

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 7TH APRIL, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 7TH APRIL, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.38 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable N. Nawaikula 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 Wednesday, 6th 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 all 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. Honourable Members, we will proceed to the next item on the agenda.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report – Energy Fiji Limited
2019-2020 Annual Reports

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report of Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) 2019 and 2020 Annual Reports. The years 2019 and 2020 were filled with its own unique milestone and challenges for Energy Fiji Limited. As we are all aware, Fiji had its first COVID-19 case in 2020 and like every other organisation, EFL too felt the brunt of its effect. With international borders closing and the tourism industry and businesses coming to a standstill, EFL sales declined significantly due to the drop in the demand for electricity.

The Committee commends EFL for achieving its financial profit of \$66.79 million after tax in 2020 and compared to an audit profit after tax of \$63.74 million in 2019 despite the odds. The Committee lauds the great work carried out by EFL management and staff by keeping Fiji energised with managing assets over \$1 billion on working 24/7 during national disasters while also working within the restriction posed due to COVID-19.

While deliberating on the report, it was evident that EFL had been continuously working towards ensuring ease of access to their service by wide range of customers. The EFL's presence and service are available in the four main islands of Viti Levu, Vanua Levu, Ovalau and Taveuni. Most of their customers are on Post Pay services for logistical convenience, domestic customers in the rural remote areas are on pre-pay service as it is more economical for both customers and EFL. Sir, EFL had used various digital platforms to ensure that customers are able to pay their bills conveniently through services such as M-PAiSA, Digi Mobile Wallet, internet banking and Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale (EFTPOS).

Given that the world is moving towards digital technology, such initiatives are welcomed. Furthermore, the Committee is very pleased to note that COVID-19 did not hinder EFL's ability to enhance the skills and knowledge of their staff as training continued to run virtually in 2020 despite the various limitations. In fact, EFL in association with JICA conducted two sessions of Regional Training on Solar via online platform in March and November 2020 with 18 participants.

The Committee noted that EFL in collaboration with the Fijian Government, under the COVID-19 Economics Stimulus committed to assist low income households by providing a subsidy towards the payment of monthly electricity bills.

Finally, I would like to thank the Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this Report - honourable Veena Bhatnagar (Deputy Chairperson), honourable George Vegnathan, honourable Inosi Kuridrani and honourable Filipe Tuisawau. On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Consolidated Review Report on the Energy Fiji Limited 2019 and 2020 Annual Reports to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the contents of the Report is initiated at a future sitting date.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report - Compliance Audit Report

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report provides the Committee review findings on the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji on the Compliance Audit Report. The Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) was established as an Independent Office by the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji.

The function of the OAG is to conduct audits to determine whether an entity is achieving its objective in compliance with relevant legislations. These audits are carried out by the Auditor-General on behalf of Parliament. In this regard, the Auditor-General must submit a report on compliance audits carried out to Parliament. In addition, a single report may include two or more audits.

The Committee reviewed the Compliance Audit Report that comprised of the following audits:

1. Commencement of Quarry Development Projects and Appointment of Certified Foreman-in-Charge;
2. Government Payroll System;
3. Financial Management Information System (FMIS); and
4. Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS).

The Compliance Audit that was conducted were focused on line agencies that were involved and how each entity could complied with the relevant legislations, policies and procedures that were in place. In addition, the Audit also identified gaps and areas that needed to be addressed and strengthened.

The Committee commended the work done by the following Ministries and Departments in the administration and delivery of those programmes and services that were audited:

1. Department of Mineral Resources – Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources;
2. Payroll Section - Ministry of Economy;
3. Department of Information Technology and Computing Services; and
4. Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts

Given the audit results, the Committee looks forward to these agencies to address those gaps that were identified and strengthened the areas that were highlighted which needs improvement. Most importantly, implement the relevant recommendations that are put forward to enhance the service delivery for each entity.

Overall, I thank the Executives of the relevant Ministries and Departments for providing written responses to the audit issues that were raised on each audit topic and the measures that are in place. Also, not forgetting to commend the staff of the Office of the Auditor-General for the technical support provided to the Committee during the review process.

I also wish to extend my appreciation to the honourable Members of the Committee who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan report namely honourable Alvick Maharaj (Chairperson), honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa, honourable Virendra Lal and honourable Aseri Radrodoro.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the contents of the Report is initiated at a future sitting date.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

INVESTMENT FIJI BILL 2022

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Thursday, 10th February, 2022, I move:

That the Investment Fiji Bill 2022 (Bill No. 5 of 2022) be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Investment Fiji Bill 2022 was tabled in Parliament on 10th February, 2022 as Bill No. 5 of 2022.

The Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, had been referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for review. Following public consultations, the Standing Committee tabled its report on the review of the Bill in Parliament on Monday, 4th April, 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2017 the Fijian Government engaged the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the World Bank Group to undertake a review of Fiji's Investment Framework. Since the engagement the following have been achieved:

1. An Investment Reform map was developed to provide a pathway for the Fijian Government to align the investment policy reforms with short and medium term National Development Goals;
2. An Investment Policy Statement was developed based on the findings of the Investment Reform Map (IRM) to serve as the guiding policy for investments in Fiji; and
3. The Foreign Investment Act 1999 was reviewed and as a result of the review, the Investment Act 2021, which is the new Investment Act was enacted by Parliament on 3rd June, 2021.

The new Investment Act amongst other things:

1. Repeals the 1999 Act;
2. Establishes legal, social and economic principles with the development of investment activities in Fiji;
3. Defines the rights, duties and responsibilities of domestic and foreign investors;
4. Provides equity for investors with transparent, reliable, efficient and fair rules of procedure within the framework of the International Treaties and Agreements to which Fiji is a party;
5. Removes the issuance of Foreign Investment Registration Certificate by Investment Fiji; and
6. Removes the power for Investment Fiji to conduct investigations and inspections necessary for the purpose of regulating foreign investors.

Given the removal and Investment Fiji's function to issue Foreign Investment Registration Certificate, Sir, and its power to conduct investigations and inspections, a review of the Investment Act 1980 was conducted to realign the functions of Investment Fiji in order to complement the changes brought about by the new Investment Act.

The Investment Fiji Bill 2022 which is the outcome of the review of the 1980 Act, therefore seeks to replace the 1980 Act to realign the mandate and functions of Investment Fiji to that of a promotional agency. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of realigning the mandate and functions of Investment Fiji is to enable Investment Fiji to move away from being a regulator of foreign investors

in Fiji and to focus primarily on the role of being a promotional agency for attracting both foreign and domestic investors to invest in Fiji.

The Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, proposed the following as the new mandate of Investment Fiji:

1. Investment promotion: to increase the contribution made by investors in Fiji's economy by promoting Fiji's competitive and comparative advantages;
2. Investment facilitation: to facilitate all necessary information and services to assist prospective and existing investors to meet their specific investment project needs;
3. Export promotion: to facilitate and promote the development and expansion of export;
4. After-care: to provide investors with assistance to overcome any challenges to the growth and expansion of their activities and support investors with their expansion and diversification objectives;
5. Policy advocacy: to collect information and raise awareness on the challenges faced by investors and recommend reform measures to improve Fiji's investment and business-enabling environment; and
6. Image building: to promote Fiji as a desirable investment destination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, apart from the Committee, a number of consultations were held in respect to the formulation and drafting of the Bill with various agencies which I do not want to go into because the Committee is fully aware of that. In short, that is the introduction to the Bill. I could go onto the different clauses, but I am sure the honourable Members do want to speak on that. Essentially, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a realignment of Investment Fiji, the agency, to fit in to the new Investment Act and use it as a promotional agency.

As we have seen like last night, the honourable Prime Minister was at one of the outsourcing companies that recently was formed during the pandemic itself, and as we have seen, 3,000 were jobs created in that sector during the pandemic in the past two years. As a result of that, we have now seen a huge interest, Government has provided \$200,000 to Outsource Fiji, the Australian Government is now partnering with that.

I remember when we had mentioned this in the last session, people from the other side were saying, "oh, it is all pie in the sky stuff" but actually it is not. It is about a hundred thousand jobs being created. This is precisely what Investment Fiji is going to do, because they are going out now and targeting Australian companies that used to, for example, have their outsourcing centres in Philippines and India. Because of the pandemic, now they want to bring it closer to home. So, Investment Fiji's job now is to get those investors to come to Fiji, we have got the Fijian Government and Australian Government working together to promote Fiji as a destination.

We have now got Telstra that is going to buy Digicel, they also do a lot outsourcing and it creates a lot of jobs. In fact, what they are saying is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there will be a hundred thousand jobs created alone in the BPO sector in the next 10 years. So, that is Investment Fiji's job, to now go and promote, hand hold investors, not simply bring them in and leave them alone in a lurch, but to hand hold them, make sure that they do the right investments and ensure that they feel confident enough to continue to invest in Fiji, which of course will not only be good in terms of foreign reserves, in particular, a lot of them do a lot of exports, but also in the creation of jobs.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to speak on this today. Reforms and modernisation of business processes for us are no longer an option, but they have actually become a norm. It is a must for any nation that it is focused on growth and only quality

sustainable growth. Effective analysis and implementation of changes in business processes will not only help the Government in responding to the changing dynamics and societal needs, but also enable competitiveness in the international environment. Also the effectiveness of implementation of reforms will improve the use of public resources to enhance delivery of services, transparency, accountability and citizens' trust in our Government.

In line with the above and aligned to the international best practices, Sir, Investment Fiji Bill provides Investment Fiji the much desired scope to transform into fully-pledged investment promotion agency, an agency that is focussed on and is well equipped to serve investors, Mr. Speaker, both foreign and domestically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill will effectively allow Investment Fiji to:

- channel its resources and manpower towards undertaking promotional and marketing activities;
- develop investment attraction strategies; and
- focus on investment facilitation and after care (as mentioned by the honourable Attorney-General).

This is a significant shift, Mr. Speaker, from their current monitoring, enforcement and administrative task. Investment Fiji was used as a scapegoat by agencies. Even until today there are agencies that would prefer Investment Fiji to undertake screening of investors, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the role of the investment promotion agency.

At present, Investment Fiji is required to ensure that investors are adhering to requirements and legislations in place and they undertake policing roles and enforce disciplinary action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, providing support guidance and assistance to investors had become a secondary Key Performance Indicator for Investment Fiji.

The Investment Fiji Bill, therefore, will equip Investment Fiji to prepare itself and have the right attitude with the clear focus on what Fiji needs. Investment Fiji needs to be out there attracting and bringing more efficiency in terms of efficiency-seeking investments.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I extend the Ministry's appreciation to the Standing Committee also for their Report and the necessary consultations. There were couple of recommendations that they had also said in the Standing Committee that was, firstly that the respective institutions which actually deal with investment continue to collaborate in order to provide an investment environment that is appealing to investors.

I just wish to inform the House that the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport has been at the helm of implementing business reform and investment reforms and this is one of the many. Reforms have been undertaken thus far including the Investment Act, Digitalisation of Business Registration, Digitalisation of Tax Registration, Removal of Business Licence and Online Business Portal are all focussed on creating a conducive environment for investment.

All these has only been made possible with the collaboration and support of each approval agency, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Also there exists the Cabinet Mandated Investment Facilitation Committee and the Doing Business Taskforce. These Committee comprise of Permanent Secretaries, Heads of Organisations, Directors and Chief Executive Officers forming the overarching umbrella to ensure efficient and effective implementation of business and investment related reforms.

Just a small point that was mentioned by the Committee, Sir, that adequate resources are provided to Investment Fiji to enable it to effectively carry out its work whether it be investment promotion functions or assisting relevant institutions in building capacity.

Investment Fiji, Mr. Speaker, has begun paving its way for this particular transformation already. The Investment Fiji Board has worked on an extensive five-year strategic plan and looking forward in the 2022-2023 National Budget, we will prioritise provision of adequate resources to Investment Fiji. This will not be ad hoc but structured and based on the five-year strategic plan which will set down the key deliverables. The Ministry will continue to provide the necessary support, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also another recommendation that came up from the Committee was that there be a monitoring and evaluation system that is set up which effectively monitors the work carried out by Investment Fiji. The Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport as a line Ministry has maintained a clear line of reporting of performance of Investment Fiji through mandatory quarterly, reporting of agreed key performance indicators. In order to ensure that there is transparency and accountability in its reporting, Investment Fiji has a monitoring and an evaluation system and they are able to effectively monitor the work that they carry out.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I stated earlier, Investment Fiji in conjunction with the Market Development Facility has developed a five-year strategic plan. This is really to ensure redesigning and redefining their new role.

Coming back to the Bill, Sir, this Bill not only alludes to remodelling of Investment Fiji but provides avenues for all other relevant agencies such as the Registrar of Companies, Department of Environment to assume their due responsibilities as per their respective legislations.

We have managed to get the agencies to understand the difference between investment and investor. When it comes to promoting Fiji as an investment destination, it is Investment Fiji. When it comes to providing support and guidance to investors, it is Investment Fiji. When it comes to implementation of investment projects, the relevant approval and licencing agencies, they need to ensure that set legal provisions are met. When it comes to the investor entering Fiji, it is simply the Fijian Immigration Department.

The Fijian Immigration Department will also bring into effect regulations that will ensure proper screening of investors before they are issued with an investor permit. Therefore, if a foreign investor violates permit requirements, then the Immigration Department, in accordance with its legislation will take necessary action.

Investment-related reforms have set a clear pathway, Mr. Speaker. Everyone is on the same page and has a clear understanding of their roles.

Sir, as Fiji positions itself for post-pandemic economic growth, the Fijian Government will continue to strip away unnecessary regulations, processes and procedures to create a pro-business culture. Our ambition is to make Fiji the desired investment destination for all investors. We are taking a brisk walk towards uncluttering the archaic burdens left since the Colonial era.

We need to realise that those countries that are able to provide the best incentives and best business environment will be able to capitalise on the opportunities. We need to be one of the countries that is able to be at the top of the game, Sir. We cannot afford to be a “business as usual”, we need to do things differently. It is high time we collectively moved away from the unnecessary administrative and cumbersome processes, and create an investor-friendly and cost-effective

business environment. To boost this reform agenda, Investment Fiji Bill 2022 is a critical piece in the puzzle.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to thank the World Bank Group and International Finance Corporation (IFC) for their continued support to the Ministry, and I wish to especially thank, Mr. Deva De Silva who ensured that we are able to get the right technical advisors on board for this particular project. The Ministry also led by the Permanent Secretary and Investment Fiji Board have worked tirelessly for the reforms to be realized and I congratulate them all on this particular achievement.

In conclusion, Sir, I have just come back from a small visit to the UAE and I was told there, and this is a great example for us, that in Estonia, Sir, the entire country is completely digitalised. There are only two things that you have to appear in person; one is when you die and the second is when you get divorced.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, in my view, there is not much to be said about this Bill because it does not in the end, say very much.

Investment Fiji was formerly the Economic Development Board, then it became the Fiji Trade and Investment Board, then the Fiji Islands Trade and Investment Board, then the Fiji Trade and Investment Bureau, and then this Government renamed it to Investment Fiji.

So, Mr. Speaker, this might be a shorter and a snappier name, but if you ask the average foreign investor and also domestic investors about the effectiveness of Investment Fiji, you are not going to get a very positive response. It is regarded as bureaucratic, uncommercial and focussed completely on the wrong things.

All this Bill does, Mr. Speaker, is set out in very elaborate and fancy words the mandate of Investment Fiji as read by the honourable Attorney-General at clause 5, the functions of Investment Fiji at clause 6 and the functions of the Board in clause 9. It does not really say anything useful even there, in my view.

We see a whole lot of very fancy words about investment facilitation, export promotion and increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of Government services, capacity building, et cetera. But these fancy words, Sir, mean nothing if you do not deliver, that is the important point. And as usual, the Government has always talked big. They come here, use fancy words, talk big, but they cannot deliver.

The whole purpose of this Bill, Mr. Speaker, is to work hand in hand with the Investment Act that was passed last year. Last year, the Government voted the Investment Act into law, but that law is not yet in force. Why? It is because the Investment Act ...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Use your brain!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... needs regulations to make it work and the Government has not yet issued the regulations. It is almost more than six months, Mr. Speaker.

So, on 3rd June last year, the Investment Act, as I have said, was passed and we heard a lot of fancy words from the honourable Minister for Trade. He talked about modernisation of the legal framework for investment, he talked about implementing the vision of the Government to transform Fiji, he talked about international best practices, and on and on they went. What happened then, Mr. Speaker? Nothing! Nothing in the last six-seven months.

One year on, the Investment Act 2021 is still not in force because the Investment Act needs sector specific regulations to make it work, and no one has prepared those regulations. Normally, as I have said before in this Parliament, Mr. Speaker, a good minister would bring draft regulations as well for the committee to consider, but this Government never does that. They never do that.

So, Mr. Speaker, what does Investment Fiji do - the agency that is being changed by the Bill before us? It just carries on under the old Foreign Investment Act 1999, the very Act that this Government says is inefficient and out of date. It is still there.

Mr. Speaker, this Government has been in power, one way or the other, for almost 15 years and in that time, it has done nothing, in my view, to change the legal framework for investment, except to make it more complicated. Ask any foreign investor about the frustrations, and they go on, on a daily basis. We do not have the ease of doing business now but for a long time, we know what the result was and this is a perfect illustration of how this Government works. All talk, no action, fancy speeches, fancy words but zero delivery.

Why, Mr. Speaker? It is because this Government is hopelessly disorganised. Disorganised! They write fancy speeches and make promises which they cannot deliver. As I have said before in this Parliament, Mr. Speaker, laws are being rushed, laws are being made without consideration of the environment in which the law is going to be implemented, whether it is effective or whether it is efficient, those are the things that they do not consider. I mean, as the honourable Minister is famously known to be saying, "What is the reality of the matter". The reality of the matter is that, big talk, no action. That is the reality of the matter.

Mr. Speaker, I really do not have a very strong view on this Bill because it really says nothing. It does not help. As I have said, apart from all the fancy words, it is nothing. But the most important thing, Mr. Speaker, that one needs to understand and, again, this is a very good example of a Government which tries to bring laws, which says that this law is going to do all this, promises that it is going to deliver that, but the effectiveness of those laws and the way it is implemented has been a total failure.

Mr. Speaker, if you look at the ADB Classification Report, it clearly pointed out that foreign direct investment has been modest, averaging about 6.9 percent of GDP during 2014 to 2019 and has been very, very volatile. This too, again, after the Election which was supposed to mean true democracy and good governance but we all know, Mr. Speaker, that far from having true democracy and an efficient government, we are continuing with the dictatorial style of governance that we saw before 2014.

Mr. Speaker, economists know that critical components of the GDP includes; consumption, investment, Government expenditure and trade. Sir, we have seen in the last 15 years that this Government has borrowed, it has spent and whatever modest growth that the ADB talks about from 2010 to 2019 – 3.3 percent average growth, a very modest growth. In fact, the economy, Mr. Speaker, contracted in 2019 by 0.4 percent, so they had all these years to look at these laws and the investment environment, but they did not.

As we know, and there is a motion after this on poverty, the poverty level actually increased as per the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) Report 2019-2020. I know in the last Budget Speech, the honourable Attorney-General or his speech writers quoted John Keynes and obviously, he did not understand, he is like a C-grade student who probably just reads half the theory. But he should read Adam Smith and look at what he said about the investment environment. I will just quote one section of what he said, and I quote:

“Commerce and manufactures, in short, can seldom flourish in any state in which there is not a certain degree of confidence in the justice of government.”

This is very important, Mr. Speaker, - the trust and confidence in Government. Investors can look at things, like rate of return, inflation, liquidity, tax benefits, frequency of return, risk of investment, safety of investment which are normal things that investors look at but beyond that, they look at the administration of justice, the independence of institutions and the trust that they have in Government.

Mr. Speaker, trust and confidence in Government and its overall administration of the justice and policies is the most critical factor. In fact, it is a binding constrain, and one of the reasons why we have not had good private investment in this country, including foreign direct investment is because of the lack of trust and confidence. You talk to foreign investors, you go and talk about Fiji Revenue & Customs Service (FRCS), you go and talk about Titles Office, you look at the registration of companies, the digitisation that they plan to do, how is it working? He knows that, the honourable Minister knows that these things are not working. Investors and potential investors are frustrated.

Then, of course Mr. Speaker, the overall macro-economic environment. When you run large deficits, when you borrow and spend and when your growth strategy is borrowing and spending, the private investors are worried because they know, and this is why investors and businesses everywhere and in every country are worried about what Government does, how it spends because ultimately, the burden of that debt not only falls on the people but it also falls on the businesses. This Government has not given that kind of confidence for investors in its own economic policies.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, that investors look at is consistency in policies. I know the honourable Minister was threatening some people during his consultations, “The only way you can guarantee consistency is if this Government is voted back into power.”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know they are getting desperate. They are spewing all these racist filth as well, they are getting desperate!

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You can see all these racist filth being spewed by the honourable Prime Minister himself about 1987 and what Indo-Fijians went through, but that is for another day, Mr. Speaker.

However, let me come back to this idea of trust and confidence in government because as economists, we understand and they must also understand that confidence and trust in government policy, government approach, the overall governance is very, very important about creating the right investment climate. You can have all these laws, you can change Investment Fiji laws, you can make it a promotion agency, but if the overall environment is not conducive for investors and if they do not have the confidence, investors are not some concrete walls behind all these physical investment infrastructure individuals who also understand and need confidence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, confidence and trust can improve or reduce compliance cost, lower transaction cost and lower cost of doing business. These are very important things and the style that this Government has used over the years, they have been ramming it through Bills under Standing

Order 51 without any serious discussions and investors are watching this kind of governance. The sacking of the Solicitor-General, the inquiry on the Auditor-General and the perception that independent institutions are not independent...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... does not create confidence.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know they are laughing because they know what I am saying is correct. That is the truth.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when State institutions are not run well, when they are not efficient, when they do not demonstrate credibility and fairness, it does not create trust in the Government and confidence in the country. The other example are these immigration laws. If you look at countries around the world, they have very clear rules about getting a Permanent Resident, getting an investment visa and then over a period of time getting citizenship. When investors look at Fiji, Fiji is not the only country where there are people out there in the world you are going to rush to Fiji to invest just because someone says we are a great country, we have such good governance and we have such good leaders.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is not unpatriotic, that is telling you the truth.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The investors tell us that. This is the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it hurts. They are worried. The truth hurts them because that is the reality.

(Honourable member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the reality.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Leave Fiji if you don't like it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You left Fiji in 1987, I was here.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You left, you ran away.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Point of Order, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did not run away from Fiji. I actually went away for my studies. I was here in the 1987 *coup*, I was arrested at Sukuna Park and went to CPS. Do not tell me anything like that. Do not lie. I went for studies and I came back to Fiji. I never, unlike some other academics in quest to get a job in Australia ever gave up my Fijian citizenship. Even though at that time I would have got a better job if I gave up my Fijian citizenship and got Australian citizenship. I did not. Others you supported, did. So get your facts right.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is, for whatever reason he left after 1987 and some of us were here during 1987 and even during 2000. They do not talk about 2000. They do not talk about all the atrocities committed against the people in Muaniweni and Dreketi. They never talked about that.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBR.- Who did it?

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They do not talk about 2006; talk about it.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who did it?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Talk about it.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who did it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He ran away after 1987, that is the fact.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You are wrong.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The truth hurts them, Mr. Speaker. They are selective and his accusing me of being unpatriotic. What I am doing is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is being patriotic.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- You are being a traitor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am stating the fact and I am warning this Government that what they have done over the last 15 years, this two men leadership has taken the country to ruin. They do not want to admit that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It has taken the country to ruin.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The silent 25 are selling their souls because they are sitting there and accepting these two men rule which is ruining this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are sitting there and accepting these two-man rule which is ruining this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They do not have the guts to stand up and state the truth. They are all hiding behind the de-facto leader.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Hiding behind the de-facto leader.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Hiding behind Rabuka.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The man sitting beside him

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the man sitting beside him does not know that he is the de-facto leader. The honourable Attorney-General is the de-facto leader.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am the leader of my party unlike him, he is the de-facto leader and the man beside him does not know.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Immigration laws, let me come back....

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You divided SODELPA.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- You divided them, look at them.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Bala is running around...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and trying to threaten the people. Let me come back to the issue, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The investment climate, the macroeconomic climate, the political climate

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What the Prime Minister says and I would urge the honourable Prime Minister to stop ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... spewing the racist fuel that he is trying to spew with respect to 1987 and Indo-Fijians because that does not build confidence in the country, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me use my last two minutes to finish off by talking about the immigration law and the citizenship law.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will respond to them later, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about this paapi and PAP, they will not like it. But let me finish what I was saying about the immigration laws. When investors look at a country, when they decide to come to a particular country, they do not come in a vacuum, they come with families, they come with an aspiration and what we have done is to change the immigration laws. We require people to be here for 15 years before they could be considered for citizenship.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You have not read it, that is why you do know, ask him.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA- I know, I know!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Ask him. It is for 15 years.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- She is saying the wrong thing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are the last one to talk about women.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are not letting me to talk because I am stating the fact. I am saying....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Vijay Nath, you are not the Speaker. The Speaker will tell me to sit down or not.

Immigration laws, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, the investors always look for a country, they do not come in a vacuum, they come with families, they come with friends, they want to go and invest, live and probably become citizens. There are many good people over the years who have come, who have invested and who have become citizens. Here we have a Government which brings this law, makes it a requirement for 15 years to be eligible for citizenship, I mean, we are losing people, we will have an exodus of people leaving this country. We already have that and yet we have this draconian immigration laws and the efficiency with which the Immigration Office does things is a matter that also needs to be considered, if you want to look at an investment climate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill will not help anyone if we do not address this other macroeconomic, political, governance and the state of administration of justice and the role of independent institutions in this country.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, we will take a break for morning tea. After morning tea, the next two speakers are:

1. Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment: and
2. Honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau.

So be ready. We break for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.03 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate on the Investment Bill.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion on the floor. During my contribution, I will be referring to the agriculture sector. Before that, the session prior to morning tea, I thought we had a stray animal in Parliament and on topping it up, I received an email from Honourable Qereqeretabua about stray animal. I thought, “Hey, she is also thinking there is a stray animal here.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the process of setting aside money by different decision making units and the entire spectrum of the economy, whether it is households, businesses, schools, farmers, government, for the purpose of promoting growth and development is an investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also, when someone sets aside money to improve the productive capacity of the existing assets, for example, a farmer buying an additional implement for the tractor, that is investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you may have read some of the recent addresses that I have made to various communities around Fiji, one of the aspects I have been touching on is that savings and investment is critical for growth and development.

What I have noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in the rural and maritime areas, farmers tend not to save. It is a very worrying issue because, firstly, it contributes to have vulnerability of that particular farming household. If any shock happens and I am mostly referring to external shocks - cyclones, natural disasters, COVID-19 pandemic for that matter, the first call is their own savings. When they do not have savings, then the household becomes very vulnerable.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been talking about that is because the first call for investment is the farmers or households’ own savings and everyone in this Parliament understands that for growth and development of an household, a farmer, a businessperson and a country, it requires investment in critical productive assets and investment to improve your productive capacity of those assets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for a country, international benchmark is that, you need to have about 20 percent to 25 percent of GDP as investment. I thought honourable Professor Prasad would make that particular contribution, instead of going all over the place. Sir, where are we now in relation to the actual benchmark of 20 percent to 25 percent of GDP investment ratio?

We are around 16 percent (2020 figure) and of that 16 percent, the good thing is that 13 percent of that is private sector driven and about 3.0 percent is Government. We want growth to be led by the private sector. But in difficult times, as the honourable Minister for Economy alluded to this earlier on this week or during the Revised Budget session, it is the role of Government to lead investment and to ensure that there is enough money floating in the economy for people to pick up and invest.

On that contribution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must say that there are various pools of money all over, locally and outside of Fiji – pools of money by individual households, the former Fiji residents, Australians, New Zealanders, et cetera. What they do is, they look around for the best return, easier to do business, easier to get their money back so that they can get that pool of money and invest in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the normal rule in economic is that, investable funds will find its way to the place where there is highest return and it is easier to do business and easier to get and own that money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, if you look at the Investment Fiji Bill 2022, it talks about investment promotion. It is very critical. How do we attract local investors who have got that pool of money sitting in the bank, or external investors who have got that pool of money and looking around whether he/she should invest in Australia, New Zealand, America, Fiji, Samoa or Tonga?

Investment facilitation is how I get to make that investment in Fiji. Export promotion to facilitate promotion and development of exports. Aftercare to provide investor assistance to overcome any challenges post-business, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Policy advocacy, to collect information and raise awareness on challenges faced by potential investors. Image building, to promote Fiji as a desirable investment destination.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if honourable Professor Prasad stands up and starts running down our country, then who would want to come and invest in this country?

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That's what you did. Unpatriotic!

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- The honourable Minister for Economy exactly said it is unpatriotic for honourable Professor Prasad to say those kinds of comments publicly.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR M.REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you have a dispute at your home, you settle it there, you do not go around in public washing your own dirty linen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a difficult time when we need to attract investment and promote economic growth. We had 16.3 percent of our investment to GDP ratio. We need to get to, at least, 25 percent, Sir, that is the international benchmark for developing countries. Honourable Professor Prasad was all over the place but he did not talk about the critical nuances of getting our investment rate from 16.3 percent to 25 percent investment to GDP ratio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion on the floor.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion on the Investment Bill. We, on this side of the House, totally support investment. We understand the importance of investment and it is crucial as it leads to the creation of jobs. A rise in employment potentially means an increase in the number of taxpayers in any country, which in turn generates high revenue for the Government through increased and indirect tax collections.

More tax revenue allows the Government to provide a level of service to its citizenship by expanding current programmes and by undertaking new investment projects in public infrastructure such as roads, schools and hospitals. Of course, this will trickle down to the people to afford basic necessities of life.

We understand investment growth can have a direct positive impact on people's living standard and consequently, reduce poverty level. So, that is something I would like to emphasise.

We do support investment, we do support all sorts of investments including the private sector, public sector and various other investments. The only concern we have is that, it is done within good governance and transparency.

Again, we also note some of the key factors as mentioned by the honourable Attorney-General, such as economic growth, which needs to sustain investment. Confidence has been mentioned by him and also honourable Professor Prasad. Again, inflation is an issue which is also affected by various factors including external factors, productivity of capital, availability of finance and we have discussed that issue, and liquidity.

The other issue which has been mentioned, Sir, is compliance. Again, that has also been discussed and if you look at the Committee's Report, this was an issue that was raised by the public. Volatility, of course, which is a concern by the investor that returns on their investment is viable.

We had also mentioned when we discussed the Bill itself (I will touch on that later), such things as limitation of foreign control, right to private ownership and the lease reserved and restricted lease which was there.

On business facilitation, this has also been discussed various times - the ease of doing business. My colleagues have also touched on that. Of course, the bilateral trade agreements and international multilateral agreements, how do we effectively benefit from that? The transparency of regulatory systems, we have seen the Bill before us which is empowering Investment Fiji, moving away from a regulatory function. So, we are concerned about the lack of consultations in terms of how that will operate. As mentioned by honourable Professor Prasad, there needs to be an implementation strategy in that, given the regulations which need to be formulated. Of course, the cost of bureaucratic delays through the system for investment and the shifting of goal posts, a key concern too is the biosecurity requirements and the inconsistency in the application of that.

The honourable Minister for Agriculture had mentioned investment trends. From what we have seen, the investment level in the country continued on a declining trend. In 2019, prior to COVID-19, the total investment in the economy was only hovering around 15.8 percent of GDP, far below the 25 percent level required to ensure that there is always going to be sustainable growth, if we hit 25 percent. This is despite the substantial increase of our loan portfolio and Government claim that it continues with capital expenditure allocations.

Since 2000, the highest level of investment on record by this Government was in 2013 – 27.6 percent of GDP during the upgrading of the Nabouwalu-Dreketi Road which contributed to that at a cost of \$228 million funded through a Chinese Government loan which was completed in 2015.

In the last 40 years since the 1980s, the highest level of investment recorded against GDP by previous Governments was in 1981 – 34.3 percent of GDP. In the 1990s, the highest level of investment recorded was in 1998 – 28.2 percent of GDP. Previous Governments have always had a well-planned investment programme under its Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP), targeting infrastructure projects with both, high economic and financial returns, not less than 25 percent and 25 percent respectively, which are prioritised and properly sequenced to ensure continuity, and generate investment in other sectors so as to generate employment opportunities.

One of the issues, as I have mentioned, is in section 5 of the substantial legislation (Investment Act 2021) – the reserved and restricted activities, and that is a concern that we are raising today. We had raised this in the substantial Investment Bill debate and the provisions there. Our view is that, it gives the honourable Minister too much power and discretion in deciding reserved and restricted activities, and this appears to require businesses in various localities to apply for their activity, then

go to Cabinet to be declared as reserved rather than having a national lease which makes it clear to the whole nation, which can lead to different rules for different locations, cities or towns.

The other concern is the insufficient protection for local businesses as two years does not give them security in terms of protection of their business activity.

The other issue, Sir, that I would like to raise today is Investment Fiji's performance in terms of the number of registered projects and projects implemented, and this has been an ongoing concern which, we in the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, have also raised. Just sharing some of the data from there, the FRCS registered a number of projects in 2016-2017 – 415; 2017-2018 – 374 and 2018-2019 – 175. Proposed investment in 2016-2017 - \$999 million; 2017-2018 - \$1.2 million; and 2018-2019 - \$685.71 million.

So, when you look at the projects implemented, you compare the FIRCS-registered projects and those which are actually implemented, it is 415 to 159 and 374 against 185 which were actually implemented and 175 and 120 actually implemented, which is why if you look at one of the recommendations of the Committee, which we are looking forward to be followed through, we noted with concern during the period under review the number of FRCS registered project proposals reduced with actual projects implemented, consistently much lower than project registered. The value of proposed investments and number of projects implemented reduced, actual employment increased but it was again consistently much less than that indicated in the investment proposal. This is why we recommended that a comprehensive assessment be made to determine the reasons for the gap between the actual versus projected output and to strategise accordingly to address these gaps. That Sir, is my contribution to assist with moving forward regarding this legislation and the Bill.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset let me state that if you think that the Government is taking us in the wrong direction, it does not mean that we are unpatriotic. We keep hearing this, Mr. Speaker, when we debated the Fiji Airways Guarantees, we were told that we were not proud of our national airline, et cetera. All we are saying, Mr. Speaker, is that we question some of the decisions by Government and that should not be termed as unpatriotic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Industry, Commerce, Tourism, Trade and Transport had said that what we are doing is remodelling, reform and modernise Investment Fiji, which is fine, but it must be done in a transparent manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just read the commentaries by the United States Department of States on a report titled *2021 Investment Climate Statements - Fiji* and this was in 2021; Legal Regime Transparency of the Regulatory System, it says:

“The lack of consultation with the private sector and other stakeholders on proposed laws and regulations remains an area of concern. The business community has complained that the government enacts new regulations with little prior notice or publicity. Foreign investors perceive a lack of transparency in government procurement and approval processes, and some considering investment in Fiji have encountered lengthy and costly bureaucratic delays, shuffling of permits among government ministries, inconsistent and changing procedures, lack of technical capacity, costly penalties due to the interpretation of tax regulations by the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS), and slow decision-making”.

This was in 2021 Mr. Speaker, Sir, and for a government that has been in place for the last 15 years, this is truly a sad indictment on how they handle investment in this country.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- US States Department, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that is a sad indictment on the government of the day and they have been doing this for last 15 years. That is why, while we support investment, we are concerned with the way they go about it.

For instance, the role of FRCS in this Bill, FRCS is to collect revenue and implements the policies of the Ministry of Economy, but in this Bill, they are also developing policies. Likewise, for the Department of Immigration, they should implement the policies of the Ministry of Home Affairs, but in here they are also developing policies. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some of the confusion that we see in this.

We ask the questions about implementing agencies. Who sits on those boards and committees? It appears to be a small clique of people who appear everywhere in this country. In any board, there are always some people who are always there.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- No, that is SVT.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, a small clique of people who are known to the Government of the day and the number of women is diminishing by the day.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Nonsense!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of women is diminishing by the day on boards and committees.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know about the ease of doing business which is truly lacking in this country and the performance indicators are well-known to us such as building the construction permits. In Fiji today, people are saying that it is easier to buy a home rather build it.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- That is what people are saying in Fiji today and I can testify that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am Chairman of the Nadroga/Navosa Co-operation, we wanted to build some apartments here in Suva and I was given the round around. No one could give me a definitive decision on the permits whether to proceed with the building or not. And everyone I met, Mr. Speaker, was acting; Acting Engineer for the Suva City Council, Acting Director of Town and Country Planning.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a Government of actors; nothing happens. It is so frustrating. You try and build a house in Suva or anywhere in Fiji and then you see, Mr. Speaker. Electricity availability, I know the Government is gloating over the lines they have run across the country but I have highlighted a number of places who have been waiting there for years for electricity.

Property of registration is one of the indicators. Credit of availability, I know there is a lot of money in the system but confidence is not there. Protecting minority investors, paying taxes, trading across borders, contract enforcement and resolving insolvency. I know that we are no longer rating

countries by the ease of doing business but this is still very much a challenge in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The environment is still very unclear. The simple way around this is to change the people in charge of this country. That is a simple solution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know what to do. We will not be leaving things in the hands of a few people. We will include people across the country to play their role in developing this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course there is also the political stability. We need to make sure the election this year is carried out properly.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Of course.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Right now we are highlighting some concerns.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Talk about the Bill.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Political stability is very much part of this Bill. Our people who are working overseas had been given 23 days to register to vote by postal and that is too short. There are asking for a longer period to register. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am talking about political stability and the democratic process in elections and they are asking - is that in the Bill? They are so limited in their understanding of things.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I believe, there were some thoughts on providing some assistance to political parties to help with education and their people in campaign, et cetera, I wonder if they can do that again because we want people to be fully involved in the democratic process (the elections) and resources are stretched, we just come out of COVID-19, they thought about it but they pulled it back, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We need people

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Speak on the Bill.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- That is another beauty, speak on the Bill. We are talking about political stability, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the comprehension level over there is quite a serious concern.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when people participate in the election process, political stability is an outcome of that I just hope they understand that. So, help political parties, do the needful to get more people to register and to be educated so that we can have a truly democratic election. There are still a lot of question marks about the way we do things over here. We are highlighting this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to help with the investment climate in this country. Stability is an issue. When people see that the people of this country are joining in election, et cetera, stability will come into the country and by extension the investment in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all these promotions by Investment Fiji, I just wonder who is going to keep track of those fly-by-nights who come in here, quickly set up something, leave the country and leave a lot of people holding empty bags in this country? That used to be the role of Investment Fiji,

who will do that from onwards, because we used to rely on Investment Fiji to do that for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Again without consultation, they have moved that to FRCS and that will confuse people. Again I say, we support investments but not the way the FijiFirst do it, Mr. Speaker, and that is why we are not supporting this Bill.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to make a short contribution. In order for Investment Fiji to align their operations with the changing legislation, the organisation is undertaking a strategic reset through the development of a new strategic plan. The ultimate goal of this new strategic plan is to drive Fiji's economic recovery, post-COVID-19 through broadening Fiji's economic base.

In developing this plan, Investment Fiji has undertaken a detailed sector and market analysis which includes identifying top priority sectors and markets for both investment and trade. Competitor benchmarking was also done to identify IPA best practices. Furthermore, over 50 public and private sector consultations and three validation workshops were held in the development of the draft report. This new strategic plan that is currently being developed will completely revamp the organisation, the way it works, the way their work is monitored and how they interact with their stakeholders.

Firstly, the organisation will have a new vision and mission which will fully reflect its ambition as a new investment and trade promotion agency and it will also support the mandate of the agency as defined by the 2021 Investment Fiji Bill.

The new strategy will also outline key stakeholder relationships, since the key stakeholders will play a vital role in the success of investment, Fiji's promotion and attraction activities. To ensure a successful investment and export promotion for Fiji, it is important to establish strategic relationships between Investment Fiji and its key partners. These partners will all need to play a role in the investment and export promotion process. So it is important that these roles are well defined and the partners buy-in to their role.

Investment Fiji will also have a new marketing strategy. These strategies are based on their return on investment. These strategies are based on their return on investment for Fiji and Investment Fiji's marketing budget. Some activities identified with the highest return on investment are direct outreach, outbound missions, consultant-led generation and in-market presence.

Investment Fiji will also have a new aftercare plan. Aftercare is a crucial service provided to existing domestic and foreign investors. It includes a range of activities from post-establishment of facilitation services through a development support to retain investment, encourage follow up on investment and achieve greater local economic impact.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimated that 70 percent of FDI originates from the existing investor base. These investments usually occur through expansion of existing facilities, all mergers and acquisitions. Efficient aftercare services will be delivered differently based on an investor's or exporter's category on prioritisation. Those with the greatest economic benefit to the country, will be provided more time and resources.

Finally, the strategic plan will include monitoring and evaluation activities, which is important to allow Investment Fiji to assess its progress on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), that

are vital to the success of an investment and trade promotion agency. As the organisation matures, it will measure its progress in line with the nation's goals, such as return on investment, gross value adding and the quality of jobs created.

In this current economic environment, the role that Investment Fiji will play as Fiji's investment and trade promotion agency is crucial to attracting quality investments and exports. Providing them with necessary budget to execute their role effectively, will be a key factor to their success.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just be short, since some of my colleagues have mentioned the topics which I wanted to speak on.

Before responding to the Bill, I just want to respond to the honourable Minister for Agriculture in his response. He mentioned that people need to do their personal savings to help them in time of need and in times of disaster. But, the honourable Minister himself understands that the rural people, especially farmers, rely on Agriculture Marketing Authority (AMA) for their market outlet. He knows very well that AMA which is supposed to buy foodstuff from rural farmers are not doing their job. They are returning goods that they are supposed to buy and saying that they have fulfilled their quota. That contradicts to what they are trying to do to promote agriculture. So, how can you save when they do have anything to save? They have nothing. So, we should blame him.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding the Bill, I do not understand the logic in shifting this responsibility to Investment Fiji as a promotional agency. Why? It is because you cannot attract investors if the environment to invest is not there, and that is what is happening here. We do not have the right policy for investors to invest. That is why we had high liquidity in the last four years or five years. People are not investing, people are not borrowing. The banks are not lending because there is no confidence in the sector.

How can the bank lend when it is not safe to lend the money because there is no confidence? They are not confident to lend money, and the borrowers or the investors have no confidence to borrow. Why? It is because of the legislation that we have. It is wrong. We need to have the right policy mix to attract the investors, so I do not see the logic in trying to shift this responsibility of investment to Investment Fiji because the climate to invest is not here. It is wrong. That is why our investment has been declining over the last three to five years. It is on a declining trend.

On the ease of doing business, as mentioned by honourable Gavoka, it declined from 2012 to 2020 from 58 to 102. Why? It is because people do not want to come to Fiji to invest. We do not have that right policy mix. They do not have the confidence. Look at the independence of the institution that is supposed to promote and support investment, there is no independence in them. We know it!

Why you do it that you know very well it will be a failure, it is just a waste of taxpayers' money. Why shift the responsibility to other institutions that do not have the skills and technical expertise to do investment development in Fiji. This is the same idea that they did to the small microfinance business. There is an organisation that receives the application, a different organisation appraises the application and another organisation disburses the loan. That does not work. You will be surprised to see an update report from small businesses. It does not work that way.

The Fiji Development Bank (FDB) that was supposed to give loans and monitor have the skills and the infrastructure. It is the same as this, Investment Fiji has the skills, right qualification and technical expertise to do this job but why take it away from them?

I do not support this Bill, thank you, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak in favour of the Fiji Investment Bill 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this Bill, the Investment Fiji will truly reflect the mandate for what an investment promotion agency should be, and why it is important for Fiji to stimulate investment and exports and contribute towards economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Investment Fiji promotes investment and exports, and in doing so, it treats both, domestic and foreign investors alike, and this Bill further ensures that impediments faced by investors and exporters are removed or minimised.

Investment Fiji as an Investment Promotion Agency (IPA) has a huge challenge. It has to compete with hundreds of other IPAs and similar agencies globally that are doing the same for their respective countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, therefore, vital to have a robust and dynamic IPA for Fiji with clear mandate and well-resourced, to carry its mandate. The Fiji Investment Bill provides just that.

For the past two years, we have suffered in terms of attracting investment because of the pandemic, but now is the time that we have to go out and promote investment and exports, to enhance our economic growth and that is precisely what the honourable Minister for Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport did just after the last Parliament. He was in Dubai, attracting investment and talking to the investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our private sector has endured and showed resilience in the most difficult times. Most businesses have carried on, despite logistics and supply chain constraints, as well as travel constraints because of closure of borders. Just as the promotion of tourism, we will need to promote investment and exports in several sectors in which we have comparative advantage.

Investment Fiji has a huge role to play. By giving Investment Fiji clear mandate with checks and balances, this can be achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a period faced with unseen economic headwinds, we need to rely on Investment Fiji and all other relevant agencies to work together to reset our path to economic growth. With this mandate, Investment Fiji can stand along with some of the best IPAs that we have globally, such as EDB Singapore, Dubai, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when honourable Professor Prasad was speaking, he started off with his favourite line, that is, “there is nothing much to be said”, and he often does that because he really did not understand and he loves the idea of giving grades. He gave Grade C to someone, Grade 0 to someone else, and he was all over the place when he was speaking on that subject matter, and I am wondering what grade he will give to himself. Did he really speak on the motion? He was all over the place.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- He would give himself ‘A++’.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, but I think we will grade him ‘F’, because he failed on talking on the subject matter.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he also spoke on the legislation that was passed initially (a couple of months back), but this Bill is to give mandate to Investment Fiji as an institution. When Investment Fiji will get the legal mandate, it can start doing its work and that is what this Bill is all about.

Now, during his deliberation, did he propose anything that we could consider from his presentation?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- There was nothing concrete in his presentation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

He also spoke about the immigration laws. Did he give credit where credit is due, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Again, he did not. He should know that the business permit which was previously given for two weeks has now been extended up to three months and this was done by this Government.

And, again, a lot of changes were made over a period of time for the ease of doing business and we have discussed this at length in this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So much of reform has taken place but then, again, he is on another mode at the moment, we understand that, he cannot focus on the subject matter because he is only thinking of how he can sit on this side of the House. But you have to wait for quite some time, honourable Professor Prasad, it is not going to happen soon.

Again, honourable Tuisawau, that is his favourite subject area. He always love to talk about reserved and restricted list. Reserved and restricted list is an impediment to investment. I will give you a good example which is the shipping services. Under the old legislation, for any investor to come and invest in the shipping services, they should have 51 percent local shares. There has to be a 51 percent shareholders to do the business.

Where is the money for local shareholders? It is because no one had the money in their pocket, that is why the shipping services were poor, it was not providing the services as required by the people. We live in a maritime area, with so many islands around us, and people need to move from one island to another. But this was the biggest impediment that not only acted as an impediment to attract right investors, but people suffered in return. However, by opening this up, now we can see competition and you can also see that shipping fares have reduced. So, that is the benefit of removing this reserved and restricted list, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I have also heard about fly-by-nights, that when investors come in, then who is going to monitor? We have clearly stated and even the honourable Minister for Commerce, Tourism and Transport has clearly stated that Investment Fiji should do its job and their job as a promotional agency, that they should be promoting investment and bringing investors into the country.

But we have other agencies, like Fiji Revenue & Customs Service (FRCS). They can be monitoring whatever they have to do and similarly, the Immigration Department will be also monitoring the type of investors that are coming in and particularly, character, in case there is any fraud related to that investor, et cetera. The reason being because they are connected with the rest of other immigration agencies around the globe and it is easier for them to access that information rather than Investment Fiji trying to get that information. It is hard.

Again, fly-by-nights, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have worked at Investment Fiji previously and I can share my personal experience and that was the reason why I left that organisation within one year and that was during the time when we were attracting investors from, I will not mention the countries. The officers at Investment Fiji and this was reported in Auditor-General's Report as well that these

investors came in, within five years their interest was to get citizenship and to facilitate the citizenship rather than to facilitate investment, to facilitate citizenship there was a lot of corruption in the organisation and that was reported in the Auditor-General's Report. I am talking about the criteria and the law that was set then but this legislation is going to change that as well as the changes that were made to the immigration law.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, this is my response to the Investment Bill. I commend the Government in bringing the Investment Bill but whether it works is another issue because my law firm deals with Investment Fiji, we deal with company laws and I do agree, the computerisation has come in handy. It does have some flaws but it has come in handy. We have all mentioned it, investment is key to our nation. We all need to support it. It is good for job creation. It is good for our nation. The ripple effect of it is positive and obviously unimaginable.

I read, Mr. Speaker, Sir, clause 5 of the Investment Bill, the mandate of Investment Fiji and just two issues that I will highlight on and I quote:

- “(a) Investment promotion: to increase the contribution made by investors to Fiji's economy by promoting Fiji's competitive and comparative advantages.
- (f) Image building: to promote Fiji as a desirable investment destination.”

We know, like any business investor, you check out the economy, you check out everything, you see there are sound policies, you see the laws in place, they want to ensure that the nation is secured, it is stable. I am one of the generation that grew up in the *coup* from 1987, I was a Form Two student at Suva Grammar School and I will never forget that day because I had to walk home Princess Road and I saw the fears in my Indian friends. I pray there will be no more *coups* in our nation, in my lifetime and the lifetime of my generation and my children's. There will be no more immunity clauses in any Constitution. We need to bring back the rule of law and true democracy in our nation.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Thank you.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Not in the 2013 Constitution.

HON. RATU S. MATANITOBUA.- Tell them!

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I know what happened at Fiji Television Limited because I saw people being sent out. I saw that, we saw that, we saw what happened to the Solicitor-General, we saw what happened to the head of the Bureau of Statistics. When I talk to my clients, I say just do the work, do it right, follow the laws, invest, do not do anything that will make you breach your investment permit, do it right.

Now, two weeks ago we all debated, even I spoke on the Development of Informal Settlements Bill which was rushed through Standing Order 51. It came to us on Thursday, on Friday I spoke on it. What concerns me and I am not sure whether the Members of the House are aware of this. The Development of Informal Settlements Bill criminalises informal tenants.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Please!

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- It criminalises it. If a developer wishes to develop the land because they have got a development lease, they will have to issue notice but the penalty is \$20,000 or 10

years imprisonment or both. Now, I pray, when these investors come and they are given development leases and I stand to be corrected, the Khalsa Road is a case in point because 200 of them have been issued the notice because some of them came to see me and I said, “see the landowner wants the land, they have gone to iTLTB, they have come back to take back what is legally theirs and that is their legal right; they are the landowners.”

We have got another community in our nation; our Solomon brothers and sisters. Our forefathers, the *vanua*, our chiefs accepted our Indian friends; our brothers who came, the Chinese and we have forgotten about the Solomons. They are staying on land that is not theirs and if any investor comes and waives that Development of Informal Settlements Bill, they will end up at the foreshore because they have no land. They are Solomon Islanders.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You are being silly.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I will not respond to that comment, I am addressing you, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Read the law.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I have read the law and I am more senior than him. I will address you, Sir.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Read the law.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have no land compared to us. We have people from Lau, Kadavu, we can always go back to our land, we have our relatives. The Solomon Islanders, where do they go? We know what happened in Papua New Guinea, because I have been there. At Port Moresby, they are out there.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- So we have to be very careful and I pray that when these investors get this, what has happened, basically the Government has washed their hands off the informal settlements. Where is affordable housing? My children cannot afford housing right now with the houses that are built by Housing Authority of Fiji. We need to make affordable housing - \$40,000 to \$50,000.

The last thing we want is investors coming here, I have never seen and I speak from my experience, as the former lawyer head of Suva City Council for six years, unprecedented growth of informal settlements from Lami to Nausori because cost of living has gone up. We have professionals, kids that are not moving out of their homes because they cannot afford the rent.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will address you until you tell me to stop.

We need to ensure that when our investors come; our people first. Start first in Jerusalem, secure our people first because when we are secured, we are sound, we are safe and we will also work together to draw in investors.

An aunty of mine used to joke to me when I was at Suva City Council, she said, “Tanya, you coming to Lami, first thing you see on the left are the dead people, on the right you see all the rubbish (before we relocated) then you see the prison, then you see the market, then you see the “Welcome

to Suva". But now we see, sadly the informal settlements, we need to empower them. We need to move them into affordable homes where they own it, otherwise we will be like PNG where we cannot control things. We need to get our people into homes that they have legal titles over, so when an investor comes, they know that this is a good country to invest in, they look after their people.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- We do.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I do not know about whether they do, because I mentioned it two weeks ago, four days with no water. That is me living in the city, but it is okay because I have water facilities. Utility services, roads, power, water and all these things need to fall in place, otherwise the mandate of the Investment Fiji and the whole Investment Bill they brought is just a facade, it is all paperwork like all the other Bills they bring in. I know because we are at the receiving end, we work the system; the lawyers.

I am glad, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that my *vasu* from Rewa have embraced and welcomed the *luvedra na Ratu*. I am glad they did that.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Talk about the Bill.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I will talk about it, he wants me to talk about the Bill, I will talk about the Bill.

I recently read and I am glad that Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) is now transitioning local road markings to Australian standard. I am glad because with our road standard, a lot of improvement need to be done. In terms of our utilities, we have all been waiting for the Singaporean standard, I will not hold my breath, maybe it will snow in Fiji then we will reach Singaporean standard. The Bill like every other law is good until we lawyers work through it and all the people that work through it, then we say it is all a facade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the Investment Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Member for her contribution to the debate. I now give the floor to the honourable Attorney General for his Right of Reply.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all those Members of Parliament who actually stood up and supported this particular Bill. This Bill as highlighted in the introduction is in fact an adjunct to the Investment Bill that was passed by Parliament last year. Of course, they both go in tandem - one cannot operate without the other.

As we have demonstrated through the parliamentary process, there is a gap between the first Bill that was passed last year and now we are got the second one; that is how long it takes. Honourable Prof. Prasad obviously in his zest to try and recover and recuperate some form of assemblance of his moral decay, said that no regulations have been put in place. I should call him now the de facto Deputy Leader of PAP.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he said were not in place. How can we have the regulations in place when the second Act needs to be approved by Parliament? Obviously, the regulations are being worked upon.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He is so far gone in terms of trying to recover from political ground, he is actually missing the actual issue. The issue is that the Investment Fiji Act go hand in hand and they cannot function one without the other. It would obviously makes sense to have the both of the regulations in place while the second one gets passed. It is very basic and logical. He comes and makes a big nonsense statement about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Gavoka talked about that American report, obviously this is similar to, they went on for about three or four years about the World Bank Ease of Doing Business and then it was revealed that there was corrupt practices in it, people actually got underhand dealings as to how countries were rated so that is now being taken away. The big bang theory has gone out.

Honourable Gavoka now has used this particular report, he obviously failed to report many sections of this report which actually gives a very positive report in respect to Fiji. He is being very selective about the bits he read out. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is also scattergun approach on how these assessments are done. They do not reveal who they talk to and this is the problem that we highlighted in the Ease of Doing of Business with World Bank. They only went to a selective group of people to get their assessments. Honourable Gavoka as a true patriot, we should all be concerned about any assessment

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED- KHAIYUM.- As true patriots, all of us in this House should be concerned about any outsider making an assessment about our country.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We need to look at whether they are based on the fundamental premise of transparency and accountability which they are on about. They need to be able to know who are people who made their contributions and they need to know where was the spread of the information obtained from. Was it only one or two organisations or was it across the board?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have highlighted continuously, the statement that Bill Clinton made – It's the economy, stupid? Continuously we highlight that. Honourable Prasad has never failed to take pot shots at the Fijian economy, make comments about the Fijian economy and the long-term stability of our country just for his own political needs.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Very poor.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- This is what we see today, demonstrated by NFP paapi is the naked grab for power at any cost. It is a sign of desperate people.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED. KHAIYUM.- We have not fallen into the abyss where we cannot get ourselves out because they are so far gone into their own political survival. Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me highlight some of the issues. The regulations, when they talk about regulations, it is all done in consultations. That is why the regulation is done. He says regulations should be brought to

Parliament. Regulations are never brought to Parliament. They are what we call subsidiary legislation and the Act empowers the Minister responsible to make those regulations and that is what is precisely being done since we gained Independence. Yet, he stands here and says, “All regulations should be brought to Parliament - only then it is a sign of good governance.” Oh wow!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I would also like to make, they have continuously said, “oh, the ease of doing business, things are not being done properly, it is so difficult.” Even in the recent past when we have brought laws or amendments to laws - the Liquor Licensing Act, the Hotel Licensing Act, the *suki* sellers to get their license for five years, they have all objected to it. They said, “Oh, it is brought under Standing Order 51, we cannot do it”, they still objected to it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even the Budget that took VAT of 21 items, increased minimum wage to \$4, all of those Bills that were presented to make, for example, zoning a lot more easier, et cetera, they have all objected to it. And they have the hypocritical position now to come and stand up and say, “We are not doing anything about it.” They are the ones who are opposing it.

That is the level of hypocrisy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Here I am, supposed to be standing here talking about this particular Bill, but I have to stand up here, waste my time to correct all the misinformation they are spreading to members of the public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Kuridrani talked about liquidity. He said, “Oh, there is so much liquidity, there is no confidence by borrowers, by the banks.” *Areh*, we had COVID-19. The entire world, all the countries in the world faced a huge issue regarding confidence of people investing. The entire world, all the countries stepped in, the larger countries did quantitative easing to pump money into the economy. And here he has the audacity to stand up here in a very emotive manner and asking, “Why were not people borrowing? Why were the banks not lending last year and a year before last?”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why would you do that when there are lockdowns? Why would you do that when 115,000 or 120,000 people have lost their jobs? Why would you do that when the tourism sector has closed down? Why would you do?

(Hon. M. Bulanauca interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- This is your problem, honourable Bulanauca, you just pluck things out of thin air. I remember what you did in 2000, I will never forget that.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- He was Minister for Forestry.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- He was Minister for Lands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they talked about foreign investor frustrations. Let me remind honourable Members as to what happened recently.

A company called Chugoku, which is one of the largest electricity companies in Japan, together with JBIC which is the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, bought 44 percent of EFL and we all know what the Japanese are like. They cross every t's, dot every i's, honourable Tikoduadua and you may be interested in this, they look at stability, they look at the environmental

standards, they look at the stability of the country, the policies, the consistency in the policies and only then they will invest. That was some fly-by-night people. In fact, the consortium is named 'Sevens'. Why? It is because of the Sevens victory of the Sevens Rugby Team. That is how committed they are to Fiji. Look at the company called Sevens Pacific Pte Limited, the Chugoku has bought in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad has an amazing ability to just obfuscate things. In the ANZ Report recently, Dr. Kishti Sen said that our debt portfolio has stability and we have the ability to pay our loans. Mr. Speaker, they come here and talk about those things, but they do not have a nuance approach to debt, for example.

If you are borrowing money where the yields are a lot higher as has been previously, or you are borrowing money with the maturity terms a lot smaller, or borrowing money at a much higher interest rate, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how can you compare your debt portfolio if the money that you are borrowing in the last couple of years, we borrowed \$900 million at concessional rates, at 0.01 percent from JICA with a 40-year term and 10-year grace period? Honourable Professor Prasad, listen! Let me give you a lesson.

The grant component of that is 60 percent. In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amount of money you borrowed, you only pay back 40 percent because 60 percent of it works out to be a grant component - 0.01 percent from the World Bank. They said to us that we are going around the world with a begging bowl. They called me a beggar. They called the honourable Prime Minister, going around talking about it, a beggar. We are not beggars, we are actually patriotic people who are concerned about our country, Mr. Speaker.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We have highlighted and the honourable Prime Minister has highlighted at the international stage our vulnerability to climate change. If you do not understand climate change, you got your heads buried in the sand further more now with Peter in the ground too, together with your head.

Everyone knows in the past couple of months the amount of damage, not just the cyclone but just what inundation of water has caused us, highways washed away, and these things cost money. As a result of that, despite being classified as a middle income country, we were able to get concessional funding from World Bank and IDA Funds at zero percent interest rate, 0.75 percent service charge. Again, a grant component of about 53 percent.

In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we only pay back 47 percent of the funds we borrowed. They do not come to this Parliament and talk about those matters. They simply look at the debt nominal figure. This is the level of intellectual input and honesty that has been put in.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is true, there is no honesty! There is no intellectual honesty in their analysis.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Tuisawau highlighted some one-off investments, they are one offs, of course. He highlighted Monasavu, that is a one off, of course, it is a huge investment, and one other major one, one- off, but he did not look at the consistency in the investment. That is the point he needs to look at. Consistency is not in your narrative, you only look at it up to your noses. How we are going to win the election, that is all. That is all you are concerned about. It is just your naked grab for power, you are not looking at consistency and long term stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they talked about all the infrastructure work. He said that there is no strategic investment by the Government. Was building Moto not a strategic investment? Was tarsealing the West Bank of Sigatoka Valley not a strategic investment? Was the tarsealing of Nabouwalu to Dreketi to have it tarsealed all the way to Labasa, not a strategic investment? Was tarsealing Sawani/Serea Road not a strategic investment? Was giving electricity to the people in Naitasiri and various other places worth over \$186 million worth of electricity connection not a strategic investment?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the problem with the Opposition. They come here and just throw things, they are not actually thinking about it. Every time they open their mouth, they actually undermine themselves.

The honourable *de facto* deputy of paapi said that the judicial system is not working. He said that there is an undermining of the judicial system. What did he say about the judicial system? Please, correct me.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I did not say that the judicial system is not working. He is actually misrepresenting what I have said. I talked about independent institutions and I referred to that, so do not mislead. I did not say judiciary.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, he cast aspersions on the judicial system, let me put it that way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, does he know that the Western Division that contributed bulk of the economic contribution to this country, only had one High Court which is Lautoka till today, but they had only one Judge for civil and criminal cases, for years and for decades?

Tourism comes from the Western Division, honourable Saukuru, remember that. Sugarcane is in the Western Division and Northern Division; there is no permanent Court in Vanua Levu; pine, gold, all of that, yet the amount of resources that was given to the Western Division was minimal. Honourable Kuridrani knows these things. That is what is going to happen when you support paapi, they will go back to their old ways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, we have a judicial system where there are far more Magistrates, far more High Court Judges, we have far more Small Claims Tribunals, we have increased the jurisdiction of the Magistracy, we now have Legal Aid Commission in every single centre of Fiji, over \$5million is allocated to legal aid services - mothers for maintenance, child maintenance, all of those allowances, feeding rooms were being built for them, is that not that about empowerment, about the rule of law?

The Laws of Fiji that we hold none of them actually hold that up. It has been revised, it was not revised since 1985. There was no consolidation Act.

We actually did that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Laws of Fiji is available online. If you an investor, you know what the Laws of Fiji are. Before, you would have to come from overseas, go to Mundro Leys and hire expensive lawyers, and get them to decipher the loan for you. That is what used to happen.

All of that has been made transparent. None of them has been referred to. Honourable Professor Prasad, your level of intellectual dishonesty is just quite amazing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, there are some other issues that was highlighted that I wanted to talk about. Honourable Waqanika, I am really quite concerned for two reasons. The first issue is, she cannot seem to let go off Fiji TV, she needs to get over that and the second issue is that, she has completely read the law incorrectly.

The law regarding development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not about any developer. If she reads the law, it says, "Should a development lease be taken by Ministry of Lands or Ministry of Housing..." So, the developer in this case is not any Tom, Dick or Mary, it is Government agency.

This was explained in the introduction of the Bill that when Government wants to formalise an informal settlement and Government, for example, either through Lands Department or Ministry of Housing goes and approaches the *iTaukei* Land Trust Board, or if it is State land that is a lot easier, we get a development lease, we are supposed to subdivide the land and then develop the land, give proper roads, bridges - if necessary, footpaths, streetlighting, et cetera.

In that particular process, we have the power now under the law to be able to get people to move their houses in alignment so we can actually build a proper road. They will have their piece of property. You cannot build the road if a house is there and one house is there how can you build the road this narrow, that is how close the houses are in those informal subdivisions. How can we subdivide it? How can we have a bus running through their subdivision, if the road is going to be that narrow? A car cannot even pass through, let alone two bicycles. That is what the law is about.

She is standing here and completely misleading Parliament, saying, "Oh, an investor can come along. This is discrimination." She brought the Solomon Islanders into the picture. Solomon Islanders were blackbired into Fiji, even before Giriti, and they have been in Fiji. They live on land, no one is going to take away that land. If they are living on *iTaukei* land, they may have got a lease. If they are living on *iTaukei* land with *vakavanua* arrangement, that is an arrangement between them and the *iTaukei* landowner. That is nothing to do with us. We are not going to take over that land. What nonsensical statement is that! Again, probably trying to look for some kind of vote bank, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other issue that I also wanted to raise was about citizenship, the Immigration Act they brought into that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted in Parliament sometime back, before under the Immigration Act, a Minister at his or her discretion, could grant someone citizenship at their discretion, and it happened under the SVT days when the leader of Peoples Alliance Party (PAP) was a Prime Minister. People who had run away from the law or from other countries were granted citizenship within six months. What does that tell you or what does that do to the value of our citizenship? It undermines our value. It undermines the value of citizenship. So, any country looking at the Fijian Passport will say, "Alright, anyone can get their citizenship." What we are trying to do is trying to actually elevate the level of our citizenship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we took away the discretionary powers of the Ministers, five and 10 was introduced. We have now said, “You must stay in Fiji for 15 years to get citizenship.” You can stay in a country, like Singapore, for 30 years and you do not get a citizenship. People have stayed there for 25 to 30 years, but they are permanent residency. In the Budget statement if honourable Prof. Prasad was listening, I do not know if he was there or not, Mr. Speaker, because every now and then he makes cameo appearances in this Parliament, we had said that permanent residency based on investor levels will be granted. We had said that work permits will become a lot easier, to make it lot more attractive, to get in the right investors.

Permanent residency, Mr. Speaker, Sir, means you can have all the rights as a normal Fijian citizen but you cannot do two things. You do not get a Fijian passport, you have your passport of your country, you get a permanent residency as we get a permanent residency in other countries and you cannot vote, you are not a citizen of Fiji. That is what we have said.

In fact some people from the diplomatic circles have in fact congratulated us and have said to us, “that is actually a very good move” because now we know that your passports actually can become a lot more acceptable for visa free entry in some of the other countries because they know now that no Tom, Dick or Mary can just get a Fijian citizenship. As highlighted by honourable Premila Kumar, a lot of people used to come as fake investors into Fiji simply to get a Fijian passport so that they can get entry into other countries namely Australia, New Zealand or USA. That is what they used to do, we were just simply a stepping stone.

So, if a person wants to invest in Fiji, wants to stay in Fiji, wants to adhere to the laws of Fiji, they need to prove their mettle and that is, you need to stay in Fiji for 15 years. That gives us enough time to know whether actually you are going to be a good citizen or not. What is wrong with that? Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. We should be proud that no one can become willy-nilly citizens in this country.

HON. A.D. CONNOR.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Honourable Prof. Prasad goes on about citizenship, et cetera, it was his leader, Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka who removed dual citizenship after the 1987 *coup*. Before in Fiji, you could be in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You could be a Fijian citizen and a citizen of another country. Mr. Rabuka removed it, the Bainimarama Government brought it back as multiple citizenship.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.-

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Ask Richard Naidu, he knows it. When he was thrown in the *lovo* pit. Ask him!

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM. I know more history than you my friend.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Bainimarama Government multiple citizenship was introduced as a result of which, so many former Fijians who had lost their citizenship as a result of Mr. Rabuka's decree of getting rid of dual citizenship have now returned to Fiji. Many of them, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have taken up Fijian citizenship, some of them do not necessarily live in Fiji full-time, nonetheless they had come and invested. If you look at some of the homes that are being built in the Western Division, some of the houses and shops being built in Vanua Levu, they are former Fijians who have come back and invested.

When you come to this Chamber, you have to be honest. You do not have to be hypocritical about it, please because the hypocrisy is quite pungent, it really is quite pungent. Honourable Prof. Prasad, that is not actually a fancy word.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I again would like to highlight to the Members and I have also got sorry Sir, I have just received some information from the comment that honourable Gavoka made. He went on about not getting a permit. This is from a Director of Town and Country Planning, it says and I quote:

“Sir, honourable Gavoka through his Nadroga/Navosa company was intending to develop a property along Carew Street, Flagstaff. The issue is drainage, the drain was running across the property and we had advised him that it can be located. He met us and we had resolved the issue. He had 360 per cent overdevelopment and had to connect to sewer line, we advised him that he discuss with the Central Board of Health on alternative means of sewage disposal. Suva City Council has confirmed that he has not got back to them...”

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- It took too long

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- “... We were being facilitative and guiding him along”

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.-

“... on how he could have gotten his development approved legally, of course, as we would have advised other local investors.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the beauty about Investment Fiji is that Investment Fiji will also be assisting local investors and by assisting local investors, we will be assisting foreign investors and hopefully the ability to meet up with some locals and be able to carry out that marriage in respect of investment in Fiji.

I would like to thank all Members who have supported this particular Bill and we look forward to this Bill being approved by Parliament and also the regulation being put in place so we can once again, as this Bill has been reviewed, assessed and contributed to, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by the World Bank, IFC and various other international partners including all the stakeholders, so we can come on a better footing to be able to attract more investment in Fiji and also to be able to play a facilitating role and create jobs and opportunities for our Fijian people.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- *Vinaka!*

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there being opposition, the Parliament will now vote. Honourable Alvick Maharaj, if you are online, you have the opportunity to vote now.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I vote in favour of the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Enjoy your evening in Paris.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Sir.

Votes Cast

Ayes – 27

Nays – 18

Not voted – 5

Abstained – 1

Motion agreed to.

[A Bill for an Act to continue the Investment Fiji Board as Investment Fiji for the purpose of promoting and facilitating investment and export in Fiji and for related matters, Bill No. 5 of 2022 enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. of 2022)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, it being now just on 12.30 p.m. which is the lunch hour, we will take a break and resume proceedings at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.30 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.30 p.m.

**INQUIRY INTO THE CAUSES OF POVERTY –
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament approves that the Standing Committee on Social Affairs undertakes an inquiry into the causes of poverty and report back to Parliament.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need an inquiry so that adequate resources and interventions can be planned following identification, root causes and factors leading to poverty. Why so, Mr. Speaker, Sir? The answer is very simple. Even during the period of so-called unprecedented economic growth of nine consecutive years, although at an average of 3.1 percent, poverty in Fiji increased from 28 percent in 2013-2014, Household and Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) poverty increased to 29.9 percent by February 2020 even before the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic to our shores. That is some 258,000 Fijians who were in poverty according to that report.

This increase came despite two general elections, they should have showed confidence, claims of lowest unemployment and increase in the amount of Social Welfare or Poverty Alleviation Assistance and other benefits that this Government wrongly and erroneously described as social wages. After the outbreak of COVID-19, it was described as “an act of God”, poverty in our estimate has risen to over 50 percent. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer lies a lot in governance as well as timely and successful implementation of policies.

No government can eradicate poverty completely, that is understandable and the FijiFirst Government is no exception. However, the problem in this Government during its two terms as well as before that, in my view, was not governing but managing. Worse, it has been micro-managing and to add salt to the injury of the poor, Government has implemented policies of so called relief measures at a wrong time when the positive effects have already been negated.

This, in our assessment is the prime cause of rising incidence of poverty. Remember COVID-19 came much later, after the poverty rate increased in six years when the economy was supposedly growing and indeed booming. Therefore, we have to find out what is the reason? Is governance the root cause of these evil? Is haphazard implementation of policies and increasing benefits prior to 2018 and then chopping them after the elections? We saw that quite clearly.

Making drastic changes in education in terms of qualification of scholarships and loan of students that are highly discriminatory, for example, offering scholarship to MBBS students were revealed in the Revised Budget but not only to those who graduated from Year 13 or Form 7 and not to Foundation students. Many of those students and parents have called us and they are struggling. These are not necessarily rich people, and there are many examples of that in the news.

Rising food, medication and fuel prices, despite zero rating of VAT because of far and higher inflammatory trends outweigh the reduction. We understand the ramification of the Russia- Ukraine but this is a recent phenomenon, but there are prices of items, like sugar and medication which does not necessarily have anything to do with the War. I was, kind of, surprised that all of them from the other side tell us that we are only looking to Elections.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Instead, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if your look at what they say and what they do, they are looking to the Elections. They have always been looking to the Elections, instead of the next generation and the future of nation and all its citizens.

Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt, therefore, that Fiji was already in the fry pan after the 2018 Elections. The economy, as we all know and I have said this in Parliament before in 2018 and also 2019, the economy was declining and poverty levels were rising. This morning, I talked about confidence, Mr. Speaker, and sadly that was missing because come the pandemic, more than 150,000 people lost their employment. We are told some \$25,000 have resumed employment, but there are still more than \$100,000 who are unemployed out there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact that poverty may have increased to over 50 percent and not to mention those who were already at the margins of poverty, would have fallen below the poverty line.

The current Government and the next Government after the Elections, Mr. Speaker, need a comprehensive plan to correctly assess its current position. I have not seen any studies by the Government or the Ministries since the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, reports that have been made public or presented to this Parliament, which actually talks about what the real situation is on the ground.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the laws that we pass and the initiatives of Government has failed miserably and we have pointed this out on many occasions. Even the dumbest copy and paste of the NFP manifesto for 2018 Elections, needed four years back, was implemented four years later when prices are skyrocketing daily. It is not enough in addressing the escalating cost of living. Thus, we have the vulnerable unable to have any affordability of basics due to unemployment and reduced wages.

Many families, Mr. Speaker, in our visits to Sigatoka, Nadi, Rakiraki and Labasa, have told us during our visits that when they go to hospitals and this is the reality. They are talking about campaign, Sir, I am sure people also tell them and they know that. They are handed prescriptions for NCD medication that they cannot afford due to lack of income. For example, a hotel worker is now a stroke patient and completely bedridden. His family is at the mercy of donors, as they are unable to withdraw his funds from FNPF on medical grounds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the list can be endless and these are people who come to us. I am sure they go to them as well. Sometimes they go to them first and then they come to us. Single mothers and widows, who have lost their jobs from the hotel industry have not been able to access social welfare funds and are struggling to feed their families.

I know the honourable Minister for Social Welfare is always very helpful, but there are thousands of people like that who are struggling to put food on the table.

Save the Children Fund has provided cash vouchers to thousands of families and Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) has been providing relief for people in informal settlements. The Fiji Cancer Society continues to provide food, chemotherapy when the Ministry of Health runs out of chemotherapy drugs, and other support to cancer patients as we do not have a dedicated facility. We were told that the Fiji Women Crisis Centre (FWCC) provides food and humanitarian assistance to cancer survivors. Sir, NGOs like FRIEND, continue to feed thousands of unemployed, as well as orphanages around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have more than two dozen people losing their limbs to amputation each week. They are effectively disabled, but there is no support for food, livelihood or mobility aid for them. Why?

There are many thousands who cannot afford housing and live in overcrowded homes in squatters or in informal settlements. There is an increase in the number of street dwellers, begging and prostitution. This is a cruel indicator, Mr. Speaker, of stresses our citizens are going through and unless we know and understand the demographics, the structure, the causes and can develop interventions to assist those in need to rise, we will continue to have half the country's citizens struggling to meet daily essential needs, like food, water, quality and affordable educational needs of the children, medical services and medicine.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that the 2019-2020 Household Income Expenditure Survey Report was vigorously condemned by Government upon its release last year because it showed disaggregated data in relation to poverty. It led to the forced removal of the Government Statistician at the Fiji Bureau of Statistics – Mr. Kemueli Naiqama. Of course, no prizes for guessing why that unfair and unjust treatment was given to him because the news, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was not good for the Government.

The fact that poverty increased by almost 2.0 percent to 29.9 percent in five years up to February, 2020 rubbishes and indicates the fears that we had about the Government dragging about the nine years of boom, and the results were in that poverty report .

The report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, established that majority of the poor - 62 percent were living in the rural areas, while 38 percent were in urban areas. The Western Division had the highest rate of poverty.

We have always said that while disaggregated data is important to the fair and targeted dispensation of assistance to those who need it the most, this does not mean that a politician of Government is practising racism, as this Government likes to claim. The importance of disaggregated data was also emphasised, Mr. Speaker, by the United Nations Rapporteur, following his fact-finding mission. But Government, again, of course, shot it down and Government believes this would be against common and equal citizenry.

Nothing can be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The increase in poverty pre-COVID makes a laughing stock of common and equal citizenry drum bit by this Government. In the last two years, poverty has increased due to COVID-19 to an estimated 50 percent and with many on the margins of poverty could actually fall quite quickly into abject poverty. And Government's latest measure of providing VAT relief, of course, plucked out of the NFP's 2018 Manifesto which back then was ridiculed by Government and its business cabal, is good but is not enough to cushion the impact of rising prices of food.

Like I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it may have come too little too late. It has come as an afterthought, in my view, in an election year, and it has come at a time when prices have spiralled out of control. So making basic food and essential items VAT free will not alone control food prices, and we all know that, and this is the major factor in driving many into poverty. So we have to look at other ways of assisting those who, despite all these measures, may still be in poverty.

As I have mentioned before, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the HIES Report highlighted that rural poverty was high and cane growers fall into this category. During the delivery of the 2021-2022 Budget in July 2021, the honourable Minister for Economy, for once, was correct in highlighting the plight of growers. He said, and I quote:

“Even with the guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne, for example, the net income of a farmer who harvests 100 tonnes of cane averages less than \$3,000 a year, and more than 40 percent of our growers harvest less than 100 tones. Even for a farmer who harvests 300 tonnes, the net payout on average is \$7,500. Almost three-fourths of our farmers harvest less than 300 tonnes. That is their annual income and it is paid four times over four periods”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it took the honourable (should I say again), the *de facto* leader of the FijiFirst Party seven years to finally digest the painful reality...

(Laughter)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No original thought.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The *de facto*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... that we consistently highlighted in Parliament since 2014. We were then accused of playing politics, but all I see from the other side, is a shameful act of playing politics and worrying about the Election.

Now, I am telling you, it has actually come back to haunt them, because they had the opportunity from 2014, Mr. Speaker. They had an opportunity in that term between 2014 and 2018 to right the policies - macro-economic fiscal policies and tax policies, but they were on a campaign mode throughout and we saw what happened after 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is absolutely vital that we try and understand the situation better, especially after COVID-19, because there are many people out there who are suffering, who are struggling, who are desperate for help and who need help in all circumstances. As I have said, the Government knows about it. That is why I am saying that this motion is very important.

I know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why we brought this motion to ask the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to do this, is because of your Ruling that we cannot ask for Select Committees to do these things. So, this motion, Mr. Speaker, is brought into this Parliament with the expectation that the Government will see this as an attempt to work together, at least, in that Standing Committee to look at the causes and the factors that lead to poverty, or have led to poverty, at least, in the last two years and before, and what are some of the ways in which we can build partnership, we can devise policies, we can re-look at social protection policies and we can review some the polices that this Government has been putting forward. Do we know the effectiveness of those policies? These are important questions, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The ADB Report actually highlighted even before COVID-19 that at the current rate at which the poverty rate stands in Fiji, it will be very difficult, or Fiji is almost unlikely to meet its 2030 SDGs. This is before COVID-19. Now with COVID-19, it could be impossible, at least, by 2030 to achieve the goals there.

Those observations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, alone necessitates the need for an inquiry into the causes and the factors that may have led to this kind of situation in the country where people are desperately calling for help. It cannot be swept under the carpet.

For the sake of our people, Mr. Speaker, I strongly urge all of us to support this motion so that going forward, there is a well thought-out plan and understanding of what the issues are. I have not seen the Government come out with a report, of course, they rubbish the report, but if it was a good Government, they would have come out and talk about the areas of concern in that report and how Government can deal with that.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this motion and I urge all the honourable Members on the Government side to support this motion so that the Standing Committee can go around the country, produce a report that can come back to Parliament, we could have a debate and it will be useful for Government and future governments as to look at what happened in the last two years. So, I commend the motion to Parliament, Mr. Speaker.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, I do not support the motion before the House. Before I continue, I just want to correct the honourable Professor Prasad. The Director Pharmaceutical Services has just texted me to say that the majority of the chemotherapeutic drugs are available ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We do not believe anything that you say.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Listen! We do not believe what you say.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- ... except the very hard to find and source medicines such as plactitaxel cell, etoposide and these are not used everyday.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. DR. I WAQAINABETE.- Do not say that. This has comes from the Director himself.

Mr. Speaker, there has been no other government than that of our honourable Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama that has assessed, reviewed, examined and put forward policies to protect the marginalised and the improvised.

The Fijian Government has been taking the important proactive, empowering policies and my colleagues coming after me will elaborate on the many other areas.

In health, to step out of poverty, there are a few important things that needs to be remembered:

1. We are pursuing Sustainable Development Goal 3.0 which is universal health coverage;
2. We must be able to manage the social determinants for health;
3. Reduce the out of pocket expenses for health; and
4. Reduce the time needed to access a health facility when someone has an emergency.

Mr. Speaker, it has been defined that there are poverty related diseases. Many of these diseases contribute to the disease burden in low income countries, a tight link to the debilitating conditions of poverty such as lack of access to proper sanitation, health education, safe drinking water, poor nutrition and indoor air pollution. Diseases of poverty are often easily avoidable, preventable or treatable with existing medical intervention, Sir. According to the most recent global burden of disease reported by WHO, 52 percent of the total disease burden in low income countries is caused by poverty related disease. This include the neglected tropical diseases but also extend to

a much wider spectrum of diseases and conditions causing high though preventable morbidity and mortality in low and middle income countries. These include:

1. HIV/AIDS;
2. Malaria;
3. Tuberculosis;
4. Parasitic Diseases;
5. Other tropical diseases including dengue fever;
6. Brewlyaser;
7. Leptospirosis;
8. Treatable childhood diseases, for example, polio, measles, ptosis; and
9. Respiratory infections, for example, pneumonia, diarrhoeal disease, nutritional deficiencies and other peri-natal and maternal conditions.

Mr. Speaker, these are some of the diseases that we are beginning to see that we are winning the battle against. We are winning the battle because not only is health doing its part but also the social determinants of health have been working in that regard.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to share some of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services policy in ways in which we have supported and mitigated the work against poverty. One is the Free Medicine Scheme. There are now many Fijians who meet the threshold and are registered under the Free Medicine Scheme. They have a card. Once they receive a prescription, they can then turn up to a participating pharmacy and take their medicines from the participating pharmacy rather than having to wait up in the chemist.

Mr. Speaker, we have the subsidised haemodialysis, not only that, but we also run our dialysis units within the hospitals in Suva, Lautoka and Labasa and also the dialysis unit that is running for chronic dialysis in Nadera.

Mr. Speaker, we had a policy and we had the catheterization laboratory which we had discussed here about two days ago and the fact that the catheterization laboratory still works and it is actually heavily subsidised for those Fijians who meet the threshold, given the fact that the consumables are very expensive and one would have to pay even more to have it privately done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had free health care except, of course, for some dental procedures but if you have a major operation that needs to be done, the surgeons will go ahead and do it. I know for sure that some of us had worked in countries overseas where they will first check your passport to find out whether you actually meet the requirement to have an operation. I know that there have been family members who we had fundraised to be able to support them with their medical treatment overseas because they have been there, they are stuck there, they are not citizen of that place or permanent resident and they actually have to pay. But for every citizen here in Fiji, no one has to pay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other policy is the General Practitioner Subsidy Scheme which is now in place. We have those who meet the criteria or any Fijian can turn up to their nearest General Practitioner. I was in Muanikoso, Makoi area a few weeks ago and they said that they have obviously two participating General Practitioners in Makoi. Certainly when they turn up to Makoi, they can go straight and see them, pick up a script and go to a participating free medicine scheme pharmacy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have subsidised dental services that are going to begin for participating dental practitioners as alluded to in the Budget by the Minister for Economy. We have subsidised private laboratory and ambulance service. Does any of the Opposition actually understand that when

you call St John, the Government gives St John money so that they can be able to subsidise the cost of your relative or our relative that gets picked up. In some instances, they do not have to pay. For distances that are quite lengthy from CWM Hospital, for example, the most they might pay is \$50 because the subsidy is paid for by Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also and I will talk about this little bit later on the social determinants of health, we have also have been increasing the access to health care for those in our rural areas. Sir, I want to touch a little bit on social determinants of health because this is so important. The access through new roads into places, there are now villages in Navosa that have a road. Because they now have a road they have the ability to be able to access our health services.

The honourable Minister for Regional Development talked about a village up in Nakida, I have been there, I walked there and I ask the honourable Prof. Biman Prasad to walk there. I can tell you that they do not walk anymore because they have a road and because there is a road, they are able to use that road, come by four-wheel drive and even if it is dry weather, they can walk on the road rather than having to climb cliffs or hills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the improved value added stations that we have now. Sir, before Dawasamu was a nursing station so when one turns up to Dawasamu and had a disease that actually needed a doctor to look at, they would then have to travel all the way down to Lodon. Now they do not, it is now a Nurse Practitioner Health Centre C Station. This is also now in Namara in Tailevu, Navunikabi in Namosi and Bouma in Taveuni to name are few. The access to medical care is now being brought closer to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week I was in Tau because we just put a doctor in Tau Health Centre. That doctor is married to a dentist and that dentist who works in Sigatoka will now provide one to one-an-half days of dental procedures and dental consultation in the Tau area.

We now have a doctor in Nawaicoba, so in between Nadi going down to Sigatoka, we have doctors in Nadi, we have a doctor in Nawaicoba, we have a doctor in Tau, we have two doctors in Cuvu, we have got doctors in Sigatoka, we have a doctor in Vatukarasa, a doctor in Korolevu, a doctor in Korovisilou and now a Nurse Practitioner in Galoa even before Namelimeli. This is increasing access to our people and reducing the out of pocket expenses. Because Mr. Speaker, Sir, one thing that has been found is that when the out of pocket expenses and also the inability to be able to reach a health care provider within two hours for an emergency case is one of the reasons why our people are not able to have quality health care.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2014-2015 we did an assessment of the ability to access emergency surgery and the cut-off in which people will say around the world that you are doing very well was 80 percent. Most of the countries in the Pacific did not make 80 percent. At that time, we were 67 percent. We think now that we are close to or above 80 percent. With the fact that Savusavu Hospital has 24/7 clinicians from Labasa looking after it for emergency obstetrics, emergency appendectomy, emergency fractures and the fact that Ba Hospital will now be working under Aspen beginning this Saturday.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the motion on the floor that the Standing Committee be given the responsibility to undertake an inquiry into the causes of poverty and report back to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, if words, just like we have heard from the honourable Minister for Health, promises could reduce poverty, Fiji then would be like Norway with the lowest poverty rate. Mr. Speaker, this Government has no shame in misleading the people. They have no shame in

hoodwinking the people. They have no shame in making false promises. The question is, does this FijiFirst Government really care about our people especially those living on or below the poverty line?

Mr. Speaker, let us then look at the poverty situation in Fiji because this is their performance indicator and as we have heard from honourable Professor Prasad that poverty continues to increase even before COVID-19. Even though the Government comes up with the excuse that COVID-19 has sort of brought about this increasing poverty rate, but Sir, right now we are sitting at about 50 percent of our population, those that are living on or below the poverty line ...

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Where is your figure from?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- ... and that we are looking at about 450,000 people.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Oh please!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, that is the reality of the matter.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- No it is not.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- The reality of the matter is rich people are getting richer and the poor people are getting poorer. Mr. Speaker, the reality of the matter is the poverty gap continues to widen.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Right!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- So, Mr. Speaker, we ask the questions. What are the causes? Why is almost half of our population living on or below the poverty line? I will re-echo what honourable Professor Prasad has said, is it bad governance by the Government in handling the affairs of our country? Mr. Speaker, I will refer to the Sustainable Development Goals because time and again we hear the Government side talk about the 17 SDGs. What has Fiji as a country achieved in regards to the 17 SDGs? Have they once presented a report in regards to Fiji's achievement of the 17 SDGs?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Yes, on the UN website. Read it!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Bring it to Parliament!

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Technology!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, let me touch on the pivotal role that good governance plays in uplifting our lives, our people's lives out of poverty and I would like to remind the other side of the House on the pillars of good governance, that is, participation, consensus agreement, accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equitable and inclusiveness and one that follows the rule of law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we ask how, has been the FijiFirst Government use these pillars of good governance in regards to public service delivery to our people?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau, one day you will come back and those words will haunt you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me try and give us a clearer picture and let us look at public service delivery, alongside the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG1 – No poverty. Poverty in all its forms everywhere. The UN and this Government's target is that, we reduce poverty by 50 percent in the year 2030.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been hearing that poverty continues to increase.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Where is your evidence?

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- They are asking for evidence. If the Government had not sacked the Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Bureau of Statistics and you read the findings in that Report ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- He was giving you wrong information, that is the problem.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- ...then you would not be interjecting with that kind of comment.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The report is here, honourable Radrodoro, look up.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if our poverty rate continues to increase, then what is the problem with this Government?

Honourable Attorney-General, do not say *oilei*, you listen!

You have the legal framework, you continuously bring into Parliament legislations under Standing Order 51. There are policies in place, and honourable Waqainabete had just mentioned that, that they have policies and programmes in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, why are 50 percent of our population living on or below the poverty line?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Not 50 percent, where did you get the figures from?

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Why is it, honourable Prime Minister? Why is it honourable Minister for Economy? Only what we can say is that, they have failed to effectively and efficiently enforced their legislations and their policies have failed. Why have these policies failed? It is because policy formulation has been on a top-down approach.

They have failed to consult the people, listened to them and formulate policies to reflect the priorities of the people. For example, Mr. Speaker, I had mentioned this in this Parliament during the COVID-19 Supplementary Budget whereby the mainstream media had highlighted that food preparations at Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital had been taken to the Military and one could not notice the good condition of the Military kitchen, as compared to the CWM Kitchen. So, honourable Minister for Health, how can we expect our sick patients to be able to recuperate quickly if that is the condition of the kitchen in which their food is prepared?

Mr. Speaker, there are various programmes in place to realise their policy intention. There are budgetary allocations in place to realise various programmes and policies, so to bring our people

out of poverty. But with that kind of increasing poverty rate, we still ask, what is wrong with this Government?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Nothing!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- What is wrong with you? Something is wrong with you.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is wrong with this Government in not recognising the problems that people have? Are you blind? Are you deaf to their cries?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have made too many false promises, as reflected in their failed public service delivery. So people are questioning about what I am saying, how does bad governance look like? What is the visible form of this bad governance to the people?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The Opposition.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on SDG2 - Zero Hunger: End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. We must acknowledge and I thank the NGOs and CSOs in their assistance during the COVID-19 period whereby a lot of our people lost their jobs and there was a lot struggles in our society. We must acknowledge and thank them for their timely assistance, particularly in the provision of food rations.

I heard honourable Koroilavesau said that the Government assisted too.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes, of course.

HON.S.V. RADRODRO.- Yes, I acknowledge that, but then one of their policies is that, for those who have lost their job is to go and help themselves by using their own FNPF and have not made any commitment to refund those FNPF contributions that they have used, Mr. Speaker. People are still unemployed now, so what assistance are being given to these people? They are still looking for jobs. They said they are going to another \$360, honourable Minister for Economy? If that is coming from your side of the House, that is very good.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on SDG3 - Good Health and Wellbeing: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all and at all ages. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had highlighted this before that diabetes is the number one killer in Fiji and how our country holds number one place in the world in regards to death rate from diabetes.

We have heard the honourable Minister for Health talking about all the policies, programmes and the medical facilities that have been renovated, but he failed to mention what policy review or what new policy they have in place which they intend to raise in the next Budgetary session so it addresses this big problem that we have.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Honourable speaker, I do not have the time to go into that in detail.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON.S.V. RADRODRO.- The next issue is on access to medicine, the free medicine that is just been flaunted by the honourable Minister for Health. Mr. Speaker, Sir, he listed down the list of free medicine, where to access them from but the problem is that, when people go to those outlets to access those medicine, they are not available.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No, no!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Where are you getting all these?

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- That is the problem, Mr. Speaker. You just have to go to CWM hospital. Go to the Maternity Unit, honourable Minister for Economy, and you can go and see for yourself.

(Hon. A. Sayed-Khaiyum interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON.S.V. RADRODRO.- You will recall in the previous Budget session, when there was a provision for International Golf, we on this side of the House, during the Committee stage of the Budget, we had requested that International Golf be put on hold and divert that money for the renovation of the CWM Hospital, particularly the Maternity Ward. But what happened? Nothing happened, the Government does not listen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you should take that on board it is because of the financial burden that this will have on our economy and also, may be our economic policies are not working.

Let us look at SDG4 - Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Mr. Speaker, because of time constraints, I will just give examples. We will recall there was a promise made by the Minister for Education then, the one iPad that is going to be provided to students. This would have come in very handy during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Mr. Speaker, the sad thing is that because of the performance evaluation that teachers do have to undertake with the Ministry, I had this parent calling in, this is the dad of the family, who does not work and stays home and his wife is a teacher and she had to buy six phones to be able to help their students in regards to their online learning.

Even though we had a debate on the FNU Labasa Campus, I think in the previous term of Parliament, I just had to smile when I saw the Fiji Sun reporting in the mainstream media that it was titled “ FNU Campus Lying in Ruins”, honourable Minister for Education. Also, in regards to FNU, what is Government’s plan now in having to pay up the arrears of Government grant? In regards to USP also, what is Government’s plan in regard to paying up the arrears of Government grant?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Economy was making a side laugh with the honourable Minister for Education but this is not laughing matter. They know and we know that education holds the key to making that breakthrough in any family and in any society. If they do hold that truth in them, then why is Government to FNU and USP being withheld?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Free education.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you talk about education. Someone mentioned to me whilst in Bua recently that the Yadua District School...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- ...has not been fully renovated after the cyclone. Yes, I also went to Lekutu, it is still under construction. How long is this construction going to take, Sir?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I have another five minutes because there is a lot of interjections?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- You have five minutes.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on SDG5 - Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Mr. Speaker, if there is anything that this Government could really do, they would have brought into the House the temporary special measure, to ensure that more women are in Parliament. But rather, Mr. Speaker, they brought in a piece of legislation under Standing Order 51, targeting women to go and change their name in the birth certificate.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- It is relevant because this targets women make it difficult for them to exercise their civil right and to vote. A lot of women have told me, why should I bother? Why should I pay my bus fare and go there to try and change my name, when nothing was wrong previously? So they only talk about empowering women, they really do not do anything about us women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on SDG6 - Clean Water and Sanitation, ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. The water problem in the greater Suva area, Nasinu corridor and in Lami still happens. This is a continuous problem even though honourable Minister Usamate comes into Parliament and tells us that there is water, it is not a problem. It is a problem, honourable Minister Usamate. If you know that, even the new CEO coming in would not be able to fix the problem. You watch honourable Minister because that has been the trend. The CEOs have been taken away, Permanent Secretaries have been taken away....

MR. SPEAKER.- Do not address the Minister, address the Speaker.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now move on to SDG13 - Climate Change.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Take urgent action...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- ... to combat climate change and its impact. Rather than interjecting and interfering, we have watched, any rain, we have flooding in the various areas,

particularly in the West. I had raised this before. If the Government was truthful enough in regards to the review of the Local Government Act, maybe they would have come up with new policies and strategies to be able to address the big revenue arrears in rate collection, and that money could be diverted in consultation, in conjunction with the line Ministry to be able to address the poor drainage in all our municipalities.

On SDG16, this one is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me, please. It is on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. This is to promote peaceful, inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, build effective and accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to end, I would just like to highlight on how Members of the Opposition have been taken up by the police, the CID to the police station for interviews.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- The motion is on poverty.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Poverty is a cross cutting issue. It also links in to this one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that demonstrates that this Government is only full of talk and no action.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, keep to your speaking times.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion moved by honourable Professor Prasad. At the outset, I must say I do not support it. However, I must applaud the strategic move by honourable Professor Prasad to move this motion at this time, months away from the election. He had four years to bring a motion to Parliament that talks about poverty, and suddenly months away from the election, he remembers the poor people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point in time, please allow me to acknowledge all civil society organisations and individuals who continue to provide for relief efforts to our vulnerable and poor, whether it is in times of crisis or everyday life.

Poverty is a global phenomenon and Fiji is no exception. The findings of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey for numerous years, statistics are collated every four years and is well recorded, and we know that poverty is a reality in Fiji. The Bainimarama Government and the Fijian Government has never turned a blind eye to it. In fact, I am sure that most of us here in this Parliament have grown from humble beginnings, some lucky than the others and naturally we always feel passionate about the poor of the country. All of us, most of us or whoever has grown up in poverty would know life is a struggle and there is always an effort to break that struggle. This Government has implemented a lot of initiatives, that is, providing support to the vulnerable of society.

Having said that, we must be truthful to our people. Honourable Salote Radrodoro, you talked about 50 percent of people living in poverty. I do not know where you got that figure from. I know the latest report says 29.9 percent.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- That was years ago.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- No, if you read the recent report, honourable Seruiratu will be talking more about that and so we will wait for his turn. Please do not manipulate numbers and facts, to gain,

you know what I am talking about, cheap political mileage.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- No, if you read the recent report, honourable Seruiratu will be talking more about that and so we will wait for his turn. Please do not manipulate numbers and facts, to gain, you know what I am talking about, cheap political mileage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, poverty is a multi-facet development issue. Fiji amongst other developing countries around the globe continue to fight and the fight has to be through a harmonised, whole of Government across approach and the Fijian Government is doing just that, which means in Fiji we already know what the causes of poverty are. There are reports by the World Bank and ADB that clearly states the root courses of poverty. We are not saying that there is no poverty. As a Government, we have never said that there is no poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also note the impact of climate change and the recent COVID pandemic has plunged the poor and vulnerable into further poverty. We recognise that if this is not addressed and mitigated pragmatically through a targeted and rights-based approach, recovery efforts will only worsen.

Poverty in Fiji is far from the poverty situation it is made to look by Members of the other side of the House. It is so because this Government has always tried its level best to cushion the impacts of poverty in Fiji through many initiatives that cuts across all Government agencies. Because of such programmes in place, the Government has an existing poverty monitoring arm which is the Poverty Monitoring Unit that sits within my Ministry. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what honourable Professor Prasad is trying to say, is trying to move simply a duplication of what the Poverty Monitoring Unit is already mandated to do.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- I do not see why we need more resources for what he is calling for because we already have the resources, personnel and staff and they are just doing that.

The Poverty Monitoring Unit is fully funded by the Fijian Government and can report on the very same to Parliament. Various development agencies like the World Bank and ADB as I have mentioned have already reported on the causes and situations of poverty in Fiji year after year. Honourable Professor Prasad, I suggest you read these reports which are independent reports not influenced by this Government.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- There you go!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government is pro-actively addressing the root causes of poverty hence the Government through its National Development Plan 5-Year and 20-Year articulates an inclusive socio-economic development approach to further improve the living standards of Fijians under the umbrella team of alleviating poverty.

When I speak of recovery and Government cushioning the impacts of poverty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of initiatives that I must mention, to put things into perspective that only this Government has done, such as, recently the increase in the minimum wage. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in one of the most difficult economic times, this Government has recognised the need to increase the minimum wage. The National Minimum Wage rate will increase to \$4 per hour which all of you know. Together with this, we have removed VAT on 21 basic items at a time when this revenue was necessary for the Government.

Our Social Protection Programme, social protection is a human right and an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is targeted at assisting:

1. Women;
2. Children;
3. People living with disabilities;
4. Senior citizens; and
5. Poor in Fiji.

Despite the downturn in our economy, this Government has not only continued to fund the Social Protection for Needy but also increased the budgetary allocation to my Ministry which is responsible for administration of the Social Protection Programme. This fiscal year, we received an allocation of \$113 million for our Social Protection Programme which supports over 86,000 households and individuals. Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last seven years a total of \$223 million has been allocated to the Poverty Benefit Scheme, \$50 million to the Care and Protection Allowance, \$258 million to the Social Pension Scheme (the first ever pension scheme), \$7.3 million to the Rural Pregnant Mothers Scheme and of course we have got \$1 million for Fire Assistance.

The Disability Allowance over the last five years, honourable Professor Prasad was allocated to a total budget of \$40.4 million whereas the Bus Fare Scheme has been allocated a total budget of \$35.2 million. These are schemes and programmes which allows the disabled Fijians to access monthly allowances. We also help them with assistive devices, like if they need wheelchairs, walking-sticks, hearing aid, we do all that. These allowances are monthly (if you go back in record) never before did the disabled have anything like that.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Those senior citizens are over 65 years, they receive an allowance of \$100; never before.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Absolutely.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must point out that it was this Government that recognised the needs of senior citizens and persons living with disabilities and provided individual assistance programmes for them. It was this Government that introduced the Food Voucher Initiative in 2010 and took it up to notch by catering for the needs of rural pregnant mothers. It was this Government that recognised the need to make accessibility easier for our citizens and introduced the Bus Fare Subsidy Programme for elderly and persons with disabilities. It was this Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has come up with Fiji's first ever targeted Social Assistance Policy aimed to cater through the social protection needs, the missing needle in times of emergencies.

I must emphasise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Social Protection Assistance, there is a monthly allowance and has been consistent under this Government's leadership, not only that, but allowances have increased in the past decade and new programmes have been introduced too, to cater for those who lost their jobs during COVID-19 and did not meet the criteria of our Social Protection Scheme, the Government quickly innovated an unemployment payout. Millions of dollars was also used to provide relief food items to those who were affected by COVID related lockdowns.

Micro-insurance for welfare recipients, the Fijian Government in partnership with Fiji Care Insurance has invested in a pioneer insurance package that covers social welfare recipients first ever. Our vulnerable do not have to run around looking for money for funeral expenses and it is the first such initiative that ensures that the most vulnerable segment of our population are insured, something

no other government had thought of. It covers all beneficiaries under our Social Protection Programme and since the inception of this partnership between Government and Fiji Care, like I said, now there are 16,700 claims have been paid out which amounts to about \$20.9 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the Disaster Relief Programme, following *TC Winston* the Fijian Government implemented a number of disaster response social protection programmes for the vulnerable. The Help for Home Initiative was the first of its kind in the history of Fiji, designed to give affected households the resources they need to rebuild their damaged homes, including roofs to withstand severe weather events, \$127.8 million was injected into this Initiative assisting almost 40,000 families. Imagine how these families would have managed to rebuild their homes?

If I can recall, when I was a little girl, *Hurricane Bebe*, I remember my mother telling me that the roof flew off. No one gave us a single nail to fix the roof, we lived in those times. Now, we have a Government that cares for these vulnerable and here we have honourable Members talking about that it is just talk and no action. What you are saying is all talk and what we are doing is all action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we did not stop at that, we also invested \$24.8 million to support over 40,000 social welfare recipients as top-up. We understood that they were the hardest hit in socio-economic terms. The Government also invested about \$220 million to build back schools, the Care for Fiji Initiative was also an unprecedented wide-reaching programme. I am talking about the poor and the vulnerable and the assistance given to them. So, 80,283 households benefited from this \$91.5 million investment.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and *TC Harold*, the Government spent over \$6 million to support all our social welfare recipients through cash top-ups and \$1.1 million to support those affected by cyclones especially. We never forgot our poor and the vulnerable. We continued to assist them, to cushion the impact, so to say that this Government is not doing anything to support the poor and vulnerable is ridiculous.

In terms of women's economic empowerment, the national women's machinery had a 300 percent budget increment under the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister because we identified gender inequality as a barrier to women's economic participation. Through the national women's machinery, the Fijian Government has supported over 50 women's groups in a span of four years.

The women's Micro Enterprise Development seed funding, this has been a total investment of almost \$300,000. We have invested over \$2 million in the National Women's Expo to bring the women together over a span of four years, allowing thousands of rural women artisans to find a platform to connect to markets.

I am very personal. I will move on to education assistance. I am sure the honourable Minister is going to talk about free education. I grew up in an era where we had to fund our own education, where we were humiliated for not paying school fees and I experienced that, being sent home, chased out of the classroom to go home and get the fees. My poor mother could not afford that. I left home to go to school but I hid in the cane farms because the teachers would humiliate you and it was very difficult. Under this Government, under the honourable Prime Minister, education is our priority. Our children do not go through that. Our poor parents do not have to worry about that.

So, you are saying that this Government is not pro-poor? This Government is pro-poor. We do everything to help and support.

Just yesterday, the Asian Development Bank's Gender and Development Report came and 99.1 percent of women and girls in Fiji are able to read and write. That is an achievement for Fiji, and I wish you would applaud that initiative. No, you will not agree to that.

I remember when I wanted to go to university, even though I scored very high marks, I could not get a scholarship. Back in those days, you work and you pay. Our group of students in the 1970s and 1980s, we did that. You wait for your FNPF to increase, so you use it to pay your fees or parents had to sell their properties - cars, farms and everything to send their children to school. That is not the case now. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 50,000 students since the inception of TELS and Toppers have gone through education. This is a Government that cares for the poor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not forgetting that this the first Government that eliminated racially segregating scholarship programmes, and recognised and supported meritorious awardees under the Toppers and TELS, and I am proud to be part of a Government that values education. I think honourable Radrodro talked about how education is a game changer. Education is something that helps people get out of poverty, we cannot deny that fact. So, education is our priority.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Pay your arrears to FNU and USP. Put your words into action.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Do not carry out a conversation between you two. Address the Speaker!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, subsidised medical care, housing assistance, infrastructure

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Put your money where your mouth is.

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- You are not listening to me.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Look who is talking! You want to question the Government, the Government has done more than enough!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- There you go!

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, subsidised medical care, housing assistance, infrastructure development, agricultural assistance, SME grants, subsidies on basic utilities are also amongst the many things that this Government has done to support low income earners. But, far too often, Mr. Speaker, honourable Members on the other side of the House have shamelessly termed these assistances as freebies in their anti-poor speeches. In fact, I take it as an insult to the poor people of this country when people say they are given assistance as freebies. This is the assistance they deserve from their government, the elected government, and these are not freebies.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am happy to inform Parliament that the Ministry is in the process of establishing a national coordinating committee on poverty alleviation. The primary objective of this committee will be to foster partnerships, coordination and oversee the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the integrated national poverty eradication programme's impact across Government, with the guidance of the Poverty Monitoring Unit.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir and to assure honourable Members on the other side, this Committee comprises of Government agencies but will also ensure and with the support of non-

government and regional and international development partners to adopt a holistic approach in our fight to alleviate poverty in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I, myself, have had a childhood in poverty. Never did I see a Government that helps us, and I wish I was born and get educated and living in this era under this Government, life would be so different, and I hope our people, our children and our elderly appreciate the efforts of the Government in trying to release some of the discomforts that they have because they do not fit in that poor group. We will continue as a Government, we will continue with the schemes that we have in place. We will continue to be a caring and a compassionate Government with the sole intention to make a positive change in your life.

From the womb to the tomb, we have cared for our citizens in every aspect. Before a child is born, the mother is provided with a voucher to help her sustain her nutrition. When a senior citizen passes away, there are schemes to help them with their funeral expenses. So, like I said, from the womb to the tomb, from putting food on the table to taking care of your health needs, education needs, housing needs, we are there for you. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take my seat and I do not support the motion.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion from the other side of the House is, again, as mentioned by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, is just a suggestion that will duplicate the undertakings of the existing machinery, that is, the Poverty Monitoring Unit which is mandated with the responsibility to plan and formulate in collaboration with key stakeholders, an Integrated National Poverty Eradication Programme in line with Government's target of reducing poverty to 10 percent by 2036 as per the National Development Plan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reinventing the wheel through this motion will not necessarily mean that we will address all the root causes of poverty, but it will be just a total waste of public spending and disrupting the well thought-out processes that is mandated under the established body of Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand that poverty is a global problem, and now with the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded with the forces of global conflict, climate change and natural disasters, it would basically slow down the progress of reducing poverty. As a result, about 100 million additional people in the world are living in poverty as a result of the pandemic.

This is evident also in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we are not going to deny that. The joint assessment that was conducted by the UN agencies, I think honourable Radrodro was asking if a report has been made, yes, there was a report made about the impact of COVID-19 and how it affects the wellbeing and livelihood of Fijian communities, and we are working on that Report. This independent evaluation is crucial for the Government's timely and effective policy interventions and immediate response to address the impacts of COVID-19 then.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the underlying causes of poverty have been well documented in most Government and development partners' reports and studies. Some of the key underlying causes that are common globally, including here in Fiji, are low income level, and the honourable Minister has talked about the various packages that are available in Government. The minimum wage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to address the issue of low income level.

The lack of employment opportunities, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was commenting to the honourable Minister for Economy when we were talking about the previous motion about Investment Fiji and

the Opposition opposed it, but that is what is going to create more employment opportunities for our people.

The low level of skills and education attainment, the huge investment in the Education Sector, expiring of land leases and we have, through the Committee on Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) and the Land Bank and, of course, subsidising the lease to the landowners so that that issue can be addressed because if you look at some of the trends when we analyse the poverty issues, especially post-2000 and early years - 2002 and 2003, one of the major contributing factors which affects the sugar industry significantly was the expiry of land leases which were not renewed. So, these are some of the contributing factors, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The evidence are already there, and I think for the honourable Leader of the National Federation Party to come up with this, I think it shows that he is out of touch with what is happening in Fiji.

The lack of excess to affordable basic social services, such as education, health, infrastructure and other basic amenities. I will not go into details but let me say this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an independent report, a Systematic Country Diagnostic 2017 Report by the World Bank. Let me read what this reports says, and I quote: “The rate of Poverty has been declining between 2002 and 2013, according to the consumption-based poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will talk more about that because previously, as all honourable Members know, our Fiji Bureau of Statistics were focussing on income based report. But the same data was translated into the consumption analysis by the World Bank and this is the summary that I have stated.

In 2019-2020 HIES recorded an estimated 29.9 percent of incidents of poverty in Fiji. Honourable Radrodro, once again, 29.9 percent of incidents of poverty in Fiji. That is also understandable.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- 2019-2020, it includes COVID-19.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- COVID-19 started in the year 2019. There was a change in methodology from the traditional. Before that, let me state the figures to the honourable Professor Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the consumption based method in 2002 and 2003 HIES, the incidents of poverty was 39.8 percent. In the 2008 and 2009 HIES, the rate was 35.2 percent. In 2013 and 2014 HIES Report, the rate was 34.0 percent. In 2019 and 2020 Report, it was 29.9 percent. Is that an increase or a decrease?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Decrease.

HON. PROF. B.C.PRASAD.- You don't know what he is talking about.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have to be a rocket scientist to interpret this. It is just common sense. If it was 39.8 percent and if it is now 29.9 percent - that is a decrease. If we go and take the income method, they are consistent. In 2002 and 2003, it was 35 percent; 2008 and 2009, it was 31 percent; in 2013 and 2014, it was 28 percent, so from 35 percent to 28 percent – a decrease.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these figures demonstrated that despite the change in methodology, the overall trend remains consistent with the income method as our poverty rate, continued to be trending downward. Of course, there has been a report post-COVID-19 but do not lie in this august House

that it is increasing because the data says otherwise, and these are facts, honourable Radrodro. Do not come and lie in this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Radrodro talked about the Civil Service and let me quote from this report about them. It says, “Fiji has a disciplined and well-dedicated Civil Service.” The problem is, you do not read.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Systematic Country Diagnostic 2017 World Bank Report. Do not waffle and baffle in this House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, across the Government, international and local organisations baseline information on incidences of poverty have assisted us in the formulation of various proactive and amicable Government Poverty Alleviation Programmes to assist the reduction of poverty rate in the country. This is by providing with proper access to food, monetary help, the honourable Minister has covered this in detail, Mr. Speaker, Sir, improving infrastructure, improving access to basic services, increase awareness to reduce inequality, marginalisation and overall improving of the standard of living. I have been touring the rural areas, the people are so excited, happy and satisfied with the amount of development that this Government is doing; unprecedented, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is the growth, those are the promises that we made to them, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We deliver. As I have stated already when we debated the budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have a huge task in going back and facing the same communities with the same lies. What are some of these programmes? Social Protection Programme, I am just focusing on the Revised Budget. When we look at the Revised Budget, about \$644.4 million is allocated towards programmes that have a direct impact on poverty issues. That \$644.4 million is about 51 percent of the total budget, which is about 6.3 percent of our GDP.

HON. CDR. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is the level of commitment, what else are they looking for? The Poverty Benefit Scheme is \$31,667,542; that budget alone is far, far more than what it was to be like when the honourable Salote Radrodro was in that Ministry.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- What has that got to do with the present Government?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- She was doing nothing while she was there, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Food Voucher for rural pregnant mothers is \$555,700.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Point of Order.

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

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Minister Seruiratu has to withdraw that comment about my work in the Civil Service and if it just triggered something, the women in

craft that the honourable Minister for Women had been mentioning, those were one of our policies when I was in the Ministry, that came in time when we were in there. The Financial Literacy Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in regards to the Social Welfare Programme, that was our policy when I was in the Ministry – when we changed the payment mode from manual into computerisation, that happened when I was in the Ministry. It is not a new initiative. Shame on you, honourable Minister and you should withdraw that comment.

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It might have been a policy during her time but was it allocated funds ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... to the level that I am talking about? Just one particular programme, Poverty Benefit Scheme is \$31 million. What was the budget during her time in the Ministry?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Food Voucher for rural pregnant mothers is \$555,700, Social Pension Scheme is \$53,956,958. That scheme was targeted to support senior citizens above the age of 65 years with no superannuation assistance, the After Care Fund included Fire Victim Allowance - \$100,000, Bus Fare Subsidy - \$6 million, Disability Allowance - \$9,355,809, Integrated Poverty Eradication Programme - \$200,000, Care and Protection Allowance - \$12,386,631.

Under the Ministry of Economy we have Unemployment Benefits to a tune of \$193,950,000, the Reskilling and Retraining Programme is \$1 million.

In the Ministry of Rural Development, Emergency Water is \$300,000, Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges - \$2 million, Grant to Self-Help Programme - \$1 million; Community Capacity Building - \$20,000, Rural High Risk Water and Sanitation Programme - \$500,000 and Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Fund - \$800,000.

Under the Ministry of Fisheries, we have the Food Security Programme on freshwater aquaculture with an allocation of \$500,000.

All these contributes to addressing the issues that the honourable Member is again raising. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has done a lot through various intervention policies of Poverty Alleviation Programmes based on the Household Income and Expenditure Survey findings locally and from the international bodies. Therefore, I do not see a reason why we need to have another body to make an inquiry into the incidence or causes of poverty in Fiji. With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the motion tabled before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I was going to take another speaker after that, but time moves on. Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move the Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Schedule 1, we are yet to complete this item and the eight Oral Questions and the Written Questions under Schedule 2 thus the request for Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is now open for debate on the motion. Is there anyone wishing to take the floor? As no one wishes to take the floor, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, I still have another six speakers after this. So, we will adjourn for afternoon tea and resume at 4.30 p.m. When we resume, this is the order before the Right of Reply:

1. Honourable Ro T.V. Kupa;
2. Honourable Minister for Industry, Trade, Tourism and Transport;
3. Honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government;
4. Honourable Lt. Col. P. Tikoduadua;
5. Honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources;
6. Honourable J. Saukuru;
7. Honourable L.S. Qereqeretabua; and
8. Honourable Attorney-General.

Be ready to speak when I call on you. Honourable Members, we adjourn for afternoon tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.59 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.31 p.m.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE INQUIRY INTO THE CAUSES OF POVERTY – STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Very briefly, Mr. Speaker, child poverty in Fiji is evident throughout the rural areas. The United Nations released the report that displays Rural Child Poverty rate at 40.92 percent, almost double urban rates of 22.22 percent. The extent of this discrepancy between those living in rural and urban areas is clear. There is a similar difference in the ages of those experiencing poverty in Fiji.

The United Nations Report highlights that 32.1 percent of children younger than the age of 14 experience poverty. We see this young children, Mr. Speaker, outside supermarkets, Cost-U-Less, services stations, Damodar City, traffic lights either selling to support family income or begging.

Poverty in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, has an unparalleled effect on young children in rural areas. This has led to a stunting rate tallied at 7.5 percent amongst infants and young children in 2004. Infant and young children are not the only ones affected by malnourishment as 22 percent of adolescence in Fiji were underweight as of 2005. Because of this, young children are increasingly affected by Rheumatic Heart Disease, NCDs and other child-related illnesses.

In Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a clear connection between poverty, geography and education. According to the 2019/2020 HIES Report, the areas that were most affected by poverty were the northern rural areas and remote maritime zones. Fiji's remote location impacts the price of uniforms, books and transportation. Although education is free up to the second level, the secondary costs of education present additional barriers for children living in poverty. Even if rural families scrape together money for their children's education, difficult road conditions and costly sea transportation prevent easy accessibility.

Furthermore, children do not receive consistent protection against violation and abuse. Many children faced domestic or sexual violence. Sometimes this adds to lifelong difficulties for these people, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Authorities under report these conditions and often times local authorities dismiss the crimes with little supervision from the countries policing system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those villages, settlements including informal settlements, who have head of households with education below the secondary level are at greater risk of poverty.

A significant percentage of individuals in Fiji did not attend secondary school due to a lack of income. According to the Save the Children Fund Fiji Report of 1998, 65 percent of school dropouts are directly linked to poverty. Unemployment, high cost of living and other related issues like COVID-19 forced many families to stop sending their children to school.

Additionally, many of the schools are in poor conditions and in need of basic materials. Nonetheless, in 2014, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government announced universal free access to primary and secondary education for all children, hoping to lower the rate of school dropouts. However, with no Annual Report from the Ministry of Education since 2017, it is difficult to gauge just how effective these policies have been.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance. Poverty is the number one enemy of education on every level. Poor students not only receive the worst education but they fall victim to lifestyle and health issues that hinder their ability

to learn.

Therefore poverty, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a hard cycle that become more and more difficult to get out of, especially when the education levels are not the same for low income families. The onus then is on Government to provide a targeted education system that will ensure that all children are educated to the best of their ability and where according to the Government mantra, where no child is left behind. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to contribute to the debate on the motion by honourable Professor Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yet again, the other side of the House and specifically, honourable Professor Prasad, has come up with a motion like the one before us which, I suppose, he thinks will win him some extra votes. For the benefit of Fijians watching, what is being asked by the other side of Parliament is that, a special committee - a committee that will tell us what causes poverty.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Standing Committee not Special Committee.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Now, he likes splitting hairs, Sir.

Be that as it may Mr. Speaker, Sir, that does not solve anything. We can actually see ignorance of this particular motion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians have seen and lived through one of our most trying times in Fijian history in the past two years. If the honourable Member has forgotten, I would like to remind him that the entire world was devastated by a pandemic, a pandemic that the world is not quite yet rid of.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we may sound like a broken record, if he may say, but lest we forget that the pandemic wiped out 40 percent of the Fijian GDP. What this means, Sir, is that those employed in the critical sectors such as tourism, instantly lost their jobs and this, honourable Professor Prasad, means they lost their livelihood and their ability to continue supporting their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as usual the Fijian Government did not let them suffer due to this external shock.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, Hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We immediately worked on a COVID package for those who had lost their jobs and today, more than two years on, when we are showing serious signs of a recovery, we have such a motion being tabled. What we are doing is, we are supporting and we are actually sustaining local businesses to ensure that our economy remains resilient from within.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me take the honourable Member back to pre-COVID Fiji, a Fiji that was growing for nine consecutive years, a Fiji that was built and I say this very proudly, a Fiji that was built on inclusivity and ensuring that no one was left behind. Not only national data but the World Bank Group confirmed that in 2019, Fiji's unemployment rate was around 4.5 percent which increased to 4.7 percent and that was due to obvious reasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ADB has noted Fiji's poverty rate is approximately 29.9 percent, contrary to what has been bended about by the Opposition this afternoon which is a massive drop compared to 20 years ago or 43.3 percent in 2002.

Pre-COVID-19 we saw new industries emerging and existing industries strengthening their position, Mr. Speaker. In fact, the targeted interventions by the Fijian Government enabled the creation of a middle-income class in Fiji. These are people who have actively contributed to the Fijian economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Minister responsible for MSME development, I am proud to say that the Ministry has provided support to Fijians who actually go into business. We have invested approximately \$103 million in MSMEs through programmes, such as micro and small business grants, concessional loans, continued grant assistance programmes such as the Integrated Human Resource Development Programme (IHRDP), the Northern Development Programme (NDP), the National Export Strategy (NES) and the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES).

Mr. Speaker, we have also revived and modernised the co-operative business model to encourage Fijians to pull their resources and make commercially viable business ventures. Today, we have more than 400 operating co-operatives in all Divisions across Fiji and they hold currently, \$133 million in assets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the most recently announced Trade Enhancement Programme (TEP) aims to assist trade-based MSMEs through a \$500 funding and a total of \$500,000 has been allocated, which will enable mini capital funding to 1,000 promising applicants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the programme will actually create employment opportunities for those who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19, encourage the movement from informal to formal sector and create the opportunity to create training awareness on financial literacy, encourage youth, encourage women and persons with disability, entrepreneurship and enhanced provision of services from the trade sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the budget-related initiatives, the Government has in place poverty benefit schemes administered through the Ministry of Women and Poverty Alleviation which, in this financial year, will assist more than 23,000 households. We have heard from the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, we have heard from the honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, so I suggest that honourable Professor Prasad should actually withdraw his motion after two of those very wonderful speeches basically told everything that was needed.

Other recent initiatives, as announced in the Revised Budget, will allow Fijians to earn a decent income through the regularisation of home-based businesses, such as canteens and catering and tailoring, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the national minimum wage has been reviewed and a gradual approach to increasing the minimum threshold has begun. This Government has done more to address poverty-related issues over the years than any other government before it. We have innovative livelihood programmes, infrastructure development, connecting villages to urban areas, provision of clean drinking water and free education schemes. Never been done before, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Global causes of poverty include lack of education but in Fiji, we are looking at about 90 percent rate of people who are educated. Inequality – we have addressed that issue. Little or no access to livelihood, we have addressed that issue. Lack of infrastructure, we have addressed that, Mr. Speaker. Inadequate access to clean water infrastructure, this Government has addressed all of those things, Mr. Speaker. All of these areas are also relevant to Fiji and are being addressed through this Government, through various programmes, so it is a calculated way in which everything is done, subject to what we have Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I wanted to underscore, Mr. Speaker, that there are initiatives and programmes to make the honourable Members realise that we have ways to assist Fijians to gain economically. We have enabled Fijians to be able to make a decent living and most importantly, the FijiFirst Government has its hands on the pulse of the nation. We do not need any inquiry or study to tell us when our people need support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I do not support the motion before the House.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion before the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the call made by the honourable Member to undertake an inquiry into the causes of poverty is grossly unwarranted. There are many reports available which have dealt with the subject of causes and extent of poverty in Fiji. Information and statistical data is already available. How will another report on poverty help? This inquiry will be a sheer waste of resources and time of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is there to find out? We all know that decline in income due to job losses and reduced working hours is the underlying factor pushing people into hardship. The Russia-Ukraine war is not helping either. Each and every country on the planet is hit by the external shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Just like these countries, Fiji is delivering on social and economic recovery strategies as announced by the honourable Attorney-General and the Minister for Economy during the Revised Budget announced recently.

The challenges posed by the pandemic over the past two years and the consequences of floods and cyclones in Fiji have further strengthened the Government's resolve to assist Fijians facing hardship.

The Fijian Government has provided significant and critical relief to all Fijians to maintain financial stability. This was achieved in a period that was most challenging for us and the rest of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic essentially resets everything. Yet, due to the prudent socio-economic policies of the FijiFirst Government, we are here. We still have an economy, we have excellent foreign reserves and liquidity, our borders are now open, we have planes to fly and we are about to embark on an unprecedented recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is actually needed is the continued implementation of the comprehensive social and economic policies initiated by the Government. There is a need for the relevant stakeholders to assist in the implementation of the policies, to ensure that the Fijians benefit and recover from the external pressures pushing people into hardship. We are acting on the ground and creating livelihoods, instead of some inquiry as proposed by the honourable Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, support has been provided by the Fijian Government in the local government arena, to ensure Fijians are able to bounce back from the pandemic. The Fijian Government has consistently supported all Fijians across the board. The financial support has seen towns and city's commercial activities progressing, given that individuals were able to access relief assistance. The waiver of market stall fees, kiosk and bean cart fees, public service vehicle fees has allowed the councils to attract more businesses and boost the economic activities.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, both NFP and SODELPA Members called Government assistance to Fijians as 'freebies' and 'handouts' - assistance that will help household and businesses to ease their hardship and to put Fiji on the road to recovery is termed, 'vote buying'. Now, it is the same the leader of NFP who did not support VAT reduction on 21 items, did not support the \$4 minimum wage rate, did not support reduction in fuel tax, did not support increase in the number of

recipients for TELS, did not support increase in number of recipients for TELS, did not support one-off \$50 for the elderly, did not support VAT removal on cooking gas and the list goes on is now asking for an inquiry on poverty. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what a joke! This is the level of hypocrisy we see. The reason given for the inquiry is to assign resources, - does he not know that the Revised Budget assigned resources to assist people in hardship? This was done after a wide Budget consultation.

Moreover, the waiver of the Public Service Vehicle (PSV) or base fees allowed the PSV proprietors to earn a living without worrying about the consistent cost of fees and charges. This would mean savings by the PSV holders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the removal of business licenses have contributed towards Ease of Doing Businesses and has created more investment through the establishment of small businesses. Fijians are now able to start up small businesses with the stream-lined processes and removal of fees that were required to be paid to the councils and other agencies previously.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that there is no increase in the fees and charges imposed by the municipal councils. Many councils have charged the same fees over many years despite the cost of living and cost of service delivery have increased. The fees have not increased to ensure that the ratepayers are not burdened to pay increased fees and charges at this time. Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, we have got another proposal from honourable Radrodro that the municipal council should be going out and asking ratepayers to pay up their rates during these difficult time when the Government is trying to ease the hardship. We are trying our level best to come up with a payment plan and some practical solution so that it is a win-win situation for both, the municipal council and the ratepayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investment in education helps in poverty reduction. The Government continues to support Fijians with various forms of social wages. The Government has made 5,000 TVET places available for upskilling and reskilling of our people. The Government already provides free education grant, free textbooks and transport assistance to all students including sanitary pads to girls from Year 7 to Year 13. This supplements the income of people who are below the poverty line.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all familiar with the Fijian Affairs and Multi-Ethnic Scholarships. During those days if a student from a poor household did not receive a scholarship, he or she had no option for tertiary education. The banks did not give loans because the families did not have the ability to pay the loan. The only other option was the parents FNPF, if they had that option. Most farmers, self-employed and labourers or casual employees did not have any option to support their children's tertiary education dream.

Since 2014, this has become possible. The TELS is the FijiFirst Government's bold initiative to provide opportunity to every eligible youth who is talented and ambitious to attain tertiary education without depending on their family members to pay their fees and other related expenses. Mr. Speaker, Sir, TELS, is a game changer to tertiary education in Fiji. Such radical transformation was needed to build nations human capital development, moving away from the gated and ethnic distribution of scholarship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Professor Prasad also raised his concern related to the distribution of scholarship and his concern was why scholarship was not offered to Foundation students. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Year 13 and Foundation differ in several ways. The Government offers Year 13 free whereas for Foundation students, they have to pay for it. So those who can afford this have been taking a Foundation study. This is the reason why Foundation is not supported. Year 13 also provides fair and equitable situation in selecting students for Toppers. Why should students take loan to study Foundation when they can do Year 13 free and get direct entry in Degree programmes?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLs has established that students who scored less marks in Year 13, did not meet the NTS cut-off for the National Toppers Scholarship, enrolled for Foundation Degree, obtained excellent GPA and were given Toppers. This created unfair and inequitable situation for those who did Year 13 in one attempt and obtained marks for NTS eligibility. It was also found that students doing Foundation repeated courses until they got the desired GPA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the action on the ground has taken off. The Fijian Government has initiated all that is needed to position our economy including local economy back on track to pre-pandemic era of growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the call for such inquiry is not unusual by the Opposition and we have seen this tactic before. The end result of such an inquiry will not make any difference because the Government is already implementing social and economic policies to alleviate poverty which is working pretty well.

The Fijian Government has set out detailed roadmap to recovery in the last few budgets including the recent Revised Budget. We cannot waste resources, time or money on inquiries that are designed to add no value.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also heard from honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa just a while ago, she used a very old report, Save the Children's Fund Report of 1998.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And we live in a different time now.

Her whole intervention was based on children dropping out of school. Least does she know that the attrition rate now is 97 percent which simply means that we have more children in school than a dropout.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the pace at which the Opposition works will make the people wait. Fijians want the assistance now and we are in action mode to assist Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as honourable Salote Radrodro made the statement that this Government is full of talk, no action. It is the other way around, we are in action except they are talking and trying to say that nothing is happening on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the motion that is before the House and I thank you for the opportunity to respond.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I continue with my intervention, let me just say that just now the honourable Minister for Education told a naked lie in this Parliament that NFP opposed the removal of VAT, Minimum Wage and the extra fuel tax removal.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- We supported the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, precisely for that reason. So I want to correct that for the record.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Too much naked lies from the Government side.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to strongly support this motion that is before us petitioning this august House to approve that the Standing Committee on Social Affairs undertakes an inquiry into the causes of poverty and report back to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go into the substantive argument about why we have raised this motion before the House. I want to take this time and it is quite fitting really on this occasion when our Parliament is debating the issue of finding ways to alleviate poverty in Fiji, that I would like to pay tribute to a very dear friend of mine and a friend of my family who passed away about three weeks ago. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you know this gentleman that I am referring to, I am not sure if you will still remember by now but I will remind you later on about who he is.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this gentleman was Father Josefa Tuimavule, a priest, who was 50 years when he died and he was 20 years a Catholic priest. He was the member of the congregation of the Mission or commonly referred to as the Vincentian Fathers or the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. As I told you earlier, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he told me a story when your honourable Speaker was Your Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji and you came to attend a wedding at the Pacific Regional Seminary, where one of your grandnieces was wedded and he was the priest officiating. He was, perhaps keen to welcome you and he addressed, Your Excellency Ratu Epeli Mara and on the second time he made another mistake by saying Ratu Epeli Ganilau. I believe you would have remembered that occasion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, sometime back when you were the President of the Republic of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Two wrongs do not make a right.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- I attended his funeral on Friday, 25th March in Natovi where close to 3,000 people attended, mostly the poor, a place where he had extended his services in his ministry as a priest. There are so many places where he had reached out to and this was reflected by the turnout of the people from all over Fiji who had come to send him off. I wanted to pay tribute to Father Jo, as we commonly know him, because as we debate this matter, these are the people who actually make a difference on the ground and who reach out to the communities in the different areas where they serve. I just wish Father Jo a safe journey on his journey back and hopefully we will see him later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say, it does not take a rocket science to know that greater poverty equals greater social decay, greater crime, greater lawlessness and many other cascading challenges. Nowhere is that more evident than right here in Fiji. It is why the Bureau of Statistics - Household and Income Expenditure Report for 2019-2020 headlined their poverty statistics on two fronts - the basic needs poverty line which is defined as the line below where individuals cannot meet their food and non-food minimum needs and the second is, food poverty line which is defined as the line where individuals cannot meet their basic food needs.

As we recall, the results were shocking, Mr. Speaker. The survey told us that around 258,000 of our people were poverty stricken. At the time of this survey, the estimated population of Fiji was 864,132. The survey said 258,053 of our people out of 800,000 in this nation are in absolute poverty. That is almost a quarter of the population, and I wonder if the Government actually knows this. I wonder, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Government is self-aware enough to know that every time they stand up in this Parliament to dazzle the nation with empty words, 258,000 of our people are listening with disgust, while their stomachs grumbled. You only need to read Allen Lockington's daily updates on *Facebook* of him and his noble team doing such awesome work in a simple taxi, about getting out and about, reaching out and helping others in the Lautoka area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I at this juncture offer a shout out and a huge *vinaka vakalevu* to Allen, his team, including his taxi driver and especially his good Samaritan donors who do not seek publicity. Sir, Allan and his intrepid team's daily visits are a lifeline to some of our 258,000 people, stuck in this vicious of absolute poverty. I wonder if the Government has the decency to be ashamed when they bamboozle with Qorvis and Vatis speeches here, while 258,000 of our people in absolute poverty wail in despair and sorrow because they cannot take a loved ones for urgent and proper medical treatment, much less by medication.

Does the honourable Minister for Health possess any semblance of doing no harm, when there is no balanced and regular nutrition for 258,000 of our people in absolute poverty? Is he even remotely concerned that the empty calories of CJ Patel's Maggi Noodles are the only products filling many stomachs these days? Is he pre-empting the massive spikes to his hospitals and health centres to cater for NCD-related illnesses?

Mr. Speaker, does the honourable Minister for Education stop for a moment to analyse students in all her schools and make the link between children who cannot bring or buy a school lunch or school books, weighed up against school attrition numbers with school exam pass rates?

How about the years of teaching experience and genuine care for students, drained annually because the honourable Minister is only too quick to farewell teachers at 55 with a selfie and a handshake? Will these forced retirements add to our already ballooning poverty statistics, Mr. Speaker?

I wonder if the honourable Minister for Economy is aware that his recent Budget ideas give almost no relief, and that taxpayers cannot see any difference or cushioning at the supermarket cash register, throwing many more people into poverty?

I wonder if the honourable Minister realises that blaming Russia and global shifts in supply and demand as an excuse for more price increases, does not help them in the lead up to elections?

Is the honourable Minister aware that when he arrogantly demands Opposition Party policies, taxpayers have lived through 15 years of theirs and know a losing streak when they have to prevail through their Government's failed policies and comedy of errors?

Now, I wonder if the honourable Minister for Agriculture knows how silly he looks when he takes a big team to give out teaspoons of seeds in small packets to some of our 258,000 people living in informal settlements, with a condescending directive to go and do backyard farming.

Is the honourable Minister for Defence capable enough to make the logical link between our 258,000 people in the rut of absolute poverty?

Does the honourable Minister for Defence possess the capacity to translate the alarming rates of robbery, shoplifting, breaking and entering, drug sales, drugs turf wars, drug addiction, prostitution, domestic violence, rape, sexual violence, assault, murder, et cetera, with the humanitarian lens of 258,000 of our people living in absolute poverty or is the honourable Minister just content to let the Police Commissioner's favoured Vunimaqo Team to run wild and outside the lines national law enforcement?

Mr. Speaker, as you know I tried to raise this in this august Parliament the sickening scourge of the evil spread of drugs in Fiji before, with a motion for an inquiry. I did this, Mr. Speaker, in 2019.

As this House knows, I got assaulted by the honourable Prime Minister and I was unjustly suspended for six months for those very effort.

But, Mr. Speaker, may I, in line with this motion, please, advocate that at the very least, the honourable Minister for Defence tried to get a drug rehabilitation programme with a proper facility and trained counsellors going immediately.

Drug addicts need help not condemnation, Mr. Speaker, and St. Giles is not helping either. We know the issues, and the Government certainly knows the issues intimately as well. But turning back to this motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously my sympathies are with the honourable Minister for Social Welfare. She knows these numbers, she knows the need out there. She probably also knows that she is way down the food chain in terms of Government funding allocation priorities, as we see in every budget, every year.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the honourable Minister for Economy who is obviously going to bore us all to tears as he loves to do so, with highfalutin, truth-lacking scenarios and incidents that none of us can validate. Please, honourable Minister, save yourself from your usual exuberant verbosity, because the taxpayers pick it apart, to heap ridicule and scorn on you, as the *de facto* leader of FijiFirst Party.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people are no fools, waste time on FBC's *Aaina*, or the programme of *Nai Lalakai, Walesi, Fiji Sun*, et cetera, or give fake likes to their *Facebook* pages. They know who the real snake and mongoose are...

(Laughter)

...and you will both get trapped by their nets at the upcoming Elections.

Now, on that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally ask everyone, especially the Government, and I urge all honourable Members of this Parliament to, please, support this motion for the betterment of our nation and our people.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to talk on this motion and like everyone on this side of the House, I think it has been adequately proven today that there is no need for this motion. It is a ludicrous motion, the kinds of statistics, the things that have been expressed by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, the statistics that have been given by the Ministry of Defence, anyone in their right mind will know that there is no need for this motion. Absolutely no need!

Now, the motion is saying, as a number of people have said on this side, that there is a need for us to re-examine the causes of poverty, that we need to get a group of people to sit down and talk about the causes of poverty. We all know what the causes of poverty are, the reports have been there, they have been expressed. Why is there a need to do this?

The causes of poverty in anywhere around the world is always based on a number of things, inequality in income distribution – that is something that the Government has been addressing over these past few years; access to productive resources – people that have productive resources can make use of that to get out of poverty; and those that do not have access to the productive resources,

they will have a harder problem trying to get out of the cycle of poverty and also access to Social Services.

If you look back at what Government has been doing since it established its National Development Plan, that is precisely what the National Development Plan focusses on. It targets the kinds of things that we need to eradicate poverty, and that National Development Plan sets out that in order address this, we have to have a multi-sectoral approach. So, if you are going to look at what the Government is doing to address poverty, it is being done in all the different agencies and Ministries. I think the honourable Minister for Defence pointed this out.

If you look a bit further in, what I am saying is that everything that I am talking about now, the causes of poverty, we all know it. If you look back at the policies and the plans that we have in Government, they address precisely those things - jobs, the focus now on bringing in foreign direct investors in so we can have more jobs and you have seen that this has been growing over the past years. We have had a few blips along the way because of *TC Winston*, COVID-19 and, again, because of the things that are happening now around the world in terms of the cost of transportation, et cetera.

On education, that has been expressed here and the kind of things that were expressed by the honourable Minister for Social Welfare, a lot of us remember those times when it was difficult for us, the cost of education was so high. I am a person that when I went to school, my *sulu vakataga* and my shirt were sewn by my mother. We could not afford it because we had to pay for school fees and so forth. But nowadays, those things are paid for by Government. It is a huge change. That is showing the commitment that this Government has to address those things that affect poverty.

Secondly on education, one of the things that we always have to remember that in Fiji, one of the things that impacts us so much now is climate - climate change. We all know what happened in *TC Winston*. The impact that it had on our economy, and this is something that happens all the time. This year, we have had no cyclone but we have had two floods. The cost of the floods to the roads themselves is going to cost us \$100 million, \$100 million just to do that. So, those things are impacting on us all the time. The need for social justice, the lack of food and water, all of these things are being addressed.

The infrastructure, as I have pointed out a few times, there has been a lot of investment into infrastructure by Government. In the energy sector, Government has implemented a lot of measures to alleviate poverty. In doing so, in 2016, Government through the review of the Rural Electrification policy, removed the 10 percent community contribution. Before, when they wanted power, they had to *soli* and get their 10 percent. This Government decided, “No, you have the right to get it, we will pay for it.” That made a huge difference across this country. Communities no longer had to make that payment.

The latest development by Government now for our 2022 electrification policy, it now expands that service to cover informal settlements, squatter, peri-urban and urban areas. This is an addition to the rural and maritime areas which are formally in the scope of our Rural Electrification Project Team. So, everyone is able to acquire the service.

It means also that not everyone is going to get it at the same time because now, there are a lot more applications and it will also depend on the budget that we have where you can make available to do the electrification over time.

Our electrification projects, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2016 to-date, Government has invested approximately \$159 million for the rural electrification. That has led to 10,901 households being connected to the EFL grid and another 7,794 households receiving electricity in the form of solar

home systems, benefitting a total of 93,475 individuals. That is not empty talk. That is decisive action, realising that access to infrastructure has an impact on poverty and making sure that we supply that to the people that need it.

Over and above that, the Government together with the support of some funding agencies, have invested close to \$6 million on solar hybrid systems. That means it has solar panels and has a generator. When there is not enough sun, the generator charges up the batteries and from that they are able to provide electricity. We have communities that have been assisted and those include the; Solevu High School, Tukavesi Village, Namara Village in Kadavu, Nakoro Village in Navosa, Yasawa High School and Vio Island. That investment has been taking place.

Also at the same time, for energy, there is a focus on making sure that those who are getting less income, we give them some additional assistance, so we have the EFL subsidy in order to create affordability for low income households to access electricity from the EFL grid. For residential customers whose household income is less than or equal to \$30,000 per year, Government is subsidising 16.34 cents for the first 100 units used. Moreover, for primary and secondly schools, whose usage is less than or equal to 200 kilowatt hours per month, Government is subsidising at 12.85 cents per unit.

Based on the 2020 EFL Report, more than 41,000 households and 795 schools are benefitting from this subsidy. Why is this emphasis? It is because we know access to power, access to electricity is important to help people to get out of poverty.

In terms of water, there has been a lot of comments about water. I agree that we are facing the issue of water in the Suva area. These issues are being addressed, one of the major problems is that the systems that we currently have, its capacity is less than the demand that we have. That being, the solution is already in play, as we all know, the Viria Project, the Rewa River Water Scheme, that eventually will come online. Once we have that, we have some other adjustments, we get rid of some of the old infrastructure, we reduce the non-revenue water with some of the additional things that have been targeted in the Revised Budget that the honourable Minister for Economy had talked about, we should begin to alleviate some of those problems.

Water Authority of Fiji, Sir, the vision of Water Authority of Fiji is Clean Water and Sanitation for Better Life. The two initiatives that are directly related to poverty alleviation are the Free Water Allowance and the Rainwater Harvesting and Free Tanks.

The Free Water Allowance started in 2012 and assisted customers who have a combined income of less than \$30,000 annually. Under that assistance, around 92,500 litres of water is free per year. This is around 23,000 litres per household per quota. The number of households approved was 34,385 under this assistance which is an equivalent population of \$170,000. This amounts to a total value of \$467,958 per year.

Also in addition to this is the Rainwater Harvesting Scheme for those customers in non-metered areas. Since the inception of the Scheme, WAF has distributed around 12,072 water tanks. Another 1,800 tanks are expected to be delivered this year.

On the same ground, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addressing water in the Ministry of Lands, we also do ground water development where money is set aside to provide safe, clean drinking water to rural communities, both in large islands and small islands. The total beneficiaries so far from the borehole drinking and the reticulation of water from boreholes has been provided to around 6,000 Fijians since 2015 when reticulation was conducted by the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the important things that should also be done over the past few years is to make sure that we can spread the roading infrastructure that we have in this country. The Fiji Roads Authority has the aim to effectively, efficiently and sustainably provide friendly land transport network. The Bainimarama-led Government has constructed rural roads to areas that have never had access to reliable road network before.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The honourable Minister for Health talked about the Nakida Road. He and I walked up that river, I think we crossed it maybe 23 times to get to the village. Today, they have a road on which they can bring their produce down and sell it in the markets where it can be sold. They mentioned major rural roads that were opened up in our rural communities to social and economic opportunities such as the Nakorosule to Nawaisomo Village in the highlands of Naitasiri, Baulevu to Delaidamanu Village in Naitasiri, the tarsealing has been mentioned already today of the Valley Road in Sigatoka, the tarsealing of Serea to Sawani Road, the Kiuva to Kaba Peninsula Road.

Currently we have opened up rural road to the village of Matokana and Navitilevu in the highlands of Navosa. People who used to walk or follow the rivers or travel on horseback before can use those roads today. Currently in the highlands of Namosi, road construction including the road from Wainiyavu to Wainilotulevu. Also the Government is working on the replacement and renewal of crossings and bridges in rural areas. All these rural roads and crossings are aimed at providing access and also alleviate poverty for rural dwellers. Also Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are other programmes that are being done. This is just an example of some from the Ministry of Infrastructure.

In the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, the mineral resources we have in our country actually belongs to the State. It was under this Government and under this honourable Prime Minister that we said, the royalty that we get for the things that are extracted from under the ground, 80 percent of that goes to the people that are landowners. Never ever, not from the 1970 Alliance, SVT or who you call it, never happened before. Under this Government, we make sure that this money can be given to them so that they can do something about it and improve.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Your predecessors did not give 1.0 percent, we are giving 80 percent.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Also, there is a lot of emphasis to the Ministry of Lands on the Land Use Reform Programme, land that was not being used, they can put into the Land Bank and out of these, they are able generate revenue that can help the landowners.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The development of *iTaukei* land - \$50,000, development of State land, the survey of mahogany plantations. All of these things focussed on helping people get them out of poverty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Salote Radrodoro had a dig at the Government for not trying to address poverty but I remember quite well that when we had the debate on the Revised Budget, she said, “I vote against this Budget.” In that Budget, we said the VAT on the following goods will be zero rated - zero rated sugar, flour, rice, canned-fish, cooking oil, potato, onion, garlic, baby milk,

powdered milk, liquid milk, dhal, peas, salt, soap, soap powder, toilet paper, sanitary pads, toothpaste, kerosene and cooking gas, she voted against that.

Who is pro-poor and who is anti-poor? When we come up with suggestions of things that we need to do to address the poor, they do not support it just for the sake of not supporting it. How can someone have the audacity to stand up in this House and accuse the Government of not being pro-poor when they do not support the kind of suggestions that we made in the Revised Budget.

(Honourable Members interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- How can you have the audacity to do something like that?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- The honourable Salote Radrodro also suggested that we should be like Norway. Do you know how much personal income tax they pay in Norway? It is on that basis that they are able to provide all those services. So as we look at things that are happening around the world, do not just say, “We should be like Norway.” Think of the underlying things that happen in that country that allow them to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Salote Radrodro says the new CEO of Water Authority of Fiji will not be able to deliver. How do you know? Can you look into the future? Can you see what is going to happen? The new CEO of Water Authority of Fiji has gone through a very rigorous selection process. They have looked at what we need to be able to run Water Authority of Fiji with all the challenges that it has and that person has been selected. And I want the Water Authority of Fiji’s CEO, staff and their board to know that we in Government fully support them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second last thing that I want to say is, I think the speech by the Minister for Defence where he was telling us that 51 percent of the Revised Budget is focussed on helping to alleviate poverty - 6 percent of GDP. If there is one thing we know, the people on this side of the House, they do not just talk, this side of the House is about being well-organised, decisive and action-orientated and that is what the Government does. This Government has been fighting against poverty alleviation and will continue to do so.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my support for the motion before the House. Sir, 258,000 live under the basic needs poverty line according to the 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey; 192,977 *iTaukei*, 58,933 Fijians and 6,143 from other population making up an absolute poverty. That is facts. For decades, Fiji had been undergoing a period of significant social and economic uncertainty. Commentators regularly predicted the eminent collapse of an over specialised economy, too heavily dependent on sugar and tourism and a top heavy bureaucracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my contribution will focus on our urban poverty and those who live in informal settlements. Definitions of poverty remaining problematic and it is obvious from the findings in Fiji that people have such complex methods for survival and income generation that the alienation of poverty line based on cash income only is inadequate. Despite the problems of measurement, there is no doubt that there is increasing poverty in Fiji in the sense that growing numbers do not have access to adequate food or housing and that greater numbers of children are unable to attend school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even where income figures are used as measure of poverty, the fact that a lot of our people are still living below the poverty line or are vulnerable to poverty while a greater number of our households have someone employed in informal employment indicates that incomes in formal sector particularly for unskilled workers are not adequate to enable households to meet basic needs. Surveys have shown, Sir, that life is becoming harder for urban fringed dwellers and in a new squatter settlement, but for squatters in old established settlements, the people have gradually become more involved in formal employment and are in a better position to eventually take advantage of schemes such as Government low cost housing.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the major problems of hardship and poverty appear to be in areas where households are becoming increasingly overcrowded such as in urban villages and on the outskirts of Suva. Although these people show evidence of being heavily dependent upon informal activities such as gardening, fishing and selling of food, it has to be recognised that income from this is erratic and cannot be assumed to be regular enough to enable people to pay for formal rented housing or even increasingly to pay school fees or books or uniforms, let alone have access to a basic nutritious diet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, solutions to the increasing poverty of Fiji's people are not to be found easily. Poverty alleviation can be carried out in several ways. Welfare handouts are often necessarily, particularly in an emergency situation where people are destitute or affected by a major natural disaster such as a hurricane or drought. However, the Fiji Government like most Pacific Islands in the 1990s is concerned that welfare payments most often caused dependency. If used over a long period of time, the provision of basic social services along with income generating and community development projects are generally accepted as being the most sensible approach with additional safety nets and income transfers for those who are particularly vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, political trades-off made while enhancing overall economic growth such as that happening through global economic restructuring, frequently mean that the non-poor also benefit from schemes designed to lift the poor from their marginalised situation. Low cost housing schemes and job creation projects are common examples. At the same time, as enhancing economic growth for the entire nation, Government and Government agencies have to be aware of the impact. For example, economic restructuring schemes on the poor in the short-term before they are able to participate in the overall benefits.

Mr; Speaker, Sir, the conventional wisdom now is that broader socio-economic policies such as reducing unnecessary and strenuous work, for example, carting water from a long distance, employment creation schemes, reducing unwanted pregnancies, parasitic diseases and providing universal, free education both formal and non-formal as well as access to medical care will go much further in reducing poverty in the long term than merely patching up as problems arise.

While we talk about poverty, Sir, the difficulties our people are facing on the ground and the solutions to these situations, allow me to talk about Ba Provincial Holding, since the honourable Attorney-General has spoken about our company. In his response to an Oral Question raised in this august House yesterday, the honourable Attorney-General said, and I quote from Page 996 of the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard*:

“There is an abuse of funds in the Ba Provincial Holdings. There is fraction, there is friction and there are fractures in the company itself. Funds have gone missing.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfair on the part of the honourable Attorney-General or for any Member of Parliament to come and attack any person or persons or organisations in this august House, who are unable to defend themselves. To make things worse, making accusations that has been recorded in the *Daily Hansard* without a single shred of evidence, is a very serious issue.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Evidence is there, I have documents.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Should you have any personal differences with Management and Directors of the Company then, please, you sort this out with them.

Sir, Ba Provincial Holdings Company Limited was incorporated as a private company in February 1995, following the resolution of the Ba Provincial Council to establish an entity to manage the Council's assets commercially with an objective to be a profitable and self-sustaining investment company in providing satisfactory returns to its shareholders. Up to 1994, most of the Council's assets and investments were administered by the Ba Provincial Council Office.

In pursuant to the resolution of the Ba Provincial Council, the \$1.9 million ordinary shares held in Trust by the Ba Provincial Council was transferred to the 593 registered landowning units and the three-endorsed entities, whose on behalf, the shares were held. Each of these landowning units' Trusts are registered pursuant to the iTaukei Land Trust Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just described the history of the Ba Provincial Holdings Company since its inception 27 years ago. The company has gone through thick and thin, and is still standing tall. It is owned by the 593 landowning units of Ba Province, and operates Koronubu House, Tavaqia House, Vidilo House, the Lautoka Magistrates Court, Matanakilagi House, Ratu Nauliano House and the Rogorogivuda House.

The honourable Attorney-General has correctly pointed out in his Right of Reply this morning, that the West is the backbone of our economy. It is my advice to the honourable Attorney-General to support Ba Provincial Holdings, as it is the only provincial company owned by the 593 landowning units. That is the model for Fiji. Please, support the Ba Provincial Holdings Company Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that, I support the motion before Parliament.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support this motion because for a country, we are told, has so much, too many of our children are going to bed without having had a decent dinner; too many young people are not able to find decent work; too many families do not live in decent homes, and this is the reality in Fiji today.

I have had calls upon calls, messages upon messages, from mums and dads, needing help for their children's books, groceries or money to supplement their income and from tenants who cannot pay their rents. There is only so much that I can do, Mr. Speaker, but there is so much more that we can all do together. And I really want to thank the honourable Professor Prasad for, once again, raising the incidents of poverty in this Parliament, because if we have had so much economic growth, the increase in GDP and all these developments, what does it mean for that mum that cannot afford to feed her children? What does it mean for elderly people looking after their grandkids? What does it mean or where is it when crime increases because of higher youth unemployment?

At this point, Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak to some points in a discussion paper titled, 'Poverty in Older Persons in Fiji'. This was submitted by the author, Mr. Mohammed Hassan Khan, to the National Council on Older Persons (NCOP) on 22nd January this year. With his permission, I outline some contents of his paper, Mr. Speaker:

"Poverty is more than just a lack of income. It can be caused or be a result of a lack of adequate food, water, sanitation, shelter, education or healthcare. It can also involve effective expulsion from opportunities and the support of family, work and community.

Despite these preventable factors in terms of old age poverty, what needs to be considered is the total effect of a very wide range of risk factors for poverty that are more likely to affect seniors and by that, I mean, people aged 60 plus, than others:

1. Couples and individuals are seriously challenged in meeting large unexpected costs of medical or emergencies of health and family.
2. The increased frailty and higher health risks of health conditions create higher financial needs for medical treatments and medicines. Such pharmaceuticals may not be in the Free Medicine List of the current scheme and the pandemic, as we all know, has further increased the vulnerabilities of life and living for older persons.
3. A major issue faced by growing number of seniors is the decreased capacity for self-care and for those living on their own, the cost of maintenance and repairs and upkeep of their home which create significant pressure on their limited pension and other income.
4. A major contributor to poverty for older people is becoming single or becoming a single income unit, following the death of a spouse, and this is particularly an issue for women who tend to outlive their husbands.
5. A lack of mobility due to old age disability, amputations because of diabetes and other debilitating diseases, requiring full or part-time carer is costly. This is further compounded by the fact that family support is diminishing very rapidly due to external migration and for rural seniors, the departure of children, family members and younger relatives for urban centres.
6. Social isolation is increasing, becoming a major area of concern for practically the same reasons, as I have just mentioned. With this, the major factor is the lack of family support, as we now have old people looking after the very old or the old.
7. There is a large number of seniors who are still required to work and often at menial jobs after retirement and retrenchment, simply because their pensions are inadequate or they have not been on any pension or they have to support their families or relatives.

There are many anecdotal and media stories of elders in our various communities, like market vendors, aging and aged farmers, who continue to work to survive. This is one of the best examples of the plight of many other senior citizens, who are required to stay working for themselves and for their families because of poverty.

With poverty remaining the biggest challenge facing the majority of elderly people across Fiji, most have no option but to work into old age for a living in various parts of Fiji. For many people, Mr. Speaker, the decision to work is their own and it is the desire of the older people to keep working to contribute to family income and to remain active and productive. Others say they work because they have no choice, because they have to support sick children or grandchildren in their care or because it is the only way to make ends meet.

One in five older people in Fiji aged 60 and above work and almost all of them do it because they have to. Many of our seniors are working past their retirement age, wanting to remain active, refusing to depend on others, paying off loans and not having anyone to rely on. There are also many seniors who continue to work.

Very few work to keep themselves occupied, but to be able to afford their daily expenses because of the rising cost of living and the fact that they pay indirect taxes like that.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need this Committee to sit down and examine the root causes of poverty. The Committee needs to consult with NGOs, religious organisations and community leaders, to help create sensible and lasting solutions that deal with poverty and, of course, data is important.

Are Government policies benefitting all Fijians? Are some communities more susceptible to causes of poverty than others? This is why desegregated data is important and the Committee, if approved, would look into that.

And I know that the honourable Attorney-General, Mr. Speaker, Sir, thinks that desegregated data is racist, and that is just a shame. So, I take this opportunity to thank Mr. Dinesh Kumar, originally from Ellington in Rakiraki, now of Narere, and his team of charity workers and their sponsors for everything that they have done and continue to do to help and support those that they know are living in poverty.

So, I appeal to all honourable Members on the other side to, please, examine your conscience, look deep into your hearts and realize that this issue can no longer be ignored. You know it, I know it, and the people of Fiji know it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. *Vinaka Vakalevu.*

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, I did not hear my name mentioned in the list but since you have given me the opportunity, I would like to contribute.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity, I thought I would raise few issues regarding the motion before us. Firstly, on the Household Income Expenditure (HIES) Report, there were some figures mentioned by the Government side on the poverty rate in 2013/2014 - 28 percent and in 2019/2020 – 29.9 percent. They were saying it is going down but that is an increase, and that is something I would like to clarify.

The other issue which was raised by the Government side was regarding poverty rates and yesterday, honourable Seruiratu, mentioned the development in the rural areas but if you look at the Report, there is section there which specifically states the poverty rate in terms of the rural areas. Just to quote from there, “Poverty rate is consistent with the distribution for the poor where majority of them were living in rural areas in 2019/2020. It shows a high rural poverty rate of 42 percent which contained around 62 percent of the total poor population, so that is just responding on some of the data which was shared with us.

In a past sitting of Parliament where we discussed the HIES 2019/2020 Report, the honourable Attorney-General went at great lengths to question the methodology regarding this HIES 2019/2020 Report. So, I would like to share some of the responses of the removed CEO of Bureau of Statistics.

A few responses there which clarify what the honourable Minister for Economy had mentioned. Let me quote from that Report,

“It is important to note that the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBS) was still able to conduct the survey, process, analyze and publish the 2019-20 HIES Report despite the 40% reduction in their budgetary allocation. As a result, most Established Staff who are Supervisors had to forego their overtime meal entitlements and subsistence allowances, despite them having to attend evening and weekend interviews with the Enumerators

depending on the time preferences of the survey participants. I commend the staff for their full commitment...”

So, going on the methodology and sampling, this is what it states, it is important to note that the sampling methodology used in the 2019/2020 HIES is well-recognised internationally and also applied by other Pacific Island national statistics offices as endorsed by the Pacific Statistics Methods Board of which I am a member.

For comparable purposes, in addition the 2017 Census was also used as a frame to randomly select the 600 enumeration areas. All sample surveys will use the enumeration areas from the latest census data where all population were counted and in this case the 2017 Population and Housing Census. The purpose of the sample is to draw inferences on the population, that is, the data is generated from a random sample size from the population of interest. It also mentioned, to quantify and validate the effectiveness of any survey result is the role of any statistical agency to engage itself with any credible organisation that has the expertise to verify its survey results. In this 2019/2020 HIES we opted for the World Bank and Bristol University of UK for these reasons. So, that is just responding to the criticism of the report by the honourable Attorney-General.

Let me go back to the Report itself, quoting from page 17 and this is an issue which was raised but again it was seen or contended by Government that it is maybe not relevant and in according to the words of the honourable Attorney-General, it is not in accordance with their philosophy. The issue about ethnicity, ethnic data or desegregation of statistics according to ethnicity or other components, so the *iTaukei* population group dominates the poverty rates and distribution of the poor with 36 percent and 75 percent respectively. That is something which is highlighted there and in that table, *iTaukei* make up 74.8 percent distribution of the poor, Indo-Fijian is 22.8 percent and Others is 2.4 percent. If you look at some of the professionals who deal with research, population studies and the issue of desegregated data into various components including ethnicity, let me quote from Professor Steven Ratuva. He said and I quote:

“Ethnicity was widely used as a variable for household and income expenditure surveys because there was a general recognition that some ethnic groups were historically more disadvantaged than others.”

This was in the wake of the comments by the honourable Attorney-General that ethnicity and religious data would not contribute to Fiji’s progress as a nation. Professor Ratuva said that having access to the information was important because it highlighted socio-economic differences between ethnic groups. It was an important factor in nation-building through formulation of well-targeted policies that would address inequality between socio-economic groups and ethnic communities.

In many developing countries, economic development, inequality, politics and ethnicity intersect in often complex and sometimes violent ways. Most modern states including New Zealand segregate data along ethnic lines because of the need to be more proactive towards creating a more diverse, equal and tolerant society. Dr. Neelesh Gounder from the University of the South Pacific

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Oh, no!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I knew you were going to say that.

I mean, he is a doctor, so how many doctors?

(Laughter)

He is an economics lecturer, he has done research in the field and, of course, he has done more than anyone on that side of the House. He said that those not happy with the ethnic-based policy needed to target the policy and not the data and HIES was just a messenger and shooting the messenger would not help. Recording data on ethnicity and there are several policy areas where ethnic data is relevant and required. Ethnic data allows us to see beyond presumably prejudices that underlie ethnic groups and it seems that Government wants to avoid race- based policies that may arise from ethnic data.

However, recognising diversity based on ethnicity does not necessarily mean that such differences could lead to policies based purely on ethnicity. Dr. Sunil Kumar, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of the South Pacific, again he expresses the same thing. The question I would like to ask is, why hide ethnic data because it is very important to know everything in terms of development. We have inequalities in terms of wealth, work, qualification, education, et cetera, and even the places we stay in terms of residences, quality of housing, et cetera. There are also inequalities which can be related to specifically or peculiar to particular ethnic groups.

That is something which Fiji, as a multi-ethnic nation need to accept that in terms of moving forward and develop appropriate policies accordingly. That is something I would like to again emphasise today, the Government, I know that has been expressed every now and then. It is not their philosophy but I would like to remind them, why do you not want these kinds of data to be known?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Why do you want it?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Let me ask you a question, when you see obvious differences in terms of wealth between ethnicities, do you leave it like that or do you do something in accordance with policy in order to address that? For example, if you look at the number of contracts awarded by Government, who is it being awarded to or the number of businesses in the country or the Chamber of Commerce – the number of businesses owned by the different ethnic groups in Fiji? As time goes on with those disparities, do you think that will create an issue in society or do you think it will create a problem later when those differences peculiar to ethnicity becomes more obvious or could it become problematic? I know that people try to avoid the issue, but it is something we need to grasp and see how we can handle it as a nation together. That is what I would like to emphasise today as we move forward as a nation.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just are couple of points I would like to respond to, but before I do so, what is really interesting which is the HIES study that was compiled, the honourable Members of course, have not gone beyond ethnicity as far as that report was concerned. But the data will give you some very good information but the general observance of all such surveys worldwide does show, for example, when the families got bigger, the incidence of poverty actually increases. In Fiji's case for example, they said the poverty rate rises, the number of children per household increases. The poverty rate for households with three or more children was 44 percent is double the rate of households with only one child at 22 percent.

Similarly, Sir, if for example, the level of education, it says here where heads of households who only completed primary school, the poverty rate was 37.5 percent for those households, secondary schools was 25.8 percent and, of course , the higher education was 13.8 percent and postgraduate studies was 5.4 percent. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some very pertinent issues that people need to understand.

Secondly, the study was done at a time, the poverty estimates were reflective of the global economic slowdown which is already underway at the time of survey marked by lengthy geopolitical trade disputes and slowdown in global investment which were largely out of control.

The United Nations' estimate places a global growth at 2.3 percent in 2019. The lowest growth was of the previous decade. Honourable Professor Prasad will not tell us that when he is bringing this motion. That slowdown ultimately affected our economy too because we were part of the global community. So it is within that context that this study was done, honourable Tuisawau, again, try and understand this.

Notwithstanding that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the survey showed that the poverty rate was 29 percent. Honourable Tikoduadua again misled Parliament when he talked about absolute poverty and abject poverty. There are far more different categories when you talk about poverty levels. Again, the World Bank Report here in 2017 said that and I quote: "Extreme poverty in Fiji is rare. According to the World Bank's measures, the 2.3 percent of the population live in extreme poverty."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course there is no doubt and I think we all can agree on this that people who have lower incomes now would have increased as a result of COVID-19. Over 100,000 people lost their jobs; we know that. As a result, what did the Government do? We provided \$430 million of unemployment benefit. Through the FNPF's general account when their funds are actually finished in their general account and then on top of that, the \$90, the two rounds of \$50 and the two rounds of \$360. As highlighted by all the previous Ministers also, market vendors' fees and the other types of assistance was provided to individuals.

In this Budget, because they have again opposed, they opposed last year's budget, they oppose this year's Revised Budget. We have given, one-off, for example, \$50 payment to all social welfare recipients, a \$100 one-off payment to all the people living in Vanua Levu including Bua. Mr. Speaker, Sir, all of these have been provided. Now there is no doubt, that if we may want to give more for people in those areas. The honourable Sakuru talked about people who cannot be caught in a poverty trap, et cetera. I agree with that just on that single point and honourable Akbar has already highlighted this.

We have what we call the "graduation process", we do not want people to fall into that. In fact, that is the reason why the unemployment benefit of \$430 million was not called poverty alleviation but unemployment benefit to show and tell people, the psychology of it was that this is an interim measure and you will get your jobs back once the borders open so people do not fall into the psychological trap of being completely dependent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of these things have been around and, of course, one of the points that the Minister for Health may have not mentioned this but the GPs now, private GPs, we actually pay the fees. They get all their blood test, urine test and cholesterol test done, everything that normally go to a doctor - all of that is being paid for by Government and this is available for people who cannot afford to go to a GP in the first place. They normally will go to a nursing station, health centre or a public hospital. We have now expanded that as part of the Budget again. We said that we will actually fund private GPs to go to populated areas. We may actually plonk one doctor along somewhere in the Coral Coast, put one in Malolo somewhere around where a large numbers of people live, in Korovuto and various other places.

All of that is being done and I would like to recall the sentiments by the honourable Minister for Commerce and Trade. When we were giving the MSME grants, they said, "Oh, handout, freebies." That was not even an election but they kept on saying that. They did not look at these things holistically and as honourable Seruiratu had highlighted, that we you look at poverty, you need to look at it holistically honourable Qereqeretabua. You just cannot at one particular incident. I know Hasan Khan, he has read that thing about the elderlies, et cetera, we all agree with that, but, of course what he fails to mention during his time when he was heading EFTCOS, there was no social pension given to people who had FNPF. A vast number of people in this country have never worked formally

for anyone. You go to all the maritime areas unless they have worked in a hotel, people working in farms, women living at their homes or working as house girls et cetera, they do not have FNPF.

The society is changing, technology is advancing, extended families are no longer extended families, they are nuclear families. As a recognition of that, the Bainimarama-led Government introduced the \$100 pension for those people initially over 70 years, and then 65 years. You have couples who are over the age of 65 years get \$100 each. That, obviously, is a lot better than what they got before, which was nothing.

In the same way the disability allowance, there was never any disability allowance paid in this country, never! There is never any, for example, rural pregnant women getting food nutrition vouchers, never! None of them have mentioned that. Honourable Salote Radrodro did not even mention that, none of that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I cannot overemphasise the fact that free education is now truly available in Fiji. When we actually announced that, honourable Gavoka at one point said, “Oh, it was available in the Ratu Mara Government”, the Leader of Paapi said, “I provided it”, then he had to correct himself once again. It was not really provided, people still have to pay building fees and all of that. It is truly free.

You actually get free transportation to schools, we get free textbooks. Today in Fiji, there are far more girls in high school than boys. There are far more females in university, than males. What does that mean, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Let us look at the overall impact of it.

It means that less teenage pregnancies. It also means that our mothers are better educated now, get better opportunities, women empowerment takes place, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and, therefore, it creates a better society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that level of education does actually contribute. Again, honourable Salote Radrodro talked about temporary special measures. TSM is a temporary special measure. Mr. Speaker, Sir, a country that has been so beholden to a quota system in ethnicity, TSM actually would be in the same alignment with them. It would have actually been an anathema to what we are trying to achieve.

Today in this Parliament, Sir, the percentage of females is the highest as ever been since Independence. She does not recognise that.

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is the Electoral System, Sir. If we have the quality of Members of Parliament like you, obviously we do not want that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fact of the matter is that, under this electoral system it has allowed more and more females to participate, allowed more and more young people to participate. Obviously, there are far more young people on this side of Parliament than the other side. But the fact of the matter is, we have got more young people in Parliament than ever before.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, she failed to mention that for the first time, we had a Speaker that was a female, for the first time we had a Secretary to Cabinet who was a female. At one stage, we

had the Speaker to Parliament, the Secretary-General to Parliament and the Secretary to Cabinet, simultaneously three females occupying these positions, they did not utter a word.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also want to make was that the honourable Professor Prasad did not actually talk about inflation. The USA has an inflation rate of 7.9 percent, not a mention of that. Not a mention of the fact that a country that is so heavily dependent on imports, will actually be affected by imported inflation rates. Most definitely, we will be affected by that.

Not a single mention by any of the honourable Members of the Opposition about these hard-core realities. They talked about, “Oh, the NFP Manifesto, we said to reduce VAT, make it zero percent,” at a time when they did it just before the Elections. It was politically expedient for them to do so.

If we were playing politics, Sir, our leader would have said at that time, “okay, let us play politics, let us also say let us reduce VAT,” but we have a principle approach to the economy, we have the audacity to stand up in the face of people who want to simply win votes. We have a principle approach.

Honourable Gavoka, please do not laugh. I am going to give you some free political advice, stop aligning yourself with *paapi* because they are actually an anathema to your vote bank. Remember that! They are an anathema to your vote bank and continuously for the past few days, SODELPA has been supporting them, that is what is going to happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point that I wanted to make was, they have actually completely did not mention any of that imported inflationary impact. At the same time, they did not mention about all the other social wages - electricity subsidy, household less than \$30,000, we pay 50 percent of your bill. During COVID-19, 100 percent was paid.

Water, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the household with income of less than \$30,000, we pay water bill for 92,000 litres of free water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the income tax paid in this country, in 2007 when the honourable Prime Minister became Prime Minister, the income tax threshold was \$8,600. Then it became \$8,800, then the income tax threshold went to \$16,000, and today it is \$30,000. So anyone who earns less than \$30,000 does not pay a single cent of tax. The entire money, apart from their FNPF deduction, goes into their pocket. They have not acknowledged that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Honourable Usamate had already mentioned that. Honourable Radrodoro said we want to be like Norway. In Norway, the tax rate is 50 percent and 60 percent. In France, you pay tax on the number of windows you have in your house. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tax rate in Singapore is very low, exactly, see you got it wrong again.

The other point that I want to make was, honourable Professor Prasad mentioned about how we have acknowledged that cane farmers earned less. Yes, we have already mentioned that. In fact, the Cane Growers Council feels this Government paid for it. Before even from the cane, you know that, when they used to get their money, the Cane Growers Council deducted from all the cane farmers, and this Government started paying it back in 2012 and 2013, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Not a single cent is paid by the cane farmer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is this, none of the other political party leaders, including NFP, including Chaudhary, including *paapi*, including everyone else had ever acknowledged that fact, and to find a solution for it. The honourable Prime Minister has said that we are going to find a solution

to it. This 43 percent of the cane farmers need to be assisted. We have made an allocation in this Budget to help those people to get long term leases. We made an allocation in this Budget to help them transition from sugarcane farming if they want to go and plant something else, or some of them simply want to get residential leases, we have allocated funding for that. The Committee on the Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL), of course, continues to get renewal of leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to make, was that, all of these things that we do is not a one-off type of event, it is done in a systematic and holistic manner. Many of these have actually been highlighted.

The honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation and the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts have highlighted about the fact that we have the Women's Expo. What is that doing? It is not just a show down at the Gymnasium, but it is about connecting these people to markets they normally could not connect to. It means sustained livelihood, Sir. That is what we are trying to do. It is not the two days or three days funfair thing. It is actually creating jobs, opportunities and livelihoods for them, but in a sustainable manner. That is what we are doing. In the same way, we reduced VAT, we did not reduce VAT at that point in time because it was not sustainable. This we have to do, we look at things on a sustainable basis, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I wanted to make was, we have tried other initiatives, for example, through FDB. When we bring the FDB guarantee, they oppose it. Here, FDB's guarantee is trying to assist people in the agriculture sector and the other smaller sectors. They are working closely together with the Ministry of Agriculture, they have given \$1million to ginger farmers, mainly from Naitasiri. They do not appreciate and acknowledge that, but they come to Parliament, they stand up and say, "Oh". Honourable Radrodro does not like the ethnicity of the CEO. They objected to it on so many different ways.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is true, why did you say "hey"; it is a fact. He has questioned his ethnicity and he has questioned his loyalty to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is, when we look at the solutions, we have to look at it from an entire legal framework perspective.

The ACCF was set up, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before, if the head of the household, the husband or the wife was crossing the road and got hit by a bus or a car, livelihood is gone, family is languishing in poverty, so what do they do? , They have to go through a court system. They have to go and hire a lawyer. It takes four years, five years and may be they will get compensation, may be they will not. The witnesses have died. The lawyer takes away the 50 percent of the money that is claimed. They do not have to do that.

Now, we have got ACCF. It is a no fault system. A person has a car accident or a road accident, they simply get compensated. The family gets the money immediately, in some cases, been paid within a matter of days, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what is happening.

Workers Compensation, before again you go through a lengthy process. There was a fault system. If I am working on a machine and my fingers got chopped off by the machine, the employer can claim, "Oh, he came to work grog doped. He contributed partially towards his finger being chopped off." Now, there is no fault system. I am at work, I get injured, I get paid through ACCF. These are the systematic issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that have been put in place that actually empowers people.

The same thing with Legal Aid Commission, \$5.5 million given to them. Women who may be abandoned by spouses or children abandoned, they can actually go and get legal recourse. People who have died without making wills, they get legal recourse and I am not talking only about people who are rich but I am talking about the people at the bottom of socio-economic strata in this country.

These are the things that have actually been put in place to help people who are at the bottom end of society, which they were talking about. None of them have addressed that. There is, in fact, a constitutional provision that any government that is elected must allocate adequate resources to the Legal Aid Commission, Sir. All of these have been put in place.

Sir, honourable Salote Radrodro, went on about the name of ‘women’. Mr. Speaker, Sir, irrelevant to the situation, but let me explain this to her. This matter is actually *subjudice*. The matter has been debated through the courts and, again, her and the people like her, in fact, even outside court have tried to influence the decision of the court.

It is a very simple issue, Sir, a birth certificate in some countries they actually call it a name certificate. It is your legal name that is recognised legally. That is your name. If your name is Salote Radrodro at birth, you want to keep that name, you can keep that name. No one is forcing you to change that name. It is very simple.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before under the old system, if you want to change your name, you had to go to a lawyer, pay \$500 or \$1,000, you get a deed poll done and then you get a name change. Some countries, like I said, instead of calling it birth certificate, they call it name certificate, but it is your formal name that is registered.

All we are saying is that, if a person has to be registered as a voter, that name should be the legal name of that person. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has no inconvenience, it does not cost money.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, now she is talking about inconvenience. Before, she was talking about the principle of changing it. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is, it does not cost a single cent. It simply requires you to fill out a form and it is done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a couple of points that I also wanted to make. Honourable Tuisawau went on about ethnic desegregation of data. This country has been obsessed with ethnicity. The leader of PAP justified the removal of the democratically-elected government in this chamber with the bullet shot over there on the basis of ethnicity. Since then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our entire Parliament has been elected on the base of ethnicity. This is why.

I remember quite clearly in 2012, I think it was, when we were at Knolly Street at NDMO, there was a particular cyclone and the honourable Prime Minister said, “We need to help these people fix up their homes.” The people at NDMO looked at him and said, “Sorry, we cannot do that.” He asked, why? “Because it has been a Government policy since the 1970s that we only rebuild homes of people who live in villages. We do not build the homes of anyone outside the village boundary.”

Even though you may be a villager living outside the village boundary, we do not build it for you. If you are living anywhere else, we do not build it, so it is done on the basis of ethnicity also. This honourable Prime Minister changed the system, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my point is this, poverty does not recognise ethnicity. Poverty does not recognise religion. Poverty does not recognise province. Poverty actually recognises your particular

condition and as Government, we need to be able to help anyone irrespective of their ethnicity, religion or province to get them out of it, to provide assistance to them. But if you are going to be beholden to that idea, you will continue to drive your policies based to ethnicity, and it will drive into or permeate into every single strata of your society. That is what will happen. You will make decisions based on that.

I remember, Sir, in 2007, when we came to Government, someone said, “Oh, we are going to appoint these people.” You know what they did in the Ministry of Economy at that time, they said, “Oh, this many Fijians, this many Indians, this many Others.” So let us appoint people to make it a bit balanced.” Nothing about merit, nothing about the person they want to appoint is going to do a good job or not, they are going to do *dinmaro* or what? Are you going to be *vucesa*? No. Their capability, their qualification? No. The only qualification was ethnicity. How can you run a modern day government if you have that kind of thinking? This is the reason why this Government actually opposes that. Mr. Speaker, Sir, diversity happens automatically, you look at the civil service, it happens automatically.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I also wanted to make was this – there are structural issues also (just to highlight) to poverty. I remember after the 1987 *coup*, the Rabuka Government made a decree, I think at that point in time. They said that if anyone was caught even with a milligram of *marijuana* had to go in for three months mandatory sentence. That was the law then, they have brought in mandatory sentencing, forget about alcohol but *marijuana*, even a milligram.

I remember, Sir, in one of those courts in the High Court, I was representing the DPP’s Office and there were four prisoners who were in fact appealing their sentence and the story goes this way. This one of them who was extremely intelligent was in fact quite aggressive. I remember talking to the prison warden on that same evening and his story was this that he was sent to prison for a minor sentence; none of this Yellow Ribbon or all of these rehabilitation work - minor incident. He was raped in prison very badly.

Since then, Sir, psychologically, he went at the age of 17 years or 18 years and remember the mandatory sentencing applied only to while it worked out, because the DPP’s Office did an analysis, most of the people who ended going to prison for that particular offence came from the lower-end of the socio-economic scale. The guy who had his first sniff behind the toilet or underneath the coconut tree, not the rich children who drive around in their cars or go to Traps, et cetera. It was these children who got caught. He was very badly raped and then psychologically he was affected. He was beholden to the prison system. From the age of 17 years to the age of 34 years or 36 years when he first appeared, where I appeared with him in the High Court, he had been in and out of prison for about 17 years to 18 years. It was like a revolving door for him, and Mr. Speaker, Sir. He had been released from Korovou at 10 that morning, at 2 p.m. he was robbing a yacht, a German gentleman with a local girlfriend. They put so much stuff in the dinghy to go across to Lami, it sank. Funny but actually quite tragic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is what you call systemic poverty, what is what leads to systemic poverty, systemic injustices, that is what happens. We get condemned every time for Yellow Ribbon, we got condemned about our prisoners getting connected to employers, et cetera. That is what leads to society becoming dysfunctional, they do not talk about any of those things.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point I wanted to also make, honourable Salote Radrodro with her obsession with USP aligns the non-grant giving by the Fijian Government to USP as an affront to education.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Yes.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- See! Mr. Speaker, Sir, she completely forgets as I have just mentioned ECE to Year 13 free, bus fares, text books all free. Toppers and TELS – USP still gets Toppers and TELS students from the Fijian Government, still funded by the Fijian Government and they want us to give grant to a system that is not being accountable and transparent. For them it is a political issue, it has got nothing to do with poverty and again this is the kind of shenanigans that we get in this Parliament, these very pedestrian kind of contributions to these type of debates.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Pedestrian?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Yes, you should learn it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other point that I also wanted to make was, honourable Tuisawau I want to come to you too. He said that we should have ethnic categorisation. It is the homogenisation of ethnification that what leads to problems because when you start lumping people into different ethnic groups, you do not recognise the intra-injustices that exist within those groups. That is precisely what happened with women when you used to it. That is precisely what happens, Mr. Speaker, Sir, between urban *iTaukei* people and rural *iTaukei* people. That is precisely what happened when under the homogenisation category, Class A Shares went to all the elite *iTaukei* to get shares in Fijian Holdings Ltd, Class B went to the provinces and they get paid lower dividends. It is a fact. Do not shake your head. This Prime Minister provided equal dividend payments. This Prime Minister did. He is doing this, I want the public to say, he is doing this, like do not say it, let us hide it under the carpet. That is what it does, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last point that I would like to make, related to that, there has been a lot of talk about empowering people. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government, through this Prime Minister, through stable leadership has provided stability to this country and funding for *iTaukei* land development.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The honourable Prime Minister in two weeks' time is going to do ground-breaking in another two places - Tavua and Viseisei. There are four about to come on stream. This is what you call actually taking a systemic issue and trying to address it in a systematic manner because this will actually empower these landowners. So this whole notion of asset-rich, cash-poor will actually go out the window. This is providing funding to people who actually are deprived of those access to funding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all in all I would like to mention also that whenever these motions are brought about, I hope honourable Professor Prasad and I know you are going to address this in your summing-up, unfortunately you have a right to do so. The point I wanted to make is that this is actually, and Minister Akbar hit the nail on the head when she said that if honourable Professor Prasad was so concerned about poverty, why is he bringing it now? Why did he not do it earlier on?

The Fijian public needs to know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is all a political stunt. It is a political stunt to try and gain lost ground because honourable Professor Prasad does know that he is down on a slippery slope and it is a sign of desperation. In the process, Sir, he is not only creating disquiet in

this House but disquiet amongst the community. I hope people understand that leaders like this, they are most definitely not the proud specimen of what a statesperson should do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should be concerned about our country. We should be genuinely concerned about the country for whom you are bringing the motion for and in that way, we will be able to deliver a lot better services to our members of the public.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, as usual that was expected from the Government side. They meandered, they wandered, they lied, they lied and they saw this opportunity in this motion to actually brag about things that they have done before. They actually misunderstood the motion completely and I was quite surprised that they did not object to this motion in the Business Committee and I tell you why. They saw an opportunity, Mr. Speaker, in this motion to brag about what Government has done since 2014. They saw an opportunity to actually lie and the honourable Attorney-General just said that we are trying to play politics. They have done exactly the same thing. They have fallen into the trap, Mr. Speaker.

I was expecting them to look at this motion and understand that this motion was to look at what has happened since the COVID-19 pandemic hit us and build on, Mr. Speaker, from the report that we had. But, no. They forgot about it, they have misinterpreted and they went on and on and the honourable Minister for Education actually told a naked lie, she should apologise.

I remember, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I spoke on the Budget, I said this very clearly, it is recorded in the *Daily Hansard* that I support this Budget for three reasons and that was that we were:

1. Reducing VAT on basic food items and other essentials;
2. Removing the tax on fuel;
3. Raising the minimum wages;

which has been a National Federation Party policy for a while.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they did not acknowledge, they actually copied the list of items in the same order. Instead of saying, “hey look, this is what you were saying.” It does not stop here, let me just get back to what they were saying that we are using this as a political tool, that we are making a political gain and that we are not honest.

In 2014, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they had it in their manifesto. They promised the people of this country that they will not remove VAT from those basic food items. It was in their manifesto and they went into the election on that manifesto. They lied, they ridiculed the VAT reduction that I was proposing. They ridiculed with their business cabal the idea of raising the minimum wages and then they come back and say that we are playing politics. The honourable Minister for Social Welfare, as I said, she tries very hard and I want to acknowledge and she is quite responsive.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Do not patronise.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not patronising. This is the problem with you. I am actually telling the truth that she responds, but I have heard her before, she talks about how poor we were. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lies they continue to tell, I come from a farming background, I went to a primary school in Muanidevo.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Again, again.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We had remission of fees, I got remission of fees right up to Labasa College and that was during the reign of the Ratu Mara Government and the NFP in Opposition. We got scholarships, thousands of students of all ethnic groups in this country since Independence got scholarships, loans, got their degrees and studying. Of course, Government improved it, more students are getting loans now, they have to pay and we acknowledge that, but to keep bragging about the fact that suddenly, the sun started shining on the education system in this country since the Bainimarama-led Government.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This level of exaggeration is just unbelievable, they do not have the honesty, they do not have any kind of integrity to be at least honest. They talk about intellectual honesty, the intellectual dishonesty that comes from the other side is breathtaking.

Coming back to the Poverty Report, the people in this country are listening to the debate on this motion from the other side. They are talking about things that they started doing before COVID. They are questioning about, how we are saying that 50 percent of the people. If you look at that Report, if they read it correctly, I know they condemned this report and I was caught surprised that the honourable Attorney-General was saying that there are some good things in that report.

There was a Minister who did not even understand the difference between a survey and a census and was trying to condemn the report. Let me just go back to the report. The report says that poverty rate is about 29.9 percent to 30 percent, but the report also said that about 15 percent to 20 percent of the people who are vulnerable, on the margins of poverty, Mr. Speaker, and after COVID-19, we all know that about \$150,000 people lost jobs and income.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They are getting it back again.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Some of them are getting it back again but a large majority are still unemployed. The rationale behind the Motion was to give the Standing Committee in which they have three Members, they have their Chairperson, to look at what is happening right now. You can talk about these reports and assessments. The buffoonery that came from that side about this whole issue of poverty, Mr. Speaker, I am actually quite amazed at the level of stupidity that came with respect to this Motion.

Of course, we know the causes of poverty, the World Bank Report and the honourable Minister for Defence was quoting the 2017 Report. We understand that, but the objective of the Motion, Mr. Speaker, was to look at what had happened since COVID-19. Where are the people? What is happening?

(Hon. A. Sayed-Khaiyum interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what the motion was and I had explained to them.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR.SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I said that right at the beginning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they do not want to talk about the people who are struggling to put food on the table. Let me tell them this, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 2.0 percent of the children in this country were deprived of three meals a day. Imagine what would have happened after the *Coup*? It talks about the size of the family - 40 percent of those living in poverty have seven or more in the family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report provides this useful barometer and what I was saying that this Committee should do is to go around the country and talk to various stakeholders and honourable Qereqeretaua gave this example. I went to Narere the other day. This little group, because they know they are living in the community and they understand that people are struggling to put food on their tables and kids are struggling three meals a day, these people organise themselves to help them. And the reason why we have brought this Motion is because we have been told this and we saw this. They know this as well.

When Ministers go, people are kind of afraid, they do not want to raise this issue. But they also call them because they come and tell us, “We have called this Minister, that Minister.” They know this, but yet for political expediency and purposes, they come here and brag about the fact that they have that, instead of saying, “This is a good Motion.” All they had to say is that, and the debate would have ended.

You, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have said that we wanted a select committee but the ruling was the Standing Committees. The honourable Minister for Commerce did not even know that the Motion was about getting the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to do the inquiry and not the a select committee.

So, it was a very simple yet useful Motion because people out there are suffering, Mr. Speaker, and Government does not have all the information. It was like people in the evacuation centres. The honourable Minister for Defence said, “Oh, they have to wait for 48 hours”, but people are starving there,

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If it had not been for the NGOs, they would have....

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- *Areh*, people do not have food and yet, you are talking about a policy? This is the kind of response they get?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Commerce, I think had said in the previous Parliament, “Oh, people are not suffering.” That is the kind of mentality of not being able to see or want to understand that they need to find more information because as I have said this morning, the trust in this Government is declining. Honourable Bala was saying, “Oh, this motion might backfire on you,” and that is what they did. They thought, “Oh, this is a great opportunity, let us all come, let us get the Ministers and brag about what they did from 2014.” We have acknowledged some of the good things that Government has done, no one is saying that they have not done anything.

Every Government, Mr. Speaker, whatever size, shape or form, has done something. They have built roads, hospitals, they provided education, they do not acknowledge that. But on a motion like this, they come and brag about it, instead of focusing on the real issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when they talked about tax threshold before the 2018 Election and they said, “Oh, anyone who is earning \$30,000 does not pay tax.” But they actually paid tax, the indirect forms of taxes, they pay VAT, they pay duty, so everything that this Government provides to the people of this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is paid for by the people of this country. When you provide services, when you give social pension, people are paying for it. So, let us not come out here and return, and add salt to injury of the poor saying, “Oh, we are doing this.”

If you say that the Government is doing it, that is the Government’s responsibility and people are paying for it.

(Hon. A. Sayed-Khaiyum interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am talking on the motion. *Areh*, you meandered all over the place, *yaar!*

(Hon. A. Sayed-Khaiyum interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are so obsessed with *paapi*, I will tell you what it means in a minute.

But, Mr. Speaker, that is the motion because the motion, again and again, I want to remind them that they completely miss the point. They are so obsessed that they completely missed the point because they wanted to play politics.

They talked about the Sugar Cane Growers Council levy. I know why they did that. Honourable Dr. Waqainabete was talking about roads being built and medical services, yes, that may be true, but you go and look at all the medical centres around the country right now. I mean, I went to Dreketi and I went inside the Health Centre.

Mr. Speaker, I remember in the 1970s when you go there, you see all these white stones, the walls are painted, the shed where people wait was something to go. You can smell the cleanliness and see the flowers. , you go to that Health Centre now, the doctor was sitting in the room where tiles have broken and where the dust was blowing. You can built roads but you need to provide the facilities as well.

(Hon. S. Adimaitoga interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.-This is about poverty, this is about a certain category of people in certain areas who are suffering and that is why we are saying after COVID-19 the situation is dire, let us have this assessment.

Mr. Speaker, they talked about, “oh, it is going to be very expensive.” *Areh*, there are Ministers who drink grog and the driver is waiting for them, paying hundreds and thousands of dollars a year and you want to say that having a Standing Committee and going around the country for two weeks is going to be very expensive? Is that the kind of logic that they are talking about? Wastage your Parliament’s time? I mean that is the kind of logic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they use to reject this motion when we need to find out that information.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is just so much exaggeration that is coming out from the Government side is just unbelievable. They talk about the policies. In fact, for a while, we thought we were

debating in the last Budget, because all they were talking about is the budget allocation. Sometimes, Mr. Speaker, just having budgetary allocations and we know, that having budgetary allocations does not mean that the people are actually getting the services. There are hundreds and thousands of people out there when they hear the Ministers talk in Parliament, they said, “Oh this is very good”, but after a while when they find out that it is not reaching them, it is the accessibility and ability of the Ministry to spend the money, to get to the people and help them. That is what we are saying, that this Standing Committee would have been able to find out some of the bottlenecks. They would have listened to the people.

When we talk about the NGOs, they have this obsession with NGOs. This is the problem with this Government. They have this obsession with NGOs because they are doing their work. They attack people who are doing the work. The motion was that that this Standing Committee would be able to talk to them, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I know the honourable Attorney-General meanders in different directions and obviously, he has now found a new word, *paapi*, but let me tell him that in the last Budget, he said, “I have joined the *paapi*.” Mr. Speaker, to explain the word, *paapi*, it means a sinner. He said, “Oh, it was the Freudian slip, but no, he said it three times, and then he said, “Oh, Biman has joined the *paapi*.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me tell the honourable Attorney-General, we are in the *Ram Navami* celebration, we are in the month of *Ramadan* and we are in the month of Lent, this is a very holy and auspicious time and for him to call someone a *paapi*, a sinner, and for him to say that I have joined the *paapi*, that I somehow have committed a sin, but the bigger sin, the *paap*, the *gunah* that they have committed on the people of this country is by not supporting a very simple motion to find out what is going on with the people. The ruin, the *paapi*, the sin that they are committing is that they have not done that. They are trying to create this, in fact, it is quite insulting for the honourable Attorney-General to talk about it. I mean, it is like a little kid misbehaving and saying this.

I want to say to him and this is my advice, “Act your age, not your shoe size”, because for you to ridicule leaders of political parties to say that we are somehow sinners, Mr. Speaker, I do not stoop that low, I do not go around saying that they are *paapi*, they did this. I would never say that. You should tell your *de facto* leader not to do that, honourable Prime Minister. I would never stoop that low, Mr. Speaker. I have never, I will never do this in Parliament and I will never do this outside. Here is a man, who has accused a whole political party with thousands of members in that political party, accusing them as sinners. Those who want to cooperate, work together are also sinners because their record, Mr. Speaker, is one of dictatorship and they want to continue like that.

HON. J.V. BAINIMARAMA.- Shut up and sit down.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Do not say shut up, honourable Prime Minister.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are not the Speaker.

You are the Prime Minister, you have that respect but do not say shut up. That is unbecoming of a Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker. I will never say that to the Prime Minister because I respect the position.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, now that we have had the Right of Reply, the Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there being opposition to the motion, Parliament will now vote.

Honourable Alvick Maharaj in Paris, you have the opportunity to vote now.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I oppose the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

Votes Cast

Ayes - 14

Nays - 27

Not voted - 10

Motion is defeated.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

CT Scan Services - Western Division
(Question No. 80/2022)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament of the alternatives available to patients in the Western Division who need CT scan services given the absence of a working CT scanner at the Lautoka Hospital?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Sir, I thank the honourable Member for that question. Currently at the moment the CT scan services in Lautoka Hospital is outsourced to Zens Medical Centre and from August 2021 to February 2022, we had referred 686 patients for CT scan. This has happened because as I have alluded to previously in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, was that the CT scan in Lautoka is not functioning and we are in the process of replacing it with a \$1.5 million CT scan top of the range which is coming through a grant from Japan. This is in addition to the CT scans that we are also getting for CWM Hospital and Labasa Hospital that are going through the tender process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Aspen has committed to putting in a temporary CT scan in May this year that will carry us through to when the CT scan from Japan arrives in August, but I want to make a point at this juncture that doing a CT scan is not a simple decision to do because with a CT scan, it is equivalent to doing 400 chest x-rays, the amount of radiation that a CT scan gives. The International Atomic Energy have indicated that in young people it is important to make the right decision about CT scan because giving frequent CT scans has been shown to have an increased risk of cancer because of radiation later on in life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also recently repaired as of last year the Radiology Department at Lautoka Hospital to a tune of \$1.5 million. Including in that is we have installed a \$302,295.89 Floor-Mounted Shimadzu Digital X-Ray which is top of the range. So, this digital x-ray also gives really good images in which some of the patients would actually get a CT scan before would not because this top of the range x-ray machine does.

We have also purchased ultrasound scans HS79A Samsung Maddison Quality Scan costing \$267,502 and this supports the use of imaging in this rather than specifically to CT scan. Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are also cases that not necessarily require a CT scan and they come directly in Haven MRI. A case in point is a case this week that last week or few weeks before had an MRI, had a head tumour and was actually being operated with our neurosurgeon using their new state of the art \$672,000 operating digital microscope that Government had also procured.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion I would like to say that at the moment we have the avenues to be able to provide other imaging apart from CT scan which is outsourced to Zens which is the digital general mounted x-ray and the digital x-rays that we have and also the sophisticated ultrasound machine that we are using.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a follow-up question for the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services, would the Minister then clarify with those who are having to be sent to Zens Medical Clinic because of the inability of the public health system to provide CT scans, are the patients paying for those CT scans when they go to a private provider or not?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Sir, all those patients that come through the public system, in which our specialists have agreed that they need a CT scan and the numbers that I have alluded to before which is 686 patients from August 2021 to February 2022, we paid \$297,340, they did not pay a cent if they came through our system with our specialists actually requesting a CT scan. If the patient came from private straight to Zens Medical Centre, then that is a private referral.

Fiji Meteorological Services Current & Future Plans
(Question No. 81/2022)

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

Given the changing weather patterns, can the honourable Minister for Infrastructure, Meteorological Services, Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the current and future plans of the Fiji Meteorological Service to enhance weather and flood forecasting?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in response to the question asked by the honourable Virendra Lal and thank him for his question.

By way of background, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the data is now showing and I think we are all aware in this House and also in our country that weather patterns are changing. We are seeing the increase in the temperatures of our seas, we have seen as a result of that the increase in the intensity of the tropical cyclones, the intense rainfall, the increased rainfall and also the large storm surges that are impacting on our coast lines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Southwest Pacific region, it has been noted lately that at least one category-five tropical cyclone was observed every tropical cyclone season since 2013-2014 with the exception of the 2018-2019 tropical cyclone season. This is a new trend and it is very alarming. For Fiji, it has been noted that most of the severe tropical cyclones occurred from the period of 2010 to 2021. There were more occurrences of categories three, four and five tropical cyclones during this period. Also, Fiji experienced back-to-back cyclones during this period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of rainfall, there is a year-to-year variability in Fiji's rainfall, a number of heavy rainfall and flood events have occurred especially during *La Nina* years but on the

other hand when you have an *El Nino* year, this is normally associated with dry spells and droughts. With this data, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the need to improve our weather and flood forecasting cannot be overstated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years the Department of Meteorological Services has been committed to improving its forecasting capabilities by upgrading of its reporting and network facilities and meeting regional and international obligations. This includes, for example, the upgrade of the Nadi radar antenna, the replacement of our automatic weather observation system at Nadi Airport, the installation of water level and rainfall telemetry instruments, the upgrade of our outer island stations and upgrade of our meteorological facilities to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently the Fiji Meteorological has changed its vision to be a people-focused centre of excellence for weather, climate, hydrological and ocean services, a paradigm shift that focuses on communities needs and works towards addressing them all through the service that it provides. Some of the future developments by the Department of Meteorological Service is firstly the move towards impact-based forecasting. The traditional way of weather prediction is to tell us what the weather will be.

Impact-based forecasting will tell us what the weather will do. It is a structured approach of combining hazard exposure and vulnerability data to identify risk and support decision-making. Generating impact-based products will require a range of specialists to work together. In this regard, the Fiji Meteorological is working with the National Disaster Management Office and the Weather Readiness Project Team from the United States of America to develop an impact-based forecasting system.

Secondly is the upscaling of our coastal inundation forecasting system. This is to enable efficient warning systems to protect coastal communities and support sustainable development. In 2020, a coastal inundation forecasting demonstration project was developed and successfully implemented with the assistance from the World Meteorological Organisation. The aim of the project was to develop a higher-resolution wave forecast model including ocean observational data. Building upon the lessons and recommendations of the demonstration project, the plan is to further expand this with a focus on building resilience of end-users and industries.

Thirdly, the upscaling of the Fiji Flash Flood Guidance System. Our current system provides guidance information on the risk of flash floods near the catchment areas. The plan now is to further develop the system to enhance the quality and the lead time for early warning of flash flooding.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the improved access to hydrometeorological data and information. The demand for hydrometeorological data and information is very high. There are two things here – one is to access the data and the other is the ability to interpret that data.

To make it user-friendly, the Department is working towards consolidating all incoming operational weather, climate and water observation data, satellite and radar imagery in a single quality-controlled database. That database will feed to the web interface for external client to access to real-time hydrometeorological data.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will move to the third Oral Question for today. This question was originally for the honourable Niko Nawaikula to ask and because he is otherwise engaged today, the honourable Ratu Tevita Navurelevu was to ask the question. Unfortunately, however, he is taken sick and I have allowed for the honourable Inosi Kuridrani to ask the question.

Utilisation of Climate Action Trust Fund
(Question No. 82/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the status of utilisation of the Climate Action Trust Fund?

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

Sir, in the interest of time, I would like to highlight to Parliament that we have already presented the Audited Financial Annual Reports for the years 2016- 2017, 2017-2018; t the three Semi-Annual Reports 1, 2 and 3, which I have here in my hand and have already been tabled and the fourth one, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is currently being audited which is also in my hand. The honourable Member, if that is what he means by the update on the status of utilisation, you will get all of that from the audited accounts.

Update on the Teachers Helpline
(Question No. 83/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government update Parliament on the Teachers Helpline which was launched on 22nd February, 2022?

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with close to 13,000 teachers employed by the Ministry, it is important that we improve our services for our teachers. The Teachers Helpline has been developed to allow teachers to register their complaints and issues related to their employment or workplace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, previously, teachers raised their concerns and issues via phone calls, letters, e-mails or by visiting Headquarters. This platform was developed to improve customer service at the Ministry. The Teacher Helpline was developed by the Ministry's IT Unit without any cost. Similar support system is used in Australia and New Zealand where teachers can contact the Ministry through online platforms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Teacher Helpline portal was launched on 22nd February, 2022. Teachers accessed the Helpline using the same credential they use to log into the FEMIS. Using FEMIS portal ensures that the communication is kept confidential. Teachers can log on to the portal with the click of a button, even from the comfort of their homes, and choose from a dropdown menu to lodge their complaints. They can also upload evidence to support the issue on hand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through three simple steps, teachers can lodge their complaints. First, they can provide a brief description of the concern, confirm that the information provided is correct, and finally upload any document or evidence that the teacher feels is relevant to the issue.

This portal is our commitment to the teachers to deal with teacher issues, such as salaries, appointments, teaching loads, contracts, transfers, to name a few. We have also provided a mobile

number to assist those teachers who are based in remote and maritime locations where connectivity can be an issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this platform, we can address issues better and provide feedback systematically. All feedbacks and concerns are tracked through a single channel, allowing teachers to check on the progress, while allowing the Ministry to provide a coordinated response. There is a dedicated team that looks after the Teacher Helpline.

To date, we have already resolved more than 80 grievances, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The turnaround time to address the issue is five working days, but I am happy to say that so far, our team has been able to resolve and assist teachers well before five days. We are in the process of creating more awareness to assist teachers across the country to use the Teacher Helpline where teachers can track the progress of their complaints and after the awareness raising, that would be the only portal where teachers can lodge their complaints because we want to store all those complaints because those complaints will provide feedback and through this feedback, we can improve our policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government recognises the importance of education in nation building. We do not only support educational needs of our students, but also empower teachers to raise their issues directly with the Ministry. That is why the Teacher Helpline was developed, to handle teacher complaints in a professional manner.

Lautoka Market Ventilation and Light Project
(Question No. 84/2022)

HON. J.A.R SENILOLI asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts, and Local Government update Parliament on the status of implementation of the Lautoka Market Ventilation and Light Project?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question asked by the honourable Member.

The municipal markets create economic activities, generate income for the vendors and the Council and, therefore, it is an important facility for the Municipal Councils to look after. The Lautoka City Council continues to address the issues raised by the market vendors to improve the market facility wherever appropriate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Lautoka Municipal Market has three structures which consists of the main market, the bus station market and the new wing market. The main market is the largest building and is a hall-type structure which houses the fish market, root crops, vegetables, fruits and handicraft stalls. The bus station market is currently accommodating the Kava sellers with spice vendors. The new market shed is similar to the main market with the roof, but retains an open air circulation. All three markets have a total of 2,135 vendors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to the implementation of the Lautoka Market Ventilation and Light Project, the Council in 2019, recruited a consultant to carry out consultation, and provide an appropriate concept design to improve the Market lightening and ventilation. Sir, the consultant's scope is to consider a go-green building concept for natural ventilation and lighting, to take advantage of the sunny weather experienced throughout the year and to use solar energy where possible. The intention is to save energy consumption and reduce operational costs in the form of electricity.

The total project cost, including consultancy, is estimated to be \$2.4 million, with implementation schedule of six months' construction to complete the works. However, due to COVID-19, this project was put on hold.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Lautoka City Council, in the interim, provided more lighting and ventilation. For example, they have installed industrial fans, tube lights, downlights, and they have also provided seven tarpaulins. All this was done by the Council to improve the market facility for the market vendors and the customers. The total cost of the installation of the lights and provision of tarpaulin is in the sum of \$22,205.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Council has also installed CCTV cameras around and inside the market. This is to ensure that the market facility offer security to the vendors and the public. There are altogether 16 CCTV cameras installed in the market.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- A market-related question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are getting request from villagers when fruits are in season, they bring their fruits to shopping complexes and they sell them at verandas, and they have been chased away. We are asking, what can Government do for them during the short period when fruits are in season? They come to shopping complexes and verandas, instead of being chased away, what can the Government do to accommodate them?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It cannot be a supplementary question, Mr Speaker, Sir. It is not related to that question at all.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- You talk about vendors, you are talking about....

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, I am talking about Lautoka Market.

MR. SPEAKER.- A supplementary question is supposed to be related to the subject matter. That is a different question altogether. We will move on.

Update on Drainage Works
(Question No. 85/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment update Parliament on drainage works done this year around Fiji to support the agriculture sector and protect communities?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank honourable Vegnathan for asking this question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to take you back. The Ministry of Waterways was established by the Government in the recognition of the fact that the management of waterways, the preservation of Fiji's pristine environment and support for agriculture is quite critical.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is to provide support to its people, secure our biodiversity from flooding through drainage improvement works, for farmlands and rural residential areas. The Ministry has already undertaken this project in areas that have been facing floods and is still committed to the provision of drainage improvement works around the Central Division, Western Division, Northern Division and Eastern Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry receives a lot of requests from farmers and rural communities, which are in need to be looked after at times, especially during the rainy seasons. The drainage improvement works will technically construct pathways, including widening and deepening of all drains, creeks, to provide them with the varying capacity and stability of water flowing. Also, it is to deal with issues of flooding in areas where we do not have any drain and there is need to establish new drains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry was allocated half a million dollars towards this Drainage for Farmlands Programme in the 2021-2022 National Budget. So far, we have committed \$435,952, nearly almost all of that fund out of the total budget allocated. The funds have been used to assist close to 1,400 farmers in the Central Division, 715 farmers in the Western Division and 440 farmers in the Northern Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this includes a total length of 227,806 metres of drainage work. The Ministry was allocated half a million dollars towards its drainage for rural residential in the 2021-2022 National Budget. The Ministry so far assisted approximately 2,000 households in the Central Division, 2,700 households in the Western Division and 409 households in the Northern Division. The total length of work carried out is approximately 185,738 metres. The Ministry has so far committed \$418,563 out of the half a million dollars allocated. So almost all the funds have been utilised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been supporting farmers and rural households in the vision to boost their agricultural production and attain economic benefits. This is also in line with one of the budgetary themes about two years ago of protecting communities, protecting rural households. Flooding has been always been an issue for the rural residential farmers. Before, there was no allocation to undertake drainage work for rural residential communities. There was only allocation which was also funded by farmers under the old drainage Land and Water Resource Management (LWRM) scheme. So there were designated LWRM drains and the farmers were making contributions for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, about three years ago, this Government removed that contribution and took over the entire drainage work to be fully funded by the Government. In addition to that, this Government took over establishing drains outside the established LWRM drains. In addition to that, this Government has taken over and provided additional resources to assist villages and rural residential areas to protect them from flooding by constructing drains wherever there is a need for. I urge the community members taking this opportunity not to throw litter in the drains, protect the drains and it is very important that we protect the waterways and keep it clear so that water can flow out. We would want to continue to protect our communities from any flooding issues.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this year we commissioned the desilting of the Vitogo River, and we are still waiting. May I ask the honourable Minister, when will the actual work start?

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we commissioned and the work has started and the honourable Member was there with me. Then later on there was an issue of another licensee being given the license by the Ministry of Lands. We are now contacting that particular person who is holding the license to whatever area that that contractor has got, they need to clear it. The person whom we have engaged on a PPP model will open up the river mouth. We are now in talks with that person who is undertaking that work on a commercial basis. He knows that.

(Question No. 86/2022 withdrawn)

Update on Visitor Arrivals and Forward Bookings
(Question No. 87/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development Minister inform Parliament of the latest update on visitor arrivals and forward bookings after the reopening of international borders and its impact on the economy?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before we talk about the impact of the economy with the reopening of the borders, I think we have to understand what actually happened to the economy with the closure of the borders. As we know that prior to COVID-19, the tourism sector contributed about \$2 billion a year in foreign exchanged earnings for us, but of course, due to the COVID-19 over 100,000 people lost their jobs and we saw visitor number drop significantly. A drop to negative 83.5 percent in 2020 and further dropped to 78.5 percent in 2021.

Tourism earnings, of course, declined significantly during this period, Sir, to only \$340.9 million in 2020 and \$36.5 million in 2021. We lost overall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about \$4 billion in tourism earnings over the past two years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, therefore the vaccination rate of Fiji and the drive towards vaccination, No Jab, No Job Policy, et cetera, helped us very quickly reach that level of vaccination that actually helped us to open up the borders from the 1st of December.

We have now seen the numbers actually creep back up. The numbers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the 1st December was, visitor arrivals was noted a significant increase where 23,226 visitors were recorded for the month of December of which 77.1 percent were Australians, 15.1 percent from the USA and the rest from other source destinations. In January 2022, Sir, a total of 16,502 visitors arrived and for February we recorded 11,014 visitors.

The forecast for March, Mr. Speaker, Sir, stood at around 15,300 visitor arrivals. From December 2021 to February 2022, a total of 50,742 visitors arrived onto the Fijian shores, Mr. Speaker, Sir, registering a 17 percent increase in the last three months visitor arrivals.

Of this, Sir, again, as I highlighted, 84 percent came for holidays, which is about 42,398; 9.0 percent which is about 4, 573 came to visit their friends and relatives, 2 percent came for business reasons and 5 percent or 2,764 came for other reasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the highest number of visitor arrivals as highlighted earlier on came from Australia from December 2021 to February 2022, this is followed by USA, 6,671 or 13.1 percent and 8.3 percent or 4,189 are from other countries.

These are the countries, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, included:

1. Hong Kong;
2. India;
3. South Korea;
4. Japan;
5. United Kingdom;
6. Continental Europe;
7. Pacific Island countries;
8. China; and
9. Canada.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the outlook, we are expecting in 2022 overall, the total visitor arrivals to grow by about 1,314 percent. Of course it is that high because we had only 34,000 visitors last year, which started from a very lower base.

We expect 447,000 visitors to come to Fiji. The ANZ Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is available publically, a lot more bullish in their projections. They expect 600,000 visitors to come to Fiji. We hope that they are right and we are wrong, Sir, and again we expect the total visitor arrivals in 2024 to go back to pre-pandemic levels, so another two years of being below pre-pandemic levels. Mr. Speaker, Sir, forward monthly tourist booking until July has exceeded our earlier expectations and visitor arrivals are expected to surpass our current projections much sooner than expected.

Tourism Fiji expects around 129,804 visitors between April to July of this year because we will approach the peak season with many visitors flocking to our shores for holidays in the coming months, Sir. Of course, this has led to a great sense of optimism, in particular, with the hotel industry in the tourism sector overall. April so far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is expected to be our biggest month yet for arrivals when we are expecting between 30,000 and 35,000 visitors.

The recent relaxation of travel restrictions or requirements by New Zealand which used to be our second largest source market is also expected to boost arrivals. Recent news indicate that the level of bookings for international travel insurance among New Zealanders is incredibly strong.

The New Zealand based Southern Cross Travel Insurance Agency reported a 2,000 percent increase in travel insurance bookings recently.

We also expect further increases from the following markets:

1. Europe;
2. Asia;
3. Middle East ; and
4. South Pacific.

Regarding Fiji Airways, Sir, travel bookings look greatly optimistic for Fiji Airways which is about 10 percent lower than the level in 2019 which is actually pretty good. If you are 10 percent lower, only 10 percent lower than 2019 numbers. Still a significant growth for us, given in particular that Fiji Airways was hardly flying in 2020 and 2021. The travel bookings on average is also growing at an encouraging rate of 10 percent pace every week. For Australia the bookings are on a steady growth and it is sitting at 21 percent above the 2019 for the next six months which is great news for us. For New Zealand, whilst the border has just opened, the travel bookings to Fiji are growing at a weekly rate of 33 percent with new bookings trending positively over 100 percent versus 2019.

For USA, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the travel bookings with the airline are currently below 2019 levels by around 30 percent. However, the rate of new booking is encouraging and growing at the rate of around 10 percent on a weekly basis.

As for the Asian route, Fiji Airways is only flying to Singapore at this point in time, we are not flying to Hong Kong not flying to Narita. It is only Singapore and in fact in the low season we are only flying once every fortnight. That will, of course, pick up should the numbers increase. As we know Hong Kong is under a very severe lockdown given what is happening in mainland China.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know that the current recovery of the Fijian economy is very much still dependent on the tourism sector, whilst government has been over the past number of years

trying to diversify our economic base, economic risk factor, of course, we are still fairly heavily dependent on the tourism sector.

This year we expect the Fijian economy to rebound by 11.3 percent, largely dependent on the assumption of the 447,195 tourist, honourable Gavoka may find this amusing. It is not amusing because last year we had only 34,000 tourists so obviously if it is going to go up 447,000, that means a huge increase and that is why we are predicting a rebound of 11 percent. Sir, ANZ is predicting over 20 percent, again we hope ANZ is actually correct.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot more people are returning to their jobs, a lot more people we are seeing in the hotel sector are returning to their jobs. I was at the Fijian Hotel a couple of weeks ago, just talking to people who are the lifeguards at the children's swim park out in the sea, a lot of them are actually working, instead of the adult side, they are now working six days a week. Some people on the other side are working four days or five days a week. So, with the numbers increasing, they will actually go back to full time work and some are already working six days a week depending which segment in the hotel sector they are in.

So, overall, of course as we highlighted that we continue to diversify our economy, as the honourable Prime Minister highlighted earlier today, was that one of the BPOs has opened in Fiji. They started off with only about 10 jobs in the year before last, they now have about 70-80 jobs in that company alone. It has grown to 3,000 jobs overall in the BPO sector. We obviously are providing support to that, so apart from the tourism sector, we are focusing on a number of other areas and with the passing of the Investment Fiji Act today by Parliament coupling with the Investment Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we hope that we will be able to diversify more and of course get more investment overall in the economy.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in times of uncertainty, historically our neighbours, the Australians and New Zealanders do not travel far, they travel close and Fiji benefits from it. I believe that will happen again this year with the war, et cetera. The question is, are we sure that the airline serving Fiji from Australia and New Zealand are committed to providing services this year? Qantas, Virgin Airways and Air New Zealand, are we sure that their commitment is here with the airlines?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, I most definitely cannot speak on behalf of Virgin Airways or Qantas or Jet Star but I most certainly can speak on behalf of Fiji Airways which is the national carrier and most definitely Fiji Airways is committed to flying to Australia and destinations and indeed increase the frequency if required if the number of bookings increase. So, Fiji Airways is the one that will continue to fly Sir.

Written Question

Seafaring Entrepreneur Assistance Subsidy (Question No. 88/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on the implementation of the Seafaring Entrepreneur Assistance Subsidy for fiberglass boats, engines and equipment for rural and maritime zones, in particular—

(a) how many recipients were assisted since 2021, by Division; and

(b) the value of the allocated funds utilised so far since 2021?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for the question, which we will provide at a later date as provided for under the Standing Orders.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, question time is now over.

Honourable Members, all I want to do now is to thank you for your forbearance and cooperation today. Our luck ran out, so we had an extended time today.

We now adjourn until tomorrow morning at 9.30.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.36 p.m.