

# PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



## PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

### DAILY HANSARD

**TUESDAY, 27TH JULY, 2021**

[CORRECTED COPY]

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**TUESDAY, 27TH JULY, 2021**

The Parliament met at 9.30 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

HONOURABLE SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Honourable Members were present.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 26th July, 2021, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE CHAIR**

HON. SPEAKER.- I welcome all Honourable Members to today's sitting - those attending in-person and those attending virtually. I also welcome all those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament. Thank you, Honourable Members.

Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today. So, we will move on to the next Item on the Order Paper.

**RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2021-2022 APPROPRIATION BILL 2021**

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the order of speakers listed on the Batting Order and I now call upon the Honourable Joseph Nand. You have the floor.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Thank you, Sir. The Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today to give my contribution in support of the National Budget for the fiscal year 2021-2022 presented to Parliament by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I wish to congratulate the Honourable Minister for Economy and his highly dedicated and qualified team for a superb Budget that was prepared in circumstances never seen before. This Budget has given all the citizens of our beloved nation the impetus and brighter opportunities to capture and move forward despite being hard hit by the global COVID pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no one would have ever imagined that there are people like those in other nations whether developed or not, would have had to endure the loss of dear ones and suffer hardship

to unimaginable scale brought about due to this health crisis. I am proud to say that our Government ably led my Honourable Prime Minister kept a close watch in the situation and without delay provided proactive responses, intertwined by the technical support of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

At this juncture, I wholeheartedly thank the Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services and his frontline team for holding the fort and keeping the fight alive against the COVID pandemic that may go beyond 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark on the beginning of yet another financial year of our Government in Parliament, I find this to be an appropriate time for me to thank and congratulate the Honourable Prime Minister for his vigilant leadership in steering Fiji forward with the best efforts to leave no one behind despite the calamities that have affected our nation in terms of very severe *TC Yasa* during the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, initially with the COVID-19 Response Budget, Honourable Minister for Economy was able to stress the available financial resources to deliver for the most vulnerable sections of our society and those that have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

As many of our citizens stayed home in the lockdown period our Police, Fireman and Military, Town Councils, Sanitary Workers, Trucks and PSV Drivers, Health Frontline Workers, Bank and Executive Workers, Vegetable Sellers and Farmers especially from Valley Road, all had to go about their work as normal with a backdrop of the pandemic hanging over them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this opportunity to thank these brave men and women for discharging their duty diligently to serve the nation when duty calls. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for public good all Members of Parliament unanimously agreed for a 20 percent pay cut too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the pandemic rages on Government had once again continued to provide household packs to those who have been quarantined or gone into isolation. Altogether \$12 million has been allocated in the Budget for the provisions of rations and outsourced by the New World Supermarket and Shop and Save Supermarket. This also provided employment to many people and generated much needed local economic activity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today we have vaccines available. Thanks to our donor partners and since the vaccination drive was launched by our Honourable Prime Minister, I am proud to say that we are able to medically safeguard the wellbeing of our citizens despite anti-campaigns by some leaders of certain sections of our society. Our Government has ramped up the vaccination drive and very soon will achieve our set target setting on course for our new normal. Sir, many have succumbed to the deadly virus - my sincere condolences to the grieving families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of initiatives have been rolled out to provide income support to those that have lost their jobs permanently, both in the informal and formal sector. This is also to support, through the continuation of Social Welfare payments and other social protection initiatives, those in the formal sector who were given the opportunity to withdraw \$200 per fortnight from their FNPF General Account. And those who had their hours reduced were eligible for a pro-rata payment based on the number of days they were not working.

The Government also paid \$205 million and out of the total \$306 million directly to the members of those who did not have adequate funds in the General Account. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for those in the informal sector Government paid a total of \$32 million to over 250,000 Fijians through

M-PAiSA and MyCash mobile wallets. This, of course, was \$90 cash assistance and two rounds of \$50 cash assistance to assist Fijians to buy much needed food and other essential domestic items.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to fully supplement and scaffold this, a further \$200 million unemployment support will be given by the Government. This is in addition to the previous initiative which will continue. Fijians affected, such as those in the formal sector with inadequate funds in their General Accounts and informal sector will now, for the very first time, be covered under the new scheme where the Government will pay each individual \$120 per month for the next six months.

Those Fijians who have received their first dose of vaccination before the first week of August, the first payment of \$360 will be made in August to cater for the three months ending till October 2021. Those Fijians who are fully vaccinated before 31st October, the second payment of \$360 will be paid out in November to cater for the three months ending January 2022. This includes those unemployed in the formal sector across Fiji and for the informal sector, only those living in Viti Levu will qualify. This also includes those above the age of 18 years and not receiving any other form of Government assistance to-date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir it is very encouraging to see that around 300,000 Fijians are expected to be assisted with this new initiative, which clearly demonstrates the very caring nature and responsibility of our Government. This is in addition to the regular budgetary provision for the Social Pension Scheme and Poverty Benefit Scheme already in place since the FijiFirst Government came into power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, nearly all Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have been affected by this pandemic and many are at the brink of totally ceasing operation due to their inability to pay off their loan repayment. In an effort to assist these enterprises to sustain themselves, a \$200 million cash injection to MSMEs, fully subsidised for two years. This shows the enormous commitment by Government for the resilient recovery of Fijian businesses. This, however, can be accessed through our very own Fiji Development Bank (FDB), providing much needed boost and support to FDB's effort in maintaining its customers that have been impacted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this initiative, businesses can take a loan from FDB, ranging between \$10,000 and \$100,000. The good part is that, they will not be repaying anything to the Bank for two years and it will be an interest-only loan for that period that the Government will pay on behalf of the businesses.

This is a win-win situation for established and aspiring businesses. Businesses can start repaying their loan from the third year, after two full years of cushioned recovery. This provides much needed stimulus for a resilient economic recovery by addressing the most wide-ranging socio-economic aspects of Fijian livelihood, thus overcoming the financial burdens of businesses that continue to struggle with the impacts of the pandemic and grapple to stay afloat. Furthermore, the icing on the cake is Government increasing its interest-rate subsidy for agriculture loans by FDB from 6 percent to 8 percent, and increasing the loan limit for the subsidy from \$50,000 to \$100,000, which means that customers will pay less.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the domestic front, despite the current subsidy of 16.34 cents per unit for the first 100 kilowatts of electricity per households with income under \$30,000, our people are still struggling to make ends meet, let alone paying for their electricity bill. Our people's worries will be over as from 1st August, 2021 to 31st January, 2022. Government will fully subsidize the 34.01 cents per unit of electricity for households with an annual income of less than \$30,000. This means that eligible households will not pay any electricity cost for the next six months. However, going into the seventh month, these households will continue to receive a subsidy of 16.34 cents per unit. With a total funding

support of \$11 million, around 50,000 households shall be assisted, which will definitely bring much needed sigh of relief to eligible Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir apart from this, Government will continue to provide 92,500 litres of free water for around 31,000 households who are currently assisted under this initiative. These households are earning less than \$30,000. This is in line with meeting the Sustainable Development Goal 6 which states Clean Water and Sanitation. With the rapid growth in urbanisation and the ever-increasing demand for good sanitation, this initiative will boost our citizens' capacity to meet those challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in an effort to honour our commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 5 - Gender Equality, Government has allocated \$1.5 million to provide sanitary pads to all female students from Year 7 to Year 13 in our Primary and Secondary Schools throughout Fiji. This is a huge relief in twofold; one for female students now not having to miss schools and second, for parents to save some money as they no longer have to buy sanitary pads. On totality, over 50,000 female students get this benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with our Government's continue drive to provide employment opportunities for people in the informal sector and those that have lost jobs, Stronger Together Job Support Scheme and Jobs for Nature Programme will continue. Since its inception, government has spent around \$3 million to the initiative and an additional \$5 million is set to be allocated in this budget. Those who are unemployed will have the opportunity to be engaged in the Jobs for Nature Programme to carryout nature reforestation work such as seagrass planting and reforestation of mangroves in coastal areas. This is in line with our government's commitment in providing resources that are essential to full securities of Fijian people and communities around outer islands and coastal areas as many people depend on mangroves, as it provide nurseries for fish and other marine species.

Furthermore, mangroves provides shelter and protection from storms for vulnerable communities who live beside coastal areas. Additional Budget of \$4 million has been allocated for this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite COVID-19 pandemic calamities and government stretch to provide for all Fijians, the Fiji Education Institute which was introduced in 2014 will continue for primary and secondary schools students from Year 1 to Year 13. Along with our Honourable Prime Minister's vision to ensure that no child is left behind, government through MEHA will ensure that every child in primary and secondary schools receive education fully paid by our government. Gone are the days when parents had to folk out money from their pockets to pay for their child's education and transportation to schools as many were in dire straits, already burden with other family commitments and responsibilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, municipal markets in Fiji provide an important avenues for thousands of vendors, for small businesses people who are from both urban and rural communities and interestingly and women make up majority of these market vendors.

We all know that the livelihood of a market vendor who are not protected, as a result many suffered from this pandemic and found it difficult to pay their stall fees. Therefore, interventions need to be made so that these vendors can continue to earn their decent income and sustain livelihoods of their families. To support this market vendors, government has allocated \$2.6 million to directly pay their full market stall fees for one year for both temporary and permanent vendors. This is a huge financial relief for more than 7,000 market vendors across the nation. To my knowledge, no previous government has ever done this. Our FijiFirst Government had that compassion for our market vendors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the whole world is facing serious threats and challenges of this pandemic and the aftermath of it. There is a trying time as many economies are struggling in order to revive and

Fiji is no different. I am proud to say that our people and industries have exhibited a fighting spirit and high level of resilience. I wish to quote from Sir Rabindranath Tagore and I quote, “Fireflies is a collection of proverbs and maxims” and I quote, “Fate is the bed that fills the light and sinks when dawn is still dark”.

I am very confident and more optimistic that our nation will fight this pandemic and overcome under the leadership and guidance of our Honourable Prime Minister and we are all poised to achieve greater things from the initiative announced in the Budget by our very own smart and intelligence Minister for Economy. It has given our government an idle platform to support and facilitate the economy’s reset.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to thank all Cabinet Ministers and all Honourable Members of Parliament for the magnificent work that has been done so far and I wish us all the very best and continue on this journey to make Fiji a greater nation amongst nations. We may have had our disagreement and methodologies and principle but at the end of the day, it is all about the job been done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I learned in my secondary school days about Karakuri island ancient wisdom of books that a King or a Ruler is one who creates and acquires wealth, protects and distributes it for the common good. Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said this, that is exactly what Bainimarama Government is doing. The Budget provides every opportunity to all Fijians of this nation to rise and capture as many opportunities and initiatives provided for their sustainable growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you very much for the opportunity given and I give my full support for this Budget presented by the Minister for Economy. Thank you, Sir and God Bless Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate and I now call upon the Honourable Qereqeretabua. You have the floor.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I begin my reply to the 2021-2022 Budget Address by offering my deepest condolences to the families of those who have succumbed to COVID-19. All of them deeply loved and deeply missed, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, and beloved grandparents and of course, healthcare workers.

We must not forget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lives also lost because they could not access medical intervention for other serious illnesses, including Cancer and Kidney failure. I know words cannot take away the pain you feel or fill the empty spaces in your hearts but I want you to know that I grieve with you.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to all medical and non-medical staff and workers at the frontline and those working in the background, trying under the most difficult of conditions and circumstances to stand between COVID-19 and us. Many of us have no idea the struggles you encounter daily nor the dangers many of you accept as part of your duty to your country. On behalf of the NFP, I thank you most sincerely and urge all eligible Fijians to please get vaccinated. I also pause to thank our rugby teams and their outstanding performances both in New Zealand and Japan, and a special shout out to the Fijiana Team and all of Team Fiji in Tokyo.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, I pay tribute to a couple of teenage sisters, Anne-Mary and Faith Raduva, founders of the Lagilagi Relief Drive for all they have done to lift girls from period poverty. Since May, 2020, the Lagilagi Relief Drive have distributed more than 3,000 sanitary pads to cyclone and COVID-19 affected communities, villages and families. They are self-funded and assisted by

financial donations from relatives, friends and supporters. *Faiaksia* and *vinaka vakalevu*, Anne-Mary and Faith.

Mr. Speaker, we know that this 2021-2022 Budget is a result of Government's failure to prevent the deaths and despair we are now faced with. This Budget rides on hope and prayer to alleviate the terrible hardships faced by the vast majority of our population as a direct result of the failures of this Government to protect our people and our economy. We all know that the economy, indeed the whole country was teetering at the edge of an abyss way before COVID-19.

There is no doubt that this is indeed an elections budget, Mr. Speaker. This Government has failed the people of Fiji. We all know that. Government knows that too but they will not admit it. They also know that this is going to be their undoing at the polls next year and that the people of this country now see them for who they really are. Arrogant bullies, lacking empathy who do not consult but always think they are always right.

Let me take us back to March 2020, Mr. Speaker, paraphrasing the words of Jacinda Ardern on 14th March to 'Go Hard and Go Early' against the virus, our own Prime Minister said, on 23rd March, 2020 that we had to act quickly and decisively. On 29th March, 2020, the Honourable Prime Minister said, "I appreciate that our lockdown measures and travel restrictions have not been easy for everyone but it is clear that these are the right measures taken at the right time to lock down this virus". Mr. Speaker, everyone knows the verse - pride cometh before a fall. I have used it several times in this House to caution Government's boastfulness in relation to everything.

In April this year, the Prime Minister boasted at an FNU event that no other country could beat Fiji's COVID record. A few days later, this deadly second wave began. If Government had been quick to act and locked us all down with all the appropriate financial assistance in place, the super-spreader events which caused this current traumatic second wave, would not have taken place. The super-spreader events and of course the primary infection point for the second wave from that flight on the 10th April, which I must add no one has owned up to nor apologised for. This is typical, however, this is how this Government operates, protect their buddies, blame everyone else.

Mr. Speaker, *Reuters* news agency reported that on the 12th July this year that the Dutch Prime Minister conceded that coronavirus restrictions had been lifted too soon in the Netherlands. The Dutch Prime Minister apologised as infections surged to their highest levels of the year. This is what he said, "What we thought would be possible, turned out not to be possible practice. We had poor judgement which we regret and for which we apologise". Do you think we will ever hear the word 'apologise' from either the Prime Minister or his Minister for Economy? Let me through you, Mr. Speaker, put that question directly to the members of the public watching on the Parliament Livestream to respond yes or no in the comments field whether they think they will ever hear that word from the Prime Minister or the Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, may I again quote some lofty words spoken in this very House five years ago. "In a democratic society", we were told, "the test of a government's strength lies not in the way it controls or prescribes to its people but in what it demands of itself." Very honourable and very democratic. Also, very selectively truthful. And whose words were these?

The Honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy's when delivering the 2016-2017 Budget. The same Minister for Economy who is now telling the people of Fiji, "no jab, no job", the same Minister for Economy who threatens people's welfare payments if they do not get vaccinated. The same Minister for Economy is getting ready to blame the people for Government cuts, if we do not reach our vaccination targets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a good leadership is no longer a luxury for Fiji, it is desperately needed. We need good leaders to help guide us, we need good leaders to make the essential large scale decisions that will keep Fiji moving. But most of all, we need leaders with integrity and honesty. We need leaders who can delegate, who are not control freaks and who can allow decisions to be made. We have already seen what happens when decisions are not made, people die.

We need leaders who can communicate, we cannot lead if you cannot express yourself without the Qorvis or Vatis online and offline spin all the time, that is so far removed from the reality, it is a joke. We need leaders who are self-aware and know what to do when they do not know what to do. They do not just bluster and blunder on. Good leaders are grateful, they are grateful for the efforts of others. They are also respectful of others and by doing so, they build trust and improve their own effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, good leaders have influence over others because they can use logic and motion and appeal to cooperation. They are empathetic, they can understand and share the feelings of others and good leaders have courage. They do not avoid problems, they do not allow conflicts to fester. They step up and deal with them and try to move things in the right direction. These are the basic elements of leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir and unfortunately, these elements are nowhere near Fiji's wheelhouse.

The Government has one responsibility of before all others and that is to look after the people as per its social contract, and in this, it has totally and utterly failed. The Government believes it would put the economy before the people and now we face economic failure and the people are crying out for help. I say to the Government; how could you failed to understand that without the people there is no economy? Why did the Honourable Prime Minister not heed the medical experts; repeated pleas to lock us down? You went hard and went early last year. I want to ask: Why did you not do this again this year in 2021? How many people have to die before you will admit your wrong and apologise to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has blood on its hands now. This Government has the pain and the misery of the dead and their families on its hands. Mr. Speaker, Sir, occasionally, we will see a picture of a Minister touring some Government facility or another. But what has any of them done to understand to stop and hear and listen to the anguish of the people who cannot pay their rent? Have they listened to the workers who are now working one, two or three days when they used to work six days a week? Can they even begin to imagine how many impoverished families worry about how they will feed, shelter and clothe their children?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Prime Minister and his first mate refused to listen to the experts and now all of us are paying for their arrogance. He is the captain of a sinking ship, his own Government. He has run our nation onto the rocks, despite repeated warnings from the health experts in the lighthouse. This Government has failed completely and totally to communicate with the people through this crisis. The Honourable Prime Minister barely talks to the people. When he does, he turns up hours late. What kind of leader speaks to his people at midnight when he supposedly turned up hours later? He thinks that the people that we all work for, have the time and mobile data to be waiting up on him to show up, at his leisure. Every video speech they make, shows reactionary emojis - all those orange frowny faces furiously doing the *tuiboto* along the right-hand side of the screen. I know this Government is tone deaf, but surely it cannot be blind to that as well.

The Honourable Prime Minister thinks that because he gives one speech, we are all glued to the television and we have all listened and will obey. He does not understand the essence of communication, which is to repeat the message, to listen to the feedback, adjust the message and

communicate some more. His Government can barely communicate in the vernacular languages. These are the languages our people need to hear. Their very lives depend on it.

Imagine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the New Zealand Government can communicate about COVID-19 in *Vosa Vakaviti*, in Hindi, in *feyang roTuom* for Rotumans and New Zealand can do this. But in Fiji, the birthing ground of our mother tongue, we cannot or we will not. It is shameful. Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people can get barely get any information in any language. Dr. Fong and the Health Officials are barely seen. Then suddenly they show up without warning.

Dr. Fong turned up once-in-a-blue-moon press conference on Sunday night, Mr. Speaker, but unfortunately, no one was listening because they were all gripped by the sweep by police on Honourable Members of this House, for questioning. I do not know about you, Mr. Speaker, but to my mind as an elected Member of this august House, the highest court of the land which makes laws for which the people sent me to do, I find the overreach of the Police on shady allegations of malicious acts worthy of parliamentary censure.

It is our job as Members of Parliament to inform our constituents on our views on Bills that are before us. It is not the job of the police to act as a primary enforcer of false or fake news related to the laws that we are looking at.

Mr. Speaker, it is just amazing how the Government loves to criticize the Opposition as politicians. Last time I checked, Mr. Speaker, everyone who sits around these tables, apart from you, Mr. Speaker, are politicians. If you are not a politician and not registered under a political party, you cannot be sitting here under this august House so all these wordplays, really are quite pathetic.

Furthermore, the Head of the Government continues to show appalling behaviour towards women. Calling a woman journalist '*ulukau*', resulting in the Fiji Media Association putting out a statement, calling out women MPs as worthy only of TikToks - this is disgusting and unbecoming behaviour of a leader of this nation, so stop it!

Mr. Speaker, all over the world we have seen television footage of hospital wards and the suffering of people and the desperation of doctors and nurses. The people must see these images to understand how serious our crisis is. The people must know the truth. But not here, Mr. Speaker, because the Government wants to hide the truth about its own incompetence and unreadiness and yet the news has now leaked out.

Fiji and the world have now seen the deplorable state of our medical facilities, our morgues, quarantine centres because the people, not the Government, shone a light on them.

Last Friday, Mr. Speaker, Professor Robert West, Emeritus Professor of Health Psychology at the University College London said this of the UK Government:

“We are seeing a decision by the government to get as many people infected as possible, as quickly as possible, while using rhetoric about caution as a way of putting the blame on the public for the consequences”.

And, Mr. Speaker, this is what this Government is doing, it is setting up the people of Fiji for the blame.

Reaching 80 percent vaccination is not the "open sesame" command that reopens borders outside of our own. The state of our health system is enough to stop anyone from coming to Fiji! But I find it dishonest that the budget address and all other statements from Government, dangles a carrot

that high vaccination numbers will automatically make outside borders reopen to receive us when the fact of the matter is that, that is beyond Fiji's control.

It is a desperate budget, Mr. Speaker, it tries to please everyone in the desperate hope of winning next year's Elections. Why do I say desperate Budget? Because it just all seems too good to be true. The Government refused to lock us down because they said they could not afford it. Yet all of a sudden they say they have money to throw around for market vendors, State lease tenants, people needing birth certificates and mobile data for our young learners.

Mr. Speaker, the four-yearly lolly scramble has well and truly begun! Do these promises sound familiar - they should! It is written and loudly declared like all the activities in Head 50 that appear year after year. Lots of activities and millions allocated but not a lot in terms of real and actual improvements to infrastructure, health, education or even the cost of basic food items.

To illustrate, Mr. Speaker, I skimmed through the Consequential Bill for Customs Tariff Act hoping to see some basic food items on the list! But no, the only products that will cost less are: green tea, fruit juice not manufactured locally or has no added sugar, vegemite, lead acid batteries for buses and taxis, audio visual equipment such as television cameras, digital cameras, video camera recorders, pocket-sized radio cassette players and radio receivers, electrical equipment, non-woven bags, cement, timber/wood, reinforcing bars, veneer plywood, nails, powdered milk, liquid milk, butter, yogurt and cheese. Really? I mean really? But watch!

Just before Elections, water tanks, free connect wifi at central points, Walesi TVs - \$1,000 that many probably did not even apply for, will fall like manna from heaven. That will not work out this time around, Mr. Speaker. The threshold for lies dressed up as truths has been wealth and truly reached.

On medicinal marijuana or industrial hemp, the Government ridiculed Honourable Members from this side of the House when this subject was raised by two Members of Parliament. So imagine my surprise when the Honourable Attorney-General brought up the subject of industrial medicinal marijuana.

Imagine my further surprise to see another Budget Consequential Bill on the Gambling Turnover Tax which updated the schedule to increase this from about less than \$1, up to 15 percent. Is the Government expecting revenue and high-rollers in this sector? What have we learned or earned from the One Hundred Sands casino exercise so far, apart from a Native-American headdress, as gleefully worn then by the Honourable Prime Minister?

Mr. Speaker, in his Budget Address, I note that the Honourable Minister is very proud of having a \$150 million cash balance to carry over at the end of the year. He describes this as an additional buffer, should tax revenues underperform. I am wondering how that is possible within the procedures of the Financial Management Act. Do all leftover funds not automatically go back to the main Government Consolidated Fund?

Mr. Speaker, let me get this clear: At a time when Government had enough cash to pay for a short, sharp lockdown, the Government refused to lockdown, instead, it opened up the containment areas. Government said it had no money but it had \$150 million in cash?

In failing to lock us down, Mr. Speaker, the Government did not just destroy people's lives and health, it destroyed the economy. Viti Levu is paralysed by the virus. It will remain paralysed for the rest of the year, and maybe even longer.

If the economy is down, of course, companies will not make profits and pay income tax to the Government. And, of course, people will not spend money which gives VAT to the Government. So, of course, tax revenues will underperform. But the other thing the Honourable Minister is not saying is this; how much does the Government owe to its creditors? How much does the Government owe under the tax incentives for film producers who came to Fiji? This includes those who came to Kadavu, who have been in the Mamanucas and in other parts of Fiji because I am told that the producers' claims are more than \$70 million. That is half of your \$150 million gone right there. And how much does the Government owe to its other creditors?

If you talk to any business person in Fiji, they hate doing business with Government because it takes so long to get paid. Imagine, we are talking about the Government of Fiji, which cannot even pay its own debts on time. And you talk about confidence in the Government's financial management! It is just incredible, just like the fairytale that the Honourable Minister for Economy told us a couple of years ago, that debt is good, and now we are drowning in it!

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I urge the Government to withdraw the amendment to Bill No. 17, and stop answering our concerns and the concerns of landowning units with an empty assurance that, "iTaukei land is safe" - no one believes that. I urge Government to have some respect for the traditional owners of this land and consult. I urge the Members of the FijiFirst Government who are members of landowning units to think very, very carefully about what it is, I have no doubt, they will be voting for.

It amazes me, Mr. Speaker, that the CEO of iTLTB consulted with the Solicitor-General's Office but not the Board. It amazes me that the CEO can be part of a ploy to amend such an important legislation and not even have the gumption to advise his whole Board, who by the way, are the lawful trustees of the landowners.

But it amazes me further that a week after that so-called Budget Consequential Bill was tabled, the Board was still in the dark about it, by which time public debate was already stirring. As far as I can tell, all members of the Board are still members and no one has resigned in protest. So it stands to reason, that there could be an element of complicity in this whole exercise with the Board?

Mr. Speaker, it also amazes me that apart from the incompetent way this iTLTB Bill is coming to this House, the iTLTB itself is coming to ask for \$5 million for its operating expenses in the Budget. Yet, this House is not up to speed with the status of its latest Annual Report - a key KPI, one would think that the iTLTB CEO and, yes, the Board should be aware of. The Honourable Prime Minister as Chair, maybe your CEO is on too many other Boards and cannot honour what he is primarily being paid to do?

Mr. Speaker, I do not support this Budget because I do not trust this Government to implement the promises it contains. When the voters send this Government out through the ballot box, in their wake, like so much *flotsam and jetsam*, will float the many broken promises and failed policies. Most tragically, Mr. Speaker, also in their wake will be the broken lives of ordinary Fijians, who this Government sacrificed at the altar of greed, arrogance and ego. Thank you.

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

Honourable Members, we move on, and I now call upon the Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. You have the floor.

HON. V. NATH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament; *bula vinaka*, good

morning, *Ram Ram* and *Namaskar*. I stand here today to support the motion by the Honourable Attorney General and Minister for Economy on the 2021-2022 Budget Appropriation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, on behalf of the Fijian Government, I take this time to remember the lives of those that have been affected by this pandemic. The 23,139 cases that were diagnosed with the virus, especially the victims and families of the 186 lives that succumbed to the deadly virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is not about fireworks and displays only as alluded to by Mr. Savenaca Narube and not sugar-coated as mentioned by Honourable Jale and it is not an Election budget as alluded by Honourable Qereqeretabua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is about assisting all Fijians affected by the downturn with more focused support to the poor and most vulnerable. It is well targeted and facts based because government officials are conducting surveys and visiting affected areas. Most of this data is consolidated using tablets and online processing and analysis. With good data we are better targeting our support and making sure that clients receive them on time. This shows that government support is not only about providing assistance, it is about providing better and timely assistance, especially to those who need them most and not those who abuse it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vulnerability of our beloved country is common knowledge and we have been experiencing the impacts of global warming and climate change more frequently now, than ever. According to the 2017 World Bank Climate Vulnerability Assessment (CVA), between 2000 and 2016 a total of 41 climate-related disasters occurred in Fiji, which have resulted in a total of 237 deaths, affected 1.7 million Fijians, and caused a total loss of FJ\$3.2 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of Fijians being pushed into poverty and hardship could increase from 25,700 people per year to an estimated 32,400 per year by 2050. Fiji suffers average annual asset losses of FJ\$500 million from natural disasters, which is more than 5 percent of the country's GDP. The disasters directly related to climate are likely to increase in intensity, and perhaps in frequency, in the future.

Moreover, the Climate Vulnerability Assessment of the country reveals that the Fijian Government will require about FJ\$9.3 billion in investment over the next 10 years to strengthen resilience, which is almost 100 percent of its annual GDP

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to this, I must state that Fiji is a member of the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). The CDRI is a partnership of national governments, UN agencies and programmes, multilateral development banks and financing mechanisms, the private sector, and knowledge institutions that aims to promote the resilience of new and existing infrastructure systems to climate and disaster risks in support of sustainable development. This demonstrates our commitment to have resilience at the heart of all our development programmes not only within the Ministry but across government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now there is a great paradigm shift in disaster management. We have an element to consider, a pandemic that can 'cripple' an economy and alter the way we go about our normal day to day activities, including our response to natural disasters.

Allow me to enlighten this august House on the impact of the deadly disease. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the dramatic loss of human life worldwide. Globally over 4 million deaths against the 192 million positive cases, as at 23 July 2021. Obviously the impact of COVID-19 to countries differ and the ability to return to pre-COVID-19 economic conditions.

The World Bank recently reported that the recovery of uneven and mainly the world's poorest countries have been left behind. While about 90 percent of advanced economies are expected to regain their pre-pandemic per capita income levels by 2022, only about one-third of emerging market and developing economies are projected to do the same.

In 2020, global extreme poverty rose for the first time in over 20 years, with nearly 100 million people pushed into extreme poverty. Although there is an anticipation of the global economy to expand by 5.6 percent in 2021, there are countries still lagging behind especially the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS). Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must enlighten this august House of the works that my Ministry has been doing to support the Ministry of Health and Medical Services during this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NDMO through the divisional commissioner's office has been playing a pivotal role in the ongoing COVID-19 operations at the sub-national level. This includes ongoing assistance with information management capacity by the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC), monitoring of the divisional operations and producing daily situation reports. This support assisted the Ministry of Health and Medical Services in their effort to provide much needed assistance to affected communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the civil servants engaged through the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, our disciplined forces, an additional 1,074 civil servants from other government agencies are also playing a support role in the fight against this pandemic. These include:

- 488 in the Central Division;
- 81 in the Eastern Division;
- 228 in the Northern Division; and
- 277 in the Western Division.

These civil servants are on the ground daily provide support to our divisional operation centres and containment borders assisting social welfare recipients, BDM services, banking services, buying and selling of agricultural produce and general assistance through the runners system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Professor Prasad and others have mentioned that Government is not taking full control of the COVID-19 outbreak. To say that this Government is doing nothing to control this COVID19 outbreak is an offence to the thousands of civil servants out there risking their lives and that of their families to ensure that those in vulnerable conditions are assisted on a daily basis. Rather than criticising Government and the civil service we must thank them for their commitment towards assisting with the containment of the current COVID19 outbreak. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition claimed that ...

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Give them a special allowance. COVID risk allowance.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Opposition claims that there is never any consultation done with the *vanua* and the churches in regards to the vaccine programme. That is a lie and I wish to correct this now. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services reached out to the Fiji Council of Churches earlier this year and through this initiative church leaders were able to mentor and share the benefits of being protected against the COVID19 virus in their respective congregations. Additionally, the Ministry of iTaukei has mobilised teams through their respective offices of the Roko Tui to ensure that the *iTaukei* communities are well-informed of the benefits of being vaccinated for their families and their future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NDMO under the leadership of key permanent secretaries, is assisting in facilitating the whole of Government awareness programme and assistance to vulnerable communities. Under this initiative the community engagement team has been formed, tasked to look after six zones within the Lami to Nausori Containment Area and it is made up of 208 personnel from 21 government ministries. As a result of our intensive community engagement, we have managed to vaccinate over 15,000 Fijians in the high-risk zones such as Lami, Suva, Nakasi, Nasinu and Rewa. The team is also advocating on the Infection Prevention Control (IPC) to communities to help break the COVID-19 chain of infection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the community engagement programme targets four key strategic areas of interest. These are:

- (1) Conducting community profiling;
- (2) Conducting community awareness of COVID-19 in the informal settlements;
- (3) Establishment of the community response structure; and
- (4) Identify vulnerable communities and intervene with a targeted approach to humanitarian response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these teams are equipped with tablets to assist in their work and enable real time feedback with the creation of a dashboard for the key Permanent Secretaries and Divisional Commissioners to access to provide them with the outcome of findings on the ground. The benefits of these initiatives are:

- (1) Identification of vulnerable members of the society who are willing to be vaccinated and the mobile vaccination teams.
- (2) Once the community response teams are formed, we complement our plans by providing PPEs. Some communities who are now using this structure to keep their community safe are: Qauia Village, Lami Village, Tovata, Wakanisila, Jittu Estate, Nadonumai, Vunibua, Nadiridiri and Bainivualiku. I would like to congratulate these leaders for being the role models and ensuring their communities are safe at all times.
- (3) While the Ministry of Health focuses on health related issues, the community engagement initiative focuses on the socio-economic needs of our vulnerable communities. Students who do not have means to print out worksheets, the initiative by the Ministry of Education is now working to deliver worksheets to these students.
- (4) Our runners are able to intervene and assist our elders who are running low on medical supplies.
- (5) Those who have lost their jobs and the need food rations, we are working with our clusters and our NGOs to support them where necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also complimented the Ministry of Health in setting up Community Isolation Facilities (CIF). Through the support of the Australian and New Zealand Governments, we have procured and delivered the following for COVID-19 emergency operations:

- Beds and Beddings;
- Washing machines and dryers;
- Generators and water tanks;
- Fridges and Stoves;
- Solar lights;

- Marquees and Tents;
- Tables and chairs; and
- PPEs to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we can see, this is a whole of Government approach. In fact this is putting into motion the Integrated Rural Development Framework, which my Ministry adopts for development in peace and non-disaster times. Now, let me turn to our Natural Disaster Preparedness, given that the cyclone season is now around the corner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, late in 2020, Fiji was severely affected by Category 5 *TC Yasa* and Category 2 *TC Ana*, which left thousands homeless, livelihoods were lost, negating many years of development gains. *TC Ana* brought torrential rainfall, strong winds and widespread flooding across the Central, Northern and Western Divisions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for *TC Yasa* approximately 24,413 people sought shelter in 312 evacuation centres across the four Divisions; and 5,300 for *TC Ana* in 141 evacuation centres, and seven casualties and three missing persons were confirmed as a result of these two storms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an After Action Review (AAR) exercise was conducted for the three tropical cyclones; involving Government, non-government organisations, civil societies, international donor partners and the private sector. The AAR's captured, consolidated and documented best practises; identifying gaps and weaknesses; ensuring we respond better the next time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NDMO has also been utilising the Fiji Cluster System to coordinate with the civil society organisations and the private sector to support humanitarian responses. The same coordination arrangements were also activated to assist the Ministry of Health in support of the COVID-19 response.

The NDMO, through the technical support of the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) has developed a dashboard to map Who's doing What and Where - commonly known as the 3W. This helps to map out the areas that have been assisted and identify gaps where the Government and the partners can strategically direct assistance to. During *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, the 3W online platform recorded a total of over 12,000 activities from the Cluster members doing work across all Divisions. Similarly, for the current COVID-19 response, a total of over 1000 activities have been recorded to date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NDMO is not resting. As we continue to support the Ministry of Health with the pandemic response, efforts have also been underway to prepare the country for the next cyclone season.

The Fiji Meteorological Services usually releases the cyclone season forecast around October, and their latest Fiji Ocean Outlook release has shown that the tropical Pacific Ocean is currently at a neutral state which will continue for the rest of year. In terms of cyclone activity we anticipate a similar cyclone season to the last season. Please, note these are predictions and we will continue to update this august House as we move closer to the Cyclone Season. Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir to highlight some key programs that will assist Government with its current preparedness phase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NDMO has also partnered with relevant NGOs to deliver disaster awareness trainings in selected vulnerable communities as mandated under the 1998 Natural Disaster Management Act. The National Disaster Awareness week is scheduled around October in preparation for the beginning of the cyclone season in November. Also coinciding with the UNDRR International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction on the 13 of October every year. The last National Disaster Awareness Week was conducted in Ba last year focusing on the theme, 'It's all about Governance'.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore, as part of our preparedness activities, NDMO conducts Emergency Operation Centre Training mainly targeting Civil Servants and first responders. During times of disaster operations these Civil Servants are called upon by their respective Divisional Commissioners, Provincial Administrators and District Officers to operate their respective Emergency Operation Centres (EOC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in times of disaster it is vital to have an effective and efficient communication platform for our emergency responders. The Government through the NDMO has partnered with the Japanese Government on a \$180,000 grant to provide technical and financial assistance towards upgrading of High Frequency Radio equipment to identified locations across the four Divisions. The NDMO has identified communication black spot and has developed communication plans to address these black spots.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NDMO is also conducting a few critical analyses and development of its current policies, plans and standard operating procedures. These initiatives are timely, taking into consideration the new complexity that has arisen in the Disaster Risk Management space.

This includes the updating of the National Emergency Operation Centre, Standard Operating Procedure, Establishment of a Logistics Manual for our warehouse operations, upgrading and digitization of the NDMO Warehouse. These are initiatives that will ensure compliance to internal audit reports for the Ministry. The NDMO is also reviewing the National Tsunami Response Plan, the National Humanitarian Policy and also the National Coordination Guideline for Disaster Risk Management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, gone are the days that we respond to a disaster using old reactive mechanisms. New emerging issues have highlighted the need to change and evolve, rather than relying on the mechanisms that may have worked well in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to echo the same sentiments raised by the Honourable Attorney-General Budget Address that adversity will not end with COVID. We were hit by three major cyclones in a span of just 10 months; Category 4 *TC Harold*, Category 5 *TC Yasa* and Category 2 *TC Ana*, and a fourth if you add *Tropical Depression Bina* - all landed their own blows on our people, delivering brutal reminders that investment in preparedness effort is vital to protect our people from the consequences of climate change and disasters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people are distraught at the effects of this pandemic has had on our livelihood and our economy. We have the utmost faith that with the guidance of the Honourable Prime Minister, the FijiFirst Government will take us back to the Fiji we were pre-COVID - the Fiji where the children look forward to meeting their friends in school; the Fiji where workers enjoy their salaries regularly on a fortnightly or weekly basis...

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Assistant Minister, you have run out of time

HON. V. NATH.- ... The Fiji that allowed families to gather and share; the Fiji that has a prosperous future.

I believe that when COVID-19 is over, we will rise from this pandemic and emerge even stronger.

HON. SPEAKER.- You are out of time.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Your time is up.

HON. V. NATH.- In that spirit, let us join hands to deliver a better life for our people.

HON. SPEAKER.- We will move on.

Honourable Members, we have just found the missing Honourable Member. And now that we have got him by the line, we will give him the floor so that he can deliver his response. I will give the floor to the Honourable Navurelevu. You have the floor.

HON. RATU T.N. NAVURELEVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members, all those watching live on TV and listening over the radio, *ni sa bula vinaka saka*. I wish you the best on these challenges and extraordinary times, and I hope that one and all are in good health with strong spiritual faith. May the power of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always.

I sincerely thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your patience and your consideration to allow me to change my position in the Batting Order that I am able to be here with you today. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I contribute to this Budget debate, I wish to plead to the Leader of the Government, the Honourable Prime Minister, to take this nation back to the main source. When I say the main source, I simply mean the God of this nation which was received by the chiefs of Fiji back in 1835.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the main source, I am talking about. Through the power of God, the nation was rebuilt. Civil war ended and cannibalism stopped and through the influence of biblical teaching, chiefs accepted and acknowledged Christianity and the Son of God, Jesus Christ to be their God and the saviour of this nation. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this happened well before the indentured system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am one of the many who strongly believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God is the main source of everything, anything under the sun, anything mankind needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during this difficult situation, I plead to all Christians to stay united in offering prayer, asking our God to intervene and protect this nation with the people of Fiji from this virus. Let us ask God to revive our economy. Let us ask our God to give courage, confidence and wisdom to combat this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, I do agree that the Covid-19 crisis has had a devastating impact on the nation's economy. It also affects business activity, employment, as well as the socio-economic conditions and public finances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from my own perception, I rather say that the Budget announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy is irresponsible and rudderless. I say this because there is no new initiative presented to help the people, particularly at this challenging situation the issues of income support for the unemployment and vulnerable, initiatives of grants and assistance only helps the people in a short term. The proposed policy measures cannot help in the quick recovery and sustainability of the economy in a short and medium term.

Mr. Speaker, sir, there is no initiative to build empowerment and accountability for citizens that will contribute to the recovery of the economy. The resource based initiative there in black and white was there in the previous budget. Can the minister tell us how was this allocation used example 'the dalo farming programme - \$400,000, yaqona farming programme - \$300,000 and farm access

road - \$450,000? Like the previous budget, it sounds simple but causes a lot of confusion to the people when it comes to implementation, it take a very long process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I requested that the amount allocated for root crops farming to be increased to a reasonable amount to meet the demands of farmers. Agro Marketing Authority can be the market access for exporting *dalo* and other commodities. This initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will contribute to the quick recovery of Fiji's economy when the major source is closed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the FRA for their recent upgrading of the road, now ongoing, at the portion of the road at Qelemumu. Now the road has been upgraded to the stage of being tarseal. I receive information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the portion of this road upgraded will not be tarsealed but only left with that smooth condition. I request the Minister to follow up and direct the authority to have it tarsealed so that the condition of the road last for so many years and not wasting rate payers money.

I wish to inform, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same with Naikelikoso Road which was upgraded three years ago similar to what they are doing now at Qelemumu and was never tarsealed. After the completion, we love travelling through that road because of comfortable condition.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the road was not tarsealed, the condition is back to square one with potholes and now continue blaming. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is how the Ministry is wasting ratepayer's money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak on issues concerning Bill No. 17/2021 that are there, the opportunity to be online with you this morning and I now rise on behalf of the landowners of Namuka, landowners of Macuata, landowners of Cakaudrove, landowners of Bua and landowners all over Fiji, to voice our concerns over this sinful action.

I am among all chiefs to show our great concern over this Bill, to remove the consent of the board for any mortgage, charge, pledge, caveat or for any such lease to be dealt with by any court. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all aware of that, *iTaukei* were the first settlers of this land before the missionaries from Great Britain arrived with the revelation.

During the leadership of the British colony, the *iTaukei* land was legitimate *iTaukei* Land Trust Act. It was known as the entrenched legislation. Its objective is to protect and safeguard the *iTaukei* land which was inherited by God to our ancestors and passed from generation to generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to ask the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney General; Why? What is the purpose behind this bill? We have the right to own, you have the right to use. Is not that fair enough?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot argue to give away what was inherited to our ancestors as forbidden by God. I recall the story in the *Bible* from *1 Kings, Chapter 21* about Naboth's vineyard. When King Ahab wanted to be in possession of Naboth's vineyard with fair price, Naboth said, I inherited this vineyard from my ancestors. The Lord forbids that I should let you have it. Through the evil plan of Jezebel, Ahab's wife, the king's wife, Naboth was accused and stoned to death by the people of Jezreel and later King Ahab went to take possession of the vineyard.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- The landowners' rights are intact.

HON. RATU T.N. NAVURELEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I relate the price of wrongdoing, evil doing. God sent Elijah the prophet to Ahab and said you have devoted yourself completely to

doing what is wrong in the Lord's sight. I will bring disaster on you. I will do away with you and get rid of every male in your family, young and old because you have stirred up my anger by leading Israel into sin. To Jezebel, your wife, the dogs will eat her body in the city of Jezreel. Any of your relative who die in the city will be eaten by dogs. Those who die in the open country will be eaten by vultures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the Honourable Prime Minister, the Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Chairman of the iTaukei Affairs Board to reconsider his decision concerning this Bill and I pray that God's will, will prevail.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude about the Budget, as I mentioned, the grant and assistance is spoon-feeding the people, creating laxity, laziness and being irresponsible. At the outset, I would say that this Budget is nevertheless but it is a politically-motivated tactic of vote buying. This Budget is irresponsible and rudderless. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. On that note, Honourable Members we will suspend proceedings for half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.43 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.18 a.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, be seated. We will continue with the debate and I now call on the next speaker, the Honourable Qionibaravi. You have the floor.

HON. ADI L. QIONIBARAVI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present my response to the 2021-2022 National Budget that was presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy on Friday, 16th July, 2021.

The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, the Honourable Government Ministers, Assistant Ministers and Honourable Members; I would also like to echo and share the sentiments of the Honourable Leader of the Opposition in expressing sincere condolences for those who have lost their lives through Delta variant. I also thank our seven gladiators for their success yesterday and continuing success in the remaining Olympic Games.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our country, similar to other nations around the world, are facing extraordinary economic and social challenges as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. For us here in Fiji, the second wave, which crashed on to our shores in April, 2021, has been devastating with both direct effect on the virus and necessary measures to control it leading to unprecedented fall in output and high unemployment.

On the global front, indicators suggest that least growth is gaining momentum. However, the downside risks are now real today, as we are trying to fight the second wave of the Delta variant which is more transmissible and deadly. The delay or the ineffective of the vaccine schedule will continue to disrupt mobility and economic activities in our country, particularly the opening of our borders to allow tourists back to our shores, as we know, tourism generates almost 40 percent of our GDP, and provides employment to more than 200,000 people, directly or indirectly.

Against this threat to the health and livelihood of our nation, we on this side of the House, review the Budget in the context of the following:

- (1) Has the Government acted swiftly to provide the necessary assistance to the most vulnerable in our society?
- (2) What type of support is provided to protect small businesses?
- (3) How has the Government responded to the evolution of the pandemic and whether it has been pro-active and forward looking or just reactive?
- (4) What are the Government's short of medium term plan or roadmap in the Budget to easing restriction to allow the easing rules in opening the economy and easing restrictions to allow businesses and the private sector to bounce back as quickly as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with uncertainty in the international front in the opening of borders any sooner, it is important that we should consider short-term measures in the budget to enhance our own comparative advantage and prioritise allocations based on our need, whilst having an open mind to the medium term opportunities rather than having an unrealistic budget full of false hope that are impractical to the urgent needs of our people. Based on these fundamentals, it is unfortunate that the Budget does not address these major questions. For me personally, the most important agenda that Government should consider is protecting the health, jobs and livelihoods of the people.

Secondly, I wish to acknowledge the enormous tasks carried out by our health officials, health workers, the support from the Military, Police, Prison Officials, volunteers and contractors in addressing the demands of the pandemic COVID-19, and now the Delta variant. Our professional health officials and support staff have given more than their best, true to their oath of allegiance to

provide the best care for all those who seek medical care in our country. The support troops have also provided much needed assistance as best as they can. For all their contributions, we express our sincere gratitude for their sacrifice. Some have been unfortunate to contract the virus and have passed on. We shall remember them for their resolution and commitment in continuing to provide healthcare even when they were burdened with the virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people of Fiji all suffered in one way or another during this pandemic. We have supported each other as best as we can. The Government has provided what it could provide and together we are fighting the pandemic. The Opposition Members have continued to keep a watching brief on Government's plans and implementation to ensure better use of resources for the benefit of people of this nation. At most, we, all the Members of the Honourable House have hurled insults across the House in our efforts to prove that we are correct. We are suspicious of each other, we deny the good policy that are proposed from both sides of the House for the betterment of Fiji. Yet, the people of Fiji are watching us, their elected leaders to provide solutions to the problems which our beloved Fiji is facing.

Yesterday, I listened intently to the debate, I somewhat felt sad and annoyed to hear the Honourable Koya denying the figures of Fiji's economic growth provided by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition in the Opposition's response to the Budget. Those figures were obtained from the Budget Supplement book for 2021-2022, and extrapolated to the latest figures. Yet, those figures were fervently stated to be incorrect, misleading in this Honourable House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reflected on the earlier *Hansard Reports* on how our earlier statesmen and women used to debate in a gentleman manner in this Honourable House. If they were to differ from each other, they would do it with wit and humour. My first plea to the House this morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a humble request that we each review the manner and form of our debate in the Honourable House, and for all Members of the House can at least make an attempt to listen to each other and debate in a civilised manner for the benefit of the people who need our direction and resources to help them put food on the table. If we have taken our custom of *talanoa* across the seas to the International Conference of the Parties, we should also be able to use the aged long *talanoa* session for our own benefits and for Fiji and its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my contribution today I will review the sectors which should be given priority health and agriculture. It is common knowledge that our health system has collapsed and the country is now in a state of emergency. The Ministry of Health has issued two recent media releases that confirm that our health system cannot cope with the crisis. The Ministry has simply been overwhelmed by the explosion in the number of cases and deaths.

Firstly, there has been sufficient time since the outbreak started for the data to tell its own story to ensure that our people respect the COVID-19 safety measures and take the vaccination, the following are my observations.

Some of us were inputting the delta variant data soon after the first infection in April-May, 2021. A simple data analysis shows that the virus has consistently multiplied between one and a half and two times every seven days since the 3rd May. This has not changed in range except for the last three days when testing in Suva-Nausori containment area has been suspended to concentrate testing in emerging areas.

The multiplication of the virus is in line with overseas experience, the United Kingdom had delta variant before Fiji and their experience showed the virus doubled every 7.4 days. The data was readily available in May. If the Government had heeded that data it would have guided them as to how many cases we would have today within a very close range. If our experience is slightly less

due to testing preferences or slower transmission, the trend is still the same and it will catch up in a matter of days.

If WHO or the United Nations have not been assisting with data modelling from the beginning then this basic administrative function should have been dealt with by Government. If not, the Government should have either made special secondment or created a position and urgently hired someone who could do this task.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at least there is an expectation of reasonableness in the pandemic situation. What would the public reasonably expect from a reasonably competent Government and Civil Service? Would the public reasonably expect that a competent Government would do a rolling and regular analysis of pandemic data and use that data to plan its resources, staff, finances, equipment, facilities, infection control measures, et cetera?

Based on what the data told them was likely to be probable rather than possible or unlikely. I think the answer is, yes. The public could reasonably expect that this would be a function of Government and in particular the Ministry of Health as the lead Ministry in the health crisis.

The fact that Government has either noticed the data they were supplied or that they compiled to inform decisions and planning or that they had the data and ignored it or that they made no attempt to compile the data or that they did not have the capacity internally or through emergency staff appointments to do so is unreasonable.

On this basis, it is bordering on neglect or wilful neglect. The Government of the day has a responsibility to have or build the capacity to manage public health crisis. They have failed in their responsibility to the Fijian people, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The actual figures todate shows the following trend:

Date	No. of Positive Cases
6th May	58
13th May	92
20th May	120
3rd June	466
10th June	849
17th June	1,463
24th June	2778
1st July	4779
8th July	8,591
15th July	13,816
22nd July	21,291
29th July	Do not know the figure for this date

The Government has a duty of care to its employees in particular, medical, police, army, navy, Civil Servants. That duty of care extends to implementing infection control education, provision of adequate PPE, sufficient testing to ensure the frontliners are not on duty if positive and importantly systems for monitoring and evaluation of those processes and the ability to adjust is necessary to ensure that staffing is sufficient to cope with projected needs based on emerging data.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji could have fared much better if there was a plan of action to address COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, the issue regarding people's refusal to be vaccinated could have been

addressed effectively if the two remaining legs of the three legged stool were put into action quite earlier on with official from every Yasana (Province), together with representatives of the Christian Churches and the iTaukei Affairs Board, take out awareness about the pandemic to the people. Likewise, for our Indian settlements, groups from the Indian Advisory Councils and representatives of the mainline Hindu and Muslim religious groups could have also taken out awareness to Indian settlements.

The recruitment of two Roko Tui Urban to address the issues in the urban areas, in particular, Central & Western could also have paid dividend.

In the absence of properly organised awareness, our people had to take to the social media and the result is as we have unfortunately witnessed, being played out.

COVID 19: Mr. Speaker, Sir, death as at Sunday at 8.00 a.m., had been 195. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of COVID-19 in Fiji has been severe and has adversely affected tourism, exports and remittances - a key strategy for economic growth and crucial source of employment, business, investment and entrepreneurial activities.

Fiji's economy has declined heavily with increased Government debt. It is expected to reach \$8.2 billion by July 2021 or 83.4 percent of the GDP. On the other hand, COVID-19 has further impacted remittances, which is the second largest source of foreign exchange earnings after tourism and an important supplement to household incomes. This declined from February-April 2020 but it rebounded in October-November 2020. And I would like to echo the comments made by the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) in expressing its heartfelt appreciation to Fiji's diaspora, who are the unsung heroes of Fiji's economy during this difficult time.

The impact of the pandemic, together with extreme weather patterns have thrown Fiji into a desperate situation. It will now rely heavily on additional external support to accelerate vital developments, such as infrastructure and agriculture, especially in the rural areas as it remains vulnerable to the harmful impact of natural disasters, exacerbating endemic poverty. Hence, a much-needed recovery plan is critical, for example, building climate resilience infrastructure and providing disaster risk insurance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's economy must now prioritise a move to agriculture and infrastructure, the former includes substantial subsistence sectors, mainly dominated by the indigenous people, who earn their livelihoods from various cash crops, planting *yagona*, pineapples, *dalo*, cassava, fishing, et cetera, not only for family nutrition, but also contributing to the economy, as well as friendlier environmental impact.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the major disruptions to trade flows as well as the downturn in the economy has put an enormous strain on public finances. Having said all that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all accept that Fiji is in a precarious situation: *sa leqa tu na vanua*.

The basic needs of the people must be addressed. Sufficient food must be grown to ensure a healthy population. This can be achieved via increasing farming for our subsistence farmers with additional crops for commercial use. This will require mechanised farming, as I had stated in April 2020.

Secondly, landowning units should be empowered to establish their own *mataqali* trust and that their *mataqali* or their members should lease, at least, 50 percent of their own land to ensure adequate subsistence requirements. Government should empower all rural communities with mechanical means beginning with rotavators and diggers, to enable large scale farming.

The dire needs of the Ministry of Health should be urgently addressed. The dilapidated conditions of the Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital and all Divisional Hospitals built in the 1960s and 1970s are urgently in need of renovation, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A healthy population will contribute to lesser future costs in our health infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I will now turn to Bill No. 17, if I have time, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would just like to inform the House of how the laws regarding the Fijian people, the native people, the first people of the nation were developed. They were developed as a bundle - the Fijian Affairs Act, now the iTaukei Affairs Act, the Native Land Trust Act, now the iTaukei Lands Trust Act, the iTaukei Lands Act, the iTaukei Development Fund Act. They were developed together, and it was through the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, the iTaukei Lands Trust Act is a special Trust that was developed only after the approval of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga and in my concerted view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the chiefs should be consulted if there were to be any amendment to the Act.

Hardly any amendment has been carried out over the years because the Native Land Trust Act is part of entrenched legislation that were put there by our wise leaders in those days. Now, we are trying tinker, to make changes to this sacred laws of the Fijian land belonging to the land owning unit or the first people of the nation Mr. Speaker, Sir. Connected to that the Fijian Affairs Act had responsibilities for the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, I refer to the now removed Section 3(1) and 3(2) of the Great Council of Chiefs responsibility under the Fijians Affairs Act and it states, "it shall be the duty of the Council in addition to any powers or duties especially conferred upon it to submit to the Governor-General. This is the wording of the old act.

Such recommendation and proposal as it may deem fit for the Fijian people so the chiefs of Fiji had a direct way to government. They could directly put to government what they need, what they would like to see for the development of the Fijian people and likewise the government seeks the advice, the recommendations of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga on regulations, on legislations, on any matter that impact on the rights and interest of the Fijian people. These are the key issues that I am trying to emphasise today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plead with the Honourable Prime Minister to please just review the intending action to amend section 12 of the iTaukei Land Act. You just need to consult with the chiefs, they just need to be informed. They need to be assured that everything will be alright. That Act was specifically prepared in the colonial days to protect the interest of the indigenous people of this nation and there has hardly been any amendments over the years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that would be my concluding remarks in my contribution today. I plead with government, it is not a simple matter. It is a matter that comes to the heart of every landowning unit and I seek their consideration. I seek your consideration to withdraw this Bill. I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir for the opportunity to express my comments in this Parliament.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- The *iTaukei* are going to benefit.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Honourable Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services. You have the floor.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Thank you. The Honourable Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament in this august House and those Honourable Members participating virtually from their office or home, members of the public watching this livestream from the comforts of their homes, through their cell phones or listening to the radio; a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my honour and pleasure to address this august House as the Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services on the 2021-2022 National Budget. Foremost, I wish to sincerely thank our Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, for providing all Fijians with this courageous Budget.

I wish to also thank the Ministry of Economy staff led by the Acting Permanent Secretary in the short time of taking up his position, for a job well done in performing the arduous task of putting together a comprehensive Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has been allocated a total of \$403.3 million. With this massive increase, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is well placed to see the recommencement of the long-awaited CWM Hospital Maternity Unit extension, the interior upgrade of Labasa Hospital, refurbishment of St. Giles Hospital, Emergency Department at CWM Hospital, Land Stabilisation and Refurbishment at Savusavu Hospital, upgrade of Lautoka Hospital Operating Theatre & X-ray Department, and upgrade and maintenance of medical facilities around the country.

With the latter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would personally wish to see that the living conditions, work spaces and stations of our Ministry staff serving in the rural and maritime facilities, together with their families are just as comfortable and stress-free as those working on the main islands and in urban and peri-urban areas respectively.

As I had mentioned previously in this august House, on my appointment as the Assistant Minister for Health and Medical Services in 2016, the very first task I looked forward to undertaking was this very subject matter. This, I commenced in December 2016 when I was requested by the then Honourable Minister to attend a handing-over ceremony of an ambulance donated by Loloma Foundation to the Taveuni Subdivisional Hospital.

In accepting her request, I asked that I also visit the nursing facilities on Taveuni and Qamea Island to which Madam Minister gave her approval. Upon my return, Madam Minister inquired about my visit. She was very surprised when I told her that if I had my way, I would shut down the Dreketi Health Centre on Qamea Island. In astonishment, she uttered, "Don't say that." I replied, "I take my hat off for the doctors and nurses at the facility for braving the inhumane conditions of their living quarters in particular, and the clinic."

Over that weekend that followed, ensuing brought heavy rainfalls over the entire country, causing a severe landslide on Qamea Island which pushed the entire health facility into the sea, taking with it a few homes and a portion of the school dormitory. When we met in the Office on the Monday morning, Madam Minister said, "Areh Minister, the Qamea Health Centre is no longer." I replied, "God has answered my prayer."

There are many other facilities like the former Dreketi Health Centre that are in disrepair and in dire need of repairs and maintenance, and I am hopeful that I will be given the opportunity to be consulted in prioritising the facilitation of repairs and maintenance to those in this financial year.

Through the Public Private Partnership arrangements with Health Care (Fiji) Ltd, the new Ba Hospital will commence operations in December this year, while the Lautoka Hospital is scheduled to commence operations in March of next year and will have on offer, apart from the other specialised services, 24 hours in open-heart surgery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to ensure that the upgraded and new facilities are supplemented with skilled and professionals, modern technology equipment and support systems and

medicinal products, hence the Government's intention to hire an additional 238 intern nurses, 140 medical interns, 114 doctors, 10 nurse practitioners and 43 midwives. The Ministry has also acquired the services of private general practitioners to relieve the pressure from the public health system.

The Ministry and the Government, on behalf of all Fijians, wish to thank the Governments of United States of America, India, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and in particular, Australia and New Zealand, for their unwavering support in the provision of vaccines, consumables such as personal protective equipment, including face shields, gowns, surgical masks, gloves, sanitizers, ambulances, vehicles, tents, nasopharyngeal testing swabs, pulse oximeters, regulators, respirators and thermal guns, ICT equipment including tablets, laptops and WIFI hotspots, megaphones, handheld radios, hospital beds, humanitarian assistance to NDMO, FRIEND, UNFPA, Fiji Red Cross, and the list goes on.

Whilst, we have turned our focus to the onslaught of this invisible enemy, we need to remain vigilant of other communicable diseases that have been around since time immemorial, such as tuberculosis, HIV & AIDS and dengue. As a country with the second largest population in the region, Fiji has the highest tuberculosis burden among other Pacific Island countries. There were 480 new persons infected in 2018 and 43 deaths from the disease in that same year. In addition, an estimated nine people with tuberculosis were undiagnosed. These cases are especially important to reach out to, to prevent the spreads of tuberculosis.

While the global response to COVID-19 has slowed the spread of the virus, it continues to have a significant impact on programmes for other major diseases. For tuberculosis, this means a serious slowdown in diagnosis, treatment and access to medicines.

During the lockdown, missed opportunities for diagnosis and treatment initiation give rise to a rapidly growing pool of undetected and unreported tuberculosis. It is also important for the global community to recognise the importance of investment in health systems strengthening and universal healthcare. These investments will not only help slow the spread of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19 and tuberculosis, but crucially will help ensure societies and economies are protected against future outbreaks. Bearing in mind that tuberculosis has affected people over 5,000 years, it is necessary to engage with outbreaks as soon as they begin in order to prevent long term catastrophic costs to nations and their people. Evidence has shown that tuberculosis was found in the remains of mummies of ancient Egypt.

According to the National Tuberculosis Programme, within three months of lockdown and restrictions due to COVID-19 containment in June last year, tuberculosis services were extensively affected. The resources of the tuberculosis control programme were reduced considerably which disrupted tuberculosis services further. These issues has caused emergence of new tuberculosis cases throughout the country, such as:

- Multi Drug Resistant Tuberculosis (MDRTB) cases emerged in Tailevu which became a public health emergency and required the immediate screening of an entire village of 500 persons. Treatment of clinically diagnosed cases and tracing of substantial number of treatment defaulters.
- Every community transmission of tuberculosis indicated by increased rate of treatment defaulter in Taveuni and Rabi, and new paediatric case in Bua.
- Outbreak of tuberculosis case on Koro.
- Operational issues such as malfunction of the only mobile x-ray machine for the control programme and the lack of communication initiatives for tuberculosis.

To respond to these issues, the National Tuberculosis Programme has ramped up coordination efforts with the health division to scale up and prioritise screening activities in hotspot areas where active in index cases emerged or were diagnosed, especially during the three months lockdown period. A proposed list of urgent tuberculosis controlled-activities was developed and need support for immediate implementation.

As a Government, we need to meet the targets agreed in the Political Declaration from the UN General Assembly High Level Meeting on Tuberculosis to be met by 2022, and the tuberculosis targets agreed in the SDGs to be met by 2030. Having endorsed the Political Declaration from the High Level Meeting on Tuberculosis, Fiji must now deliver its fair share of those global commitments and to set nationally relevant targets as per the United Nations High Level Meeting targets.

As a result of the impact of COVID-19 on Tuberculosis services, it is imperative, now more than ever, to accelerate resource mobilisation for Tuberculosis in Fiji. To those Fijians refraining or not wishing to receive the vaccination for reasons known to themselves, let me remind them all that when they were born, they received the BCG injection which was to protect them from Tuberculosis, and at six weeks old, they received the DPT injection which protected them from Diphtheria, Pertussis and Tetanus. During the school years, other inoculations were administered to every child.

Only in November 2019 did the Ministry of Health and Medical Services run a nationwide immunisation campaign due to an outbreak of measles. Why were there not any repercussions back then and why only now?

I plead with all of you who are sitting on the fence, still trying to make up your minds to, please, think of your children, your family, your community, your workmates and your country, by getting your vaccination, mask up, keep your distance, do not share grog bowls and cigarettes, avoid crowds, wash your hands, install the careFiji App on your phone with the Bluetooth switch on, avoid unnecessary movement from your homes and stay within your bubble.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not one who expresses openly the invaluable services of our taskforce from the commencement of Operation COVID-19 in March 2020 to-date, but I can honestly say that I silently remember each and every member of our frontliners from within the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, the Disciplined Forces, Government Ministries, FBOs, NGOs, CSOs, the private sector and others, in my daily devotions.

I look forward to continue working together with the Honourable Minister, the Permanent Secretary, the Chief Medical Advisor, the entire Ministry staff and allied workers, in taking forward the Ministry's vision of "Developing a Healthy and Productive Population" and more so, to working together in fighting this invisible enemy 'COVID-19' and 'Leaving No One Behind'.

With those, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2021-2022 National Budget and I thank you most sincerely.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for his contribution to the debate and I now give the floor to the Honourable Aseri Radrodro. You have the floor.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, Honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Honourable Members of this House, let me make it very clear, that I join my colleagues from this side of the House in opposing in the strongest possible terms, Bill No 7 of 2021 cited as the 2021 - 2022 Appropriation Act. Now,

I will outline some of the reasons why I find the Bill very deceptive, pro rich, very Bourgeoisie and utterly distasteful.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me start by recapturing what I have been saying since 2014 that the FijiFirst Government lacks the expertise, the experience and the practicality to lead Fiji. What they have been doing all this while is only favouring their niche group, their inner circle of friends who unfortunately, over time, have grown smaller and smaller because many eventually woke up to the fact that this gravy train by the FijiFirst Government was headed into coalition course eventually.

The day is here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Government was warned about a possible global financial meltdown, and it did not listen. Instead of growing the domestic market so that we can be self-sustainable during such a time as this, the FijiFirst Government continued to portray that they only trusted advice from their own favourite people. They continue to bring in expatriates and favoured them over our own people, and by doing so, Government failed to uphold their constitutional obligation, to ensure the right to economic participation and the right to employment of our people is realised. The Constitution they imposed has conditions if the FijiFirst Government is unable to provide economic and employment opportunities for our people.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they cannot escape to these arguments for cover, as it is evident by their own actions to hire expatriates, that there is an affordability and there is also an opportunity. They just do not want our local people.

They have turned Fiji into a mockery, with the kind of expatriate appointments, like the recent FDB CEO. What a shame! And before I forget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, naturalizing someone too to become a Fiji citizen only after seven or so years of his being in Fiji, is this for real?

The deception to use their jobs to gain citizenship in Fiji makes me very, very nervous. A small tiny Fiji is being exploited when we cannot even provide jobs to our own people? Now, we are freezing new appointments and putting people on acting appointments. Mr. Speaker, need I say more, that putting people on acting appointments over a longer period of time is not only a sign of a lack of faith on the incumbent, it is also contradicting Government regulations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is apparent that the FijiFirst Government has no time for our Fiji born and bred citizens. That is the long and short of it. Right now, we have an outgoing LTA CEO, Mr. Samuel Simpson. We also have a recently appointed Tourism Fiji CEO, to promote our country. What a joke, Mr. Speaker! A sick joke! How can a foreigner promote the Fiji that he does not even know well?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how many of our Permanent Secretaries brought in by the FijiFirst Government have been foreigners and most have since left with a few still here, wasting taxpayers' money?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, do not get me wrong, I have nothing against expatriates personally. I have objections, however, in the hiring of expatriates in areas of expertise that are locally available. For instance, in the FDB scenario, I am aware of a couple of very senior highly qualified locals from other banking institutions, including FDB, who applied for the position but were overlooked. It is such practices that makes me wonder at the criteria that our Government is using. I do hope we can learn and begin to improve in this area.

Effectively, the FijiFirst Government has promoted reforms of both, the public and private sector, which has further disenfranchised our country and our people and driven a wider gap between the wealthy and the struggling ordinary disadvantaged people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the recent Budget announcement by the Honourable Minister for Economy is a desperate attempt to try and win back the hearts of the people. It is evident that the FijiFirst Government has lost the plot and it is because they choose to listen to one advice only - that of the Minister for Economy.

Sadly, all the other Ministers and Assistant Ministers on the other side of the House will know what I am saying, that it is the truth, but will not dare to admit it. Fiji is today a fraction of what it used to be because Ministers and Members of Parliament from the other side of the House lack the moral courage to do what they are supposed to do.

Mr. Speaker, one look at the Budget and we see that the words by various line Ministers in this august House is just hot air. Fairy tales, because they cannot be sure they will come to pass. Of course, the funds to carry out these plans, they so like to paint as delightful and rosy are, in fact, mostly under 'R' in the budgetary provision. What a sad bunch of jokers, Mr. Speaker!

Mr. Speaker, Fiji used to be a place where we lived together in peace and harmony, and where people, irrespective of their political divide, could land jobs and be free to voice their opinions.

Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the attitude of the FijiFirst Government is not pro-Fiji, not pro-workers, not pro-unity, but is instead, deeply rooted in politics of race, of division and of ruling by tyranny and nepotism. As a result, we can see that this country is on the brink of a civil war driven by hate for the authorities, driven by poverty, unemployment, serious crimes and a misjudge on the COVID-19 mitigation programme.

Mr. Speaker, I hate everything I have just said. I am on record as having called for racial unity in this House, demanding that both sides of the House work towards addressing the biggest fears of the two major races in Fiji - wealth disparity and land security. However, someone has been so stubborn, arrogant, unwilling to listen, and over time, we on this side of the House have proven time and again that his reforms and his strategies are a failure. As recently announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy, this is a proposed million dollar budget with an estimated revenue of \$2 billion and expenditure of \$3.7 billion and a net deficit of \$1.6 billion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Despite all that, Government is faced with the stark reality that Fiji is in a cash-strap situation. As a result of a drop in tax revenue collection and no tourism, no major bona fide investments, massive and widespread unemployment, low sugar production, an extremely high daily statistics of positive COVID-19 cases, it has been forced to opt for a conservative budget.

The fact that it will need to be reviewed in 6 months' time, is worse for everyone, especially the business community of this country and its workers, because it means for the next 6 months, everyone will be holding their breaths and just hoping for a miracle to happen, and for things not to end in catastrophe. Everyone I meet now tells me, let us just all pray that in the next six months, that nothing will worsen and we will not have pay cuts for instance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by their own admission, government is expecting a 43.3 percent decrease in tax revenue collection which is significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ironically, there does not seem to be any real development plan by government on how to grow or recover from post-COVID-19, let alone how to survive COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a \$150 million in cash balances have been carried into the new financial year. Is this from unspent budgetary allocations? What does this mean to the government services? Just like the past financial year, government again mentions the cash budget support grants it receives from Fiji's development partners which have become a key feature of bilateral support. This and the

further divestment of shares now targeted at Amalgamated Telecom Holdings Limited, Airports Fiji Limited, the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation and some other smaller entities, which were mostly established before the FijiFirst Party period of Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now what is so terribly wrong with that picture? It is the shocking lack of the FijiFirst Government's innovation to establish anything on their own that would gain Fiji, economic revenue, create employment and establish social development benefits. All they have to show for their last 15 years of leading Fiji is a massive debt and a lot of investors taking over what used to be primarily domestic activities that are supposed to protect a small developing nation like Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, I often argue with people that we cannot be bringing the same argument one would have for bigger countries like Pakistan, Shri Lanka, Australia or even New Zealand and pitch that against Fiji because that would be like comparing apples with pears. Fiji needs to have some level of protectionism policies in order to encourage domestic growth and development of our agriculture sector, our building and manufacturing industries, our textile, and our tourism and eco-tourism sectors for instance.

These are areas that must not be opened unnecessarily to foreign participation because it will become detrimental to times like we live in now, when international economies contract, and when our domestic markets should have been able to support and sustain employment opportunities within the country. Sadly, that all disappeared when Government changed the Fiji Foreign Investment Act and opened up the investment market into Fiji whilst removing the Investment Bonds usually held by the Reserve Bank of Fiji, sending thousands of our local entrepreneurs to wind up because they could not compete against the bigger, wealthier backed foreign entities like Grace Road, for example.

The long and short of it, Mr. Speaker, instead of creating anything new, the FijiFirst Government is selling off our national assets and proudly declaring that as a boost to our national coffers. This is a deceptive and shameful exercise for this FijiFirst Government.

These are dark days, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we have a government that has failed its people so miserably because it has to rely on offshore grants to sustain our economy, and as such, exposes us to possible manipulation and reliance on external forces. *Isa ko Viti e sana vakavevei!!*

On that note, some of the Land Owning Units of the Monasavu Dam, Wailoa Power Station, Savura Water catchment, and others areas are still waiting for the proper compensation of the use of their resources as promised by this government. The FijiFirst Party government is on record that they did the coup to rid Fiji off corruption but look at what has happened now, we have gotten worse.

The SODELPA Government will ensure that we genuinely look after the needs of the people of Fiji. We will improve livelihoods and we give everyone an equal opportunity and equal chance to thrive in whatever aspect of the employment sector that they wish to engage in. We will look after our youths and give them a promising future. Not one that is so depressive and oppressive like that of the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, why is it so hard for the FijiFirst Government to realise that when you oppress people, they will lose their creativity, their drive for success and growth. The employment policies of the FijiFirst Government is so depressing that we have Toppers and Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Board (TSLB previously known as TELS - Tertiary Education and Loan Scheme) graduates still unemployed in this country with bonds on their heads to work off and now Government's announcement to have a tighter control on public spending is topped off with their announcement to freeze all government recruitments. We will consequentially have more unemployed graduates on

our hands and what a gloomy future we have in store for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Unless of course, the people of this nation are bold enough to say enough, it is now time for change, and the SODELPA Government is the only untested Government with no baggage of failed promises, so we invite them to give us a try.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the shadow spokesperson for infrastructure, I have lost all faith in trusting all the budget announcements of the FijiFirst Government. It is like a pie in the sky, they want to paint which are only uttered to make things sound good. Why the FijiFirst Government cannot accept that all their reforms have failed miserably? Yet they still continue with the open taxi rankings, which is a failure. The removal of municipal taxi bases which is going to cause chaos to both the operators and the travelling public, converting of depots for used tyre collection centres and the many more highlighted in this Budget. The John Prasad, Tony Fulman and MWH experts were all fake who knew close to nothing, Mr. Speaker, of infrastructure development and as a result, we only have to see the status of our roads, jetties and water reticulation systems to all admit that not only are the roads so embarrassingly pathetic, our water cuts have become a living nightmare for everyone with frequent long water disruptions and disconnections that last days on end.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to highlight some needs that are urgent. One of them is the continued closure of the Sawani border. It has now been three months and the people of Naitasiri are struggling because the border remains closed. What is the logic of the closure when COVID-19 vaccination has now reached over 80 percent coverage for first dose and 20 percent fully vaccinated as of last Friday for Naitasiri, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, there must be some progress made when these vaccination programmes are being effectively implemented otherwise we are looking at a lot of depressed communities. Government cannot come and deny our people their right to access services in the main cities when it should take responsibility of its poor judgement call, making people lose their livelihoods, properties and social support systems overnight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Bill No. 17, I will now end by speaking on the controversial Bill No. 17 which is a Budget (Consequential) Bill and as such it will need to be passed so that the objects of the Budget Bill can be put into effect. The way I see this, Government so desperately needs to finance its plans set out in the Budget and so the answer lies in the fact that this Consequential Bill No. 17 ties in with revenue collection for Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if it holds any bearing, let me just highlight that the Sri Lankan Government mortgaged its port called Hambantota International Port to the Chinese. When they could not meet the repayments, the Chinese forced the Sri Lankans to give them a 99-year lease on their port. Let us hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we are not looking at the beckoning of devils into our country.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the admission by Mr. Tevita Kuruvakadua, the Chief Executive Officer of iTLTB that they were involved in consultations with Government on this Bill make matters worse. It means that both Government and iTLTB have failed in their fiduciary duties, trustee duties, agency duties to engage and involve the landowners on the decision-making about what belongs to them and what is that - that is native land, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What is so difficult about consulting the landowners on what belongs to them? They have to remember, they are there because the landowners give them the trusteeship and all this outcry by the people of Fiji could have been avoided, had the executives ensured there was proper explanations on all the amendments to remove unnecessary anxiety.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the land has eyes, lest we forget. A SODELPA Government promises to do better by our people and we will not only give them back their freedom, dignity and sense of pride

of being Fijians, but we will stand with them to ensure we rebuild Fiji into a peaceful and economically viable country where justice and equity are the cornerstones of our nation.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all our frontline workers and their families who continue to give their best for combatting COVID-19 with us all. My thoughts and prayers are with all who have lost loved ones during this time of great trials and I also urge all of us, Fiji has to unite and give ourselves and our country the best possible chances for resumption to normalcy.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish our Fijian Olympians the very best of wishes in the quest in their Tokyo Olympics 2020 Games against Great Britain today. *Toso Viti toso*. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Assistant Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment. You have the floor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Firstly, I would like to commend the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team for a very bold and forward-looking 2021-2022 Budget. I support the intent of the Budget which promotes our responses to COVID-19 and once again reminding us of the importance of food security, promotion of locally-grown foods, fruits and vegetables and limiting our reliance on imported foods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I commence with my Budget speech proper on Ministry of Agriculture, I would like to take a minute to speak to you all on the current COVID-19 pandemic that is infecting our people and our country. We are now well in the fourth month since the second wave of the pandemic hit us with much more aggression, given the transmissibility of the Delta variant.

Let us all remember that there is no rule book on how to manage this crisis, but rather the remedial and the mitigation actions need to be taken in context of the dynamics of the country, zone, district or area. Government's multi-pronged approach has been crafted to ensure that it safeguards people from the potentially deadly impact of COVID-19 disease, providing for their livelihoods through various ongoing interventions. Whilst, at the same time, deploying all resources to wrap up our vaccination coverage, which as of last week, has surpassed 73 percent of the targeted population, receiving their first jabs and over 15 percent getting their second.

If we are to win this war, we must continue to accelerate the delivering of our vaccination programme and encourage all to get vaccinated at the earliest. This can save people's lives and that of their loved ones. I hope that as we have deliberations on the Budget, we remain committed individually to act as advocates for the vaccination programme amongst our old respective network and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Attorney-General, Honourable Minister for Health, the Permanent Secretary for Health – Dr. James Fong, the whole team of frontline workers for the work done so far. I would also like to thank the Divisional Commissioners and their district teams for their tireless work.

Special thanks to Team Ba for their hardwork. The first jab achievement in Ba is more than 100 percent and our teams are working very hard toward providing the second jab.

I also acknowledge the support from Ba Chamber of Commerce, NGOs, youth groups, individuals, community leaders, friends and families overseas for their support during this time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to thank Honourable Bulitavu for his support to the 2021-2022 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture is extremely appreciative to the Government for the allocation of \$61.9 million which is adequate to cover both our operational and capital programmes. Through this, the Ministry will further its service delivery to provide effective and efficient support to farmers and stakeholders. Allocation of budget will be distributed accordingly whereby \$14.2 million is allocated for Crop Extension Services and a further \$8.5 million for Agriculture Crop Research enabling commodity development, improving provision of extension services to all farmers and releasing of new resilient crop varieties.

The Animal Health and Livestock Division is allocated \$15 million to support both, its Extension and Research Services. This funding will cater for provision of fencing materials, infrastructure support and stock development.

The Ministry's operational funding includes wages and salaries of staff and funding grants to immediate stakeholders such as Agro Marketing Authority of Fiji, Agriculture Schools - Navuso and Tutu, Fiji Crop and Livestock Council and Committee for Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years the Ministry of Agriculture is committed to improving food and nutrition security for all Fijians through programme that will deliver improved production and access to safe and nutritious food.

Amidst the pandemic, the agriculture sector has stood tall amongst others to be the backbone of the economy as well as being the stronghold of sustainable alternative livelihood for rural and urban households.

During the 2020-2021 financial year, the Ministry continued to expand its planned activities and undertake several initiatives to cushion the effect of the pandemic and minimize multiple vulnerabilities by ensuring direct access to diversified nutritious rich foods, increasing purchasing power from savings on food bills, provide a substitute for imported food products and employment opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ongoing Home Gardening initiative has provided more than 470,000 individual seed packs to households in the four geographical divisions since the pandemic begun last year. This Activity was ramped up in April this year where in three months alone we have managed to achieve a distribution of 27,000 seed packages, amounting to around 164,000 individual seed packs.

Of this latest blitz operation run by the Ministry of Agriculture, 61 percent of distribution has been in the Central Division, the region hardest hit with the current pandemic. West has achieved around 32 percent distribution with rest of regions as well as corporate organization allocations making up the remaining.

The success of our home gardening initiative has consequently improved urban and peri-urban home gardens. As a result, positive progress has been identified with some households in the Central Division. For example, in Vatuwaqa, a resident Kitone Tagi, a hotel worker, who lost his job, said that his vegetable seeds gardens have been feeding his family during these unprecedented times. Mr. Tagi was one of the few recipients of the first distribution of seeds from the Ministry when the pandemic started. He further stated that getting food for his family was a challenge and his home garden has enabled him to provide the necessary nutritious meals that his family needed during the trying times. Mr Tagi has since been assisted twice through the home gardening initiative.

Another recipient, a Mr. Lingam from Nadera, shared his passion for toiling his quarter acre residential lot when home gardening seeds was provided to him. He further expanded his home garden by creating vertical hanging garden to provide sufficient space. He has progressed further by selling surplus harvest from his backyard garden.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also know that home gardening has not only complemented household food requirement but in many cases, people have been able to grow, produce and sell these to meet their other pressing commitments in these trying times.

The aim of Home Gardening is to support food and nutrition security and our programme has achieved more than that. It has enabled households to save money otherwise spent on buying food or produce and has also provided means of alternate livelihood for many, rekindling their interest in pursuing agricultural activity on a larger case in many instances.

We also know that vegetable gardening can not only increase produce consumption and physical activity, it is also associated with improved emotional wellbeing. According to a recent study, out of 15 daily leisure activities, such as walking and biking, vegetable gardening is one of the most beneficial activities for mental and emotional health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ongoing Cash for Cultivation initiative to-date have assisted 1,000 farmers across Fiji with a total cash incentive of \$200 per farmer. The Ministry will be assisting an additional 3,000 farmers in its second phase, targeting 825 farmers in the Central Division, 280 farmers in the Eastern Division, 925 farmers in the Western Division and 970 farmers in the Northern Division.

The objective of this initiative is, to provide cash assistance to vulnerable farmers affected by *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. This assistance will enable a farmer to clear and prepare his land and procure planting materials to establish a one-acre plot. A total of \$800,000 will be distributed to farmers through this scheme, since we began in February 2021, and I must acknowledge the generosity of our development partners who have made this possible.

Cash for Cultivation is an output-based initiative that will contribute to household economic wellbeing in the following areas:

- garden products can be sold to earn additional income;
- earnings from the sale of home garden products and the savings from consuming home-grown food products can lead to more disposable income;
- disposable income can be used for other domestic purposes, and
- households can purchase additional food items and savings can be used to fund education, and other service needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, back to rural agriculture, during the first wave of COVID-19 in early 2020, a total of 115,000 Fijians lost their jobs. This includes workers in the tourism sector, airline employees, MSME's and others who are engaged in small businesses.

In response to this change, and to ensure that we continue to successfully develop and expand Fiji's agriculture sector, the Ministry of Agriculture launched the Back to Rural Agriculture Programme (B2RA). This Programme aims to support Fijians who have lost their jobs due to the current pandemic and are now returning to their villages and communities to focus on agriculture. This initiative provides successful beneficiaries' initial farm support kits at a total cost of \$400, which will help them to start up their farming activities.

Since the announcement of the programme on 28th June, the Ministry has received 8,147 applications, 23 percent of which were women. The Central Division received the largest number of applications at 52 percent, followed by the Western Division at 45 percent. This overwhelming response does reinforce the fact that considering the current crisis, there are far many who need our support to embark on other ventures to sustain their livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Village Food Security Initiative – Fruit Tree Planting, the Ministry of Agriculture has emphasized that the nutritional security of all Fijian villages will be ensured. This will be made possible through the Ministry's provision of a set of 3x12 fruit tree seedlings to be provided alongside fruit trees to meet their nutritional requirements.

Since the Fiji Day celebration in 2020, the Ministry introduced the Fruit Tree Initiative whereby 50 villages were identified and supplied with 50 fruit seedlings to plant around their communities. The success of this programme enabled its continuation into the current financial year, ensuring the provision of fruit tree seedlings to villagers and communities throughout Fiji.

In June 2021, 50 fruit trees were planted in Taveuni, 25 in Navakawau Village and 25 in Somosomo Village. For the 2021-2022 financial year, the Agriculture Research Services has been allocated \$244,000 that will continue to support this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on organic manure, we are also mindful of the need to ensure our agricultural farming systems and methods are sustainable and conducive to maintaining our ecosystem, waterways and aquatic food sources. With the objective of reducing Fiji's consumption of chemical/synthetic fertilizers, the Organic Manure Initiative is allocated a budget of \$190,000, to address soil pollution, environmental pollution, biodiversity and safe foods.

The Ministry has already embarked on this initiative, and has begun drop offs of the local fertilizer completely free of charge for farmers at various locations. A total of 40 sites across Fiji have been identified, and we have distributed around 14 tonnes of organic fertilizer by end of last week at four sites in Tailevu and Rewa zone. These spots are Kiuva village, Matainoco Village, Bideshi Road Farming Cluster and Naduru Farming Cluster. From this week, we have begun to go further into other areas such as Naitasiri, and villages in Ba Province. An additional 24 tonnes will be distributed by end of July, with an average of 3.5 tonnes per each site, and our ongoing activity in this area will see total of 78 tonnes organic fertilizer distributed across all 40 sites by end of August.

To further complement this activity in the new financial year, the organic initiative will be used to develop three composting sites in Central, Northern and Western divisions. Proper sheds will be put up to ensure that compost is processed safely in a dry condition reducing chances of leaching. This work will expand compost production and sustain future supply for organic fertilizers by the ministry while part of the budget will be used for in depth comparison studies on the impacts of organic fertilizers on crop, animal health and productivity, environmental health and on different soils and climate regimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture remains focused on ensuring food and nutrition security for all Fijians whilst expanding agriculture to address our economic challenges. The growth trajectory has been a positive one in these trying times, and we will continue to deliver on our motto of "Grow Beyond" to enable agriculture standing tall in support of the government in meeting its objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by congratulating the Minister for Economy and his team once again for a very bold and forward-looking budget which in my view augurs well for our future economic development. I join other members of the House that have commended the 2021-2022

Government Budget presented by the Minister for Economy by offering my own commendations. I fully support the 2021-2022 National Budget and I look forward to the outcome of the 2021-2022 funded programmes which will ensure food and nutrition security and assist the achievement of SDG 2- Zero hunger. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members on that note we will suspend proceedings for lunch break.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.28 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 1.35 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please be seated. We will continue with the debate and I call on the next speaker, the Honourable Salote Radrodro. You have the floor, Madam.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Attorney-General, Members of Cabinet and Honourable Members; I rise to contribute to the 2021-2022 National Budget debate and at the outset let me say that I do not support the Budget. Having wasted over billions of dollars in the past years with mismanagement as highlighted in the Auditor-General's reports, now the Minister for Economy comes to Parliament again with this Budget and just like previous ones it is another smoke and mirrors trick, another attempt to continuously hoodwink the people of Fiji.

This Budget has brought great sadness and apprehension to the people because it does nothing to directly improve their lives and most importantly in having to cope with the daily struggles in having food on the table, money to pay for medical expenses or pay for rent just to stay afloat during this COVID-19 pandemic. The Minister for Economy again blamed the pandemic as an excuse for Fiji's economic doom. But our people have seen the failures of this FijiFirst Government. They have suffered impoverishment and trauma well before COVID-19 arrived.

Mr. Speaker, we in the Opposition continue to visit our people in various communities and likewise they too reach out to us in many other different ways. We have spoken and listened to them. We are bringing the people's voices to Parliament in all our responses. For example, with Bill No. 17 but unfortunately even before the first sitting day yesterday, some of our Honourable Members of Parliament were taken to CID for questioning on Sunday evening and it is obvious, Mr. Speaker, this is another intimidation tactic by the Government. We are bringing the people's voices to Parliament so as to ensure that their concerns on what matters most to them for their wellbeing and survival are presented in Parliament. And it is my plea that the Government exercise wisdom and not only listen to what we are saying but make it their priority. And in this instance, Mr. Speaker, to withdraw Bill No.17.

Mr. Speaker, this Budget is just the same old, same old, full of false promises. There are no new innovative or creative ideas. The only thing new in this Budget is that it comes with threat, mandatory requirements and coercion of no job, no benefits, no job, no this and no that. There is no theme, no vision to direct us through this most dark times of our lives in having to deal with the economic and social problems that have been aggravated more by COVID-19. Our people are crying in pain, for poor public service delivery especially with social welfare and health assistance to keep them going and to survive this COVID-19 pandemic.

The FijiFirst Government and especially its leadership, the Honourable Prime Minister has become numb to the needs of our people. They have become deaf to the cries of our people. They have become blind to the crisis facing our country. They have become mute to the abuse of the positions they hold in trust for the people. This Government with its leadership is the most authoritarian, careless and incompetent that Fiji has ever seen. The FijiFirst Government has lost its way and is dragging Fiji further and further down the road of disaster with this deceptive, unreliable and the further and further down the road of disaster with its deceptive, unreliable and anti-people budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in his address, the Honourable Minister for Economy, when referring to the Honourable Prime Minister had said, I quote: "We have a good captain Fiji", but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us stop for a moment and let me ask those who are watching the live stream or listening over the radio; Does Fiji really have a good captain? Does Fiji really have a good Prime Minister? I only

wish we can hear the people's response and I am confident it is a resounding no, with colourful commentaries. And as a quick reality check, I encourage the Government Members to tune in to the parliamentary live feed and see for yourselves the viewer's colourful emoji expressing mostly negative emotions when Government Members speak.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last sitting, I had echoed the voices of the CSO alliance calling for the Honourable Minister for Economy to step down. I again make that call and also to the Honourable Prime Minister because of their failed leadership, they have failed the people of Fiji, as evident during this COVID-19 crisis.

Is the Honourable Prime Minister really thinking and prioritising Fiji's future, ensuring a sustainable future for the next generation? Is it reflected in the Budget? No, I do not think so. A very good example which is staring at us, is the failure of the COVID-19 crisis mitigations strategies to contain the virus due to poor leadership and poor decision making. Who made the decision for that infamous flight from Singapore to Fiji which brought this Delta variant to us?

Only the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy have that authority. So why are the people being blamed for the chaotic COVID-19 situation that we are in right now, with 23,139 active cases, 5,928 recoveries and 196 deaths as of yesterday. And people watch helplessly as the number of infections and deaths increased on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in times of crisis, a true leader takes on the responsibility and not hide behind anything or anyone because the people will find you out. And the chaotic situation we are in right now with COVID-19, spinning out of control and the accompanying daily struggles of our people, is the biggest performance indicator that the FijiFirst Government and its leadership have failed Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that brings to mind the national briefing by Dr. Fong, the Permanent Secretary for Health, Dr. Tudravu and Dr. Aalisha and the team for your hard work and sacrifices. We can never thank you enough and please note our sincere and deep appreciation. But now things have changed. People are questioning the validity and reliability of this information.

The last media conference that happened, following Dr. Fong's national briefing, was on about 30th June and we all remember that long wait and then finally the Honourable Prime Minister appeared at midnight to deliver the national COVID-19 briefing, which was met with people's anger and frustrations, because they know that the truth is being deliberately with-held from them. When leaders do not tell the truth, it is a sure sign of failure of leadership.

For the almost 17,000 active cases in isolation, how many are actually in home isolation? Let us face it, we do not have the luxury of social distancing or a great health system in place to handle COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the ability to isolate when you and your family members have to go out and get food or go to work every day, when we live in very closely, especially, in informal communities and villages is very hard to do. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a recent advisory said that if you have COVID-19 symptoms, there is no need to visit screening clinic for swab. You are to stay home and strictly isolate for 14 days. Eat well, drink lots of fluids and monitor your symptoms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, is this the end of testing? Which means people will have to self-diagnose and treat themselves at home according to what they can afford and know. Of course, people will resort to traditional healing methods like *kuvui* or the herbal concoctions like '*vevedu*', but then the Ministry of Health discouraged people from doing this.

Does this also mean that if an individual want to get tested, they can do so at any clinics but they have to pay for it themselves and with the cost of about \$100? How many of us can afford that,

when almost 50 percent or more of our population are living on or below the poverty line? Does it mean that our health system is really overwhelmed and is unable to cater and cope with this COVID-19 crisis? Does it mean that the Ministry of Health do not have the required resources to continue with the testing that they do not have the money, equipment and testing agents? That there is shortage of staff because they have become infected themselves due to the challenging work conditions that they work in without sufficient and proper personal protection equipment.

With no testing, there will be no statistical data to clearly show Fiji's position in this COVID-19 crisis. Does this also mean that the validity of data submitted to WHO, Australia, New Zealand, India and other countries to substantiate previous and any future help is compromised?

Mr. Speaker, these are the questions and people are looking for answers. While the truth is hidden the reality on the ground is that, people are feeling very unapprehensive and there is a high element of mistrust.

The FijiFirst Government and its leadership looking more like the enemy of the people now. And together with the ineffective communication strategies the low awareness and community outreach have definitely contributed to the initial significant resistance and apprehension to vaccination.

Even though, Mr. Speaker, we are pro-vaccination, the no jab and various attached conditions as highlighted in the Budget are seen by the majority of the people are a threat, coerced and discriminatory, which tantamount to the most serious failure of leadership. One is the \$200 million unemployment benefit held under requisition, when it should be easily made available to Ministries, so that people could easily access these benefits.

The failure of leadership to foresee, plan and implement accordingly, reflect the lack of vision and responsibility. With FijiFirst leadership, it is all about power and ego.

Mr. Speaker, let me share some things on the frontline, especially to the Ministry of Health. Once the Budget focus on vaccination as if it is dependency to all our COVID-19 pandemic problems but what is there to look after frontline workers?

Our hearts cry out to the Ministry of Health staff, to Dr. Fong and his hardworking courageous team, who are expected to go out when everyone else is expected to stay in. Our frontline health workers are ill-equipped, overworked, over stressed, over stretched and who risk their lives more because of the very pathetic health facilities they work in, especially at the CWM Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, our overall health system is overwhelmed. For example, at one time the military had to help out in the meal preparation for the CWM hospital patients. And from media coverage, one could not help but notice the good condition of the military kitchen, as compared to the run down CWM Hospital kitchen.

Mr. Speaker, this is a shameful reflection of misplaced priority of this Government. Our frontline health workers have been undervalued and it is heart-breaking to see that we are starting to lose some of them.

A young staff nurse, with very young family just recently lost her life and I take this opportunity to thank all front-liners for your dedication, commitment to the call of duty and I also pay tribute to all those that paid the ultimate sacrifice and have lost their lives. We grieve with your families and loved ones and we pray that our Lord Jesus Christ will give you the peace that surpasses beyond all understanding.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, we ask what kind of financial assistance can be given to help them and their families? I note that there is a \$1.5 million allocation for sanitary pads for our young girls in schools but this is another misplaced priority because schools are still closed and may remain closed until when it is time for the budget review which is towards the end of the year.

A more prioritized need right now, is the welfare and wellbeing of our Health front workers, and if this FijiFirst Government really care about frontline workers then allocate this \$1.5 million for that purpose. Let me remind the people of Fiji on the Free Milk Programmes for class 1 students, whereby the real beneficiaries are the business houses, who are the donors of the FijiFirst Party? This is a similar case and the company involved can very well be the same but only the Programme is changed from “Free Milk to Free Sanitary Pads”.

In one of my previous budget response, I had suggested that a more sustainable option is “cloth reusable pads” which can be sewn and supplied to schools, especially rural schools by individuals or women’s groups. In this way, it would help support small business in the informal sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, still on Social Welfare a good captain, would make Social Welfare, a priority in times of a national crisis like COVID-19 pandemic. But, are the Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Economy making Social Welfare a priority in this Budget? No, I do not think so. For example, people in lockdown areas have to wait anxiously not knowing when and whether they will receive any assistance for food and basic household items. And we must thank the CSOs, NGOs and many individuals for their humanitarian efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people are told to isolate at home for 14 days but with no clear advice on what kind of help will be given to them. A lady shared to me that they were told to lockdown but they were forgotten that there were no contacts again to give them any kind of help. I had said this before and I will say it again that the one off food ration, cash grant of \$90 and \$50 are very unrealistically very small, to say the least.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation mandated to protect and serve the most vulnerable has seen a great reduction of almost \$13.5 million with their budget. In particular, the Social Protection Programme has been reduced by \$4.2 million and only a government that does not care about the people would do this, especially at a time we are in now, when almost 50 percent of our people are living on or below the poverty line.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some people have to resort to peaceful protest and only then you see food rations flying to them like superman. So if peaceful protests is a way of making Government listen to the people, then why have those trade union organizations that applied for the march made to run around and finally, denied the permit?

The Government claims that “Fiji is a Democracy” but if our democracy is to flourish, it must have criticism, if our government is to function, it must have dissent. People must be allowed to protest, to show dissent which is a positive civic duty. Honourable Minister for Economy also said and I quote “We are here to govern and serve, not be the Social media celebrities who appear in the media or post on *Facebook* every few hours”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any government cannot govern without criticism and reliable reporting by the media. So, Honourable Prime Minister and Honourable Minister for Health when was the last press conference on the COVID-19? Was it on 30th June? Why has it been disallowed? Is it because the media were asking the tough questions? And now with no press conference, with no media acting as the watchdog of society, the government has failed to put itself for media scrutiny. So can the people really trust the information that is being given out by the Ministry of Health?

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget, just like the previous ones, come covered in a blanket of deception. Fancy words and big figures only to hoodwink and make you feel good. Their words and figures do not translate into actions. Implementation, no money is their biggest problem and their biggest performance indicator of this budget and previous ones is the high level of poor public service delivery, increasing poverty and associated problems which is very visibly all around us.

My fellow Fijians, I plead to you that we pray to the Lord Almighty to open your spiritual eyes and see through and beyond this veil of deception that hides the true reality of the crisis we are in. To open your spiritual ears and hear the cries of our people that are hungry and just do not know where and how to get food and help from. Furthermore, Fiji is in a very legislated environment now. There are so many new laws aimed at controlling people and we can only say that the more corrupt the Government becomes the more laws it makes to protect itself. But thank God, Mr. Speaker, nothing lasts forever and we hear change is coming.

Let me urge all of us, before I leave and I leave this with you. And Fiji will not be destroyed by those who do evil but by those who watch them without doing anything. Wake up Fiji, exercise wisdom and vote this Fiji Government out in the 2022 General Election. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. V. LAL.- Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Assistant Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, viewers and ladies and gentlemen: first of all, I would like to thank the Honourable Minister for Economy and his team for such a well-thought-out Budget. This Budget is the result of several months' close consultation with the members of the public, businesses, civil society groups, faith-based organisations and other stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on people all across the globe. This has put a fierce challenge on the sustainability and growth of the world's economy. This pandemic has viciously brutalised our economy and dealing with the unexpected problems caused by this has stretched thin our ability to supply goods and services. This pandemic has caused despair and opened our eyes to the stark reality of survival in distressed times. However, our Government, through this Budget has put in many measures to assist its vulnerable and susceptible population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this Budget, the Government, under the able leadership of the Honourable Prime Minister is doing its civic duty to look after its people. There is something for everyone in this Budget – those who are unemployed, market vendors, taxi, minibus and bus drivers, farmers, fishermen, traditional landowners, women, youths, students, those living with disabilities, those living in poverty, civil servants, micro, small and medium enterprises to industry leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the following are the Government's main budget objectives:

- (1) Virus protection - vaccinate to achieve herd immunity;
- (2) Continue to support the vulnerable;
- (3) Protect Fiji against future pandemics and climate change consequences;
- (4) Diversify the economy beyond tourism; and
- (5) Create sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is focused on Fiji's recovery that depends entirely on the protection of every eligible Fijian through vaccines. Once we achieve widespread immunity from the

virus, we can get back to our normal way of life here at home and secure the chance to reopen to the world and have the world reopen to us.

The FijiFirst Government, through this Budget, urges all Fijians to get vaccinated and take advantage of the unemployment support. Without vaccines, many Fijians will not have a job to go back to. The Government has made changes to the law to create safe workplace environments so that vulnerable members of the society are protected. At this point, I would like to express my sincere condolences to all those who have lost their loved ones due to COVID-19.

Sir, a considerable portion of this Budget is dedicated to unemployment support. Since March last year, those affected by the current pandemic have benefitted from the government-funded unemployment benefits and in this Budget, the Government has announced \$200 million in unemployment income support to Fijians affected by COVID-19, both in the formal and informal sectors. This support will assist those who do not benefit from any social welfare payments, education allowances, any other government-funded assistance or withdrawals from the FNPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the earlier initiative, whereby unemployed Fijians were eligible for \$220 fortnightly payout from the FNPF, will continue for members with sufficient General Account balances. However, those who have exhausted their General Account balances or do not want to access their General Account balance, will be eligible for the \$720 per person payment under the new initiative. The unemployment support will provide great help for purchasing of essentials for those who have lost jobs or have been working on reduced hours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has not forgotten its obligation to the most marginalised Fijians, and in this Budget, it is providing \$120 million for the Poverty Benefit Scheme, Child Protection Allowance Programme, Disability Allowance Programme, Social Pension Scheme and Bus Fare Subsidies for the Elderly and Disabled to assist more than 130,000 vulnerable Fijians.

Not only this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 1st of next month, the Government will pay the medical report fee for all those who are required to submit such reports to employers for job applications or those wanting medical reports for referrals to go overseas for treatments. In addition, the Government will pay the police clearance report fees for those who need it as a job requirement or for obtaining a PSV driving licence again, that includes taxi drivers, bus drivers, mini-bus drivers and carrier drivers.

This Budget announces that vendors will be exempted from market stall fees for a year, taxi and minibuses stand fee will be consumed by the Government, waiving the 50 percent additional penalty charged on Traffic Infringement Notices for illegal operations. This Appropriation Bill further guarantees to pay inshore fishing licence fees and other associated MSAF fees for the local fishing industry for the next two years and provide 5 percent subsidy on fishing boats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government, through this Bill, is promising to further assist low income earners through water and electricity bills. The Government will continue to provide free water to households with an annual household income of less than \$30,000 for up to 92,500 litres of water and effective from 1st August this year, the Government will pay the full cost of electricity for 100 kilowatt usage.

This Budget encourages more entrepreneurs, more eco-friendly and more smart ways to conduct businesses for better wellbeing and stability of Fijians:

- Tax holiday & customs exemption in ICT investment - encourages investors to boost digital platform in Fiji;

- Hotel incentive – the best time for Fiji resorts to remodel or renovate as tax holiday will be provided with duty free on importation;
- Incentive in recycling business - encourages to re-use, reduce and recycle approach for less wastage. Tax holiday and customs exemption in importation;
- Agriculture incentive - tax holiday and duty free importation - this will encourage many to invest in agriculture sector; and
- Tax deduction for development or upgrade of online shopping websites with integrated payment platforms; 200 percent tax deduction will be allowed on the development or upgrade of online shopping websites with integrated payment platforms. This will encourage many businesses to build their own online store and also for new investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$200 million for businesses to meet operational needs, including payment of wages, salaries, rental cost, utility bills, purchase of stock and other working capital requirement will help many businesses that have not operated for the past three months. However, expenses such as rent is still accumulated. With this support mostly small and medium sized businesses can be saved from closing down. This loan with low interest rate will help businesses stay afloat till the pandemic ends in Fiji. Taking advantage of this, landlords have an incentive to reduce rent. This will also keep small to medium sized businesses afloat. Landlords will also benefit as they will not lose tenants. Without this support many small businesses could close down and Landlord's would miss out on rental income by losing tenants.

Turning to Education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government under the leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister, began the education revolution in this country with the introduction of free education for primary and secondary schools, subsidized transport and other assistance to students and gave unprecedented access to tertiary education with the Tertiary Loan Scheme and National Toppers Scheme. This Government will continue to ensure that every child receives primary and secondary education fully paid by the Government. Not only that, the Government encourages children of school age to be in schools and Government's support to tertiary students will continue.

Since 2014, over 48,000 students have taken advantage of this assistance and more than 19,000 have completed their tertiary education and have entered the workforce. The Government will continue its scholarship support through Toppers. Top-up for students who are renting for education purposes with no income can take advantage of this support. Assisting students with \$100 monthly top-up on their industrial experience is new initiative the Government has brought in to help the students meet their daily needs.

The present time has dictated online learning for students at all levels and the Government, in partnership with ATH, will provide a monthly data top-up of \$20 per month to each Fijian student to assist them in their online studies.

Keeping TELS and investing in our education system brings confidence in the economy and is a step forward towards growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tourism our biggest foreign exchange earner, has been seriously battered by this pandemic. It is virtually closed because of border closure. It once had the locals patronizing the much exclusive hotels in our country but that too has stopped because of restrictions on movement in view of observing COVID-19 protocols. This has a gigantic effect on our economy almost crippling it. However, the FijiFirst Government is positive that it would bounce back and thus through this Budget has provided incentives to all stakeholders to prepare its restoration with opening of the borders.

The Budget restores the huge tax reduction from last budget and also provides other incentives like Short Life Investment Package (SLIP), Customs duty exemption will continue to be provided on all capital goods, extending the tax holiday to existing hotels, \$40 million allocation for the Fiji Recovery Rebate Package. This all is done to assist our tourism industry to be ready for the new normalcy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pandemic has struck hard the ordinary Fijians who had acquired loans to grow their business or buy new homes. However, the FijiFirst Government has come forward to the rescue and stated that the financial institutions can help their customers by providing holiday repayments which is either interest or principal payment only which is only on case-by-case basis.

However, the financial institutions had been providing assistance to those customers who had been unemployed or had their hours shortened due to COVID from March this year and this will continue. This Budget has continued with the cut to taxes on businesses and reduced duties from the previous budget. It further announces that \$200 million loan provision as working capital for businesses that will assist many businesses sustain their operations during this pandemic times. Reducing interest rates to 3.99 percent by financial institutions will provide a much needed relief to MSMEs. Government will absorb the interest for the first two years giving the businesses an extra assistance to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many businesses are facing supply chain disruptions due to this pandemic and this working capital relief will assist them in securing inventory and equipment requirements for their businesses or making upfront payments for their supplies which is a new shift with most businesses moving towards online trade platform, both locally and internationally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic in Fiji is not showing any signs of exhaustion as yet. Even our neighbour's, Australia, has recently closed its cities and town in its largest states to lessen the effect of this pandemic. In this Budget, the Government has proposed new measures such as household packs, provide healthcare through general practitioners, 300 percent tax deduction to employers who continue to pay COVID-19 positive employees to support its COVID-19 patients. However, the onus is on us to strictly observe all COVID-19 protocols, get vaccinated and remain COVID-19 free.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, taxes are the most important source of government revenue in the modern economy. These are collected to increase the revenue to meet the basic needs of citizens and businesses. However, this budget has provided incentives and reduction in various categories to help build our economy.

The VAT Monitoring System (VMS) is further differed until 2024 however providing 300 percent tax deduction for voluntary implementation, payment of VAT at the point of import for Gold Card taxpayers is deferred for two months, incentivizing the Agriculture and Fisheries by further reducing the tax on their export income from 60 percent to 90 percent, and increasing its duration until 2024, extending debt forgiveness to 31st December, 2021, maintaining the debt-to-equity ratio at 3:1, providing tax amnesty to taxpayer with arrears and making arrangement before 1st August 2021 to pay before 30th June 2022. All these measures are put in this budget to help restore our economy to its previous level or beyond.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sugarcane Industry has a rich history of many stakeholders. Since its start (in the colonial days) until now many different groups have shown interest in its growth and development. The politicians had their own stake and made the sugarcane industry a vibrant topic of discussion in formal and informal gatherings.

The FijiFirst Government in this budget has promised to support the livelihoods of the sugar cane farmers, the government has extended the minimum guarantee price of \$85 per tonne of cane for the 2021 season, making this the fourth year of guaranteed cane price support. This is apart from the fertilizer subsidy, cane farm development assistance, cartage subsidy, upgrade of cane access roads, weedicide subsidy and other assistance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has always supported the Sugar Industry and will always do so in the future.

Turning to Agriculture Sir, agriculture loan interest subsidy through FDB is very timely as many people who lost their job in the hotel sector are moving towards home gardening and agriculture for a sustainable living.

New Farmers Equity Package to help farmers who need to start commercial farming will be of great help. Sir, \$1 million allocated for lease facilitation for farmers is a good incentive as most farmers will be able to roll start with this assistance.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Budget has been well received by the people of Fiji from all sectors which can be seen as a hope to the people at this critical phase of pandemic. This budget is a sensibly designed, balanced and a positive budget that would boost the confidence of the people of Fiji including the private sector and the ordinary Fijians. The budget covers the fiscal year from August 1, 2021, to July 31, 2022, and aims to build on major initiatives launched in the 2020-2021 budget to support economic recovery, revitalize private sector activity, protect jobs, assist the unemployed while maintaining economic stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget will make a difference in the lives of all Fijians who will be able to put food on table and will secure them a sustainable living during this time of pandemic. The absorption of all kinds of fees, licences, stall fees, interests et cetera will create economic activity in all sectors and will also increase money circulation thus contributing towards economic recovery and growth. This is a growth Budget with growth rate increasing from -15.7 percent to -4.1 percent from financial year 2020-2021 to 2021-2022 and eventually to 6.2 percent in the third year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this time of uncertainty arising from pandemic this Appropriation Bill has given a sigh of relief to all people living in Fiji, a hope to recover and rebuild our debilitated economy.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the Fiji National budget 2021-2022. Before I take my seat Sir, I would like to congratulate the Fiji Sevens Team for winning all its pool games and would like to wish Team Fiji all the best in all their games. Thank you for the opportunity Sir. *Vinaka.*

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution. I now give the floor to the Honourable Rasova. You have the floor.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Bula vinaka* Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Ministers and Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications for the delivery of the National Budget Address on Friday, 16th July 2021.

I would also like to thank the Leader of Opposition, the *Turaga Bale Na Tui Cakau* Honourable Lalabalavu for a very inclusive in-depth Budget response on Monday, 26th July 2021, giving us all Members of Parliament a very clear and robust platform to highlight the failures of this Budget, its irresponsible policy and how the reckless FijiFirst Government has brought our beloved Fiji and its citizens to economic uncertainty. Time for change, this Government has failed and it must go. This is yet again a gamblers budget. With the cumulative over-projections of revenue and expenditure by

the Honourable Attorney-General since 2014, it is clear that he is a gambler who has been fooling the nation, gambling with our treasury, cooking the books and playing with figures to paint a fake picture of prosperity and success when the truth is that he has mismanaged the economy for the benefit of a select few while fooling the majority with handouts, easy come, easy go.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, definitely you and I will feel *madua* of the FijiFirst history of how they have governed even with their apprenticeship in political leadership for seven until 2014 reflects none other but financial mismanagement ...

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You have never prepared any alternative budget and yet you complain.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Listen! Evidently shameful that almost forty annual reports dated back to 2013 through 2017 has just been detailed and passed in Parliament in May and July, 2021 with clear evidence of neglect and abuse of funds and processes by Government management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our biggest *vinaka vakalevu* with our total support to the frontline workers of all degrees and measures who have been on their toes, who sacrificed the comfort of loved ones and in the danger of their individual lives to save others since 10th April, 2021 and hopefully until 1st October, 2021 when all achieve vaccination. My most heartfelt sympathies and condolences to all families that have lost loved ones and the families left behind with the new normal, the difficulties faced in burying them at various cemeteries all over Fiji. I have encountered several burials in Suva in the last three months and it is sad that we could not offer the best burial services, sad to say the services at the CWM Hospital is an absolute chaos with hidden costs.

An irresponsible failure when one is alive and again when he or she has passed away. You cannot take FijiFirst Government anywhere locally or overseas Mr. Speaker, Sir, so much that we love to help this long-awaited bubble to open up the tourism sector, then again I doubt very much the people are ready especially those who were redundant. Some said to be fired from their employments in hotels and the famous 758 Fiji Airways employees terminated without addressing their collective union agreement especially long service pay. Another airline blunder by the famous chief executive of Fiji Airways turned chairman of the Fiji Development Bank, joined by the latest chief executive officer. Lord have mercy on Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to all in Team Fiji for the Tokyo Olympics throughout this week until the 8th of August, congratulations, individual sport and team sport. *Vinaka vakalevu* for the third win today by the Fiji 7s men's team over Great Britain. It seems like we are medal prospects.

The Fiji Parliament are right behind the all players and officials, together with the loved ones and the citizens of Fiji, seeing you safe and enjoying international camaraderie, giving your best individual and team performance to bring back gold. Bonus payments is tucked somewhere in the Head 50 because sports victory is the health stimulus no doubts, *io eda sa qaqa!* Go Fiji!.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA budget is to be health, jobs and livelihoods of the people of Fiji and similarly in supporting unemployed and getting people back to jobs without discrimination, without conditions and without any slightest intent of racism. Compulsory vaccination is no condition in our democracy and commonwealth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, no matter if vaccines are free, easy to access or even it scarce to last a week, it is still not a forced requirement that every employer and employee in Fiji must be vaccinated is discriminatory. The Honourable Prime Minister acted beyond his powers with his "no jab, no job" policy.

Government was empowered under the Constitution to issue guidelines for civil servants to adhere to. That was proof that he had been given poor legal advice regarding provisions in the 2013 Fiji Constitution which provided guidelines for all the civil servants. The Honourable Prime Minister is under the firm belief that he can be the judge, jury and executioner on this occasion by issuing a directive prescribing a penalty and delivering a judgement in one breath, concluding that all civil servants who do not follow these guidelines, which stated 1st August for the first jab and November 1st, 2021 for the second jab, will be terminated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated, mandated or not, without vaccines, many Fijians will not have a job to go back to only because without vaccines our schools will not open, without vaccines we cannot mount an economic recovery. No jabs, no opportunities; no opening of stadiums, no restaurants or borders. The repetition of vaccine in this Budget speech is like the Bainimarama boom, boom, boom. After the boom came the kaboom. Here comes vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, what is next? Vamoose? I can clearly remember when the world introduced hybrid and several years later the organic, original power to life. It is like the famous *TikTok*, now branded by the FijiFirst Government as *tiko lo, chuppe raho*, Please, Honourable Opposition Members you are entrusted by your voters, keep tik-toking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has failed miserably and the vaccination department of the citizens of Fiji. Listen! Since 2014, the Opposition Leaders have always sought the bipartisan approach for the better improved running of our nation. The former Leader of the Opposition, who could not bear the arrogance of this failed leadership and good God, he exited to a better environment of surety and happiness. Mr. Speaker, Sir, only if the silent Minister for Health and Medical Services would have sought the assistance from this loyal side of the House to have a bipartisan approach to the national vaccination, Fiji would have reached 100 percent target vaccination, even before 31st October this year.

Health is wealth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our health containment policy for this pandemic be strictly implemented by experienced professionals and not political and business homemade Doctors who misinformed us at some middle hours of the night & the repercussions still in the minds of the vulnerable Citizens of Fiji. Please, from this day forward, for best practices, we offer the FijiFirst Government to use the initial ASK, ask us, we will help you build this nation to its former glory.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will like to thank the Honourable Minister for Fisheries for his budget response, which confirms the decrease in his budget estimated at \$2.3 million from last year's \$15.4 million having to operate this year with only \$13.2 million. A drastic decrease in a time we need to boost our natural resources which is unprecedented and lacks confidence in the future of fisheries expansion.

Unfortunately, in RIE or *kerekere* budget is Activity 2, SEG7 is \$380,000 for Electronic Monitoring System, Activity 3, SEG 8 is \$100, 000; Upgrade of Office and Quarters which has been delayed for several years and Activity 6, SEG8, there is \$417,766 ongoing construction species hatchery in Ra, Food Security Programme-Freshwater Aquaculture Small Holder Farms \$500,000 and \$175,000 Commercial Brackishwater Shrimp Aquaculture Farmers. A total of \$1.193 million in RIE is another short of the actual budget, to make it only \$12 million in the Fisheries extra estimates this year.

#### Contribution to GDP

- In 2018-2019 – 1.8 percent to GDP and 7 percent of Fiji's total export earnings;
- Total Tuna Export US\$140 million from 2017 – 2019;
- Total Tuna Catch (National Waters) US\$ 47 million from 2017 - 2019;

- Total Tuna Catch (National Fleet) – US\$ 74 million from 2017 – 2019;
- Total Allowable Catch (TAC) – Was reduced from 15 mega tonnes to 12mega tonnes due to the overexploitation of tuna resources; and
- Licence Cap, now kept at 60 from 2015 following a collective grievance by the members of the Fiji Tuna Boat Association (FTBOA) to the Honourable Prime Minister in 2014.

The use of Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) only on licensed Fiji fishing vessels fishing in Fiji Fisheries waters and Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ) – Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) tool.

Given the decreasing contribution to GDP of the fisheries sector over the years, again I ask, what are some of the strategies currently implemented by the Minister responsible for Fisheries that will assist in the increase or double of GDP contribution by three percent in 2022?

What are some of the new initiatives in place that the Ministry of Fisheries is exploring to help boost the Aquaculture sector, given the low production of Tilapia fries, Prawn post Larvae (PL) and Brackish water PL?

Noting the challenges resulting in the establishment of the Inshore Fisheries Management Division within the Ministry, can the Minister enlighten the House on the progress of collating Coastal Fisheries Data and what approach have been adopted in terms of fisheries monitoring and compliance for inshore and coastal fisheries?

The National Fisheries Policy is the overarching document of the Ministry of which all other Ministry policies should be aligned and guided from, time and again I question, why has it taken the Ministry so long to finalize its National Fisheries Policy which began consultation in 2016?

And again can the Minister responsible for Fisheries enlighten the House on the progress of its efforts in working towards meeting Fiji's 30 percent Marine Protected Area (MPA) commitment?

In the effort to combat Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and ensure the proper conservation and management of our offshore resources, how is surveillance mechanism such as VMS complemented considering it is only installed on licensed long line vessels? And how the other vessels without VMS are monitored on real time?

The Fisheries have been poorly performing since 2012 until 2021 with an average contribution to GDP is -5.1 percent.

The economy is in crisis. Lack of confidence and low investment. Subdued aggregated demand. The focus should be on improving demand. Key sectors of the economy are not performing. Poverty will continue to increase. Revenue continue to decline.

Expenditure must be control further. Inconsistency between fiscal and monetary policy (better synergy) and the need for proper policy mix. It is a desperate budget to save face at all cost. Fiji will now surely fall into a debt trap with excessive debt. Theoretically sounds real but the reality is the opposite.

Bullish Budgeting, Overstated Revenue and Overstated Expenditure. Average estimated revenue is \$2.085 billion while average estimated expenditure is \$3.7 billion and \$1.6 billion deficit. Full of contradiction. All the challenges cannot be addressed overnight but progressively, we are back to square one. The budget will destroy the local industry through the relaxation of tariffs and duties also inconsistent with our World Trade obligation.

Poor targeting of expenditure. Removal and marginalization of key independent institution as checks and balances. Decline in investment lead to high unemployment. Failed, costly and disorganized reform agenda (Civil Service, Education, Police).

Marginalization of local expertise in favour of expensive expatriates (Judiciary, Statutory and Semi-Government Institution, Public Service).

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Honourable Koya. Yesterday, he was very emotional to the Opposition side in regard to Bill No. 17 that states, and I quote:

“(1A) Notwithstanding anything contained in subsection (1), consent of the Board is not required for any mortgage, charge, pledge, caveat or for any such lease to be dealt with by any court of law or under the process of any court of law.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know it is a big issue right now. Let us go to the Constitution and I will read the Preamble, recognising the indigenous people or *iTaukei* their ownership of *iTaukei* land, their unique cultures, custom, tradition and language and recognising the indigenous people of Rotuma from the island of Rotuma their ownership of Rotuma lands. The unique culture, customs and tradition and language. Recognised the descendants of indentured labourers from India and the Pacific Islands their culture, customs, tradition and language. There was no land.

Recognising the descendants of the settlers and immigrations to Fiji and customary law. There is no land but however, we declare that Fijians are united by equal citizenry. There is no mention of land, that is why land to the *iTaukei* is very pertinent, it is special. Once you are born today, you are automatically written to the land. If we argue about it, it means to us and the Preamble, other races there is no land only the Rotumans and the Fijians that is why Bill No. 17 is very important and I would like to have the Minister, the Prime Minister and the CEO for the *iTaukei* Lands Trust Board to review this.

A big *vinaka vakalevu* to the Acting Permanent Secretary for Economy, Mr. Shiri Gounder, the Head of Budget, Mr. Isoa Talemaibau, Head of Treasury, Mr. Nemias Dawai and the Head of Fiscal Policy, Mr. Mohammed Jabid, the Solicitor-General and his team, the FRCA team and Mr Vineil Narayan, Head of the Climate Change Division. It takes a lot of courage to be apolitical, hopefully as well the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board and the CEO Mr. Tevita Kuruvakadua, to be apolitical, the very meaning of *iTLTB* which was blessed by our forbearers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a lot of things that is being offered by government in this Budget. All lip services, most of the things in the last budget were not implemented. We went to government, MSAF...

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Why don't you prepare one alternative budget but you did not?

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Honourable Assistant Minister, promises are not fulfilled. Even *TC Harold* in Kadavu...

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Their right is still intact.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- I am for this Bill No. 17 because an island in Kadavu is now being considered, imagine if this passes through. All other existing leases on the native land will be activated that they will never need the consent of the landowners or the Trust Board. These lands were given to the Trust Board on trust of the *iTaukei* people. So, bear that in mind, that it was given

on trust. So, we hope that this government, the chairman, the Prime Minister and the CEO must build that trust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu*. I have reservation but until then, I do not support the motion before the House.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate and I now give the floor to the Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment. You have the floor.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today to deliver my response to the 2021-2022 Budget for the Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we pass through the shadows of this pandemic, not by choice though, I strongly commend the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications for delivering a well-thought-out Budget that takes into consideration the plight of Fijians, and focuses on Fiji's recovery from this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an excellent and comprehensive Budget that will support economic recovery, rejuvenate private sector activity, protect and create new jobs, improve livelihoods of ordinary Fijians, give a helping hand to the poor and vulnerable while at the same time, not losing sight of ensuring macro fiscal stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the forecasted funds that the Government is expected to raise in 2021-2022, there cannot be any better expenditure bundle than what has been presented by the Honourable Minister for Economy and he needs to be commended for being the architect of this comprehensive Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all concerned and anxiously waiting for this pandemic to end, so that we can begin our lives in the new normal.

In this regard, the Government has not shied away from its responsibilities. In fact, all ministries are working tirelessly every day, every night to battle the current pandemic. Our Government has been able to secure adequate quantities of vaccine for its people when some countries are struggling with meeting their targeted vaccination numbers. The least we all can do is to promote and encourage people to get vaccinated which will save lives and put our country back on track. They can all agree that it has not been easy for everyone but we can all also agree that we can act with solidarity in getting our targeted population vaccinated. We have seen the impact on people not getting vaccinated where people have lost their loved ones to COVID-19.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I continue with explaining our plans for the three ministries that I am responsible for, I wish to respond to some of the comments made since yesterday in this House by Honourable Members on the other side. Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday Honourable Kuridrani and some other Members spoke about the lack of funding provided to the Ministry of Agriculture or not enough funding. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Members on the other side are stuck in the 1960s and 1970s era when the budgeting system was based on incremental budgeting. We have done away with that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Most of the developing countries and developed countries as well are now looking at an output-based budgeting system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will demonstrate in a minute how the Ministry of Agriculture is bringing in efficiency in terms of every dollar of Government investment. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he was talking about that farmers are not getting any support and therefore, the output in the agriculture sector is their own doing and that is not correct.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2019–2020, the direct support to the farmers in terms of machinery, in terms of planting materials, et cetera, was to the tune of \$12.8 million. In 2020-2021, the direct support over and above the public goods, infrastructure, the technical advice, plant protection support, et cetera, was \$13.2 million. This is in addition to the support in terms of dredging of rivers so that their farms are not flooding, drainage work through waterways were undertaken so that their farms are protected, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are massive support that the Ministry of Agriculture is making to farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Honourable Kuridrani and other Members were talking about a decline in the agriculture sector. I just cannot understand, where they are getting their data from. All I am asking to them is go to the Bureau of Statistics, the institution that carries all official data and look at agricultural output data which I will present in a second and it will tell you what is happening to agricultural output. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they just do not understand the difference between agriculture's contribution to the overall GDP and agricultural GDP output over time, and I will talk about that in a second.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday the Opposition Members were talking about that the Census Report is a waste of Government money \$4.5 million. Just in the last sitting, Honourable Members on the other side were harping about where is the Census Report. Why is there a delay, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after working so hard in this pandemic, when we were able to release the Census Report, two weeks ago then they know, they come to this House and saying it is a waste, \$4.5 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the same Members who were asking for the Census Report. Over the last two weeks, since we have released, not a single Member from the Opposition side came to our Ministry and said, 'We want a copy of that Census report'. Not a single Member. They were continuously harping in this House, "Where is the report?" When we released the report, not a single Member is now interested in the report, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

They also said that the Census report is no longer useful because so many things have happened over the pandemic. They have no idea that the Census document is a static document. The Census is about the snapshot of the variable understudy at a particular point in time. The variable understudy is the agriculture sector, so the 2020 Census is a snapshot of agriculture in 2020. What happens in 2021, 2022 and 2023, we have to wait for another 10 years and we take a Census. Why 10 years? The Census is a very expensive exercise. You cannot carry out Census every year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they were talking about other issues that I will pick up in my speech. Allow me now to comment on the Ministry's allocation for 2021-2022 Budget. Agriculture's two key objectives are to provide food security for the Fijians and expand agriculture sector for the benefit of the country. We have done a lot and the Honourable Assistant Minister Viam Pillay pointed out to ensure that we secure the households with regards to food security during the pandemic. Have we not done that, we would have be in shambles.

Of the period 2010-2019, the non-sugar cane agriculture GDP grew at a compound rate of 6.3 percent. Tell them, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It increased from \$343.6 million in 2010 to \$630.2 million in 2019 - a massive 83.6 percent of increase.

The return on investment, every dollar that we invest in agriculture, provides \$9 in the agriculture sector. I asked them to use one of the accountants that they have at their site to work out the return on investment of agriculture. In 2019-2020 period, the return on investment in agriculture,

every dollar that you invest, the Government money that we invest in agriculture provides return of \$9, compared to 57 cents in the sugar sector. So things should be placed in perspective.

They are talking about the procurements of agriculture, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In 2020, agricultural outputs compared to 2013, increased by 97.2 percent. We have now agricultural produce exports, we have now surpassed hundred million mark. We will continue to support agricultural growth and development so that while the agriculture sector grows and develops, all those engaged in the agricultural sector will continue to benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also doing a lot of work in terms of promoting the core high value procurement that is pushing our export sector. We have turned around the rice industry, thanks to Fiji Rice Limited for supporting or for the initiative. Also thanks to the Government of China for providing us support with regards to the agriculture machinery.

We are setting up a model farm in Lautoka, thanks to the funding from the European Union through our NGO partner Dialogue Fiji. In the model farm where we have a hydroponic setup, we will have a nursery, we will have a drip irrigation set up on the farm. As we speak, it is under construction and it should be ready in three weeks' time for running of short courses training of farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our agriculture sector work is continuing. We will take agriculture to a different height, different place.

Let me now turn to the environment: The Ministry of Environment in the next financial year will continue to ensure that Fiji's natural environment is protected, resources are sustainably utilised, all developments are sustainable, ozone layer protected and waste is properly managed. The budgetary allocation of the Ministry of Environment is \$4.7 million that will be utilised to undertake various work, including \$1.5 million that has been provided to extend the Naboro Landfill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department in cognizant of the fact that preventing pollution reduces our financial and environmental cost overlays, we have an allocation of \$132, 000 for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just yesterday we launched another significant policy for Fiji's Mangrove Management and Conservation. Fiji's Mangrove Management and Conservation policy with further underpin the existing institutional frameworks that promote the conservation, management and protection of Fiji's mangrove ecosystems.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry supports the twin Job for Nature Programme that was announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy with an allocation of \$4 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to announce today in the House that the Department of Environment under the able leadership of our Permanent Secretary, Mr. Wycliffe and Director Environment, Ms. Sandeep Singh, we were able to secure more that \$18 million over the last 24 months in external donor funding to support our biodiversity conservation and environmental protection work, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the various donor and development partnership including the Global Environment Facility (GEF), European Union (EU) and the (Jeff) Bezos Earth Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Jeff Bezos, founder, and the Executive Chair of the online retail giant Amazon announced the establishment of the Bezos Earth Fund in February, 2020. This philanthropic move committed US\$10 billion with the express goal of helping preserve and protect the natural world and

with an emphasis on social justice as climate change disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this global initiative is intended to fund scientists, activists, NGOs or any effort that offers a real possibility to help conserve and protect natural resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department has also secured another investment of \$600,000 from the World Wild Life Funds for Nature (WWF) to support our mangrove conservation project, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department is also working with the PacWatePlus to formulate an Organic Waste Management Programme which is funded by the European Union for a sum of US\$300,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also working with Safeguarding Marine and Terrestrial Biodiversity in Fiji (SAMBIO) Project which is another global environmental facility funded initiative where we are able to secure US\$7.2 million, will be executed by the Department of Environment over the next five years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also undertaking a work on Bycatch and Integrated Ecosystem Management Initiative (BIEM) funding from the European Union of \$1.1 million. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also bringing in efficiency in the Environmental Assessment Section, though people do complain about it, Sir, last year alone, we processed 2012 EIA applications at the value of about a billion dollars and to be exact, \$0.973 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the waterways area, we have got allocations by the Ministry of Economy to undertake work in terms of maintaining our drainage system both the scheme and outside the schemes as well as, Mr. Speaker, undertaking drainage to protect our rural residential communities and villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, we are also undertaking a number of projects to protect our coastal communities. Some of this work we are securing money from outside donors. We are not sitting here and say when the request comes from the communities and we said that it is not in the line item, not in the budget and therefore we cannot do your coastal rehabilitation work now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have done nine coastal nature-base seawall last year, all funded from external donors. As we speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have got funding from ADB worth \$1.5 to do or to construct nature-base seawall at 10 sites. We have also got funding from the British High Commission to do a Nature-Based Seawall at Namatakula Village this year, so a total of 11, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Then we have got budgetary allocation to do another 10 sites, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- What about Galoa?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- As we speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also right now undertaking river bank protection work at two sites, funded by EU through Dialogues Fiji, our NGO partner. One is at 4 kilometre nature-based river bank protection work at Mataniqara River, Mr, Speaker, Sir, funded by R2R; 400 metres nature-based solution at Qelemumu Village funded by the EU through Dialogue Fiji, 300 metre nature-based solution riverbank protection work at Navutu Village, Lautoka funded by European Union through Dialogue Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these words are continuing and our Department of Waterways, Department of Environment, Department of Agriculture, while improving the efficiency of service delivery within the Ministry, we are also at the same time actively writing proposals and looking for money from donors to ensure that we are the forefront of supporting our communities to be protection from climate change activities so that they can carry out their activities and also to be secured. Also Mr. Speaker, in terms of pushing agricultural output expansion for food security as well as for the improve export and agricultural production, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I once again commend the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for the vision in taking this nation forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir. For once I beg the Members on the other side, do not be emotional, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when there is a Bill that is tabled, whether it is Bill No. 17 or whichever Bill, look at the rationale behind it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Do not unnecessary raise emotions. Look at how these Bills that the job of the Parliament is to scrutinise the Bill to ensure that we improve service delivery, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Bill legislations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are not static documents, these are live documents, over the time they need to be reviewed. For once I plead with the Members of the Opposition to support this Budget, this Appropriation Bill as our people need support and protection during this difficult time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am asking the Members of the Opposition, please, do not deny assistance to our people that is coming through this Budget. Please, rise up and join our side and also your own Member, Honourable Bilitavu, in supporting and commending this Appropriation Bill 2021-2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Minister for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, we move on and I now call upon the Honourable Saukuru. You have the floor.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to contribute to the debate on the Budget for 2021-2022 Financial Year, that was presented by the Honourable Attorney-General, Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications and the Minister responsible for climate change on 16th July 2021.

At the outset, Sir, and on behalf of the 593 landowning units and the 24 chiefs of the Province of Ba, let me set the record straight with this FijiFirst government and the Honourable Attorney-General by saying: "Our Land is much more important to us than your Budget!" In 1936, the Bose Levu Vakaturaga resolved that it was in the best interest of the iTaukei People, and the nation, (yes, the nation!) that all lands not required for the use and maintenance of landowners be opened for national development. The leading figure in these discussions was the late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. These debates and deliberations gave birth to iTLTB in 1940.

I wish to repeat that, Sir, that this act of trust, creating the statutory trust, the iTaukei Lands Trust Board, opened up the land for national development. As a result, Fiji is one of the most developed Pacific nations today.

Now let us get this straight. You have clinically removed the Great Council of Chiefs, you have carelessly removed Ratu Sukuna Day, the champion of iTaukei cause from Government's Annual Calendar never to be remembered again. Now, this far-reaching amendment to the iTaukei Land Trust Act 1940 is sneaked into Parliament without any consultation with the landowners.

Land in the Fijian context is considered to be an extension of oneself, including one's life, sustenance and culture for the Fijians, known as the *Vanua* in the Fijian language. For Fijians, as for many peoples around the world, the land is central to their identity and wellbeing. This approval by the Council of Chiefs in 1936 was regarded by the Governor at that time as "one of the greatest acts of trust in colonial history."

Primarily, this imposition yet again of changes to the management of our asset, our land, is very sad, Sir, because the Trustee here, the iTaukei Lands Trust Board has agreed to this change, without consulting the real landowners of the land on whose behalf the Trust holds the land. That is great travesty, Sir.

This law was first changed by decree after the 2006 coup where the members of the trust are no longer appointed by the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga*. I am sad to say, Sir, that this is a betrayal of the trust of our forefathers, who entrusted the land to the iTaukei Land Trust Board for the benefit of their future generations. We cannot take the land with us, for we hold it in trust for our future generations.

Sir, when you talk about development in Fiji, you are talking about the Ba Province but yet this FijiFirst Government believes it is unimportant to have our province to be represented in the iTLTB Board to replace the late *Marama na Tui Ba* – Adi Laita Koroirua and the late *Taukei Sawaieke* – Ratu Tevita Momoedonu. I wish to respond to my colleague across the aisle, Honourable Naiqamu regarding his contention that the majority of the people of Ba support this Bill.

With respect Sir, you are incorrect. The majority of landowners and the chiefs of Ba do not support this Bill. They form the majority of signatories on the over 10,000 signatures tabled yesterday with the Honourable Speaker. I repeat Sir, with only two days of signature collection, over 10,000 people signed the petition tabled yesterday and another 15,000 signed online petitions. That is why I plead with the Honourable Prime Minister to withdraw this Bill, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, the most important objective of a National Budget is to reallocate resources across the nation, bringing down the inequalities in terms of earning and wealth, paving way for economic stability, managing public enterprises, contributing to economic growth and addressing the regional distortions. The National Budget that has been announced is full of giveaways which is good for our people but it fails to directly address our economic decline. On the other hand, setting conditions to access this budget assistance which is the right of every citizen is discriminatory.

The Reserve Bank of Fiji reported that from 2014 to 2021 only agriculture and manufacturing in the natural resource-based sector made average positive growth as a percentage of GDP of 6.08 and 3.83 respectively. Forestry, fisheries and mining all achieved negative average growth. However, in the midst of this crisis we were expecting that the Budget would focus on health, jobs and livelihood for our people. Health is very critical at this time because of the current uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 virus and our health facilities are overwhelmed. Therefore, it is necessary that more resources should be directed to the health sector to address the unprecedented outbreak. In addition, resources should be directed to improving health infrastructure, ensuring sufficient supplies of medicine, and necessary health equipment and provision of support services for the health sector.

With regard to jobs, it is important that Government should consider providing job opportunities particularly for those who have lost their jobs, at least 120,000 people in addition to those entering the labour market. This could be done through directing more resources to sectors that will provide employment opportunities and also in the public sector through the cash for work programme in the short term.

With regards to protecting the livelihood of our people, the focus should be on food security and decent homes for the disadvantaged groups at this point in time. Therefore, resources should be directed to the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure food security and the development of value addition to our resource-based sector. At this point in time, we should look inward rather than outward, forget about the Bula Bubble because tourists will not be coming to our shores anytime soon.

In addition, the improvement of public housing facilities and increasing our stock of affordable housing should be given more priority. It is an overstated Budget. While a deficit budget is best suited for developing economies but for a struggling economy like ours, it is always prudent that a balance is maintained with consistency as key.

Budgeting is a long term process. The more consistently you log your expenses, assess your progress towards your financial goals and look for ways to reduce wasteful spending, the more benefit your budget will have on your financial life. You do not have to be an economist to understand that the variances from 2014 to 2020, were averaging \$711million in revenue and \$459 billion in expenditure. Why do you have to overstate your budget when the actual revenue and expenditure for the same period were both averaging around \$2.9 billion?

In some cases, financial mis-statements are due to the errors or incomplete information. But when you deliberately massage earnings to meet a desired goal, those actions may be considered unethical or even fraudulent. You do not have to be an economic genius to know that our Government is borrowing to pay for our debt. This is unprecedented.

The Honourable Prime Minister denounced the \$2 billion added to the national debt on Mr. Qarase's watch as deficient far as the eye can see and he illegally took over the government, but Honourable Bainimarama's budget have added \$9 billion to the national debt over the last 10 years. Do you call that transparent leadership? No, it is failed leadership.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Have you seen how GDP went up over the same period?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- In the words of Thomas Jefferson and I quote: "Never spend your money before you have earned it."

You do not have to be an economist to descend trouble when other countries like Australia and New Zealand are giving direct budget support for the government. Only economic basket cases get direct budget support. Such funds are being advanced to prevent economic and social collapse. They are not being given like a prize for prudent financial management contrary to what we are being told. Satanic and draconian budget. A national budget is set for every citizens of this nation, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, status or creed. The budget is the most important economic tool of the government and it provides a comprehensive statement of the nation's priorities.

The Government is seen as discriminatory in making vaccination a pre-condition to access assistance. When a government is not listening to the people, they are playing God, and that is very dangerous because you are inviting more disasters upon the land. It is reasonable to feel some fear in the face of the virus that poses an elevated risk of death to the elderly and those with the underlying health conditions. But we also have much to fear from a government that believe a public health crisis gives them the right to play God with our lives. Christianity depict the end time as a period of tribulation that proceeds the second coming of Christ. We will face the anti-Christ along with His power structure and usher in the Kingdom of God.

In Islam, the day of judgement is proceeded by the appearance of the *Al-Masih*, *Al-Dajjal* and followed by the descending of Isa. Isa will triumph over the false messiah or the anti-Christ which

will lead to a sequence of events that will end with the sun rising from the West and the beginning of *Qiyammah* judgement day. The announcement of the Budget to a wider section of believers and non-believers alike, sounds the warning of the end time. Revelation 13:16-18 reads, and I quote:

“It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the illusions that science through vaccines is our only saviour again shows the Government playing God. What our nation need right now is a passover. Passover commemorates the Biblical story of Exodus where God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and the passing over of the forces of destruction or the sparing of the firstborn of the Israelites when the Lord smote the land of Egypt. Stop saying that the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and the science through the vaccines are our only saviour.

The people of Waya Island, Yasawa celebrate passover on 17th February. The date is of special significance because they believe they were spared the deadly Spanish flu pandemic that claimed about 40 million lives globally and more than 8,000 in Fiji alone. After attending the Ba Divisional meeting in February, 1919 a group of church elders led by resident Minister Samuela Jeke of Wayasewa, Namara left Nawaka in Nadi as they headed towards Wailoaloa Beach on their way back to Yasawa.

It was around 3.00 a.m. when Samuela was waiting behind the others when he saw a bright light in the water before him. There was peculiar writing on the sand which was lighted and clear. The words clearly stated that if Waya is to survive the coming pandemic its people had to fast and pray for divine intervention. On arrival, Samuela immediately informed Na Buli Waya and he issued a directive to all the people of Waya to fast and pray. The people of Wayalailai and Viwa gathered and held a thanksgiving service for the people miraculous escape from the worldwide outbreak.

Sir, we need God. The 1997 Constitution of Fiji begins with the preamble which sets out historical, cultural, political rationale for its formulation. The framers of the Constitution wanted the preamble to acknowledge the unique place of indigenous Fijians and Rotumans. While at the same time affirming the equal value to the country of Indo-Fijians and other minorities.

The preamble recalls the events in our history that have made us what we are. It begins by asking for the continued blessing of God who has always watched over these islands. And goes on to acknowledge the strong Christian traditions of the Fijian people dating from their conversion from atheism through the power of the name of Jesus Christ and speaks of the enduring influence of the Christian faith in Fiji today. Mindful however, Fiji's complex history of immigration which has resulted in the multicultural nature of the Fijian nation today.

The preamble also acknowledges the contribution of other faiths to the spiritual life of Fiji. I call on Government to put God first and restore God in a rightful position in our Constitution as sovereign and supreme authority over our land. We shall surely witness this miraculous work tomorrow. In Exodus Chapter 34 vs 10, and I quote:

“And he said, behold I make a covenant; before all thy people. I will do marvels, such as not have been done in all the earth, nor in any nation and all the people among which though art shall see the work of the Lord; for it is a terrible thing that I will do with thee’.

Sir, I wish to conclude my contribution with the following *Bible* verse: Proverbs Chapter 29 vs 2, and I quote: ‘when the righteous are in authority the people rejoice But when a wicked man rules,

the people grow'. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now call upon the Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. You have the floor.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers and Honourable Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka* and good afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in this august House to lend by full support to the 2021-2022 National Budget. At the outset, I would like to commend the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team for their confidence in framing this National Budget under the most challenging of circumstances. Despite the difficulties encountered, this Government has provided a holistic budget that serves the needs of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji, like the world, is facing one of the darkest periods of our history as we battle this pandemic. While our country is experiencing its worst economic hardship under this global financial crisis, we continue to support our citizens who are devastated by this pandemic. Despite this economic fallout which is tagged as the single largest economic contraction in Fijian history, Government couched a sustainable and bold budget that provides the economic environment to support recovery. Amidst the darkness, Government through this Budget, is projecting a future that is safe and an economy that can rise from its current contracted size.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Small Island Developing economies like Fiji, are at a disadvantage as we do not have the fiscal luxury to sustain our economies with huge stimulus measures, nor do we have the privilege of being first in the line to get vaccines.

Many politicians on the other side of this august House are saying that this Budget is unsustainable and has significant fiscal challenge. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have one simple question to those so-called intellectuals, "Can you show us any country in the world or especially any Small Island Developing State that has no fiscal challenge right now post-COVID-19?" The simple answer is none and I have with me a post-COVID-19 Report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) after one year, particularly for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and it is interesting reading, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government income is very low because of lower economic activities, which means low taxes and lower Government revenue. We are all managing through this COVID-19 storm together. However, this is only temporary, and it will subside. We are working like any other SIDS country with good technical support, oversight and surveillance of our development partners, including the IMF and the World Bank. This is why we have confidence in this Budget.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our collective national efforts against COVID-19 and projections to recovery is continuously being challenged by the increasing misinformation spewed to discredit vaccination efforts that is a critical pre-requisite to safeguarding all Fijians.

This has been exacerbated by lies and propaganda propped by anti-government elements here and abroad. These elements do not have Fiji's best interest at heart and are misleading Fijians that our rights as safeguarded under our Constitution are under threat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must realise that we are not in normal times and our collective security takes precedence over our individual rights. Sir, this is, again, one of the biggest challenges for Fiji

now. It is not so much the virus, it is about human behaviour and human rights. These are the big challenges that we have in the country right now, particularly in our campaign against COVID-19 from a collective security perspective and I say, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our biggest challenges are human rights and human behaviour. Collective security once again is a collective and shared responsibility.

Honourable Qereqeretabua has correctly stated there is no government without people but government needs the people as well, when it comes to strategies. We need the people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I will probably talk more on that during the course of my delivery this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate my sincerest appreciation and thanks to all our frontliners, who are constantly working around the clock sacrificing their time away from their families to fight this battle against this virus. Let us not undermine the great effort for a safer Fiji. Our complacency and disobedience is perhaps, the greatest security threat to our hopes to contain this virus and return our lives to normalcy. We cannot win this fight if we do not play our part in this battle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone needs to play their part. Parents, community leaders, village elders, chiefs, churches and most importantly, every individual Fijian needs to wake up and realise that this pandemic is very much real and not some, sort of, conspiracy theory as being spread through the social media by some overnight experts.

The increasing number of positive cases and deaths only points to our own selfishness and resistance, and Government will not hesitate to resort to taking drastic measures to ensuring compliance to protocols for the safety, security and wellbeing of Fiji and all Fijians. My portfolio Ministries, including the security forces, will continue to ensure compliance on all fronts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it should not have to take Government to come down hard on people by instituting lockdowns to stop the spread of this virus. It should not have to take the alarming rates of positive cases and deaths, to get us to realise the seriousness of this pandemic and to get vaccinated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, vaccines protect us all. Government has taken the first step and gone to great lengths with the support of our partners to make available the vaccines. It is now time for all Fijians to help themselves by getting vaccinated. We must all remember that God helps those who help themselves first. We do acknowledge the spiritual component on this, but there are different levels of faith in the community and that is something that we, as leaders, must understand.

Mr. Speaker, the Budget before the House is a budget that helps us all and steers us to a post-COVID prosperity. Again, let me say that once more, Government has yet, again, and as usual put FijiFirst in our 2021-2022 National Budget, by putting the needs of all Fijians first. Despite the uncertain and difficult times that we are presently facing, this Government is hopeful that the future of our economy will, again, be restored and prospered. The Budget before the House provides the means to achieve that vision.

As such, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I wish to outline how the Government, through my portfolio Ministries and line Departments, aim to fight and win the battle against this pandemic. But before doing so, just a few quick rebuttals. Let me go quickly to what the Honourable Rasova said. He particularly made fun of the boom, boom, boom,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is sad that some Honourable Members on the other side enjoyed the boom so much that they wanted to change their residential addresses so that they can gain more from the boom, and that is a fact, Sir. They have come to condemn the captain of the boat on this side, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, let me read the article from the two papers on 16th April this year where Honourable Tabuya queries leadership. This was on 16th April, just a few months away, and this was the response from their Party Leader. “Stop bad mouthing party,” that is Gavoka. I will not go into the details.

Yes, we talked about the captaincy of this boat and he is steering us in good waters but this is the alternative government that wants to take the country into 2022. This is another article, Mr. Speaker, Sir. “Resign! Tabuya tells Gavoka and Ratu Epenisa.” I will not go into the detail, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Honourable Rasova talked about the previous leader of the Opposition resigning because of lack of bipartisanship in here. But that was not what he stated in Parliament when he left the doors of Parliament, he talked about the cloak and dagger issue in SODELPA. It is a cloak and dagger Party.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Tell them, Minister!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the alternative Government that we are looking at. That is the leadership.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them, Minister! Tell them!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Qereqeretabua correctly stated about the qualities of leadership. How can you lead a Government, a cloak and dagger party? Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just go, if I have time, I will come back. I enjoy this, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to share with this House that the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the National Disaster Management Office have already been consistently engaged with activities that support the National Budget objectives and the Honourable Nath has talked about it and then later on, the Honourable Sigarara will also help me in that area. But, I have talked about the OECD Report.

On that note, I wish to thank our partners. We are not working in isolation, the World Bank is currently working with us, of course, targeting also our vegetable farmers, all those who sell fruits and vegetables to markets, those who produce handicrafts for our tourism sector, ensuring that Fijians, including the country’s most vulnerable can get assistance and support when they needed most.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must continue to future-proof Fiji, we have to further diversify our economic base to make us more resilient to adversities that will surely come in this century and more open to new opportunities, including bluer and greener sources of employment for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that the global pandemic and natural disasters have undermined some of our hard-won developments. However, the nation can be rest assured that with innovative and risk-informed rural development strategies, we will not only rebuild our economy, but build back better.

Let me quickly go to the Ministry of Defence. I wish to acknowledge and share my appreciation for the total budget of \$14.4 million provided to the Ministry of Defence, National Security and Policing, which is allocated for the following key programmes and initiatives:

- (1) For the National Security and Defence Review, a total of \$260,000.96.
- (2) \$12 million for the Aftercare Fund, expressing Government's continued commitment to all our returned and retired ex-servicemen and dependents for those who's returned service personnel have passed on.
- (3) An allocation of \$10,000 for the Narcotics Policy Framework;
- (4) An allocation of \$10,000 for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Rehabilitation;
- (5) Funding of \$200,000 for Search and Rescue; and
- (6) A new allocation of \$10,000 for anti-human trafficking initiatives, as outlined in our National Anti-Human Trafficking Strategy 2021-2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on security industry licensing, I also express great appreciation that through this Budget, Government will pay all security licensing fees for the next 12 months for all security companies and security industry employees who are required to possess and maintain a security licence. This is an alternative employment opportunity for most of our people who have been laid off from the other sectors and this is, in fact, a good initiative and we need to applaud the Honourable Minister for Economy for this.

On the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), Mr. Speaker, Sir, the RFMF continues to effectively execute its role and responsibilities as entrusted under the 2013 Constitution, of ensuring the security, defence and wellbeing of all Fijians. On countless occasions, the RFMF demonstrated its ability to become the key defence instrument in Fiji's arsenal, particularly during times of conflict, including regional and global peacekeeping, natural disaster response and, of course, supporting our current pandemic.

Although the allocation of \$79.7 million to the RFMF means a decrease of 5.2 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was, of course, a necessary sacrifice to enable the Fiji Government to provide necessary fiscal space in assisting ordinary Fijians during these telling times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not go into the details, but let me just say, particularly, that the bulk of the \$79 million is skewed towards maintaining the Force's strength and operational readiness in order to effectively provide critical support services to the nation.

Let me just highlight the \$12.1 million allocated to the RFMF's Naval Division, which is responsible for the surveillance and security of Fiji's maritime zone whilst also critically supporting our COVID-19 responses. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this week is Navy Week and that is why I am wearing the navy ties right throughout this week and I wish to convey my well wishes to all our sailors past and present and, of course, wishing them well and thank them for their work, particularly during this crisis.

On Head 49 – Peacekeeping Operations, it involves the Fiji Police Force (FPF) and the RFMF. In this regard, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation of \$50.6 million for RFMF and pFPF personnel committed for deployment to peacekeeping and UN Policing Missions ensures our continued commitment to global peace and security.

On the Fiji Police Force, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Honourable Minister responsible for policing, I acknowledge with great appreciation the allocation of \$184.3 million for our premier law enforcement agency, the FPF. This supports their commitment towards the maintenance of law and order, whilst remaining steadfast in their COVID-19 response through the enforcement of all legislation passed since 19th April, 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic first entered our domestic front. The allocation includes, firstly, \$4.4 million for the recruitment of 328 positions which will greatly support the work of the FPF, not only into the future but particularly during the current crisis that we are going through, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As Honourable Members of the House know that there

is a five-year plan, a 10-year plan and 20-year plan for the FPF and recruitment has been happening from the last few years. Sir, that will see the strength of the FPF being increased, and not only that, capability and capacity as well within the FPF, so \$4.4 million will be allocated for that purpose.

Secondly, \$25 million for the ongoing construction of Police Stations, ensuring police accessibility to people in the Central and Western Divisions. I have said this already in this august House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and, of course, Honourable Members from the other side are also highlighting about the state of buildings, not only for hospitals but Government Offices because most of them were built during the colonial days and we are thankful that this Government is taking the necessary steps to ensure that we create a better environment for our people to operate from. That is why we will see the continuation and hopefully, completion of Nadi Police Station and the Regional Police Headquarters in Lautoka, the continuation of Nakasi and, of course, Nalawa.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, like in our recovery from natural disasters, this pandemic has taught us a valuable lesson, that we are a nation of resilient people and this Budget maintains financial prudence while gearing us towards overall economic recovery and stability. Above all, it is focused on ensuring sustenance for all Fijians in these trying times, whilst providing opportunities for growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst there will be nay-sayers opposing and criticizing the Budget, independent commentaries and research have supported and validated this Budget. The Bank of Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) has dubbed Fiji's Budget as strong, and just what the doctor ordered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this 2021-2022 Budget is evident of Government's approach to providing the people of Fiji hope and that at the end of the tunnel, there is light. The onus is now on all of us to step up and carry out our duties and responsibilities as citizens of our country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two questions that I will keep asking, particularly most recently because of the crisis that we are going through. The first is; are we really patriotic as Fijians about our country? Do you love Fiji? And the other question is; what can we do? Because there is no Government without people but collective security and I say that again, 'collective security' is a shared responsibility, it is everyone taking that responsibility seriously and I hope that we will be patriotic. "We wish our team in Tokyo all the very best - Bring back the gold!" At the same time, for us to win this war here in Fiji, we need to work together.

Mr. Speaker, with this, I close by reiterating my full support for the 2021-2022 National Budget and since its Navy Week, I say, "Bravo Zulu". Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Today I start my reply to the 2021-2022 Budget by expressing my deepest condolences to the families of those who have passed away to COVID-19. Some, who I knew personally, many who are loved dearly and all who did not deserve to die.

I rise today with a heavy heart knowing that families throughout Fiji are watching this with empty stomachs. I see it almost every day as I distribute rations on the front lines of this pandemic. But I am also comforted with the knowledge that although we face immense challenges, through God's mighty grace, we shall overcome. Just like our flag bearer, swimmer Taichi Vakasama, whose event is tonight at 10.35 p.m. Fiji Time in the 200m breaststroke event, and just like our Olympic Sevens Team.

Now the Great Britain side looked formidable, thrashing Japan and Canada and holding them scoreless in the process. They seemed unbeatable. But each member of the Fiji team had trained for this Game all their lives. They all know that when they run onto that field, they represent their families at home, families who are struggling, but who will still climb a mountain to watch them play, families in search of hope for something to believe in.

Thrashing Great Britain 33-7 today put a smile on Fijians all around the world and we needed that. Thank you, Jerry Tuwai and the boys, win or lose, we believe in you. Dei tiko, Viti. Now, just like in rugby, we win when we work together, when we listen, when we communicate.

At a time when we should be listening and communicating with each other, this government has decided to run by itself and take on COVID-19 alone. Now that this government has isolated itself, COVID-19 has tackled them and turned over possession. The government decided it would play individually led by its know-it-all Vice-Captain who has now lost control and left us overwhelmed.

The fact of the matter, Mr. Speaker, is that the suffering, the hunger, the death and despair of our beautiful island nation is because FijiFirst has failed the people. The Honourable Prime Minister yesterday proudly proclaimed this Budget from the “Bainimarama Government” and FijiFirst. He added and I quote, “the health of our people and the health of our economy have never before been intertwined”. Now, at the risk of sounding like Honourable Bulitavu, I will agree with the Honourable Prime Minister.

The health of our economy and their plans in this Budget is as sickly and ravaged as the health of our people. FijiFirst has failed to keep us safe! The blood of 194 COVID-19 deaths is on your hands, FijiFirst. You destroyed Fiji. Firstly, when you opened the borders and allowed COVID-19 into our lives. You had a whole year, from the first wave to your credit you boasted about being COVID-19 contained and that NZ should learn from us.

But what were you doing the whole year to prepare for the second deadly wave, which was happening all around the world causing mass deaths, but what were you preparing here? Why were medical facilities not upgraded from our development partners to be COVID-19 ready? Why were vaccinations not rolled out? Why was money not saved up to provide assistance during long lockdowns - Why? Because the government fell asleep at the wheel! The captain fell asleep at the wheel! The government failed to prepare! You fail to prepare, you prepare to fail.

You destroyed Fiji when your incompetent system allowed an infected soldier to interact with a maid. Now, you would think that after over 20,000 cases and all the pain and suffering that the people of Fiji have had to go through, that we had finally learnt our lesson and kept our borders secure. This is after being assured time and time again by Dr Fong and the Honourable Prime Minister that mistakes of the past will never be repeated.

But just four days ago, Mr. Speaker, the *Fiji Times* reported that soldiers were still attempting to fraternize with people in the quarantine zone - the main reason why we are suffering, the main reason why there is so much death and destruction is because of the Bainimarama Government's failure to keep our borders secure. The FijiFirst quarantine protocols have failed and will continue to fail. The solution is simple: We just need to make just two changes - change the protocols and change the Government that came up with them.

The Bainimarama-led Government is responsible for the death and destruction brought by COVID-19 because it did not listen to the people and to their medical professionals calling out for a lockdown. But instead of listening, they blamed. The people called for a lockdown, a measure

implemented by New Zealand. We, the people, asked for a lockdown, vast majority did. Many health experts had said that a 14-day Viti Levu-wide lockdown in the beginning stages of this crisis would have saved us. I dare take a step further and can only assume because of my faith in our medical team that they would have advised the same.

Before I go into what I think of this Budget, please, let me touch on how this Budget has been communicated. One of the main aspects of navigating a crisis is communication. The Government has obviously missed the most important point of communication which is defined as an exchange of information. Communication from Government to the people has been only one way. The only way the public has been able to communicate is through angry emojis on the Honourable Prime Minister's videos on social media.

Does he not see how angry the people are? I honestly hope he reads the Facebook comments on his videos after he reads his speeches and yes, on *TikTok* too.

On the video of the Prime Minister's budget presentation on the Parliament of Fiji website, the most reactions, over 1,000, were angry emojis. The comments are so bad, I cannot repeat most of them here and even Parliament's repeated notice of 'no abusive remarks' kept popping up on the screen. But that is what happens when you do not communicate and listen. And to add insult to injury and amid all this crisis, the Government tried to sneak in legislation that touches *iTaukei* land - What a blunder!

At a time when our country is coming together united on this crisis which does not discriminate, they attempt to sneak in this legislation for exactly the purpose to divide us. Every time we talk about indigenous issues, the Government labels it as 'racist'. Being pro-*iTaukei* rights does not mean being anti-Indo-Fijian or any other community. Let me say that once again because in all the propaganda of the Government this is often not communicated clearly. Being pro-*iTaukei* rights does not mean being anti-Indo-Fijian or any other race. What we, the landowners want is, to hold onto our land and develop it in a way that benefits us and the people that use it.

For too long many Governments around the world have taken over native lands saying, it is for their own benefit and for too long, indigenous people are being left landless. Our land is sacred. Passed on through generations from the beginning of time. All we are saying is 'come talk to us first before you do anything to benefit us'.

Yesterday, the Honourable Prime Minister spent 15 minutes of his 21-minute speech defending the Land Bill and attacking me. Mr. Speaker, I will not spend as much time because Fiji is out of time as far as COVID is concerned which should be our main focus. But I would like to start talking about Bill No. 17 by explaining why this FijiFirst Budget failed by trying to sneak in this Bill. We can go back and forth with legal opinions until they find a cure for COVID. I, like the Honourable Attorney-General can also present the legal opinions of my esteemed colleagues such as Filimoni Vosarogo questioning who monitors the full value of the land and thus the correct rent going to landowners or that of Richard Naidu who aptly describes the Bill No. 17 as disrespectful and arrogant, especially in regards to the sensitive areas of *iTaukei* land.

The Honourable Attorney-General wrote an almost 2,500 word explanation of his defence of Bill No. 17 on his Facebook page. I have also seen with much amusement how iTLTB released the same press statement, word-for-word as that on the Government websites. But the fact of the matter is, it does not matter! What matters is asking the landowners first through consultation. What does consultation of landowners look like? It looks like this: The number of petitions that have been filed before Parliament that contain tens of thousands of signatures petitioning the Government to remove Bill No. 17.

The Coalition of NGOs and the Methodist Church of Fiji have supported this call. That is what it looks like Mr. Speaker, Sir, because when the land has eyes it looks back at you baring its teeth. I am proud to stand here with the thousands of land owners across Fiji from *Na Momo Levu na Tui Nadi* and *Na Momo Levu na Tui Nawaka, na Bose* in Momo of the Province of Ba, the *Liuliu ni Yavusa Kalabu Ratu Paula Rawiriwiri*, and all the signatories both *iTaukei* and non-*iTaukei*, people of all races who have signed petitions, totalling almost 30,000 signatures because they agree with the need to show respect and consult.

Please, Honourable Prime Minister, do the right thing, withdraw the Bill and take it back for consultations. I ask you this: as a freehold landowner, and you have a tenant sitting in your land, would you let your tenant go and mortgage your land without your consent? Absolutely not!. You as a landowner need to give consent before that mortgage is issued. It is not an administrative issue, it is a legal fundamental right. We may even end back here in parliament where you will likely achieve the same result, but it would have been a properly consulted Bill, a people's Bill. This is the voice of the people standing with me in Parliament. These are the landowners here to tell you to ask landowners first. Nothing about us, without us!

The stakes are high, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in finding solutions and I honestly do not see them in this budget. This election budget is big on all the small promises of help. In assessing the implications of the 2021-2022 Budget, just as I will not pretend to be a doctor trying to cure COVID-19, nor will I pretend to be an economist trying to solve the country's economic problems, so I turned to former Reserve Bank of Fiji Governor, Savenaca Narube, for his assistance, and we have discussed some interesting findings I would like to share here in Parliament.

The other side loves to call us bush lawyers and discredit all Opposition. To you Honourable Prime Minister I am not a bush lawyer, I am actually a lawyer, but as Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji, he was at the helm of cleaning up Fiji's economy after the mess the Honourable Prime Minister left in 2006. So I can say with absolute confidence, that Mr. Narube actually knows the definition of GDP. I would like to give him credit for his input on my presentation.

The Honourable Prime Minister keeps laughing off the suggestion that printing money is a real option. An option used by many countries all over the world, especially during difficult times like war, recessions and now more recently this COVID-19 pandemic. He, nor his trusted bush economist, understand the concept or how it works, otherwise they might actually be using it as an effective tool to get our economy back on its feet, like so many other nations, including the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand have done and continue to do through these unprecedented times.

The idea is not new and I am not the first one to suggest it. Mr. Narube, mid last year suggested we should print and inject money into the economy \$500 million and while this might sound outrageous to the lay person, the concept is simple, legal and has been used effectively for decades. It is more formally known as monetisation and is a form of quantitative easing. It occurs when a government finances itself, by selling bonds to the RBF in exchange for cash. The result is the creation of money at no direct cost to the Government, which they can then use to pay for its fiscal programs. Countries around the world used this approach to fund large COVID-19 economic stimulus packages. With this money, cash was quickly distributed to micro, small and medium sized businesses, encouraging them to keep their doors open and people employed.

Cash was quickly put into people's bank accounts and digital money accounts like M-PAiSA especially low income earners and those who lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19. While the Government has previously suggested that printing money would increase inflation and affect our foreign reserves, it has failed to understand or at least explain to our people that, whether the RBF

prints money or Government borrows money from overseas, which they are doing, both could have similar effects since they both involve increasing the money supply.

Furthermore, by next year, with the economy having declined for three years in a row by a cumulative 25 percent, the RBF should be more concerned about deflation rather than inflation, a real risk with demand crashing. Left unchecked and not well managed, there are potential risks of hyperinflation. Zimbabwe being a classic example.

Monetization only works if there is a respected and responsible central bank ready to turn off the taps when inflation threatens to exceed its targets. It also requires a responsible Government with effective financial leadership that will allow the Reserve Bank of Fiji to operate independently and without interference.

Well, in hindsight, Mr. Speaker, perhaps it is a blessing in disguise that this Government has been in power too long, has become complacent and no longer creative or inventive enough to have used monetization as a way to solve our economic challenges otherwise we might have indeed followed Zimbabwe's example.

Keeping FijiFirst's hands out of the till is now best left to the next responsible Government. When we are a Government next year more responsible than FijiFirst. Having said that, when we form the new government next year and it will be a priority to pay back FNPF moneys, Mr. Speaker, used by our people during this crisis.

Now to conclude, Mr. Speaker, I do not support this Budget because it has failed to show decisive leadership that can steer us out from this pandemic. Just yesterday, the Honourable Prime Minister proudly proclaimed that he will enforce cost cutting measures throughout his portfolios of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, iTaukei Affairs and the Sugar Industry, and the only example he gave was to take out the cutting of cakes from events. Are you serious, Honourable Prime Minister? For someone that wants his cake and actually eats it too, it is pretty mind blowing. Instead of cutting millions of dollars from his salaries. Instead of cutting millions of wasted tax dollars from his Government's lavish lifestyle, he wants to sacrifice by cutting cake from events. That's not sacrifice.

Let me tell you, Sir, what sacrifice. Give 100 percent of your parliamentary salary to the poor, Honourable Prime Minister. That's what I have done. I have given back all of my salary to feed families in need and others devastated by this pandemic.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- You have a lot of money though.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- To help expectant and new mothers. It does not matter what you have, Honourable Akbar. It does not matter what you have. It shows your sacrifice from what you receive as a Member of Parliament in this House. So spend your money to help expectant and new mothers.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Yes, we are.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- To have access to baby clothes, baby milk, bottles, and diapers. Reach out to the children in need who do not have laptops and tablets in rural areas instead of trying to tab this online learning that is not even working.

Honourable Prime Minister, you have failed. Your Government has failed. It is time to go.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I have been summoned by C.I.D after this to continue with their interrogation. But I just want to say to this Government. Do your worst. My answer and the tens of thousands of Fijians behind me remain the same.

We say 'No' to Bill No. 17 - we say 'No' to this 2021-2022 National Budget and come elections next year we will say, 'No', to FijiFirst. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Honourable Members on that note we will take a break for refreshments. There is no more match now but we will take the break for refreshments and remember there are Fiji Sevens Team, not only one.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.49 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.21 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members we will continue with our debate and I call on the next speaker the Honourable Rohit Sharma. You have the floor.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and the Honourable Members of Parliament; *Namaste* and *Bula Vinaka* to you all.

I rise this afternoon to contribute my wholehearted support to the Budget of 2021-2022. First and foremost I wish to take this opportunity to personally thank the Ministry of Economy in particular for this responsible and commendable budget for this fiscal year.

A special gratitude goes to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for their foresight and love for the people of our nation and these attributes are reflected in the 2021-2022 budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are in the midst of a fast evolving pandemic in Fiji and around the world. We have made the decision to protect each other. We have quickly adapted, we now wear mask, we wash our hands more often, we maintain a safe social distance as a result thousands have stayed safe. We remain deeply concerned about the path of the virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to be part of a government that is doing its level best to get everyone over the age of 18 years and above vaccinated as soon as possible, to get rid of this COVID-19 pandemic and bring our nation's economy back on track. As the wise farmer will tell you when the tempest is raging you must protect your plants from damage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Prime Minister is the wise farmer, caring for our beloved country. We have many strengths which includes our young and ambitious people, our institutions, a robust and vibrant democracy independent judiciary and our commitment to social justice progress and our economic strength. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it gives me immense pleasure and privilege to highlight some of the key components that the Bainimarama-led Government offers to our fellow Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a Budget that says we are prepared to commit and take the action of \$3.69 billion to get the recovery going. As the Minister for Economy said on the first reading of this Budget last week, the commentary is already changing. There is already confidence returning to the economy government impacts mitigation of COVID-19 and continuation of the stimulus package such as supporting the unemployment benefit for three months, EFL and water bills to be paid by Government whose household income is not \$30,000. Affordable housing brings stability, economic diversity and improves the physical quality of the neighbourhood hence the FijiFirst Government's initiative towards adequate housing benefits to help more Fijians, Fijian families own a decent housing is meritorious.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugarcane farmers have been the ball game in the Fijian political history. It is our leader, Honourable Prime Minister, who has come out clean as a whistle for the plight of the poor farmers who had been suffering before 2006. This Budget is definitely for the absolute majority of our population and it must have taken a herculean effort to prepare considering all dimensions.

I must comment the efforts by our Attorney-General and Minister for Economy in presenting such a balanced Budget with enormous opportunities for growth and development for all our fellow Fijians. Indeed this Budget speaks volume about the FijiFirst Government's efforts and commitment towards sustainability of natural and human resource development. Realistically it is imperative that

all aspects of Fiji's national development are sustainable, inclusive, resilient and low carbon considering the fact that the FijiFirst Government is on the frontline of the global campaign in our efforts towards tackling this COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and its implications.

In my perspective, I strongly believe that this Budget has been prepared using the microscopic version, covering all aspects of the economy such as education, health, technological advancement, welfare, infrastructure, environment and tourism. A very healthy budget indeed. I seriously feel that this Budget has been prepared on the basis on high intelligence, equity and vision and does not paint much space and opportunity for Members of the Opposition and even the general public to criticise. There were numerous rumours with negative connotations about the recent Budget prior to the announcement that was spreading faster than COVID-19.

However, it was a different story altogether when the Budget was tabled. People were full of smiles with new hopes and aspirations towards a more secured future for themselves and their children. That has been one of the major commitment of the FijiFirst Government that believes in true democracy, transparency, equality without any form of discrimination, just as gender, race, colour and ethnicity and it is this faith held by every Fijian provided through a vast array of political, civil and socio-economic rights enshrined in our Constitution.

The 2021-2020 Budget has revealed Government's commitment towards a bright and secured future for all. I believe there have been prudent and disciplined financial decisions made to ensure that we achieve a balance in terms of expenses and revenues and investments with strong relationship with development partners along with the extreme climate vulnerabilities we face. The FijiFirst Government has always invested in our people by caring for those that were vulnerable. Building resilience to worsening climate impacts, empowering the disadvantaged to stay out of poverty and giving all the people a fair shot at success in our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, agriculture has helped reduced poverty, raise incomes and improve food security for 80 percent of the world's poor who live in rural areas and work mainly in farms hence FijiFirst Government has not left any stone unturned by promoting vigorously to agricultural sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget 2021-2022 is welcomed by a vast majority of stakeholders including our people except for the Opposition which forgets the initiatives given in this 2021-2022 Budget by our Government is that no citizens are left behind. Giving tax concessions, free education, free medicine, unemployment benefits, free motor vehicle levy, free taxi and bus base fee, free market fee and many other are in this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under FijiFirst Government, every child is given a further opportunity to be educated, free education till Form 7 which reduces the burden from poor parents. There are tremendous efforts being made by the FijiFirst Government and looking after our education and teachers and civil service sectors and the protection of our marine resources. We would like to have our oceans free from nuclear testing, illegal mining, overfishing, industrial dumping and of course, plastic pollution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of our economic realities, I believe that the Government through its incentives on tax from 5 percent to 150 percent, more investors are encouraged to invest, which will create more job opportunities, and with pro-active measures will be able to collect billions of Fijian dollars in tax revenue within five years. This is what I referred to as prudent and disciplined financial decision making. I wonder how many valuable millions of dollars we must have lost under weak and an inconsistent polices, and how do we really consolidate to those taxpayers.

The 2021-2022 Budget is for every Fijian families, everywhere in Fiji, because all Fijian families matter. When Fijian families are strong, united, stable and thriving, the nation is strong, the nation is united, the nation succeeds, and this is the Budget that is grounded in the same values that builds strong and stable Fijian families, responsibility, integrity, accountability, foresight and the sense of duty and care for all our fellow Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a country that is on its way on the journey of recovery. We are not there yet, and it will take time, but this is a country that can look back on the last few weeks and the last few months and say, we had a hell of a challenge but we met the challenges, and we supported each other. We supported each other through the health crisis and now it is time to support each other through the financial crisis and the monetary rebuild and we will do that.

It is a country that has proven that when its far up against it, we pull collectively, we work together, we cooperate, we collaborate and we make the difference and we are thankful for the leadership that we have, to be thankful for the investment that has been put in through this budget as we recover and get back on our feet again. This is a budget that empowers Fijian families, laying out new and better economic opportunities for every member of every family in the country. This is a budget that gives a leg up to families, we need special care for those who are in the rural and remote parts of Fiji and those low income families. This is a budget that protects families who are facing tragic and unforeseen circumstances during this COVID-19 crisis. And this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the budget that will bring every Fijian family more prosperity, not only here and now, but for the years and decades to come.

As a Member of this august House, I therefore, appeal to all Honourable Members to join hands together, by disseminating this budget message honestly and truthfully to our people. If we are genuine in taking our nation forward, gone are the days when we lied to people about the truth and let us be responsible as Members of Parliament for the betterment of our people. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support this budget and may the good Lord bless us and bless our beloved nation. Thank you and *vinaka vakalevu*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the next speaker, the Honourable Tikoduadua.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no nation on earth has matched that record. I am not talking about our Fiji Sevens Team trying to retain gold at the Tokyo Olympics. I am not talking about the nine years of the so-called unprecedented economic growth described as a Boom.

The reality of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I, at the outset, quoted the Honourable Prime Minister, talking at the Fiji National University on 13th April, 2021, which was reported by FBC News. And I am talking about what the Honourable Prime Minister said that day, days away from when he planned to commemorate 365 days of COVID-free status at a resort in Nadi. He said and I quote:

“I am not speaking to you through a mask and we are not meeting virtually because we defeated our outbreak of the coronavirus and have kept our people safe from the pandemic for more than 350 days. No nation on Earth has matched that record.”

The FBC News reported the Honourable Prime Minister as saying that Fiji now has a chance to join the world in defeating the pandemic for good. This, he says, can be achieved by registering for the COVID-19 vaccine and receiving the shot when the time comes.

Most importantly, FBC News reported the Honourable Prime Minister as saying that Fiji was leading the world in COVID-19 containment and all the measures put in place to protect Fiji against the pandemic has worked. This was only days before all hell broke loose. I say hell, Mr. Speaker, because of many reasons and realities on the ground that are being deliberately ignored by everyone on the Government side during this debate. And what were those measures?

Those measures were quite elaborately outlined by the Honourable Prime Minister in a statement on 4th November, 2020, when Fiji marked 200 days of COVID-free status following Case No. 1 in March 2020. He said, and I quote:

“Fiji credits our 200-days of COVID containment to a fast and early science-based approach, including the systematic identification and isolation of people infected with COVID-19, and quarantine of every known contact of confirmed cases.”

Mr. Speaker, the key words here are, “fast and early science-based approach, systematic identification and isolation of infected people, quarantine of every known contact of confirmed cases”.

Fast-forward to today, Mr. Speaker, instead of bragging rights and optimism of joining a bubble with New Zealand and Australia to kick-start our tourism and revive our economy, we are bracing for the worst. A fast and early science-based approach has been completely abandoned because either the Opposition political parties or the civil society have been urging the Government to adopt a proven containment measure, or the Honourable Prime Minister and his right-hand man, the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy threw in the towel or waved the flag of surrender. Obviously, after being influenced by some who do not give a damn like them and are only interested in the advancement of their interests over the health of the people and eventual recovery of an economy to become genuinely vibrant.

Tragically, Mr. Speaker, under this Government, containment has turned to containers, simply, from preventing death to housing the dead. Why? Economic considerations have brutally suppressed the right to life and the right to healthcare, as espoused in the 2013 Constitution supposedly promoting genuine democracy, equality and access to opportunities through open merit.

Mr. Speaker, what is open merit in this case? It is the struggle to avoid the race towards one of the two containers, giving a harrowing image of a nation whose population has lost all hope and optimism of avoiding the ravages of a pandemic not contained by a science-based approach but exacerbated by economic considerations.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Speaker, comes the 2021-2022 Appropriation Bill 2021 or the National Budget. Despite all the hiss and roar of Government, this Budget’s projections and deliverable objectives will tragically deflate like a balloon. The Honourable Leader of the NFP said last night, to learn from the past. Absolutely, we learn from history.

History is a vehicle. One looks ahead and also reflects on the past watching the side and rear-view mirrors to ensure mistakes are not repeated. But this Government has not learned from history, and it somehow has the illusion that people will, once again, catch the bait of pie-in-the-sky promises over theoretical as well as sound and sensible solutions. What people are worried about is their lives and livelihood and both, lives and livelihoods have been lost so naturally, they need income support.

Of course, it is a government’s responsibility to fulfil its moral obligation of compassion and economic support for the population. However, this is a government which thinks it is always right, a government that thinks it can do no wrong. Of course, when it believes that the security forces are

on its side and constantly watching people, and empowered through Section 131(2) of the Constitution, it feels emboldened to do as it wishes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, but the wish list, with the ultimate aims of winning an election itself becomes a pie-in-the-sky objective because of a government's own dictatorial, deceptive, arrogant and non-consultative approach. A budgetary provision that immediately comes to mind is, "No job No benefit" measure. This is the height of governance insanity.

Vaccinating the targeted population has been a problem world over. It will be so for a while as people grapple with the idea of vaccination. It is simply the nature of people. Any new product either takes the market by storm or swims against tide. It needs massive education, togetherness and demonstrable unity amongst leaders to show the way forward.

It needs education, awareness and persuasion, not imposition or threat of withholding salary and benefits. Vaccination is an early and proven science-based approach. It has always been and will remain so, be it for COVID-19 or any other disease, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We have always encouraged and promoted vaccination. COVID-19 is no exception, but to deny people benefits funded by the taxpayers just because they have not been vaccinated is inhumane, unjust and morally wrong. It puts to shame this Government's objective of leaving no one behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Attorney-General said in Parliament on 10th December, 2020, while promoting the careFIJI App, and I quote:

"These measures are very important to give confidence to countries like Australia and New Zealand, to safely re-open their borders with Fiji. Even when a vaccine is available, the threat of COVID-19 will not simply disappear and we cannot be complacent."

Mr. Speaker, I will repeat what the honourable Minister for Economy said. "Even when a vaccine is available, the threat of COVID-19 will not simply disappear and we cannot be complacent." So how can the Honourable Attorney-General make an about-turn and say, "Once herd-immunity is achieved through vaccination, borders can open with those nations with similar statistics, et cetera." If the careFIJI App is as important as vaccine, why blackmail the people with "No job no benefit" or "No job no pay" for civil servants?

It is heartless and cruel to hold people to ransom - those who struggle to put food on the table for their families and that fact too for \$30 a week. What nonsense! This Government legislated through Parliament COVID-19 as an act of God in May last year. Cyclones and floods are two natural disasters regarded as acts of God. Does Government admonish or punish those who have lost their homes or suffered any form of damage just because they ignored weather bulletins, did not move to higher ground or did not have cyclone-proof homes?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what about the various relief measures rolled out in May 2018 post-*TC Keni* and *TC Josie* that caused minimal damage compared to monstrous calamities we suffered with no strings or conditions attached whatsoever? Was it because Elections were six or seven months away? What about 5,000 litre water tanks being given to residents who even had piped water - no questions asked? Electioneering or not - taxpayer's funds, whether raised through taxes or borrowing, taxpayers will have to pay for it anyway, should be given without any pre-conditions to those who need it, with no caveats whatsoever.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations and Youth and Sports, like his leaders, said vaccination was the only answer to reviving

the economy and derided the FTUC for not telling the truth when FTUC said it was not consulted on this policy. The Honourable Minister should know that any legislation on workers has to be brought to the Employment Relations Advisory Board (ERAB).

HON. P.K. BALA.- Get your facts right! You are incorrect.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Wait Bala! Wait Bala!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You go and check the law.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- He should honestly tell Parliament whether or not he deferred an ERAB meeting late in the afternoon on 6th July, scheduled for the next day.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are misleading Parliament.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- And the meeting was supposed to discuss the vaccination policy.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are misleading Parliament.

HON. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- The Honourable Minister should tell Parliament whether or not an email was sent the same evening to the Occupational Health and Safety Board, informing it that the Minister had decided to make vaccination regulations and sought the Board's views at about 10.00 a.m. the next day - 7th July.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Please, do not mislead Parliament.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- I am not misleading Parliament.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- For all intent and purpose, it was a carefully crafted plan to defer the ERAB meeting under the pretext of lack of quorum, engineered by Government and employer representatives who wanted this policy. Tell the truth, Honourable Minister, you lied to Parliament.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Go and read the law!

HON. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, just as the Honourable Prime Minister, the pre-2018 Election description of GDP as *dinau* or debt is a case of chickens coming home to roost, his statement at Fiji National University in April this year has come back to haunt his Government.

Last night, 1,285 COVID-19 positive cases were announced. The Ministry of Health also announced the seven-day average of eight COVID positive deaths daily. The number of COVID cases since the outbreak in April has reached 24,354. The total number of deaths since April is 193. A total of 100 or more people have died after contracting COVID-19 but were classified as non-COVID-19 deaths because they had pre-existing conditions.

During the 2019-2020 Budget debate in June 2019, I showed Parliament the picture of a washroom door at CWM Hospital. The place had to close using an intravenous tube (IV) and a wooden block, and this was only seven months after the Elections. It was a clear sign of the state of decay under a Government which spent 48 hours strategising low-hanging fruits.

Tragically, Mr. Speaker, the wails of people gasping for breath and losing their lives, the cries of people for genuine and timely help, the high cost of living including rising prices of food and medicine felt by those who cannot afford it and the indignity in farewelling loved ones being taken from makeshift containers and morgues is the undeniable, extremely painful portrait of the nation today.

Pregnant mothers have lost their lives. Our doctors have saved lives of babies through Caesarean or C-section, babies who will grow up without the love of their mothers – the love and care that is irreplaceable. Who is responsible for the psychological trauma, pain and suffering of grieving families and absence of motherly love and care for these babies? No announcement of camouflaging a blind cosmetic and band-aid solution can hide this unmistakable tragic truth – a truth brought about by the leadership of a Government drunk on power, led by a captain and his right-hand man. They do not give a damn, have shown total lack of empathy, compassion and care – sadly endorsed by 25 other Honourable Members who lack the moral and courage to take a stand and tell them that they are only heaping pain and misery on the people through their policies.

Mr. Speaker, amidst these dark clouds of uncertainty enveloping us, we have real heroes who work tirelessly day and night to protect us. The security forces, the army, doctors and nurses, the medical specialists, volunteers, retired and former medical personnel – they are our real heroes. They are separated from their families but their call of duty is paramount. They are overworked, underpaid, under-resourced, carrying on regardless, despite the severely stressed environment. They have been forced into this situation because of the ‘containment to containers’ mitigation strategy adopted by this Government’s leadership. And sadly, they too fall victims to the ravages of this pandemic which is allowed to run amok on Viti Levu by this Government. Some have lost their lives in their line of duty because of the unseen, silent enemy that COVID-19 is. Unfortunately, a tired, overworked medical personnel and frontline worker is prone to making mistakes, and this is a fact.

Mr. Speaker, at this point, I also pay tribute to my wife who, like others, is away from home for weeks as part of a vaccination team. The members of her team also tested positive for COVID-19. She had to go into self-isolation in the Village, away from our family, and she is set to resume her work. This will be the routine for our frontliners this year because the health and safety of our people has been compromised in favour of economic considerations, an economy that will be scarred because of a leadership shamelessly pretending that all is well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has talked about how it is fighting a war against COVID-19. I want to tell the Honourable Prime Minister and his Members this, right now the enemy is utterly defeating you. It is out manoeuvring you. You cannot even talk to your troops and get them to march in the same direction – the people of our nation. You have to point a gun at them and say, ‘get jabbed and march’, ‘No jabs, no benefits and no salary’. You are throwing away all your intel by not even testing properly, so you no longer even have information or intelligence on how the enemy is moving. You have decided that you will just sit there, an open target, a sitting duck, waiting for the enemy to come over you and ride all over you and ride all over our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the *modus operandi* of the FijiFirst Government leading Fiji today under its captain and its aide. Instead of containing and eliminating the virus that is causing a social, economic and health catastrophe, the Government is trying to crush anyone opposing its ill-

conceived, divisive and discriminatory policies. These days of shameless governance, dictatorial and failed leadership must become a thing of the past through the ballot box next year.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the Budget that is before the House. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable Members of Parliament; *bula re* and a very good afternoon to you all.

I stand in your midst to complement the voices of Honourable Members of this august House in their response to the 2021-2022 National Budget. At the outset, on behalf of the Fijian Government, I take this time to remember the lives of those who have been affected by the pandemic, the 23,139 cases that were diagnosed with the virus, especially the victims and families of the 186 lives that succumbed to the deadly virus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must first congratulate the Honourable Minister for Economy for delivering a Budget in the middle of a global crisis in a ray of hope for all Fijians. The 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey indicated that Fiji's rural poverty headcount is estimated at 41.5 percent of the rural population. This is equivalent to a total of 160,450 people.

These numbers may have changed since the first outbreak of COVID-19 due to the following: loss in tourism revenue; drop in foreign direct investment; job losses or reduced working hours, increased inward remittance flow, increase in urban to rural migration and a better targeted support during the COVID-19 response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Honourable Minister for Economy for providing the following:

- \$200 million for the Unemployment Benefit Scheme;
- \$120 million for the Poverty Benefit Scheme;
- Child Protection Allowance Programme;
- Disability Allowance Programme;
- Social Pension Scheme; and
- Bus Fare Assistance for the Elderly and Disabled to assist more than 130,000 vulnerable Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these allocations are to provide support to the poor and vulnerable in the form of cash transfer support ranging from \$35 to \$127 per week and \$50 food voucher for 27,490 Fijians; continuing to provide balanced and nutritional meals for expectant mothers in rural areas; Food Voucher Programme and a Social Pension Scheme of \$100 per month is, again, commendable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must acknowledge upfront the budgetary allocation for the Ministry's main development programmes and commend the Honourable Minister for Economy for recognising the importance of the development of the rural economy. Sir, in light of the objectives of our recently announced National Budget, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management pledges its full support towards the Government continued efforts for the full

vaccination of this targeted population to achieve herd immunity. I am sure that you would agree with me of its necessity in building confidence in all spheres of the Fijian economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am certain that the Budget will address the current realities and will prepare every Fijian for the unforeseen future. The Budget places emphasis on the development of our rural and maritime areas to give them access to the same service we have in urban centres and at the same time, narrowing the rural poverty gap. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the fact that we cannot do it alone. We need assistance from our civil organisations, advisory councillors, *mata ni tikina* and *turaga ni koro* to be the medium development between the Government and the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Government mandate to empower and promote the development of livelihoods for the rural population, the Ministry will continue to identify priorities and develop essential areas of need for the 44.1 percent of Fiji's population. To bring this to reality, the Ministry has been allocated with a total of \$14.5 million for the 2021-2022 financial year and includes \$5.1 million for capital programmes alone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that our rural and maritime communities are accessible to economic activities that improve their livelihoods, the Ministry has been allocated a total of \$2 million for the community access roads, footpaths and foot bridges and \$1 million for the grant to help them. For the past three financial years, the Ministry has been given a budget of \$8 million for these two programmes.

The Ministry managed to successfully implement 545 projects that benefited an estimated 100,000 Fijians in the rural and maritime areas. We are now targeting small and micro businesses to stimulate our economy and also allow them to become more self-sufficient. The Ministry has been allocated \$1 million for self-help and income generating programmes for the new financial year. This support has always been an active platform to pivot our rural and maritime communities to better opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the incentive and assistance provided to support businesses. This is the provision of \$200 million as working capital support in the form of loans to help Fijian businesses meet their operational needs. The support for micro, small, medium and large businesses that have been the hardest hit by the pandemic is essential to sustain development as these entities are the engines of growth in our economy and must be given the right type of support to escalate our national recovery effort. As such a time when the degree of uncertainties have never been more real, explorable options are a must to support ease of doing business along the vital mechanism. This Budget provides the light to guide us through the darkest of times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitution guarantees the right for every Fijian to clean and safe water in quantities and adequate sanitation facilities. In 2020-2021 financial year, a new budgetary allocation of \$0.75 million was provided to assist communities that are still relying on high risk water and sanitation. The Programme enabled the construction of ecological purification system, allowing communities to access safe and clean drinking water. The Ministry has been allocated a budget of \$0.5 million for the high risk water and sanitation projects in the 2021-2022 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, taking care of our people has always been at the forefront of our vision in the FijiFirst Government. The Ministry has, again, been allocated \$0.4 million for the repairs and maintenance of government pool quarters at the sub-national level. This is only the second time the Ministry has been allocated this budget and I can assure you that not only is the Ministry grateful but also our civil servants in the four Divisions as there has been some urgency placed on the improvement of their safety and living conditions. A total of 62 families have benefitted from the programme in the current financial year.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of Divisional Commissioners have, again, been allocated a budget of \$0.1 million for institutional strengthening. The allocation is used to ensure that our Provincial Administrators and District Officers are equipped with the right resources and facilities to serve our rural and maritime people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$5.1 million capital budget include close to \$0.35 million which is allocated for Divisional Development Projects. The amount is to fund the 10 percent retention cost for:

- Kavala Government Station in Kadavu which is expected to benefit 11,000 Fijians;
- Namarai Government Station in Ra, having a total beneficiary population of round 3,500 distributed over 27 villages;
- Kubulau Duplex Staff Quarters in Bua with a total beneficiary of 2,579 from the Tikina of Kubulau, Wainunu in Bua and the Tikina of Wailevu, Cakaudrove; and
- Wainikoro Government Station in Macuata with an expected 45,000 beneficiaries in the Tikina of Namuka, Nadogo, Dogotuki and Udu.

The FijiFirst Government has stood in this august House over the last few years talking about maximising our reach into our rural communities as we live by our word, Mr. Speaker. After years of planning and implementation to ensure that our investments are worthwhile, this project will finally be completed with the last payment of redemption cost to our contractors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the creation of the wealth through high value economic activities in Fiji, Fiji's rural and maritime areas continues to be an area of focus that has the potential to be fully developed and realised. There has never been stronger emphasis on sustaining growth development for the sake of Fijians with the right infrastructure support to accomplish optimistic results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the future holds much promise for our beloved Fiji through sustainable farming, fishing, value-adding of agriculture and forest resources, strengthened markets and supply chain so that rural communities can equally enjoy the benefits of development in meeting their basic needs and improved quality of lives towards self-sufficiency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes the outcome of the Fiji Agriculture Census that was undertaken in the last financial year. There are notable data emanating from the Census that will assist the Ministry in strategically allocating its budgetary resources. The assistance available to the resource owners and promotion of income generating projects for the women is one such support that the Ministry is adamant with.

The Ministry notes the increase in the value of exports in fresh or chilled crop totalling \$23.6 million. The Census highlights that a total of 29,450 households are engaged in fishing activities. This is further demarcated to 89.9 percent male-headed and 10.1 percent female-headed households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development will continue to assist through cost sharing of one-third community contribution and two-thirds Government contribution in the procurement of outboard motor engines and boats, not only to assist the livelihoods of our fisher folks, but also as a means of easing transportation within our maritime islands. Sir, I commend the allocation of \$0.5 million as announced by the Honourable Minister for Economy for the same purpose.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has begun drafting a new Strategic Development Plan which is aligned to the National Development Plan and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The plan works along with key strategic priority areas in efforts to address maritime development goals and

identify priorities. It is our vision that this plan will highlight and guide the Ministry in prioritising development in the rural areas and address a number of goals, including reducing poverty, improving food security, fostering innovation, making settlements inclusive and safe resilient and sustainable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must note that as part of our development framework, our Ministry works with other agencies, as well as stakeholders in the communities, including District Advisory Counsellors. That provides the link between the communities and Government in promoting and facilitating the implementation of Government programmes and projects at the community level, and including our Provincial Administrators and District Officers during natural disasters. There are 16 Councils and over 300 Counsellors all across the country. I acknowledge that a budget of \$0.6 million is allocated in the 2021-2022 Budget as an allowance for the District Advisory Council members.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that with our budgetary allocation, the Ministry will continue to deliver the best it can in serving our rural communities, even with the current arrangement of work and new norm we are faced with. I wish to reiterate to the Honourable Members of this House that we must encourage our staff, families and friends to get fully vaccinated for the sake of fully realising the targeted plans ahead of us. There has never been a more crucial time needed for our relied support to work together as a family and as a nation to rebuild our beloved Fiji. We have done it before and we will do it again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, and Honourable Members, I thank you for your indulgence and I support the motion by the Honourable Minister for Economy on the 2021-2022 National Budget. *Vinaka*.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister. I now give the floor to the Honourable Vosanibola.

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to respond to the motion before the House. At the outset, the 2021-2022 Budget delivered on 16th July, 2021, is against the backdrop infections of rising COVID-19, will be the third National Budget by the Government since March 2020. The Budget is based on a total revenue forecast of \$2.08 billion and expenditure commitment of \$3.69 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after borrowing to finance the shortfall of \$1.6 billion and debt repayment of \$367.8 million, Government debt stock is estimated to reach around \$9 billion. This would equate to almost 92 percent of the GDP, and the total debt servicing for 2021-2022 will be \$57.8 million or 36 percent of the total revenue, or 20 percent of the total expenditure. Sir, as expected, that burden continues to worsen, as we are already in the trap of debt.

As I analysed the Budget, with all the initiatives and hand-outs thereon, it caters for vaccinated citizens only, such as market vendors, and others as outlined by the Honourable Minister for Economy in his Budget Address. I request the Government, please, provide the social financial assistance without the job conditions.

Looking around where we are living and we are thinking of the rest of the community members suffering in silence out in the formal and informal settlements and villages, I think leaving no one behind is much to be desired during this pandemic period in the distribution of social financial assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, beyond sickness and death, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought economic damage and social disruption in Fiji. Dealing with the impact of the spread of COVID-19 is simply about protecting lives, healing infected people and reducing economic harm.

Sir, on that note, I would like to congratulate and pay tribute and extend our sincere appreciation and gratitude to all frontline healthcare workers and members of the Disciplined Forces for the untiring efforts towards controlling the disease and treatment of infected citizens. And also, we would like to pass on our condolences and sympathies to the families of the frontline care workers, who have died from COVID-19 namely or just recently, a medical doctor and a nursing staff.

On that note, Sir, I reiterate the call for the frontline workers to be provided with special COVID-19 risk allowances. Sir, everywhere we have seen an absolute disaster. The problem is, we cannot pit health against economy. Unless we have a healthy population, we will have problem in our economy. Economy is human construct while health is a biological reality.

We have to look after the health of the community ahead of the economy and from the outset, there is a clear evidence that we are having a war of competing priorities between health and economy.

Everyone knows that the health crisis is out of control. Our positivity rate is more than five times the WHO benchmark. Our health system is crumbling and infected people are admitted in shocking and deplorable hospital conditions. Families are looking for the bodies of their loved ones for burial.

Sir, the Budget has only one option to solve the health crisis, which is vaccination. In the likely event that we miss this target, our economic and social woes will be multiplied and many people will die.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is too optimistic, over ambitious and does not reflect the real needs of the people. Fiji has been in a weak economic and fiscal position since 2019 and the economic threat posed by the pandemic revealed the truth and further uncovered the underlying weaknesses in our economy.

The Budget should focus more on the health of the people, jobs for the people and livelihood for the people of Fiji. Health is very critical at this time because of the uncontrolled transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Our health facilities are in substandard conditions, therefore, it is necessary that more resources should be directed to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to address the situation. More resources should be directed in improving health infrastructure, also ensuring sufficient supplies of medicine and drugs and necessary health equipment and the provision of the support services for the health sector.

With regard to jobs, it is important that the Government should consider providing opportunities, particularly for those who have lost their jobs. This could be done by providing more resources to sectors that will provide employment opportunities and also in the public sector and programmes in the short term.

In regards to the livelihoods of our people, the main focus is food security. Therefore, more resources should be directed to the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure food security and the development of value addition to our resource-based sector. At this point in time, we should focus within Fiji because tourism or tourists will not be coming to our shores any time soon.

Sir, while the Honourable Minister for Economy in his consultations had suggested that his Budget theme is supporting the unemployed and getting people back to jobs, Government must make sure that it has to achieve what the Honourable Attorney-General has diluted during the consultation rather than just another exercise in giving lip service without making sure the allocations and programmes are implemented and targets are achieved.

Of course, a review of the previous year's Budget clearly shows that very little has been achieved because funds have been controlled by him due to shortfall in revenue collected, and that has been the trend for the last 10 years. Also Sir, in his latest announcement of the Budget, the Minister for Economy seems to suggest that the focus on 2021-2022 National Budget would be on macro, fiscal and economic stability.

On Saturday, 10th July, 2021, during a budget training session organised by the Fiji Media Association, he informed that the budget to support economic recovery, rejuvenate private sector activities, protect jobs, assist the unemployed and maintain an overall macro-fiscal sustainability. Well, Sir, these things should have been considered when we were reminded by experts and development partners that Fiji is facing a headwind in 2017 and also since 2017, SODELPA had reminded the Honourable Minister for Economy, but to no avail to consolidate Government finances to ensure fiscal space for future crisis. Therefore, the Government should have considered micro-fiscal stability to provide a fiscal space that is needed, particularly in this time of crisis. It is unfortunate that today, we do not have that fiscal space to be able to manoeuvre but the only option available for us is to continue borrowing when our debt is already unsustainable at over 100 percent of our annual GDP which is over \$10 billion currently, which includes Government debt of \$9 billion and \$1 billion of contingency liability.

In addition, Sir, we rely on budget support from our development partners for the implementation of Government programmes and to support urgent services to mitigate the pandemic. Sir, our focus is more on the implications and impact of the Budget to the people of Fiji. Budget should have a human face in addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged and the vulnerable groups rather than focusing more on the economic recovery and big business houses. There must be a very clear balance between revitalising the economy while at the same time, protecting the most vulnerable.

Sir, on Fiji's economic performance, it is unfortunate that the FijiFirst Government continues to claim Fiji's economic growth in the last 10 years has been unprecedented and no government has achieved such a feat. It is important that Members continue to inform the public that it is not true. I think, Sir, Fiji's highest economic growth for the 10 years period was from 1971 to 1980 and the highest growth rate ever achieved was during the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's era. Sir, on that note, no previous Government has brought Fiji to its knees economically than the FijiFirst Government.

Sir, on investment, regarding investment as a percentage of GDP, you will appreciate that for Fiji to achieve sustainable economic growth, it needs at least 5 percent annually. It will need, at least, 25 percent investment as a percentage of GDP. On that note, I think it is after the completion of the sealing of the 70 kilometres of the Nabouwalu-Dreketi Highway in 2013, investment continues to decline.

In 2018, the total investment which include government, private, public enterprises was hovering around 21.1 percent, but there was a decline. Therefore, in reviewing the 2021-2022 Budget, it is important that the Government should target areas that would provide urgent employment opportunities to those who have lost their jobs.

Sir, on the Government expenditure and revenue status, based on the expenditure and revenue trend since 2013, it must be appreciated that the continuing trend of expenditure and declining trend of revenue. In 2014, the gap or variance between actual expenditure and total revenue was around \$495 million. It further increased to \$581 million in the 2018-2019 Budget. But in the 2020-2021 financial year, the gap jumped up to a whopping \$2 billion. This implies that the deficit debt since 2014 continues to increase.

The budgeted and actual revenue and budgeted actual expenditure shows substantial variation annually and most importantly, the variation in operating expenditure and total expenditure, again, in the total budget continue to increase or rather underutilised. Please, note that the underutilisation of funds does not mean it is savings. When funds are allocated, Ministries are expected to utilise those funds based on the programmes to be implemented.

Sir, as the Shadow Minister for Lands, I would like to discuss further on the Ministry of Lands' budget allocation for this year. The budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Lands is \$23.20 million, \$1.7 million less than the 2020-2021 allocation of which Operating amounts to \$18.9 million, Capital - \$3.2 million and VAT - \$92,600.

Sir, with the current plan commitment on Operating and Capital by the Ministry, I hope it will also take into account some of the challenges and issues highlighted in the Annual Report, which could be implemented in this financial year:

- (1) Upgrade of Land Database;
- (2) Provision of electronic software to assist in monitoring of lease and land dealing processes;
- (3) Existing staff to undertake local and international training; and
- (4) Filling up of vacant positions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I note that the Honourable Minister for Economy discussed further on the repealing of the Quarantine Act. During the Budget session, the proposed repealing of the Quarantine Act as informed by the Minister for Economy has two main goals which are reducing bureaucracy and the ease of doing business, and I strongly recommend a thorough consultation with relevant partners must be carried out prior to the proposed repealing of the Act.

Under the Quarantine Act (Cap 112), the current time of clearing the vessel as stipulated under the Act is one hour after the sunrise and one hour before sunset. The main goal of the Quarantine Act and its legislation is to prevent the transmission of disease, its causative agent and even its transmission host into Fiji. And the Act clearly stipulates the clearing of vessels from a healthy port, which is Part 3 of the Act, and also from a malarious port, which is Part 6 of the Act. My worry is on vessels coming from malarious ports, and there are underlying reasons for clearances to be carried out during daylight and that is why Quarantine Officers need to carry out a thorough inspection of the vessel for mosquito breeding within the vessel.

Sir, in Fiji, we have the malarial virus, medically known as *wuchereria bancrofti*, among our foreign students or even to some of our Military Forces members, who have had a stint of peacekeeping duties in East Timor. But we do not have the *anopheline* mosquito which is the core host for malarial transmission, therefore, it needs to be looked into during consultation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, globally and due to the increase in international travel and trade, the emergence and re-emergence of international threats and other health risks and Fiji as a WHO Member State, has agreed to implement the International Health Regulations 2005. The purpose and scope of that international Regulation is to prevent/protect against control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease in ways that are commensurate with and restricted to public health risks and which avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic and trade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the amendment to Bill No. 17/2021 on the Native Land Trust Act, I just wish to make a few points. In Fiji, especially, to the *iTaukei*, nothing is more important than land. Not only, *iTaukei*, to all Fijians. That is the fulcrum around which Fiji revolves and majority of the landowners rely on their land for their livelihood, and it is a source of indigenous power, culture and

identity. That is the golden asset to any landowner and it is the heartbeat of our existence, and even become a sensitive issue, when there is a dispute situation.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General to relook at this amendment for the withdrawal of the Bill and let it be scrutinised through a consultation process with the landowners. Although you may term it as a minor amendment but be cautioned, it is land and let us hear the voice and the views of the landowners and let us respect them.

If, in the future, when native land laws are being amended easily through the Parliament corridor, I think the landowners will be reluctant in granting their land with iTLTB for leasing. I remind the House of the following Biblical story as mentioned earlier by the Tui Namuka in 1 King 21:2-3:

<sup>2</sup> Ahab said to Naboth, “Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.”

<sup>3</sup> But Naboth replied, “The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *iTaukei* version of those verses is as follows:

*“2 A sa vosa vei Nepoci ko Eapi, ka kaya, “Mo solia vei au na nomu were-ni-vaini, me noqu were ni rourou, ka ni sa voleka ki na noqu vale: ia ka'u na solia vei iko me kenai sau e dua na were-ni-vaini e vinaka cake; ia kevaka ko sa vinakata me kenai voli nai lavo, ka'u na solia vei iko.”*

*3 A sa kaya vei Eapi ko Nepoci, “Me kakua sara vei au e na vuku i Jiova, me'u solia vei iko na nodra i votavota na noqu qase.”*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to commend some of the projects in the Budget such as the proposed ice plant on Koro Island, as informed by the Honourable Minister for Fisheries yesterday, and also request the Government to look into the communication connectivity on the construction of towers for mobile phones in the Lomaiviti Province, such as on Koro Island in the Tikina of Mudu - the Villages of Namacu, Nakodu, Sinuvaca and Mudu; also in the Tikina of Cawa; on the Island of Ovalau along with the Villages of Lovoniwai, namely, Visoto, Nacobo and Nukutocia; and on the Islands of Motoriki, Gau, Nairai and Batiki. Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Government for the construction of the seawall at Natokalau Village on Ovalau, which has been completed.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for your indulgence and I do not support the 2021-2022 Appropriation Bill. Thank you, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Member. I now call upon the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji; I endorse and commend the Appropriation Bill, and congratulate the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications and his team for delivering a well-planned and

coordinated 2021-2022 Budget to support our economic recovery - a brave Budget, a sensible Budget.

This is a critical Budget because we are being tested as a country like never before. We have had natural disaster after natural disaster, coupled with the pandemic that has impacted us for over a year. We have had job losses and loss of livelihoods for a lot of our people and as I have said, we are being tested as never before. We are being led by a Government that is not only resilient, but far-looking and decisive.

We are focused, not only on addressing COVID-19 and saving lives, but at the same time, addressing the consequences of COVID-19 on our long term sustainability as a country. The Government has helped families meet basic needs, like food items, connecting them with programmes that can help guide those who are out of work through applying for financial assistance, encouraging our citizens to practice self-care, even if it is just taking a few minutes for themselves or going for a walk or getting plenty of rest, providing awareness programmes on social distancing and hygiene.

Honourable Members of the Opposition have referred to what Government does as freebees. This implies that the people getting this assistance do not really need it. Are they suggesting that we do not provide food rations, that we do not subsidise water and electricity rates for those whose family income is less than \$30,000 a year, that we do not provide sanitary pads for our young girls, that we do not provide assistance to purchase data for school children at this time so dependent on computers and being online? Is this official SOLDEPA doctrine? Is this your grand plan to deny assistance to those who need it?

Government cares for all in Fiji, as seen in education, social welfare, water, electricity, unemployment benefits, assistance for Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) - these are not freebees. This is looking after the needs of those who need it and putting the interests of ordinary Fijians first.

The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has been allocated a total budget of \$23.2 million, a reduction of \$1.7 million. The Ministry staff, under the leadership of the Permanent Secretary, are innovating to make use of this money to the best of their ability, they are tapping into opportunities and potential so that we can effectively and efficiently administer, develop and manage all our State land initiatives, including our country's mineral sector and groundwater resources. We will look to strike the right balance between the fulfilment of our role, supporting and encouraging economic activities and at the same time, ensuring that we protect our environment and manage the environment well.

We will continue our emphasis on supporting the development of the commercial agricultural sector and agro-processing by speeding up the process of land accessibility. We have reviewed and improved our processes for land accessibility. We have called upon every arm of our creativity and innovativeness ever since COVID came knocking. We have revised our SOPs for the second time as a result, placing importance in an effective criteria for the allocation of lots on advertised State land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No. 16/2021 is one of the Consequential Bills that removes the need to seek consent from the Ministry for issues, such as consents, mortgages, caveats, et cetera, is just a step also to speed up our processes.

In the year 2018-2019, there were a total of 3,650 such dealings, more than 10,000 over these past few years. Sir, 70 percent of those dealings were accomplished within the 10-day timeframe

and, yes, there have been cases in the past where it has taken months and even years, even though there has been a gradual improvement over the years. These delays would now become a thing of the past. Processes will be faster, and at the same time, the Ministry will make its own adjustment so that it can keep track of all of our leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No. 16/2021 on the State Land Act does not change the ownership rights of State land. This is also true for Bill No. 17/2021 which does not diminish the rights of iTLTB over the land that it manages in trust for *iTaukei* landowners.

A \$150,000 is provided for the Fiji Land Information System to cater for the consistent, maintenance and updating of the system. This has allowed us to assist other Ministries - the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the Fiji National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) during *TC Winston*, *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, and also the Ministry of Health during this pandemic, through the use of our geospatial expertise. That assistance has helped both Ministries make sound informed decisions and allowed them to develop effective strategies using this GIS expertise that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$45,000 is allocated for the Land Harmonisation Exercise, where we continue to harmonise land data on the system with what actually exists on the ground. This year, we have been able to roll out the initial phase of our online lessee viewer platform. This platform will allow lessees to view their State lease details, rental statements and payment online through the systems that we have.

Our Mineral Resources Department has compiled geological GIS data packages on mineral resources available for possible extraction. This makes it easier for potential investors to decide whether to invest in this sector.

Sir, \$1.62 million has been allocated for Groundwater Assessment and Development for large and small islands. Through this, Fijians in the maritime and remote drought-stricken rural communities in the large islands get access to clean drinking water.

For the current financial year, we have targetted to develop this for 175 households, housing more than 800 people, and we have also reticulated water from this groundwater sources to more than 197 households, or slightly below 900 people. So this emphasis on groundwater extraction and use for the benefit of our people will continue, and we are also finalising our National Groundwater Resource Management and Development Policy to ensure that we have sustainable use and management of groundwater resources.

An allocation of \$60,000 continues our improvement efforts in the collection of revenue and arrears. To help out our lessees who are under stress, we have extended the waiver of interest on rental arrears for those who have defaulted in payments. The most recent one was approved by the Honourable Minister for Economy for 12 months, effective from November 2020.

For those who cannot make lump sum payments, we have also made payment arrangements with them, but we will also track down lessees who tend to take advantage of the system and have defaults on their rental payments. We will continue to focus on maintaining as much good agricultural land as possible for agriculture and continue to improve on the speedy processing of expired leases to ensure security of tenureship.

We remain committed to see that all State agriculture land is provided to those who will plant on it. Specific importance is also given to the allocation and identification of State land for high return investments because this creates wealth and also provides job opportunities for our people.

We have commenced work on upgrading our National Seismological Networks after the purchase of equipment so that our warnings on earthquakes and seismological events are timely and accurate.

An allocation of \$40,000 will allow us to continue the kind of work that was done post-*TC Yasa* for Nabavatu Village in Macuata. This is in terms of geotechnical assessments and Honourable Members would recall that this village had landslips, which resulted in cracks on the ground, making it unsafe for continued habitation.

We continue to update the VanuaGIS that will allow people to analyse geographical data online, without having to visit government Ministries to obtain land information. Such assistance was very critical for the Ministry of Health.

The Ministry will continue its work in monitoring the sustainable use of our natural resources, looking at:

- foreshore development activities through the consideration of sustainable mangrove management;
- sand and gravel extraction using our natural resources officers; groundwater extraction rates and its use;
- illegal land dealings ; and
- the exploration, quarrying and mining operations.

Turning now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to infrastructure, there has been a significant reduction in the budget for the infrastructure sector, which includes the Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services (MIMS), Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) and Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) - a reduction of more than \$50 million.

The Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services has been given a budget of slightly over \$23 million for its activities. The Ministry is heavily focussed on developing policies and is continuing to upgrade policies. Some of the policies in place include; the National Energy Policy, the Fiji Electrification Policy, the Biofuel Policy, the National Water and Sanitation Policy and the Rural Water and Sanitation Policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$1 million is committed to carrying out maintenance and upgrade of Government-owned buildings. This will include the upgrading of water and sewer lines to public buildings, including Government offices and quarters. The Ministry is also investing in the upgrading of its building software, to improve the quality and time taken to deliver the design and costing of projects.

We remain committed to our target of ensuring 100 percent access to electricity, and also to our target of increasing renewable energy in electricity to 100 percent by 2030. The Department of Energy has been allocated a total sum of \$8.3million to undertake its core role - \$4.3million of this will be used for ongoing house wiring projects, rolled over to the new financial year. An additional \$6.3 million is provided under Head 50 for grid extension and house wiring to be managed by Energy Fiji Limited (EFL).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$1.12million is budgeted for completion of the rehabilitation of diesel schemes for relocated communities and reconstructed homes. This will enable rural people to have better health and wellbeing, security and improved resilience to climate change and natural disaster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$491,000 has been allocated to the Department of Water and Sewerage to deliver its role of formulating and managing national water and sanitation policies and to monitor all water and sanitation systems, including water and effluent quality in both, urban areas as operated by WAF, and also in rural areas. These are in line with our national development goals of ensuring access to clean and safe water by every Fijian household, as well as contributing to the achievement of SDG 6.

Our Meteorological Services has been allocated a total amount of \$4.84 million, to provide timely and quality weather, climate and hydrological information to the general public. As we approach the cyclone season, the Fiji Meteorological Services is gearing up and getting ready to ensure that they are up to speed in weather forecasting, in hydrological assessments, forecasting of coastal inundation and also for flooding forecasts.

Part of their budget will be used for the completion of the Viwa Island Station to improve the living and working conditions of our staff on the island, and to protect their instruments and equipment that we have there. It is essential for our network to ensure that we have consistent weather reporting.

The Ministry is focussed on improving our key processes that will improve service delivery. We are also promoting community and Government partnership programmes in our bid to improve our service delivery in our rural communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$194.9 million has been allocated to WAF for that very important role. Sir, WAF's Strategic Plan for the period 2020-2025 will guide the organisation towards fulfilling its vision and mission over the next four years.

This current financial year has been a challenging one for WAF due to the COVID-19 situation, the cyclones and the flooding. Mr. Speaker, Sir, WAF has had to relook at its business operations which has brought about new and innovative business strategies.

For the new financial year, WAF is focused on more capacity and resilience-building upgrades to our existing infrastructure, to make sure that it can manage when disruptions do occur because disruptions will happen. It is also focussed on making sure that our existing assets last longer and serve a longer service life through modern asset management processes. Through such improved operations, we will be able to ensure regulatory, environmental, statutory and financial compliance.

We are earmarking a number of key projects for this new financial year. Under the new Rewa River Water System, we are allocating \$65 million to continue with the ongoing construction of the new 40 mega-litre water treatment plant at Viria, the construction of the 10 mega-litre reservoir at Waitolu and pipe installation of over 26 kilometres of pipeline from Viria to Waila. This new water project will benefit over 300,000 people, 24/7, for Fijian living within the Suva–Nausori corridor and it will increase service coverage to upcoming residential subdivisions. The overall project is approximately 41 percent complete for the design, build and contract, and 32 percent for the gravity mains contract, and the new treatment plant and reservoir is expected to be commissioned in December of 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$20.25 million is allocated to complete the ongoing construction and installation of the 20 mega-litre Nagado Package, a 3 mega-litre Vunidawa Package Plant, and the 5 mega-litre Nabouwalu Package Plant that will benefit over 53,000 people within these communities.

Sir, \$7.3 million will be used to stabilise our main critical water pipelines that transport raw water to treatment facilities throughout the three regions, benefitting more than over 145,000 people and \$1.5 million will be used to overhaul, supply and install critical parts of the three desalination

plants currently supplying water to the dry southern end of Taveuni, that will benefit over 2,000 people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$13.75 million has been set aside for expansion and laying of new water pipes, \$5.7 million for the Nawaicoba Pump Station and the rising main to cater for the 2 x 6 mega-litre reservoirs built at Nawaicoba Hill. This project will ensure that Fijians living within the south-western peripheries of the Nadi-Lautoka Regional Water Supply Scheme with a population of over 10,000 people receive normal water supply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$8.7 million has been received for the purchase of new backup generators for crucial sites across the three regions because most of these sites rely on on-grid power and having this in place allows them to be able to kick in during power failures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WAF has also incurred additional operational costs, such as water carting and wastewater bailing, and these new Gen-sets and electrical updates are critical to saving some of these operational costs.

Sir, \$2.95 million has been received for the ongoing non-review water activities and programmes. This includes; the:

- procurement of new and replacement meters;
- repair of leaking service pipes;
- continuation of leak detection works; and
- pressure management through the installation of pressure reducing valves and boundary valves.

This allocation will enable WAF to reduce leaks to manageable levels and increase revenue generation through meter replacement programmes.

Sir, \$4.49 million has been received for 40 new rural projects in villages, settlements and communities in rural areas and these include, 10 sites with ecological purification systems. The 40 projects will benefit over 9,850 people in the rural areas.

Also, Sir, \$1.5 million has been received for rural water carting to non-metered areas which includes, rural and maritime areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2.25 million has been received for ongoing land acquisition of pipeline in sites that are still under the Ministry of Lands that need to be transferred to WAF. Money has been set aside to acquire safeguard and protect development catchment management plans for some major catchment sites for water intakes in Suva and Nadi, and there is \$6.8 million allocated for the ongoing contract at the Kinoya Wastewater treatment Plant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$1.2 million has been allocated for the restoration of the collapsed gravity main at Admirable Drive in Pacific Harbour, benefitting almost 7,000 people. The WAF is now focussed on embarking on a cultural transformation programme in trying to strengthen and improve organisation performance.

The FRA, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been given a budget of \$272.4 million to advance its physical works, organise future initiatives and importantly, to preserve the existing infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$72.8 million will be used for the routine maintenance of existing infrastructure. That includes, grass cutting, drain cleaning, replacement of potholes, grading of

unsealed roads, streetlight maintenance, bridge maintenance, jetty maintenance, et cetera. Sir, \$50 million will be used for the resurfacing and \$70 million is allocated for the full reconstruction of Queens and Kings Roads, which includes Foster Road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$15 million has been allocated to complete ongoing rural roads. The FRA will not be starting any physical works on new rural access roads in this financial year, however, much of the effort will be put to getting the survey and design completed so that we are ready to execute when the time comes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition stated that there is very little to show for the money that has been invested into our roads under FRA. Nothing is further from the truth. Since FRA has come into being:

- 198 kilometres of unsealed roads have been sealed;
- 880 kilometres of sealed roads have been reconstructed and resurfaced;
- 12 kilometres of two-lane roads have been widened to four-lane roads, with upgraded service lines and EFL cables placed underground for greater resilience;
- over 100 kilometres of new rural roads have been constructed; and
- over 300 low-level crossings and modular bridges put in place for the rural community.

Over the past few months, you will have seen the 150 kilometres of roads that have been resurfaced and reconstructed around the country.

In this session, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard a lot of criticism from the Opposition, but they have not presented any meaningful suggestions on what to do. It seems they are devoid of constructive ideas, they have presented no alternatives. Where is their alternate budget? Nothing!

On one hand they complain about debt, but on the other hand, they request for more money to be spent on some particular issue. They have not come up with anything. Can they do it? Can they come up with creative ideas, or is their skill set limited to throwing stones, to criticising?

Honourable Tabuya started off this misinformation about Bill No. 17/2021. I listened to her original message on social media, and the number of issues she says. She said that the authority of iTLTB to award leases has been removed. That is a lie! She also said that the lessee will decide on the amount of lease to be paid. That is another a blatant lie! Third, she said that there will be a reduction in the amount of money that landowning units earn from the leasing of their land. That is also a lie! So all these hullaballoo have been based on statements that are lies. This is fear-mongering blatant lies!

We are seeing the impact of that on the social media. Ethnic slurs are being bandied around, all supported by the number of statements that have been made that are not factual. We see the same thing that happened prior to the 2014 General Elections and prior to the 2018 General Elections, trying to scare the *iTaukei* population.

Honourable Members, let us be honourable and let us speak truth at all times and be factual. Before you say anything on the social media, think about it. Make sure that what you say is factual, think about its impact on Fiji.

Dealing with COVID-19 is not just about facing the battle of COVID-19. For 17 months now, Government has been urging all Fijians to hand-wash, to socially distance and wear masks. We have brought careFIJI and you have seen it, but Honourable Members of the Opposition bad mouth this. We now have the vaccine in Fiji, thanks to our friends and yet, again, we hear some Members of the

Opposition bad mouth this, bringing in perceived conspiracy theories - 666, illuminati, one world order, a whole lot of absolute worthless conspiracy based on thin air and imagination.

It is all imaginary, but it is affecting our people. They believe all these imaginary lies. Many are reluctant to go and vaccinate because of these, and this has exacerbated this COVID-19 situation. The spreading of such is not patriotic, it harms our country and we must not let it happen.

We will win the COVID battle. We will not only win that battle, but we will also eventually win the war to re-establish life and livelihoods and that, Mr. Speaker, must be our focus. This Budget is doing precisely that and that is why I fully support this Budget. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. SPEAKER.- Thank you, Honourable Minister. I now give the floor to the Honourable Tuisawau.

HON. RO F. TUSAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I rise to contribute to the Budget Debate.

The Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Members of Government, Honourable Cabinet Ministers and Honourable Members of the Opposition; it is obvious that Honourable Members on the Government side continue to be blinded by their blind loyalty to the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General.

In response to the Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services, no one said that no assistance is to be provided to the people. Of course, that is always welcomed. Let me remind that such irrational loyalty without independent analysis of the current situation facing Fiji blinds you and will result in your self-destruction.

I am not sure where the Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport in his contribution, is getting his figures from. What the Honourable Leader of the Opposition presented are from the Budget documents provided by the Honourable Minister for Economy and other data from the Bureau of Statistics. He is contesting that but they had provided the figures. Let me reiterate what we, on this side of the House, continuously try to enlighten, year in year out, and you do not want to listen and, of course, this is assisted by Fiji Sun and FBC.

Let me, again, repeat what the Honourable Leader of the Opposition stated as he tries to educate and enlighten you, "Please, Honourable Government MPs, move away from the hero worship of the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Attorney-General. Get away from your head-in-the-sand attitude."

When you look at the Budget figures, you are taking into account the current status of the economy as already stated based on previous revenue trends that revenue target is too high and unrealistic. Given the unemployment and depressed demand, it is unlikely that the target of \$357.2 million direct taxes will be realised.

With regard to indirect taxes, the target is too high since aggregate demand for goods and services will continue to decline, particularly in VAT collection. It is estimated that revenue of around \$210.5 million will be generated from the sale of fixed assets. How realistic is this figure? A major reason in the increase in the last five years is because sales anticipated from assets were not realised.

Honourable Government Members, these figures are right there in front of you. Are you blind or what?

The Government side conveniently avoids the debt situation. The Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport goes on a nonsensical diatribe on the economy without mentioning debt. What a Joke! Again, we on this side of the House reiterate the serious situation of financial and economic mismanagement this country is subjected to since 2006.

The projected budget deficit of 16.2 percent, combined with the domestic debt of \$5.2 billion, external debt of \$1.7 billion and Government contingent liabilities of \$1.6 billion is a nightmare. Our calculation of the actual debts as reiterated by our Honourable Leader of the Opposition, a ratio of GDP stands at 70 percent. This figure is a conservative estimate of the debt to GDP ratio, since the stated nominal GDP in the Budget Supplement seems to be inflated. It seems that this is overstated nominal GDP inflated, at least, by 10 percent to 15 percent. If that is true, then the real Debt to GDP ratio stands at around 82 percent of GDP. If the contingent liabilities are taken into consideration, Sir, the national public debt stands at 100 percent of GDP which is very frightening, as we face a financial crisis if the revenue projections are not met. We must be truthful about the nation's finances.

On economic recovery, why continue the tourism projections when you know very well that it will not happen anytime soon? Why give the people false hope? Tourism projects in Table 10 in the Supplement to the 2021-2022 Budget projected 447,195 visitors in 2021 and 715,511 in 2022. What happened? Again, in Table 10 in the Supplement to this year's Budget, the government projected 16,892 Visitors in 2021 and 268,317 in 2022. What kind of projection is this when you know very well that COVID-19 Delta variant is now out of control in Fiji and creating havoc in our tourism markets, that is, Australia, NZ, the US and Europe? The Australian Prime Minister specifically mentioned that no Australian is envisaged to travel until maybe mid-2022, which is the end of the financial year. So, why make unrealistic and misleading projections?

The Honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport must also explain the status of the following initiatives in the tourism sector, some of which were based on misleading assumptions and doom, the:

- Bula Bubble;
- Blue Lane Initiative;
- 6 percent Service Turnover Tax;
- Reduction of ECAL;
- \$100 off the Departure Tax;
- Zero ECAL for mid-sized tourism operators;
- First 150,000 visitors to receive \$400 per passenger to go towards tourism packages;
- Alcohol Tax; and
- Tariffs.

Where is the update on the results of these?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on COVID-19, the latest as follows:

- 24,354 cases since April;
- 989 cases per million population; and
- 195 Deaths.

The reality of the COVID-19 situation in Fiji:

- Major hospitals are full.
- Conditions at our hospitals are questionable and needs to be improved.
- Test results are sometimes misplaced.

- Telephones are not answered.
- Frontliners are getting sick and infected.
- Mortuaries also have issues, there was a body which was misplaced, I am not sure whether it has been found.
- Deaths are left unattended at hospitals for hours.

We, on this side of the House, maintained that the Honourable Minister for Economy has failed to carry out a comparative analysis with countries, such as India, the US and others, because the result will surely show that the spread of the virus in Fiji is now uncontrollable and our infection rate per capita has exceeded India's infection rate. The question is; how do we hold our leaders accountable for leadership negligence which resulted in the current situation?

We, on this side of the House, will hold a commission of inquiry into Government's management of COVID-19 as is done in Australia and the United Kingdom. Obviously, there was a lack of contingency planning when COVID-19 appeared earlier before the April outbreak, and lapses of judgment in our border controls. These must be thoroughly analysed and lessons learned taken up for better management in the future for the sake of our people who have died and have suffered from COVID-19, and also for the sake of our frontliners. We continue to thank all frontliners from the Ministry of Health, the Disciplined Forces, the Civil Service, NGOs and Volunteers for the dedicated and selfless service, despite the challenges.

On Bill No. 17 - Amendment of iTaukei Land Trust Act, I quote Honourable Prime Minister when he stated yesterday, as stated on page 1955 of the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard*, and I quote:

“It is such a bureaucratic legal requirement that has not only made *iTaukei* land unattractive in particular for individuals that it gave opportunity to corruption which we cannot tolerate. So, we proposed an amendment to the iTaukei Land Trust Act that make a simple administrative change, to remove the iTLTB tedious approval process for development on lease land.”

So, why not just review the internal processes to ensure more efficiency?

The Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Disaster Management and Meteorological Services has confirmed that the situation has improved in terms of what they have been facing - the backlog. So, why bring up this Bill? The other question is; is this a consequential legislation to the Budget? As far as I can see, it is not and it has been inserted to be rushed through. The question is; why?

The Honourable Prime Minister says that the *iTaukei* have nothing to fear, in that their ownership of Native land and their requirement to obtain the prior consent of the landowning *Mataqali* remain intact and will not be adversely affected which is protected in the 2013 Constitution. Again, this is missing the point. The problem here is that, the *iTaukei* landowners are unified, in that, any changes to any law directly affecting their land must be discussed and considered as a matter of procedure by themselves and their institutions in consultation.

It should be noted that a true patriot leader, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, dutifully followed this process of consultation when he convened the *Veitarogi Vanua*, the reports of the Native Nands Commission from 1936 onwards before he tabled his Native Land Trust Ordinance Bill in 1940. And that is what the Honourable Prime Minister as Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Chairman of the iTLTB should do - convene a meeting of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (BLV), advise them, explain any changes, get their views and then act accordingly. At the moment, it is all one way or the highway, and that is not good leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should be reminded that Fiji is a part of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 18 – they have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which affect their rights through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their procedures. This was there before under the VLV and they nominated the Board of the iTLTB but not now. Now, it is a political issue and it is led and chosen by politician, the Minister for iTaukei Affairs - the iTLTB Board, not by the landowners.

“The State shall consult and cooperate in good faith the indigenous peoples’ concern through their own institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent.” Again, this has been totally disregarded by the Honourable Prime Minister, the Board and the CEO of iTLTB.

The Government seems to be obsessed with their mental irrationality that we, the Opposition, have been spreading lies or are a bunch of liars. Hundreds of landowners have written, they have signed the petition, et cetera, so what about their views? Is the Honourable Prime Minister saying that they are being manipulated and cannot think for themselves? This is an insult to the chiefs of the nation, those who have stated their objection and the landowners.

You will understand, Sir, and the House should also understand that the landowning units of today have their own legal advisors, lawyers and financial advisors. They even have their own strategic plan for the development of their resources, and that is their views in accordance with the assessment. Please, stop insulting them, Honourable Prime Minister! Cease your colonialistic attitude on the *iTaukei ni Vanua* in Fiji.

I go to the issue of police questioning of Members of Parliament and political leaders. I heard today the issue of cloak and dagger within SODELPA. That is very harmless. This cloak and dagger is very deadly, and it is sad that in the discussion and awareness which is part of our role as the representatives of the people, we have been taken in by police and probably be charged soon. We perform our role as the voice of the people and we get picked up by police. What is this, dictatorship or democracy? Again, people will say; “Awh, that is your view, you did wrong”, but let us hear what a compatriot of the Honourable Prime Minister said, Mr. Graham Davis. I quote:

“The sham democracy in Fiji in which the Prime Minister orders the police to detain opposition figures for daring to complain about the lack of consultation on the Government’s planned changes to the laws governing iTaukei land in the midst of COVID. Australia, New Zealand the European Union and other Democracies assisting Fiji should naturally continue and increase that assistance in the interests of the Fijian people. But they also have an obligation to their own people to insist that the Fiji Government ceases to use the institution of State to harass political opponents. It must also strictly adhere to the election timetable that requires that a national poll be held sometime between July 2022 and January 2023. The arrests yesterday took place or detainment or questioning, on the direct orders of the Prime Minister, who maintains personal control over the disciplined forces and is behaving like a dictator and he has and to a large extent, still under the veneer of parliamentary rule.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is as clear as daylight, going back to the 2006 *Coup* that it is a *coup* to undermine the *iTaukei ni Vanua kei Viti*. Yes, cloak and dagger and SODELPA but as I said, that kind of cloak and dagger is very dangerous. From the 2006 *coup*, there are also, from the Government side, some have been accused of bombings, arrest at night and other issues which are more deadly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after that *coup*, 2006 was made worse by the entry of the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communications where his sunset clause advocated the dismantling of cultural-based institutions, such as the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), as he saw these as threats which undermine the State. This bulldozing of Bill No. 17, despite

the overall disagreement of the *iTaukei ni Vanua*, is a clear example. Other pieces of legislation which undermine the *iTaukei ni Vanua* have been in place and bulldozed through.

The removal of the GCC (*Bose Levu Vakaturaga*) is to remove the Head of the *iTaukei ni Vanua* from the socio-legal political structures, disabling a legal effective voice and body of consultation, independent of the State and the Political Parties of Parliament. Why disrupt this healthy consultation framework? This is clearly demonstrated at the iTLTB which has now become an arm of politicians who are running the Government.

Today, with Bill No. 17, it clearly demonstrates that the State (that is FijiFirst Party) politician led by the Honourable Prime Minister is in control of iTLTB and not the native landowners. We gained independence in 1970 but the sad fact today is that the *iTaukei ni Vanua kei Viti* are now effectively ruled by a coloniser, which is the State created by usurpers of 2006, who continue to control Fiji today with their networks of parasitic hangers-on and State functionaries fully funded by the public. We have become prisoners and colonised in our own land by the State and its parasitic political legal frameworks, imposed by *coup* in 2006 and under the 2013 Constitution. What is the situation of the return of State land, Honourable Minister for Lands?

I would like to ask the Honourable Prime Minister; if you say you are for the landowners, why did the Suvavou landowners go to court in 2010, spending thousands without any help from you? The Honourable Attorney-General after that court case, which the Suvavou landowners lost, condemned the Suvavou landowners that they lost the case and he is happy that no other case will be brought up because that is a precedent.

In relation to that, I ask; "What has happened to the Botanical Gardens?" The Government of India withdrew and a letter was written to the Honourable Minister for Lands from the Tui Suva, requesting that that land be returned, in accordance with the 2013 Constitution and the Crown Lands Law regarding the return of State land, once it is not used.

The issue at hand on the FSC land, this has been tendered. Why has this not been discussed with the landowners in the Western Viti Levu and the sugarcane belt? Originally, these land belong to traditional landowners, the *iTaukei ni Vanua*, and they must be given the first preference in the return of such land and not put to public tender. Another question is, why have the *iTaukei ni Vanua* being sidelined in the operations of sale of Government-owned enterprises? Their ancestors gave up prime land for the operations of those entities for public use and now they are commercial operations - the Fiji Ports, Fiji Airports, et cetera.

When we take Government in 2022, we will ensure:

- (1) that all these issues are rectified, and the *iTaukei ni Vanua* are placed in the rightful place in accordance with the Constitution and also in terms of the socio or political legal framework which was thrown upside down from 2006 and is still today.
- (2) to review the Constitution to ensure genuine *iTaukei ni Vanua* protection.
- (3) to review the election methodology to ensure fairness in the value of vote.

I laughed when the Honourable Attorney-General said that the 2014 and 2018 Elections were the only genuine democratic elections ever. That is a joke because when you look at the methodology, some people with 500 or 400 votes got in. We need a new framework for peaceful coexistence with genuine dialogue, not top-down approach or forced integration.

Finally and the last one, Sir, the review of the *iTaukei ni Vanua* Governance Framework, including iTLTB which has lost track of its original purpose and politically compromised, we all

know of native lease land must be in control, not politicians or political appointees.

The review must ensure full participation of *iTaukei ni Vanua* in sustainable economic development as active participants. I end by stating that I do not support the Budget and we reject the Bill No. 17/2021 Amendment. Thank you.

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

Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings. Supper will be served in the Big Committee Room, and we will resume at 7.00 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.16 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.04 p.m.

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with our debate and I call on the Assistant Minister for the Sugar Industry, you have the floor.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Honourable Speaker, Honourable Prime Minister, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition, Honourable Ministers, Honourable Members of Parliament, media and fellow Fijians: good evening to you all. I acknowledge that Fiji is trending through worst times ever in the history of its existence, managing a virus that has not spared any country in the world.

Before I present my speech on the national budget, Mr. Speaker Sir, I sincerely thank the Prime Minister for his visionary leadership and courage to lead the nation at a very challenging time, a situation no other leader in this nation ever experienced. He stood steadfast as a good captain, charting the relentless waves of stormy seas, yet not losing his vision and courage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point in time, I would also like to thank the Attorney-General, Minister for Economy and Civil Service, for a positive and innovative Budget that was prepared through consultation with a large cross section of the community, ranging from the business community, service industry inclusive of market vendors and our farmers. Budget prepared during these extraordinary times requires deeper understanding, good judgement and appreciation by the citizens of this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has caused a global economic crisis. This is the worst economic contraction any government has seen. Millions have lost their jobs with businesses closing down every day and thus leading to huge economic decline worldwide. It is reported that global economy declined by 3.3 percent in 2020 and this is said to be the largest global economic contraction in over 100 years.

Invisible to our naked eye, the Coronavirus spares no one in its path as it moves from person to person creating havoc and even death. Here in Fiji, the government is trying its best to contain this virus but we can see there are Members in the Opposition side who ridiculed this vaccination drive and said this vaccine is of no use and yet they go on to have their own vaccination. Here I am referring to Honourable Bulanauca, yesterday he was speaking that vaccination information is of no use, not good and at the end of his speech, he said he has already taken the vaccine dose. What is he telling the people of this country?

I sincerely express heartfelt sympathy for all families and individuals affected by this second wave of the deadly pandemic and those that lost their loved ones. So many families have not been able to share happy and sad moments through their physical presence. We all would agree that for us, Pacific Islanders, we cannot stay apart, especially at times when our loved ones need us. We are not used to sending our condolence messages by phone or email, we are not used to sending our love by monetary value or by social media post or by making a video call. But this pandemic has given us no choice, and I express my deepest sympathy to all Fijians suffering in such situations. We all want this to end and maybe expect that it should have ended yesterday.

Our frontliners, the Fiji Police Force, Fiji Military Forces, the Medical Team and volunteers deserve to be recognised and commended for their efforts in combating the spread of this virus. We acknowledge their tremendous effort and sacrifice in trying to save lives while risking their own lives. Last but not least, I must thank the NGOs, business houses, communities, individuals and charity groups who stepped forward to provide assistance to families in need.

The Governments of Australia, New Zealand, together with the European Union and other development partners need to be thanked for their cash budget support. Their timely ongoing support has tremendously helped our country to cushion the effects of this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the pandemic affecting all of us, once again, FijiFirst Government and Honourable Prime Minister has given a lifeline to all Fijians. The National Budget has come at no better time. The COVID -19 crisis has had a catastrophic impact on the Fijian Economy, ceasing almost all business activities, creating unemployment and unfavourable social-economic conditions and affecting the public finance. With economic growth on a negative slope, revenues expected to halt in near future and expenditure still standing like an unmoved mountain, we the people of Fiji expect the Government to provide a solution. A solution that will steer us swiftly and smoothly through this crisis.

The Budget provides a light at the end of a dark tunnel. Almost 17 months ago, we became the victims of this virus war and the FijiFirst Government stood up to support all businesses and those unemployed in various ways. I wish to highlight that incentives such as the direct cash transfers for unemployment support to those affected in the formal and informal sector, concessional loan funding to MSMEs, loan repayment holiday provided to businesses and personal customers and other forms of cash flow relief were some of the efforts that this Government made to ensure that our economy keeps moving.

We note that despite the contraction of the Fijian economy this year, we have managed to perform well in the last fiscal year. Our fiscal deficit and Government debt is lower than what we projected which is a clear indication of tighter controls placed by the Government and respective ministries in their operational expenditure. No doubt, these controls need to continue as we sail through this stormy and hard times. The Fijian Government has at no point considered a reduction in civil service salaries. We continue to pay all our civil servants their designated salaries as they contribute immensely to the economy through their spending and supporting their extended families.

It is pleasing to note that the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has received an increased budget allocation of \$403.3 million which enables them to recruit additional staff. This will assist them in performing their task more efficiently during these trying times. The budget clearly states that if we need to walk out of this crisis, the only solution is vaccination. All developed nations agree that vaccination is the only way out of this crisis. We are not superman or batman to deny this fact. We are just a developing nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I make a humble plea to the nation. Please, get vaccinated. It is our only hope. The same has been reiterated by health professionals worldwide that the only way to walk out of this crisis is to get vaccinated. We need to get the herd immunity as soon as possible, Mr. Speaker, I repeat, as soon as possible, so that we can quickly rise to our feet again and secure the sustainable foundation for recovery of the Fijian economy.

There is no other alternative. This is the only chance we have to economic recovery. We have set our deadline as 31st October, 2021 to have at least 80 percent of the targeted population fully vaccinated. Based on the current trend on vaccination which has already surpassed 75 percent vaccination for first dose last week, I am confident that we will reach 80 percent full vaccination by end of September, one month before the target date of October. This means people can go back to work earlier. This will be a big boost for everyone and this will be good for the economy.

I once again wish to thank the Governments of Australia and New Zealand, as well as the Governments of India and United States of America, who have supported us with vaccine supply to fully vaccinate our target population. I am sure that the “No Jab No Job” policy is surely going to

help us complete this race. I urge all civil servants who have opted to take leave from work just to avoid vaccination, to not be carried away by fake rumours and baseless theories. We need to relook at the statistics, the statistics that is backed by developed nations where vaccination has resulted in normalcy and economic activities have resumed.

We need to trust and have faith in vaccination. I wish to repeat my earlier statement. Vaccination is the only hope. During the Budget presentation, the Honourable Minister for Economy and Civil Service, stated and I quote: “Without vaccination, we cannot mount an economic recovery”. He further alluded that it’s not only “No Jab No Job”, but it is: No Jab No Opportunities; No Jab No reopening of stadiums, restaurants, or borders; No Jab No tourism; No Jab No national airlines and no chance of seeing our families and friend, or no precious time with neighbours and loved ones; No Jabs No going to places of worship, no celebration of religious festivals; and for some, No Jab means no form of social gatherings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said the above, I wish to commend the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Team for their guidance all along with respective health measures to contain the virus. With their continued efforts and research in understanding, how this virus mutates and moves, they have assured us that the second dose of the vaccine can be taken only eight weeks after the first dose. Vaccination will protect us against severe illness, hospitalisation and death. Therefore, we will not be a burden on our health system. So, it is evident that if we are fully vaccinated, we have a greater chance of recovery.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker Sir, today, I stand here to say that despite having the vaccine at hand, we are still in an economic crisis. We still have a declining economic growth, increase in inflation rate and unemployment and socio-economic issues that still affect our beloved Fiji. Therefore, the National Budget is a helping hand and presents many good incentives to the people of Fiji. It has catered for every individual, all businesses whether small or large, as well as the agriculture sector and our farmers.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the FijiFirst Government, through this budget, has demonstrated that it will always put the Fijians first. The \$200 million as unemployment support is expected to assist around 300,000 Fijians. No doubt, this will significantly boost our economy and will promote our vaccination drive. The social welfare support and disability allowance will still continue. The EFL bill subsidy for Fijians earning below \$30,000 and the assurance of free water initiative is to continue for our fellow Fijians who have struggled to make ends meet during the silent war with this pandemic. Small businesses also stand to enjoy the EFL subsidy.

I also wish to urge employers to have a look at the “Stronger Together”-Job Support Scheme initiative and take advantage of the scheme. This initiative is now extended to the jobs for nature programme to engage those who are unemployed to undertake nature reforestation work, such as, planting of mangroves and seagrass with an additional allocation of \$4 million.

The National Budget for year 2021-2022 has paved way for GPs to strengthen the relationship with the Fijian Government by providing General Outpatients Services. This is a unique and very innovative arrangement and the first one for Fiji demonstrating that the FijiFirst Government will leave no one behind. We already have 17 GPs on board and we look forward for more GPs to join the initiative.

Despite these challenging times the Fijian Government promises that it will continue to ensure that our children are given the right to education. With free education provided for primary and secondary, no parent should deny their children the right to education. A further allocation of \$17.1 million is now provided for transportation which is expected to assist more than 103,000 children

from low income families. Apart from this, the strengthening of TELS and NTS Scheme will also ensure we have the adequate human resource in our country.

The continued support for Sugar Industry with guaranteed price sugarcane of \$85 per tonne for the fourth year in a row is highly appreciated during these difficult times. It is acknowledged that in a huge volatile commodity market where farmers normally see fluctuations in prices, the FijiFirst Government has stepped in to provide guaranteed price for this 2021 season.

The livelihood of 200,000 families who depend on the sugar industry matters. The FijiFirst Government under the leadership of our Honourable Prime Minister continues to ensure that we provide support to the Sugar Industry.

The two Tropical Cyclones; *TC Yasa* in December and *TC Ana* in January 2021 had devastating impact on the Sugar Industry. Farmers lost their properties, livestock and crop in these cyclones. Now the onset of this pandemic has given another devastating blow when things were getting better. The provision of guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne will provide much needed relief and impetus in recovery and rebuilding process.

None of the governments prior to the Bainimarama Government and FijiFirst Government dared to assist cane farmers with guaranteed price and neither did they provide any subsidy for fertilizer, weedicide, cane planting grants, new farmer assistance and maintenance of cane access roads as provided today. The Ministry of Sugar Industry is working closely with all sugar industry stakeholders to lay solid foundation to create a sustainable Sugar Industry. Sugar export remains a key economic indicator and contributor to our GDP.

It is anticipated that we will export 111,000 tons and 71,700 tons of sugar this in 2021 and 2022 respectively. Therefore, an allocation of \$72.2 million to Ministry of Sugar Industry which is an increase of \$7.3 million from the 2020–2021 revised estimate is very much appreciated and welcomed. The \$30 million injected into the Sugar Stabilization Fund will allow the sugar cane sector to maintain sustainability and continue to improve.

I wish to also highlight that the reduction of fiscal duty on automotive batteries from 32 percent to 15 percent will also greatly assist our farmers reduce their expenses thus having better returns. The Government assistance in payment of wheel tax for tractors for next 12 months will also provide much needed support for all farmers.

I am sure the incentives given to all Fijians through this people oriented national budget for year 2021-2022 by the FijiFirst Government is commendable and I thank the Honourable Minister for Economy and his hardworking team for their input to formulate better strategies for all Fijians. They have indeed worked tirelessly and extremely hard to compile such a positive and innovative budget in challenging times. Mr. Speaker Sir, with those words, I support the Budget. Thank you.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Assistant Minister for his contribution to the debate. Honourable Members, we move on and I now call upon the Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. You have the floor, Madam.

(Technical glitch experienced through virtual connection)

HON. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will take the next speaker and then we will come back to you, Honourable Minister. I will give the floor to the Honourable Waqanika. You have the floor.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Thank you, Sir. Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members, it gives me great pleasure to present my first response to a Budget Address. Before I begin, I convey our well wishes to all our Olympians who are representing our nation in Japan. Today, we all unite to cheer for our Fiji 7s Team and also we cheer as well for one of our swimmers, Taichi Vakasama, as they will all be competing tonight. We can all agree Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sports unites a nation unlike this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, any Budget Address should provide a vision and then set a framework within which, strategies are clearly laid out that addresses the needs, interests and aspirations of every citizen of our beloved country. This budget comes with its assumptions, empty promises, doubts and divisiveness. This budget would have been a perfect opportunity to unify our people amidst all the fear, gloom and uncertainty. Instead of uniting our people with this budget, this government adds salt to wound, and tables Bill No 17 without landowners' consultation. Let it be known, SODELPA condemns any racial or political upheaval and attack on any person in Fiji, especially to all our non *iTaukei* brothers and sisters. This is not the Christian way. We ask everyone please respect the law and follow due process.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we saw the media statements from the Honourable Prime Minister telling the landowners not to be misled by Opposition MPs, bush lawyers, urban elitists and the like. This government underestimate the intelligence of our landowners as they have long been involved in commercial leasing of their land. It is critical that they are consulted on changes regarding their land and be presented a complete impact assessment regarding all interests for a fair and thorough discussions. The news on the media and social media platforms, has provided a sense of insecurity and has allowed for many interpretations of positive and negative impacts. To pass this Bill without landowners' consultation is asking for civil unrest. And if this happens, this is this government's own doing and therefore, we plead with this government, please withdraw the Bill and consult the landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when times are hard, one would expect this Government to lead the way in fostering compassion, empathy and encouragement, instead their recent actions continues to go down a path that shows that it really does not give a damn about all Fijians who see things differently from them. In this respect, I highlight a few things that are in this Budget which we need to consider very carefully. Maintaining public sector operational costs given the forecasted revenue estimated provided. We are simply providing a regime of operations that is unsustainable and is clearly not conducive with our small economy.

The absence of any real capital investment in critical sectors such as education, health, housing, agriculture, fisheries and environment management. The future of our nation depends largely on ongoing investments in these sectors. Then you have the uncertainty in travel advisories. We still get fed the rhetoric on our need for preparedness towards the opening of our borders. It is almost as if we are the only country that has been affected by a downturn in the visitor travel market. Current economic modelling in Australia suggests that borders will open in the second quarter of 2022 or even longer depending on how they contain the virus. The opening of our borders is not solely reliant on our vaccination. It is also reliant on how other countries contain the virus and also their own vaccination drive.

Sir, this Government is again mentioning public sector reforms which is simply the sale of public assets. Next financial year is the possible election year and any moves for further public sector reforms during this time is bordering on absurdity given the appalling state of our health and education infrastructure which needs critical attention now. Let us start first with the basics and sort out proper healthcare and education. As we normally say *Tekivu mada i Jerusalemi* and then we have this hand-out mentality. Yes, this mentality has existed prior to the coup of 2006 and is made worsen today by this Government.

The amount of money that is being promised to our people against this COVID backdrop is completely unsustainable. We are not empowering them but enslaving them further. Giving the people \$1,000, \$90 or \$50 is simply keeping them impoverished and vulnerable. The Governments earlier farm care and homecare projects are examples of the failure of such social and economic initiatives. The only thing that we see with this Budget, it has a likely roll back within five months by the end of this calendar year, if things it purports to accomplish are not realised immediately.

The cost of doing business in Fiji continues to rise along with the cost of basic food items and all of that is being proposed here is to acquire more debt and further burdening our people. Sir, in light of the above, it is plainly obvious that this Budget does very little if anything when it comes to supporting and enhancing the following:

- (1) Creation of new employment opportunities. We must not make the mistake of counting the jobs vacated by people who chose not to be vaccinated at this stage. I am pro-vaccination but there needs to be a better way of asking and pleading with our people to be vaccinated.
- (2) The empowerment of our rural dwellers. We want them to be more involved in our economies as entrepreneurs other than just being ad-hoc suppliers of food crops, seafood and other unprocessed or semi-processed goods and items. Then you have the empowerment of young adults. Apart from gaining full employment in our formal sectors, we want them to become business people and entrepreneurs over the course of time. The educational opportunities in the vocational in our schools and institutions, we see companies now hiring expat workers because we have failed to invest in vocational learning and inspiring our young people to become skilled and qualified in these areas.

Today, we have heard about the \$200 million relief package for small and medium enterprises which will benefit only those companies that have the resources to meet the compliance standard that come with such initiatives. We have seen so many times before, the ordinary farmer, plumber, electrician, an unvaccinated Fijian businessman that will be cast by the wayside. In addition, the continued number of Fijians given the billions of dollars in capital projects that will go mainly to foreign-based companies and to large local businesses.

The present Government solution to any challenge has always been to do things its own way. They disregard the opportunities that bipartisan brings and sadly views any opposing entity as an enemy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I note in the Budget, the 20-year tax free holiday for Telecom's ICT Park at Tamavua.

In a Trade Investment symposium in Sydney back in October, 2016, the Honourable Koya in his address said, I quote: "Manufacturing and service zone is currently built in the Western Division, it will focus on the ICT & light manufacturing industries. Preparatory work for this zone is already underway".

Three years after that symposium, Honourable Aseri Radrodro questioned the Honourable Minister for Local Government, Housing and Community Development in the June 2019 Parliament Sitting on whether works on the development of the Western Special Economic Zone had started. Well today, no works on that development in the Western Division exists, and specifically for ICT industries. So, we will not hold our breath for this budget incentive, just like what they said for the Waila City and the Thousand Sands Casino projects. Then you have the cable network. This Government proposes a 30-year Tax Holiday for more cables to land in Fiji. We are already connected to our major markets through the Southern Cross Cable. The last thing any investor would do is invest in a multi-billion dollar pipe dream of this Government during this global pandemic. The Honourable Minister for Economy should not worry about volcanic eruptions, but be more concerned

about overcoming this pandemic. If this Government does not focus on the immediate things that needs to be done, like making our country safe again, all their anticipated outcomes in this Budget will all come to nought.

Now, we have all heard about the allocation of the money to the Ministry of Communications. There are two issues that I will highlight, first is the wastage of costs to *Walesi* and the second is control. The establishment of *Walesi* has come at a substantial cost to our taxpayers. We had an existing commercial entity, *Fiji TV*, which did what *Walesi* is now doing and they did it at no costs to the taxpayers. *Fiji TV* had offered to Government back then, because I was part of the Executive Management Team, to host *FBC* and *Mai TV* on its *Sky Pacific* platform and this would have reduced the duplicity of infrastructure costs that we are now seeing at taxpayers' costs. The price model that *Fiji TV* offered compared to the price of a *Walesi* Set Top Box and the purchase of a UHF antenna, was competitively cheaper.

Now is the control. Everyone must take this into account *Walesi* is owned and operated by Government and the ultimate underlying motive here is 'CONTROL'. Once all free to air broadcasters are on *Walesi*, any Government of the day has full control of all the information and communication. News can be censored, freedom of expression muzzled and healthy debates restricted.

In the event of a political upheaval, any Government of the day, whether it is this Government or the next Government or rebels bent on overthrowing a democratically elected Government as we have seen twice happened in our lifetime just need to switch off *Walesi* and they would have disabled all free to air signals to every home throughout Fiji. It is always risky when putting all your eggs in one basket, especially when Government changes.

Now I will speak on Bill No. 17 briefly. From a business and legal perspective, it is clear to me that native land will never ever be alienated and the Constitution protects that. But, this Bill works on a stealth mode. We will debate this Bill in detail later this week. Yes, removing the consent with regards to mortgages and other legal instruments does remove the red tape, but at the benefit to the lessee and the financier and the not the landowners.

The legal concern that I see is when a lessee loans from a bank, uses their lease as collateral and then defaults on their payments. Will iTLTB consent to transfer to the bank by virtue of a foreclosure and who then is responsible for land arrears if any? I do not see this being addressed in this Bill. I read the *FBC* online news yesterday and I was amused at the comments of iTLTB CEO where he says, I quote: "That Solicitor General's Office consulted with the iTLTB Management".

Time will only tell if the CEO did write that statement, because for me, it seemed like yesterday, as a former *Fiji TV* Executive, when we were summoned to Level 8 at Suvavou House in the presence of the Honourable Attorney-General and he pulled out a drafted press release in my presence and in the presence of others and told us to sign the statement which said the *Fiji TV* Board and management supported the co-sharing of the IRB Sevens Series to which *Fiji TV* had exclusive rights to. Such a cowardly and unethical behaviour from a bush lawyer. We know that this Bill was never discussed by the iTLTB Board and the landowners were never consulted. We all heard Honourable Tabuya asking the Honourable Prime Minister to withdraw the Bill and his response was, "Forget it". To my *Turaga taus* and *Marama Taus* in the Ba Province, please do not forget this statement come election Time next year.

We all have a COVID-19 war to fight, but we have all been distracted by this Bill, and rightfully so, because issues of land touches the core of my people. I reiterate what Honourable Saukuru said today, "When you talk about the land, you talk about the Ba Province", because they are the ones

who are most affected by this Bill. Remember, FijiFirst Government and I have said it before, you are in Government today through the 40 percent votes from the Western Division. Accord them due to courtesy and consult them. Who knows the outcome may just in your favour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government prides itself as the leadership that listen. The fact of the matter is, they are only listening to themselves.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, this Budget is completely relying on a vaccination campaign which hopes to open up borders so that life can simply return to pre-COVID days. Let me remind everyone here about the lofty speeches made by this Government when it ruled us by decree and categorised everyone of us as 'Fijians'.

Sadly, they further divide our country into counts of the vaccinated and unvaccinated which is divisive, unethical and immoral.

This Government has divert the blames of deaths on people refusing to be vaccinated when the blame squarely falls on them for not taking heed of wise counsel. This Government simply does not know its people. Our frontliners, especially the Ministry of Health staff are overwhelmed and tired.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reside near FEMAT Vodafone, and it pains me to hear the ambulance sirens day and night. The death of those succumbing to this virus is on the hands of each and every FijiFirst MP. Some of you had the opportunities to speak up as watchman but you fail to do so. You share the responsibility on the deaths of our people and it is on your hands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I refer to the Health and Safety at Work (HSW), General Workplace Condition (Amendment) Regulations 2021.

All I can see in this Budget are incentives for the vaccinated, what I do not see is the financial facility established for the Fijians, irrespective of their stand on vaccination that would cater for any adverse events that we may encounter for the long term.

Using the language of the Honourable Minister for Economy to future-proof our nation seems non-inclusive. This Government wants to put this entire nation on the call for vaccination and right in to the so-called battle with COVID.

The Government should get off their horse called 'pride', stop comparing ourselves to other nations and sincerely liberate the entire nations so that the fight to get our country safe back again and economy back on track is every citizen's responsibility too.

My second conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is worried about its survival and its ability to remain in power. The HSW Amendment regulation is a key part of this Budget that can be easily turned against its citizens.

With the upcoming General Elections this same regulation can be used to close down businesses or any facility that can be used for assembly on almost regular basis or for prolonged period who thought any opposition against this Government. Any place of gatherings can easily be made by this regulations.

Political gatherings can be confined to limits in numbers that would make these gatherings impractical to host. Whether we will go to polls next year is all up in the air with all the fear-mongering related to COVID.

Let us not be fooled into thinking that things are normal, that things will be returned to normal.

I have just mentioned the situation with Walesi and control over information. A long game is now in play which we must now all be aware of.

In this respect I would like to pose a couple of questions because of the distraction and uncertainties related to this global COVID situations:

- (1) Is the roll-out of the electronic registering of voters inclusive of our citizens residing abroad?
- (2) If so, how?

I refer to Page 273 of the Budget Estimates, Item 13, which reads “2022 General Elections Expenses: (if held in 2021 to 2022 Fiscal Year). Is this Government committed to hold General Elections next year within this financial year or the next? Because preparation for this critical event appears hindered by the COVID crisis which should never be the case.

The people of Fiji must see that their freedoms relating to assembly, association, freedom, thought, expression and prosecution amongst other things, are now under threat.

My third conclusion, this Budget’s sole intention is to force to go for local businesses and to keep our people economically and socially vulnerable - people depend on Government hand-outs. This has been this Government’s modus operandi for 15 years now and we have seen the repercussions when those whom they have kept feeding have now turned on them as they are no longer getting their fish. Government continues to support growth in informal settlements and seems content on keeping Fijians there without a well-detailed pathway to better living opportunities.

My final conclusion, this Budget is not future-proof because it provides very little for addressing those challenges that we will continue to face. This Government is committed to a policy of ‘divide and rule’. Its interest and agenda does not include the ordinary person that is struggling every day to honestly feed his family. This Budget further divides us by keeping a good number of Fijians poor and dependent. I firmly believe, as a woman of faith, and who is also a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister and an aunt, that the people of this country, through the majority of us are poor, we are not all ignorant of the hardships that are upon us.

This Government boasted of unprecedented growth under this regime then why are we basically begging for assistance from our bilateral and multilateral partners, not even two (2) years into this COVID-19 crisis? To answer this question. Plainly. it is because government’s spending is ad hoc and does not heed sound economic principles including saving a little for a rainy day. The government had stated over the 16 months that no one knew about COVID-19 and yes, that is absolutely true.

But it is your responsibility to prepare for difficult and challenging times, which this government has failed to do. The Sunday school story of Joseph and the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine comes clearly to mind. No matter what people may say, I do not believe that this Budget is anywhere close to being a caring one, let alone being enterprising or courageous. This Budget is simply a vote-buying exercise, based on the idiom of feeding needy individuals for a day, supporting those intimate with this regime and maintain budget plans that offers little alignment to the economic difficulties that our country is facing.

As a Christian, I simply cannot support this Budget as it is not wholly inclusive in upholding the rights and aspirations of every citizen of our country. As a mother, I cannot support this Budget

because it gives nothing substantive that my children and many others across the country can hold onto, to shape their own lives and respective dreams.

I end with this quote from the Word of Yeshua in the Book of Philippians Chapter 2 Verse 3 (2:3): “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.

My Speaker, Sir, I do not support this *champagne* lifestyle on a *namu* Budget. Thank you.

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

Honourable Members, we will move on. We still cannot get in touch with the Minister Vuniwaqa then we will move on to the Minister for Health and Medical Services. You have the floor, Sir.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Honourable Prime Minister, Honourable Cabinet Ministers, the Honourable Leader of the Opposition and Honourable colleagues; I rise before this august House to support the 2021-2022 Budget as announced by the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and I want to pay tribute to the Honourable Minister for Economy and his hardworking team at the Ministry of Economy - the Acting Permanent Secretary and the three gentlemen who worked hand in hand with him everyday in terms of preparing the Budget, but more importantly, in terms of the ongoing working with our Ministry during this difficult time in ensuring that we are properly resourced for the fight that we have at hand.

I thank the Honourable Prime Minister and the Honourable Minister for Economy for allocating \$403 million to enable us to deliver our role as a Ministry and as a health service provider in the 2021–2022 Budget year and this, Mr. Speaker, in a time of challenges, not only within Fiji but also worldwide. Many, many nations are facing the economic challenges of COVID-19.

Many nations’ budgets have been reduced, many nations’ economies have been depleted and in the midst of all these, I have witnessed in my meetings with countries who have had their budgets in the Ministry of Health reduced, that we are one of those countries where our Ministry of Health budget has actually been increased in the midst of a pandemic. This shows the investment and the compassion and care that the Honourable Prime Minister has towards the people of Fiji, through the Ministry of Health.

Our objectives in this Budget are threefold. One is to continue with the complex and I say ‘complex’ because this is the word that one of the specialists from the Australian Medical Assistance Team (AusMAT), also this is a word that is coming very clearly from our discussions with WHO and development partners that are working with us, that this is a complex, well-thought-out response to COVID-19 and to fully vaccinate our people - that is our first objective.

Our second objective is to continue to strengthen our remodelling exercise, universal health coverage on Sustainable Development Goal 3. We want to continue to reach the unreached and leave no one behind. We had begun on sending out outreach teams on making sure that we are able to hold clinics in isolated health centres and also, enabling our subdivisional hospitals to be used as secondary-level healthcare facilities. In this time of the outbreak, this preparation has been very useful to us. We have been able to switch a health centre into a place where we can be able to admit patients, such as we have done with Makoi and Nakasi.

Our third objective is, we want to continue to strengthen our health system. So, at the end of this, we have developed a resilience dividend, which means that we are making health gains. We

remember and extend our sincere condolences to the families of those lost to COVID-19 and within my own family too, we have had our own losses.

We have also lost frontliners and I thank the many frontliners, including the Disciplined Forces and civil servants and the many organisations that have worked hand-in-hand with us day and night, and their resolve is exemplary. For every 99 good things that they do, only one is put up in social media, and that seems to be the reason why the frontliners are not doing their part, just one event. And we keep on encouraging them that Fiji is, indeed, grateful to the work that they have done.

Mr. Speaker, at this point, when I was reading through and trying to make sense of why people would attack our frontliners on social media, et cetera, I read with interest, a quote from someone when he says like this, 'The keyboard is a sword for the weak men', I realise that, that criticism comes from a place that is different to what the general Fijian wants. The general Fijian wants to be able to be protected and looked after by the frontliners, and the frontliners will continue to do their part.

On the 10th of March, this year, we introduced COVID-19 vaccines and we began with a gradual uptake from April to a much broader vaccination programme. Again, I express my dismay at the anti-vaxxers, including Honourable Members of this Parliament, for our data clearly shows that nearly 90 percent of our deaths are the unvaccinated.

The rollout that we have now is on track to achieving greater than 80 percent of the age-eligible population, and I urge us to all keep on pushing so that everyone is able to be vaccinated. And if we can achieve near 100 percent, even better, because we have enough vaccines to do so. As of this morning, we have vaccinated 449,934 first doses and 103,742 second doses, which accounts to 76.7 percent of Fiji's population who have received their first dose and 17.7 having received their second dose.

Mr. Speaker, also today, it was heartening to see the rollout begin in Lakeba and also in the Mamanuca and the Yasawas, and this has also been able to happen because we have many partners that are supporting us, such as Sea Mercy from New Zealand who took the vaccines up to the Mamanucas and the Yasawas, and Air Mago, who took it up to Lakeba.

The Central Division has received 76.7 percent for the first dose and just a little under 16 percent for the second dose. The Western Division is doing very, very well and I congratulate our Western family for having achieved more than 84 percent of the first dose and 24 percent for the second dose. The Northern Division, 67 percent for the first dose and 10 percent for the second dose, and in the Eastern Division, 38.5 percent for the first dose and 6.5 percent for the second dose but because of the small population, we believe that this will be quickly covered in terms of their first dose.

Mr. Speaker, I remind this august House that being fully vaccinated by two doses and a further two weeks after, engages the maximum protection. That is why we have the fully vaccinated – the new policy that we have in place that my Permanent Secretary had read in his statement. That is also why Honourable Aseri Radrodro for our island people with some distances between their homes and our healthcare facilities, this is the time to achieve as more vaccination as a protective measure.

As I have stated before, nearly 90 percent of those who passed away were unvaccinated and just little over 10 percent had been partially vaccinated. This is in keeping with the Public Health annual report which came out nearly a month ago, which showed that 92 percent of those who have been fully vaccinated, are protected from hospitalisation and a higher percentage from death.

Mr. Speaker, full vaccination is a lifesaver. To date, we have confirmed enough vaccines for all age eligible individuals and continue dialogue for securing vaccination for the 12 years to 18 years of age, when it becomes acceptable and meeting the WHO criteria. We note that the EU has made recommendations on this recently, and we are on track to have all the fully vaccinated age eligible individuals and enough vaccines to be able to reach out to our children less than 18 years old, when that guidance comes through. I call on everyone and encourage everyone, those who have vulnerable conditions and those who do not, but who are over 18 years, to come forth for a vaccination. We now have Moderna which has 28 days interval between doses, and this is specifically for our mothers and the vulnerable population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of 8.00 a.m. on 26th July, 2021, we have recorded 24,400 positive cases of COVID-19, and we continue contact-tracings where possible and this is undertaken through face to face interviews, follow-up phone calls and through the use of the careFIJI app.

There has been 2,808 cases in the Western Division. In the Northern Division, there were five cases which have all come through the local repatriation programme, and these cases have recovered. For the Eastern Division, there were 12 cases reported, but all have recovered. For the Central Division 20,459 cases were recorded for this current outbreak.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have introduced some strategic and innovative changes in the operations in the Central and Western Divisions which includes operationalising a robust clinical monitoring referral system for all cases of concern. We have established and consolidated Intermediate Care Facilities (ICF) and optimised the human resource and supplies such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and expand our bed capacity for ICU. We have enough PPE.

We noted that there were issues with the delivery of PPE and we have made sure that this has been attended to. This also included the expansion of functional and staff beds and intermediate care sites to manage over 200 cases.

The Laucala Bay Sports Complex is a wonderful asset and I thank the CEO and her Board for their indulgence. This includes also a centralised retrieval system run by FEMAT and includes members of the Volunteer First Responders (VFR), Disciplined Forces, St. John, and all those expansions we have done, have specialists in charge. And these specialists are either physicians, surgeons, internists, paediatricians, they are in charge of all our extensions and our optimisation that we are doing all across the Central and Western Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been in the health system for more than 10 years, and I can tell you if when faced with this calamity 15 years ago, when we had only 300 doctors and under 2,000 nurses and much less oral health, allied health and other resources such as vehicles that we have now, and on top of this, if the salaries were reduced like the Opposition has kept asking, we would have surely collapsed. At that time, 15 years ago, we only had a few specialists and I was just a very young specialist. The Honourable Dr. Lalabalavu had just begun his career. Of course, at this moment, we are stretched. Yes, there are occasions when things such as isolation facilities, use of tents, the use of container refrigeration is not normal to us, but this will pass. If we adhere to the Public Health Safe Measures, if we become fully vaccinated, and those numbers keep on rising as quickly as possible, the number of cases will decrease and deaths will stop.

We only have to see what has happened in the US, UK, EU, even in Israel, vaccination does work. Vaccination prevents the huge transmission of disease and vaccination does reduce the death within Israel, and I am saying it with interest because one of our Honourable Members continues to talk about Israel.

Mr. Speaker, task-shifting, especially in the Central Division, has now allowed us to focus our clinical teams on critical roles, while the role of information management and remote monitoring is being managed by mostly non-health staff under the supervision of health staff. At this juncture, I want to thank the many Civil Servants who have been seconded and have volunteered to come and work with us. They have been very useful and they brought their expertise – teachers, lawyers working through the SG’s Office, people coming from the Ministry of Economy and drivers, they are all part of our frontliners and they brought their expertise to support us because the Honourable Prime Minister has made it very clear that this is a whole of Government and a whole of nation approach.

Mr. Speaker, we have to keep reminding ourselves and by doing so, the Ministry continues to conduct training via virtual platforms on key issues with our health workforce through SOPs, our clear pathways, our strategies because whether it is the Delta or other variant, we have to know what is the best practice.

This Delta variant, as we all know, is more transmissible than the beast that we had last year at this time. So, it is so important that every week, I have been part of this, apart from the many things that happen in the morning and in the evenings, such as this, and as we speak there are doctors, nurses and technical staff who are on virtual platforms throughout the country sharing best practice, talking about what needs to be done, talking about journal articles, learning about what we can do as a Ministry to continue to fight and overcome this difficult challenge that we have.

Mr. Speaker, in this Budget, \$25 million is a Contingency Fund for COVID-19 and we will use this as needed and during this present Budget, the Contingency Fund that we have in place has been well used for the many strategies that we have. This \$25 million will be available for whatever the next curve ball COVID-19 wants to throw at us.

Mr. Speaker, I want to bring to this House’s attention that on 12th July, 2021, the Public Health (Amendment) Act 2021 came into force which spells out our legal responsibilities to support the collective effort towards controlling and stopping the COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji. It is imperative that we promote COVID-safe measures so that we can bring this outbreak under control.

In order to ensure that, that was the amended legislation and I would like to thank the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport, Municipal Councils, the Fijian Competition & Consumer Commission and the Police Officers who are enforcing the COVID-safe regulations. Under this amendment of the Public Health Act, fixed penalty offences have been gazetted for around 23 offences which carries fixed fines ranging from \$20 to \$4,000. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank these agencies and in particular, the Fiji Police Force, for their efforts and dedication towards keeping the law and order and ensuring that COVID-safe measures are enforced.

Mr. Speaker, in the first week, the Police Team conducted 556 bookings. Of this 245 bookings were related to face masks, 89 bookings were in relation to Public Service Vehicles and 69 bookings were for gathering offences. I sincerely hope that these bookings will reduce because it will show that we are continuing to embrace the COVID-safe measures.

Mr. Speaker, the digitalFIJI Team has also assisted us in setting up online payment systems to avoid queuing and unnecessary contact, and other payment system, like M-PAiSA or MyCash. Internet banking or direct transfer deposit have also been activated.

Mr. Speaker, human behaviour can be influenced by several factors ranging from the use of media, communication, and behavioural response towards an infectious disease is shaped by a

combination of all these influences, and it is hoped that with the use of notices, we can be able to strengthen our need for COVID safety.

Mr. Speaker, in relation to the vulnerable groups who are people with NCDs, the elderly the disabled, on this subject, the Ministry in this 2021-2022 Budget will continue to support those living with chronic diseases, those with compromised immune systems, older people over 60 years of age, children, women and in particular, pregnant mothers, people living in geographically remote areas and the unvaccinated.

The Ministry has developed targeted messaging for people with co-morbidities and pre-existing conditions. National and community-based vaccination drives has included drive-thru vaccination programmes, targetted vaccination for pregnant mothers with the Moderna vaccine and home vaccination for the elderly and physically disabled. Continued advocacy on public health measures, including social distancing, restriction of movement, hand-washing, appropriate masking.

With the support of health partners, the 165 Helpline was implemented on 19th May, 2021, in the Western Division and on 26th June, 2021, in the Central Division. The line received an average of 8,000 calls per week. We have also been working with the Fiji Sports Commission to get targetted physical activity measures specified for various age groups using national food and nutrition centres and other social media platforms to advocate for COVID- safe measures. Virtual training with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and also activity involvement in the UN Food System Summit, to ensure policy changes, reflections of transformations needed for food and nutrition security.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is also working with NGOs, such as the Foundation for Rural Integrated Enterprises & Development (FRIEND) Fiji, Medical Services Pacific (MSP), Fiji Cancer Society (FCS), Diabetes Fiji, and as I have alluded too earlier, we also working with the Fiji Sports Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our public health programmes of communicable disease prevention, our National Centre for Health Promotion, pollution control, climate change and healthcare waste management and food safety, to name a few, range from \$20,000 to \$200, 000 in this 2021-2022 Budget. These programmes are vital in advocacy and health prevention and protection. All our Divisions also have provisions for outreach programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2.5 million has been set aside for our many mothers and women, who are our Community Health Workers (CHWs). I have been proud also to have met a growing cohort of male CHWs. Sir, these CHWs have been part of our frontline response, and I thank them and they are our great asset in every community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue in this Budget to support our mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) which is a priority in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. We have decentralised our mental health services closer to the community a few years back and we work with NGOs, such as Empower Pacific and Medical Pacific in providing support to those who might need psychosocial support.

Once we have Stress Management Wards in the three Divisional Hospitals, St. Giles Hospital has been recently undergoing further renovations to a tune of nearly \$1 million. Patients in rural settings are able to be seen in our remote facilities and access treatment and services, including free counselling services and these will continue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the health system continues to receive in this Budget more than 100 new Medical Interns, 114 Medical Officers, 138 Nurse Interns and 43 Midwives to boost services across

our four Divisions. The recruitment of these additional staff, doctors and nurses will definitely assist with managing the COVID-19 crisis. They will be strategically posted to where there is a critical need within the health system. Also of note is a training budget for doctors that is now \$776,000 in this new 2021-2022 Budget, increased by \$300,000, and this will see us training more specialists but also training in areas that are specific to what we currently do not have at the moment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also, throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, used tele-health as a means in which we could engage with our patients and ensuring that we meet the COVID-safe protocols. We have been doing it since the onset of COVID-19 outbreak using Helpline 165. We also have tele-dentistry project which started in Sigatoka in May, tele-dermatology for those with skin conditions, tele-health services, tele-medicine NCD and SRH telemedicine through UNFPA and there are other potential tele-medicine initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is also being used is a virtual platform, such as zoom and viber groups, to be able to reach out to patients and provide clinics and also online prescriptions so that they can access medicine from the nearest facility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$16.1 million has been allocated for Capital Construction works for the Ministry which includes major refurbishment and maintenance of Health facilities. Sir, \$562,000 is to upgrade and maintain urban hospitals and institutional quarters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the CWM Hospital air-conditioning unit remedial works of \$250,000 has been set aside.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$270,000 has been set aside and allocated for maintenance of Sub-Divisional Hospitals, Health Centres and Nursing Stations. There is a continuous maintenance programme planned in the beginning of the year to maintain the health facilities in both, urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Other funding includes the new CWM New Hospital Maternity Unit of \$7 million and the next phase - the land stabilisation and refurbishment of Savusavu Hospital - \$1 million. The upgrade works at the Labasa Hospital - \$2.5 million and the upgrade of Lautoka Hospital Operating Theatre X-Ray Department - \$1.1 million that is left; and the final payment that we are making for the CWM Hospital Emergency Department.

Mr. Speaker, \$11.4 million has been allocated to capital purchases. The purchase of a new boiler at CWM Hospital. The laundry services that had been outsourced and the security services, and then there are many more.

Mr. Speaker, Government continues to look at the most effective means of treatment of medical clinical waste to prevent any harm to the environment and our health in general. We have also allocated \$800,000 for the purchase of dental equipment for urban and subdivisional hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, \$1.5 million has been allocated to the Kidney Dialysis Treatment Subsidy and I know that we have discussed this a lot during this Budget debate, but this is a great avenue for which we can be able to look after those who need dialysis and no longer do they have to pay, especially as this is specifically for those who meet the eligibility criteria.

Mr. Speaker, we also have support that is coming from the World Bank of \$1.8 million towards our COVID-19 (Emergency Response) Budget and \$25 million, as I have alluded to earlier, that is in the Contingency Fund.

HON. SPEAKER.- You are out of time.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, the Honourable Minister for Economy had discussed that in this Budget cycle, we will see the beginning of the actual work happening around the public private partnership at the Ba and Lautoka Hospitals.

HON. SPEAKER.- You are out of time, Honourable Minister. Are we able to get the Honourable Minister for Women?

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Mr. Speaker, can you hear me?

HON. SPEAKER.- I can hear you now. You have the floor, Honourable Minister.

HON. M.R. VUNIWAQA.- Thank you, Sir. It is an honour to address this august House regarding the 2021-2022 Budget.

The total allocation to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for the upcoming fiscal year is \$145 million, which is a decrease of 9.21 percent from last year. I must ensure to explain in my statement today how my Ministry will work within the allocated budget, ensuring that service to the most vulnerable continues efficiently.

But before I do that, I wish to thank each and every frontline worker, who is at battle since the second wave of COVID-19 in Fiji, for every Fijian. The service and sacrifices of these frontline workers are invaluable, and so is the support of their families. I also wish to extend my sincere condolences to the families that have lost loved ones to the Coronavirus.

Mr. Speaker, we know that the death toll due to COVID-19 is increasing with the spread of the disease over the past three months, what we also know is that a good majority of those who passed away were unvaccinated. Therefore, I take this opportunity to ask our fellow Fijians to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Government has even established vaccination drive-thru venues and arrangements to enhance accessibility for vaccinations to all Fijians. It is our duty as Fijians to get vaccinated not only for ourselves but also for our loved ones and for the sustainability of our future as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, the virus is not only claiming lives but is increasing human suffering and upending people's lives for the long run. Governments across the world are facing a double challenge, they have to contain the health pandemic while responding to its economic and social effects - Fiji is no different.

Having said that, I congratulate and thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team for giving us the 2021-2022 Budget which is aimed at doing just what is demanded by 'COVID times' – balancing both the health and inevitable socio-economic crisis we are faced with.

COVID-19 is a human, economic and social crisis that is now attacking our own country to its core. This means, for the Fijian Government, which has pledged to leave no one behind in alignment to our commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, the need to promote social inclusion, reduce inequalities and alleviate poverty remains paramount and the 2021-2022 Budget is exemplary of the political will of the Fijian Government to do just that.

The COVID-19 outbreak affects all segments of the population and is particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situations. Evidence indicates that the socio-economic impacts of the virus are being borne disproportionately by women and vulnerable

groups, including the poor. Therefore, the priority for my Ministry now is to ensure that the indirect implications of COVID-19 are also managed, particularly in relation to its implications on our clientele.

Our aim is to ensure that our national social protection system continues to be operated efficiently in serving those eligible beneficiaries. I am happy that even at a time when the economy is not in its best position, this Government is able to allocate sufficient money to ensure the continuity of social protection allowances to current beneficiaries.

The Fijian Government has had to take unprecedented actions to respond to the health, economic and social impacts of the pandemic so far. Crisis in Fiji is nothing new, with natural disasters being a frequent kind, and in every crisis, some people are affected more than others. The people hardest hit have often been individuals and families already struggling before the crisis, which has highlighted the significant pre-existing inequalities. However, COVID-19 has also been a huge blow to those who were able to make ends meet before the pandemic. This Budget further targets everyone who has been impacted in the best possible way for some relief, all of which fall into the larger social protection system of the country, and is not restricted to social welfare beneficiaries alone.

Mr. Speaker, in responding to the needs arising due to the severe implications of the pandemic, it has been recognised that social protection, indeed, has a fundamental role to play in addressing the social, economic and health scopes of the pandemic. Through this Budget, the Fijian Government proves that it supports the idea that social protection needs to be an integral component of our national economic recovery plan and as a component of fiscal stimulus that can boost collective demand and support the economy to bounce back.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has recently made a proposal for member countries to widen social protection by spending 2 percent to 6 percent of GDPs in order to lift people out of poverty and enhance resilience against future pandemics. In the past year's and in the new budget, Government allocation to social welfare programmes alone in Fiji make up 1.4 percent of the GDP and over 4 percent of the entire Government budget for both years. This is aside from other Government funded assistance that forms a nationwide social protection network in its entirety, such as the introduced unemployment benefits, disability/elderly care (through grants to NGOs, for example), healthcare, et cetera. The \$200 million allocated for unemployment benefits, together with the allocation to my Ministry, easily crosses the recommended allocation to expand social protection systems by ESCAP. So it is safe to say that Government is doing its best to align itself to international standards when it comes to widening social protection.

It needs to be made clear at this point that by protecting individuals and families in need, social protection can help address the health, social and economic dimensions of the current crisis. The actions of governments across the world regarding social protection have so far been unprecedented and temporary social protection measures are being rolled out to accommodate the needs of those who do not typically fall into the social protection policies of governments. We have done the same and so far, temporary social protection measures have played a prominent role in catering to the people in immediate need of such assistances.

The partnership between the Fiji National Provident Fund and the Fijian Government to roll out relief packages to assist its members, different types of cash top-ups to those who did not fall into the above category living within containment zones and partnerships with bilateral and multilateral partners to provide top-up assistance to certain groups of welfare recipients, are temporary social protection measures that the Fijian Government adopted and I am grateful that the Fijian Government

has done this strategically enough in the past fiscal year to be able to continue with such initiatives based on the demand of the situation in this fiscal year. In fact, it is because of the strategic and careful management of funds that in the new fiscal year, Government has the ability to introduce more assistance initiatives. Imagine doing that in a time when the national economy is suffering its biggest blow. It takes more than talk to do that!

Speaking of new assistance programmes, I must particularly commend the Honourable Attorney-General for announcing Government paid stall fees for market vendors and free sanitary pads for female students. As a nation keen to achieve gender equality aligned to its international obligations and national policy commitments, these two programmes are especially welcomed.

A COVID-19 Response Gender Working group formed by my Ministry undertook a rapid gender analysis with multiple development stakeholders that included the UN Women Fiji Multi-Country Office. The analysis found that 40 percent of rural women in Fiji work as farmers or as farm labourers.

The Working Group's report, 'Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Women in Fiji' noted that most rural women farmers are between 40 years and 65 years, and that women earn 25 percent less than their male counterparts. The report also noted that for 77 percent of those in retail, vending in markets was their sole source of income and the savings that they will make from not having to pay stall fees for the whole year will, indeed, be of great help to them.

We can also proudly say that we have followed in the footsteps of some of the most developed economies, like New Zealand and Scotland, to address what we call 'period poverty'. Gender inequality, extreme poverty, humanitarian crises and harmful traditions can all turn menstruation into a time of deprivation and stigma, which can undermine a female's enjoyment of fundamental human rights, like education and human dignity. This is an excellent initiative to begin mitigating period poverty in Fiji and it could not have come at a better time. So I do not understand why a supposed gender equality champion and former director for women in Government, like Honourable Salote Radrodro, would want to attack such an initiative that contributes directly to the empowerment of girls.

Mr. Speaker, this Government finds opportunities to improve in every situation and a good example of this is how we had to recognise and sought to fill significant coverage gaps in our social protection systems over the past year, and this was when we developed Fiji's first ever targeted Social Assistance Policy and this will be our guide for the new fiscal year and the years ahead as we work with the budgets allocated to my Ministry for social welfare programmes. Like always, the largest portion of the Ministry's total budget allocation in the new fiscal year is for the administration of the nation's core Social Protection Programmes. The clientele benefitting from these programmes include children, the disadvantaged, persons with disabilities and the elderly.

The Honourable Salote Radrodro has picked on the decrease in the social protection budget for the Ministry to support her assertion that it shows a case of misplaced priority. Last year, the Ministry carried out for the first time a recertification exercise to clean and update our list of beneficiaries. For that exercise alone, over 7,000 beneficiaries from different programmes were removed from the beneficiary list. To complement that, the Ministry's efforts in regularly reviewing case files to ensure that only eligible beneficiaries are actually receiving allowances has had an impact as well. I assure social welfare beneficiaries that their entitlements will not be affected in this new budget. The Honourable Radrodro can rest assured that the decrease in the Ministry's budget is going towards other Government programmes that have the same aim to leave no one behind during these trying times.

The Poverty Benefit Scheme that currently assists over 25,000 households has been allocated \$36 million for the new fiscal year; whereas the Care and Protection Allowance Programme that currently assists over 8,000 households has been allocated \$11.3 million. The allowances per household will depend largely on the number of dependents and case by case assessments with the \$50 food voucher remaining the same and complementary to the cash allowances.

Mr. Speaker, the budgetary allocation to the Social Pension Scheme (SPS) in the new fiscal year is \$55.3 million and those who qualify for this are older persons who never in their lives received any superannuation in any form. There are currently there are over 45,000 recipients under this programme. The introduction of the Social Pension Scheme in 2013 and the progressive reduction of the eligibility age from 70 to 65 years, and the increase of the allowance from \$30 per month to \$50 in the past years, and then to \$100 since our commitment to the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). This commitment is, again, reflected in the increased budgetary allocation for the National Council of Older Persons (NCOP) and the funding support given to the three State-owned Homes for the elderly, and also towards its much needed upgrade which is currently underway.

More than 52,000 senior citizens and people living with disabilities will also continue to benefit from Government's free Bus fare scheme and we acknowledge the receipt of \$5 million towards the administration of this cost. The Expanded Food Voucher (EFV) for Rural Pregnant Mothers will be maintained in this new budget year with the allocation of \$1.02 million in the new fiscal year.

We also continue to administer the Disability Allowance with an allocated budget of \$10.78 million, which is an increase of \$1.43 million from the current fiscal year. This programme currently supports over 8,000 Fijians, again, indicating Government's commitment in ensuring that the rights of every individual, including persons with disabilities, is protected.

With such a complex social protection net covering over 80,000 Fijians across our 110 inhabited islands, it is critical that the platform and the rules and procedures around deployment of the programmes is resilient and adaptable to the needs of our clients at any given time. Keeping this in mind, we are happy to have received an allocation of \$10,000 for the review of the Social Protection Programme Systems and Processes.

We are aiming to address any possible gaps in the administration of all these programmes to ensure accurate and timely payments, avoidance of overpayments and double dipping, improvement of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and facilitation of timely reviews for graduation and termination of allowances as necessary. We will also be working on the upgrade of the Social Welfare Management Information System during this time. This sum will be complemented by the generous grant of the Australian Government towards the same cause.

The Ministry has continued to fully operate the two toll free helplines, namely the Child helpline 1325 administered by Medical Services Pacific and the Domestic Violence Helpline 1560, administered by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre during the COVID-19 lockdown periods in Fiji. We are grateful that both Helplines have been allocated their own budget respectively to continue operations. These Helplines have become even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic given the hike in the rate of violence against women and children. With the increased incidence of women and children staying at home during this time, it is critical that such accessible avenues for advice and assistance is available.

To this end, I would also like to acknowledge our private, non-government and international development partners, who provide as much support as possible in a more targeted and effective

manner to address the immediate needs of those Fijians who fall under the overarching mandate of the Ministry.

The Ministry's role through the Department of Social Welfare is not limited to Government's Social Welfare Schemes and Child Protection Programmes, it also entails the rehabilitation of juveniles in conflict with the law. The budgetary allocation for the running of the institution will enable the Ministry to focus in providing rehabilitation programmes that will empower these juveniles and prepare them to be productive members in society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is satisfied with the allocations we have got towards the Gender Equality and Empowerment Programme based with the Department of Women for the new fiscal year. The 2020-2021 Budget reflects the continued effort of the Fijian Government to accelerate Fiji's commitments to progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5, "Promoting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment". Working towards gender equality and empowerment of women needs collaborative effort and the government intends to strengthen the efforts in a coordinated manner working with its stakeholders drawn from Government, Non-Government organisations, donor partners, corporate organisations and UN agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021-2022 Budget reaffirms this Government's commitment to the empowerment of women with the allocation of \$150,000 for Department of Women to implement its core programmes under the Women's Plan of Action - a reduction from the last fiscal year, but the reduction is based on the low utilisation rate which was mainly due to the postponement of programmes because of *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*, and the pandemic.

For the next four years, the key thematic areas that the National Women's Machinery will be focusing on are:

- (1) Ending violence against all women and girls;
- (2) Prompting Women's Economic Empowerment;
- (3) Improving protection from and resilience to climate change and disasters for all women and girls.

These priorities are complemented with four cross-cutting areas, including:

- (1) Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development;
- (2) Women and Girls Leadership;
- (3) Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights; and
- (4) Gender Statistics.

Major initiatives have secured donor funding for its design, development and implementation and the Women's Plan of Action will support this mainly for the participation of the National Women's Machinery and coordination and advocacy role of the Department.

The Ministry is committed to ensuring that our women are treated as equals in all aspects of our socioeconomic development and are able to participate fully and equally in all aspects of our national life. The voices of our women must be heard, and they must be visible at all areas of development. To leave no one behind, is to provide a space where women's voices is heard, where their issues are considered and that their contribution is acknowledged.

That is the principle on which the Government has allocated budget towards the development of women. Therefore, reduced allocations to gender programmes within my Ministry does not mean

there is a lack of political will, it is a means to place emphasis on gender responsive budgeting across Government.

On that note, I congratulate the Honourable Minister for Agriculture and his team for a very comprehensive Agriculture Census that has very astutely put women in agriculture on the map by having a specific chapter on gender and by having sex-desegregated data on every agricultural activity that was surveyed. I have no doubt that the Ministry of Agriculture will, in the years ahead, fully utilise the data they have collected to improve the position of women in agriculture in Fiji through targeted and impactful initiatives.

I would also like to congratulate the Honourable Minister for Economy and his gender-enlightened team on what I know to be a precedent in laying the foundation for gender-responsive budgeting across of Government in years to come. The continuation of initiatives like the Institutional Capacity Development will, indeed, aid the success of gender responsive budgeting across Government.

Mr. Speaker, to conclude, the momentum created by the response to the pandemic may enable progress on these issues in the near future and it is change that will go far and beyond the COVID-19 crisis and the new budget will support that. Due to the unique characteristics of the pandemic, social protection has also broken new ground, particularly in relation to service delivery and innovation, especially in the area of social protection which are going to have long-term effects on the sector.

Overall, despite the economic downfall, this Budget considers the needs of all actors of the Fijian society and for this very reason, I support the proposed 2021-2022 Budget. I thank you.

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

Honourable Members, that brings to an end the debate for today. I thank you for your cooperation and forbearance. We will now adjourn until tomorrow morning at 9.30.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.32 p.m.