

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 11TH FEBRUARY, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	730
Communication from the Speaker	730
Questions	730-745
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Transformative Institutional Capacity Development (Q/No. 37/2022)	
(2) Addressing Frequent Flooding at Wailotua Village (Q/No. 43/2022)	
(3) Healthy Lifestyles and Diet (Q/No. 44/2022)	
(4) Tourism Industry's Progress – Reopening of Borders (Q/No. 45/2022)	
(5) Update on First Home Buyers Programme (Q/No. 46/2022)	
(6) Safety of Children and Teachers in Schools (Q/No. 47/2022)	
(7) Student Turnout – Reopening of Schools (Q/No. 48/2022)	
(8) Ministry of Education – Amended Curriculum (Q/No. 49/2022)	
(9) Update – Civil Service Reforms (Q/No. 50/2022)	
End of Week Statements	746-767
(1) Deduction of Bundle Insurance from Cane Payment	
(2) Contact Teaching – Readiness of Schools	
(3) Labour Standards in Various Employment Sectors in Fiji	
(4) Clean and Safe Drinking Water for Fijians	
Adjournment	767-768
Update on Fiji's Humanitarian Work in Tonga	

FRIDAY, 11TH FEBRUARY, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.40 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry, Foreign Affairs and Forestry; honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi and honourable Ratu T.N. Navurelevu.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 10th February, 2022, 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 SPEAKER

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

Honourable Members, for your information, the *Daily Hansard* report for yesterday's sitting will be circulated later today.

On the next item which is Questions, the first Oral Question for today was carried forward from yesterday. Honourable Members, we will deal first with the question that was carried forward and I now call on the honourable Selai Adimaitoga to ask her question.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Transformative Institutional Capacity Development
(Question No. 37/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation update Parliament on the Transformative Institutional Capacity Development initiative?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development (ICD) is led by the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation in

partnership with the Ministry of Economy. This was endorsed by Cabinet in January 2020.

The ICD initiative aims to strengthen the role of national women machinery and enhance the capacity to fulfil their mandate as a catalyst for gender equality and women's empowerment. It is an institutional mechanism and coordination structure with the formation of Gender Mainstreaming Action Groups (CMAGs) for the development of gender mainstreaming action plans using a whole of Government approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initiative aims to institutionalise gender responsiveness on Government legislations, policies and programmes. Agencies will develop skills for gender mainstreaming and gender responsive planning and budgeting. Furthermore, Sir, the ICD is now a component of Government's annual budget process and is currently piloted with nine agencies which includes the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Fisheries, Ministry of Forestry, Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, Fiji Police Force, Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Tourism and Transport, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.

The goal, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, it aims to provide an enabling environment for Government agencies and officials to identify and apply women and girl's needs, interests, concerns, contributions, perspective into policies programmes, budget and reports. Moreover, it is a step towards accountability and transparency to women and girls but also towards achieving, inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this initiative is supported by New Zealand, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, rendering the technical advisory services of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement, the Government of Canada for the provision of a short-term technical experts on gender responsive budgeting, gender analysis and this has been done upon the request of my Ministry and Fiji Women's Rights Movement to support the development of knowledge products.

Supported by Asian Development Bank for the provision of a short-term technical expert on gender budget, assessment analysis seconded to the Ministry of Economy from September until November, 2019. Of course, we have partnered with an Indonesia's South-South and Triangular Cooperation for the provision of short-term technical assistance to develop a training manual, training of trainer sessions. I must highlight that the Ministry recognises achieving the goal of gender equality is not a straight forward or a simple path that can be taken alone or made with a checklist or one interventions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, achieving the goal of gender equality is a process that requires listening, transformative approaches, partnerships, relationship building, new ways of working, finding solutions with improved data and commitment to foster an enabling policy, budgetary and institutional structures for gender equality that adequately protects girls and women's rights, tackles the barriers they face and meets their particular needs and interest.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main outcome of the gender transformative institutional capacity initiative is to develop and enhance government's capacity and competence on gender mainstreaming with the focus on gender analysis. In addition, it aims to raise the profile and overall capacity of my Ministry as a national central gender policy coordinating unit while providing a gender roadmap, structures and measures to deepen the collective efforts and accountability across the Government for promoting gender equality and particular achieving the sustainable goals.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir and I thank the honourable Minister for that explanation. My question is, what are some positive impacts that has been achieved through this

initiative or some challenges? I ask that question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because one of the biggest performance indicator of gender equality mainstreaming throughout the civil service is in the annual reports. Annual reports for all the ministries that I have come across in the Standing Committee on Social Affairs only reflect the staff composition in regards to males and female in the Ministry and not how the gender equality mainstreaming is being undertaken in the Ministry.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What is the question?

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- The question is the impact. I asked that in the very beginning, you were not listening. May I ask it again, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the thing is, for supplementary question, you should just ask the question. Do not explain the question, ask the question.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question was asked first, and the question was, what has been some positive impact or challenges that has been brought about in the implementation of this initiative?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a very new initiative. Actually, I forgot to tell you the progress of that. We are still in the process of training, having training done within the first nine agencies. Altogether, we have 20 Government agencies. Once the training is done by the donors that I mentioned, it comes at a cost of \$500,000, that is the budget for that.

It is totally funded by donor agencies and because we are in the early stage of the training of trainers process, and we have not completed all the other Government agencies, we will not be able to know the impacts of it now. But we do hope that the impact would be where gender mainstreaming becomes part of every Ministry and people are more conscious of the needs of the two genders when it comes to reporting or budgeting. It is in a very early stage, honourable Radrodro, and once we complete all the 20 agencies in terms of training, then we will start implementing it, and hopefully we will see the results then.

Addressing Frequent Flooding at Wailotua
(Question No. 43/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment inform Parliament about the Ministry's plans to address the frequent flooding in Wailotua Village, Tailevu?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are three causal factors that are contributing to flooding of Wailotua Village. One is the excessive rainfall, second is the topography of the place and the third is the Wailotua Creek. So I am going to talk about three things. Out of these three, two we cannot do much about, but the third one I will say what we will be doing. With regard to rainfall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the January rainfall recorded was 876.91 millimetres, which is twice the amount that was received in January last year. It is much more than average annual rainfall that was experienced in that area. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the short to medium term, there is nothing we can do with regards to the intensity of rainfall.

The second causal factor is basically, this Wailotua area is a flood prone area due to the nature of its location where its natural ground level is lower than the levels of the surrounding areas, including the mountains in the main King's Highway. The village is situated approximately four metres below the King's Highway and the mountain adjacent is 200 metres in elevation. So in simpler terms, Wailotua Village can be assimilated to a basin that collects storm water during heavy downpour periods. There are a number of areas in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was designated as a retention basin - a ponding area, and it was clearly demarcated that this area should not be allowed for residential purposes.

Now, in the interior, this area should not be marked out but around the local government areas, the municipal areas within the peri-urban areas, those areas are marked out and should not be allowed for residential development.

Unfortunately, even in the local peri-urban areas, natural ponding areas have been allowed for residential development for some reason or the other, but in the interior this has not been marked over the years but these areas were inhabited by people. Unfortunately, during those times, there was not much rainfall intensity but now with heavy intensity of rainfall, these areas have now become ponding areas - a retention basin. So, nothing can be done about that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, unless these communities are relocated.

The third factor, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the Wailotua Creek which is silted and our staff have examined that and we would want to undertake a desilting of the Wailotua Creek. So it is four-kilometres of the Wainibuka River as well as the Wailotua Creek which is about 2.5 kilometres that need to be desilted.

We are looking at advertising this, plus a number of others, close to, 100 rivers and creeks tomorrow in the dailies for a Public Private Partnership (PPP) model that we have adopted over the years, so we are looking at undertaking that.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the short to medium term, these things can mitigate, but I think in the longer run this community and a number of other communities that we have identified, together with the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, it would be better to move them to a safer and higher ground so that those areas do undertake its original intended purpose of ponding.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- A supplementary question to the honourable Minister; can he inform the House if plans are in place to dredge the Wainibuka River, to minimise flood build-up in the tributaries and one of which he has referred to, that eventually rise high enough to flood villages along those tributaries or along the Wainibuka River itself?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know whether that is on our list, the Wainibuka River, but the larger rivers, dredging needs to be undertaken by the use of a dredger and we are expecting a dredger sometimes in January and February next year. The smaller rivers can be undertaken through the use of an excavator with super extension boom. We can do that, we are advertising it tomorrow and there will be close to 100 rivers and creeks that will be advertised. I just do not know the width of this river and its status, but we can examine that.

MR. SPEAKER.- One more question but there are three of you, so I will give it to the best looking who is Honourable Gavoka.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister, given the frequency of flooding these days in flood-prone areas, can there be provision for boats to enable the villagers to move around because in Wailotua, flooding could be three or four days? Wailotua

Village could be underwater for those many days and it can be useful having boats during floods. Can that be provided to places like Wailotua?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is something that NDMO could look into. I think the honourable Minister has alluded to in one of his responses that they are examining that and that is something that we could also talk to them about.

Healthy Lifestyles and Diet
(Question No. 44/2022)

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

Given the high level of NCD cases in Fiji, can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the Ministry's efforts to promote healthy lifestyles and diets?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for that question. Sir, NCD is a global health concern with cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, diabetes and cancer at the forefront in virtually all developed and developing nations. It is estimated by World Health Organization (WHO) that there are 41 million people annually, who lose their lives through NCDs, which accounts for 71 per cent of all deaths globally. Of this, more than 15 million people die prematurely before 69 years old. Sir, 77 per cent of all NCD deaths are in low and middle income countries. We all know it is a challenge in the Pacific, and we are not only alone in the Pacific but other regions as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I read an article several years ago by one of the most senior public health physicians then, I think it was Dr. Pashu Ram, who said that the prevalence of diabetes in 1970 in Fiji's independence was only 2 per cent. Our data in 2000 showed that it was up to 15 per cent. So, you can see that within that 30 year period, we have moved quite significantly in terms of the prevalence of diabetes, and all of us know what the risk factors are. This, obviously, leads to high blood pressure, high sugar level and also high fat in the blood or high lipidemia.

Our Government and the Ministry recognises the huge burden, and also that we want to ensure that we reduce the one-third premature mortality from NCDs through the prevention and treatment in the many ways, including the advocacies that happen, the taxes on MCG and sugar-sweetening beverages, to help curb the intake of sugar, the Tobacco Control Act 2010, and the increase tobacco taxations since 2013.

The *Food and Health Guidelines for Fiji* was published as an advocacy and counselling tool and these are taken by our health staff as they go out into the communities, and also the work done by the National Food and Nutrition Centre (NFNC). We have also developed the *My Kana* App by the NFNC, which is a food and gardening App, to help Fijians grow and eat healthy foods. It also allows Fijians to be able to see what their recommended calorie-allowance intake is daily.

We have established a Wellness Unit and it reports to the Chief Medical Officer. It is responsible for establishing NCDs Strategic Plan that guides our response to NCDs. It involves working with the:

- Environmental Health Unit in areas such as restaurant grading;
- Package of Essential Non-Communicable (PEN) Disease and also in other areas;
- public education and exercises such as social media pages, print media, virtual live streaming and the developing of health promotion videos;

- partnership and collaboration with Diabetes Fiji, Medical Services Pacific, and even with organisations, such as Courts and Sports World; and
- ongoing virtual and face to face training on NCD Prevention with our partners, such as Goodman Fielder, APTC, Fiji Sports Commission, et cetera.

Those are some of the areas in which we have involved in the promotion of mechanisms to be able to prevent NCDs.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his response. I also do support and promote healthy lifestyle and diets for everyone here in Fiji and in the world because it is important to build up our natural immune system to fight all these non-communicable diseases. My question is; what is the effect or impact of healthy lifestyle and diets against communicable diseases and viruses?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, there is a lot of literature out there that healthy lifestyles, healthy food, healthy eating and exercise helps to simulate and boost our mechanisms to be able to look after ourselves when we get sick with disease.

A very simple way to think of it, Mr. Speaker, and through you to honourable Bulanauca is that, when one is beset with a disease or has an injury, there are three important things that come into play and determines the outcome:

1. How well they were before they had the disease. So, if you were very well, very fit and very healthy and you had a major accident, you have a possibility of a good outcome.
2. The severity of the disease that hit you. So, if you had a major road traffic accident, then your outcome will be lower.
3. Your treatment.

Those are the three important things, so you can see that in a very simple way, that it is important to live a healthy lifestyle. Whatever disease that we get, the severity of it may have an impact on our outcomes and the management and the treatment that is available. All these three play an important role, and I have said lately that healthy lifestyle is important.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Another supplementary question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have had your supplementary question.

Honourable Member, whatever healthy lifestyle we lead, you and I will still have the same problem, we still lose hair.

(Laughter)

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- A supplementary question, has the Ministry endorsed the Food and Nutrition Security Policy? If so, how will that help in our fight against the NCDs?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- I thank the honourable Member for that question. The National Food and Nutrition Committee play an important role in terms of all the nutritional policies that we have, including some of those things that I talked about, for example, – the *My Kana* App. You have asked specifically in terms of the policy around nutrition and food, off the top of my head I cannot remember if we have fully endorsed it. Oh, but I have been reminded that it is with the Ministry of Agriculture.

Tourism Industry's Progress – Reopening of Borders
(Question No. 45/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport update Parliament on the progress made by the tourism industry since the reopening of borders?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Tuisawau for the question. I think I had answered a similar question on Tuesday.

However, Sir, we have already set sail and basically, we are not looking back. The ultimate aim, Mr. Speaker, of opening the international borders has been and will continue to be about creating opportunities for ordinary Fijians and restoring the livelihoods for thousands of Fijians who, for years, have actually depended on the tourism sector. I think we all know that.

This was also made possible through well-established partnerships and enhanced health and safety protocols that we have put in place, and an effective vaccination coverage, and that is so important, Mr. Speaker. The careFIJI commitment programme has contributed immensely to lifting visitor confidence also, and gradually restoring safe mobility for the tourism industry.

Our visitor numbers, Mr. Speaker, in the last two months are indicative of how resilient the industry has been in solidifying for the re-opening whilst not everyone actually opened in December, the overwhelming majority of our stakeholders were ready to safely re-open. The CFC has actually given us greater confidence to resume travel whilst ensuring the health and safety of our travellers remain paramount.

To-date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have over 2,200 businesses that are registered under the CFC compared to 1,741 in December 2021. This is an increase of 26 per cent. Other notable achievements, we have 23,226 visitors were received in the month of December which was 73.5 per cent of the total arrivals for 2021, 92 per cent of the total December arrivals were mainly from our key source markets, that was from Australia and the United States of America. The month of December also, as I had mentioned and alluded to earlier on during the week, we collected the highest monthly revenue collection of \$190 million by the Fiji Revenue & Customs Services (FRCS) since Fiji's first COVID-19 case in March 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we constantly review also and update our travel partner countries and now we have 57 countries added to this particular list and the most recent addition is being People's Republic of China and Hong Kong. In terms of forecast of tourism numbers for March and April particularly the lower seasons in our tourism calendar, we also almost recorded 50 per cent of December arrival figures on the books already, so more tourism properties, accommodation properties will also be opened for full operations from March and onwards.

During the course of opening up in late December and January, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were challenged with the highly transmissible Omicron variant, but we were not deterred and remained steadfast about our re-opening plans and though we had some resource constraints and exhausted staff, we learnt how to best deal with Omicron variant and tested all our COVID safe protocols. Now, we know better how to deal with adverse situations.

Further to this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you must remember *TC Cody* also inflicted its fair share of challenges on the tourism industry, but despite all of these hurdles, we continued to remain resilient.

There were stories of fire trucks and 4 wheel drives providing transportation for our tourists in flooded roads to catch their flights and hotel staff transporting people and members of the public, assisting in a way possible, but that is just us being Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were some issues in regards to non-compliance also. We have had that with respect to our COVID-19 protocols, in the down time also our COVID-19 safe ambassadors have conducted surprise monitoring visits and address these non-compliance issues. The programme was introduced last year and will continue to be instrumental to advocate adherence to the COVID safe measures.

We are returning to normalcy as recently announced by the honourable Acting Prime Minister and a number of COVID-19 related restrictions, including the national curfew, removal of restrictions on social gatherings, allowing businesses except high risk natured ones and public services vehicles to operate in full capacity and the lifting of the mandatory requirement on the careFIJI app, the QR code and the vaccination check too. We have eased entry requirements also in terms of COVID-19 testing for travellers from travel partner countries, now all travellers departing from travel partner countries have an added option of providing a rapid antigen test 24 hours prior to departure as an accepted testing requirement. This will make holiday cost lesser for our visitors and consequently makes Fiji a convenient destination to travel to.

All these efforts have generally brought about optimism in the tourism industry and promising return to normalcy in our daily lives; a breath of fresh air, weight of confidence, a reduction in administrative burden and one last thing to worry about, Sir.

I basically close by just saying that with Government works also, we have had tremendous amount of consultation with all the stakeholders - Tourism Fiji, hoteliers, the national airline, the transport or experienced providers, Ministry of Health and all our Health Officials and we will continue to do so to protect and promote the best interest of the industry. I thank you for the opportunity to answer the question.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- A supplementary question. Thank you honourable Minister for the update, noting in your update you had mentioned 23,200 tourists in December. My question is related to the projections in the Budget Supplement 2022 - 268,317 and in 2023 - 715,511. Could you please enlighten the House as to whether these projections are realistic or not and why?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, I leave you to answer that but that is not within the range of this. You have the floor.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir, but I think the honourable Member should realise these are projections. These projections are not just plucked out of the air, they would have been done with a little bit of research. As we know, the template that we work of changes on a daily basis because of COVID. So there may be some variations but those projections that were made, were made with some research. When Ministry of Economy does this, it does not just pluck out of thin air.

Update on First Home Buyers Programme
(Question No. 46/2022)

HON. J.N. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the First Home Buyers Programme?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for this question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the First Home Owner Initiative was introduced by Government in 2014 to increase the home ownership opportunities for low and middle income earning Fijians. The Programme started in 2014 with a \$10,000 assistance to Fijians with annual household income of \$50,000 or below who were constructing their first home.

In 2018, Sir, this was further expanded by increasing the first home grant to \$15,000 and also introducing the first land purchase grant of \$10,000 for those Fijian households purchasing their first residential block of land. This, of course, is a grant. Since inception in 2014, Mr. Speaker, Sir, first home ownership initiative we had assisted over 3,400 Fijian households to a tune of \$36 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2020-2021 Financial Year, we made a bold decision to increase the value of the grant to up to \$30,000. This was, of course, done with the intention to help people to own their own homes quickly and encourage them because we see the rate of home ownership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji is actually quite low comparatively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was also helped because in the COVID situation, if you had more people wanting to build homes it will create economic activity. So the current parameters, Sir, are that if a household earns less than \$50,000 a year and they want to construct their first home, they are entitled to a \$30,000 grant. They have to go through the banking system or housing authority. If they want to purchase their first home, they are given a \$15,000 grant because obviously we want to increase the stock of homes. Nonetheless there are still assisted if they want to purchase their first home. If you earn more than \$50,000 but less than \$100,000, you actually qualify for a \$20,000 package if you apply and you are building your first home and \$5,000 for purchasing your first home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2020-2021 Financial Year, a total of 433 Fijian households benefitted from the first home grant with a total Government investment of \$7.5 million. In the 2021-2022 National Budget, Sir, a total of \$4 million was allocated. As of date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total allocation has been paid out. The demand was so high. In fact, with the additional \$400,000 currently being vired to the programme from the First Land Home Programme. A total of 213 Fijian families have benefitted in the current year from this programme, the total pay-out to date is \$4.345 million.

What is really interesting, Sir, is that out of the 213 successful applicants a total of 130 households received the grant to construct their first home, value of \$3.4 million grant, and 83 households received the grant to purchase their first homes of about \$900,000. Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 145 of the households that benefitted from the \$50,000 and below income category, \$3.4 million and the balance 68 with the high income bracket of \$0.935 million. Interesting statistics, Sir, to note that 47 per cent of the applicants or 100 applicants who have received the grant assistance to-date are from the Western Division. A total of \$2.1 million was received by these households and out of this, 64 applicants were constructing their first homes creating much needed economic activity, in particular, in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to let you know the total value of the loans that they drew down, in 2020-2021 Financial Year, 433 successful applicants secured home loans to a total value of \$58 million, and almost eight fold of economic activities compared to the grant pay-out of \$7.5 million. Of course, this creates a lot of economic activity. We have received some more applications, we actually have not stopped receiving applications. We have received a further 198 applications to-date which awaits payment of \$4.3 million, which we hope to facilitate, Mr. Speaker, of which, interestingly enough, out of 198, 133 actually are for construction and the balance 65 were for purchase of homes. Those are the figures on that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before that, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development has assisted 26 households in the current year of the total pay-out of \$260 for the purchase of their first land. We also provide \$5,000 to assist those people who want to rebuild their homes destroyed in accidental fires, of course, not deliberate fires and up to \$5,000 to retrofit homes to meet the needs of disabled Fijians. So if you have a disabled person in your home, perhaps, they need railings in the home or they need a ramp, I am talking about internally in the home, we actually retro fit the homes up to \$5,000. We have received 1,200 applications for retro fitting of which we found that 65 were identified to be eligible for that and they are currently being facilitated.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Acting Prime Minister inform Parliament if there are plans to assist those living in informal settlements to acquire some form of legal tenure to the land and, therefore, benefit from the first home buyers programme?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not quite understand the question.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- Can the honourable Acting Prime Minister inform Parliament if there are plans to assist those living in informal settlements to acquire some form of legal tenure to the land and benefit from the first home buyers programme?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are actually about 40 sites we have identified as informal settlements that need to be in fact formalised. A lot of work has been going on. Honourable Kumar when she was there, she talked a lot about that. So there are people who are living in *vakavanua* arrangement in lot of places, and some of them have been living there for about 30 years to 50 years, so they pay on a monthly basis to the landowner in that particular area or an individual. So what we have done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have identified these areas, we have negotiated with the landowners and iTLTB.

We currently are now paying, even though the land has not been developed, the lease payments for all those people who live in those informal areas. So they are not paying anything, they have been identified. Of course, we have now developed some of them, they have already started works, some of them are at their design stage. There are some issues that we want to resolve because, for example, the *vakavanua* arrangement are not necessarily in one nice little square block, they are all over the place. Also we hope to bring some laws to Parliament where once Government has identified to develop an informal settlement or area in *vakavanua* arrangement, we have got the right amount being paid to the landowners, we want to be able to have the ability to realign homes. One of the problems, I think, it is in Caubati in one of the areas.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mamas Place.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mamas Place, where we are paying on their behalf, but people do not want to move their homes, so how can we build roads. You have a house here, one house there, one house there, so we have to build roads in this fashion, very narrow. So we want to be able to have the ability and say to them, "Look, will get you a 99-year lease. We are paying the lease for you at the moment, you will get a 99-year lease which you can then build your nice concrete home but you have to have the ability to move so we can do proper subdivision", to be able to put the sewerage line, to be able to put wide enough roads because in some of the subdivisions, the road is as narrow from here to there, that is it. Two vehicles cannot even pass. So that is what we intend to do, Sir, but we obviously have about 40 sites that have been identified where we can give them long term security of tenure.

Safety of Children and Teachers in Schools
(Question No. 47/2022)

HON. M.R. LEAWARE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government update Parliament on the protocols in place to ensure the safety of children and teachers in schools?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Member for his question. Sir, COVID-19 is a disruptor. We all know that the COVID pandemic has not only disrupted the education sector worldwide, but every sector of the economy. With almost two years of living with the pandemic, COVID is not going anywhere any time soon. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, life cannot stop because of COVID. We have to learn to live with it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, returning to school has taken on new meaning and a new set of worries for teachers, parents and guardians. Schools have to balance the educational, social and emotional needs of their students, along with stringent safety requirements to protect our students and teachers during this pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry, working very closely with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, has undertaken a considerable amount of work to keep our schools safe. In August 2021, the Ministry developed a COVID Safe Schools Reopening Guidelines that outline the multi-layered mitigation measures and the responsibilities of Head of Schools, teachers and parents, to ensure COVID-safe measures are implemented.

Teachers and Schools Heads underwent vigorous COVID-safe reopening training programmes. We are very grateful to the competent international organisations, such as WHO and UNICEF, for their advice and guidance, particularly advising us on research data and signs to strategize better in reopening schools for our children.

The Ministry of Education worked closely with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, to ensure all schools have COVID-safe measures based on the implementation of multilayers of mitigation measures.

Mitigation measures included; temperature screening, correct and consistent mask use, physical distancing as much as possible, increase ventilation in classrooms, hand-washing with soap, respiratory etiquette, staying at home when sick and cleaning and disinfection of school spaces.

Moreover, all teachers and ancillary staff throughout Fiji are fully vaccinated, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Head of Schools started preparing the schools from October 2021 by using the Free Education Grant to buy consumables, prepare signage, clean and repair classrooms and compounds. The Ministry also distributed cleaning agents, masks, sanitizers and thermal guns received from the private sector, NGOs and from our development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all schools were inspected by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and Ministry of Education Officials, to ensure schools met the required COVID-safe standard. Sick bays are set up in schools for students who may present symptoms of COVID. Clear canteen guidelines were developed and COVID-safe messages have been displayed in schools. In fact, just last week, there was another round of school inspections carried out by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Officials, to ensure schools were ready to receive ECE up to Year 7 students.

Schools have ensured that classrooms are well ventilated, new fence were installed, hand-washing facilities and sanitizers are available for teachers and students.

I have personally visited 60 schools around Fiji and have seen the level of preparedness at each school, and I must commend the teachers, Head of Schools, school management team, parents and guardians for this great effort. During my recent visit to schools, I was taken through the COVID safety protocols at each school, which I found well in order.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important for us to understand that COVID-safe measures require multi-layered approach. All of these measures complement each other to ensure school facilities are safe for our children to attend schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the Opposition and teacher unions have selectively raved on about physical distancing, they know very well that COVID-safe measures require multi-layered approach. We have said it so many times and so have the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, UNICEF and WHO. They do this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to create fear amongst our parents and guardians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate that evidence continues to show that schools are not the main driver of transmission and when mitigation measures are in place and consistently applied, children are less likely to contract COVID-19 in schools than in the community settings.

Globally, whilst sporadic COVID-19 cases have been reported in schools, relative to the level of community transmissions, schools have not been identified as super spreading settings. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our teachers, parents and school management committees, together with the guidance of Ministry of Health and Medical Services and with our development partners, we have put in the hard yards to ensure safe reopening of schools.

In fact, those who question whether schools are safe for our children, I ask them, how safe are children in their communities, at community functions, at the supermarket, in cinemas, at municipal markets, in places of worship?

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Can the honourable Minister enlighten the House on the disease outbreak at Ratu Kadavulevu School which saw a busload and truckload of sick students being sent home arriving home late last night without prior knowledge of their parents?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what speculation does. It started with Mr. Rabuka and he made a statement in the newspaper that RKS students had COVID-19, parents were concerned. Our data showed that there were 10 students who were not feeling well, they went to hospital and they were simply feverish, so there was no such thing as they had COVID-19. There was no COVID-19 at that time. So, it does not mean if someone has got fever-like symptoms, they are COVID-19 positive, it is nothing like that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Student Turnout – Reopening of Schools
(Question No. 48/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, and Local Government update Parliament on the student turnout after the reopening of schools?

HON. P. D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Adimaitoga for her question. I am pleased to inform Parliament that student attendance since the reopening of school has been good,

despite so much of negativity spread by certain political parties, teacher unions and other critics over the past months. They created anxiety and worry amongst our parents and guardians as well as students who were eager to get back to schools. Clearly, they do not care about the education of our children and their future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, student attendance from Year 8 to Year 13 in the first week of January averaged round 60 per cent at the peak of second wave. Since schools reopened on 24th January, attendance for Year 8 students was 73 per cent on average. For secondary school, it has been 70 per cent on average. We should note that the week of 1st February, Year 13 students began their exams and study break started for Year 12. Attendance for primary schools was at 80 per cent and secondary schools at 70 per cent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from Monday this week, all our students from Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Year 11 are back in school, except the Western Division where the floods necessitated school closure. We are seeing average attendance for ECE at 70 per cent and primary at 72 per cent, secondary school attendance was at 69 per cent for last four days. Hopefully, from next week, we will have good attendance from our Year 12 students for their exams and Year 13 also resuming to sit for their remaining papers. We also expect ECE to Year 11 students from the Western Division to return to classes from next Monday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, three weeks ago, we ran a rapid assessment survey in collaboration with UNICEF to obtain feedback from parents on reopening of schools. We received 10,000 responses. Around 60 per cent have clearly said they will send their children to school, 20 per cent were not sure and 20 per cent said no. This is a strong indication that parents want their children to go back to school.

Regarding teacher attendance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it ranged from 83 to 92 per cent since schools reopened for teachers. My Ministry had planned in advance to deal with teacher absenteeism as a result of COVID-19 cases. We have a list of 100 registered teachers in various districts, ready to report to schools if the need arises. We also had the option of using primary school teachers since Years 1 – 7 students were home. As we have seen, even in the worst time, there was no need for this.

Ministry of Education - Amended Curriculum
(Question No. 49/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government update Parliament on the amended curriculum to ensure that students do not lose out in achieving the minimum standard to advance further?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Kepa for her question. During the period of school closure from April to November last year, teaching was conducted remotely using a variety of methods including; worksheets, educational programmes on Walesi Channel, radio broadcast, Zoom, Learning Hub and other digital platforms. This occurred amidst the challenges of remote learning, such as access to internet, availability of digital devices, connectivity, locality and reach of students in the remote and very remote areas.

Facing these challenges, it was not possible to manage the complete coverage of the syllabus so realignment of the curriculum became imperative. The Ministry, having learnt from the experiences of 2020, decided to carry out realignment of the curriculum in both, primary and secondary schools. This was carried out systematically, keeping in mind that the core body of

knowledge is not compromised. This meant, a careful look at the continuation of concept knowledge and addressing knowledge gaps as students progressed from one level to the next. I want to thank the Permanent Secretary and her team at the Ministry because they did a very systematic work when they were involved in the curriculum realignment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had to be mindful that different students were learning at different pace and the best people to gauge the pace of learning are the teachers. We had meetings with all primary and secondary heads of schools and took them through the process used in curriculum realignment and explained the need for teachers to work closely with the students, so that they are aware of their students learning. Majority of the teachers received completed worksheets on a regular basis to mark, so they were aware of the learning that was taking place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when students returned to school, teachers were given a set of questions that they could use to gauge the learning gaps. Using these, the teachers were able to understand the learning gaps of their students and have designed the lessons to cover these gaps.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision to have an extra term was to allow time for catch up and undertake revisions before students progressed to the next level. During this time, teachers will carry out some form of assessment and use this to inform teacher to plan their teaching in the new academic year to address knowledge gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while this is working well, the fact remains, science practical and projects have been compromised, but clearly this was unavoidable. We have to face the fact that last year was by no means a normal year and it is pointless to assume that complete learning would take place given the circumstances. This problem is not unique to us in Fiji, all we have to do is look at the global situation to see that this is a global problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a comprehensive study by UNESCO, UNICEF and WHO on the state of the global education crisis, a pathway to recovery states that school closures have affected more than 1.6 billion learners globally. The impact on learning loss has been more significant in younger students from rural and marginalised areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must look ahead, learn from the experiences of the past two years and prepare for the future. The Ministry continues to build resources that can be used if such situation arises. We have appointed a Manager e-learning who has joined the Ministry this week and will be responsible for creating e-learning resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to say that we have been talking to three universities to provide extra support to the first year students when they start tertiary studies. All have agreed and have already designed programme to provide that extra support.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Minister for her response and also for the work that she is doing for the Ministry of Education, it is not easy.

My question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what type of monitoring mechanism is there for ongoing assessment in the effectiveness of this curriculum realignment that you have spoken about?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have already explained that the teachers, first they were given questions and through those questions, they will be able to monitor the learning gaps and the second step is the assessment that they will be carrying out. Through that assessment, again they will be able to find out whether the curriculum that was realigned is really producing that result or

not, but above all, we all have to accept the fact that there has been learning loss which we will not be able to recover ever and I think we have to live with that.

Update – Civil Service Reforms
(Question No. 50/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development inform Parliament of the civil service reforms in place to improve services to members of public?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I think the first point of call really should be the Constitution and if we look at Section 123, it says under Public Service, and I quote:

“The values and principles of State service include –

- a) high standards of professionalism, including professional ethics and integrity
- b) prompt and faithful implementation of Government policies and administration of laws
- c) being free from corruption
- d) efficient, effective and economic use of public resources
- e) prompt response to requests and questions from the public, and delivery of service to the public, in a manner that is respectful, effective, impartial, fair, and equitable
- f) accountability for administrative conduct
- g) transparency, including –
 - i. timely, accurate disclosure of information to the public; and
 - ii. prompt, complete and candid reporting to Parliament, as required by law
- h) cultivation of good human resource management and career development practices, to maximise human potential; and
- i) recruitment and promotion based on –
 - i. objectivity, impartiality and fair competition; and
 - ii. ability, education, experience and other characteristics of merit.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been carrying out a number of reforms within the Civil Service starting off with the Open Merit Recruitment and Selection (OMRS) but also with various other initiatives. One of them, of course, we have been seeing in Parliament this week as to how we can improve processes, licensed periods from one year to three years or five years which provides, of course, better services to members of the public, and also to removing bottlenecks. There is a lot of duplication that was taking place, there is still some duplication taking place.

As we mentioned, the Ministers are working with the Permanent Secretaries to see how we can unlock the bureaucratic bottlenecks that we do have. We have opened a number of Government centres where people can go to. We now have Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) offices, for example, throughout Fiji as far as Rotuma, Lau and various other places. Only a few years ago, BDM offices only existed in Lautoka, Suva and Labasa. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the issues that we have dealt with, we have toll free lines now, people can make complaints, we also set up a transparent accountable digital feedback tool where people can actually go now to the digitalFIJI platform, you can lodge complaints, you have the email addresses of the Permanent Secretaries and Ministers and phone numbers they can get in touch with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course at the rudimentary level, we have these *talanoa* sessions. The honourable Prime Minister is the one who leads the charge in that respect. Ministers do that now whenever we go and of course, the different ministries also have those. There are a number of Civil Servants who go beyond the call of duty, who actually are fantastic in their responses but then at the same time there are some who are actually quite rude. They believe that because they are in a position of authority, they can treat the ordinary citizen in whichever way they like. I mean, we see the language that they have, calling someone, *lewa* come and do this, *bhaini* come and do that, whatever it is or I do not have to respond to you or if you ring up the wrong department, they do not necessarily handhold you to say, “look, you have called the wrong number, let me transfer you to the right department.”

It is was interesting in Singapore a few years ago, they made that actually an objective. So if I rang up, for example, Ministry of Forestry but really I should have rung up Ministry of Environment, the Forestry person would not get off the phone until they know, that I have been transferred to the right person in the Ministry of Forestry or they will get them to make a phone call and call you back.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are about to launch a new Customer Service Guideline for the whole of Civil Service where it consolidates all aspects of customer service delivery processes and activities. As I highlighted the other day, pretty basic things like calling someone Mr. Poasa or Mr. Prasad, Sir or Madam - goes a long way. It makes the citizen feel that you are giving them that particular level of importance, that they are actually your customer, your client as opposed to them coming up to you and kowtowing to you and indeed being obsequious to you, just in case so you can get your work done. That culture needs to change. Many people, for example, we have had discussions in Fiji, if you go and see a doctor, some doctors are very good and other doctors would not necessarily explain to you what the medicine is for. If you go to a hospital, they will not call the patient a Sir or Madam or by their surname or Mr. or Mrs. That needs to change - that culture needs to change.

This particular Service Guideline, we are actually rolling out and we are currently ensuring that it will be rolled out through Public Service Commission because once we get it through PSC, that means the Permanent Secretaries who are employed by PSC will be held accountable for ensuring that their particular or respective Ministries roll out these services and so we can then be able to improve the level of service to members of the public. In a nutshell and in consideration of time, Sir, that is the response to the honourable Member’s question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, question time is over. We will take a 20-minute break, after which we will start on End of Week Statements.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.50 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.14 a.m.

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

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

Honourable Members, we are now set for the first speaker and I now call on the honourable Professor Biman Prasad to deliver his End of Week Statement.

Deduction of Bundle Insurance from Cane Payment

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, this is about the earnest plea from cane growers for Government and sugar authorities to correct what they rightly believe is in justice done to them. That is the wrong deduction of funds for bundle insurance from their final cane payment for 2020 season in October 2021 without their knowledge and authority. We all know the importance of insurance and we all want insurance be it life, medical crop, property, et cetera, but the manner in which the deduction was done is tantamount to fraud. It gets worse – this enforcement and deduction for the bundle insurance was done without the growers' knowledge nor was it shown on their statements of payment which contained all other deductions but not this. The question is why.

Mr. Speaker, last October, growers received only \$12.05 cents per tonne as fourth payment when the actual payment should have been \$14.99 per tonne. This means growers were short changed by \$2.94 per tonne and received only \$82.06 per tonne for the 2020 season, despite Government boasting that it had guaranteed a price of \$85 per tonne. Similar to the shortfall of \$2.79 per tonne from the total proceeds paid for the 2019 season, growers were betrayed and have every right to feel that they were cheated by the stakeholders.

What makes this fraudulent, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that the scheme is voluntary. It also does not cover growers who are over the age of 65 years and at least that is what one learns from reading the material about the scheme put out by Fiji Care. This is not an authorised deduction permitted by the Master Award as well. Consent has to be obtained from growers. The Sugar Cane Growers Council, Chief Executive Officer since his appointment last year has never defended the rights of growers instead, vociferously promoting anti-grower measures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the annual premium for the \$10,000 cover is \$52 for \$1 per week, but all growers who harvested over 141 tonnes of cane in 2020 had more than \$52 deducted from their proceeds and 30 per cent of growers who are above average producers have collectively lost several thousands of dollars. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if a grower harvested 500 tonnes, he or she had \$185 deducted from the proceeds. If the grower harvested 1,000 tonnes, he or she lost \$370. In total, more than \$600,000 was deducted from all cane growers.

This is sickening, Mr. Speaker. Sir. How many growers signed up for the scheme in the last three years? No one knows and we have not been told. Who authorised the Fiji Sugar Corporation to make the deductions? Was it the Council? If it was, what powers has an unelected council's CEO have to heap financial misery on all growers, a vast majority of whom have not opted for the scheme. And worse, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why was not the deduction reflected on the statements provided to growers? Why was this deliberately hidden from growers? Similarly, why were deductions from industry costs and Sugar Research Institute not shown on the statement provided to growers? Irrespective of whether it was deducted at source from growers' share of proceeds, it should have reflected in the statements. This is the norm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, this is fraudulent. It is a racket where unsuspecting growers without their knowledge and agreement, have actually been overpaid for something they do not know about.

An act of fraud committed by unelected Council and its CEO, who do not seem to give a damn to growers. Yet the unelected CEO thought the deduction was reasonably fair because Government topped-up cane payments by what he claimed was \$156.5 million since 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a case of trying to use one's good deeds or assistance in the past to justify an illegal act. His warped logic simply means, Government's assistance to growers in terms of cane payment top-ups or subsidies provides the basis to fleece growers of their hard-earned money and it is almost like a sick joke. In normal times, it would be a matter of great bewilderment to see the CEO of an organisation representing the largest and most important stakeholders of the sugar industry, shirking his or her primary role of protecting growers' rights and interests.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know that these are not normal times. An elected Sugar Cane Growers Council, which used to be the umbrella representative body of growers, has been demolished by the previous Bainimarama-led Government and now the FijiFirst Government. The CEO is no longer appointed by a legitimately constituted and democratically elected Council's Board of Directors.

The latest instalment of a decision that has siphoned hard-earned money of growers is yet another example of how complete lack of transparency and accountability has gutted the industry that was Fiji's economic lifeblood for more than a century.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I say again, this was not an authorised deduction permitted under the provisions of the Sugar Master Award. It, therefore, requires the consent of growers. It is not a special project, as claimed by the Government controlled Council.

The Sugar Cane Growers Council, after being exposed, started singing a different tune. They said growers are covered. For argument's sake, let us assume he is right or the Council is right, but what is not right at all and the CEO and the Council know, is the manner in which the deductions were made. It is beyond justification.

What happens to deductions in excess of the annual premium of \$52? Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$185, for example, covers more than three-yearly premiums and \$370 covers more than seven premiums. Does it mean that the coverage amount will increase beyond \$10,000? I do not think so, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Why is there silence from the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) on this fleecing of growers in terms of deduction? The FCCC's CEO is extremely quick to defend the exorbitant increase in the price of sugar manufactured by FSC and he has, time and again, ventured into attacking politicians and waded into politics. But when it comes to doing the job required of FCCC, the CEO has actually zipped his mouth in terms of protecting growers from this fraudulent act. What a shame, Mr. Speaker, Sir!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugar Industry Tribunal certifies cane payments and we all know that, but suddenly the role of the Tribunal for the sugar industry has now really become a secondary issue. Previously, it was a full time role. The Sugar Industry Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would know, is a product of negotiation between the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and the former leader of the NFP, Sidiq Moidin Koya, in 1984. It was an Act of bipartisanship.

It was established as a quasi-government, meaning the sugar industry had its own mechanisms, independent of government influence. But not anymore, the industry is now micro-managed by the current Government and being run to the ground. This brings me to the use of legacy that Government has harped about throughout the week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no amount of squeaking like a rat and calling me and the NFP anything and everything will change one irrefutable fact of an industry that has slid into life support under this Government. Here, I am referring to the remarks made by honourable Koya on Wednesday. He invoked the names of NFP founders - A.D. Patel and S.M. Koya, saying they would be turning in their graves because I was supporting someone who destroyed the sugar industry.

Let me tell honourable Koya, the late Siddiq Moidin Koya may be turning in his grave because the Minister's wholesome support for a Government that has actually destroyed the sugar industry. This fraudulent deduction of proceeds for bundle insurance is an example of this, and I am talking about the late S.M. Koya's vision of the Sugar Cane Growers Council of which he was the first Chairman, Mr. Speaker, the umbrella democratic body of growers abolished by the same Government that honourable Koya now supports.

Under their leadership, poverty amongst growers and their families have been increased because from a crop size of 3.2 million tonnes and 300 tonnes of sugar in 2006, Mr. Speaker, the industry's last season produced only 1.4 million of tonnes of cane and less than 135,000 tonnes of sugar. Even the Acting Prime Minister knows this and he has commented twice about the meagre incomes of growers in the last seven months, and we agree with it.

Mr. Speaker, if honourable Minister Koya wants justice for cane growers, he should tell his leaders to do the right thing, immediately correct the injustice heaped on growers by refunding those growers who had more than \$52 premium deducted from their proceeds. This would be in conformity to the vision and principles of two of the finest Statesmen, whose names the honourable Minister invoked in vain. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his End of the Week Statement. I now call on the Acting Prime Minister and Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development for his response.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will not get into the areas, nor respond to honourable Professor Prasad other meanderings but I will get to the facts. Under section 52(1) of the Sugar Industry Act 1984 states, and I quote:

“The Council shall have power to raise a special levy from time to time to meet the cost of any capital project of the Council or for any other special purpose.”

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Council exercised its powers bestowed in section 52 of the Sugar industry Act 1984, and made the decision to set up a dedicated platform to raise the total levy of approximately \$600,000 which is annually \$52 per grower or \$1 per week for all active registered growers and the deduction to be made from the growers' share proceeds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Council made a submission for insurance deduction to the Sugar Industry Tribunal, who has the authority to approve and issue certifications under its powers vested in section 53 of the Sugar Industry Act 1984. So the Tribunal actually gave the authority for the Council to make this deduction, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to-date claims of \$1.8 million have been made by the farmers and, indeed, has been paid. Sir, 912 sugarcane farmers or their families have received benefits for death, funeral, fire and personnel accident claims. The insurance cover is:

1. Funeral \$1,000;
2. Death \$3,000;
3. Fire \$3,000; and
4. Personal Accident \$3,000.

A similar bundle insurance is also offered to dairy farmers, copra farmers and one other category of farmers and I think it is also the rice farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad claims that it is a fraud, if he believes it is a fraud and he has got evidence of a fraud, please, report it to the Police or report it to FICAC.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is honourable Professor Prasad's election year, so he has gone about and this is precisely the point I was trying to make the other day, Sir, when you have a lot of farmers - 43 per cent cutting less than 100 tonnes of cane a year, they have meagre earnings, despite the fact that we have guaranteed price of \$85. A lot of them are carrying on because of the lease issue.

Those people are the most vulnerable when unscrupulous politicians like honourable Professor Prasad, go and make all these disquiet amongst them, saying, "You are being exploited. This Government is doing x, y and z, therefore, you are in this position."

I do not want to response to every single line he has mentioned. He, again, has misled Parliament in respect of the payments that were made. He is saying, "Despite the \$85 a tonne", he does not talk about all the other assistance that is also being given to farmers on top of the \$85 a tonne. He does not mention that at all. He does not mention at all that this would lead to stability and confidence to the farmers that at the end of the day, they will get \$85 a tonne.

A lot of the farmers are actually happy about the sugar price increase, in the sense that there is a guarantee and an increased income for them. As we have mentioned yesterday, Sir, with the increase in price with the 70:30 split of the sugarcane price increase, Sir, this frees up more money for Government to be able to then give further assistance. In fact, a number of farmers have said to us, "Can you please bring back or increase the new cane funding that you gave us", which we had cut down a bit last year because of COVID-19. We said, "As soon as the economy picks up, we will be able to do so", as I have also mentioned yesterday, Sir, but he just failed to address that. We would have thought that, that is what he would address. The challenge is because of the global situation we have.

As we have mentioned, 90 per cent of the fertilizers in the world is made by China and some of it by Russia. A bag of fertilizer, Sir, is currently costing about \$44 or \$45 a bag because the farmers only pay \$20 which the Government subsidises, is likely to go up to \$80 to \$90 a bag. He is not mentioning that, he is not talking about that, the impact on the farmers and how Government perhaps, needs to step into that space. We already had discussions with the Chairman of FSC, with the Cane Growers Fund and the Council too, to be able to see what we can do because otherwise, it will affect the next season, it will affect their bottom line. These are the critical fundamental issues affecting farmers, not playing politics like he is doing Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he also goes on about the democratically elected Council. Sir, there used to be 38 councillors. All those councillors used to be elected and we saw the shenanigans that went

on when we actually had the amendments, he knows that. At one time, some members of the Council were invited for an overseas trip and because some were elected under the Labour ticket, NFP ticket, some other ticket, that was what used to happen.

In the sugarcane fields, people were flying different political party flags and just to get elected to a Council. When they went to the Council, because they could not agree as to who should go overseas or represent the Council, all 36 of them went overseas. Guess who funded it? The cane growers funded it themselves because they have money.

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently, the Council in terms of their representation, it is appointed by the Minister and it consists of nine members - one member from Government, Commissioner Western and Commissioner Northern, and six growers - two from each cane producer association. The six growers are members of the Cane Producers Association.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Cane Producer Association members are elected by the growers from their own local district. So, the people who actually come to the Council, come from the Cane Producers Association who, in turn, are actually elected by the cane farmers themselves. He does not tell us that, he is not being upfront about that. He deliberately misleading Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, in the representation, of course, we have the Commissioner Northern and Commissioner Western involved in that. As honourable Seruiratu highlighted, thanks to honourable Nawaikula who had met Mr. Qarikau in those days, we saw vast areas of land leases not being renewed purely for political reasons. Those vast areas of land are still left vacant. In order to be able to instil and engender and get landowners to understand that this is good for the economy if they were to lease it, if they do not want use the land themselves, they have worked very closely with the Commissioner Western and Commissioner Northern to get leases renewed and a lot of farmers are actually grateful for it.

The Government actually pays 4 per cent on top of the 6 per cent UCV to iTLTB directly for it to go the landowners for renewal of cane farmer leases. All of these is being done. This narrative about, "We brought the sugarcane industry to their knees."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are also more internal issues, for example, if you go to most of the cane farms today, the historical basis of cane farms has been that if your father, your great grandfather is a farmer, you continue to be a cane farmer. One or two of your brothers and sisters may go out and become a teacher or professor, et cetera, but they continued with the farming. Nowadays, most of them do not want to do cane farming at all, very few young people want to get into cane farms.

As I had highlighted the other day, we also now have the issue of cane cutters. Many people gladly from Tailevu, et cetera, used to go and cut cane in the Western Division. A lot of people do not want to do that now. A few from the Yasawas' and Mamanucas' used to come and cut cane on Viti Levu. They do not want to do that, the hotel industry is there now, they want to work there.

These are some of the critical logistical issues within the sugarcane industry itself, which he fails to pick up on. He is talking about a \$52 a year, \$1 a week insurance premium Sir. Never before have cane farmers had this type of assistance given to them.

He also mentioned, Sir, that those over the age of 65 years do not get cover. They do get cover, the only cover that those over 65 years do not get is the death cover because the risk becomes higher. If the risk becomes higher, then the premium will go higher. So, in order to mitigate against the risk, Sir, anyone over the age of 65 years, their family gets \$1,000 for funeral, they will get it for fire, they will get it for personal accident, they do not just get it for death. Anyone below the age of 65 years gets all of the four benefits.

Many people, many families and spouses have thanked this Scheme because they have now benefitted from it. Imagine if you are earning about \$3,000 a year, Sir, and your house burns down tomorrow, you actually get, at least, \$3,000. If your husband has been working, it is mainly men who work in the sugarcane fields and if he passes on below the age of 65 years, at least, you will get \$3,000, something to live on and it is only for \$1 a week, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I think this is all the sort of political posturing, trying to create disquiet amongst the farmers. We are doing all we can in respect of assisting the farmers and, of course, we need to look at the holistic picture in terms of the way forward, not just for those who actually want to continue with sugarcane farming, but those who, indeed, want to be able to look for other alternative source of livelihood and get security of tenure for land.

Contact Teaching – Readiness of Schools

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Acting Prime Minister, honourable Members of Cabinet, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable colleagues, *ni sa bula vinaka saka*.

My End of Week Statement is on the state of readiness of our schools for contact teaching with early childhood and primary school students joining their high school counterparts this week in returning to face-to-face classes. We, parents, grandparents, Government, teachers and students know that there are risks but we have to learn how to manage the risks to achieve our common goal.

Our schools shut down in April 2020 as the second wave crashed onto our shores, reopened in January and then closed as Omicron reached our shores, and reopened again this week, despite the worsening wave of the pandemic. According to the honourable Minister for Education, most schools are in compliance with the COVID-19 safety protocols and they have introduced COVID-19 monitors in schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key issue here is monitoring, compliance with safety protocols being observed by teachers and students. I ask the honourable Minister, is the Ministry working closely with the Divisional Education Officers around the country to ensure this is being carried out?

Sir, the concern is that, children are effective spreaders of COVID-19 to vulnerable family members as according to the reports that we received. In addition, those below the age of 12 years are not vaccinated and parents have raised concerns about the schools' ability to enforce social distancing for smaller classrooms or those that are crowded and they lack proper ventilation.

It is because of those reasons, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that some parents refuse to send their children to school. Moreover, the sudden lifting of COVID-19 restrictions on Monday this week came after health authorities stated on Tuesday, 25th January, just a mere two weeks ago that they will not advise the Government to lift COVID-19 restrictions out of fear of a resurgence of the pandemic. This comes amid, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 16 deaths and close to about 350 new cases as reported in the community on that same week. The Permanent Secretary for Health, Dr. James Fong, says the spike in cases was experienced after health restrictions were relaxed in November last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some parents and guardians take comfort in the Minister's reassurance that teachers are trained to handle any child who is not feeling well. This training was provided to teachers by the Ministry of Health.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, students, especially those with vulnerable family members at home will monitor other students. Schools that have good protections in place including masks, teacher vaccinations, some sort of symptoms screening and good ventilation have been able to open successfully with very little disruption.

Despite these assurances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the mindset of the new norm that COVID-19 has brought about, many parents do not trust the authorities and prefer to see for themselves the data and statistics to back up the Minister's reassurances. It is unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that as Government used its authority and various measures to get eye vaccination rates, the lack of information and severe controls on movements and unnecessary curfews for almost two years decreased the people's trust in the Government. However, I acknowledge that the honourable Minister has answered a few questions on the school reopening today, the more that she answers questions and informs parents and all stakeholders, the better. But still, the Government has a long way to go to restore the people's trust, even a new government to be elected this year will have to earn public trust in the government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Attorney-General said that hospitalisations were falling and the number of Fijians getting booster shots was rising every day and that it is time for a new direction, one that is guided by the same principles that our honourable Prime Minister set out and one that considers the lessons we have learnt, and one that recognises that while the pandemic is not over, it has entered a totally new face. As much as we get to enjoy gatherings, sports and lifting of curfews, we have to question our safety and that of our children who are now going back to school.

In that regard Mr. Speaker, Sir, public health and cautionary principle must be the key word rather than rash, bullish decision making by leaders in particular those at the helm of Government. Much talk has been said about manning the school curriculum to suit the children who are returning to school after staying home for about eight months and this, I have to say, as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Education this morning, when she said that the Opposition and teacher unions are creating fear amongst our parents that it is not safe to send their children to school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we are concerned about is the safety of our students and in addition, also the curriculum that has lost its plot. A basic tenet of education like education in the heart, education of the mind, education of the hand and importantly moral education are now not seen in our curriculum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Teachers Association prior to the opening of schools for the ECE and Year 7 have been pushing for the restructure of the syllabus with the Ministry of Education to suit the circumstances that the students are currently faced with especially at this time. It is also critical that those students who are left behind during the lockdown when schools were closed, and simply do not have the gadgets, laptops and tablets to participate in zoom classes, these students have to be considered.

We do not need yet more disenfranchised children and youth. The Ministry must make every effort to help them catch up. Proper valuations must take place so they are given the assistance they need to catch up with the school work. After all, Government always says that they leave no one behind, but it failed to answer how these students were assisted during the pandemic. I do know of heroic teachers hiked mountains, crossed rivers and the seas to get their worksheets to the students.

That is the heart of teachers to reach the students, but this Government must prove it has also the heart to reach those who are left behind during the lockdown.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pandemic not only caused deaths but also tested people's trust in the medical profession and modern vaccines in order to protect themselves from Coronavirus. Civil servants, Sir, who refused to get vaccinated due to their personal beliefs were terminated from their employment based on the Government's No Jab, No Job policy. According to the President of the Fiji College of General Practitioners, Dr. Ram Raju, even thrice boosted patients are dying from COVID-19 and he is calling for the lifting of this policy.

He claimed that no medical research or data at international level had fully proved whether a partially vaccinated or fully vaccinated person had full immunity to any variant over the virus as the research was ongoing, the policy only served to deny Fijians the ability to provide for their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 344 teachers have been terminated because of the Government's No Jab, No Job policy.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, just a Point of Order!

This matter is before the courts, he knows that very well and he is now talking about the merits and the demerits of the case. The matter is currently before the High Court, just to bring it to your attention and he is going about that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, take note of that. It is before the courts.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Talking about separation of powers.

HON. M.R. LEAWERE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of 344 teachers have been terminated because of Government's No jab, No job policy.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.R. LEAWERE- That is the reality.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, I understand where the honourable Attorney-General is coming from. But this is a

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Under what order are you standing up on?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is not a *sub judice* matter, his only highlighting what the media is highlighting, so he can proceed on that. The separation of powers is quite clear, he is just talking what is recorded in the media and we do not see any problem with that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, I disagree with that. Come on, come on, have some merit!

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, it is before the courts and you are reminded that it is before the courts, so do not touch it. If you are touching being the thing and then you reminded that it is before the courts, leave it. Go on to something else.

HON. M.R. LEAWARE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The same will also apply to students who have been double vaccinated although the latest variant appears to be mild for young people. The cautionary principal and the public health must be the primary consideration. My view, Sir, is that the Ministry to tread cautiously despite the loud voices in Cabinet to normalise everything, the health and safety of our students, the teachers and their families must be the paramount consideration in this reopening. I thank you, Mr., Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to make this end of the week statement. To our teachers and students, remain vigilant, enjoy the resumption of school but remain cautious and watchful for each other and the nation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to honourable Leaware's statement, let me first thank the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, my staff at the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, our advisors WHO and UNICEF and the teams who have tirelessly worked towards the reopening of schools at all levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the closure of schools in April 2021, the Ministry of Education together with Heads of Schools, teachers and school management committees have worked persistently towards maintaining continuity of learning and teaching remotely and putting in place COVID safe measures for face to face teaching.

The severity of the Delta variant followed by Omicron posed extreme challenges to all stakeholders and we had to come up with smart solutions. Despite these challenges coupled by negativity and misinformation as you have heard from honourable Leaware and there are many other politicians that we have, critics and teacher unions who were rampant on social media, the Ministry, Head of Schools and teachers remained steadfast in their preparation with innovative learning and teaching methods for the benefit of the students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one thing I just cannot understand regarding the statement made by honourable Leaware, he is saying that many parents do not wish to send their children to school. I have just shared the survey that was carried out by UNICEF where 60 per cent of the parents are willing to send their children to school and also the data we have gathered on the attendance which I shared with House this morning indicates that there are a lot of parents sending their children to school.

We have given option to parents who are not willing to send their children, they can keep the children at home because perhaps they are willing to engage in home schooling, we have given that option to the parents. But what I do not understand, just because of handful of parents and union and the likes of honourable Leaware, these are the people who are trying to create that fear in our parents. I think you should just leave the decision to the parents. I mean, who are you and I to tell what the parents should do? The Government has made it clear that our schools are open, the doors are open, it is up to the parents whether they want to send their children or not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's strategy for vaccine rollout ensured that our preparation for reopening of schools was possible. We achieved the target rate of vaccination last year, which enabled us to make final preparation for reopening of schools. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were happy to note that our decision to reopen school was supported by the majority of parents, guardians and teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what honourable Leawere is talking about is an old story. There is no rampant community transmission at this point in time. The infection and hospitalisation rate is much lower, and the recovery rate is faster as well. The active cases in our community today stands at 253. Community transmission is not rampant. In fact, hospitalisation numbers were falling and the number of Fijians getting booster shot was rising everyday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the data, the honourable Acting Prime Minister announced the lifting of a number of COVID-19 restrictions. We need to get our economy going. Dealing with this crisis is everyone's business but we have some irresponsible people who do not understand their responsibility in making sure that our children go back to school. We are all in it together. The effort will have to come from you, me and every Fijian. My Ministry has made the Free Education Grant available to schools in a timely manner, which helped Heads of Schools and the school management committees to prepare schools based on COVID-Safe School Reopening Guidelines.

What we need to understand is the fact that children are much safer in schools, not only in terms of COVID-19, but from a number of other adversities that plague them. These include, domestic violence, gender-based violence, violence against children, child labour, teenage pregnancies, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two years, teenage pregnancy has increased in number. What is not addressed by the Members like honourable Leawere is, there are other threats that children face when they are away from school. This is widely published with statistics and evidence from WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO. The sad reality is that, we are divided on this critical matter, while the safety and future of our children is at stake. How can we even think about keeping children home endlessly, just because COVID-19 is not going away?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to share with this House an email which I received from a mother, who argued why the school should reopen. Let me read out this email to everyone, and I think the mother understands better than some of these critics:

“On behalf of the parents who are low income earners, especially, garment factory workers, the salesgirls, market vendors and many unclassified jobs, the school has been closed for more than 10 months and we are waiting for the school to open normally. We want the school to open from kindergarten right up to Form Seven. We are uneducated and teaching children at home is very hard. We are unable to teach our children because we have studied up to Class six and eight only.

While some of our schools are taking online classes, it has been very hard to buy data and we have connection issues and when we receive hard copies, as we parents do not know what to teach because we ourselves are uneducated. If the tourism is open, then why are you not opening the schools? Parents are taking children to parks, shopping, and in big events, such as weddings, parties, then why cannot they send their children to school? If parents do not want to send their children to school, then it is their right, but please think about us parents who are low income earners. Also think about the canteen operators in school. They are all at home, bus drivers, carrier drivers, taxis. There must have been language teachers, support staff, handyman who might have been terminated due to school closure. Think about them. Also they are transporting children to and from schools, and some might have been earning a living through selling in school canteen. Madam, we depend on our teachers and respect them and we want them to teach them face to face. Please, understand this. COVID-19 virus is not leaving us, we have to get along with it. Please, think about everyone, especially us.”

Now, this mother understood the importance of sending the child to school and I just do not understand why honourable Leawere is not able to understand the basic logic of sending children to school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me reassure Parliament and the people of Fiji that we have prepared the schools well for reopening. Exams will be completed and the catch-up that is required to be done before the 2022 academic year starts in April has actually begun.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the comments made by honourable Leawere, again, he is stuck on social distancing as I had highlighted in my response earlier on. And we have made it very clear that there has to be a number of measures that needs to be put into place, and we talked about multiple layers of measures that needs to be put into place.

I also found it interesting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that honourable Leawere read only Dr. Raju's article in the *Fiji Times*, and chose not to read Dr. Fong's reply. This is what he does in Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Viam Pillay to deliver his Statement.

Labour Standards in Various Employment Sectors in Fiji

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to deliver my Statement on Labour Standards in Various Employment Sectors in Fiji. Labour standards encompasses the minimum terms and conditions of employment stipulated under the Employment Relations Act 2007, which is enforced by the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 10 of our Constitution under the Bill of Rights guarantees the freedom from slavery, servitude, forced labour and human trafficking. In promoting fair labour standards to various sectors, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1996 provides clear objectives, obligations and functions which cover every workplace in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Section 20 of our Constitution, further stipulates that every person has the right to fair employment, practices including humane treatment and proper working conditions. Workers have the right to form or join a trade union and participate in activities and programmes, while employers have the right to form or join an employers' organisation to participate in the activities and programmes. Trade unions and employers have the right to bargain collectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government has ratified the international Labour Law (ILO), fundamental and governance conventions and technical conventions to ensure we meet proper labour standards through these international ratifications. The labour reforms implemented by our Government has given us the right platform to provide fair labour standards to all workers and employers and ensures a good and fair discussions with the parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the labour inspection process within the two legislations of the Employment Relations Act 2007 and the Health and Safety at Work Act 1996, provides a modern approach in ensuring that labour standards are met in all workplaces through constant inspection and setting up of workplace committees, such as the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Committee and the Labour Management Consultation and Cooperation Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this ensures that workers and employers get together for a roundtable discussion in improving employment conditions, safety issues and productivity at the workplace that will help the workers and employers better their performance and provide quality service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, minimum terms and conditions stipulated within the Employment Relations Act 2007 ensures that every employer in Fiji must provide their workers with minimum terms and conditions, including payment of annual holiday, sick leave, bereavement leave, maternity leave, paternity leave and family care leave.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these conditions are enforced by the Labour Inspectors through robust and targeted labour inspections conducted at the workplace, to ensure fair labour practices and also encourage good faith employment relations between workers and their employers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any breach of the Employment Relations Act 2007 are taken through the process stipulated within the legislations and if employers fail to ratify the breach within the given timeframe, then the matter is taken to the Employment Relations Tribunal for adjudication.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the effective enforcement and compliance of the minimum terms and conditions of employment under the Employment Relations Act 2007 is fundamental in ensuring that workers and employers understand their responsibility in dealing with employment matters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the various industries covered through the enforcement of the labour standards are:

1. Security services;
2. Building and civil;
3. Electrical engineers trades;
4. Wholesale and retail trades;
5. Road transport;
6. Hotel and catering trades;
7. Manufacturing industry;
8. Sawmilling and logging industry;
9. Garment industry
10. Mining and quarrying;
11. Printing trades; and
12. National minimum wages

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Health and Safety as Work Act 1996, the Occupational Health and Safety Inspectors promote and maintain a working environment which is healthy and safe to both, workers and employers, and directly contributes to the improved productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir through a robust complaint investigation process, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, through its labour standards services, ensures that workers whose complaints are lodged with the Ministry are investigated and workers are paid their rightful dues accordingly through compliance investigation process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the compliance mechanism in dealing with matters from the sectoral wages sector is important, and I note that the Labour Standard Services of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations is working towards a smarter and better compliance and enforcement plans, in particular for the security industries, to ensure issues related are dealt with accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the measures put in by this Government through reform legislations has provided a much needed boost in the employment relations arena, in ensuring that the labour standards across the industries in Fiji are benchmark to international standards and best practices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a robust labour standard process will ensure that we secure social justice for all Fijians, and also provide a vibrant labour market, the best and level playing field for the employers and the workers to enter into negotiations, and continue to bargain in good faith for the best possible outcomes in line with the spirit of legislations in all employment relations conditions. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Minister for Employment, Productivity, Industrial Relations, Youth and Sports for his response.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the statement that has been made by honourable Viam Pillay in regards to the labour standards in various employment sectors in Fiji. Labour standards are key to employment growth, productivity and overall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, returns to the economy and thus, the people of Fiji.

It is important to note Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the labour standard aims for equality among all sectors of the workforce in relation to the workplace and the rights, entitlements, and recourse to just practice. These are key elements in ensuring a level playing field to all the stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the labour standard practice in Fiji have very much improved after the labour reform with the introduction of the Employment Relations Act 2007 with full implementation on 2nd April, 2008, introduced under the Bainimarama-led Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the international forefront, the Fijian Government has ratified 39 International Labour Organisation Conventions. These ratifications has ensured that we are in par with our international obligations in meeting fair labour standards in Fiji, as we continue to advocate for better employment relations for all workers in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our effort to achieve fair labour standards, Fiji became the second country in the world on 25th June, 2020 and the first in the Asia Pacific to ratify the ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the Workplace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Convention is a powerful statement of human rights and one that will underpin all its work towards equality in all workplaces with a harmonious and productive environment, free of violence and harassment. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1996 also provides clear objectives, obligations and functions which covers every workplace with the aim to have a safe, secure and healthy workplace for everyone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the completion of the Ministry's labour reform programme, we have taken the lead in ensuring that baselines are set for social protection and labour standards are accorded to all our workers and this fits well with our social and economic needs. In addition, it has also promoted good faith employment relations and ensure that best business and management practice are implemented in workplaces practice to improve the productivity in a sustainable manner. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been possible through the participation and goodwill of stakeholders with the nation and its progress at heart.

However, the Ministry and the other stakeholders continue to work on issues in good faith and with socio-economic interest of workers, employers, industries and Fiji as a whole at the forefront. Those who do not front up and stay away from these important consultations and processes are doing a disservice to their positions and the workers they claim to serve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the completion of the reforms of the employment relation laws and labour standards procedures in various sectors in Fiji has led to a significant improvement in employment

relations and labour management discussions. This is evident in all areas of employment including discussion on productivity through the labour management consultation and co-operation framework. Having this in place is an important step in having the baseline security for all stakeholders so they can concentrate on productivity and growing their respective industries. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the labour standards and employment relations machinery in Fiji works in line with our policies and programmes within the Employment Relations Act 2007.

In upholding the central principles of the Fijian Constitution to fairness and justice for all, this has resulted in improved employment relations with a fair and just work environment for all workers and employers that assist in job creation and economic growth. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new employment laws has seen a shift in the way we manage and resolve our conflicts in workplaces. This is through the enforcement of labour standards and ensuring that the employers meet the minimum terms and conditions of employment to be met by the employees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all in all, the laws of labour standard were gradually modified on a piecemeal basis. The Government like those under Mr. Rabuka, Mr .Chaudhary and even Mr. Qarase failed to meet the challenges of the labour market.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- It remained a mine field to be used for political gains. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was through this Government and the determination it had under the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister that the labour market, labour laws were reformed in Fiji. Let there be no mistake, honourable Gavoka or mis-information about this. The employment sector reform had been only possible with the vision and determination of this FijiFirst Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON.P.K.BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the day before yesterday the honourable Acting Prime Minister and honourable Minister Koya talked about *Business Process Outsourcing* (BPO). Mr. Speaker, Sir, the expansion at the BPO sector will also further enhance our labour standards. The employment legislation promotes good faith employment relation and productivity in the workplaces and social justice to all Fijians and encourages employers to enter into good faith discussions for the betterment of employer and its workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to share some of the operational insight into the operation of the Labour Standard Services at the Ministry. The Labour Standard Services ensures that all employment terms and conditions are met by workers and employers through a proactive labour inspection process which covers employers from the 10 minimum wage sectors and the national minimum wage sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Labour Standard Services of the Ministry is also responsible for the promotion of social justice in workplace through the provision of awareness, training and advisory service to employers and workers on the provision of the Employment Relations Act 2007. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the last financial year, 1st August, 2020 to 31st July, 2021 through the proactive labour inspections and investigations of labour complaints, the Labour Standard Services of the Ministry has conducted 2,785 labour inspections and has resolved 1,394 labour complaints.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through these proactive measures, the Ministry has recovered a total sum of \$2.76 million in the last financial year which was then paid out to the workers. This payment of \$2.76 million was possible through the enforcement and compliance of the Employment Relations Act 2007 and the Wages Regulation and National Minimum Wage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also highlight some of the issues in relation to the labour complaints received by the Labour Standard Services at the Ministry. The highest number of complaints received by our Ministry in the last financial year is from the security industry. These complaints are mostly for non-payment of wages, annual holiday, sick leave and non-payment of minimum rate per hour of work under the Wages Security Services (Amendment) Regulation 2017. While this does not reflect the industry at large, Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed there are many security companies in compliance but these bad eggs give a rotten image to this sector in general.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through proactive labour inspection, our Ministry has taken 11 security companies to the Employment Relations Tribunal for breaches of the Employment Relations Act 2007. These matters are currently before the Tribunal where we are claiming over \$3 million as entitlements to almost 4,800 workers. The Ministry will continue to work for the benefit of all stakeholders and as is evident from this matter, we ensure that workers are always given their due and bad players in the industry are made to comply and pay their dues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to advocate and promote social justice and good faith employment relation to all workers and employers in Fiji. We have always asked that workers or employers visit the nearest Ministry of Employment office should they need any advice or assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please give me five minutes. I am coming to a very important area. Sir, I would like to also update this august House following the recent announcement by the Australian Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- You people are shouting, every break you people come to me, “Please two people from my province.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Australian Government to restructure the two labour mobility programmes namely the Seasonal Work Programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) under a single consolidated Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Don’t come next time to me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Fiji- Australia *Vuvale* Partnership, Fiji joined the PLS on 5th April, 2019 following the signing of the MOU in Canberra. The PLS enables low and semi-skilled Fijians and other Pacific Island workers to work for up to three years in the agriculture, forestry, meat works, fishing and aged-care industries. At the closure of the borders in April 2021, following the second wave of the pandemic, a total of 178 Fijians continued working in Australia under the Seasonal Work Programme while 847 Fijians were deployed under the PLS on three years contracts since Fiji’s participation in this Scheme in 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first stage of the reforms to Australia’s Labour Mobility Programme, the seasonal work programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme was announced through a joint

statement by the Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Minister for Employment, Workforce, Skills and Small and Family Business together with the Minister for International Development and Pacific on 14th September, 2021.

The initial reform was the alignment of the two Australian Labour Mobility Programmes in response to public consultation on the programme on 14th September, 2021. The Fijian Government also contributed to this consultation with the submission to the Australian Government. The reforms announced in November 2021 are expected to be effective from 4th April, 2022 where the existing Pacific Labour Mobility Programme will be replaced by a new single Pacific Australian Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme. The PALM is expected to streamline the administration and reduce duplication of work with a lot of benefits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the PALM is expected to deliver new flexibilities including certain advantage to our country. May I also say that this programme is generating a lot of public interest. I would like to acknowledge the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister in making the bold decision of No Jab, No Job almost a year ago, not only to safeguard our citizens but also to ensure that we overcome the pandemic quickly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the pandemic starting to affect our other Pacific Island countries that are also part of this Labour Mobility Programme resulting in some of the borders closing, new employers are now turning to Fiji to engage our Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been briefed by my team that we are expecting over 1,000 workers to be departing our shores for Australia within the next three months. These opportunities will not only benefit these workers, their families and communities, but also our economic recovery too.

Clean and Safe Drinking Water for Fijians

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Acting Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Minister and honourable Members of Parliament. Sir, water is a very precious commodity and a basic need of life. Although mostly unpriced, it is the most valuable limited resource in the world. The survival of human life is dependent on water.

According to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene UNICEF Report in 2021, 2.2 billion people still lack access to clean and safe drinking water. More than half of the global population does not have access to safe sanitation, 3 billion people do not have access to hand washing facilities and still 673 million people practise open defecation.

The Constitution provides every Fijian with socio-economic and environmental rights. The realisation of these rights is critical for inclusive and sustainable development. These empowers every Fijian through the provision of essential social service and other public goods. Access to water is the top priority for the Fijian Government. Section 36 of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji guarantees the right of every person to clean and safe water in adequate quantities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, water is and will continue to be the critical resource for Fijians more than ever. In prioritising the critical resource, the Fijian Government has been investing in millions in every financial year to Water Authority of Fiji's capital project to help achieve its goal of 24/7 delivery of water to all Fijians and expand its sewerage network.

In the year 2010, only 126,794 households in Fiji were connected to Water Authority Reticulation System and by December 2021 the number have risen to 140,773 households. The Namau Water Project in Tailevu was commissioned in June 2020. The project has a five mega litre

reservoir, 21 kilometres of new pipelines and accompanying electrical infrastructure costing \$20 million benefitting 12 villages, 6 settlements, 7 schools and 2 farming communities in Waidalice and Vulagi. The plant has saved \$50,000 annually in water carting costs to affected villages that were not connected to the water system before, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Waste Water Extension Project completed around Fiji in the past four years had benefited many household with new water and waste water connections. This project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, includes the Kaba Peninsula Water Supply Project includes laying of 16.8 kilometres of new pipeline costing \$4.3 million and benefiting five villages with over 1,960 population. The village of Waicoka, Vatani and Dromuna since their establishment have taken dip and drank from the same river for decades but in 2020 was the first time ever for the villages to receive clean drinking water. The Denaru Extension Project and Denaru Bypass in Nadi costing \$0.48 million benefiting the Denarau tourist spots and over 3,100 population.

The Kawakawavesi to Colovi new pipe extension in Seaqaqa, Vanua Levu costing \$212,897 benefiting over 230 Fijians. The Black Rock Sewer rising main project in support with the Black Rock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp costing \$1.2 million is nearing completion. This 2.2 kilometre sewer project will provide sanitation service to the Black Rock site and has the provision for sewer extension for other surrounding communities.

Moreover, the hydro link improvement main projects in the past four years has enhanced water service to benefit a population of 65,279 people from 50 projects in all our urban areas costing around \$24.89 million. The projects include main upgrade in Suva's CBD areas like Waimanu Road, Toorak area and McGregor Road. The Western upgrade on Vio Island, Sonaisali Island and Vuda Back Road while the Northern saw Benau to Volanau main and Naselevu head works/upgrades to name a few.

Other key water improvement projects include the Lal Singh Road to Rewa Bridge new pipelines in Nausori costing \$3.2 million which will benefit the greater Suva/Nausori corridor water supply scheme. This project is part of the preparation works anticipating the new Rewa River Water supply scheme.

The Nakaibula Steel Tank installation in Lautoka costing \$1.5 million was to stabilise and improve hydraulic capacity to meet customer demands living within the peripheries of Lautoka City, eliminating intermittent supply areas. The recommissioning of the DMO Reservoir in Saweni, Lautoka in July 2020 around 800 Fijians living in the elevated parts of Balawa and Saweni Beach Road in Lautoka now have consistent water supply after the recommissioning of the DMO reservoir at a cost of around \$22,447.

The Tauvegavega one mega litre steel tank installation in Ba costing \$1.4 million was to stabilise and improve hydraulic capacity to meet the customer demands living within these intermittent supply areas benefiting over 2,500 population.

Sir, WAF continues to invest in rural water scheme to see that families have access to water. From 2016 to 2020 WAF has carried out 344 rural water projects which have benefitted 17,929 households. Villages who used to fetch water from creeks and rivers now can access water at their homes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WAF provides 23,000 litres of free water to its customers who have a household income of \$30,000 or less under this scheme. A total of 35,201 applications were received and 34,385 were approved in 2021. This programme has benefited a population of approximately

171,925. The total annual water supplied under this scheme is valued at approximately \$484,003 and based on 23 units at \$0.15 cents per quarterly bill per household.

To assist every Fiji the Government of Fiji announced in April 2020 during the first wave of COVID-19 the disconnection of meters to seize and customers be given time to pay their bills. Sir, WAF seized disconnection from April 2020, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Also when customers faced difficulty in paying their accounts, they were advised to visit the nearest WAF office and make arrangements to clear their bills by 31st December, 2021.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reiterate the importance of using water wisely during this challenging times we are going through with the current third wave of COVID-19 and the impacts of climate change that is affecting our water level production and damages to our water infrastructure. Both dry and rainy weather affects the water supply. During drought, it becomes difficult to fill the reservoir while in rainy season a lot of pipes get washed away which supplies water from the main source to the treatment plant. This is affecting Water Authority of Fiji's service delivery and every Fijian has the responsibility to conserve water and use it wisely. Every water drop is precious, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Fijians should adhere to Water Authority of Fiji's advisories on saving and storing water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current infrastructure and assets were laid a couple of decades ago. When it was done, it was not anticipated that there would be such a huge rural to urban drift. A few decades ago from Lami to Nausori, the population was below 100,000 and today, it sits above 300,000. With such a drift, Water Authority of Fiji's infrastructure operates under pressure and its service is greatly affected to supply citizens with continuous 24/7 drinking water. While water is essential, urban drift and ageing infrastructure becomes the biggest hindrance. Regardless of all these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all should appreciate the work carried out by Water Authority of Fiji. A lot of reforms have taken place and lot needs to be done. Therefore, I would like to welcome the new CEO of Water Authority of Fiji and we anticipate that the water situation will further improve in densely populated areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government will continue to invest millions to build a climate resilient water and waste water infrastructure and ensure we improve access to clean drinking water and sanitation to better the lives of all Fijians.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Acting Prime Minister, honourable Leader of Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, getting enough water of the right quality has been one of the most important issues in all of human history. Our target in Fiji is to make sure that all our people have access to clean and safe water in urban areas by 2021, that was the target in the National Development Plan and also in rural areas by the year 2030. We are just about hitting that first target.

Getting water to Fijians is done by Water Authority of Fiji which provides surface and ground water by the rural and maritime development, as you heard yesterday from the honourable Minister, by NGOs, by communities working on their own and also by the Department of Mineral Resources which just does ground water. Last December, I commissioned the Department's ground water bore holes in Yaro Village on Kia Island in Macuata, Sese Village in Saqani Cakaudrove, Navukebuli Village in Namuka Macuata, Naqumu and Nasea Villages in Macuata, Volivoli Primary School in Saqani and Qumusea Primary School in Macuata. These are just an indication of some of the projects that are done by the Department, but WAF is the major player.

One great challenge it has is old infrastructure. Some of them are now more than 50 years old and these old infrastructures struggle and needs upgrading, and the upgrading work is being done

progressively. But when we do upgrade to make improvements on some parts of the network, we put a large strain on the older assets that are in the same network which cannot handle the water pressure. This leads to pipe breaks and critical failure which affects the delivery of services, leading again to increase in repairs and maintenance cost. This old infrastructure is a major cause of the 48 per cent of non-revenue water recorded in the third quarter of 2021. We have also now 83 areas that have intermittent supply of water affecting slightly over 37,000 Fijians connected to Water Authority of Fiji's network.

Over the past few months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been water disruptions in the Central Division. I get complaints from Rewa, Tailevu, Naitasiti, from places such as Naila, Waikete, Cautata, Lakena, Ovea, Vuci South, Burebasaga, Nakaile, Visama, Tacirua, Sakoca and so forth. The question is, what is causing these sorts of issues?

Well first of all, over the past decades, as the honourable Maharaj has said, there has been more and more people moving into the Korovou to Lami corridor. It is very heavily densely populated now. The population has shot up and the demand for water has also sky rocketed. The demand is outstripping supply in this area.

The second major reason, we have had so much rain which causes flooding and high turbidity of very muddy water and all that dirt in the raw water leads to pump breakdowns and dam blockages. This reduces the amount of water going into our treatment plants and it takes time then to get the water treated to an acceptable quality.

Third, the water sources are places that we source water in the Nausori to Lami area need to be pumped up to where it is needed because the rivers at a lower elevation, they always need to be pumped up. When we have no power, we cannot pump. So, we cannot move the water through the pipes to the reservoirs where it then flows to customers. When there is no power, the reservoirs empty out. It then takes time for the water to start flowing again, to fill the reservoir and all the pipes along the reticulation network. It takes time for water pressures across the whole system to normalise. And all these needs to reduce production to no supply or intermittent supply which leads of course to frustration. The good thing is that WAF is addressing all these issues progressively.

First, you may have now heard that WAF is currently in the middle of constructing a new \$266 million Water Treatment Plant in Viria, Naitasiri that will initially provide an additional 40 million litres per day to the greater Suva and Nausori areas. This should be ready by mid-2023 and it will benefit over 300,000 people.

Second, with the new 40 million litres of treated water coming online in the future, some may ask where we are going to store this large volume of water. While Viria is being constructed, WAF is already putting in place the new reservoirs in the Central Division to increase clean treated water storage capacity. This includes a three mega litre or three million litre reservoir in Tacirua East new subdivision. A two mega litre reservoir in Toorak and two five mega litre reservoirs in Raralevu which I expect to be commissioned by the end this year and it will service the Tailevu South and the Rewa Delta areas.

Third, to mitigate the power outage problem. Sir, WAF hires backup gensets for the critical water and wash water pump stations to ensure that water continues to flow where it is needed. Sir, WAF is progressively buying and installing tailor-made standby gensets for all its water and waste water pump stations in all critical sites within the region.

Fourth, if necessary, WAF is continuing to do water carting with priority given to filling community tanks. There is a number that customers can call to address this issue. On top of all these,

we have the impact of natural disasters. Natural disasters have a huge impact. Sir, TD03F and *TC Cody* this year cost \$1.65 million worth of damages to WAF's infrastructure. So, that \$1.65 million takes money out of existing projects in order to fix the damage that is being done by these natural disasters.

How are these things being handled systematically? Major investments. Sir, WAF is investing in major projects around the country. Apart from the new Rewa River Water Supply or the Viria Project, Water Package Treatment Plants in Namau that is now operational, Savusavu about to go online, Viria coming on line as I have mentioned before and Nabouwalu where the earthworks have been done, civil works have been done and the land is secured, the package plant is ready and work is about to commence there. Nagado, Vunidawa, Deuba and Waiwai are being constructed to fill in the reticulation gaps in these regions. New reservoirs are being constructed in the Western and Central Regions to ease the intermittent water supply issues namely Toorak, Raralevu, Tacirua East, Lautoka Hospital and Nadi Hospital.

Back Up Gensets - \$8.75 million has been invested to buy new tailor-made backup generators from critical sites across all three regions. These critical sites rely on EFL power supply so the backup gensets will ensure that water will still flow to reservoirs even if EFL has power blackouts.

Sir, WAF is upgrading treatment plants at PALM stations switchboards with a power factor correction for various stations to correct the higher power usage and the cost that goes with it when power surges. When power fails, WAF has to foot the bill for water cutting and waste water bailing. Once again, this money has to be taken out of other projects. This is extra expense. The new gensets and electrical update will get rid of this additional operational cost.

Automation of major sites - WAF is now looking to implement a five-year automation programme that automates key valves to maintain service delivery levels. Automates reservoir flow metres and valves and lastly to automate treatment plants. This will be piloted in the Suva-Nausori system and will result in annual cost savings of around \$670,000. It will also free up manpower and machinery to address other important issues. This pilot automation programme will benefit over 300,000 people in the greater Suva area, the area that has been continuously facing water disruptions.

Sir, WAF is now introducing a Central Event Management Solution, this will assist in the reduction of leakage, service interruption and will improve WAF's network efficiency. Through this system, leakages will be identified quickly and resolved. The project will target the Suva-Nausori Water Supply network and the pilot project for the first year will begin in the Wainibuku Zone 1 area.

Implementation of 10 to 20-Year Master Plan - Master plans have been drawn out for all of our major urban areas. These plans are roadmaps for future investment in each of these areas. The master plans are then used by WAF to make yearly PSIP request to Government.

Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the problems that we have is unpaid bills. It costs \$1.01 to produce one unit of water, one unit of water is equivalent to 1,000 litres of water (\$1.01 to produce 1 unit). Residential customers in Fiji are charged \$0.15 per unit for the first 50 units, so it costs \$1.01, they get charged \$0.15 cents and then they are charged \$0.43 cents for the next 51 units to 100 units and \$0.83 cents for usage above that. Commercial customers pay \$1.06 per unit. Now, WAF has had major issues getting people to pay their water bills despite constant reminders and awareness. The total unpaid bills as of 31st January, 2022 is \$32 million.

Residential customers owe \$30.13 million, commercial customers owe \$830,000 and institutional ones owe \$390,000. WAF is now addressing this much more vigorously with more awareness on social media, reminders sent through emails and SMS directly to the account holder.

Community awareness is being carried out and payment arrangements for customers with financial difficulties are assessed and approved on a case by case basis.

Sir, WAF has resumed disconnection since October 2021 in an effort to collect unpaid bills. WAF has also carried out arrears waiver for customers who are social welfare recipients or FNPF pensioners and a total of more than a thousand customers who owed \$1.8 million were assisted by this waiver.

More Fijian people now have access to clean water and proper sanitation than a decade ago and almost 100 per cent of all Fijians living in urban areas now have access to treated water in 2021 compared to around 5 per cent prior to the year 2010.

Benchmarking of our Service - Fiji is one of the few countries that offer free water allowances, 250 litres of water per household connection per day for households with a combined household income of less than \$30,000. Fiji tap water is safe to drink and I drink it all the time. Sir, WAF's national water quality laboratory was awarded the ISO1725 Accreditation so we test our water at the level on par with international best practice. We still have some way to go to deliver especially in our rural and maritime areas, where we still have mainly untreated water but we have national plans in place which set our target, a vibrant WAF complimented by Mineral Resources Department and Rural and Maritime Development and a network of other NGOs.

We have put in place the Rural Water and Sanitation Policy with practical guidelines for rural water supply management to ensure quality in rural areas. All these moves us closer to achieving our 2030 target of 100 per cent access to clean water in rural and maritime areas by 2030.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were a number of water related issues that were brought up by Members of the Opposition, I would like to address them very quickly so that I can give them some relief on the issues that they brought to the House.

The honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa had raised issues on the Rewa water issue in villages including Vutia, Nukui and Tavuya. I would just like to say that in March 2021 WAF undertook extensive works in the Rewa Delta which included the replacement of old water infrastructure in the area. The result of these works allowed sufficient water pressure at Naililili to re-activate the Lomanikoro header tank that was not in service for many years.

In addition, the old water pipeline that used to supply the Rewa Delta has been replaced with a new pipeline. She also mentioned the issue of delays in sending water bills to customers leading to disconnections. For the benefit of the House, most of these delays are possibly caused by unpaid postal boxes and invalid postal addresses. Sir, WAF has been receiving around 1,000 plus unclaimed water bills every month from the post office. To address this, WAF has now introduced an electronic bill delivery system. Another reason that we have had is accumulated bill arrears during the COVID-19 period. With the COVID-19 situation, the no disconnection period of over 18 months had resulted in many customers not paying their water bills every quarter when they fall due.

To address this, as I said, WAF is looking at electronic bill registration drive. The honourable Gavoka had raised the issue about the trench in Silana. The WAF people had visited that place. They have only managed to find, a new connection was provided to one of the residents in another village called Naevuevu Village. Sir, WAF has checked this with the *turaga ni koro* and they have been looking at things that they need to do to top up the road crossing with proper backfill materials and arrange for the contractor to carry out permanent reinstatement works.

Honourable Anare Jale had talked about Narocivo and Namalata not getting water. I would just like to state here for the benefit of the House that Namalata and Narocivo Borehole Scheme was implemented by the MRD and is all currently operational and connected directly to the existing WAF main. The Namalata and Narocivo villages are yet to formally register their water committee with the Department of Water and Sewerage and once they do this, the assets will be given over to them so that the water committee looks after that particular issue.

Honourable Mitieli Bulanauca talked about the need to review the WAF Act. The WAF Act came into place in 2010 and the board will review it when it is necessary to do so.

Honourable Salote Radrodro raised the issue of Nabouwalu. When it rains, there is problems in the water there. The great thing is, the package plant is ready. It is here. The land has been secured and very soon WAF will be looking at putting their package plant in place to deal with that issue once and for all. She has also mentioned the issue of Yacata Island, water supply issues with a solar pump. That particular borehole was drilled by the MRD but the reticulation, the distribution system and the solar pump was done by an NGO, so we will need to be able to look at it together. I just would like to add that it was not done by MRD and WAF but we will still, in the interest of looking after all of our people, we will look at what we can do about that issue.

Honourable Ratu Tevita Navurelevu talked about water supply to rural and maritime schools and I will mention here that from the period of 2010 to 2021, WAF has constructed rural water schemes to 44 schools in rural and maritime areas. As I added recently, the MRD also does boreholes for these schools where this is necessary. I think those are the comments that I have.

In closing, I want to thank the teams at WAF who often work under severe pressure, long hours and difficult conditions. I want to thank all of them, to the people right at the top, to the people on the ground because I have walked the lines where they have worked and I have seen what they go through. Also the people at MRD who work on groundwater, the NGOs who assist rural communities and the staff at the Rural and Maritime Development. My appreciation also to the people at the Department of Water and Sewerage at the Ministry of Infrastructure. This Government will keep on moving to making sure that we can supply clean and safe water to all of the people of this country as soon as possible. All of these people are working together to bring clean and safe water to all Fijians.

ADJOURNMENT

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I give the floor to the Leader of the House, I have been asked if he could update Parliament on a response that he made on Monday so that Parliament is aware. You have the floor, Sir.

Update on Fiji's Humanitarian Work in Tonga

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for the opportunity. Just for the information of your good self, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and this august House, on Monday I responded to the question on the humanitarian work to Tonga and I did state that our troops are still in Australia, but I am happy to report again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have had approval from the Kingdom of Tonga.

Sir, 30 of our troops have left Amberley Air Base in Brisbane on Wednesday 10th and they are currently in Tonga. Their main responsibility are the islands of Ata'a and Mango Island just off Tongatapu and for the remaining 18, they will be air lifted again from Enoggera Camp where they are in now, back to Sydney and then they will sail when *HMAS Canberra* sets sail again for Tonga

to replace the *HMAS Adelaide* that is already in place. The main body, the 32 that have left, they are currently in *HMAS Adelaide*. That is the update, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 7th March, 2022 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I just want to thank you all for your participation and cooperation, forbearance and contributions during the Parliamentary proceedings in the course of this sitting week.

I now declare Parliament adjourn *sine die* until Monday, 7th March, 2022 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.47 p.m.