and economic inclusion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, of course, will stand in the course in ensuring that every Fijian has full equal and affordable access to voice and internet connectivity as a matter of absolute necessity and indeed as a matter of right.

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

Honourable Members, as you are aware at this time, I call on the Leader of the Opposition or his designate and on this occasion, it is Honourable Waqanika. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I commend the Government's efforts of extending mobile connectivity and their plans to expand the mobile voice and internet connectivity, especially to the North. I am told by my fellow MPs from the North at Natewa Bay, 80 percent of the Natewa Bay does not have connectivity and we are also aware of the Honourable Ratu Navurelevu, who had to make his way to Labasa to get connected so that he could deliver his Budget response. So, hopefully within the next four months, we do not expect to see the Honourable Ratu Navurelevu speaking from Labasa but speaking from his own home in his village. So, thank you for the expansion the Government is doing.

Now, connectivity is one thing I understand because you have a structure and everyone can connect to it. It is the means. When I talk about means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you talking about laptops, mobile phones, data, consistence supply of electricity to connect to the tower that the Honourable Attorney-General had mentioned. That would be a challenge.

Sir, COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of internet connectivity more so now and everything is pretty much virtual and online and yes, if we do not get our people connected, especially our school children, they will certainly be left behind. We can already see this and I speak from experience, Mr. Speaker. Sir.

My two youngest daughters are still in high school. They attend high school here in Suva and it is always sad because every time I ask them, "How many kids have connected onto the online classes for today?" They will say, "Mum, we have about 30 students in our class but only 10 to 15." I always ask them, "Just to make sure if any of your classmates' parents have lost their jobs or having difficulty connecting, just keep us in the loop and we will try and see how we can help them."

We are also aware that there are parents who are going to the schools to pick up materials, or students are being told to go to the schools. But if anything, this internet connectivity is more challenging for us now. We all have been told that the next budget review will be done in six months' time and given what is happening globally, you have seen what has happened in Australia. In my Budget response, I had mentioned their current modelling. Australia does not see their borders opening until the second quarter of 2022.

When I made that statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was prior to the Delta variant hitting their nation. Now with the Delta variant hitting Australia, we really do not know whether their borders will open in 2022, no one knows. We do not know what tomorrow brings. Whatever happened in Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the world, will it affect Fiji as well?

We have seen the job loss as a result to this pandemic. A lot of parents will have hard times purchasing laptops and mobile phones. In fact, some of us here have received request financial assistance to assist their kids in laptops just to get their kids connected online.

It is one thing for our students to have this device but what about the teachers, do they have the devices as well and let alone data for both the teachers and the children to connect. So, you can have all these infrastructures up. You see, it is like having all these highways that you are building. You are building all these highways to everyone but you do not have cars that can come and run on the highway so what we would like to see or perhaps, Government has that in their pipeline is, how can Government assist or facilitate for parents and teachers to have access to these devices and let alone, be able to afford them and taking into account that a lot of parents have lost their jobs, have had a lot of pay-cuts and seeing the way things are happening globally, I personally anticipate more job losses in our nation.

Another thing which I believe is happening here at the University of the South Pacific (USP) is, if any student at USP connects to the `usp.ac.fj` failed, their data is zero-rated and it is also zero-rated as well for their tutors and lecturers. I am not sure whether Government is doing this as well but what I do know is, about two weeks ago, my daughter received a call from their school asking for her data plan because they wanted to top up the data in order for them to get more data too for their online classes. That is a good incentive where Government is looking at providing data for students but it will come to a point where Government can consider, and I am sure it is the same as well for FNU, where anyone that connects to the Government domain, any online educational materials - that data should be zero-rated to the teacher and also to the students.

If anything, most of us or pretty much all of us parents and grandparents here, we have to make sure that we have a responsibility to ensure that all our kids get connected to all the education materials. It is very challenging now - we are hearing stories of kids being left behind, some kids are facing depression, suicides, and it is even worsened when their parents have lost their jobs, so if there is any way that we can connect our kids without extra financial burden to them, please, do it quickly. It is important that we need to keep them engaged, it is important that they need to have that social educational interaction. We have kids that are sitting exams and right now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my kids are only having one subject per week, and it is a challenge and this is the type of thing I think the Ministry of Education needs to inform the nation on how they will bridge that gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the statement made by the Honourable Attorney-General of tower-sharing, we would like to know whether it is compulsory for all mobile operators now they are on telecast to be on a centralised tower? Are they required by law to be all on the towers even though it does not give them the return on investment? I understand from the business perspective, businesses will not go into places where there is no return on investment and I take into account the \$500,000 infrastructure or CAPEX or any tower that is put up and ...

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have gone over ...

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is all, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member, for your statement.

I now give the floor to the designated speaker of the Leader of the National Federation Party, the Honourable Qereqeretabua, you have the floor.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to respond to a Ministerial Statement presented on mobile connectivity by the responsible Minister. Dare I say at the onset, Mr. Speaker, that this has been a convenient sidestep by Government to muddy the water against the public outrage at their treatment of a former Minister who has been unjustly vilified and mistreated by the *Fiji Sun* during the weekend - shameless indeed.

Mr. Speaker, under Head 16 of the Budget, just passed by the Government numbers under the dubious process of acclamation instead of a divisional vote, as we requested, the World Bank has allocated about \$3.5 million towards Login Connectivity. Within that same allocation in Head 16, \$30,000 is being allocated to a project to connect the unconnected, while \$1.3 million is being allocated to the COVID-19, helpline 158 for that we can safely assume goes to Vodafone.

The statement by the Honourable Minister claims that mobile connectivity in Fiji stands at 95 percent but mobile connectivity should not be confused with internet or social media connectivity alone especially, if M-PAiSA or mobile money are middlemen conduits who can examine the money flows and charge for these services like one of them has been doing with e-ticketing. The Hootsuite Digital Fiji 2020 reports that in January 2020 there were 1.24 million mobile connections in Fiji while internet penetration in Fiji stood at 66 percent and social media penetration in Fiji stood at 63 percent.

Mr. Speaker, a 100 percent internet connectivity should be our target and not the low-hanging fruit of mobile telephony which still discriminates against the large number of our rural and semi-rural tax payers due to the tyranny of geography. Access to the internet is critical for our children, now resorting to guided learning via Zoom because of this COVID-19 crisis whether it is primary, tertiary or secondary education, yet the government seems to have forgotten all about its One Laptop Per Child promise that its Cabinet Decision of 2012 had approved, blaming *TC Winston* instead. I must also ask the Honourable Minister, what has happened to the free digital or the free Wi-Fi that was promised at every bus stand around the country? More broken promises!

Our learners need computers and internet connectivity because our healthcare system currently burdened by COVID-19 should not be further lumped with smartphone use injuries, such as Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) or thumb and wrist pain, poor eyesight, neck injuries and associated dopamine addictions, et cetera. Now, the Government has seen fit to promote VitiKart as the Vodafone middlemen retail service. The RBF has just released guidance on VitiKart for Vodafone because Vodafone is once again so lucky to receive \$1.5 million from the government and the RBF, integrating of course with M-PAiSA to assist micro to small businesses set-up their e-commerce platforms and I am quite certain that more than anything, these micro and small businesses need full internet connectivity to be able to engage regularly with similar businesses abroad to learn and to set-up networks.

Mr. Speaker, it can never be a good thing if one or two bodies hold a monopoly over mobile-related services or hold the population captive simply because the government owns shares in it. This abhorrent kind of behaviour stifles free market enterprise and kills innovative thinking. I would urge

the Government to rethink its approaches to ensure equitable access to the internet rather than just promoting mobile telephony because it is easier and lucrative for some.

Perhaps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) should also be involved to ensure that proper due diligence parameters are set out. We only have to refer to the disaster of the multiple or the multitude of the e-ticketing roll out issues and the toll free line 161 at the height of the second wave of COVID-19 response to be reminded of expectations versus reality.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would like to also ask the Minister responsible for social welfare if they could confirm whether the e-ticketing allocation for senior citizens has dropped from \$10 a month to \$3 a month.

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

Honourable Members, we will move on to the second Ministerial Statement for today and I call on the Minister for Health and Medical Services. You have the floor.

Brief Update – Status of COVID-19 in Fiji

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament, I rise before this august House to give a brief update on the status of COVID-19 in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji's seven-day rolling average as of yesterday, Sunday, 15th August, 2021 is 7.0 daily deaths with a case fatality rate of 0.93 percent. We have had widespread community transmission in the Central Division with a test positivity of over 30 percent, and we are also beginning to see a rise in the Western Division which continues to record increasing number of cases everyday. The current statistics from the Western Division indicate increasing hospital admissions, ICU admissions when compared to the previous two weeks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I continue to meet with my Officials everyday to discuss the progress in our national pandemic response, deliberate on what activities the data is telling us, listened to our infectious disease and pandemic response experts, including those from WHO and Australia and New Zealand Medical Assistance Team (ANZMAT), and we also visit our teams at the frontline and get-on-the-ground perspectives and formulate appropriate advice and recommendation for the Government to consider.

Mr. Speaker, the WHO and ANZMAT experts are not only providing virtual daily advice but in addition, they have physical presence in mentoring, guiding and evaluation the work on the ground. Many of their recommendations have been implemented and certainly their high level expertise and advice is always welcomed. In addition, we have interest for other teams to come over; an American team, a New Zealand-based Med-Pack Team and Rubicon Team. These teams are already in consultation and are talking to my Permanent Secretary and a group of experts as they manoeuvre over through this response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have a Permanent Secretary's Group that runs a detailed comprehensive, profiling and even door-to-door profiling. There is evaluation, they provide counselling, data analysis and this is sent back to their Incident Management Team. In addition, there is a vaccination mobile team that is value added to this team and when we find that there are people in the community who have not been vaccinated, the team actually provides counselling and

the mobile vaccination team goes forward and actually provides the vaccination on the ground in their own homes to make sure that they are not left behind.

Mr. Speaker, our medical experts, nevertheless, have support from their many colleagues overseas as most of them have spent a period of time post-training and their clinical disciplines are virtual assessments that they are part of and best practice is shared. I have been part of several of these sessions and some of our policy in managing COVID pregnant women and vaccinations of pregnant women have been shared from obstetricians from the global organisations to their local obstetrician counterparts in Fiji. In addition, the high level meetings organised by WHO and other UN agencies at Ministerial or Permanent Secretary level are where we share our challenges, just like the other countries do and then they continue to provide the high level policy advice.

In response to changes in the outbreak on the ongoing community transmission in the Central and Western Divisions, we have in the past two weeks re-strategized our COVID-19 testing strategy to address the significant pressure on our laboratories and health services during the mitigation phase of response. The mitigation response is a recognised public health intervention in an outbreak and we have utilised the framework of this in the past as when we had the significant dengue fever outbreak in 2013 and 2014 with 15,000 cases.

There is literature available including WHO and CDC in every country or region is advised to understand the in-depth case profiles, cultural and socio-economic landscape, their health system mobility and to respond and shut their pathway based on these principles. These includes being more targeted with the testing so we can provide turnaround results quicker to the most at risk of severe COVID-19. It is critical that we are using our various service data and disease outbreak indicators to inform our understanding of the current situation in these divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our disease surveillance teams are rapidly analysing various data sources to help us build a clearer picture of the current transmission in these divisions. However, we do know that the risk for exposure to the virus in both the Central and Western Divisions remains high with significant community transmission of the highly transmissible called “Delta” variant. On a brighter note, we continue to record recoveries everyday from the diseases. Another 231 recoveries were recorded in the last 24 hours ending yesterday morning, bringing our total number of recoveries to 15,841 and some of these individuals have returned home to their families while those who were on home isolation are now able to live in the comfort of their homes to go and work or to go to the supermarket.

Mr. Speaker, on Saturday, 14th August, 2021, we had our first case in the North outside of quarantine. This was a frontline officer at the Nabouwalu Port who deals with the clearing of cargo ships at the port, and our Bua and Northern Teams have acted quickly to put in place the necessary public health measures, such as contact tracing, testing and isolation with the objective to contain and eliminate the disease in the Northern Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to this, while the disease was limited to Viti Levu, our Northern as well as our maritime areas Divisional Health Teams, with the support of the Divisional Commissioners and all Government agencies, have been in preparation phase with an ongoing screening, disease surveillance within the community, as well as at the ports of entry, while at the same time fine-tuning their response plans that cover for the main islands as well as the small island communities.

Awareness campaigns have been carried out in communities and healthcare facilities in the Northern Division and the maritime areas have been made ready with the training of the health staff, similar to the training that we received here in Viti Levu, using virtual platforms, and the frontline

teams, the designation of COVID-19 wards, isolation beds and the establishment of community isolation facilities with the support of the Divisional Commissioners.

More importantly, the Divisional Teams have also embarked on vaccination. To-date, the North has had 80 percent with the first dose coverage and the 12 percent of targeted population fully vaccinated with the second dose. When the positive case in Nabouwalu was highlighted last Saturday, all these preparations were in place, and I would like to reassure Northerners in Tovata, that we are as prepared as we can and we will need their support and adherence to the public health safe measures and the vaccination programme to stop the virus in its tracks.

Globally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been 207 billion cases of COVID-19, with 4.4 million deaths. The cases continue to increase across the global and this is being driven by the variants, and in this case at this moment, it is the Delta variant which, according to the Centre for Diseases Control, causes between 80 percent to 87 percent of all US COVID-19 cases in the last two weeks. The variant's exceptional infectiousness has also driven cases in the US from the seven day average of 13,000 two weeks ago, to 92,000 as of 3rd August daily.

I would like to quote from the American Microbiology Society who said that "... to a world that has become very weary, yet accustomed to playing defence against SARS-CoV-2, the evolution of the Delta variant is both unwelcome and unsurprising." The Delta variant was first identified in India in December, 2020. Within months, it has spread to over 100 countries around the world, including ours, United States of America, India, United Kingdom and Israel. While the US has had 50 percent fully vaccinated coverage, the Delta variant is now, as I had alluded to earlier, responsible for more than 80 percent of COVID-19 reported cases.

The Delta variant is up to 60 percent more transmissible. Furthermore, significant variable particles have been found in airways of those affected with the Delta variant as opposed to the other variants. According to a UK report, the symptoms can be varied. Apart from fever, you can also have headache, sore throat, runny noses are more common, cough and loss of smell are also less so. There are situations on inability to have adequate oxygen within their system, also being manifested in those who have the Delta variant of the disease. Research is ongoing to determine if the Delta variant infection is associated with the increased hospitalisation and death, but one early study assessing the risk of hospital admissions in Scotland reported that hospitalisation is twice as likely in the unvaccinated individuals with Delta, as in unvaccinated individuals with Alpha.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, still it is difficult to determine whether Delta is actually making people more sick at the previous forms of the virus or if it is simply circulating amongst more vulnerable population where case numbers are high. Vaccination rates are low in these areas, and I continue to stress again today, the importance of being fully vaccinated.

Over the past few months, we have seen a spike in dangerous misinformation and individuals posing as experts providing incorrect facts about COVID-19 disease and the COVID-19 vaccine. We are concerned that people are inclined to resist the vaccine and will cling to this misinformation or even misconstrue facts that are reported correctly, threatening the efforts of our teams. I want to state and restate the facts about the current situation at the Delta variant as I have alluded to.

Research to-date have also revealed that the Delta variant is even more transmissible than the common flu or influenza virus. Here in Fiji, the evidence is showing that we are on the right track with responding to this new strain. The latest global data tells us that the vaccine does reduce risk of the symptomatic disease from the virus and also, in the public health immune report, up to 90 percent chance or protection against hospitalisation and death. And while some people may still be infected

with the virus when fully vaccinated, COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective in reducing a person's risk of becoming seriously ill.

Mr. Speaker, the experiences from these countries and the latest guidance from global experts provide us a picture of what we, in Fiji, can anticipate for the future. If we reach our goal of at least 80 percent full vaccination for our targeted population, while we may still see people get infected with the virus, we will not see nearly as many people becoming seriously ill, dying or being hospitalised.

Our ultimate goal is to protect our family, our friends and colleagues from becoming seriously ill or dying from this virus, and the vaccines are the best way out. Mr. Speaker, we should all be vaccinated, not only for our health, but for the health of all those around us – our families, friends, co-workers and customers.

We also know that vaccination alone is not the answer - we must continue to apply all of the public health measures, such as wearing a mask, frequent washing of hands, physical distancing and practising the correct cough and sneeze etiquette. Until we reach our full vaccination targets, these COVID-safe measures are essential and compulsory. For those in our community who have yet to be vaccinated, I want to, again, remind you to listen to the facts and not be misguided by misinformation.

Mr. Speaker, there have been people talking erroneously, including an unregistered doctor, and analysing evidence erroneously and using the mainstream media and also being part of a panel discussion. Sir, this is a matter of life and death, we must not give erroneous analysis on platform to discourage our people in seeking health advice for the vaccination is free and admission hospitalisation is free. The intervention presented to our people, if adhered to, is lifesaving.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has reviewed the recommended 90 days waiting period for a person previously infected with COVID-19 in getting vaccination.

Based on recent evidence and the advice from WHO Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization, all those who have recovered from COVID-19 or presumed COVID-19 are eligible for vaccination once they have completed 14 days of isolation and have recovered from the acute illness.

The evidence is that the vaccine is safe for people with prior COVID-19 infection, including within 90 days of recent recovery. Furthermore, while there is evidence that previous infection confers immunity for at least six months, immunity from previous infection will have limited protection from other variants of concern. This is why people who have been previously infected with COVID-19 need to be vaccinated.

We are also aware that previous advice was partly promoted when vaccine supply was limited, to ensure that priority was given to those without any form of immunity. Given the high level of vaccine supply available with us, the prevailing vaccine safety data, the need for broader protection of the population and the highly transmissible nature of the Delta variant, we are advising that all Fijians who have recovered recently from COVID-19 or presumed COVID-19 are eligible for vaccination once they have completed their 14 days of isolation and recovered from the acute illness. This stance is also consistent with the current global best practices and WHO advice.

In the early days of our COVID-19 containment effort, the Ministry made it clear to all Fijians that our effort was based specifically on two broad strategies – our primary public health intervention which will focus on the prevention of an outbreak and the protection of everyone. We had activated

our quarantine facilities and designated isolation facilities to ensure that. We had mandatory curfew hours, including consecutive lockdowns to contain the virus and help stop infection.

We set up both, mobile and stationary screening teams and tents to test as widely as possible and to make sure that we pick up any community case. We set up contact tracing teams to ensure that positive cases get followed up with primary and secondary contacts isolated.

In that process, however, we had clearly indicated to everyone that should our cases surge to unmanageable level, we will change our strategy to mitigation phase, which I have alluded to earlier is a non-public health intervention which focuses on clinical care pathways and the management of the sick and saving lives. We have changed strategy in both Central and Western Divisions to mitigation phase in the last few weeks. However, testing in this mitigation phase is still a priority and our mobile screening teams had a cumulative number of those screened at 790,403 up to yesterday, with an accumulative 69,891 of those swabbed before the mitigation phase.

Our stationary clinics continue to do screening with up to 3,000 individuals screened over the last 24 hours up to yesterday evening. However, because of the wide community transmission in both, Central and Western Divisions, we have set up designated swabbing facilities to ensure that the criteria is closely followed with maximum outcome. We continue to test. We continue to screen. Our national test positivity rate on a seven day moving average is 33.3 percent with a daily round about two percent per 1,000 population as of yesterday.

Since entering into our mitigation phase, contact tracing teams have now been called the monitoring teams that does tracing virtually through phone calls but mainly to establish the risk level of both the patient and their contacts. That risk level is based specifically on whether the patient or any of their contacts have any pre-existing medical conditions which makes them vulnerable of developing severe conditions should they get sick. And this strategy, Sir, was done in consultation with our experts from WHO, who have had previous experience in this. One of them has had previous experience working with the Ebola Virus in West Africa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had outlined in my Budget Response, the various mental health support available to all Fijians including our frontline workers. We have developed support groups, *Viber* groups, buddy systems for our front-liners, including the creation of *talanoa* sessions or de-stress platforms to allow them to unwind and to share their stories.

We have also collaborated with Empower Pacific through Australian Aid for the 5626 helpline and the mental health 165 helpline. We have recruited an in-house counsellor for frontline workers including a short term COVID-19 psychosocial support consultant. And the setting up of a regional forums/webinars for frontline workers to share their experience and learnings to the region and from the region.

Mr. Speaker, at this time I want to thank and acknowledge the immense support from our multilateral partners, supporters, well-wishers and friends in our fight against COVID-19. Some of the support came in terms of Vaccines, PPEs, medical supplies and equipment, testing machines and consumables, hospital beds, mattresses and pillows, disinfectants, ambulance, food ration, oxygen concentrators, funding, technical support and technical advice.

I thank the Government and people of Australia, New Zealand, India, China, USA, Japan, Austria, Korea, European Union, UN Agencies, COVAX Facility, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, ANZMAT, WHO, Local Corporate Bodies, Local NGOs and CSOs, Faith Based Organisations, social and community groups, generous families and individuals.

Sir, they are all part of our response. “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”, this was Sir Winston Churchill speaking to the British Parliament and referring to the RAF pilots and crew as they defended England from the invasion of Nazi Germany. These words echo true today as our beloved country battles a war right now. Fiji’s COVID-19 Outbreak Response Frontline teams are out there every day for the few and many of us that depend on them - doing their best to protect the lives of all Fijians from the threat of COVID-19.

As they make the daily sacrifice as they often face a constant barrage of insults and mockery from a minority of our very own people, healthcare workers not in the frontline. Many of them do not realise that this is a battle with COVID-19. They do not believe that people are dying from the virus. They do not believe that vaccinations can help and prevent them from dying. Mr. Speaker, this misinformation even Members of this august House were part of it.

As a nation we must embrace the public health self-measures. If you are in Viti Levu as soon as you leave the comfort of your home put on your mask. We must not gather. And if needed to do for a funeral please adhere to the 10. We must maintain our physical distance and wash hands regularly and this will pass. Sir, if we embrace vaccination as swiftly as possible and everyone has been vaccinated fully after being vaccinated with the initial dose.

I am saying this, Mr. Speaker, because I heard a concerning message from the Medical Officer in Navosa this morning who says that after the first dose, there were challenges again in being able to roll out the second dose. We must encourage everyone to be vaccinated and if they have been vaccinated once, they must come back for their second vaccination because after been vaccinated fully in the second dose, then two weeks after, then the greatest protection from immunity is available in the body.

Sir, we are at war, it is just like *TC Winston*. Just as our boys did when they won the Olympic Gold again. Just as our Fijiana Team did ... we must play together and we must build a powerful team spirit. The principles each time were the same, “Together we can and together we will”. We will continue to fight the good fight and shut down the naysayers, the anti-vaxxers, the opportunists who prey on the gullibility of people and, more importantly, we will fight and overcome this pandemic of COVID-19.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister, for your Ministerial Statement.

Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate and I call on the designated speaker of the Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Salote Radrodro.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to take this opportunity to respond to the Ministerial Statement on the current status of COVID-19. Mr. Speaker, I could not help but capture the words of the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services when he said that together we can, and on that same breadth, he blamed the Opposition; on that same breadth, he also blamed the people.

That is exactly the point, Mr. Speaker, that one of the biggest problems with this Government is their implementation failure. Their implementation gap is so huge and as we have heard from the Honourable Minister for Health, of all that he has said. How many of those things we really see being implemented, Mr. Speaker? And we keep that implementation gap, the failure by the Government in implementing what they promised the people at the back of our minds.

Also he said that we have to embrace our war with COVID-19 but then again, on the same breadth, Mr. Speaker, he keeps on blaming the Opposition, blaming the members of the public in

their failure in carrying out their COVID-19 mitigation strategies.

Mr. Speaker, this COVID-19 is a national crisis - they have said it, we have said it, and if it is really a national crisis, then it requires extraordinary measures, and that includes having to work in partnership by partisan, even with the Opposition and in partnership with the members of the public and for them to stop playing politics with COVID-19.

Before I carry on, I ask the question, if there is a third wave, did we hear the Honourable Minister said anything about addressing the third wave, did we hear anything the Honourable Minister said should our children require vaccination, when, how are we going to tackle that as a nation, Mr. Speaker? This is what the people are asking, they are concerned about their children and even when adults are resisting vaccination, and now they are hearing that the children will also be vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, because of time limitation, I can only make recommendations to the Honourable Minister for Health, and also to the Honourable Prime Minister, to the Honourable Minister for Economy and the whole Government side, and the first recommendation is this, instead of coming in to this House with a Ministerial Statement, a responsible Minister and a responsible Government will bring in a report and table it in this House. Even now, they only come in with questions, they come in with Ministerial Statements because they are anticipating the questions that we are going to be asking them, Mr. Speaker. That is not the strategy of addressing this problem, Mr. Speaker, and I would request, the Honourable Prime Minister, it is not a laughing matter, Honourable Prime Minister, and I would request that the Honourable Minister for Health table a report in our next sitting and also bring in supplementary report after that in every sitting.

Mr. Speaker, because in that way, when the report is tabled, it then can go to the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, whereby there will be consultation with the members of the public and then we can bring in the recommendations which highlight the gaps that are in their COVID-19 mitigation strategies.

Mr. Speaker, the second recommendation is their communication strategies. They have failed in their communication strategies to raise the level of awareness in the communities to be able to encourage those who are resisting vaccination, Mr. Speaker, and I will suggest to them, rather than coming with this militant, coercive, no jab, no benefits, no jab, no jobs, they could engage with the NGOs and CSOs.

Did we hear that from the Honourable Minister? No! He only mentioned the overseas assistance coming in. He failed to recognise the potential that our NGOs and CSOs have and to engage them, partner with them, to raise the level of awareness in the community, Mr. Speaker, because we can have the same message but the messenger determines the response or the acceptability by the community and because this organisation has a very good network, that is why I am recommending that they be engaged. There are a lot of organisations and you know it, Honourable Minister for Defence.

Mr. Speaker, also on our frontline workers, I have heard that the issues raised by nurses at CWM Hospital that they are not fully-equipped with personal protection equipment. They had to reuse the ones that they are using because there is no more new supply. Their supply had all been used, Mr. Speaker, and also with COVID-19, it has also heightened poverty.

Mr. Speaker, we must acknowledge the help by the NGOs and CSOs, Honourable Minister for Defence, for the help, humanitarian help that they are undertaking in regards to helping out with the food rations with our people and one of the issues that I would like to highlight here is the long

closure of the schools. The long closure of schools also contributes to the health, the mental health or even the consequences on our children, Mr. Speaker, and we heard from the Honourable Minister for Economy this morning that they are going to have all these information technology upgrades and all these things.

Mr. Speaker, I believe the Honourable Minister for Agriculture was the Minister at that time and it was a promise in 2016, yes, in regards to the digital literacy programme. That did not eventuate and what we have heard from the Honourable Minister for Economy this morning, those are just false promises again. They have not even addressed the adverse or the struggles that our people are facing from the natural disasters. You have *TC Ana* and *TC Yasa* and they are talking about upgrading information technology facilities in the schools. Have you fully repaired Lekutu Secondary School? It has not been, Mr. Speaker, and that is exactly my point, that there is a lot of false promises.

Also, Mr. Speaker, what strategies do they have to be able to cater for the new community transmissions, particularly now in the Northern Division? It has started to go into the Northern Division and we have just heard from the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services, but that raises the question of implementation, Mr. Speaker. They do not honour their words. They come here, there is a lot of false promises made in this House but at the end of the day, hardly or even maybe more than 50 percent of those promises are not carried out.

Mr. Speaker, an example would be the Nausori Hospital. A new Nausori Hospital was promised in 2016. If, indeed, the new Nausori Hospital was constructed, then that would have been a good buffer for the dilapidated CWM Hospital and that is exactly what I mean when I say that the Government comes into this House with a lot of false promises. I would plead to the Government that they step it up and engage the Opposition, engage the public, this is all about us, it is about our children, it is about our future and stop playing politics with COVID-19 and engage and partner everyone to be able to conquer or deal with this COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Speaker.

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

Honourable Members, we will continue. I remind all the other Honourable Members who will speak of your time limitations. I now give the floor to the Honourable Leader of the National Federation Party, but I cannot see him.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- I am here, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Professor Prasad, I can see you now. You have floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, 565 people have lost their lives after succumbing to COVID-19. For some strange reason, we are told that only 371 people have died directly as a result of COVID-19 while 194 people lost their lives due to existing medical conditions. This kind of defies a logic because each one of them were alive, even if there were suffering from other illness but died when they were infected by this deadly virus. It also goes against the statement made by the Honourable Prime Minister a month before the outbreak of the second wave in April, he actually emphasised the importance of keeping our borders safe and preventing COVID-19 from re-surfacing because it will have a deadly effect on people suffering with existing conditions and he particularly mentioned diabetes.

We know that Fiji has the highest rate of diabetes in the world. A few months later, of course, the Government does not give a damn about what happens to the people because they think that opening up the containment zones would rescue the economy. What a shame, Mr. Speaker! What a shame! When the problem was small, they did not lockdown, and we had said this time and again

that this Government's strategy of winning the war against COVID-19 is as miserable and a colossal failure, I would say, and like its non-adherence to good governance and transparency. The only visible strategy is from containment to containers and if you look at those three 40 foot long containers outside the CWM Hospital, Mr. Speaker, it is a stark reminder of the failure of this Government in dealing with this COVID-19 crisis.

As I said, Mr. Speaker, when the problem was small, we did not lockdown; we made all kinds of excuses and even the Honourable Prime Minister went onto a radio station in New Zealand and said, "We can't have lockdown because the people in Fiji are not educated". Mr. Speaker, this is really a slap on the face of our people, our citizens. It is actually shameless and despicable to go on the airwaves and say that and indirectly insult our people. I would say, this is gutter level of politics or excuses, Mr. Speaker. Calling you own citizens "uneducated" in my view, is unforgivable. The Honourable Prime Minister should apologise to the people of this country for saying that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we keep hearing, we get the impression that it is "the people's fault", it is not the people's fault that COVID-19 has spread out. It is the negligence, sheer negligence of the leadership of the Government, which includes the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Minister for Economy and includes the Honourable Minister for Health and all the others in Government.

We all remember, in his midnight address on 29th May, the Honourable Prime Minister had announced the opening up of containment borders and soon after that, if you look at all the statistics, the graphs, there was an exponential rise in the number of cases of COVID-19 virus in the containment zones. So the important message that we were keeping all this while was that 'the virus moves when you move,' suddenly becomes 'the virus may move if you move,' and it may have resulted in the near collapse of the health and medical services, non-screening, non-testing, no contact tracing, no strict isolation guidelines and patients becoming seriously ill by the time they arrive into hospitals.

It is not denying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry of Health is now under resourced and has overworked human resource. If we did not have the help from our international partners, donors and friends, we would be in a dire situation. Our frontliners are battling fatigue, so much so that the Ministry has sought assistance from organisations in terms of manpower. A good example and it is a good partnership between the TISI Sangam and the New Zealand Government in providing 190 more nurses and the salaries, of course, are paid by the New Zealand Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the resources put into this failed mitigation strategy by the Government and they think that vaccination will eliminate the virus, is actually flawed. Vaccination is important, we all understand that and we all promote vaccination. We have all been calling people to vaccinate themselves, but more important is the elimination for our economy and tourism because even after we achieved the targeted vaccination rate, we are still going to have people who are going to fall sick, who will end up in hospitals and we will still have the virus around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government needs to re-look at its strategy and that is why we wanted to bring that motion, so that we could have a much better debate, more people could speak and we could put out ideas. This is just five minutes, this is a Ministerial Statement for which we only have five minutes to respond to. It is quite shameful that the Government actually opposed that motion when your office allowed the motion to go to the Business Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, we need to tell this Government, in fact, to move forward. They need to apologise to the people of this country for their failed strategy and failed leadership in containing the spread of the virus when the problem was small.

All I can say in conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that it could not help Fiji with this kind of government that we have. I know the Honourable Attorney-General always talks about intellectual honesty and dishonesty. I think, this Government and has attained intellectual death

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- They cannot think outside the box and they cannot look at alternative ideas. Let me just urge the government

HON. SPEAKER.- You have gone overtime, Honourable Member. Honourable Members, I thank the Honourable Professor Prasad for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, time moves on. I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today. On that note, we will break for lunch and will resume with the next agenda item after lunch. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.25 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

FSC Submission to FCCC
(Question No. 145/2021)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs inform Parliament whether the Ministry was consulted by the Fiji Sugar Corporation on its submission to the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission seeking a 100 percent rise of processed sugar?

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA (Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to respond to the question by the Honourable Tikoduadua but before that, I would like to make a brief remark on the comment by Honourable Qereqeretabua and, of course, their leader, Honourable Professor Prasad.

The comments they made this morning, Mr. Speaker, has shown us that the National Federation Party have lost the plot. They do not know where they are going and they are grasping at straws. The remarks by Honourable Qereqeretabua is nothing but full of sarcasm but that has been her hallmark throughout the last two years or so in Parliament. The speculation on her part about bus fare being at \$3 - the bus fare for the elderly, Honourable Speaker, is still \$10.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- A point of order, Mr. Speaker, I will explain.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Qereqeretabua, I am just trying to get hold of what the Prime Minister is saying.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- And I would like to clarify something that he has just said, Honourable Speaker, because he is casting aspersions on something that I said.

HON. SPEAKER.- No, I cannot hear. Honourable Prime Minister, you have the floor, I cannot hear what was being said.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. I talked about her remarks on the bus fare at \$3 - that is speculation on her part. All she has to do is find out from the Honourable Minister or the Honourable Assistant Minister what the real bus fare is and put it out. Maybe she is expecting a lot of emojis coming up when she makes that remark - that speculation, but she is always full of sarcasm.

I fear, Honourable Speaker, beneath that façade is a woman that has shown a lot of evil in the way she speaks in Parliament. I think she looks as if butter would not melt in her mouth but really the way she speaks is evil. It is as if she wants to fight everyone because I have heard that she used to fight before.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Don't get personal, Honourable Prime Minister.

HON. SPEAKER.- A point of order.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- A point of order, Mr. Speaker, this coming from our Prime Minister is un-parliamentary language.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Un-parliamentary? Because it is un-parliamentary.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- He said that I made the statement - I asked a question whether they could clarify if the bus fares for seniors has, indeed, dropped to \$3 from \$10. I asked a question, but to point to me as a woman, it just follows what happened in the *Fiji Sun* on Saturday. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker. When I hear the brief remark by the Leader of the NFP, Honourable Professor Prasad, they have no strategies in place for this - all he can talk about is the lockdown. When he found out that the lockdown was not an option, he is now running around like a cornered rat trying to find a way out of the brief remarks he has made about lockdown. If Honourable Professor Prasad is really worried about the education of our children, there is a big number of children at the University of the South Pacific. They are now educating, learning in an environment of corruption, maybe he can go and help sort that bit out.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Don't get too personal, Prime Minister. You were saying that Fiji people are uneducated - don't say that.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Shush!

HON. B.C. PRASAD.- You should apologise to the people.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Go to your University.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, but my simple answer would be that the Ministry was consulted and the advice given to the FSC was to follow the transparent process as laid down under the law for the review, just like any other company.

Mr. Speaker, I would also like to advise NFP to do the same - make your submission if you want to be heard. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to ask this supplementary question to the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Sugar and I thank him for saying that he had consulted with the company and my take of it is that, Government has endorsed the rise in the price of sugar by 100 percent. So, my question is, if he understands that people are having such a hard time, let alone the price of anything else from sugar and I am trying to find sugar on the market, why is he exacerbating their pain by allowing or endorsing this price hike? Thank you.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I said that they had lost the plot. He does not seem to understand what he is talking about. He asked me the question whether Government was consulted and I said, "Yes, the Government was consulted." But if he wants a

longer response, Mr. Speaker, I want to say that collaboration and transparency have always been the strongest pillars of my Government's policies which was supported through constructive stakeholder engagements and good governance.

I was curious, therefore, Mr. Speaker, whether the Honourable Member had an understanding of both, the process and the appropriate authority responsible to regulate prices for basic food items, including sugar. They have not put in their submission in this review. There was a whole lot of talk from NFP about this but they have not done their bit.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister was wandering to unnecessary conjectures but let me ask him; as part of the consultation, is he aware that the FSC also intends to have only one mill in the Western Division and the reason they are giving is because they need to generate more income and that is why they have asked for the increase in price?

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- We were talking about the sugar price but let me educate the Honourable Professor Prasad a bit, Mr. Speaker. It seems he is confusing himself with the roles of the Ministry of Sugar, FCCC and FSC in this context.

Let me inform him and Honourable Tikoduadua, Mr. Speaker, that the Ministry of Sugar is not the responsible authority to regulate the price of any item, including sugar, whether the proposed price increase is 1 percent, 20 percent or 100 percent, or even 200 percent for that matter, neither can it influence the body mandated to do so. That role is vested only to the FCCC as a primary regulator that provides services as an independent institution.

Mr. Speaker, FCCC is an independent statutory body established under section 7 of the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission Act 2010 that promotes effective competition and informed markets, encourages fair trading and protects consumers and businesses from restrictive practices and controls prices of regulated industries and other markets where competition is lessened or limited. Those functions, Sir, are evidently important in setting prices for multiple industries to fix a balance between affordability and equitable returns.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, for the information for those two Honourable Members, the Ministry is also not the sugar manufacturer, neither the watchdog to intrude into the operational matters of sugar industry institutions....

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- That was FSC's submission. That was the submission FSC made.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... including that of the FSC and FCCC.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It's a limited liability company.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Mr. Speaker, for the information of NFP, especially Honourable Professor Prasad and Honourable Tikoduadua, all industry institutions have their own Boards to oversee the affairs and overall operations of those institutions, led by chairpersons and

board directors, who function through Chief Executive Officers to provide leadership in the company and deliver shareholders its long term values.

In this case, Mr. Speaker, the proposal submitted to FCCC by FSC is an operational matter and FSC has done the right thing to take its proposal to FCCC for price review, like any other company would do so, whether it's a State-owned company or a private-owned entity. The Ministry of Sugar Industry is a policy-maker, for the information of those two Honourable Members, and is responsible for overseeing the affairs of the sugar industry.

Given this role, let me ask those two Honourable Members from the NFP, "What would there be a need for FSC to discuss the percentage of price increase with the Ministry of Sugar Industry and not directly with FCCC?" Members of the NFP keep on talking about good governance, I want to ask them whether they understand the principles of good governance, especially Honourable Professor Prasad.

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- We do, better than you, Prime Minister.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Does he want that Ministry as a Government body to interfere in the affairs and operational matters of FSC?

HON. PROFESSOR B.C. PRASAD.- Government is a shareholder.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Is this not a gross breach of good governance? Is he not aware that FSC is a company with its own Board, governance structure and operates under the Companies Act and Articles of Association where the Board is responsible for decision-making and provides strategic direction to the company? Are they implying that FSC's abled Board is incompetent and the Ministry of Sugar Industry should be consulted first before any such independent decisions are made?

Mr. Speaker, this is not only ignorance, but they are questioning the role of the FSC Board and its Management. In fact, it is useless for them to bring this question to Parliament in the first place. They should go and educate themselves on the processes of FCCC, an authority which will decide on whether and how much should be the price of sugar. I am obviously aware of the processes of FCCC and the approach it has taken before deciding on the price change of any item. The key process are, of course, consultations with all relevant stakeholders and the Ministry of Sugar Industry will obviously be part of the consultation process, similarly as any other individual organisation.

On 14th July, Mr. Speaker, FCCC had put out a press release inviting members of the public to actively participate in the sugar price review by providing their views and comments and their suggestions. Subsequently, on 15th July, Government Ministries including the Ministry of Sugar Industry, were invited to comment and make suggestions on the FSC's price proposal.

Furthermore, FCCC has made available a non-confidential version of FSC's submission on this website, social media pages and newspapers requesting public feedback. Here is a submission for sugar price review by the FSC. I have also gathered that FCCC has requested submissions from a range of other non-sugar stakeholders including the members from the other side of the House. It is sad to inform this august House that no submission had been made to-date by NFP nor Honourable Tikoduadua and Honourable Professor Prasad, at least, as sugar consumers, but this is not something new.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- On several occasions as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Sugar Industry had requested inputs from stakeholders on sugar industry policies, yet not a single contribution has been made from NFP...

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- ... who are continuously singing the same old song and misleading the public with their lies and promises to turn around the sugar industry. Mr. Speaker, obviously, they do not care about the growers nor the welfare of sugar consumers. If they were really concerned, they would have sent their input and, at least, produce some facts as to why the domestic sugar price should remain unchanged. Again, they have started making noises that they did most recently through a failed campaign to boycott sugar cane harvesting.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Let me ask, Mr. Speaker, Sir, did they ever jump so high, when there are proposals for price increase for any other basic food items? No, never. There is nothing valuable from them but just another attempt to gain political mileage. We cannot expect anything from them, including FSC's proposal on sugar price.

The last review of sugar prices in domestic market was done in 2017, while the domestic sugar price remained, the fact the maintenance cost, particularly the labour cost price of parts and equipment for the factory has significantly increased over the past years. It was further heightened by the outbreak of pandemic due to high freight cost to improve mill efficiency and optimise grower and FSC revenue, significant target investment is needed in the mills. Therefore, it may be appropriate to re-look at FSC's cash flow and investment requirements in mills. Also not forgetting the fact that sugar intake is the major contributor to NCDs, which is the biggest killer in Fiji, killing thousands of Fijians each year.

I want to allude again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar price review will not be done by the Ministry of Sugar industry, but the FCCC as the responsible body. Therefore, we must let the FCCC carry out its due process to make decisions on any price changes.

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

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A supplementary question; can the Honourable Minister inform the House what will the Ministry do if the sugar price is not reviewed quickly since FSC has already indicated that it is facing ongoing adverse financial and operational difficulties? Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have put up my answer to the question that was put forward by the Honourable Tikoduadua. Honourable Kuridrani has raised a substantive question. He can ask me another time. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- We move on to the next Question.

Health & Safety at Work (General Workplace Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2021
(Question No. 146/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports inform Parliament on the actions currently taken by the Ministry in implementing the Health and Safety at Work (General Workplace Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 in workplaces throughout the country?

HON. P.K. BALA (Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would also like to thank Honourable Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services.

The Health and Safety at Work (General Workplace Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 was enacted after consultation with the employers and workers representatives on the 8th of July, 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry, through the National OHS Services, is currently conducting awareness on the requirements of the regulations and compliance through audits of workplaces Fiji wide. Sir, printed materials are also distributed to the employers and workers for reference to highlight the key date for compliance and the obligation under the amended regulations. The main objective is to protect employers, workers including others from any risk of COVID-19 or related disease transmission at the workplace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the virtual training we were able to reach out to our key workplace stakeholders such as the Fiji Employers and Commerce Federation, the Fiji Trade Union Congress Members and the Fiji Human Resources Institute representing all but 80 companies to-date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Employment is also conducting workplace audits in parallel with awareness programmes to ascertain the implementation of the COVID-19 protocols in the workplaces. The audit includes verification of the workplace COVID-19 Management Systems and Procedures, and the vaccination data of employers and workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to inform this august House that to-date, my Ministry has conducted 5,188 COVID-19 audits to the directed 16,226 workplaces which are registered under the Ministry. Furthermore, Sir, 1,208 employers and 66 workers were identified during this survey to be exempted or seeking exemption from vaccination through the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to reiterate that it requires our collective effort as we continue on our path towards maintaining a safe work environment, healthy workforce and quick return to economic recovery.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Tabuya for her supplementary question.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Minister mentioned that the aim of the policy is to protect employees from any risk of COVID transmission. I want to ask the Honourable Minister with this "No Jab No Job" policy -how does he reconcile that with the fact that being jabbed does not prevent you or a person from contracting COVID-19 or spreading it? How do you reconcile that with your policy, Honourable Minister?

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Firstly, let me make a brief on the Amended Regulation 2021 which stipulates the following key requirements. I think after hearing that, she will then come to know what this amendment was all about.

- (i) unvaccinated employers and workers must not enter the workplaces on or after 1st August, 2021, unless they have received at least the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine;
- (ii) unvaccinated employers and workers must not enter the workplace on or after 1st November, 2021, unless they have received at least the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine;
- (iii) An OHS inspector may order the business 'temporary closed' if an employer has not received, at least, the first dose of COVID-19 on or before 15th August, 2021.

Since we are talking about how we are going to reconcile that, we will cross the bridge when we come to it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is so simple.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is not simple, you still do not answer the question.

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

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you, Honourable Speaker, Sir. This is forcing people to vaccinate. My question is, why force people to vaccinate when you can give choice to the people, take the vaccination or another alternative because there are plenty other alternatives, Honourable Speaker, Sir, which are better than vaccination.

HON. P.K. BALA.- What is it?

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- There are much better alternatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so why insist on forcing rather than giving the choice for people to decide for themselves, whether for vaccination or other alternatives such as herbs - drinking hot water, inhaling steam to improve your immune system so that you can have a better immune system in order to produce to attack anti-bodies. The question is, why force when you can give a choice to the people to make their alternative choices, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you are supposed to be asking a supplementary question. I give the floor to the Honourable Minister, if he can give an answer.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I will. Sir, there is no force and I am telling you why. During our survey we found out that there were some workers who did not want to be vaccinated and those who did not want to turn up for work; so it is their choice. There is that group of people so I do not know where the honourable Member is really coming from. I cannot hold their hand and ask them, 'Please, come and get vaccinated'.

HON. SPEAKER.- A supplementary question, you have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- A supplementary question to the Honourable Minister on the definition of 'workplaces'. Does that also include working from home to be considered a formal workplace?

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- The answer is simple, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Jale, a supplementary question, you have the floor.

HON. A. JALE.- Thank you. A supplementary question to the Minister. I noticed at the Nausori Market it said, 'No Jab, No Entry'. My question is - is the Nausori Town Council in compliance with the regulation to post that notice up?

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Unfortunately, I am not the Minister for Local Government, I was there before but I can tell you that the Ministry of Employment is working very closely with all the Municipal Councils.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on to the third Oral Question for today and I call on Honourable Aseri Radrodoro to ask his question.

Clarification on COVID-19 Fourteen-Day Period
(Question No. 147/2021)

HON. A.M. RADRODRO asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister clarify their 14-day wait period for recovered patients who contracted COVID 19 before receiving one dose of vaccine?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the Honourable Member for that question. I had discussed this in my Ministerial Statement this morning, but certainly we have changed our policy in terms of vaccination after someone has been declared positive. That was initially 90 days but it has now been moved back so once you have completed the isolation of 14 days and you are clinically well, then you are due for your vaccination. Thank you, Sir.

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

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Just a supplementary question to the Honourable Minister. For those COVID-19 patients that have recovered, (since we are just discussing the Health and Safety at Work Bill), we are now into the 16th of August, for those that have recovered and they cannot enter the workplaces, can the Ministry give exemptions to them, to allow them to enter the workplaces.

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, from what I gather from the question it is if someone has recovered from COVID-19. So, the guidelines at the moment is when someone has served their 14 days of isolation and they have not been asymptomatic, then they are able to return. In some instances, they have been asking for certification as in the form of a Ministry of Health letterhead and that is being given to them when needed.

HON. SPEAKER.- A supplementary question, Honourable Tabuya.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The latest statistics for COVID-19 since April, we have had active cases of 40,000 and recoveries of about 15,841 which is over a third, which is a good rate. My question to the Honourable Minister is this. Can you consider, when you are giving your breakdown of statistics to inform the public from that 15,841 recoveries, how many were

vaccinated and how many were not because that may very well be a way to encourage people to get vaccinated if the rate is greater. So it would help the public, if you were to breakdown that 15,841 in terms of how many were vaccinated and how many were not? Would you consider doing that, Honourable Minister?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, if the Honourable Member can send it as a written question and we can provide the details. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- There is a supplementary question.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Is it safe to have vaccination within 14 days, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Honourable Member, could you repeat the question.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Yes, the question is a short one. Is it safe to have vaccination within that 14 days?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- To have vaccination within 14 days, no. We wait until they have recovered and the guideline says at least 14 days, so once you finish the 14 days then you can have vaccination given that they are clinically well. But, Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that it is interesting that he has just really changed. Thank you for now advocating vaccination.

Challenges Faced by Fishermen - COVID-19 (Question No. 148/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Fisheries explain what the Government is doing to address the challenges faced by our coastal subsistence and commercial fishermen during this pandemic?

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU (Minister for Fisheries).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also thank Honourable Nagata for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are trying times that we live in. The current COVID-19 pandemic has affected all the sectors in Fiji and our coastal fisheries sector is no exception. Commercial fisheries is also affected, it even contributes to the local economy in terms of supporting the supply chain of seafood from the sea to the markets and customers. This ensures a supply of healthy seafood to our fellow Fijians during this pandemic.

Through the Coastal Fisheries Development Project, the Ministry has been allocated \$501,800 for the current financial year. The funding will address the following needs:

- (1) Strengthening inshore fisheries sustainable developments in the maritime and coastal communities;
- (2) Capacity building at community level through awareness and training programmes;
- (3) Assist fishermen by enhancing productivity through the FAD Deployment Programme;

- (4) Ensure rural and maritime communities are able to process good markets through the provision of proper facilities;
- (5) Promote community-based fisheries resource management; and
- (6) Ensure effective and efficient service delivery to rural and maritime communities.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, there are welcomed initiatives announced in the current Budget for our coastal fishers and this include a free in-shore fishing licenses as well as a waiver for MSAF related fees for vessel registration and certification. This will ensure that our fishers are not burdened by these financial commitments and promotes sustainable harvesting through licensing and ensuring that their livelihoods and food security status are secure.

The Ministry will continue to operate our ice plants around the country to support our freezers and we will further assist the needy communities through solar freezer initiatives. We realised that these are difficult times and the Ministry through the new budget initiatives will ensure that our fishermen are able to secure their livelihood and ensure that there is a long-term food security and economic growth through their sustainable use of our marine resources.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Tabuya, a supplementary question.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Honourable Minister for that response. I noted in today's news, the Fiji Ports Corporation Limited (FPCL) has just reported a very good profit of about \$22 million for the last financial year (2020). I want to ask the Honourable Minister whether there has been discussion with FPCL done to reduce charges for our port fees on commercial fisher people during this pandemic who use the ports when they come in and out?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You got the wrong Ministry.

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

HON. CDR. S.T KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There is already a huge assistance given to fisheries through the removal of port charges. That was done in the last financial year (2020-2021).

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Kuridrani, you have the floor on a supplementary question.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A supplementary question. I hope that the Honourable Minister has correctly said that everyone is facing hardship during this crisis. Has the Honourable Minister considered the uplifting of the ban on the harvesting of *sucuwalu* in our coastal areas?

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

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a totally different question, but there is a programme that is in place and it has reached the third stage. The final stage will be done and then it will define the time for the uplift of the ban.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Mikaele Leawere, your supplementary question.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I heard the Honourable Minister mentioning about the costal fisheries development budget of \$501,000. I wonder if this allocation is also going to assist the fish wardens to carry out their tasks in our fishing waters.

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

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir and I thank the Honourable Member for the question. The answer is yes.

HON. SPEAKER.- We move on to the fifth Oral Question for today.

Reporting Framework for COVID-19 Expenditures
(Question No. 149/2021)

HON. RO T.V. KEPA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament if expenditures towards the Government's COVID-19 pandemic response are recorded using a reporting framework that enhances monitoring and evaluation?

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

Last year, the Fiji Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Plan was prepared, outlining the Fijian Government's commitment to respond to the COVID-19 challenges that Fiji is facing. While this plan has been developed with the Ministry of Economy and other Ministries, including the Ministry of Health, its successful implementation depends on the expertise, dedication and hard work of all the ministries and agencies across the Fijian Government. The Plan outlines four key objectives which include:

- (1) Facilitate preparedness of the health sector and other relevant agencies, like we are seeing at the moment, to respond to the cases of COVID-19;
- (2) Support a coordinated system wide response to COVID-19;
- (3) Provide guidance to health services and relate to any agencies that are working with us for the management of COVID-19; and
- (4) Outline key activities and responsible organisations, units and even individuals which I think includes even coordinating through with, for example, the rations that are being given at the moment, who is actually responsible for ensuring that the rations are being profiled, put into the app and the tender companies that has been tendered to actually goes out and provides.

This Plan provides details on how the outbreak may develop in Fiji and the kinds of preparedness and at that time we were looking towards, what is the likelihood if we were faced with the situation such as we have with the Delta variant, and response actions could be implemented at each stage.

The preparedness and response actions anticipated by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services follows the strategy of initially containing and mitigation, which I talked about today. To implement this plan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were fortunate to receive special COVID-response funding in 2020-2021 Budget, even before that, there was a supplementary budget which had funding towards us and towards this response. As we are now into the second wave of COVID-19 cases, we are again privileged to receive the Budget Announcement for 2021-2022 fiscal year of further \$25 million, which is announced under RIE funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budget allocated for COVID-19 responses is being utilised for accommodation, cost for quarantine citizens, as well as staff, expenditure for contact tracing,

surveillance, monitoring cases and contacts, the budget would be funding the operational cost of COVID-19 response, the procurement of consumables and medicine, COVID-19 as specific personal protective equipment, Intensive Care Unit (ICU), the Consumables and Biomedical Equipment, Digital Health needs because now we really gone into digital health and virtual platforms for discussions. The doctors and the healthcare workers are consistently on a weekly basis up to three times in a week they having their webinars to be able to keep them up to pace in terms of best practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Health Accounts Audit in the last fiscal year further improvements have been made in their reporting in evaluation of the public funding for the pandemic response. The budget also factors in risk communication training and field hospital support and we have the FEMAT here in Laucala Campus.

The COVID-19 management team also known as a COVID-19 Response Unit have the operational responsibility for the implementation of these funds under the supervision of the Permanent Secretary for Health as the Chief Operating Officer of the Ministry. As the funding is listed under 'R' they are further controls in cheques implemented at periodic release of funds. The IMT is required to draft a workplan for its financial expenditures and provide periodical acquittals to ensure that we meet robust financial requirements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also design 10 key outputs and key indicators for COVID-19 funding. And this output includes financial allocations to the Board Quarantine Management, Provisions of Equipment, Risk Infection Control Measures, Digital Health needs, Facility Improvements for Compliance, Fuel and Transport needs, Operation's Needs, Risk Communication, Field Hospital Support, Outreach Activities, Vaccines Support and Human Resource Cost. Furthermore, IMT uses the Government financial rules and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Finance Standard Operating Procedures to ensure that financial expenditures for COVID Response are properly accounted and meets the necessary financial procedures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the IMT and the Monitoring Evaluation Framework is outlined in the COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. Last year, the IMT used the World Health Organization guidance in conducting a country COVID-19 intra-action review and conducted an intra-action Report. This internal review allowed the IMT to focus on what work well and what areas that they needs to improve on. Mr. Speaker, I thank the Honourable Member for that question.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, we will move on to the sixth Oral Question for today. I now call on the Honourable Nath to ask his question. You have the floor, Sir.

Vaccination for COVID-19 Positive Patients
(Question No. 150/2021)

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

Can the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services clarify when should the COVID-19 positive patients receive their vaccination?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE (Minister for Health and Medical Services).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have answered that question to a bit in term of the supplementary questions that were given, suffice to say that after 14 days if they are well, they must be vaccinated. But I want to use this opportunity to correct the statements that were made by the Opposition.

Firstly, Honourable Tabuya, studies that are coming out from around the world and at the moment, we are expecting studies similar to that in terms of the Delta variant have shown that you

reduce transmission up to 70 percent by being fully vaccinated. So, that is also the reason why we would like as much as possible for those who are working to be fully vaccinated because you do reduce transmission. It is not 100 percent but it is significant.

Mr. Speaker, the other thing is this morning, I just want to make it very clear in no way did I or the Government blame our people and that is something that Honourable Radrodro brought up this morning. I think she is misleading Parliament this morning. If she is to read the *Daily Hansard* tonight, she will see that part that I talked about - why the concern about the misinformation and why we are giving platforms to people who are erroneously looking at data and are anti-vaxxers. She will see that I am addressing a small part of our community that are resisting the mechanisms for our people to be able to receive life through being vaccinated and the data that we have available.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to make that very clear, that part of that is because of what the healthcare workers have raised. They have come to me, messaged me saying, "We are very concerned about people who are giving misinformation, we are going out into the community, we are going out into the middle of Naitasiri, Tailevu North, even in Navosa" and they are saying, "See this healthcare worker, this keyboard warrior has written about the vaccine, has written that it does not work, that is why we do not want to be vaccinated". That was what I was addressing this morning.

I was addressing this morning the concerns of the healthcare workers, the concerns of the frontliners who go out into the field and are facing this. That is why I want us collectively, as an august House, to address the issue of misinformation and to say, "We should not give these people a platform" because they are taking away the ability of our people to receive something that is free and available, that is, vaccination which does save lives which also reduces transmission for up to 70 percent.

HON. SPEAKER.- I give the floor to the Honourable Gavoka. You have the floor.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. My question to the Honourable Minister, the prevailing wisdom is that, once we get to herd immunity, life goes back to normal. Some countries I believe are finding that that is not so. If that is the case, are we going to change the narrative and not to rely on herd immunity at 80 percent but for the whole country to be immunised?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister has said that we would like everyone (at least 80 percent of the population) to be fully vaccinated. We want as many people as possible to be fully vaccinated.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- 100 percent.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- We want 100 percent. What the studies are beginning to show and there is some literature that has come out recently that showed that this notion about herd immunity is one part, one important part is actually protecting your own self, that is one important part. You get vaccinated to protect yourself from serious illness, serious hospitalisation and death - that is the second thing I want to raise.

The third thing is this, what we do know is that there are some countries (and the US as we have seen recently) where they actually have many counties or districts that have actually brought back the masking mandate. Part of the reason is that, because they have not really got as much fully vaccinated as the United Kingdom has and Singapore; they are just above 50 percent. United

Kingdom is above 60 percent, Singapore is above 60 percent, Gibraltar is now 115 percent so there are countries that have actually gone right ahead in terms of their vaccination.

The other thing that I want to say before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, is the Public Health Safe Measures is important, whether we are at 20 percent, 30 percent, 40 percent or 60 percent. The Public Health Safe Measures is important in terms of the masking that we are doing at the moment and the other measures. In terms of what happens after that, that is actually dependent on the Honourable Prime Minister and the Cabinet and also the experts giving advice which they are doing on a regular basis, really on a daily basis, Sir.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Can the Honourable Minister update Parliament on whether there are any cases of reinfection following first time COVID-19 infection and if so, what percentage of the total number of cases to-date?

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

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Yes, Mr. Speaker. I think the nitty-gritty of the question of the Honourable Member can be best served if it is brought up as a separate question in the next parliamentary debate or as a Written Question. I think that will be able to answer it well.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you. We will move on.

Students without Internet Access & Electronic Devices
(Question No. 151/2021)

HON. T. WAQANIKA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the measures taken by the Ministry to ensure that students without access to internet connection and electronic devices can still undertake lessons from their teachers for the duration of this second wave of COVID-19 infections?

HON. R.S. AKBAR (Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts).- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. When schools nationwide closed on 21st April this year, the Ministry immediately rolled out a number of initiatives for all students from Years 1 to 13, to ensure that some form of learning continued.

The Ministry developed supplementary learning materials in the form of worksheets for the first week of the school closure. During the same time, educational video programmes were aired on our education channel, radio lessons began to broadcast on FBC, Radio Fiji One and Radio Fiji Two on weekdays.

On Monday, 7th June, the Ministry launched its learning hub specifically designed for students around the country and all supplementary learning materials, such as radio lessons, video lessons, worksheets, as well as *Bula Kids* videos. Those accessing the learning hub via Telecom Fiji and Digicel Fiji network will not incur any internet charges. However, those wishing to access this platform through the Vodafone network will incur normal internet cost.

Since 5th July, schools have been developing learning packages for the students in the form of weekly home study packages. This is in print form. This is prepared by teachers based on their classroom coverage because teachers know what has been covered in Term 1 prior to schools being closed and a mode of delivery to continue in the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for those teachers who do not have access to devices, data and resources, we allow them to access school-based resources to continue delivery of lessons for the students. We have kept our schools open to cater for this delivery of materials. The Ministry has fully released the free education grant and schools are authorised to use the funds to facilitate these materials. Our schools have also been making other printed worksheets and weekly home study packages that is collected by parents upon discussion with the heads of schools from their nearest school. This is for those students who may not have access to reliable internet services or electronic devices as mentioned in the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is free, of course, and no child or parent has to pay for any of these printed materials from schools. To take off the academic pressure from our students, we have removed all school-based projects from Years 8, 12 and 13. All boarding school students have returned home and are accessing resources the same way as the rest of the students. Teachers from these boarding schools are sending them the learning resources either electronically or hard copies are being provided or teachers have formed groups where they are working with teachers in these schools to provide learning materials to their boarding students. Parents and guardians are then able to collect printed materials if they are not able to access it electronically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we are faced with extreme challenges, we tend to respond in innovative ways. In our regular meetings with our heads of schools, they have shared that teachers are making every effort to ensure that materials do reach their students. Teachers are using the assistance of their *turaga ni koro*. In the Yasawas, eight out of thirteen school heads and many teachers are stranded on the mainland. Each week they prepare and print the learning materials and send them to the islands in fibre boats. The school community and village headman distribute these to the students and families help students complete their work and return these by the same boat to the head of schools and we hope this will continue for as long as schools are closed.

The delivery of resources to students in remote areas also uses this form where we use the village headmen, *turaga ni koro* and community leaders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 16 percent of our primary schools and 52 percent of our secondary schools are engaged in some form of online learning. These include Moodle, zoom, websites, *Google* drive, *Google* classroom, emails and other social media platforms. We have also noted that a number of schools use other learning platforms as their own initiatives, such as the *Viber* groups, and *Whats App* groups. To help teachers and students effectively deliver and learn through online platforms, the Ministry now has setup the latest version of the Learning Management System Moodle which is assisting many schools. This is a free software and does not need regular financial commitment and our schools using these are responding very well and many other schools are eager to try this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very soon our Year 13 students will receive their monthly data bundle of \$20 which was announced in the recent budget and we hope that this will help them engage in learning through zoom classes with their teachers. They will be able to communicate with their teachers through e-mail and other communication platforms and of course, access the Moodle online if their schools are using them.

The initiative by the Fijian Government will further ensure our Year 13 students get equitable access to learning resources despite the socio-economic situation. We hope our students will not be left behind and we hope they make good use of the data bundles that will be available to them in a couple of weeks. Children who do not have access to online platform or who do not have access to devices will continue to receive the same level of support and activities that children are accessing online. Teachers, parents and communities will continue to assist in every possible way in terms of providing these children with printed worksheets which is returned when they collect the next week's worksheets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has had unprecedented impacts on all major sectors of the economy across the globe. Canberra in Australia went on a week lockdown last Thursday and I am advised that they are going to go on a further two weeks lockdown. Many countries have readily available internet and immediately resort to online education delivery. For us, out of the thousand primary schools, we have only 85 schools that are not connected and out of the 175 secondary schools, we have only three secondary schools that are not connected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not about schools being connected, this is about communities being connected. This is about devices being available in the homes of the children. Earlier in the morning we heard the Honourable Attorney-General talk about all these digital devices and the plans for it. Honourable Waqanika spoke about data, I think if I heard you correctly, for university students. Our three major universities are switched into online education delivery and these universities have made arrangements with Vodafone and Digicel to allow their students to access learning resources hosted on the universities local service. This means that students' data will not be consumed when accessing the learning resources through the universities' websites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand these are difficult times and we understand that teaching and learning has been greatly disturbed. We hope that we resume and open our classes to face-to-face mode because we strongly believe that teaching and learning actually, for us here is favoured in a traditional form of learning, that is, students want to see their teachers in the classrooms. What we are doing now is supplementary learning as well as teaching of a few new topics but when schools do resume, the Ministry has put in plans to ensure that these children do not miss out.

It is also a fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that when schools are closed for a longer period of time, we will see a small percentage or a greater percentage of children may not want to return to school, so we need to think about that as well. What we are doing now is using the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Facility Programme, to run a lot of counselling and training programmes for our child protection officers - refresher courses for our trained councillors. When the students do come back to school, our teachers and our facilities are also prepared to welcome them back.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to say the parents play a very important role. Pillar 4 of our national curriculum framework talks about parental engagement. I plead to all the parents and guidance to look after the children while they are at home and please engage them in some form of learning. We continue to run competitions for our children so that the spark of going back to school remains there.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister. Honourable Bulanauca, you have the floor for you supplementary question.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is very encouraging to hear about connectivity as announced in the morning, to Bua, Wailevu, et cetera. But I am concerned about the reception availability and accessibility, in particular the affordability on all those gadgets in order to connect those things. It might be easier in the rural areas. How can you help those to have the accessibility, particularly in the rural areas and the affordability to connect?

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

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did mention the issue here is about the connectivity, accessibility and affordability in communities right now. Our schools, to some extent, are equipped with that but unfortunately, we are talking about the households and communities.

If he heard correctly, right now the Honourable Attorney-General spoke about that. At the moment, we are going to assist our Year 13 students. We are keeping our schools open so that the facilities could be used by the community members and parents and, of course, our teachers are there to support.

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

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A supplementary question to the Honourable Minister; I thank the Honourable Minister for the many initiatives being established, especially in the Ministry of Education. But, in terms of teachers accessing students in rural areas, is there any form of financial assistance for the teachers available from the Ministry when they travel to these schools?

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

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the question, the first thing I would like to note is that, in this year's budget, the Government did not touch on the teachers' salaries and acting allowance et cetera. When teachers do travel to areas away from their schools to deliver worksheets et cetera, yes, we have under the Free Education Grant, where the Head of School can accommodate for transport. As I have said, all the printing materials is free of charge and Heads of schools and teachers can claim for transportation from the Free Education Grant. For this Free Education Grant, we have not withheld any amount, we have given the full percentage to the schools as per this term.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on the eighth Oral Question for today, I want to advise that the Honourable Bhatnagar has withdrawn her question, as has already been addressed in the Ministerial Statement by the Honourable Attorney-General earlier today. We move on to the Written Question.

(Question No. 152/2021 withdrawn)

Written Question

Update on Beef Extension & Beef Breeding Programme (Question No. 153/2021)

HON. I. KURIDRANI asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment provide an update to Parliament on the Ministry's beef extension and beef breeding programme for the periods 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 –

- (a) the annual average ratio of livestock officers to farmers;
- (b) distribution of the new beef cattle breed by Division and Province; and
- (c) the effect of the programme on domestic beef production?

HON. DR. M. REDDY (Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment).- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting date, as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister. Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of Written Questions.

Honourable Members, just to remind you on the answers to Written Question, I would like the answers to come in as soon as possible. Some of you get it in quickly and others dilly-dally a bit.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's proceedings. Parliament will now adjourn until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.46 p.m.