

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 8TH APRIL, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 8TH APRIL, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.33 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 and Foreign Affairs; the honourable Ratu N.T. Lalabalavu; the honourable N. Nawaikula; the honourable Professor B.C. Prasad; the honourable Lt. Col. P. Tikoduadua and honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 7th April, 2022 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament. I also welcome those joining us in the public gallery and those watching the live broadcasts of the proceedings. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament. For those of you in the public gallery, you are most welcome and I trust that you will enjoy your time in Parliament today.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Rural Electrification Programme
(Question No. 89/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the current status of the Rural Electrification Programme implemented by Energy Fiji Limited and funded through an annual Budget allocation?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in response to the question that has been delivered by the honourable Filipe Tuisawau. By way of background, the Government Rural Electrification Programme has been delivered by two implementing agencies. The first is Energy Fiji Limited which is responsible for the construction and distribution of powerlines and the

Department of Energy which has been managing the house wiring. As has been expressed earlier this week by the honourable Minister for Economy that for the 2021 Budget that approach has changed and now both the house-wiring and the powerline construction are to be handled by EFL for the current Budget going forth into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of coverage about 80 percent of Fijians are connected to EFL Grid Extension Programmes in the four islands in which EFL operates. These are Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, Taveuni and Ovalau. The rest of Fiji and their connection to power has been through rural government stations in some parts of Fiji through solar-home systems, solar hybrid systems (where you have a small solo farms) and also a diesel generator that you may use when there is not enough sunshine to power the batteries which then provides power to that area. As I had mentioned yesterday, places like Tukavesi have systems like that and also the diesel systems that we have in a lot of our villages which we are hoping to phase out over time as part of our approach to 100 percent renewable energy for the whole of Fiji.

For the Grid Extension Programme which EFL has been managing since 2014, Government has commissioned around 491 Rural Electrification Schemes, benefiting around 12,648 households, with a total value of \$85.1 million. This consists of around 123 schemes in the Central Division, with a total cost of \$16.8 million, 250 schemes in the Western Division amounting to \$41.6 million and 118 schemes in the Northern Division with a total value of \$26.6 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of March 2022, there are 32 pending schemes. From the 2017- 2018 and 2018-2019 financial year of a total of \$18.85 million which are under construction and are expected to be completed by mid-2023. Once completed, 2,754 households, approximately 10,000 Fijians will benefit from the project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude Government is also funding the house wiring component to connect all the houses to the grid and on to the 2,754 households, 1,258 house wirings are under construction and the rest, 1,496 house wiring materials are under the procurement process.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a case with Namarai, Ra where the power lines are in place and live but it has been one year and they are not connected to their homes. Can the honourable Minister explain why you have cases such as this?

HON. J. USAMATE.- In Namarai, Ra, the grid extension has been up, the house wiring, sometimes there are difficulties with making sure that these things happen at the same time. So the house wiring has to be done, it has to be commissioned and I know now that Namarai, Ra, and going all the way up to Naocobau. The grids are there but now we are in the process of connecting all the houses. I think we have done from Silana (not sure whether it is Silana or Nasinu) and all the way to Naocobau. As I speak today, I was there I think two weeks ago with the company that has been appointed to make sure that people get connected onto the grid, including the Government station that we have in Namarai, Ra.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of rural electrification in general, the allocation of budget, it is quite alarming to note that allocation generally in Government has been underspent hovering around \$500 million annually which is almost a quarter of annual expenditure. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services on average under which rural electrification comes under underutilises around \$48 million annually.

MR. SPEAKER.- What is your question?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- So this underutilisation is also in the rural and maritime ministry. What is being done to address this underutilisation of funds in the Ministry?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the honourable Minister for Economy had read out how the budget has been utilised. Sometimes we have budget certain amounts and we commission more projects, other times we commission certain amount and sometimes when we have massive things like *TC Winston*, sometimes funds have to be taken out of projects that were budgeted to address things that we need to address immediately.

When we had the devastation by *TC Winston*, we had to make sure that we pulled funds out of existing projects because there is an urgent need there and then. A budget is a plan. It is built in a context of your understanding of the situation you have at the time in which you build that budget. But you cannot always foresee what is about to happen. Is there going to be tropic cyclone, is there going to be COVID-19, for instance, in which the construction teams cannot move to the areas where they are supposed to put up the grid lines and do the house wiring. You cannot do it. So in those cases the budget is not fully utilised.

A budget is a plan with all intents and purposes to make sure that it is delivered on time and that is what happens in this situation. But one thing that I can say, Government is firm in its commitment, a 100 percent access to electricity, the plan is there, we hope to be able to achieve it on time but if situations change, it will change, funds will be moved around to where they are needed, but eventually we will get to that destination of a 100 percent access to power to all households in Fiji.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a supplementary question. For subcontractors who are given contracts for Rural Electrification Programmes, how does the Ministry ensure that they follow through with the standards allowed by the Ministry?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before a contract is awarded, the contractor has to show that it has met all the standards. For grid construction, obviously, EFL also has its standards. At the same time, when the house wiring is done, our own officers also inspect, but now that will all be done by EFL. They will check to make sure that the contractors that are awarded these tenders, they meet standards upfront and as the work commences, they will also check to make sure that the standards are met, whether it is for the construction of the power lines or house wiring.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to ask a supplementary question to the honourable Minister. With regard to villages all around Fiji, and this is especially for Kadavu, those who are using generators, we have requested for solar power through the Rural Electrification Programme. The Government has put a hold on that because they are using generators. What is your policy or plans for the future? Are you going to change those generators into solar systems as soon as?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. As I said, we have a number of targets in Government, 100 percent access to energy. So that means that if you have a diesel generator at the moment, and we want to put solar home systems, we will first put it in a place where there is no electricity, because you already have your diesel power. First put it in that place that has no electricity. But, eventually, over time, because we have a target of 100 percent renewable energy, we hope to remove all those diesel engines and replace it with something that uses renewable energy. In some cases it will be a hybrid situation, as we have in the village of Namara, Sanima in Kadavu and also in Tukavesi. Where you have a solar farm and at the same time you have a small generator on the side. When the sun is not shining, their generator powers up the batteries. But, eventually over time, we want to continually move towards a 100 percent renewable

energy. In some places in Fiji, we have small Pico hydros. We have a hydro system that used to be there in Buca, we are hoping to get that redone, and another one on the other side of Vanua Levu towards Natewa. But, the focus at the moment, move towards 100 percent renewable energy. If you already have a diesel system, we will try to keep that going, but eventually, it needs to be replaced by something that uses renewable energy.

Coastal Protection Works
(Question No. 90/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the coastal protection works currently undertaken and the respective locations?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for asking me that question. Sea level rise is a major consequence of climate change. The global sea level rise is due to a combination of thermal expansion of the oceans and increase in the run off from the mountains of continental glaciers.

The rate of global mean sea level has slightly accelerated during the last century, and projections predict the sea level will be 0.4 metres to 0.8 metres higher at the end of this century around the Pacific Islands. Regional variations in sea level also exist and are due to large scale current of climate features. In addition, the sea level experienced in the Pacific Islands can also be affected by the vertical land movement that can either increase or decrease the effects of rise in the global mean sea level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coastal inundation are caused by a combination of high waves, tides, storm surge and ocean currents while future changes in the number and severity of higher waves and storms are difficult to access. The rise in the global mean sea level will cause an increase in the frequency and severity of inundation in coastal areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji will continue to experience a positive rate of sea level rise. This sea level rise will cause a significant increase in frequency and severity of coastal flooding in the near future. Our Government has stated that it will be difficult to protect those villages which are lying below the sea level in the longer run so these villages will eventually have to be moved to a higher ground.

Now, the Ministry of Waterways is committed to protecting those areas which we can through establishment of construction of seawalls and we have got allocations under the Coastal Protection Programme to protect these communities, villagers and infrastructure by construction of seawalls around these areas. Under this programme we have implemented both a mixture of nature-based seawall and also concretes seawalls.

Our nature-based seawalls which is now internationally renowned and we are also getting a lot of enquiries on the exact model. We have got a paper done and uploaded on our home page on the exact dimensions of the nature of the seawall, very unique, the first of its kind where we have three layers of defence in this nature- based seawall. The first layer of defence is where we plant mangroves in the front and then we have got boulders stacked up in the second layer of defence and the fourth layer of defence is a play wall on which we plant vetiver. So, a very successfully constructed nature-based seawalls around Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently the Ministry is constructing nature-based seawalls at Viseisei Village of 500 metres, one of the longest seawalls that we are constructing, totally nature-based seawall - Viseisei Village in Lautoka - 500 metres, Navunievu Village in Bua - 250 metres, Nananu Village in Tailevu - 500 metres and Nabubu Village in Macuata - 200 metres. So these are the current ones that has been constructed. All of these sites, at the moment there are machines where we construct these nature-based seawalls at the moment.

We are also constructing a concrete seawall at Bau Island - 624 metres. We have been trying to construct the seawall for the last three years because it requires a lot of mobilisation. It is an island and a lot of costs are involved. We were not able to get a particular contractor, but finally we have one. We have mobilised the machines already and the work is being currently undertaken. Due to the nature of that area, we cannot undertake a nature-based seawall construction. There is no material on that island as the island is very small. So we have to undertake a concrete seawall construction. The largest seawall, 624 metres. So that is on Bau Island which is now under construction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the past four years, the Ministry of Waterways through its Coastal Protection Programme, we have done 14 Coastal Protection which consists of four nature-based seawalls, one concrete seawall in the Western Division, three nature-based seawalls in the Northern Division, three concrete seawalls in the Central Division, one revetment wall in the Eastern Division, one nature-based seawall in the Maritime Islands. These projects have benefitted approximately 750 households living in the coastal community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the completed ones in the Northern Division are Raviravi Village - 660 metres seawall, Naividamu Village - 150 metres seawall, Drekeniwai (completed last year) - 150 metres seawall and Lamini Village - 220 metres seawall.

In the Western Division, Nabukadra (completed) - 250 metres seawall, Vaidoko Village – nature-based seawall 140 metres, Verevere Village – nature-based seawall 150 metres, Malomalo Village - 70 metres, Namoli Village - 430 metres, Rukurukulevu – 380 metres of concrete wall. In Sigatoka, Dravuni Village – 280 metres.

For Rukurukulevu, Dravuni and Lamini villages, these are the concrete sea walls, but the others, Raviravi, Nawaidamu, Drekeniwai, Nabukadra, Vaidoko, Verevere, Malomalo and Namoli, all are nature-based sea walls. In Sigatoka, Dravuni Village – 280 metres. The Rukurukulevu, Dravuni and Lamini villages, these are the concrete sea walls, but the others, Raviravi, Nawaidamu, Drekeniwai, Nabukadra, Vaidoko, Verevere, Malomalo and Namoli, all are nature-based sea walls.

In the Eastern-maritime, the Lodonu - 200 metres nature-based seawall, Namuana - 280 metres seawall completed already.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the demand for coastal communities with regard to the need for coastal protection continues to increase every year. Currently, it stands at about 103 seawalls that we need to construct other than the ones we are doing which will protect close to 160 villages. The number is different like 103 seawalls protecting 160 villages because some of the seawalls will be protecting two or three villages.

These 103 includes 17 requests from the Eastern Division for about 4.8 kilometres of seawall that we need to construct, 43 requests from the Central Division for 8.7 kilometres, 30 requests from the Western Division for 10.6 kilometres of seawall, 12 requests from the Northern Division for 4.8 kilometres, making a total length of 29.1 kilometres of seawall that we need to construct. Some of these could be concrete, but most of it where the materials are available, we can construct a nature-

based seawall. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a nature-based seawall is sustainable, durable, cheaper and we are using nature to deal with the problem caused by nature itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say that the Ministry is very proud of the nature-based seawall which has been developed; our own thinking, our own original idea and our own original model. It came up, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we returned from Taveuni after opening a 150-metre seawall at a cost of \$1.2 million and we sat down and said that we cannot continue this way; 150 metres seawall costing \$1.2 million, how would we get the money? When were we going to complete the 29 kilometres of seawall that we needed to do?

At that time, we did not have 29 kilometres, at that time it was probably about 15 kilometres or so. And then we said, “look I think we need to sit down, get to the drawing board and come up with a model which is cheaper. Then we sat down, get to the drawing board and come up with a model which is cheaper, durable and deals with also developing an eco-system around that area.” So, the nature-based seawall apart from providing protection to the village, we also established an eco-system which contributes to building resilience, expanding the biodiversity and also provides a source of food for the communities around there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 20th December, 2021, a volcanic eruption occurred in Tonga which created havoc. A group of Government delegates made a tour to the Lau Group and during their visit to Daliconi Village in Vanuabalavu, the people of Daliconi thanked the Government of the day for putting a 240 metres nature-based seawall which saved their livelihood, property and village. Had it not been for that 240 metres nature-based seawall, there would have been havoc in the village with that major tidal surge arising out of the earthquake in Tonga.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the climate change is a problem, is a reality and small island states with a lot of coastal communities like Fiji and the Pacific are in the forefront of this challenge posed by climate change and we are in terms of thinking, we are way ahead. At the moment we are also putting resources, we are also talking to donors, development partners, ADB has approved the construction of 12 seawalls with a lot of paperwork and we want to thank them for that. So, there are other donors coming on board and we are working with them and ensuring that we get them the required documentations they need. Quite meticulous work needs to be done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are excited that we will be able to deliver this 29 kilometres of seawall. I do not want to give a timeline now but I can give a timeline maybe in six or seven months’ time, when we are clearer in terms of the funding that we are doing to get from our development partners and of course our own funding as well.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Seven months’ time

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his reply to that question. The coastal areas around Vatuwaqa are now very heavily populated, some like Nanuku sitting on a bay is in need of seawalls. Is there any plan to build and protect that Nanuku area?

MR. SPEAKER.- I think you have already covered that, honourable Minister.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I did not hear it.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You should concentrate.

MR. SPEAKER.- But you have the floor.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have got a long list here which adds up to 29 kilometres. We are happy to examine Nanuku. The Nanuku I mentioned is not this Nanuku, but I mentioned Nananu. That is past the jetty at Natovi. So, we are happy to examine that and see, and get it on the list.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say that we need to get it on the list. We want to know the total kilometres that we need to construct because we are going to donors, the development partners, so we need an exhaustive list. So, if there are other places, we need to get it on the list, Sir.

Production and Export of Primary Agricultural Products
(Question No. 91/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on the Ministry's programmes to increase the production and export of primary products, such as *yaqona*, *dalo*, ginger, *tavioka* and so forth?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank honourable Radrodro for asking that question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture, in its 2019-2023 Strategic Development Plan envisions a competitive, sustainable and resilient agriculture sector. The priorities are particularly food and nutritional security for all Fijians and also, expanding commercial agriculture and promoting exports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's top non-sugar agricultural exports are led by kava. The 2021 data shows that kava exports were \$41.9 million, followed by *dalo* - \$30.1 million and interestingly followed by number three, which is turmeric - \$22.9 million exports only, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but mostly to USA. Then ginger - \$13.9 million, then assorted vegetables - \$5.7 million, cassava - \$1.7 million, chicken meat and eggs - \$4.7 million. Those are the top seven, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Once again, for our working knowledge, kava - \$41.9 million, next is *dalo* - \$30.1 million, next is turmeric - \$22.9 million, then ginger - \$13.9 million, vegetables - \$5.7 million, eggs and chicken products - \$4.7 million and cassava - \$1.7 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, kava makes an extremely important contribution to our rural exports. The leading export earner, non-sugar crop and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we see that kava export in terms of volume and value will increase.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, external shocks, like cyclones, have affected all of these agricultural crops, particularly kava, after *TC Winston* and then that is why prices surged about three times due to a shortage in supply. But we are anticipating that the external shocks, particularly cyclone will continue to be there and that is how we are planning and that is why we are putting a lot of infrastructure on the ground, to ensure that it does not affect that severely, the export of those commodities. So, today farmers and exporters are bearing the fruit of the market access that we have developed over the years for these particular crops.

Total kava production in 2021 was 13.79 tonnes with an average annual growth rate of 12.8 percent. That is a substantial two-digit growth rate, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Agriculture received a total budget of \$300,000 for kava production only, and this goes to farm access roads, provision of *yaqona* cuttings, construction of farm houses, training of farmers, nurseries, technical support and physical testing. Before it was only the University of the South Pacific's laboratory but now, we have got our

laboratory at Koronivia where exporters can bring in their kava and get it tested in the fraction of the price that USP charges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have distributed 100,000 kava cuttings in Lomaiviti, Northern Division, Western Division, constructed farms in Ovalau, Moturiki, Levuka and Lau; established nurseries in Ovalau and Vanuabalavu. We have plans to establish more nurseries in the Western Division so that instead of giving cuttings to farmers, we can give seedlings because germination rate is 100 percent. With cuttings, germination rates are much lower.

With regards to *dalo*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$400,000 was provided to promote *dalo* and this includes 63,500 *dalo* suckers distributed to 55 farms in Bua and 14 plantations in Koro Island. This was after *TC Yasa* and *TC Ana*. In addition to this, 452,000 *dalo* suckers were distributed outside this area. The annual average *dalo* production was 54,700 tonnes. The annual average growth rate of *dalo* production was 7.5 percent for the last five years.

Ginger, with the improved production and targeting export, we are putting a lot of resources on ginger, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There was \$3 million worth of material support to ginger. Ginger is a different crop, we need to open up new land every year. If you plant ginger in one plot, for the next three years you cannot plant ginger in the same plot because of nematode. It means every year, farmers need to shift their production to new plots and after three years, they can only return, so you have to put in a lot of money in terms of land preparation and excavator usage and also planting material supply.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we assisted 333 new farmers with more than 87 metric tonnes of ginger valued at \$217,000. Yesterday, when honourable Members were talking about poverty reduction, the sustainable way of reducing poverty which they were arguing in the rural and maritime areas is to assist those farmers to utilise the resources that are with them for a sustainable solution to poverty alleviation. This is exactly what we are doing.

Honourable Professor Prasad was saying that we are reading out the Budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is the Budget about? It is about growing the economy, assisting the farmers and resource owners utilise their resources and earn a sustainable living and, therefore, deal with poverty rather than just giving them a handout.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the turmeric commodity is a competitive advantages. Our turmeric has a particular cumin component which is much, much higher than turmeric from other countries and it is for this reason, turmeric is high in demand in the United States. Turmeric is not only used for food purposes but also a medicinal product. Our turmeric now is sought after in the United States, We expend \$100,000 in this year's budget on promoting turmeric expansion and we have seen that turmeric grew - 33.3 percent last year, compared to the previous year.

When you talk about export, you also need to support exporters so that they can collect their produce, lift it and export it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. For the last five years, we have spent \$29 million with Agro Marketing Authority (AMA) so that they can collect produce from those areas where exporters are not able to reach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the honourable Members were saying that AMA is only collecting for that particular quota. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot have farmers who wakes up one morning and says, "I need \$20", so they will pick half bag of cassava, come to the AMA outlet, sell that cassava and take the \$20. We cannot treat AMA like a bank. So, what we are saying is, if you sign up a contract with us, then we know what volume you need to secure our market. Without that, we cannot, we have contracts with buyers from Australia and New Zealand and we need to ensure that we have

that volume. So, in the absence of a contract with the farmer, we are a bit conservative in terms of what we will be able to procure and, therefore, sign up contracts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have done now from about six months ago, we have said; “Alright, we will not turn you back. Anyone coming to Savusavu or Bua, we will not turn you back, but this is the quota, this is the premium price. Then after that quota, the price drops. That is the two-tier price, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, no one coming to Savusavu Office or Bua AMA Office will be turned back. But if the Bua quota is exhausted, then the second price will kick in, which we can buy and sell it at a lower price. This business concept is something they do not understand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday, they were talking about the welfare of the farmers. We are now going all out in our meetings with FNPF and FDB to make farmers voluntary members of FNPF. In every meeting, we have an FNPF Officer with the desk there and we announced two days before for them to come with their ID card and \$10 to them members of FNPF. A lot of the AMA farmers are now members of FNPF, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We also want our farmers to receive pension after 55 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2012, the Ministry had assisted 25 agro exporters. As I have said, we need to support exporters so that they are ready to pick up the produce and send it. We have supported 25 agro exporters with 13 cold storage facilities, nine packing houses, two collection centres, three storage sheds, two freezer trucks and two food processing machines at a cost of \$3.3 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to support exporters because they have done an excellent job over the last two years during the most difficult situation with freight rates going up during COVID-19, but they continued to pick up their produce, lift their containers, both through air freight as well as sea freight.

Having said that, our exports have gone up substantially. In 2020, for the first time, we exceeded \$106 million, in 2021 it went to \$121 million. In nominal terms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2020, the value of non-sugar agriculture was \$1.2 billion. My belief is that, today in 2022, it is about \$1.5 billion. In nine years’ time, we want to get it to \$2 billion in the agriculture sector and export to \$0.5 billion from the \$121 million that was there last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is where we are. Numbers have picked up and I hope honourable Members from the other side use these numbers.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe the honourable Minister is meandering in answering his question. So maybe the next time, he should be succinct and give the answer as required in the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the explanation that is given, most of the farmers are saying they are finding it hard to maintain large commercial farming because of the decisions that have been taken by the Ministry, especially in terms of weedicides.

MR. SPEAKER.- Ask your supplementary question?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is something to do with the decision of the Ministry with regards to paraquat.

HON. A. SAYED- KHAIYUM.- Your question.

HON. A. M. RADRODRO.- Give me a second, honourable Attorney General, I will ask the question to the honourable Minister which is regarding paraquat. As we know, paraquat has been used by neighbouring islands, Tonga and Samoa to increase their production, especially *dalo*. The question is, can the honourable Minister review the decision to bring back paraquat to be used by farmers in Fiji, especially those in Vanua Levu, Namosi, Naitasiri who plant *dalo* and ginger?

MR. SPEAKER.- That is a longwinded supplementary question. I now give the floor to the honourable Minister and I hope you are brief on this.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- No, paraquat is never going to come back.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member said to bring back paraquat to increase production. Paraquat does not increase production. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a major ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- You are an educated man, you could explain it to the farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, paraquat has a major health risk. The FSC banned paraquat long time back because they found residues of in the sugar that was manufactured, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farmers in USA are saying that we should ban paraquat because of possible cause of Alzheimer's. There is a lot of health effect. Paraquat has also been found in vegetables that people are consuming. There are a lot of journal articles published which demonstrate the link of paraquat to cancer. I just asked him to *Google* and see the effect of paraquat on health, cancer in particular.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to answer his question about substitute, he did not ask that question, he should have asked, what is the substitute to paraquat? There is a substitute to paraquat which is glucoside. Farmers are being told and there are cooperative farmers which are completely organic, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Completely organic is not reading newspapers, there is a big feature article in his favourite paper which shows that they are completely organic without paraquat.

Renewal & Replacement Programme - Old Crossings and Bridges
(Question No. 92/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the progress of the renewal and replacement programme for old crossings and bridges?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in response to the question asked by honourable Rohit Sharma and thank the honourable Member for his question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the road infrastructure network under the Fiji Roads Authority consists of around 6,400 kilometres of the slightly more than 11,000 kilometres of roads that we have in this country. It includes 1,390 bridges and crossings. These bridges and crossings form part of the road network and they are very important to the network itself.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years some of the factors that have affected our bridges and crossings are aging infrastructure, a lot of them are quite old, the impact of natural disasters such as floods, landslides and also the overloading, when a lot of these crossings and bridges were built, they did not have the kind of heavy vehicles that we have now on the roads that are using in our roads in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the significant increase in the number of heavy trucks on the Fiji network has caused accelerated deterioration of the infrastructure that it has, and we have had to impose restrictions in the number of bridges, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this regard, the renewal and replacement programme for bridges and crossings is very important. Replacing bridges and crossings on time is critical as if we delay any such exercise it can mean more maintenance costs over time and also poses a risk to those who use those at risk infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the selection of these bridges and jetties is determined on the inspection carried out through our National Road Infrastructure Network. The FRA inspects them, identifies the ones that are most at risk, that are heavily used and then it categorises the ones that need to be fixed immediately, those that can be done progressively over time and those for which you do not have to replace it or you can just do a little remedial work so that it can still be used.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has committed unprecedented funding allocations at recent years and has vastly expanded and upgraded the country's entire land transportation network to provide new levels of access and far greater mobility for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past few years, the funding for this has been consistently between \$30 million to \$50 million that has been allocated for the upgrade and replacement of existing critical bridges and crossings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the renewal and replacement for bridges and jetties will be pursued on a bigger scale. In doing so, the replacement for 40 new critical bridges is currently being undertaken in phases with the design phase and then eventually, we will be looking to see how we can fund all those critical new bridges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent programme of improvements of the road infrastructure network achievement, we have had 76 new bridges and crossing renewals and replacements completed across Fiji.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for the renewal and repairs of those bridges, because those bridges will also serve agricultural areas in Fiji and ensure production comes up. I would like to say that when we come into Government, we are going to increase all those figures that honourable Reddy has mentioned; lot of exports and less on imports.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Ask your supplementary question.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- The question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are you also going to renew and repair the Nabilodra Bridge and Bua Bridge? The Bua Bridge is not for traffic, but for person traffic one, so can it be included also in the programme, the renewal and replacement of those bridges?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not fully get the question, it was such a long one.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- There was no question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Be precise about your question.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is the Nabilodra Bridge near Namuavoivoi to the Wainunu side and the Bua Bridge, are they included in the programme as well?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, what the FRA does, it inspects all the bridges and crossings. At the moment there are 100 critical bridges and crossings; you cannot fix them all at the same time. There are some crossings, all you need to do is make the approaches better because sometimes when you have crossings, the crossing stay but the approach goes. The approach means the end towards the side. So in those cases, what you do, the crossing can remain serviceable, you try to improve the crossing, you make the cement portion a bit longer so that it does not get washed away, you do the riprap to make sure the water does not take that away.

There are others which really need to be fixed immediately, those ones will be immediately put on the critical list. The Namuavoivoi Road is a very important one because it shortens the access of people from Wainunu going across to Labasa. At the moment, some of those places still have splash crossings, which means the vehicle goes across the river and up on the other side. Eventually overtime, as it moves up the priority listing then all of these will eventually be addressed. There is a large list, it has to be done progressively over time, but it is our focus to make sure that that road network is improved overtime.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is on Raiwaqa Bridge along Kavanagasau Road that links the farmers to the market. What is FRA planning to with the Raiwaqa Bridge?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the exact thing that is done to any specific bridge, I do not always have that information on hand. But I will get that information and pass it along to the honourable Member.

“Say No to Illegal Logging” Initiative
(Question No. 93/2022)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and the Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry, Foreign Affairs and Forestry update Parliament on the status of the “Say No to Illegal Logging” initiative recently launched by the Ministry?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am answering this question on behalf of the honourable Prime Minister who has got an engagement in Serua. Illegal logging is a major problem across the world and in all types of forests. It has serious negative impacts on the environment and forest ecosystems, communities and indeed economies. It undermines the legitimacy of the forest sector and hinders efforts to implement sustainable forest management. It also depresses the market value of timber. It also depresses the market value of timber while disadvantaging those companies that engage in legal and sustainable logging and trade. There is a huge disadvantage to the majority of the landowning communities as well.

United Nations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, estimates that illegal logging costs to global community up to \$US206 billion each year. This makes it one of the largest environmental crimes by economic value in the world today. Fiji, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is not immune to illegal logging and the

trade of illegally log timber. In Vanua Levu alone, for example, Sir, a total of 29 cases were recorded from January 2017 to January 2022.

The most common illegal logging practices in Fiji include:

1. Harvesting, transportation and purchase or sale of timber in contravention of violation the national laws such as the Forest Act, Environment Management Act and the iTaukei Land Trust Act among others;
2. Extraction of CITES listed species deliberately encroaching into forest adjacent to licence logging areas. Logging in protected areas such as forest reserves, logging in prohibited areas such as steep slopes, river banks and catchment areas including buffers and removing undersized trees;
3. Falsifying declarations of volume or species harvested as well as export documentations. Transporting logs without truck passes or outdated truck passes. Ignoring waste disposal and an Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) screening processes and operating sawmills without valid licences; and
4. Dishonest practices resulting in only a few benefitting from the forestry deals at the expense of the majority in landowning units and we saw that. Quite significantly, honourable Bulanauca will know about this. A lot of illegal logging took place the days before the mahogany industry was actually regulated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to curb illegal logging and to help enforce our national laws and regulations, the Ministry of Forestry formulated partnerships through Memorandums of Understanding, with agencies like the Fiji Revenue Custom Service (FRCS), Fiji Bureau of Statistics, Fiji National Provident Fund, Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations and the Fiji Police Force.

It is working very closely with the Ministry of Environment to ensure that licences for logging, sawmilling and treatment plants are issued only after an assessment has been conducted and the environmental impacts and the Ministry of Environment has approved either the Environmental Management Plan with a more detail Environment Impact Assessment.

The Ministry is also strengthening its relationship with the iTaukei Land Trust Board especially to clearly identify not only the genuine landowners but also to make sure that majority of them (at least 60 percent of them) have agreed to the harvesting of trees from their respective lands.

The latest development from iTLTB is the sharing of access to the online Harvesting Licencing System which, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister had the privilege of launching three weeks ago. This will help expedite our business facilitation processes also.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these partnerships aim to form a formidable front to cut down illegal forest activities, ensure that forest-based companies provide appropriate safety working conditions for their staff, pay their staff the correct wages and FNPF and also pay the correct amount of taxes. Importantly, Sir, it aims to strengthen our efforts to protect the environment as a way to address climate change, as any environment through damage caused by hastily and poorly planned operations can be irreparable.

The partnerships will also help to ensure that fair compensation is provided to the resource owners through correct and timely royalty and stumpage payments and where appropriate lease payments. Additionally the partnerships will ensure that the total contribution of forestry sector is accurately measured and reflected in the country's GDP.

The Ministry also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, launched the “Say to No Illegal Logging Pledge” in Labasa on the 11th February, 2022. Their aim is to create greater public awareness and to gather support from as many stakeholders as possible to curb illegal logging. Close to 300 individuals, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have signed up to the pledge since its launch. These include farmers, landowning units, licenced loggers, Government officials, of course, and private companies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 68 percent of the pledges actually come from the landowning units and we expect the momentum to increase as we continue to conduct awareness through the *tikina* and provincial meetings where one of which our honourable Prime Minister is attending today through our ongoing discussion with the members of the timber industry through increasing media awareness and also right here, of course, in Parliament, Sir. The pledge is been piloted in Vanua Levu before it is implemented in Viti Levu and other areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also in discussion with the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) where a number of illegal logging cases have been filed, it also strengthened partnership including running the say to “No Illegal Logging” pledge in parallel with FICAC’s “I do Not Accept Bribes” campaign.

The Ministry is building the capacity of its staff, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we wish to thank both FICAC and the DPP for the training opportunities they have provided and are providing to the Ministry of Forestry staff when investigation and prosecution processes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would like all Members to actually support this to “Say No to Illegal Logging” pledge because it is critically important for us because I am sure that we all would agree that we need to protect our forests. If the forest is going to be harvested, we need to be sure it is done in a sustainable manner. We need to also protect indigenous species.

The Ministry of Forestry, of course, started a nursery on the indigenous species and also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also need to look at forestry in a very different manner which is that currently, our way of valuing forestry is only when it is cut down and that contributes to GDP. But as highlighted in the Climate Change Act, we can actually have GDP contribution by the forestry sector by keeping the trees on the ground through carbon trading.

Rehabilitation Works at Lekutu Schools
(Question No. 94/2022)

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, and Local Government update Parliament on the rehabilitation works at Lekutu District School and Lekutu Secondary School?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the question on Lekutu District School and Lekutu Secondary School, I would like to refer to honourable Salote Radrodoro’s *Facebook* post of 10th January, 2022.

Honourable Salote Radrodoro claimed that she visited both schools on Saturday, 8th January, 2020, prior to school re-opening to check the progress on the rebuilding works on Lekutu District School and Lekutu Secondary School. These two schools were damaged by *TC Ana* and *TC Yasa* in December 2019 and January 2020. She claimed that school rebuilding was at a snail’s pace which

meant, both schools will operate with much less classroom space whereby the social distancing problem becomes a much a bigger problem.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Let me speak you will have a chance to ask questions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an utter nonsense. Let me inform this august House that the situation in the schools that honourable Salote Radrodro visited, as claimed in her *Facebook* post, is not true at all. The Ministry's response to the damages caused to these two schools...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, we are not referring to the *Facebook* page.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Just answer the question.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, I am answering the question.

These two schools, after the tropical cyclone were very quick and students were accommodated appropriately. Initially, students were in tents of good standard, while pre-fab buildings were built.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Lekutu District School sustained minor damages during *TC Yasa* and after swift repair works, the school was ready. However, the student hostel was damaged and students initially used tents. The hostel is part of the defect reconstruction project. Now, a single tent is used as a dining facility for the primary school students.

At Lekutu Secondary School, a 1 x 7 classroom block was damaged during the cyclone. While the pre-fab building was being constructed, students were accommodated in well-constructed tents, while school closed on 20th April, 2021. A 1 x 7 pre-fab block was built by the Government at a cost of \$380,000 and the construction work was completed in August 2021, and this building can withstand Category 3 cyclone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when this claim was made by the honourable Member in January 2022, the standard temporary classrooms were already built and it was ready for the students to resume classes. So, the temporary structures or what we call the pre-fab buildings, were already built when she visited the place.

Alternative arrangement was already made, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is rather sad to note how the Opposition Members told half-truth through the *Facebook* page. This was the time when the country was dealing with the crisis and every effort was being made by the Ministry to get the students back into the classroom, but the Opposition Members were hell-bent in discouraging students to go to school. It is related to the school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another six-classroom building is currently under construction by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) with floor and walls already built as part of phase one. A team of eight ADF engineering personnel arrived on 5th April, and will be followed by the main team that will be here on 21st April, 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main construction team comprises of 21 RFMF personnel, 25 ADF personnel, six personnel from the French Armed Forces of New Caledonia and four personnel from the New Zealand Defence Force. Construction will recommence on 25th April, and it will finished by the end of July 2022. So, while this building is being made, there is another set of building already

built for the students to resume their classes. In addition to the classroom block that the ADF is constructing under the DFAT project, additional work at Lekutu will include; dormitories for girls and boys, one ablution block, a dining hall for Lekutu District School, five teachers' quarters, covered walkways to link school buildings and building services for solar power, water supply and waste management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on overcrowding, let me highlight the fact that Lekutu District School has 154 students from Year 1 Year 8. The lowest number of students in a class is 12 and the highest is 29. The issue of social distancing in Lekutu District School is a non-issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the secondary school has seven classrooms in the newly-built prefab building which has a sitting capacity of 45 students per class. Overall, it can cater for 315 students, while the current school roll stands at 219, so honestly I am not sure what her concern was all about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such kind of misinformation actually discourages parents from sending their children to school and during that time, she also advised the students' parents to engage the children for two hours of learning each day and teach them life skills, such as washing, sewing and gardening. Clearly two hours of school work was not enough to compensate the learning loss of almost eight months. We wish to ask the honourable Member, why was she sabotaging the work of the Ministry? What authority did she have to advise parents against the advice given by the Ministry based on science and sound advice from United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO) and Ministry of Health?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what was happening behind the scene. While the Ministry was busy trying to prepare schools ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, just stick to answering that question.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are going all over the place.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am pleased to say that while DFAT and ADF continue construction work at Lekutu District School and Lekutu Secondary School, there is ample space for students to study in comfort. I have personally visited the two schools and had discussions with the head of school, teachers, management committee and parents, and I provided them firsthand update on the project and the work schedule.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do not fix the schools using glue. We build Category 5 standard classrooms.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Shame on you!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am not ashamed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Land Buy Back Scheme
(Question No. 95/2022)

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the current status of the Land Buy Back Scheme?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Vosanibola for his question.

The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources through its Land Use Division, or what we commonly refer to as the Land Bank, has always emphasised the right to equal access to land for all, including members of our indigenous *iTaukei* and those desiring to secure affordable parcels of land for their livelihood.

For the past three years, we have committed to taking all the necessary steps in providing fair, transparent, effective and non-discriminatory administration of all Freehold Buy Back land purchased under the Freehold Buy Back Scheme. To date, the Land Use Division, through the Land Bank, has successfully implemented joint venture initiatives and resource owner-friendly concepts to fasttrack and assist landowning units, as stated in the Sale and Purchase Agreement.

So far, out of the 24 Freehold Buy Back land, the following seven landowning units have fully paid their dues:

1. Yavusa Waivunia of Cakaudrove;
2. Yavusa Waidau of Ovalau;
3. Mataqali Nailagobakola of Nausori;
4. Yavusa Nasuva of Taveuni;
5. Waidra and Nabu of Yavusa Vugalei in Tailevu;
6. Mataqali Naobisi, Luvunivuaka, Tailevu; and
7. Mataqali Nasavunivonu, Drekeniwai, Cakaudrove.

A balance of 17 landowning units are still in the repayment process.

For the 2021-2022 financial year alone, despite the impacts of the pandemic, two landowning units successfully paid off their dues; namely Mataqali Naomisi of Luvunivuaka Village in Tailevu and Mataqali Nasavunivonu of Drekeniwai, Cakaudrove. Further, in the 2019-2020 financial year, Waidra and Nabu of Yavusa Vugalei in Tailevu settled their dues. Their total repayment was \$380,000, being \$92,000 for the Mataqali Naomisi; \$140,000 for the Mataqali Nasavunivonu; and \$148,000 for the Yavusa Vugalei.

It is significant to note that there has been a reversion of around 168.6187 acres of Freehold land to native resource owners between the years 2019 to 2021. We have successfully collated and recovered \$2.318 million out of the \$4.575 billion that was supposed to be collected from the Land Owning Units (LOUs). This is around 50.68 percent. There are three out of the four land parcels of the LOUs who had fully paid their dues have been transferred namely; Yavusa Nasuva of Taveuni, Cakaudrove; Yavusa Waivunia of Savusavu, Cakaudrove; and Yavusa Waidau of Ovalau.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years, we know there are some landowning units who defaulted in their payments. They had encountered some challenges in meeting up with their contractual payment agreements, or they encountered repayment constraints. So, assistance was rendered from the Land Bank by leasing of the Freehold Buy Back to meet the landowners' payment obligation. To date, nine Freehold Buy Back land has been leased to assist those LOUs who defaulted in their payments. So they default on their payments, the land is leased and money is collected to pay back what they owe, then that land is given back to the lenders because they could not pay it off themselves. That is the exercise.

For the buyback land occupied by informal settlements and Naviria in Savusavu, ongoing consultation has been executed with the tailor-made solutions communicated to all parties involved for a win situation for all. With this concept will see the regularisation of the 63 informal settlements occupying the buyback land where they will pay the premium of their lease whilst the money collated would be used to clear all the land owning units arrears with a surplus paid directly to their accounts.

In essence as mediators and land administrators, we have to ensure the right balance is struck so that economic growth is stimulated through the collection of revenue from landowning units and appropriate utilisation of our resources it optimised. Consequently, the land use division has to ensure that all parties affected are assisted and their interest are realized and protected.

HON. RATU. J.A.R. SENILOLI.- As reported by the honourable Minister, four landowning units have paid their debts and three parcels have been transferred. There is one landowning unit which I understand is *Mataqali Nailagobokola* in Nausori which has yet to receive their title despite the fact that they have fully paid their debt. Can the honourable Minister explain why the transfer title has not been transferred?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, I am sure that the transfer process is in progress and the officials are working hand in hand with the landowners to make sure that that is done as speedy as possible and it will be done.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- I am just trying to make sure no one is at my back. I note that there is a small budget for the administration of all these buy-back land. Why is there no budget for new buy-back land?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this programme started in 1989 where there was a commitment of approximately \$4.575 million. From 1989 till now, that is the money that has been tied up and not paid on time. If you look at the value of the money at which it was bought and the amount of money collected now, the value of money declines over time. So there were a lot of assets that were tied up at that time, it has been slow.

One of the things that we wanted to do now is clear the ones that were already there out of the 24 freehold land buy-back schemes; that was the situation. There was a commitment made, the payments were not done on time and the Ministry of Lands has gone out on its own to help them make their payments. These group of landowners wanted this land, they could not make their commitment so what the Ministry of Lands said, "We take this, we lease it out so you do not have to pay.

Once that money is collected then meets the amount of money that you owe to Government then when the rest of the money that was collected goes direct to you. We have gone out of our way to do that, but there has been capital been tied up, that was a policy in 1989, the Government is committed to implementing it. If the Government decides to do it again in the future, that will be something that will have to be decided in the future.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will move. We do not have the time today. We will finish at 12.30 pm.

Outsourcing Services
(Question No. 96/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service,

Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on how much has been spent on outsourcing of services to private general and dental practitioners and the plans moving forward?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like the honourable Member for the question. As has been discussed in Parliament previously that the Private GP Scheme that it is going to be made available to members of the public who normally would not go to a private doctor has been made available during the COVID period in June 2021. We have seen that is a very good scheme that is now providing a lot of services that hitherto was not provided to those Fijians who could not afford to go and visit GPs.

Currently, there are 14 GPs, and one medical centre that has locations in three different centres strewn across predominantly Suva, Nadi, Ba and one in Lautoka. Sir, essentially the scheme prior to the new announcement, you could go to a GP for consultation, review, referrals, injections, dressings and other minor dressings and also you could participate in the free medical scheme should they prescribe any medicine for you, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had allocated \$5 million. So, far we have spent \$1.6 million, the cost of medical services, 58,425 Fijians have actually used these services. When the GP Scheme, interestingly, Sir, was rolled out in late June 2021, an average of around 1,400 patients were seen on a weekly basis. Over the last few months we have seen the numbers have gone up to an average of 1,700 patients a week that are seen under this particular scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had also announced in the Budget, Sir, that we will in fact now increase the type of services that will be made available under this particular scheme. So now, for example, if you go and visit one of these GPs, Sir, you can get a multi-urine dipstick test done, ECG, nebuliser treatment, oxygen supply and ultrasound scans if they have it, at all Government's cost. So it is actually a holistic approach to the services that these GPs will provide, Sir, including as announced in the Budget, we also have advertised for private medical laboratories. These doctors can also ask for blood test for you, so for example, sugar, complete blood count, base metabolic panel or basic electrolyte panel, cholesterol lipid profile, glycated haemoglobin test, liver function and renal function.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we talk about NCDs, we need to be able to capture the members of the population at this very early stage. So if they develop a relationship with a private GP who they regularly see, that particular GP will be able to track their medical record, be able to track their medical moving as their age, for example. If they are able to do this test they can also say to them, "look, you are 30 years old but your sugar is 6 or 7, cut it back down". Normally, what we see when these people who normally cannot afford to go and see GPs, when they get really sick, that is when they are turn up to the public health system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as also announced in the Budget, we want to expand this particular service, we have advertised, we have received 28 Expressions of Interest. Interestingly in a number of new areas too, Savusavu - 1, Labasa - 1, we did not receive anything from Rakiraki or Tavua, Ba - 3, Lautoka - 2, Nadi - 3, Sigatoka - 4, Navua - 1, Korovou - 1, Nausori - 1, Lami - 0, Nakasi - 3, Nasinu - 2 and Suva - 6. This will become fairly wide in respect of the services they will be able to provide, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be announcing those who qualify by next week and, of course, these are available on the Government *Facebook* page so members of the public can actually go and visit them also.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the expansion to the dental services, as a result of COVID-19 and because of the lockdowns, because of the infection issue, a lot of the dental services were actually put on hold and we have seen now a huge rush for those services. Again, Sir, we have advertised that these dental procedures which includes consultation, temporary filling, permanent filling and extraction will be provided through this particular PPP Scheme. We have so far received six EOIs - two from Suva, two from Nakasi, one from Navua and one from Lautoka. If they qualify, Sir, these dental services will be made available to them. As we also said, Sir, we have also advertised for the Private Medical Laboratory Scheme where we have already received six Expressions of Interest in that respect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last component of this is that we also want to assist private GPs to go into areas where population numbers are growing and people may need to travel long distances. So some of the areas we have highlighted, for example, if you look at Seaqaqa, Nasorowaqa, Dreketi, et cetera, if you have a private GP in that location, you could have a number of people travelling to them too.

Also if you look at some of the areas that have now expanded in what we call “semi-urban areas” outside Nadi, like, Korovuto, Malolo, Nawai and all those areas, so if you have private GP there, in particular, for example, if there is flooding and people cannot get to Nadi Hospital, if you have a private GP available, they will be able to go and see the private GP. In that respect, sir, we also allocated \$200,000 to actually help them with some additional set up costs because we need these people out there. Of course, we will be advertising that very soon.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that is the end of the question time, we will take a short break for morning tea and resume with End of the Week Statements.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.56 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.19 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 Ministers responsible for the subject matter of the Member's speech. No seconder is required and there will be no other debate.

Honourable Members, I now call on the Honourable Qereqeretabua to deliver her End of the Week Statement.

Quality of Education

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Good morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

“No Action Talk Only” is how I would describe the many, many rhetorical statements from the Government on education - on how it has left no one behind, on how it has given everyone a leg-up in terms of making education free.

On paper free education looks enticing. It looks like a succulent dish described on a menu - wonderful to the ears of the people but sound is all it is good for, Mr. Speaker. The reality is that education is not totally free. There are free bus fares for certain stages within zones for students who come from families with the combined income of less than the tax threshold. There are scholarships with strict conditions for those who enter tertiary institutions and mostly loans that need to be repaid once a student starts work. We do not begrudge that.

The reality is that, despite tuition free education and free bus fares, parents and guardians still have to spend a lot of money to ensure their children attend school daily, and this has been the norm all along.

Fiji's most preeminent people both, locally and overseas, who have carved out a reputation for themselves have done their nation immensely proud sacrifice for the attainment of the highest standards. They did not miss school or university, despite tuition not been free. They did not have access to loans that they could start paying off after gaining meaningful employment. Why? Despite not being given the so-called leg-up or despite not being left behind, did they succeed nevertheless because of the quality of education they received, Mr. Speaker, right from their very first day at the then Kindergarten or Class One, right up to the then Form 6 or Form 7 and the progression up to University into either the then sole local tertiary institution - the University of the South Pacific or abroad if their parents could afford it, they turned the impossible into possible.

Not for a moment, Mr. Speaker, am I suggesting that the current cadre of teachers at all levels lack the same level of competency or skillsets as their predecessors. Might I add that, indeed, they are more qualified but just as practice makes perfect, Mr. Speaker, or the wine gets better as it gets older, teachers grow into their roles with experience, or for that matter in any other career. But do teachers have the freedom to grow into their roles through their classroom or peer experiences? Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker! It is more of a paper trail. If one holds a Degree and passes a literacy test, like how to use a computer, a teacher is upgraded above his or hers vastly more experienced colleagues.

Degrees and other tertiary qualifications are ironically the preferred choice of progression for teachers. Yes, that same piece of paper, the honourable Madam Minister for Education called it, while defending the failure of a student with a highest marks to be supported in her medical studies.

Only yesterday Parliament heard the Honourable Minister rubbish Foundation students studying medicine or MBBS. Strangely, she said that if students could afford Foundation studies, they can also pay for their MBBS Programme. This ridiculous remarks are an insult of the highest order to the many, many parents and their children, who missed out not only on scholarships but also TELS loans, just because they opted for Foundation. How can the honourable Minister say that MBBS Programme is affordable to them because they paid their Foundation fees? It is literally comparing horses with donkeys, the fee amounts are poles apart. If they were ever an analysis on comments on education resembling animal farm, the honourable Minister for Education would win hands down.

In keeping with her political masters, she wants to show that she and her Government are far, far superior to us. She too is caught up in the Government's toxic insecurity. She believes that if she says she is better and smarter than us, it will be so.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, education is a subject for all of us. It is something on which all of us can contribute for the betterment of our country.

Mr. Speaker, all the experts agree that the quickest and most effective way to improve a country's economic and social status is through education and investing in education. One has to work smarter. One must have a vision and a strategy and to know where he or she is going. But in the education field, the Government has never known what it is doing.

The NFP has been calling since 2014 for an Education Commission - a group of experts to lead a national collaboration on resetting our education system for this century. The last time Fiji had an Education Commission, Mr. Speaker, was in 1999 and here is the Report.

The former Minister for Education, the honourable Dr. Reddy announced in his 2014 maiden speech that Government would set up another one. But then someone must have reminded him that this the NFP idea because that was the last anyone heard about it.

Since the Bainimarama *coup* of December 2006, there have been several haphazard reforms in education and several ministers have come and gone, but 15 years on, the Ministry is just like the rest of Government. It has no vision and no plan.

Leaders, Mr. Speaker, communicate their vision and plans to others but in Fiji, none of the key education stakeholders have any idea about what is going on. The Government shares nothing with them.

The Government makes random decisions without consulting the teachers, parents or school owners. It veers off in one direction and then another, with ministers and headquarters officials issuing edicts that they all forget about a month later.

The Ministry's piecemeal handling of the learning and teaching losses during the recent COVID-19 pandemic showed how dysfunctional the whole education administration system has become.

Mr. Speaker, there is so much potential power for good in the education system, and the ripples it can spread go far beyond teaching our children. Schools, Mr. Speaker, are focal points for communities. They serve as polling venues and they serve as evacuation centres during disasters.

Mr. Speaker, many of us are invested very deeply in the education of our children. We feel strongly about our loyalty to our old schools. So schools are places where we all want to participate

and contribute.

We seem to have forgotten that teachers have always been leaders in their community – respected for their knowledge, trusted to care for our children, they have become sports coaches and event organisers and yes, many have become politicians.

But, Mr. Speaker, the FijiFirst Government has always behaved arrogantly in the education sphere. They think that because they pay teachers' salaries and students' grants, they have the right to dictate terms to everyone else and these include; school owners and managers, parent-teacher associations and teacher unions. These are the people who make education work. The Government forgets that all they are doing is spending the people's taxes. But it is the Government's treatment of our teachers in the past few years that has really stood out, Mr. Speaker.

Lecturing, talking down to, labelling teachers as unqualified and threatening to replace them is not only derogatory and insulting, but the bane of education in Fiji. This has become a noticeable trait within the FijiFirst Government. Blame everyone else when things go wrong. Worse, labelling teachers as unqualified.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, we all want better qualified teachers and, of course, we want teachers always to refresh and upgrade their skills. But that does not mean you ignore the years of experience and commitment of the thousands of teachers who are in the system and treat them as the problem.

It is for the Government to provide a pathway for improving the qualifications and skills of teachers. But this requires proper planning and funding, and to do it properly, Mr. Speaker, experienced teachers need to be part of the process. Their views need to be heard and respected.

Mr. Speaker, until 15 years ago, all Governments encouraged and supported teachers' skills and qualification upgrades, as well as giving them security of employment. Over many decades, thousands of teachers benefitted from in-service training and other professional development opportunities. But since 2006, the Government has undermined every aspect of this noble profession of teaching, including forcing teachers into contractual employment. As a result, the economic, professional and social status of teachers has been seriously diminished.

Over the last decade, under several Ministers, recruitment, promotion and career development for teachers have been severely compromised and in many cases, politicised. There are credible allegations that those that openly support the FijiFirst Government receive promotions and other favours.

Teachers fear undertaking their social obligations and engaging with the community because they worry about being identified with the wrong political side. Teachers fear suggesting changes to policies and practices because they will be singled out as critics. Overall, teachers today have less democratic space, not only within the schools and classrooms but also in the community to be useful agents of change and good leadership, Mr. Speaker, and the same is true of their students.

No parent or guardian wants to send their children to a school where they cannot freely express themselves through debate and discussion. We all expect our children to do well in the school, whether we are poor or rich, whether we are literate or not. We want our children to grow up in a free, open and transparent democratic framework.

The next government, Mr. Speaker, needs to begin from a position of respect - respect for education stakeholders, the school owners and managers, the teachers, the parents and community partners from business and NGOs, all of whom contribute to the broad education of our people. That

respect must be extended to the USP where this Government's pettiness and vindictiveness has resulted in massive damage to our most important educational institution and the education and aspirations of thousands of our young people.

I am on my last page now, Mr. Speaker. Respect for others must be at the core of education and any education policy, as it must be for every policy. And, Mr. Speaker, after the Government has changed and we are all freed from the shackles of the FijiFirst Party, that is what we promise to deliver. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to honourable Qereqeretabua's Statement on issues pertaining to quality education where she spoke about everything, except the factors that contribute to quality education and Free Education Grant (FEG) is so important to improve the quality of education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as usual, there is nothing substantial in what she said - nothing in terms of actual factors that she thinks has affected the quality of education and how it can be fixed. Just as usual, aiming for sound bites that they think sounds good.

The honourable Member said in various other forums, and I quote: "Free Education Grant does not mean quality education." She made that statement even now and during NFP Convention. It is very disappointing that she is trying to diminish free education which has opened doors for countless Fijian children who would not have been able to receive an education otherwise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, girls are most affected when FEG was not available. Parents had to choose which child will go to the school and which one will have to stay back. Today, FEG has helped many more girls to be in school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our education is the reason why Australia, New Zealand, America and other countries are poaching our nurses, doctors, lab technicians and other teachers. They are in demand, Sir, so on what basis honourable Member said that the quality of education is not there. Can the honourable Member seriously say that easing the financial burden of thousands of families, who can send their children to school is not important? Can she not see that families no longer have to decide, as I mentioned earlier on, which child will go to school and which one will stay home?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are well aware that the quality of education involves several factors, such as school environment, flexible curriculum, learning and teaching resources, teaching standard which involves teachers and committed stakeholders like school management committee, et cetera. Did she really speak on all these subject matter?

While the honourable Member may not think that the FEG is important, various reports, including the Education Commission Report 2000, makes reference to finance amongst other things, which helps in improving the quality of education. If the honourable Member really cared about the quality of education to our children, they would not be complaining against our merit-based appointment system where we choose the best teacher for our children. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do not care about the children and they do not care about their future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact is, with the FEG, school infrastructure has been improved, schools are well-resourced with items such as computers, science model, library books, charts, PEMAC items, to improve teaching and learning. These are aspects of FEG provided by the FijiFirst Government that honourable Qereqeretabua conveniently ignored.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FEG is also used towards providing internet connection for schools, which is critical for the digital age in which we live and yet she says, that the selection should not be based on someone who does not know computer. In other words, teachers if they do not know how to use computers, they should be still teaching children of this era using computer and technologies. How is that possible? Around 90 percent of primary schools and 98 percent of secondary schools are connected and we place a lot of importance to ICT technology.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government put wheels in motion for a change in the education sector. The vision of transforming Fiji has education at its heart. The FijiFirst Government introduced reforms in education of which we can now see the results. Our five rural schools are in top 10 schools that achieved high marks in Years 12 and 13, 2014 proved to be a game changer for education when the FijiFirst Government introduced two fundamental initiatives that changed the education sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first was the implementation of Free Education Grant which is in the tune of more than \$60 million every year and this goes to all primary and secondary schools and from 2015 we have included ECE centres as well.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The establishment of Tertiary Education Toppers and Loans Scheme was a second initiative which ensured that the education dreams and aspirations of our children could be realised right from Year 1 to tertiary level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can we create a level playing field if students end up doing Foundation studies can repeat and get higher GPA as compared to a student from Year 13? She is not able to understand the basic difference that we are trying to put on the table. Our parents and guardians no longer have to worry about tuition fees, bus fares, textbooks and on top of that fundraising to fix schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key component of quality education is the standard of teaching. How the curriculum is delivered in the classroom is fundamentally important. To enhance the quality of education, the Ministry incentivises teachers to upgrade their qualifications, but who objects to that? We have heard it all! It is the Opposition who do not think that the teachers should be upgrading their qualifications because they want to side those teachers who have not upgraded their qualifications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, curriculum is another integral part of quality education. It is not always about no action and talk only. Let me talk and I think honourable Member should listen carefully so you will know exactly what is happening in the education sector. My Ministry has constantly been focusing on revising and modernising the curriculum. I am pleased to say that we are trialling curriculum for literacy and numeracy in Years 1 to 4 this year and then for Years 5 to 8 next year that addresses systemic gaps and is aimed at a more holistic and practical approach.

From 2024, we will roll out revised secondary school English and Mathematics curriculum. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also revising our Social Science and History curriculum and carrying out a review of Early Childhood Education sub-sector to build a strong foundation for our children.

In addition, we are introducing civic and moral education which will be the root of building a better society. In recognition of the threat presented by climate change, we have also ensured that climate science is being taught to our children and they are well prepared for this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been consulting widely at every opportunity. In fact, Ministry of Education has a think tank made up of experienced, qualified teachers who advise us on the area that we need to work on, so it is not that we are doing things on our own. We consult and we constantly talk to our teachers, head of schools, parents, school management committees, teacher training institutions, faith-based organisations, principals association, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, simply by using words and she is trying to, in fact create this mistrust between the Ministry and the teachers, this will not work, honourable Member. Free education grant when it is dished out, it is done in a very transparent way. We have partnership with school management committees and this partnership has never been better. Again in their old familiar pattern, the Opposition complains and says that the Minister needs to visit schools and see things on the ground, but when I do visit schools to meet teachers, parents, students and committee members, NFP then changes tune and says that the Minister is engaged in electioneering. Nothing we do seems to please the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir - damned if we do and damned if we do not.

To enhance the quality of education, the FijiFirst Government is working with the development partners to develop education sector plan. Unlike the Education Commission Report which was not a new bright idea from NFP, these reports were developed from 1969 before our Independence, Mr. Speaker, Sir but the FijiFirst Government will be developing the education sector plan which will include the resource implication, evaluation strategies and monitoring mechanism which was absolutely missing in the Education Commission Report 2000.

My hardworking teachers, Permanent Secretary and the staff of MEHA are consistently working on several fronts to improve the quality of education and I reiterate, quality improvement in education is a continuous process that needs to take place all the time. It is not one time fixed. Mr. Speaker, Sir the honourable member and honourable Prof. Prasad as well can talk all they want but the reality is, NFP cannot take away what the FijiFirst Government has done in the education sector under the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister. The FijiFirst has educated more Fijian children than NFP, SODELPA and every other party combined. In fact, NFP's count is zero at the moment.

Importance of Pine Industry in Fiji

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, appreciation is given to previous government's vision and support by the Colonial Government, the Alliance Party Government through the leadership of the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, SVT Government through the leadership of Major-General (Ret'd) Sitiveni Rabuka, SDL Government through the late Mr. Laisenia Qarase for their continued vision and support for the establishment of pine forest plantations, processing of logs, marketing of subsequent products for the benefit of the landowners and Fiji as a nation and for the reversion of the Pine Industry to the landowners to own and manage.

Identifying of economically depressed areas particularly on the drier side of the Fiji Islands – Viti Levu and Vanua Levu with smaller islands through extension services of the Ministry of Forestry to establish pine plantations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefit to landowners will also benefit other races for various businesses and the nation as a whole. So, the purpose of the Pine Industry is to first benefit the landowners in substantial ways, with flow-on effect to others in doing businesses within the industry and to the nation as a whole; increase production, increase GDP, increase export foreign exchange, employment, business opportunities, et cetera. That is how important (as planned) the Pine Industry is to the nation as a whole. What benefits the landowners flows on the other races and to the nation in totality. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, benefits to the pine landowners has been minimal.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- They have been deprived and this can be improved substantially. When we come into the Government, we are going to improve it substantially. Most emphasis are on others and to the nation- but to the landowners? That is the question to the honourable Minister for Forestry who is responsible for Pine Industry and Pine Board. They have fallen short of helping the landowners. In fact, the FijiFirst Government has stolen from Fiji Pine landowners, fallen short of giving them maximum or fair benefits from their resources. They are robbers. You know what robbers do? They steal, kill and also destroy. That is them - the FijiFirst Government.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Point of Order.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- The Ministry of Forestry was instrumental in the establishment of these forests in obtaining consent/approval from the landowners.

MR. SPEAKER.- There is a Point of Order.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member has said that the FijiFirst Government steals and kills. What are we stealing and what are we killing? He needs to tell us. You cannot just tell us, you need to prove it. What have we stolen and what have we killed? There is a Point of Order, he cannot misrepresent things to Parliament, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, take note of that.

HON. M. BULANAUCA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The forest plantation consists of a total area between 76,000 hectares to 88,500 hectares excluding Private Woodlots or Extension Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior consultation with the landowners were obtained through the Ministry of Forestry, Ministry of Lands, iTLTB and Ministry of Fijian Affairs. It is very important to have prior consultation. Benefits envisaged, discussed and agreed to by the landowners before giving their consent and approval for leasing were as follows:

1. Development of land - opening up of locked lands, roads, water, buildings, et cetera, for landowners and community and nation will benefit;
2. A lease, providing security of tenure to the Government for such industry development and nation;
3. Lease premium and rentals subject to re-assessment of 25, 10 or 5 years depending on the lease issued. The landowners and community will benefit;
4. Employment and contract opportunities in nursery, land preparation, planting, maintenance, logging, et cetera, landowners, other races, community and the nation will benefit as well; and
5. Business opportunities both for other private entrepreneurs and landowners themselves. Landowners and other races in the nation will benefit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are also indirect benefits. It started off from the Ministry of Forestry with the experimental stations in transferring the management to Fiji Pine Commission who increased the land areas required in raising of seedlings and nurseries, land preparation, planting and maintenance and these stations brought services and development assistance to the community in harvesting stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Pine Limited, commissioned the changed to a commercial company, the Fiji Pine Limited was registered to be responsible for the efficient, effective and profitable

business management in harvesting of pine plantations. This change from a Government Service Entity to a Commercial Business Entity also brought additional benefits in services and developments to the landowners, community and the nation as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tropik Woods Limited, in the early 1980s, the foundation was laid for construction of the chip mill, I was there. This company was created to process pine logs to chips with international agreements, and also value-added pine sawn-timber for marketing and selling particularly to Japan and China.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Malau Fiji Forest Industry (FFI). Native timber subsidiary, is no longer working, it has failed and assets have been sold, the FijiFirst Government too will also be sold as well.

The Pine Group, to consolidate business efforts into value adding and marketing growth both locally and internationally.

The Fiji Pine Trust, the *iTaukei* landowners' affairs of the pine industry was normally within the Commission originally but the Fiji Pine Trust was established to specifically focus on resolving and improving landowners' affairs within the pine industry. This move also saw improvements to services and developments to the local communities and the nation as a whole. But what has come of the Fiji Pine Trust now? Who is now handling the landowners' affairs?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a forest business is normally a long-term one and Fiji Pine Industry business is no exception. Subject to natural disasters and political disturbances, most of the forest plantations in Viti Levu were severely and disadvantageously affected. As a result and due to new experiences, struggles and teething problems associated, the Fiji Pine Limited operated at a reducing deficit over the years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, however, in 1991 and 1992, the Fiji Pine Limited Board approved a capital structure to take the operations through to another 15 years to 20 years before it can expect profitability by 2007 when Bua Plantation which was considered the best plantation come into operation for harvest.

Performance, from 2014, production came from about 539,000 cubic metres, dropped in 2016 to 106,000 metres and recovered again in 2017 there were a dropped of 200,000 cubic metres and recovered again in 2017 and 2018 of 395,000 cubic metres, it was good that they bounced back after *TC Winston*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also the exported chips dropped from 349,000 metric tonnes to 106,000 metric tonnes in 2014 to 2016 and up again to about 232,000 metric tonnes in 2017 and 2018. We do not have the figures for 2018 and 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the export value also dropped to \$18,000 but bounced back to \$37 million in 2018. There are two figures here for 2018 and 2019, which one is correct, I am not too sure. You must be careful that annual reports that you produce are correct; one says \$47 million for the export value, one says \$78 million.

What I am concerned with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the proportion of export of sawn timber which is ever increasing. It is between 50 percent and 80 percent of export, apart from chips. The percentage of sawn timber export to value added products remains with an exceptionally high proportion between 50 percent and 80 percent. That needs to be rectified.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to value add more of our timber products for exports rather than exporting proportionately high sawn timber. When we come to government, we will do that. We will add more value add products for export.

Fiji Pine Limited holds 99.8 percent Government shares, but it needs to be properly explained to clear issues here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Through a share capital structure approved by Fiji Pine Board in 1991 and 1992 to ensure profitability and Government to, at least, recover its establishment costs, reversion or transfer of Fiji Pine Limited to resource owners. Resource owners are to redeem ownership of the pine industry in Fiji.

The shares should be as follows:

1. Class A - 0.2 percent for the Fiji Pine Trust or the landowners valued at \$100,000, with voting right and dividend right.
2. Class B - 0.2 percent with the value of \$100,000 with the Government of Fiji, with voting right and chairmanship.
3. Class C - 99.6 percent of Government with \$69 million, the value for establishment cost, the Government of Fiji with no voting right nor dividend right. But it is redeemable by the landowners themselves through provincial and chairmanship to remain with the Government.

Bua Pine Plantation on board profitable in 2007 and the Fiji Pine Trust to redeem Class C shares from profits because it is important.

How much of the establishment cost of \$69 million has been paid? How much shares is now held by the resource owners? That is the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Bua Pine Plantation commenced harvesting by 2007 as envisaged by the Fiji Pine Management Board since early 1990s. Fiji Pine Limited profited in 2009 - \$11 million, 2013 - \$20 million and 2014 - \$24 million. When you total that, it amounts to \$55 million.

Fiji Pine Limited had paid over the years about \$9 million and \$7 million in 2018. It was the election year. This year, we should expect another \$10 million payout because of the election year. Where is the balance of \$46 million?

If it has been paid to redeem shares, fine - no one knows, where? The resource owners are in the dark here. That is exactly why I wanted an inquiry through a petition in this Parliament into the pine and mahogany industry to clear all these issues, but the door has been closed. We need to clarify, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where is the transparency? Why do you keep suppressing the resource owners?

What about the years from 2007 to 2022? Taking away four years – 2007/2008, initial entry preparatory years of Bua Pine and 2020 and 2021 for COVID-19, we are left with eight years. Profits assuming a conservative estimates of \$20 million profit a year, would total \$160 million. Where is that?

Therefore, a total of \$215 million should have been with Fiji Pine Trust now, less \$69 million plantation establishment costs to Government. If paid in full by now, a balance of \$145 million should now remain with Fiji Pine Trust. Where is the money, Mr. Speaker, Sir? They have only been paid \$9 million, where is \$206 million? FijiFirst Party has stolen it from the Fiji Pine landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a continuation of the suppression of the resource owners in this country. It is part of the Sunset Clause - Cultural Autonomy Thesis. When we will remove that Sunset Clause, we will free the landowners from suppression and oppression.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the capital structure, resource owners should be helped or assisted to rise to management level to attain at least 50 percent at management level by 2016. We have already passed that now. If this has not been done or achieved, why not? Resource owners should have been awarded scholarships for management level leadership at various areas within the pine industry, but I noticed that during the Standing Committee of Natural Resources visit to the Fiji Pine Limited Office, there are only five managers, including the Chief Executive Officer, but none of them are resource owners. When are you going to implement that? Do you not have a heart for the poor resource owners?

Forget it, we will do it for the resource owners. It is too late for you now. Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the capital structure as well, the vision and to fulfil the promises and purposes or reasons for the establishment of the pine industry in Fiji to revert pine industry to resource owners at a certain point in time and in this case by 2025.

If the FijiFirst Party going to return the pine industry as promised and planned, Year 2025, is not far away, what have you done for the reversion? What can you do now? It does not appear to me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no will for FijiFirst Government. Why cannot the resource owners own their own resources and business entity? When we become the next Government, we will do it.

We will ensure the following, Mr. Speaker, Sir:

- (1) Ensure investment confidence in general is enjoyed by business people - the engine of growth of any economy;
- (2) Fiji Pine Limited and Tropik Woods Limited continue to be profitable;
- (3) Ensure majority ownership by the landowners of the Pine Industry in both, Fiji Pine Limited and Tropik Wood;
- (4) Sustainability of both the plantations, milling, processing, selling and marketing are secure;
- (5) Increased meaningful participation of resource owners in management, doing businesses in all areas within the pine industry;
- (6) Increased dividends and benefits to resource owners and shareholders;
- (7) Open up opportunities and promote simpler ways of doing businesses in and outside the pine industry.

MR. SPEAKER.- Your time is up, Honourable Member.

Before we move on, Honourable Members, I remind everyone that you have an allocation of 10 minutes for End of Week Statements. Organise your material so that you achieve that time. We work to a timetable and when you are warned from the Speaker, take heed of it.

Honourable Members, we will move on and I now call on the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development, to deliver his response.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, I do not know why the honourable Leader of SODELPA is leaving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the same way Honourable Bulanauca could not keep track of time, in the same way he could not keep track of the funds when he was in Fiji Pine. Let me go through the gobbledygook that he actually poured on his table.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pine Group delivered yet another record breaking result for the 2021-2022 financial year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Pine Group delivered a historical record operational profit of \$41.9 million. Not only that, Sir, the Pine Group became debt free for the first time ever after paying the last lump sum payment of \$2.2 million which they owed to the Government to sell the last of its debts.

The Pine Group, Mr. Speaker, Sir, contributed \$629,000 towards landowner community development projects which included education, water, solar projects, cyclone rehabilitation, et cetera. Unprecedented levels of engagement and consultation with landowners was carried out and continues to be carried out. The landowners now get firsthand information on Fiji Pine Limited's plans and achievements.

Honourable Bulanauca, please listen and honourable Leawere too.

Through this record levels of lease renewals and new leases have been consented too by the landowners which I know Honourable Bulanauca is trying to actually stifle, adding up to more than 5,000 hectares of lease renewals in just 15 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Pine Group of Companies has undertaken a journey of ambitious pine planting. This is to address the neglect of the past where pine forests were irresponsibly harvested without focus on sustainability and business continuity.

Just last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Pine Group achieved a record planting of 4,300 hectares. This year, the Group has challenged itself to achieve a planting of 7,300 hectares. We can see the energy, we can see the drive, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can see the happiness in engagement of the pine landowners which, of course, is unprecedented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of these has been achieved through the FijiFirst Government's vision and bold actions to bring about reforms and changes. The Pine Industry, figuratively speaking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was raped and pillaged by previous Governments and Boards for whom only the petty politics or political point scoring by people like Honourable Bulanauca, mattered. They served the elites and left the ordinary landowners behind.

Honourable Bulanauca, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was actually one of those who sat on the Fiji Pine Limited Board and shamelessly played with the aspirations of ordinary landowners, and he continues to do that. Yet, he continues to harp about the pine industry and the forestry sector. He continues to harp about the shareholding structure of Pine Group without having any understanding, nor any genuineness towards landowners. The pine landowners are well-informed and we will not be fooled by the likes of honourable Bulanauca.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just in terms of the shareholding itself, he does not understand the shareholding classes. The landowners own Class A shares or which is the ordinary shares which is the only class that has dividend rights. Class B and Class C redeemable preferences are owned by Government, they do not have any dividend rights whatsoever. If the landowners were to redeem those shares, they will have to pay \$62 million. He does not tell us that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other point that I also wanted to make to all the pine landowners out there, you have seen the results through all the reforms that the FijiFirst Government has carried out, you are now been

consulted on everything that the industry does. This is, of course is unprecedented. Additionally, the Company has paid \$34 million, honourable Bulanauca, in lease security bonus payments since 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister will be part of yet another dividend payout later on in the next few months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in return for the trust the landowners have placed on the Group, Fiji Pine Limited pays them back millions of dollars every year in the following ways:

1. Land leased rental of \$13 per hectare;
2. Stumpage payment at 12 percent of net revenue;
3. Lease premium of \$20 per hectare on lease renewals when offer letters are received by iTLTB;
4. Land on a community development funded 5.5 percent;

Fiji Pine manages this and landowners apply for their assistance through this fund for education and other areas that give priority, for example, rural electrification and various other projects, cyclone rebuilt after the cyclone, et cetera.

The dividend lease security bonus payments is announced based on the Company's financial performance after the annual accounts have been audited. For the past two years, Sir, the lease security bonus payment methodology was designed as follows:

- 30 percent of the bonus amount is distributed equally to the members of the landowning unit through iTLTB's equal lease distribution mechanism. There is no deduction of any fee by iTLTB. The Fiji Pine Group pays the service fees to iTLTB separately, so, we pay them separately.
- 70 percent of the bonus amount is directed towards the landowning based projects. Again, we provide project options for landowners to choose from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to make is that, from a verge of collapse in 2008 prior to which the likes of honourable Bulanauca were involved, reaping all the benefits or the junkets they used to have, the Fiji Pine Group as we speak has cash at bank of \$83 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are record levels of pine planting. The six forest stations have been revived and infrastructure has been put back. These stations are located on isolated areas, however, all of them have facilities of modern office, internet connectivity, et cetera. As we speak, there is a brand new office complex being built in Lekutu in Bua. This is a state-of-the-art facility and it is expected to be opened by the honourable Prime Minister in two months' time.

The Pine Group is also putting up a new sawmill at Drasa, they already have one, and you should go and see. It is a state-of-the-art mill. They are putting up another one, as part of its business diversification plan, to process or value-add other species logs, honourable Bulanauca. Listen to that!

This is done because pine forests are quickly facing sustainable issues due to neglect in planting in the past due to mismanagement which took the industry to its knees. The new sawmill facility will cost \$16 million and the project has already commenced.

The Pine Group, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also is planning to construct a shopping complex or mall at the Drasa Avenue in Lautoka. The land has been secured and surveyed. Depending on the

feasibility study, this project will take form in the next two to three years. A budget of \$20 million has been allocated for this developer, honourable Saukuru, listen to that.

Pine Group, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a living example of how resources owners can be empowered and provided returns, if the organisation is run ethically, is run by good managers and in line with good governance processes. That did not exist when he was there. It is now happening because the right people are doing the right job.

At the end of the day, what matters, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the dividend that the landowners get. And for the landowners to get the right dividend, they need to have the right people in the management, not based on what honourable Bulanauca says, not based on provincialism or ethnicity or whatever, but the right people to do the job, so that at the end of the day it is the dividend that matters, not people who fill in positions. They just want to fill in positions so they can get the perks. The ordinary landowners will suffer. They have never got this kind of bonuses they have been receiving since 2013, they have never got it. He knows that! You go to church, do not lie.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this journey of transformation started through the vision of the present government. The industry since its inception was manipulated for self-interest and self-interested people, to name a few like honourable Bulanauca, with the likes of people like George Speight who were involved in Fiji Hardwood Corporation Ltd. This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been transformed and there is no room for such activities. People like him continue with their narrative but the reality on the ground is completely different and the landowners do that and they will actually show that in the next coming months.

Removal of Year 1 to Year 3 Examinations

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning I rise to speak on the Government's initiative to do away tests and exams for Years 1 to 3. Exams in early primary school has been experienced by all of us in this House. How we coped and reacted to this is an individual experience, the degree of lightness and dreadfulness to sit for mid-year or annual exams in the early school days have imprinted some anxious and nervous depictions in our minds.

Our school system demands a satisfactory score in standardised tests to constitute a pass, however, administering these tests in early primary schools especially in Grades 1 to 3 three has put many young and developing minds through lots of pressure and agony. The burden of increasing test scores in Maths and Science has inevitably drawn away the fun to learn and progress. Tests and exams in early primary schooling has subjected young minds to the methods of memorising lessons and discourage a child's creative impetus.

The well-known Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget has categorised children of early primary school into late pre-operational and much into concrete operational cognitive development stage. At this early learning stage, children are getting better with language and thinking, however, they still tend to think about things in very concrete terms thus loading them with homework, tests and exams effectively withdraws the excitement and time to learn new concepts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the stigma associated with not performing well in early school days have undoubtedly forced the slow learners to abstain from school and eventually drop out of the formal education sector. These children may have the untapped potential to excel in fields of interest but the loads of tests and exams force them away from realising their dreams.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, removing exams for the young ones would become the game changer for the education system and its future. Removal of thematic teaching and introduction of civic and

moral values would inculcate everlasting good virtues in the young minds who would later take the nation to the desired achievement level. Education with right thoughts, words and attitude will give more success to our future generations. It is high time we become realistic and genuine towards the education of our citizens.

I have heard lobbyists harping on removing exams would dilute the education system but may I remind them that Finland has completely revolutionised their education system outranking USA. Finland has no standardised tests but a voluntary test for students at the end of an upper secondary school. The education system in Finland allows the students autonomy and encourage creative play instead of putting students in a competitive race for top grades. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our education system demands a test and exam-based learning starting from early primary school. Standardised testing is the blanket way we test for subject comprehension.

While immersed with this, it inadvertently takes away the components of happy, harmonious and healthy student and learning environment. What often happens is that students will learn to cram just to pass a test and teachers will be teaching with a sole purpose of students passing a test. Creative learning is unintentionally diluted and possibly distant. Removing mandatory tests and exams for Grades 1 to 3 would give more time to focus on rudimentary lessons on arts and crafts, food and health, music and physical education. This does not mean that the basic tenets of literacy and numeracy are ignored.

The early primary schools should focus on these and help develop the young minds for more advanced primary schooling, more open learning where children are subjected to independent and interest guided learning should be encouraged with the grading system set by a teacher to monitor the progress. These all are achievable and the present curriculum should be revisited to adopt changes and make room for more interactive learning with no formal assessment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government under the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister began the education revolution in this country with the introduction of free education for primary and secondary schools, subsidised transport and other assistance to students and gave unprecedented access to tertiary education with the Tertiary Education Loans Schemes (TELS) and National Toppers Scheme (NTS). This Government will continue to ensure that every child receives primary and secondary education fully paid by the Government. Not only that, the Government encourages children of school age to be in schools.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly support FijiFirst Government's initiative to reform early primary school education, removing tests and exams for Years 1 to 3. This would make going to school more fun and exciting.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Lal for his statement which I fully support and I would like to add further to what he had said.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2022 academic year, schools will no longer conduct exams for Years 1 to 3. The current examination system distorts curriculum intention and kills innovative teaching and encourages rote learning. This must change to create room for critical thinking and analytical mind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, students need to demonstrate a range of skills and qualities such as problem solving, team work, communication, initiatives and flexibility. The outcome of education is no longer simply acquisition of knowledge which is readily available. It is about exploring ideas, without ideas there is no creativity and without creativity there is no innovation.

In a 37-week school year, students from Years 1 to 13 have been sitting for term exams. In total, there are three term exams and some schools can have up to two mid-term exams in addition to this. There is a constant pressure on teachers to cover the curriculum and conduct revisions and exams. What is taught to our children are facts which they must rote learn because it can be tested in the exam. A child's educational journey should be an enjoyable one. Learning should be fun so they become lifelong learners, it is therefore critical that we create learners who are interested in learning and are able to learn on their own.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a teacher centred teaching will take us nowhere. At least in the 21st century, we must change the teaching style from teacher centred to child centred. The emphasis needs to be changed to one that values process over content and understanding over rote learning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children learn more in the early years than at any other time in their life. It is crucial that these early learning experiences are positive and appropriate to their age and not an imitation of the formal school system. In fact students at such an early age deserve more time for inquiry- based learning and learning through games and activities. There is a need to move away from an examination system that stresses the concept of passing and failing and putting very young children in a hierarchal from smart, intelligent students to weak or poor students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such practice affects the self-esteem of lower achieving students and it could make it harder to convince them that they can succeed in life. At such young age, it can reduce their motivation for learning and gradually they dropout from school. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our community and it is something that is often practiced in our society that we tend to compare our children's' results with our neighbours and family and that puts added pressure to the young ones.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improvements at the lower Primary level will mean that children would accomplish more at Secondary level. A strong foundation and learning at this level yields high returns throughout life. Examination-oriented approach does not address the acquisition of practical skills, values and attitudes in young learners. It does not encourage higher-order skills such as critical and analytical skills.

Education Superstar Globally is Singapore's school system. Without examinations, their Primary school learning is designed to build a strong educational foundation for children. Their focus is the development of problem solving skills, building character, nurturing, sound values and good habits. The Education Commission Report 2000 clearly states and I quote:

“Many Submissions to the 2000 Commission from stakeholder groups and the public at large were highly critical of the lack of creativity in the teaching and learning programmes of Primary schools and the extent to which the testing and examination system prevents this occurring.”

It also states that for teachers, coverage curriculum becomes the key task rather than development of conceptual understanding using methods of enquiry and problem solving. Mr. Speaker, Sir, removing examinations does not mean students will not be assessed. We need to introduce a variety of other assessment methods and procedures capable of producing a range of valued learning outcomes.

This could take place in many forms including in-class discussions, quizzes, group work and reflections. These are highly effective because students get direct feedback to improve. Mr. Speaker, Sir, by removing exams at this early stages of learning, we will expose students to discover their very own interest and talents. The recent launch of the Revised Literacy and Numeracy Curriculum

focusses on the enhancement of inquiry-based learning which is appropriate as this would complement the non-examination atmosphere in the classrooms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Head Teacher's Association fully supports the Ministry's decision to remove examinations for Years 1, 2 and 3. The President of the Fiji Head Teacher's Association said and I quote:

“Any educator with right mind should support this new call because this will allow teachers to spend more time on learning and teaching rather than preparing students for examinations, particularly at this early stage. It is high time that we need to be realistic and genuine when it comes to the education of our young ones.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we aim to develop our children holistically with a range of skills and developed in their civic pride, the very core values that defines the character of a person. Assessment methods have a strong influence over what teachers teach and what and how students learn. We need to move away from pencil and paper test that upholds concepts of pass and fail. Putting children in the rank of first, second, third, et cetera will not build a strong foundation for lifelong learning as required in the 21st Century.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this change has been brought about based on the consultation that we had and also the recommendation made in the Education Commission Report 2000.

Rural Roads in Fiji

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise this afternoon to speak on the End of the Week Statement under my name on the subject of Rural Roads in Fiji.

Before I go into that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to praise the God Almighty for blessing this country with FijiFirst Government and I praise God for putting the Opposition to be the Opposition because that is where they rightly belong.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years ,rural road development in Fiji has picked up at a fast pace and Government is increasingly focussing on rural roads. This is because we know that there are many economic and social benefits offered by rural roads. These roads are equally important as urban roads.

From 2016 to 2022 an additional 188 kilometres of rural roads was constructed. Rural roads are often considered to be the lifetime of rural communities. They play an important role in poverty alleviation, enable transportation, linking producers to markets, workers to jobs, students to schools and sick to hospitals, as roads are vital to any development and economic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Fiji Road Infrastructure, we have a total of around 11,000 kilometres of road in Fiji of which, 6,400 kilometres is under the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) and the balance is categorised as community access roads, farm access roads, cane access roads, logging roads or private roads. The FRA is the authority that manages 4,600 kilometres of sealed roads and 1,800 kilometres of unsealed roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on constitutional rights to reasonable transportation; the 2013 Fijian Constitution provides every Fijian with socio-economic and environmental rights. The realisation of

these rights is critical for inclusive and sustainable development. This empowers every Fijian through the provision of essential social services and other public goods. Sir, under the Section 34 of the Fijian Constitution, all Fijians has the right to reasonable access to transportation. This is further aligned to the 5-Year or 20- Year National Development Plan (NDP).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Government's investment on rural roads; Government has been taking various proactive steps to boost rural roads as they play a very important role in enhancing income-generating opportunities for the people, followed by other benefits.

Sir, while the construction of urban roads is important, it is equally important to develop rural roads. Government regards all Fijians as equally deserving of development, rural or urban. It is the same reason that the Fijian Government has increased its investments in rural road development programmes over the years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past six years, Government through FRA, has invested around \$43.9 million on the construction of rural roads. This has benefitted around 94 communities. Apart from rural roads, a total of \$113.8 million was directed towards the renewal and replacement of crossings and bridges. This has enhanced connectivity from our rural to urban roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the information of the House, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, through the Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) Programme, also constructs community access roads in rural areas. In doing so, from 2018 to 2021, a total of 199 CARFF roads were constructed, amounting to \$22.9 million, benefiting over 3,900 people. This has not only provided basic access, but also opened up these communities to other opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the benefits for rural roads; one may ask, what are the benefits of investment on these rural roads? To name a few:

1. It offers better transportation facilities, rural roads contribute significantly by creating linkages, thus increasing the opportunities to access goods and services located in nearby villages or major towns and markets.
2. It boosts agricultural activities and productivity. Rural roads are essential for sustaining agricultural development also. A good network of rural roads can provide a boost to the agricultural activities by timely transportation of water, seeds and other raw materials needed for farming.
3. It improves mobility and saves time. The presence of roads in rural areas increase the mobility of labour and materials. Typically, rural roads can ensure shorter travel time and the time saved this way may help the rural poor to be productive and generate increased incomes.
4. It gives access to essential services, such as, healthcare and education. Improved road connectivity can also enhance access of rural masses to education services. They can travel to nearest towns and cities and get better and higher education, which can open better employment opportunities for them. In addition, they can also access quality healthcare medical services, such as maternity services, dental, physicians, et cetera.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all Governments in Fiji have been investing to some degree in rural roads. The Bainimarama-led Government have not only continued their focus, but also raised

their focus to another level. It has continued to focus on the needs of the rural and maritime communities.

As I speak today, work on the Vunisei to Vacalea Road in Kadavu is continuing and weather permitting, will be completed by September this year. By next year, one should be able to drive from Nabukalevu-i-Ra and Kadavu up to Vunisea, on to Vunisei, drive past the villages up Naceva, go all the way to Vacalea in Nakasaleka, or drive up to Naleca Jetty in Kavala Bay.

On the Island of Kadavu, there has been very significant investments in rural roads, and the same is true to other islands and maritime districts and rural parts of Fiji. Kadavu is important for the Government and there has been considerable developments in Kadava these past few years.

But, it is not only Kadavu, also in other rural and maritime areas. The emphasis on rural roads continues. This Government focusses on leaving no one behind in everything it does, and that commitment will never diminish.

To conclude, the FijiFirst Government will continue to develop rural roads to ensure that our rural communities have access to social and economic opportunities.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Member for her End of the Week Statement. For the response, I now call on the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise this afternoon to further contribute to the End of the Week Statement delivered by the honourable Adimaitoga, on one of the most critical determinants in our rural communities which is rural roads.

Firstly, as Minister responsible for infrastructure, I must say that the building and maintaining of rural roads is critical but challenging. Probably more challenging now than it was years ago. This is because there are other emerging factors that we have to deal with, such as:

- the effect of climate change;
- the more intensive tropical cyclones that have a direct impact on our road infrastructure;
- the changing weather patterns;
- intense rainfall resulting in floods that are washing away crossings and landslides causing road slips;
- high volume of traffic with heavy vehicles, such as logging trucks using our rural road infrastructure and damaging it, especially after heavy rains;
- the high demand and requirement to build more resilient infrastructure, taking into account the need to have the right design and also having a competent road contractor to deliver the works on the ground. A good example is the damage to our road infrastructure due to adverse weather at the beginning of this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had travelled around Viti Levu earlier this year to see first-hand the damages on our road infrastructure due to the weather, in particular, flooding, and it was devastating. Along the Kavanagasau River Bank of Sigatoka, we could see the road that has slipped away on the side of the river. It washed out nearly three-quarters of the road in Kabisi, Nadi, the Bure-i-Wai Crossing in Ra washed out by strong currents, landslides in the highlands of Ba, and looking also at the Burewai crossing in Tailevu North.

According to FRA estimates, the cost of the damage from the flooding in the early part of this year amounts to around \$100 million, and that is a lot of money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this means that we need to lift and we are lifting our game because we cannot continue to rely on the old way of doing things as much as roads are concerned. That is one of the reasons we have established the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), to ensure that we can lift the level of our service to match the kind of challenges we face today in road construction.

For rural roads, there are a number of implementing agencies that are involved in the construction of the Rural Road Project. These are namely the:

1. Fiji Roads Authority;
2. Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development with its CARFF programme;
3. Ministry of Agriculture which has the Farm Roads;
4. Ministry of Forestry for the forestry and pine roads; and
5. Ministry of Sugar for cane access roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FRA manages most of the road infrastructure in Fiji. Other implementing agencies that I have mentioned do construct basic rural access roads which can later be upgraded to FRA standard and some of these are eventually taken over by the FRA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vision of FRA is to provide affordable, integrated, safe, responsible and sustainable network of roads, bridges and jetties. As mentioned earlier, there is a real challenge, given the emerging issues that we have to deal with.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FRA is now implementing best practices, to ensure that we have a robust rural road network, together with resilient infrastructure such as crossings and bridges. How is it doing this? It is looking at design improvement.

Taking into consideration the changing weather patterns, FRA infrastructure design is focussing more on resilience and sustainability. As an example, now FRA constructs box culverts instead of the round culverts, box culverts higher to ensure that there is free flow of water during heavy downpour which avoids the washout. As we know rainfall is heavy now, it is very intense so we have to redesign the kind of culverts that we use in these areas.

When deemed necessary, crossings are upgraded to bridges due to continuous washout. For one example, right in the middle of Viti Levu, we are now building the Fiji \$6.1 million Matawali Bridge which connects the main road network to the highlands of Nadroga/Navosa. The existing crossing washes out in nearly every heavy downpour. In some wet seasons, they will have to fix that crossing up to 10 times in just one season. Now, we are putting in a \$6.1 million bridge right in the middle of Navosa. We are building a new 64-metre bridge that is currently being constructed which will be completed this year.

The second that it is now focussing on is the procurement process. Mr. Speaker, Sir, FRA has strengthened its procurement process to ensure that the best contractors are hired for the job.

Now, FRA has a well-defined criteria for contractors who take up road contracts. There is a strong emphasis on the ability of the contractor to deliver the project with a quality output.

Thirdly, capacity building. Sir, FRA is working with local contractors to ensure that they go through capacity building programmes to be up to par with overseas contractors. This is not only to ensure that they have the right knowledge but for these contractors to deliver better.

Fourthly, standards is another important element that FRA is driving for newly constructed rural roads. Most of the rural roads constructed in the past are unsealed. This is something that FRA is looking to change and, that is, for more newly constructed rural roads to be sealed. For example, the first planned newly constructed rural sealed road is the Nakoro-Navitilevu Road in the highlands of Navosa. This is right in the middle of Navosa. Nakoro is where the Honourable Prime Minister opened their solar electrification system recently, and I have visited the road that has been built up to Navitilevu and because of the terrain there, they are looking to seal that particular road.

Fifthly, availability of raw materials is another challenge when it comes to the construction of rural roads, particularly within our maritime communities. For example, the availability of aggregate to the gravel for road construction. Now, FRA has identified and arranged for strategically positioned quarries in the islands so they can supply aggregate closed to where it is needed.

I have visited some of these quarries such as on Kiobo near the village of Namara, Sanima in Kadavu, Yale in Kadavu and also in Nukutocia in Ovalau.

Having these quarries on the islands is much more cost efficient because in the past, a lot of the road contractors would have to cart the aggregate from Viti Levu to the islands. So, there is a major cost component there in carting the materials across. With those quarries on site, a lot of these issues will be reduced.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has done far more on our rural roads, as has been expressed by the honourable Adimatoga, far more on our rural roads than any other government before us. This has brought about immense benefits to recipients of these developers, these are benefits that are just access to materials. People are able to take their farm produce to the market from the village on wheels, before they used to carry it on horseback or by foot, walking for miles to get to the road, wait for the bus and then go down to the markets or wait for the carrier.

Yesterday, we mentioned Nakida Village in the highlands of Naitasiri, before they had the road, I walked along the track, along the banks of the river that the villagers had been using with the honourable Waqainabete and honourable Vijay Nath. It took us more than three hours crossing the same river 23 times in 2019. The late honourable Osea Naiqamu came with us and he joined the team that walked on the planned route of the eventual road.

Today the pilot-cut of the road has reached the village. The villagers are already using it and the road is being improved to a standard whereby it can be handed over to FRA.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Today they can begin to supply *yaqona* and *dalo* to the market using the road and as the road is upgraded and finally completed, larger volumes of market goods can be sent to the market via this road.

Similar partnerships are being done across Fiji where Community “X” road is built initially by the Community, Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) Project under the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and eventually taken over by the Fiji Roads Authority.

These roads allow for people to have access to quality education, a village boy, a village girl can attend tertiary education and achieve the dreams that they have for their career, accessing of health care and transporting of building materials. When I was in Nakida, I was told that building materials used to reach the village by bamboo rafts. They would actually pull these rafts upstream,

over the rocks, they would camp on the banks of the river as they pulled the building materials up to their village. So that now will be a thing of the past.

There are other rural works that are currently underway:

- Wainiyavu to Wainilotulevu, Namosi Road, Namuamua to Nukusere, the Namosi Rural Road Access to Waibogi and Wainidiro, Serua, all of these costing \$19.8 million.
- Matokana Village Access Road, once again, in the highlands of Nadroga/Navosa - \$3.7 million.
- Nakoro to Navitilevu Access Road in the highlands of Nadroga/Navosa - \$8.5 million.
- Vagadra Village Access Road in the highlands of Nadroga - \$6.72 million.
- Nanuku to Nalotawa Village Access Road, Ba Province - \$5.4 million.
- The road that I visited recently, a place where they thought they would never have roads because it is such a rocky and difficult terrain - Veidrala Village Access Road in the Ra Province, costing \$2.78 million.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government will continue to develop our rural roads to ensure that everyone is connected and no one is left behind. There are planned rural roads in Vanua Levu to be done by FRA and there will be continued work done by the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development with the CARFF Programmes and the community access programmes which utilises the resources that landowners have in building the roads. Eventually, these roads will be passed on to FRA.

In parts of Fiji, we have existing non-FRA roads that are used for public transport on access to schools, access to health facilities, village, settlements, et cetera. On an informal basis, FRA has tried to assist the maintenance of such roads in the past, now however, in this just recently revised budget, the Government has now provided a one-off budget of \$5 million this year to improve and do some maintenance of these roads. Some of these roads are in rural areas while others are in peri-urban areas.

The Government is committed to rural roads in all of Fiji. As I sit in Parliament and listen to questions from the Opposition, each Member of that side always ask about the area that they regard as their constituency. I can imagine if they ever came into power, that is what they will do, they will just focus on rural roads in their area. This Government does not do that. We look at the needs across all Fiji, we treat everyone fairly. We look at the most critical issues and address those upfront. Just as this Government is pro-poor and pro-the marginalised, unlike those in Parliament who oppose the Revised Budget despite the many things included in the Revised Budget that help the poor and the marginalised.

This Government has shown itself to be focussed on the needs of all our rural areas, of better rural access by roads and crossing in jetty, not only to those who elected them into Parliament or elected us into Parliament but for all Fijians, all rural areas, all equally unconditionally.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members that brings an end to today's Agenda item.

ADJOURNMENT

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 9th May, 2022 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I take this opportunity to thank you all for your participation during this week's sitting. That brings to an end this week's agenda and I now declare Parliament adjourn *sine die* until Monday, 9th May, 2022 at 9.30 a.m. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.42 p.m.