

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 6TH APRIL, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	986
Communications from the Speaker	986,990
(1) Welcome	
(2) CWP Fiji Group Meeting	
(3) Correction to the Order Paper	
Presentation of Reports of Committees	986-989
(1) Consolidated Review Report – RBF 2018-2019, 2019-2020 & 2020-2021 Annual Reports	
(2) Review Report – Follow-Up Audit Report for High Risk Ministries and Departments	
Questions	990-1010
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Status of the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project (Q/No. 70/2022)	
(2) Rural Development Model Initiatives – Saemaul Undong (Q/No. 71/2022)	
(3) Regularisation of Expired Tenancy Agreements (Q/No. 72/2022)	
(4) Budgetary Allocation for Electrification Projects (Q/No. 73/2022)	
(5) Update on the Government Rural Housing Scheme (Q/No. 74/2022)	
(6) National Substance Abuse Advisory Council Counselling Services (Q/No. 75/2022)	
(7) Staff Retention Initiatives/Policies – Civil Service (Q/No. 76/2022)	
(8) Update on First Home Owners Grant (Q/No. 77/2022)	
<u>Written Questions</u>	
(1) Deaths Caused by Myocarditis (Q/No. 78/2022)	
(2) Micro, Small and Medium Entities Concessional Loans (Q/No. 79/2022)	

WEDNESDAY, 6TH APRIL, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.33 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable N. Nawaikula, the honourable Adi L. Qionibaravi and the honourable S.V. Radrodro.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 5th 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.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome those joining us in the public gallery and those watching the live broadcast of the proceedings. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Fiji Group

Honourable Members, at this time, I wish to remind Members of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Fiji Group of your meeting during the lunch break today at the Small Committee Room that has been arranged, preparations for that have also been made and I hope that you will all attend.

Thank you, honourable Members, we will proceed to the next item.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report - Reserve Bank of Fiji 2018-2019,
2019-2020 and 2020-2021 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 the Reserve Bank of Fiji 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Annual Reports. While the 2018-2019 period was business as usual for the RBF, the year 2020 brought its own unique challenges due to trade tension between the USA and China during the first half of the financial year and Fiji being hit by COVID-19 cases during the

second half, like many other countries, Fiji too had to face the brunt of the pandemic as global economic activities had dwindled significantly. Proactive measures were taken by the Fijian Government to avoid large-scale outbreak and with borders closing around the globe, the number of inbound tourists dropped dramatically which led to the negative economic ramifications in the country.

While deliberating on the Report, the Committee noted the various policies that the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) had introduced during 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 periods to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19 and commended the Bank for its swift action.

The Committee noted the shift towards digital method of transactions which were triggered by COVID-19 restrictions, with more people using services such as M-PAiSA and internet banking. Fijians living abroad used mobile money services to send money to relatives living in Fiji which contributed towards the significant increase in remittances.

While the Committee appreciates the shift towards cashless transactions, it also recommended for RBF to continue working with key stakeholders, such as the Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), to strengthen its cyber security capabilities.

The havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was also an opportunity to explore other prospects, one of it being the huge potential of business process outsourcing and the many benefits Fiji could gain with more international businesses outsourcing their services to Fiji.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to the Governor of the RBF and his team members for being prompt in answering the various queries and questions raised by the Committee.

Finally, I would like to thank our Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this Report, namely: the Deputy Chairperson – honourable Veena Bhatnagar, honourable George Vegnathan, honourable Inosi Kuridrani and honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Review of the RBF 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 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 content 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 - Follow-Up Audit Report for High Risk Ministries and Departments

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, the Committee Report follows the Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji on the Follow-up Audit Report for High-Risk Ministries and Departments.

The Audit Report covers the outcome of the follow-up audits of audit recommendations provided in the 2017 Audit of High-Risk Ministries and Departments. The follow-up audits were carried out during the audit of the 2017-2018 Agency Financial Statement. The following reports and agencies were covered:

- Audit Report on General Administration Sector 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 07 of 2019*), covering Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management, Republic of Fiji Military Forces and Fiji Police Force.
- Audit Report on Social Services Sector 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 08 of 2019*), covering the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.
- Audit Report on the Economic Services Sector 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 09 of 2019*), covering the Ministry of Agriculture.
- Audit Report on Infrastructure Sector 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No.10 of 2019*), covering the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport.

This Report examined the extent of implementation of the audit recommendations made on the above-mentioned Reports with responses from Ministries and Departments. The Committee noted that this detailed status update was done on the follow-up audits for the eight high-risk agencies.

It is important to note that majority of the recommendations made in the 2017 reports for different agencies were yet to be fully implemented. Only 39 percent of the recommendations were fully implemented, 27 percent were partially implemented and 34 percent were not implemented at all. However, after the Committee's consultations with the eight respective Ministries and Departments, it has been confirmed that these agencies have shown progress in their implementation.

In view of the above, respective Ministries and Departments should take necessary action to fully implement the remaining recommendations. There is a possibility that Permanent Secretaries of some agencies have not been largely updated on the status of the implementations of recommendations by their Accounting Heads as required.

The Committee noted that the implementation rate can be improved if recommendations made in these reports are implemented and outstanding audit reports are included in the agenda of all monthly meetings of the agencies. This can be achieved by the formation of an audit committee by Permanent Secretaries. The role of the audit committee should be extended to include findings for internal audits and matters relating to risk of agencies.

There were matters highlighted in the report by the Auditor-General that were not seriously considered by some Ministries in relation to audit recommendation implementation as reflected in the follow-up audit report. This was a matter of concern by the Committee as the relevant Ministries and Department Heads need to prioritise and take necessary action where appropriate.

Overall, the Committee commends the effort of those Ministries and Departments that have progressively implemented the relevant recommendations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the support from the Department that despite the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the Committee met on a virtual platform to conduct its scrutiny process of the Audit Report.

At this juncture, I also wish to thank my fellow Committee Members, namely: honourable Alvick Maharaj - Chairman, honourable Ro Teimumu Kepa, honourable Virendra Lal and honourable Aseri Radrodro, for their efforts and contributions in the final compilation of this Report. With those words, I now commend this Report to 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 content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting date.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, on that note, I intend to take morning tea break now and resume at 11 o'clock when we will take the next item on the agenda. I hope everyone is in agreement of that. I see all the nods, no one is dissenting, so we will take a break.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.48 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.04 a.m.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Amendment to the Order Paper

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed with the next agenda item, at this juncture, I wish to advise that there is a correction to be made in the first question that is to be asked today. When it was pointed out to me, I had the thought of reprinting the whole Order Paper but that would have been a waste of paper and time. So, I am going to correct that, but it has also been corrected for you on the website.

The first question, in line four, the words “proposed Asian Development Bank-funded” is to be deleted. With your co-operation, we can delete that, and the question remains as it is a part of that. I take full responsibility for that mistake, honourable Members, and I apologise for that.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Status of the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project (Question No. 70/2022)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you for that correction. My question is:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service and Communication, Housing and Community Development inform Parliament of the status of the proposed Nadi Flood Alleviation Project which was the subject of the Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) Report in 2016?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for that correction. As has been highlighted previously and I did give a fairly detailed information on the Nadi Rehabilitation Project back in 2020, the Nadi River Rehabilitation Project is a diversion from what was in the 1990s. When the Leader of PAP was then Prime Minister, they had a Nadi River Diversion Project funded by the Japanese Government where they wanted to realign the Nadi River, not for it to go through town but actually take it out at the back where the Colonial Plaza is and empty it down into the basin in that area. Of course, that never took place because lack of accountability during that period.

In 2016, the JICA conducted a feasibility study, referred to as the Nadi River Basin Rehabilitation Project, and we were very keen on this. We have already provided funding for this particular project because Nadi, as we know, is the gateway to Fiji. The international airport is there, a lot of hotels are in that place and so connectivity, to connect Nadi with the rest of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the project proposed by the team has a number of elements to it. There is retarding basin and a river improvement downstream, construction of ring dike downstream and river widening. When I say river widening, it all means river deepening in midstream and replacement of the existing two bridges - one is what we call the “back road” and one is in the town area - retarding basins A and B, dam and river improvements in upstream and river improvements in the tributaries that feed into the Nadi River which is Nawaka, Malakua and Namosi Rivers and retarding basins in 13 other sites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Nadi River Project is divided into three components. Component A includes the Nadi Town surrounding dikes and inland drainage of soft component. Sir, one of the issues in Nadi Town is that a lot of the drainages that actually go from the town has, in fact, over the years been built upon. There is one particular building opposite the Nadi Market and if you go and see, the building was not supposed to be built there. Yet, in the 1990s, the then Government allowed someone to put up a building on top of this major drainage outlet that takes out water from Nadi Town, and if you look underneath the building, you can see the drain but as you go along, it narrows and that is why we get a lot of flooding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second stage which is Component B is the combination of structural measure, including the widening and deepening of the river, construction of bridges, ring dikes and two retention ponds. Essentially, it is from Nadi Town upwards, going up to the back road. Component C is the back road bridge and up that way which is the watershed management upstream.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government had undertaken widespread discussions with interested development partners in order to identify suitable partners for the implementation of the project. Since 2018 and 2019, the Government has spent around \$4.2 million for the Nadi Flood Alleviation Project.

We had allocated funding in the 2021 Budget. The Fijian Government allocated \$3 million for the project of which, a sum of \$1.8 million has already been utilised for the release of the EIA report and the engagement of Scope Pacific Fiji Limited in February 2022 to undertake an action plan for Project A. The Japanese Government, Sir, has agreed to support the project by way of a grant for Part A. It is estimated to be about ¥2.5 billion, equivalent to approximately FJ\$46.9 million for the implementation of Part A. Mr. Speaker, Sir, of course, this involves, as we have said, the construction of surrounding dikes and inland town drainage.

In 2019-2020, Sir, the Fijian Government engaged the JIO Engineering Company of Japan to undertake the additional survey for Project A at a cost of US\$848,000 or about FJ\$1.5 million. The additional survey includes geographical and topographical studies and also updating of relevant data for Component A. So, there is going to be a flood gate, Sir, dike gate for roads and rails, et cetera, because when you build a dike, you essentially will be ring-fencing the town against rising waters. It will be like building a dam, for want of a better word. We have already sent a Diplomatic Note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to formalise that grant component, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of stakeholder consultations, in fact, has been held in January 2022. I remember going to that one, Sir, where we had the Nadi Chamber of Commerce, business communities, residents of Nadi and nearby villagers and communities, et cetera. Again, Sir, we had highlighted this at the recent Budget consultation at the Nadi Town Hall. Apart from the Budget itself, we had a presentation on the Nadi River Rehabilitation Programme and all the different components to the various groups, for example, Nakovacake, people we had met up with and various other groups we have met, in terms of telling them as to what exactly is going to happen. A sum of \$1.8 million as has been stated earlier, has been utilised for the release of EIA and the engagement of scope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next steps, of course, we have also got the Minutes of discussions or the preparatory survey for the project for Nadi River Project and detailed project designs will be also issued, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding ADB, we have a bit of a disagreement. For Component B, Sir, as has been highlighted in a number of other projects, we believe that the river should, in fact, be deepened to its original state.

As highlighted back in 2020 in Parliament, if you look at all the towns in Fiji, apart from Suva and perhaps one can argue Lautoka, all of them are built on riverbanks. The reason why they were built on riverbanks, Sir, is because that is the mode of transportation in those days. So, the ships would come from overseas and the cartage with the boats would actually go up the rivers themselves and then the towns will flourish around that. Today, you cannot even take a cartage up the Nadi River for that matter.

As I have highlighted, in the Sigatoka River, people are playing rugby at low tide in front of Laselase Village, opposite Tappoos, and even in Ba River. That is why dredging is critically important, to ensure that the depth of the river has enough capacity to convey that amount of water downstream and empty it out into the sea. In fact, ADB's proposal in component B was to keep it at the same depth but buy vast tracts of land around the river and create flood plains. It actually means relocation of thousands of people and just keep those flood plains, so do not dig up the river and restore it to its original state.

We, of course, have said, "no", we need to ensure the river gets restored to its original depth. It can also restore the river life and the sea life that used to exist there, but because of years of silting that does not take place anymore. Now, as a result of the disagreement, we are currently in discussions and are now talking to a number of other development partners, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. We are also talking to JICA and the World Bank. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Australians are already looking at component C - the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP). That, Sir, I would say, would be the most recent update.

The river widening and deepening, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is from Narewa Village and all the surrounding villages in that area, all the way up to Votualevu, around at the back end, which is one of the six priority projects proposed in the FS 2016 by JICA. This will actually mean to cater for 1,800 cubic metres of flood discharge, which is equal to design flood with the occurrence probability of one in a 50-year occurrence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you can, of course, design, you can under design, you can over design, so the benchmark that we have used is that, it should be able to cater for one in a 50-year event. You can do a one in a 100-year event, which is like a pandemic, drawing analogies between that. That will, of course, mean a lot more deepening, a lot more widening and a lot more drainage systems, but if you cater for one in a 50-year event, we believe that is good enough to be able to meet the conveyance of water in the one in a 50-year event. So that, in a nutshell, Sir, is the current status of the Nadi River Rehabilitation Project.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker; \$2.156 million was allocated in the 2019-2020 Budget for the Nadi River Flood Alleviation Project. The whole amount was then deployed to Judiciary, according to the final quarter Appropriation Statement for that year, why was the Government not serious about this critical issue for Nadi back then?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish the honourable Member had actually asked that as her main question, but I knew that she would do something like that, so I have got the figures here. The honourable Member, of course, forgets that we had this thing called COVID-19 and when we do all these international engagements and we bring in engineers from overseas because with that capacity, it does not exist in Fiji, people do not travel during the COVID-19 period.

I have got the figures here. In 2019-2020, the figure was \$7.9 million, then it was revised to \$5 million in the COVID-19 Response Budget and \$1.6 million was actually utilised. Similarly, in 2020-2021, \$5 million was allocated and \$595,000 was utilised. I have the breakdown of the

payments as to where they were made but fundamentally, work could not continue because of lockdowns, because the Japanese refused to travel during that particular period, understandably. Their country did not allow people to leave their country and consultants even from Australia and various other places, could not travel. So, the honourable Member should rather in trying to look at these figures and say, “Oh wow, there is something there, they allocated, they have not spent”, she should actually look at it holistically which obviously, they have a problem with looking at things, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Rural Development Model Initiatives – Saemaul Undong
(Question No. 71/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Defence, National Security and Policing, Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on how rural development model initiatives such as the Saemaul Undong benefit rural and maritime communities?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Honourable Member for the question, on how rural development initiatives such as the Saemaul Undong Programme from the Government of South Korea benefit rural and maritime communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is one of the few models that we are seriously looking at and we are also thankful that because of one of the participants, we have been able to pursue this further.

In terms of the other models, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have the Sufficiency Economy model that was designed by the King of Thailand and we are also looking at one by the Government of Sri Lanka, which is the Ruhunu Rasara model, but I will concentrate on the Saemaul Undong model.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a few years back, the then Permanent Secretary for Public Service Commission, Mr. Parmesh Chand, visited South Korea and he came with this model and discussed it with the Ministry of Rural Development. In 2016, together with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we sent five of our people to South Korea - two from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the Senior Assistant Roko in Macuata and the Senior Assistant Roko in Tailevu, together with three Turaga-ni-koro. One from Nabavatu Village in Macuata, one from Silana in Tailevu and the other one is the Mata ni Tikina from Toga in Rewa. They came back and as part of the training, they were given tasks to implement before the team from South Korea, the Saemaul Undong Team, could come over and visit the projects.

Unfortunately, the Turaga ni Koro in Nabavatu, Macuata, and the Mata ni Tikina in Toga, Rewa, did not do much of what they learnt. We are thankful that the Mata ni Tikina from Silana in Dawasamu did an excellent work in the implementation of this Saemaul Undong initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will dwell on that later.

The word ‘Saemaul’ means new village and ‘Undong’ means movement, so it is about a new village movement that was adopted way back in the 1970s in South Korea. It was regarded as one of the most successful long-term economic development model that was behind the Republic of Korea’s growth in the 1970s. The model was based on the Saemaul spirit, focussing on three components - diligence, self-help and co-operation.

As I have stated, ‘Saemaul’ means new village and ‘Undong’ means movement, and it was mainly designed to overcome the endemic rural poverty in the 1970s in South Korea on three

successive stages:

1. Basic rural infrastructure;
2. Development;
3. Dissemination in terms of changing the mindset and confidence of the people to embrace the idea.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the successful achievement of the Saemaul Undong (SMU) Model included rehabilitation of village agricultural production, infrastructure, construction of farm roads, introduction of high yielding crop varieties, improvements in rural housing structures and improvements in the overall rural environment such as rural electrification and telecommunication and significant increase in rural household income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the success of this development model in South Korea, together with other countries, we have seen this being implemented and, of course, the model in Fiji particularly has been tailor-made to our local context, to ensure that our local communities are empowered and embrace this new idea of socio-economic transformation through a “can do” spirit. This “can do” spirit has transformed the Government of South Korea from a donor-recipient country in the 1970s to a donor country in the 21st century, in a span of less than 50 years.

In the Fiji context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Saemaul Undong Initiative was first introduced to Fiji through the signing of the MOU in 2018. But as I have stated, prior to that, we sent the team across to go and study in South Korea on this model. When it was initially signed, it was with the Ministry of Youth and Sports because the Minister was then in South Korea and he signed it and it was under the Ministry, but we have now transferred it to the Ministry of Rural Development and we are thankful to the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports for facilitating this request.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2020, the Government of Korea has invested over FJ\$286,000 in three villages. The three villages are Silana, Naimasimasi and Mau in Namosi, and we will still revisit Macuata, particularly the Dreketi community in Nabavatu and, of course, we will revisit Rewa. I have had some discussions with the *Marama na Roko Tui Dreketi* during tea break if she can assist with Rewa. But these are the three villages that have been assisted because from Silana in Tailevu, the Turaga ni Koro who is now Mata ni Tikina, given his implementation of what he learnt, he has been widely used by the Tailevu Provincial Council Office to spread this concept. We have seen significant improvement, particularly in most villages, but Naimasimasi and Mau have also been chosen to be part of this implementation under the current MOU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, \$286,000 is for the improvement in sanitation, particularly from the transition from pit toilets to flush toilets and the construction of septic tanks. Secondly, is the improvement in water supply, due to the construction of water dams and water catchment improvements, community hall upgrades, footpaths and village drain construction and improvement and waste management improvement.

In Silana, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have also gone ahead because they were the initial implementers of the Saemaul Undong Initiative. They are now also focusing on their livelihood projects through community work. They are also focusing on improving, particularly agriculture-related projects in the villages. But let me just give you a breakdown of how that \$286,000 was spent.

In Silana, they were allocated about \$95,468 and that includes the construction of footpaths and even driveway into the community, the community hall upgrade which included their kitchen, village office and dispensary. As you know, Mr. Speaker, Silana last hosted the Tailevu Provincial

Council Meeting and, of course, one community toilet and two village footpaths upgrade and construction.

In Naimasimasi Village, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also an allocation of \$95,000. They have completed five toilets and septic tanks and 25 are in the process of being constructed, the garbage collection improvement site and one small footbridge and crossing just next to the community hall.

In Mau Village, Mr. Speaker, Sir, same allocation - \$95,468. The water improvement dam extension which includes the upgrade of the old existing dam, laying of water pipes to elevated areas to maintain water pressure, fixing of water tanks and connecting water pipes to affected households. The newly upgraded water system will benefit the whole village, consisting of 152 households with a population of 452 villagers.

They have also constructed one footpath and footbridge connecting the village and school, one village drain upgrade and, of course, they upgraded their community hall which includes the kitchen, office, toilet and bathroom and, of course, their evacuation centre and the improvement of their waste management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this ties in well with the *solesolevaki* spirit that already exists in our rural communities. So, these grant initiatives showcase the ability, particularly for participatory and inclusive modality, and it has created a sense of innovation in creative projects for the community and proactive approaches on the reduction of different vulnerabilities and social risks.

Just lately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, towards the end of last year, the Director-General of Saemaul Undong visited Fiji and we have had some serious discussions on the future of the project and, of course, the possibility of keep extending it into the other communities. That is why we are targeting Macuata and, of course, Rewa, and hopefully, this will spread into other areas within Fiji as well.

We are thankful to the Government of Korea for this partnership and we also thank the Ministry of Youth and Sports for the initial three years in which this programme was under them, as well as the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs on us working together.

What is Government's contribution to this? Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is something that we also have discussed with our friends from South Korea. We will also look at how Government can complement the work that is being undertaken and particularly, we have had discussions with these communities on their income generation projects for their economic empowerment. Thank you, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister for laying out what is happening with this Initiative, but I do not hear anything about the economies of the villages. Is that part of the equation that you uplift the economy of the villages?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I did state this yesterday as well when answering the questions on rural development that we are shifting from social projects into economic empowerment projects and this is one of the key initiatives. As I have stated, in Silana, Dawasamu, they have already focussed on this.

If I may elaborate on it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what they have done in Dawasamu under the Saemaul Undong initiative, let us say if this farmer's main crop is chilli, so there will be a time in the month where the whole village will just go and work on the chilli's farmer's farm, so that he can produce more. At the same time, weekly, there is a sort of a collection just to cater for emergencies (I would say) or some levies that may be given to the villages. That is also something that they are looking at. This is where our government programme will also link up with them because we are

looking at the potential in each of these communities. In Dawasamu, they are heavily involved in fishing as well, so probably fishing boats, et cetera. This is part of the work that we are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this, we are also concentrating on the youth and our women. That is something that the team have discussed together with our counterparts from Korea. Basically the idea is, you deal with the daily issues first - hygiene. If you go to these villages, you will see collection points. They will have a separate bag for glasses, plastics and household leftovers and then the daily lives like water and sanitation, the same thing with the Sufficiency Economy Model of Thailand. Eventually once this is accounted for, then the economic empowerment is the last thing that we will focus on once the other areas have been addressed.

Regularisation of Expired Tenancy Agreements
(Question No. 72/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on actions taken to regularise expired tenancy agreements on properties still occupied by Government agencies?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for this question. The honourable Member asked about the expired tenancy agreements, I presume he means office space. If he refers to Head 50 - SEG 5, you will see that we allocate about \$35 million a year in renting office space throughout Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past number of years, of course, the number of tenancy agreements that have been entered into by previous Governments and this Government also and any tenancy agreement that has been entered into previously, we obviously have a legal obligation to continue with those tenancies until they come to an end. Unfortunately, one of the things that we have seen is that, a number of the tenancy agreements that did come were entered into by previous Governments for a very long term tenancy agreements without proper checks and balances. So a lot of the buildings that were actually leased out, for example, for 15 to 20 years were substandard and were not necessarily built to requirements of government.

I can give you a case in point with the Suvavou House, you can have lifts that do not work for months. There is absolutely nothing in the tenancy agreement that gives any relief to the tenant, which in this case is Government. So members of the public who want to access offices on Levels 2, 3 and 4, do not have to access it through the elevator, they have to climb up the stairs. We have elderly people who cannot access the offices, so Government obviously, cops the blame for that.

We do not have enough waiting rooms. We do not have, for example, Ministries like the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, separate rooms for women who may come with their children, there is no feeding area, et cetera. We have been lumped with these buildings so what we have been doing, Sir, in the past number of years is, we have been improving the tenancy agreements. Whenever a tenancy agreement comes to an end, we are now entering into only three-year tenancy agreements or five-year tenancy at the most, where there is a requirement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in those cases, we then have the landlords being able to provide that particular service to us as tenants. We are forking out a lot of money in that respect and we expect value for money. There are about 40 tenancy agreements, honourable Vosanibola, that you would probably be concerned about through your question, that are being done on a month-to-month basis,

whilst we are renegotiating the tenancy agreement to put in clauses that are more suitable to us as tenants because obviously, when we are paying money, we are paying top money. We are paying market rates and we expect the same level of service from those buildings.

Another case in point is that, if we look at the MOIT building in Samabula which used to be a cinema before, absolutely, there are no windows on either side of the building because it was a cinema. The rent, I have just got a confirmation that was over \$200,000 for the renting that place - a very basic building, a cinema, someone said it used to be the inn at that time, PSC used to rent all the buildings. We have seen a number of cases which we can highlight as the honourable Vosanibola asked that question. In fact, the Elections Office at one stage under the old system, three floors, each floor was about \$25,000 a month of rent. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is how much money was being forked out to these private individuals.

Honourable Qereqeretabua talks about corruption, that is what she should be looking at. We are now actually holding accountable these landlords. No one can simply come in and have a mate in and get a tenancy agreement, but we now have people paying the market rate. Every time there is a power blackout or water shortage, there is no backup generator or there are no water tanks. As a Government, we need to be able to continue with the services. Our civil servants need a better environment to be able to ensure that we provide a good workplace environment. Therefore, we are building and entering into tenancies that will actually provide the right work environment and the right service environment.

You would have seen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also that Government advertised some time back and calling for the construction of buildings where the private sector can actually build. In those arrangements, we will specify what we want, they build to our specifications, they put the capital upfront and we can then enter into long term agreements if it is built to our specifications. The Ministry of Education is actually strewn across, I think, about nine or ten different locations throughout Suva. So the Ministry of Education is not a one-stop shop - Exams Office is somewhere else, another office is somewhere else. Even Poverty Alleviation is somewhere, half of it is spread across. You have half of the Lands Department in there, the other half - the Maps, is in Raojibhai Patel Street. It used to be stuck in some old corner of an office. Someone obviously got a sweet deal. I have actually been to that building. The paint on the walls is peeling off because it is built right next to Nabukalou Creek and there is dampness coming through. The seepage is coming through, the maps are getting old, they are deteriorating even before it is supposed to deteriorate. That is what we are doing and part of the deal that we have announced.

We have called for expressions of interest and Cabinet has just recently approved. We will, in fact, be announcing all those different companies that will be doing the construction - the right to build those buildings for us or ministries. We will be putting the Ministry of Education in one building and the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation all in one building. So all the people who need to access those services can go to one place. So you can have one entire building dedicated to that. We want to have, for example, coffee shops, service areas for members of the public and for the staff, better working environment and not being stuck in cubicles with no windows and no ventilation - that is what we are doing. This is part of the process. We are reviewing the tenancy agreement on that basis but we will also be entering into new tenancy agreements where we can enter into long term agreements, as long as they build it according to our specifications.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Will the Government consider updating its building codes to cater for the requirements that the Government is looking at which, I believe, is good and that can all be addressed, Mr. Speaker, in the building codes?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is a separate matter altogether. Of course, the building codes are being reviewed but let us not deviate from the main point. It has nothing to do with building codes. You have to have buildings that are built to your specifications. The building code does not say, "You can have a feeding room". The building code does not necessarily say that your lift must be working all the time. It is the responsibility of the landlord to do so.

However, it is also the responsibility of the tenant who is negotiating to ensure that the building which you are going to lease is actually built for purpose, it is built to your specification. If it is not, then you should not be leasing it because you should actually provide a good workplace environment for the civil servants. You should also ensure that the toilets are working all the time, there is enough ventilation there, and that has got nothing to do with building codes. That is to do with the quality of landlord and tenancy relationship, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that has not been happening.

Most of the Ministries require, for example, screens whether it is for zoom meetings, whether it is presentations, there is no dropdown screen, there is no proper air conditioning, air conditioning is an afterthought, there is no aesthetic in respect of how the building looks, there is not enough ventilation, there is not enough natural sunlight coming through. These are the specifications that we want these new buildings to have. If we have enough natural sunlight coming through, you do not need to turn on the lights during the day, you save electricity cost. These are the sort of things, the finer points of your tenancy that we are looking at, Sir.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the previous administration, provincial companies were encouraged to build and rent out to Government. Some of those leases are now coming for review and most were built at that time, Sir, and they need to be brought up to speed with modern appointments, as the honourable Minister is highlighting.

MR. SPEAKER.- What is your question?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Would the Government help the provincial companies upgrade these facilities so that they may continue to retain the patronage of Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, any landlord or any company that wishes to become a landlord can apply through the normal process, that is what we are doing. Suvavou House, for example, has a 20-year lease. By now, they should have more than three times paid off their loan and started making profits. But what we have noticed is that, in many of these organisations, money is being siphoned out on the side. People are not actually doing the right thing, there is no proper accountability. The same thing that is happening with the Kadavu Provincial Building. We actually paid a million dollars just to get out of that contract because we knew that that building was built to substandard. The UN is now telling us that one of the walls or one of the floors has actually cracked and one of them fell down on someone. That is the quality of the buildings that were being built.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Exactly what we were....

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they should have never built it. There should have been proper accountability. People were dodgy and if you look at the shareholders of that company, there were people who were siphoning off funds. The point being, Sir, is that whoever wants to lend or lease buildings or floor space to us, we will treat everyone equally. We will ensure that if they meet the specifications. There is one particular provincial council that is currently talking to us and they are going to build something specific to our requirements and we will go ahead with them. We will have a very good relationship as landlord and tenants.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister; for those places outside of the CBD, will the Government consider assisting provincial councils who intend to build so that Government can rent, in places like Vunidawa, for example?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, the honourable Member who obviously sees himself representing Naitasiri, already knows that we have been discussing with people from Naitasiri in respect to that. But again, like you said, if there is a need for it, we will then only rent it. The Government's model is this, we want people to build it for us. They need to come up with the upfront funds. We will, of course, in return, give them a long term lease, if they build it to our specifications, and that is the basis on why people can go and borrow money. But, they need to ensure that they simply do not get a free ride, and Ba Provincial Holdings is a classic example.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can go on about it. Honourable Saukuru should know about this. For the Family Court and Magistrates Court, the toilets do not work. Half of their building is non-operational at times, things are falling down and dilapidated, yet, the Government year-on-year, using tax payers funds, is actually paying the market rent for this, and there is abuse in that Holding Company. There is an abuse of funds in the Ba Provincial Holdings. There is fraction, there is friction and there are fractures in that company itself. Funds have gone missing. That is what is happening, and here they come and pontificate on that basis.

The point is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they need to be able to deliver the service that we, as tenants, want. Not to get a free ride, but we all assist people. Like I said, there is one provincial council that is actually talking to us, we are looking at entering into a tenancy agreement with them because they will do the right thing.

Budgetary Allocation for Electrification Projects
(Question No. 73/2022)

HON. DR. S.R. GOVIND 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 budgetary allocation for electrification projects by Government and in which particular areas this will be targeted?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for this question. The Electrification Programme under the FijiFirst Government has been one of the most empowering programmes ever undertaken by any Fijian Government in such a short time. It is the fact. Honourable Gavoka, please, listen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, never before and it is fact, you can actually verify this. If you look at their kilometres of electrical cables that have been laid since 2012 uptil now and if you compare it to any other period in Fijian Government history, it has been the fastest at such a huge rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2012, we allocated \$237.2 million for what we call in those days, Rural Electrification Projects, we actually now call it Electrification Projects because it is not only confined to rural areas, there are some peri-urban areas that do not even have electricity, so we are also connecting those people too. Mr. Speaker, Sir, also, its solar panelling too.

Of the \$237.2 million allocation, \$187.4 million has, in fact, been utilised. Of course, some of it had to be put on hold because of things like COVID-19, we had cyclones and we had to re-divert funds. I will give you a breakdown, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In 2012, \$9.9 million was actually budgeted for. The amount used, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was \$10.6 million, in other words, more was used. They vired it and got more because more projects were being done. In 2013, \$9.9 million was allocated and \$9.3 million was used. In 2014, \$22.8 million was allocated and \$21.68 million was used. In 2015, \$22 million was allocated and \$12 million was used. In 2016, \$13.2 million was allocated and \$13.2 million was used. In 2016, \$18.02 million was allocated and \$17.91 million was used. In 2017, \$42 million was allocated, in fact, they went over budget and used \$43 million. In 2018, \$61 million was allocated and \$42 million was used. In 2019-2020, \$17 million was allocated and \$10 million was used. In 2020, \$7.8 million was allocated and \$4.9 million was used. In 2021-2022, \$10.3 million was allocated and, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to date, we have used \$9.6 million and the year is yet to end.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of that, and as we have seen, for example, along the Kings Road, we have extended the grid itself, that is, electrification. There is also what we call the solar system projects which are standalone systems where people have been given access to solar systems where they are too far away from the grid so they cannot actually be connected to the grid and it is done a lot quicker. Since 2014, Sir, the number of schemes that have actually been approved and, in fact, been connected were 491 schemes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the changes that we have also done now is before, when we had these grid extensions, EFL would actually do what we call the grid extension, and the house wiring which is what they call the black wiring when colloquially speaking, was done by the Department of Energy. In order to bring a lot more synergy now and to ensure that there is no disconnection, the entire contract is now given to EFL. So, EFL has to do the grid extension, they also have to do the black wiring because in some cases, what we used to have, the grid will go but the black wiring was delayed. So, people will say, "Hang on, what is happening", or in some instances, the black wiring was done but the grid actually do not come along so people will say, "Oh, there is a disconnection."

In order to avoid the disconnection, Sir, from the recent Budget, we are now saying that EFL will be given the entire contract. So, they will be responsible both, for the grid extension and for the black wiring. So the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Ministry of Economy and other stakeholders can actually go to one organisation which is EFL and say, "What is actually happening with this particular project?" That, we are seeing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is working out a lot better.

The Honourable Member, in fact, had asked for the areas which will be upgraded, Sir. During the next three financial years, the Fijian Government will be allocating more than \$20 million to fund a total of 178 schemes. These areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will benefit about 10,000 Fijians living in the various areas, for example, in the Western Division, these includes: Mavua and Navuto in Sigatoka; Dratabu, Lavusa and some areas in Votualevu in Nadi; Abaca, Natawarau, Lovu, Tavakubu and households without electricity living along the Vuda Back Road in Lautoka; Balevuto, Moto, Vatusui and Vakabuli in Ba; Waiqumu Settlement, Wairuku, Nadele, Nabuna, Toko and Vuniniurea in Tavua; Navolau, Tavuvatu and Naqaqa in Rakiraki.

For the Northern Division, areas such as: Muqumuqumu, Bulileka and Korotari in Labasa; Nabalebale, Matakunea, Nasavu, Natuvu and Natua in Savusavu; Drekeniwai and Boruto in Taveuni. So, those are the areas that will be connected in the next three financial years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government will also ensure that those in the Central Division that do not have access to electricity in areas such as Korovou, Tailevu, Namosi, Naitasiri and Serua will also be connected to the grid.

I have got a list of all of these villages here that have been connected in the past number of years and, of course, we have continuously invited honourable Members of the Opposition, if they

do want to come to the situation room and look at all these projects, they are most welcome to do so.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister; for those EFL customers whose houses were destroyed by *TC Winston* in 2016, how do they get Government to resolve their electricity plight?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, I did not hear the first part of the question, can you, please, repeat it?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- For those EFL customers whose house were destroyed by *TC Winston* in 2016, they still have yet to be connected to electricity, how do they get Government to resolve their plight?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- They have to apply.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- They have already applied.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, if the honourable Member is saying that they have applied and they have not been connected, please, give us their details and we can look into that.

Update on the Government Rural Housing Scheme
(Question No. 74/2022)

HON. J.A.R. SENIOLI 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 Government Rural Housing Scheme?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for this question. This particular Programme has evolved over a period of time, not necessarily for good reasons but it has been a kind metamorphosis in respect of this Rural Housing Project.

It actually started in 1976, as far as the record show, that we had what we call Rural Housing Project and it was essentially confined to the rural and maritime areas. Over the past 45 years or so, some form of assistance has been provided - sometimes it is not very good, sometimes it is all right.

In 2005, the One-Third and Two-Third Assistance Programme for Rural Housing was introduced under the previous Government. Under that particular Programme, the applicant pays one-third of the material cost and Government assists with the two-third balance of the material cost, procurement and delivery of the materials.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the Government actually focusses on the financial assistance, there was not much focus on the quality of the houses that were built and that was a huge problem because obviously as we know in the rural setting or village setting, a lot of people have moved away from the *bure* to build something a bit more substantial to withstand climatic changes, et cetera. So, whilst the funding was provided, there was not much emphasis given on the engineering standards.

When the Ministry of Housing and Community Development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was established in 2018, the administration of the Rural Housing Assistance was transferred from the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and the review of the Rural Housing Assistance was

actually a key task undertaken by the Ministry itself as immediate steps to improving the quality of housing in rural areas. The Ministry made improvements to the 24 feet x 16 feet open house plan with assistance from registered engineers. However, there were about 64 applicants who were still part of the old project under the old Scheme, and they were actually assisted under the old Scheme.

The review of the Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, has identified many areas of improvement. The One-Third and Two-Third Programme was, in fact, designed primarily to assist rural community development projects, such as upgrading, and also assist in roads, community halls and repairing culverts. It was not solely for individual households.

The assistance was only rendered to households within village boundaries in rural and maritime areas, and excluded other Fijians living outside of those areas or within rural boundaries. So, we see a lot of settlements that are now developing, for example, in Deuba and various other places, so they do not actually qualify for that. This, of course, excludes a large proportion of Fijians living in those areas.

As per the 2017 Census, Sir, there were about 10,274 people on Freehold titles; 6,633 State leases; 17,475 leases with iTaukei Lands Trust Board, in rural areas in Fiji. As I have said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of this focuses on the financial side of things, as opposed to the engineering standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rural Housing Assistance Programme aims to introduce a more sustainable and climate-resilient housing assistance in rural areas. The Assistance under the new policy will be extended to all Fijians living in the rural areas, provided they are either part of the landowning unit, they are building their own homes within the village boundaries, or they hold other areas for which they have some form of title. Sir, applicants will require to produce a house plan certified by a recognised engineer for Category 4 Cyclone standards. We actually have that ourselves.

To assist the applicants in this, the Ministry has introduced a Category 4 Engineer Certified two-bedroom house plan which is available for free to any Fijian, so they can copy that. The plan comes with the full list of materials required to build their house to specific standards. The Ministry is currently negotiating the prices of the building materials with major hardware suppliers so that successful applicants can purchase materials at those agreed prices because what we can do is, we can have some people, for example, who can price gouge. We do not want these people turning up with the money and the hardware company is actually putting up their rates when they know it is coming from Government. The new house plan, Sir, covers 47 square metres, and it includes two spaces bedrooms, living area, a kitchen and sanitation facility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, successful applicants under the new policy will receive a grant assistance of up to \$10,000 to purchase building materials - \$8,500 and transportation, for example, in the maritime areas; sea cartage - \$1,500 to applicants from the maritime areas or sometimes from the deep rural areas, they need a lot of cartage for that too. Prices negotiated with hardware companies will be inclusive with transportation either in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

The new policy also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognises the importance for gender inclusiveness in the rural housing sector. This is one main for moving away from the traditional open plan house structures and introducing two bedrooms so you have some privacy, et cetera, separate kitchen, living area and sanitation facilities. The house plan can also easily accommodate changes to improve accessibility with ramps for people with disabilities. As the Member would also notice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the revised budget, we have allocated from now until the end of the financial year \$600,000 to implement this revised policy.

National Substance Abuse Advisory Council Counselling Services
(Question No. 75/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education, Heritage and Arts and Local Government update Parliament on the counselling services provided by the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council (NSAAC) to students during this pandemic?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Our children have suffered immensely with the spread of Coronavirus across the nation. Some children lost their loved-ones, others faced emotional and physical abuse, neglect, cyberbullying, violence and drug abuse. During this time, counselling services provided solace to heal their pain and suffering. The pandemic caused hardship to many families because of job losses or reduced hours of work. With children at home, restricted movement and financial issues, it was a difficult experience for many families.

When such situation arise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact is felt by our children as well. We were not alone in this. Many countries around the world had similar experiences. There are several reports by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the World Bank that document the impact of school closure and downturn of the economy on children. These reports showed that during school closure, children's health and safety were jeopardised particularly with an increase in domestic violence and child labour. The mental health crisis amongst young people also reached unprecedented levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NSAAC has been working closely with the Ministry of Education to provide training and workshop for the teachers as well as counselling and support services for students. The counselling services for students were provided by four divisional counsellors, 33 teacher counsellors, 913 trained child protection officers and NGOs such as Medical Services Pacific, Empower Pacific and Lifeline Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the eight months of school closure, NSAAC provided counselling via phone to their student clients. They also worked closely with the head of school to identify students who needed counselling. The counsellors conducted phone counselling for 82 students and two teachers during the lockdown. During COVID, NSAAC sent psychosocial support messages to students, parents and community members through social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* with the assistance of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the facility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the psychosocial support information flyers were sent to schools to help the teachers to prepare themselves before students returned for face-to-face classes. In anticipation of the help that may be required by students when they return to school, NSAAC in collaboration with the Ministry and UNICEF took advantage of the school closure and provided online training to 913 child protection officers. This was done to ensure child protection officers could provide immediate basic support to students and refer more challenging cases to NSAAC and other NGOs.

When schools re-opened, the psychosocial support services programme was developed for Years 12 and 13 by NSAAC. Mr. Speake, Sir, NSAAC staff along with the 33 ministry counsellors and schools child protection officers conducted the support programme. Students who needed individual help were also assisted through one-to-one counselling session. These psychosocial support services programme was conducted in the first week of November when school re-opened for face-to-face classes. A total of 129 secondary schools were visited to provide psychosocial

support services to 8,934 students and 680 teachers. Around 60 students and 7 teachers were assisted with one-to-one counselling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021, a total of 316 students were counselled between January and December. All child abuse cases were referred to Social Welfare and a follow-up was made by NSAAC to ensure that the safety and welfare of the students were not compromised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 234 students received counselling from 4th January to 31st March, 2022 when school re-opened this year. According to the data collected by NSAAC, the pressing issues identified with students were sexual abuse at home and in the community which was reported by students, mental health issues and depression where students inflicted self-harm because of the underlying negative emotions caused by the trauma they had experienced.

Students reported challenges they faced from their own families such as abuse, neglect, break-up or relocation. Students using drugs in the school compound and this was reported when I visited more than 70 schools during this period. Students displayed violent behaviour in school, some students were cyber-bullied by other students on social media using vulgar words and sex-related clips. Teenage pregnancy also increased during the lockdown. While comparing data from recent years, the most common issues were violence, drugs and cyberbullying.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank NSAAC staff, child protection officers, counsellors, NGOs, heads of schools and teachers for working together to protect our children from social and mental issues

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for raising this question. It is very important concerning our students. My supplementary question to the honourable Minister is, in the long term, is Government considering establishing a rehabilitation centre for young people given that St. Giles is not fit for these special purposes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I think that question should be directed to honourable Minister for Social Welfare.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Social Welfare, are you able to answer that question?

HON. R.S. AKBAR.- Not at the moment, Sir.

Staff Retention Initiatives/Policies – Civil Service
(Question No. 76/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development update Parliament on Government's staff retention initiatives/policies for skilled and technical areas in civil service?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I could just be allowed, I had mentioned in my earlier question about the rental and I wish the *de facto* deputy leader of paapi was here.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- The *de facto* leader of paapi, honourable Prof. Prasad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the SVT days, Nasilivata House which I mentioned, the rent for that which entered into long term agreement for an old cinema was \$61,881 per month (VEP), annual rental - \$742,572 (VEP) a year for that building. That is the kind of tenancy agreements that previous governments as SVT had entered in to. Nearly three quarters of a million dollars a year we are paying for the junk building – 20-year lease or whatever it was and that is where the money is going.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Tuisawau does not know that I have answered this question partially the other day. As announced in the Budget that we have allocated \$50,000 to carry out a scarce skills review in the civil service. These allocations will in fact fund research that will identify those highly skilled positions across the Government and further identify the underlying reasons contributing towards the scarcity of that skill. For example, surveyors in the Ministry of Lands, local tertiary institutions do not offer Degree level programmes which means that Diploma level graduates need to undertake longer years of practical to in fact become a registered surveyor and specialized skills cannot be gained in the country.

Furthermore, surveyors used to work in the private sector because the remuneration is a lot higher. Recently the Head of our Climate Change Division was poached by a UN agency. We had, for example, the Head of our Communications section, the gentleman who rolled out all the ground breaking work we did a few years ago, he has been poached by the World Bank. He has now become the regional expert for them and laying up projects across the Pacific. We have, for example, some of the nurses, of course, because of the pandemic, a lot of overseas countries are requiring our nurses. We have Indian nurses moving across to UK, they are providing services there. We actually have a lot private sector organisations that are getting to the medical field. So the Private Hospital like De Asa has opened one up and various other people in Walu Bay, others are being opened up. They are also being poached, they poach these young, trained or good trained nurses in the system, some of them 10 to 15 years, now they are going to these private institutions.

So, obviously there is movement of labour across the different organisations, global trends change and of course, trends within our country itself changes. For example, a huge demand for IT specialists not just in Fiji but in Australia and New Zealand. They are poaching some of our best and brightest. We also need our ITC Centre to be run properly by good people, young, trained people or older trained people. So this is what we are looking at in terms of the scarcity of the skills sets but also retention is critically important for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other point that also needs to be made is not only about wages or salaries. It is also about having a right work environment. As we mentioned earlier on, we need to provide good work places for them. They need to have all the tools, work in offices that are salubrious and that are enticing for them to stay in, and have proper ventilation and lighting.

People want those types of things, they need to be able to understand, know and feel confident in the system that if they perform their high performer, they will get recognised for that high performance. They are not going to be actually promoted based on seniority but on capacity and capability and what they can deliver. That is what they need to feel confident about because workplace environment is not just about wages and salaries but about the environment itself that you work within and also having the confidence in the system to know that if you are a high-flyer, you would be recognised for that. If you want to apply for jobs, everyone will be treated on a level playing field and that is what actually helps people stay in jobs.

HON. RO F TUISAWAU.- Staff retention can also be affected by leadership and management issues. Some of the major complaints which have been coming through is the management of contracts, where contracts have come to an end and civil servants have been given short-term contracts which affects their job security, et cetera. So, the question is, what is the

Government doing to rectify that problem when the contract comes to an end and nothing is done to renew or advertise and they are given short-time contracts, monthly contracts? What is being done about that?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, I wish the honourable Member had actually asked that substantive question. That appears to be a substantive question.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Yes, we can ask the question anytime.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- His question, Mr. Speaker, says, “ Can the Minister update Parliament on Government’s staff retention initiatives/policies for skilled and technical areas...?” Now, he is talking about general contract conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we have highlighted to Parliament time and time again, this does not fit in with your narrative, that is the problem. All of you are going out, trying to create this disquiet amongst civil servants.

As any civil servant would know, Sir, if he/she initially takes up a position, you give/her a three-year contract. If, at the end of three years’ assessment he/she performed above a particular level, he/she is given a five-year contract. Most of the people who have actually been through the three-year cycle all have five-year contracts. I cannot understand what he is going on about?

We did say in Parliament a few years ago that some HR Departments in some of the Ministries and, again, there was no investment in the HR Departments of many Ministries. We have said this on the record also, some of the Ministries need to strengthen their HR Department. The HR people need to know, for example, that the contracts of these 10 people are about to expire in six months’ time, so they need to start the particular process so that people know before their contract expire, whether they will be renewed or not, and that needs to be done in time. That is the point we are making and I have continuously said this in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I am again emphasising that.

There was some issues with some of the Ministries and that has been rectified. If there are one or two instances where they have not, please, bring it to the attention of the respective Ministers or respective Permanent Secretaries and get it addressed. But do not use one or two examples to try and shoot down an entire system which is working well, which is actually giving a lot of young people the opportunity to work in the Civil Service, a lot of people in the private sector to come and work in the Civil Service, bring a particular skillset that is still required in the Civil Services and to be able to improve the quality of the workplace environment.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Sir, as we are still on staff retention, recently, we had massive resignation of nurses in the Ministry. Does the Ministry has a plan to improve their working conditions and increase their salary for retention purposes?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, as highlighted previously and, again, I had answered this question in many ways, honourable Kuridrani should take heed of what we have said. We had said that nurses in respect of their movement, there is a lot of demand for them from overseas. If you look at the people who are resigning, where are they going? That is what you need to look at. It is not just simply the question of resignation.

Firstly, if they are resigning, for example, to go overseas, whether we paid them three or four times more their salary, obviously they will go, you cannot stop them. So, do not just come here and say, “Oh, they have resigned, therefore, there is something bad.” But they are going for alternative

employers that may be offering lots of money. We cannot, actually, offer that amount of money. We cannot compete with the salaries in the United Arab Emirates. Those guys have oil, we do not have oil. There were huge shortage of people, they have a much larger population, Sir.

Secondly, some of them are resigning, as I have mentioned earlier on, because they are going to some of the private hospitals, the private health centres, some of the private GPs and one just opened opposite the QVS Boys Club – the MIOT facility. Maybe when I say QVS Old Boys Club, you may know where it is. Some of the nurses I have seen there have actually gone from the public health sector, some of them have gone from Suva Private Hospital to there, so there is movement of people. De Asa's Hospital, there is a hospital in Walu Bay. I have got some other companies that want to set up a private clinic also. Zens employ so many nurses, and the problem for us, of course, is that they are taking people who we have trained and so for us, that is an issue. It is an HR issue.

Some of them, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may not be happy with the conditions. We have now restarted and reignited the overtime as announced in the Budget. Honourable Kuridrani, read the Budget! The nurses are the only ones that get overtime in the Category F. No other civil servant in Category F gets overtime, except nurses. If you look at their salary increment that took place in some of the different categories of nurses, it went up in some areas by 39 percent, 42 percent. Please, look at that. As also announced, that is part of the Civil Service reform. We have allocated this funding to look at areas where there is shortage of skillsets. We will be reviewing those areas also which, of course, includes the nurses also.

Update on First Home Owners Grant
(Question No. 77/2022)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development inform Parliament of the latest update pertaining to the first home owners grant?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for this question. This is actually a very highly successful programme that was launched by Government. The first time it started was in 2014, and the idea was to assist, in particular, low income Fijian families, to buy or build their first home, because we have seen the rate of home ownership in Fiji is very low. As a result of that, many Fijians do not have an asset against which they can borrow in the future. This is why we find a lot of people, for example, go to moneylenders for small loans, because they do not actually have an asset they can take to mainstream financial institutions, use that as collateral and be able to borrow against that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Programme which started in 2014, we gave an assistance of \$10,000 to Fijians with an annual household income of \$50,000 and below. In 2018, this further expanded by increasing the First Home Grant to \$15,000, and also introducing the First Land Purchase Grant of \$10,000 for Fijians buying their first residential piece of land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the financial year 2020-2021, the First Home Grant was further increased to \$30,000 and we also had two categories in that. If you earn a household income of \$50,000 or less, if you are building your first home, you get a grant of \$30,000. If you earn more than \$50,000 but less than \$100,000, you get a grant of \$15,000, if you are building your first home. If you are buying your first home, the amount is lesser than the building grant, so one is \$15,000 and the other one is \$5,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2020-2021 financial year, the Ministry paid \$7.5 million under this assistance programme to 433 successful applicants. This was the highest payout till last year since the Programme was introduced.

In the 2021-2022 Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of \$4 million was allocated for the First Home Grant, which was in July last year when we approved it, and this was paid out within the first few months of this financial year, assisting 213 Fijian households. In fact, \$410,000 was vired from the First Land Purchase Programme to meet the total payout of \$4.3 million. A total of 130 or 61 percent of households from the 213, received their grant to construct their first home, and 83 households received their grant to purchase their first home. A total of 145 households benefitted from the \$50,000 and below income category, and the balance of 68 were in the high income bracket.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although the funding was fully utilised, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development continued to receive applications for the First Home Grant. To meet this high demand, and I hope the honourable Members of the Opposition have picked this up, the Ministry has been allocated an additional \$5.9 million in the Revised Budget, to be able to cater for those applicants who have actually been successfully processed through the banks.

As of today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has received a further 243 applications. From the 243 applications, nine were declined as they did not meet the eligibility criteria. There were 26 incomplete applications, and the Ministry is currently liaising with the applicants for further information. The remaining 208 successful applicants will receive their grant payments in the coming weeks to a total payout of \$4.6 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the really update regarding that. As we have said, it is working out quite successfully. Just as a matter of interest, it is one thing to give the grant but it is also important to know the total value of loans they took out. In 2020-2021 financial year, the 433 successful applicants were able to secure home loans to a total of \$58 million. In other words, the \$58 million were actually lent by the banks under this scheme for them to buy or build their homes. In the current financial year, home loans in excess of \$63 million have been secured to-date by the 421 applicants, over seven folds of economic activities compared to the total grant payout of \$9 million.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it meant that as a result of \$9 million grant by the Government, \$63 million was released into the economy by the banks and that, of course, has created economic activity in the construction sector, et cetera. Of course, this means more employment opportunities and better roofs for ordinary Fijians.

HON. J.A.R. SENILOLI.- Mr. Speaker, a supplementary question; can the honourable Minister inform Parliament as to why this grant is not available to those who wish to build a home in their village or on *mataqali* land when FNPF allows for such withdrawals?

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- They qualified under the Rural Housing Scheme.

MR. SPEAKER.- Could you repeat the question.

HON. J.A.R. SENILOLI.- Can the Minister inform Parliament why this grant is not available to those who wish to build a home in the village or on *mataqali* land, whilst FNPF allows for such a purpose?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Member for his question. We can provide him with further clarification.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNPF does allow people to take out 50 percent of their eligibility funds to build on land on which they own as members of the landowning unit because they are a member of their landowning unit, so obviously no one can ever boot them out from there. In the Vola Ni Kawa Bula (VKB), they are in that particular landowning unit.

So, FNPF knows when they take out that 50 percent, that that money is not going to waste. That is why FNPF will never allow you to take out your 50 percent, if you are going to build a house on land that is not secure through title. If you do not have a proper lease and no proper title, they will not allow you to take out the money. But if you a member of the landowning unit and also in the VKB, no one can illegally boot you out of that land. So, that is why they will let you take out your money because that money is for you to build your home.

In this particular scheme, of course, the Honourable Member would know, that the banks are actually providing the bulk of the funds. So, someone may come along and say, "I want to build a \$150,000 home." They have a proper title, whether it is freehold, whether iTaukei lease or whether it is Crown lease. The bank approves that because they obviously have to have a job to do the repayments. The bank then provides the loan funding, they will apply to us also and we give \$30,000 towards their loan. That is how it works.

The bank takes a mortgage on that particular property. If that person cannot pay the fund, the bank can use that land which is as collateral, to be able to move in to do a mortgagee sale, in the worst case scenario. Obviously, you cannot do a mortgagee sale on iTaukei land because you will never have to do a mortgagee sale on iTaukei land because the person will never leave that land and you take out 50 percent of your money from FNPF. That is the difference. Of course, as I have highlighted earlier on, we have the other housing scheme where we contribute \$10,000 for people to be able to build their homes, should they want to access that particular fund.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- I do not understand how this scheme works. We all understand that Civil Servants' contracts is only up to five years maximum and to be renewed two years or three years but the policy of the banks in order to provide the loan, they need to secure the repayments of the loan. They need to establish that the customer has to repay that loan within that period. The financial institution will provide a 20 years term. That is what I am saying. I do not understand how the banks or financial institutions can lend money when the security of a job is only five years.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I do not know whether the Honourable has worked in the private sector or not, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but Honourable Gavoka should talk to him. He has worked in the private sector, he never had a life term employment agreement, no one. Not even Shangri La gave him a life time work. Tourism Fiji did not give him....

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- How did you know?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I know these things.

(Laughter)

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- I have worked in the private sector before. Honourable Tanya Waqanika has worked at Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, she did not have a lifetime job. So, you worked at FDB, I understand, you did not have a lifetime job. No one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, gets a contract for a lifetime. Banks know that, even the bank CEO get contracts for three years themselves or five years maximum. They still go and borrow money. So, it is a fallacy, it is misrepresentation and maybe we can perhaps have a discussion afterwards. Banks do lend money to people who have a job, contract for three years or for five years.

They give them a loan because they do know at that point in time, that you actually have a secure contract and the contract will also stipulate the manner in which it can get renewed but they also have at the same time a collateral, they have a mortgage over the property. In the event that you cannot pay, they give you time to pay and should you not pay within or go through a default period and then if they do not, then they can get their money back by getting the collateral. So, that is how it works. No one in the private sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has a job for a lifetime - three-year contracts, five-year contracts and banks still lend them money.

Written Questions

Deaths Caused By Myocarditis (Question No. 78/2022)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services detail the number of deaths caused by myocarditis from April 2021 to February 2022 by -

- (a) Age, gender and division; and
- (b) COVID-19 vaccination status?

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my response at a later date as permitted under Standing Orders with regards to this interesting topic of myocarditis brought up by the honourable Member on the other side.

Micro Small and Medium Entities Concessional Loans (Question No. 79/2022)

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA 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 Micro Small and Medium Entities Concessional Loans since 2018, in particular:

- (a) The total number of applications; and
- (b) The total number of successful recipients?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I shall provide the answer as provided for under the Standing Orders.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members that brings an end to Written Questions and the Agenda for today. On that note, we will adjourn till tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

Lunch is being served in the Big Committee Room and I remind the lady Members of Parliament of their meeting as well.

Honourable Members, you have a short day today but do not push your luck, you might have a long day coming up. We adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.39 p.m.