

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 26TH JULY, 2022

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 26TH JULY, 2022

The Parliament met at 9.32 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 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 Monday, 25th July, 2022, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome those joining us in the gallery this morning and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament. I welcome those who are in the public gallery today, most warmly. Thank you honourable Members and we will move on.

CONSIDERATION OF BILLS

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the following Bills be considered by Parliament without delay -

1. Media Industry Development (Budget Amendment) Bill 2022 (Bill No. 45/2022); and
2. Water Authority of Fiji (Budget Amendment) Bill 2022 (Bill No. 46/2022).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move that the Bills -

- (a) must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (b) must not be referred to a Standing Committee or other Committees of Parliament;
- (c) must be debated and voted upon by Parliament immediately after the vote on the 2022-2023 Appropriation Bill 2022; and
- (d) that time for the debate be limited to ensure that the Bills tabled today are debated and voted upon during this week's sitting of Parliament.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as with the previous Bills, this is part of the budget streamlining processes, fixing up numerous laws and also the bureaucracy. It is also to put in place some new methods of doing operations, in particular the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) and the various challenges, so we will debate that later on.

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

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker. Where do you have the time to do all these? We have the Consequential Bills and we were given six Bills yesterday to be debated and now you have this. How are we allocating time for all these, Mr. Speaker? I am at a loss to understand how we are doing all these things - these are laws, Mr. Speaker. Are we going to make time for this, Mr. Speaker, because the way I see it, the time is all taken up already and we do not know how. Are there other Bills coming in tomorrow?

Mr. Speaker, you must make some sense out of our Parliament. This is really unforgiveable - the way they just bring Bills to be passed this week. Please, can you tell us how we are going to allocate time to do this, Mr. Speaker, because right now, we see that the programme is congested already? I mean, this is very perfunctory, very casual in the way they handle legislation in this country, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, let me make it very clear, time in this House is dictated by the Speaker. There will be time to debate these Bills. It is my job to ensure that there is time to debate the Bills. Just make sure that you are here. Let us make no doubt about that. Anyone else wishing to take the floor at this time?

There being no-one else wishing to take the floor, I give the floor to the honourable Attorney-General.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments, except as you have correctly highlighted, you have to control time and even in the motion itself, we have not restricted any time. There is no time limit. Normally, in some of the Standing Orders, motions are brought about we say it is one hour debate, there is absolutely no time limit.

Question put.

<u>Votes Cast</u>		
Ayes	-	22
Nays	-	15
Not voted	-	13

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2022-2023 APPROPRIATION BILL 2022

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the order of speakers listed on the Batting Order and I now call upon the first speaker, the Honourable Joseph Nand, to take the floor.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet colleagues and honourable Members of Parliament, at the outset, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the honourable Minister for Economy and his able team for innovative thinking and hard work in producing a Budget that has been welcomed by many Fijians.

The 2022-2023 National Budget has been described as an outstanding budget which is fit for its

purpose and meets the expectation of every Fijian. To me, it has not come as a surprise because the FijiFirst Government is known to deliver what is best for Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while many critics tried all their best before the Budget and kept throwing their cards on the table to manipulate people that the 2022-2023 Budget will have nothing for Fijians, the same have been seen licking their wounds and found in the corners with their tails tucked between their legs. Those that attempted to deride the Budget, tried to no avail because Fijians breathed a sigh of relief with this Budget, in the midst of inflating prices for food items and fuel which, again, is not faced by Fiji alone but other nations around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was very evident that this Budget reflected the voice of Fijians which were raised during public consultations conducted by the honourable Minister for Economy - indeed a classic example of what the FijiFirst Government believes - putting people first. The Budget was not designed by sitting in the room with papers, computers and calculators. This Budget was driven by what Fijians needed - passion to strengthen the Fijian economy recovery after being hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and determination to support every Fijian in their daily living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, soon after the Budget, I met a group of Fijians in Nadroga who were cutting cane and they shared their feelings on how the Budget has components which will positively impact their family life and they mentioned inflation, mitigation package, transport subsidy and guaranteed sugar price. They are happy and they have extended their sincere gratitude to our honourable Prime Minister for his great leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has always been quick to respond when it was needed the most, and this we not only did for one sector but various sectors, ensuring essential support to ordinary Fijians, organisations and institutions. Let me share some examples when the Drua Team entered the Super Pacific Rugby - the Government came up with a Strategic Plan to support them. When COVID-19 hit the country we knew what to do and came up with a revised budget to boost the economy and now that prices are hiking up, inflation and mitigation packages and transport subsidy have been introduced.

We do not shoot in the dark and hope it reaches the target like some on the other side do. The FijiFirst Government believes in targeted approach and that is why we consult people and then come with the Budget so that it serves its purpose and provides positive impact. Despite facing an economic downturn due to COVID-19, the way our Fijian economy has bounced back is admirable by many nations and this is because of smart planning and delivery of a strategic result-oriented budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to pick a few of the many strong aspects of the Budget which especially brings joy and satisfaction to me, and one of them is the \$6.9 million sports grant which has been allocated to support the development of sporting activities in our communities. We all know what Fijians are capable of doing in the sporting arena - the only country to win gold in Sevens Rugby at the Olympics back to back. So, the \$1.9 million allocation to assist and enhance the performance of national teams through participation at regional and international tournaments, has come at the right time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through continued support, we have such grants. The FijiFirst Government indicates its seriousness to development at community, national, regional and international level. We have the capabilities to compete at all levels. The Government is determined to leave no stones unturned when it comes to supporting our athletes and pledge to carry dreams to sign at global level and that is why \$200,000 has been especially allocated to engage local and international experts to enhance sports development.

I am very confident that at such level of focussed resource commitment, we can emphasise more and more of our players and athletes making their mark at international level. In return, this nature of

investment brings great return in terms of remittances to the country and we are all very much aware of the number of our rugby boys playing in France, Japan and England and earning enough to support families back in Fiji, making their lives better than before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we say health is wealth and that is something which is very much cherished by the Government by adopting the Private and Public Partnership (PPP) model through the free General Practitioners (GPs) Scheme - a way of ensuring that no Fijian is denied basic medical access. As we are becoming steadier and steadier in our commitments, the allocation of \$1 to further boost the free GPs Scheme is a clear sign of the Government ensuring its promises and becoming sustainable in its initiatives.

Another aspect which I wish to emphasise is our steadiness in meeting the infrastructure demands, especially through roads and bridges. While we cannot deny the fact that there are challenges faced in meeting expectations in this area, especially due to the negative impact of climate change, I am glad to say that we have maintained our approach. It is clearly evident in the bridges being built around the nation which is built on the basis of building back better to ensure durability so that it can serve Fijians for as long as possible. The Fiji Roads Authority's (FRA) undertaking towards the Capital Works Programme is serving what we can expect in future in terms of our roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget has once again shown to the nation, Fiji's commitment to climate change. This was something never undertaken until our honourable Prime Minister took it upon his shoulders for all Fijians during COP 23 and since then, he has continued his journey on this path. Apart from funding the Nadi River, flood alleviation projects and retaining walls, the funds have also been allocated towards studies in climate change area, such as through the three awards for Masters scholarships for Monash University, Fiji National University (FNU), Pacific Island Countries and Climate Change Research Centres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am urging Fijians to be wise and make the best use of the initiative because the prime objective of the Government is to improve our daily living. I must also call you to judge what people have to say about the Budget before misinforming people for their personal gains. Once again, I congratulate the honourable Minister for Economy for a sound and realistic Budget for the people of Fiji.

Having said that, I support the 2022–2023 National Budget as announced by the honourable Minister for Economy on 15th July, 2022. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to contribute towards the Budget debate.

HON. RO T.V. KEPA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you are well aware, I am not an economist nor do I have any business experience, but like most women in Fiji, I am reasonably good at multi-tasking because I not only have to attend to my parliamentary responsibilities, but I also have to carry out my other traditional roles in the village as well as cater for my family and household needs.

Like any other entity, managing a household involves watching our income and expenditures carefully to ensure that when catering for my family's needs. I first take care of our fixed commitments before our household needs both in Suva and in the village, and that it all adds up based on tight control of our household budget. And due to my being a widow for many years now and for the sake of my independence, I have to keep very tight control of our finances so that at the end of the day, our needs are met and we have savings for a rainy day.

As most housewives know, when it comes to purchasing for our family's needs, we must remain within our budget and so we cannot afford to develop bad habits like that of the honourable Minister for Economy where he is unable to control the National Budget and we end up spending well beyond our means.

As I see it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the difference between the honourable Minister's Budget and the budget of the ordinary housewives is this, because we can only spend our own money, we have to watch every dollar, in fact, every cent as we cannot afford to let the dollars run away from us. The funds that the honourable Minister has at his disposal is not his own personal funds, therefore, the responsibility is greater and that the fund belong to the taxpayers of Fiji which include all of the housewives in Fiji, as well as all of the people of this country as it mainly comes from taxes and penalties imposed upon the people. So he has to have a more responsible, accountable and caring attitude where he cannot afford to be reckless and careless when it comes to spending which brings me to the budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I see it, the basic principles of managing a Government is not much different from managing household expenses. The difference being that the Government's funding runs into billions of dollars whilst my household budget is in the thousands. But the need for prudent management and common sense applies equally to both. And here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we take heed from very wise words in the *Bible* where we are told the importance of the little things by the suggestion that if we are faithful in the little things, we will be faithful in much. If we are dishonest in little things, we will be dishonest in much and this is in regard to a wealthy man who hired a manager to oversee his business enterprises where it was apparent that the manager was incompetent and wasteful like the wastefulness of the Government hired vehicles that cost \$82,191 per day. Why does the Government leasing have to be renewed almost every year? Why do some Government Ministers have to have more than one ministerial vehicle at their beck and call? Why such vanity, Mr. Speaker?

What happens if you do not return to Parliament after the elections and you become once again just another citizen like so many ordinary housewives facing the reality check of everyday life? It is then that the little things, the dollars and cents that matter so much to the ordinary housewives will become more relevant to each one of us when we are back to square one living the life of ordinary citizens. For example, when presenting the 2022-2023 Budget in Parliament, the honourable Minister for Economy referred to the Budget as the blueprint for his next financial year and a prudent responsible and visionary one which he said, "rested on the pillars of infrastructure, education and health."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very briefly on infrastructure, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for the water situation in Rewa, in that most of the time water pressure is good. On the landing at Nasali, we are grateful for the railings and the ramp, enabling persons with disabilities to access both sides of the river and also the ablution block at Burenivudi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just on electricity because some areas like in my own village, we have 150 volts instead of the 240 volts, if you can have look at that, please, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I will now look at education, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that for the past 15 years, education has had no sense of direction. Had the Cabinet paid attention to the honourable Minister for Education in 2015 when he talked about an Education Commission and for once he made sense, millions of dollars would not have been squandered on hastily put together and hastily removed policies also known as Government Initiatives like milk for Year 1 students and the much doubted technical colleges including to-ing from fro-ing from exams to classroom-based assessments back to exams. It is no wonder teachers and students and other stakeholders, Mr. Speaker, Sir, did not know whether they were coming and going. And as such where Fiji was once amongst the top in the Pacific, literacy and numeracy have suffered with so many students even up to Year 8 and you only have to ask any parent and they will confirm about the very poor reading and writing skills their children have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government could take a leaf out of the Education Commission Report of

2000 titled “*Learning Together - Directions for Education in the Fiji Islands*” which was to undertake a comprehensive review of Fiji’s education system. Amongst other things, it was designed to look at developing our human and intellectual resources, inculcate in our children and young people the values of living and learning together, as they are crucial building blocks for our success as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation.

The six-member Commission consisted of the Chairman, Professor Kazim Bacchus from Canada, Dr. Evelyn Coxon from New Zealand, Professor Royce Sadler from Australia and from Fiji - Mrs. Suliana Siwatibau, Professor Subramani and Dr. Esther Williams. A member of that Commission currently still in the education sector, Sir, is Professor Subramani at the University of Fiji and Dr. Esther Williams may still be available. Also mentioned in the Commission Report that assisted in the Commission’s work were professionals such as, Dr. Helen Tavola, Ms. Unaisi Nabobo, who is now a fully-fledged Professor at FNU and Mr. Filipe Jitoko of USP. That could be the starting point for the work or the basis of a new Education Commission.

In December 1999, with the approval of Cabinet at that time, honourable Pratap Chand, the Minister for Education required the Commission to submit a report on its findings within six months from the commencement of its work and also required it to have extensive consultations throughout the country. Funding for this Commission was sourced from the Ministry of Education’s budget and supplemented by grant contributions from AusAID and NZODA and the Canada fund. The SDL Government based many of its education policies on this Education Fiji 2020 Strategic Plan. Had the FijiFirst Government continued with this very detailed and structured plan, the students of Fiji would have been the beneficiaries with a higher standard of literacy and numeracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be an advantage for political parties running at the next general elections to have the setting up of an Education Commission included in their manifesto as it also deals with Student Loan Schemes, administration of scholarships and loans and directions for change. Failing that, education will continue to slide downhill on a slippery slope.

Although, the University of the South Pacific (USP) is mentioned in the Education Commission Report, it is disappointing to note the absence of its grant in the 2022-2023 Budget Estimates. Mr. Speaker, Sir, did I miss something? The precedence of both, USP staff and USP staff unions, have highlighted that withholding of grant payments for 2020, 2021 and 2022 already passed in Parliament, I might add, totalling \$78.4 million are not beneficial to the students, staff, University or anyone associated with the University, except maybe to someone’s pride and sense of great power. Anyone wielding such power even over Parliament has to be mindful that pride comes before fall, regardless of how long or how short you have had the power and the pride that comes with it, that the fall will come and to be prepared for it.

So to the staff and students and to the many housewives associated with USP, the power is in your hands. Very simply, claim that power and do not tick any FijiFirst candidate as they are all part of the colluding and conspiring against USP. It would be an advantage to any political party to promise to make good with USP, that that unpaid grant of \$78.4 million including what should have been included in the 2022-2023 Budget, will be honoured. After all, if the economy is in such good hands, the total unpaid grant should be parked at Head 50.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the indigenous people, which other honourable Members have already spoken on which I will not address, except to plead with the honourable Prime Minister in terms of the so-called *i qoliqoli* owners. The honourable Prime Minister has repeatedly said that all payments have been made. I beg to differ in that. Previously, the *i qoliqoli* owners were paid fishing licence fees for those fishing in their *i qoliqoli*. In the past few years, no such payment has

been made, no other *i qoliqoli* owner of which there are over 400 is willing to say anything as they are too embarrassed and do not want to call the honourable Prime Minister a liar.

No satisfactory response has come from the Ministry of Fisheries or the iTaukei Affairs which is supposed to be handling this payment. We are being advised, however, that there is a trust fund for damage to the *i qoliqoli*. How that works? No *i qoliqoli* owner seems to know as there is no statement of accounts, what the balance is, no one knows. Will it suffer the same fate as the payment of licence fees to *i qoliqoli* owners? Perhaps, only time will tell.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on another note, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for giving Rewa the opportunity to showcase our youth or *i sausau vou kei Rewa* at the traditional ceremonies of welcome at the opening of the Rewa Provincial Council at Lomanikoro, Rewa, on 18th July, 2022. Having the youth participate, Sir, was a challenge, in that, we had to arouse and maintain their interest to showcase their talent in age-old ceremonies with its related protocols which many people had written off as irrelevant.

We had to incorporate modern technology, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to maintain this interest from the youth so we had to have livestreaming, a LED screen and a drone to confirm that tradition and culture are relevant and applicable to the modern rapidly-evolving world where our youth need to be grounded in that reality for the stability, strength and durability they need for them to balance themselves, thrive, grow and contribute to the betterment of their people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the Vuniyavu Choir for their especially composed song about their *Naita*, the iTaukei Trust Fund for their showcasing of the *i yau vakamareqeti kei Rewa*. Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the chiefs and the people of Rewa for their visionary leadership, contribution, cooperation and collaboration at the two-day Provincial Council Meeting, the Rewa Day that was held over two days and the Thanksgiving Service.

Last week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was quite an eventful one and to the beautiful women, the housewives of Rewa, what else can I say? They outdid themselves, Sir, from the finely woven mats for the *vakamamaca* to the finely fired Lapita style pottery, the food and the delicacies of Tebara was outstanding. I would like to thank the Lord for the beautiful cool, fine weather He blessed us with the whole of last week and my prayer is that the Lord will continue to bless us all.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of this august Parliament, I rise to respond in support of the 2022-2023 National Budget that was delivered by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for delivering an excellent people's budget that will enable Fiji to forge ahead and regain the growth that the country needs. Of course, this well thought-out and well-articulated budget is hard to be digested by honourable Members on the other side, they have a habit of seeing the glass half empty rather than half full. What the Opposition needs to do is to get out of that political smokescreen and see what the FijiFirst Government has achieved since it has come into power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has become the regional economic hub. Our infrastructure investment and investment in technology has put Fiji at an advantage and has benefited the nation. This has not happened just like that, it is the decisive leadership of our honourable Prime Minister that has enabled us to achieve that. It is the stability that the FijiFirst Government has provided, it is the visionary leadership that this Government has given to Fiji and the ability to be part of the regional and global leadership on issues that concern the region and has global significance.

While the Opposition is just criticising the Government and its initiatives, others like Australia in *Nine News* in July praised Fiji for embarking on a new direct service between Nadi and Adelaide. While the Opposition criticises, Fiji, under the FijiFirst Government and the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister, moves ahead.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been calls by the honourable Lalabalavu for Fiji to compare itself with countries like Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Really! Realistically, we should compare with countries based on the Human Development Index (HDI) collated by UNDP. The HDI was created to emphasise that the people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not their economic growth. The 2020 HDI Report places Australia first, then Singapore, New Zealand, Fiji and then Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands with PNG being the last.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to improve, one must compare itself with the one that is performing better than itself rather than those who are lagging behind. Calling for Fiji to be compared with Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG rather than Australia, Singapore and New Zealand shows the lack of understanding in the subject they are talking about, or probably it is the Opposition's proposal to take Fiji backwards, should they, God forbid, ever come into power. Sir, I humbly request the Opposition to either write their own speech which is factually correct or, at least, proofread the speeches written by others to ensure that what is being said is factually correct and make sense.

The 2022-2023 Budget has continued to focus on the agriculture sector and MSMEs. These are the two sectors that continue to contribute significantly to the GDP of the country and continues to be the biggest employers in the country. The agriculture sector continues to be the backbone of Fiji and the FijiFirst Government continues to recognise this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge the hardworking farmers who, during difficult times, continue to toil the soil to ensure that the nation was all well-fed. Not all that we eat is important, it is the result of the hard work of our farmers which keeps us all fed. The FijiFirst Government has ensured that these farmers are well-supported either technically or materially, to enable them to produce for the nation.

The 2022-2023 Budget continues to support these hardworking farmers so that they continue farming and continue feeding the nation. This has only been possible under the strong leadership of the honourable Prime Minister. No other government, apart from the FijiFirst Government, has invested the kind of resources to stimulate growth and accessibility for our farmers, yet political opportunists continue to misinform our farmers in rural and remote communities. The Opposition never has and never will be able to match the achievements of the FijiFirst Government in the rural and remote communities.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Tell them! Listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while others play by words, the FijiFirst Government puts money where the mouth is. To this effect, the FijiFirst Government has allocated \$2 million towards Commercial Farmers Equity Package and Farm Mechanisation. Commercial farmers who wish to expand their business and need loans from commercial banks can get their equity contribution through this Package. The Package also intends to increase farm efficiency through mechanisation. Intensive farming and increase in farm sizes require investment in machinery and equipment on the

Farm. This enables a farmer to maintain profitability and expand the portfolio on the farm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this well-articulated 2022-2023 Budget, gone are the days where the farmer had to book for a Ministry's farm machinery and wait for its availability. The allocation of \$7 million towards the outsourcing of machinery hire on a 50/50 basis will ensure that farm machinery is readily available for hire. The waiting time would significantly reduce and efficiency gained on the farm - feels proud to be part of a Government that continues to invest in agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$3.45 million has been allocated for *dalo*, ginger, *yaqona* and rice farming, with special emphasis on women in agriculture. Is that not great? Has anyone from the other side commended the Government on this?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- No!

HON. S. NAND.- I do not think so. No, they did not, because they will not get their brownie points for supporting or commending a Government programme. Rural development and women capacity development are things they do not subscribe to. If they had, they would have commended this allocation in the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the livestock sector continues to see investment by the Government under this Budget. The dairy industry has an allocation of \$1.2 million which will go as direct assistance to the dairy farmers under the Dairy Development Programme. The FijiFirst Government's assistance to the dairy industry has far exceeded any other Government support to the dairy industry since independence.

Yesterday, honourable Kuridrani said that cows are producing an average of 2 litres of milk per day per cow. Where did he get his figure from?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. NAND.- This is a direct insult to the hardworking dairy farmers of our country who, despite being faced with Bovine Tuberculosis and Brucellosis, continue to forge ahead and improve the dairy industry. There is a difference between a cow and a goat.

(Laughter)

I suggest that honourable Kuridrani to go back to the farm and see the difference between a cow's udder and a goat's udder. Please, when you go to the farm, you make sure that the big animal is a cow, not something else.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) continue to be a focus of the FijiFirst Government. Our Government continues to encourage women participation in business and to support female entrepreneurship in MSMEs, the Government has allocated in the 2022-2023 Budget \$1.1 million via the Fiji Development Bank as women entrepreneurs loan package.

The women entrepreneurs' loan package will primarily target women entrepreneurs with registered businesses in operation for a maximum of six months, who require working capital or need to expand their existing business. Sir, 10 percent equity required for the loan packages will be provided through this \$1 million allocation and will greatly support female entrepreneurs' access to financing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst people's Budget 2022-2023 is an important opportunity to enact policies for the betterment of our nation however, this is not the only opportunity. The FijiFirst Government's ears are open to businesses of all sizes – micro, small, medium and large, as they always have been.

The FijiFirst Government remains flexible to develop joint solutions on every serious and unforeseen challenges facing our nation's recovery, especially in the business community. We have been creating the most efficient and least bureaucratic environment possible for a business to thrive. Our golden rule is, every process must serve a purpose, other than just simply creating a bureaucratic role.

Mr. Speaker, the FijiFirst Government has invested \$432.3 million in its people who have suffered from the pandemic. Apart from this, the FijiFirst Government continues with the \$200 million concessional loan via the Reserve Bank of Fiji to assist businesses with working capital needs. This assistance continues to be active. Has anyone from the Opposition side commended the Government for assisting businesses or the people? No, they did not. All they cried was 'freebies'. Is assisting its people - freebie? Is assisting the business to continue operating under difficult situation and continuing to employ people - freebie? No, it is not a freebie. It is helping the people to live the economy in times of need. The Opposition calling this a freebie shows the lack of understanding of economic stimulation and yet they are asking the people to trust them in running the Government. Will they be able to trust them?

Yesterday, Honourable Gavoka proposed a tax hike, God forbid, but if they ever were in power they will put our people in great economic crisis just to help a niche group of people. Everyone knows what effect the global pandemic and the Ukraine-Russian War has had on the global market - availability of resources had contracted, cost of crude oil and refined oil have gone up, freight charges has almost gone up by threefold.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is an import-driven market and cost of imports have gone up. Most of our basic staples are imported so the cost of these imports have also gone up. The FijiFirst Government had no part to play in this increasing cost. Yet, there are so-called Professors (I do not see him here), who go around the country saying they will decrease the cost of these imports. How can they sell a product at a price lower than the cost of the price? The people of Fiji are not fools. They know you are lying through your teeth. I hope he is here. He always says his part and runs away.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same individual has called the 2022-2023 National Budget a *saqamoli* Budget. This shows his lack of understanding of the assistance provided to the people. A dollar a day makes a lot of difference to a person who desperately needs this and this honourable Member is belittling this. Those who are in need of assistance only a person with a *saqamoli*-sized brain will make such a derogatory comment. The same Leader of NFP, honourable Professor Prasad, has been going around telling the cane farmers that the guaranteed cane price has been slashed. Really? Can you stoop that low?

The markets set its price and the Government pitches in the difference to make it \$85 a tonne which is the Government-guaranteed price. Where is the reduction in price? I urge all the sugarcane

farmers not to believe in his lies. He lies through his teeth. Has he told the farmers that the cost of a bag of fertilizer is \$80.90? The farmer only pays \$20.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$60.90 is paid by the Government. Did he tell this to the media? No! This will not suit him because the Government is contributing here. He does not get his brownie points.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no limit to how much the NFP will lie and mislead the people just to be in power, let alone going back on his words of not supporting a *coup* leader. The union between the NFP and the PAP leader must be really rosy. Both of them have excellent skills - one is a professional at running away from the middle of an interview and the other is good at shaking at the Desi Girls' tune. The fact is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not feel sorry for this Professor but I feel extremely sorry for the students he has taught. Thank God I was not one of his students.

If the Opposition had a wee bit of substance in them, they would have come up with an alternative budget and not only with criticisms. We should not disagree for the sake of disagreeing only. Look at the reasons behind this excellent Budget. I am sure if Honourable Members shared their political veil aside, they will clearly see the rationale and the greater good of the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji have chosen us to represent them in this august Parliament. Let us not desecrate their confidence in us. Let us not mislead them. Let us speak the facts and not let our political opinion cloud this.

Honourable Professor Prasad needs to be told the facts without being fabricated to suit his own personal agenda. Denzel Washington once said, and I quote:

“You will never be criticized by someone who is doing more than you. You’ll always be criticized by someone doing less. Remember that.”

The Opposition in this Parliament is doing just that. They have not been able to even dream about what the FijiFirst Government has already delivered.

To conclude, I would like to thank the Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy for delivering the 2022-2023 Budget (People’s Budget) which I support, and I am sure the whole nation supports. Thank you and God Bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank the Honourable Member for his contribution to the debate.

Honourable Members, on that note, we will suspend proceedings for an adjournment and Parliament will resume in half-an-hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.26 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.02 a.m.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the fellow honourable Members of Parliament and to those members of the public sitting in the public gallery and those tuning in this morning from the comforts of their homes or offices, *drau bula nakwa*.

Firstly, I would like to join our fellow colleagues in also conveying my best wishes to our athletes participating in the Birmingham Commonwealth Games and I only wish them that they will do their best, that they are all winners.

I also would like to convey my best wishes to the top two local provincial rugby teams; Naitasiri and Nadi playing in the finals of the Skipper Cup Competition this Saturday. As the supporters of the Naitasiri usually say, “go black go” and that supporters of Nadi “*cevu* Nadi or must be Nadi”, may the best team win.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will begin by stating that it is quite unfortunate that in listening to the Budget responses over the last day, it seems that a good majority of speakers are focused on the impending General Elections that will occur later this year, instead of considering the recovery plans Fiji needs to have in place to combat the unprecedented challenge of managing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Fiji, a country where international tourism is still the cornerstone of the economy, implications of the crisis are massive and it is obvious that the road to full recovery will be steep, given the effects of the war in Ukraine and other global shocks mostly created by the drastic effects of climate change on countries around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget Estimate announced by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy on 15th July, 2022 is a stimulus package worth \$2.939 billion for the 2022-2023 financial year. The question for us as legislators will be to review whether Fiji will be allocating the resources in a way that addresses the country’s needs and whether such resources will deliver short-term benefits with the focus to target the protection of our population against the continuing crisis, or achieves a more inclusive, prosperous and sustainable economy. Sir, is there a way to achieve both goals in this Budget Estimates? That is the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, not every stimulus spending has long-term benefits and not all long-term investments will be able to deliver a short-term stimulus. For instance, infrastructure projects often take years to be designed and approved so they cannot create many jobs quickly, unless they are already ready to go. In any event, Sir, as a shadow spokesperson for infrastructure, it is important that I remind this august Parliament that physical infrastructure has a critical role to play in supporting the post-pandemic recovery and in laying the longer term foundations for green, resilient and inclusive development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a growing body of evidence highlights the contribution of infrastructure development to a wide range of development indicators and this includes; employment, productivity, income, inequality, trade and human capital formation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, here in Fiji, infrastructure remains waffling inadequate. A lot of our people, especially in the rural and maritime zones live more than a mile from an all-season road and many more lack access to electricity at home, whilst accessing the broadband signals is also a challenge for many. Even where these services are available, they are frequently erratic and unaffordable. The disruptions caused by unreliable infrastructure caused individuals and businesses hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, investment in infrastructure was well below the levels

needed to achieve Fiji's development goals. Since the pandemic, spending has been further squeezed, for example, in the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) for the 2019-2020 Budget, there was a budget provision of \$258.7 million. The Budget Estimates in 2020-2021 was \$195.3 million, for 2021-2022, a budget of \$195.2 million was set, and for this new 2022-2023 Budget, a budget of \$204 million has been set.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), fortunately, there has been some growth, for instance, in 2020-2021, the actual budget expenditure was \$277.1 million. For 2021-2022, the revised Budget estimate of \$338.1 million was set. For 2022-2023, a Budget estimate of \$376.7 million had been set.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a recent report study of developed and underdeveloped nations, it was captured at whilst many developed economies have implemented stimulus packages to support economic recovery often with the infrastructure components, the world's poorest States lack of fiscal space for such measures and calls have been made for enhanced efforts to fund infrastructure development in low and middle income countries for instances. Given the crucial link that infrastructure provides for national development and substantially, the acknowledgement that infrastructure cuts across the successful implementation of all sustainable development goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial that we acknowledge how Government has tended to a lot of infrastructure upgrades, maintenance and new projects. However, the delay in submission of Annual Reports to Parliament from entities, such as FRA and WAF where the last Annual Report was presented in Parliament for the year 2018 under the Ministry of Infrastructure, will not provide Parliament with the ability to gauge whether the programmes announced through budgetary provisions are actually being carried out on the ground. This, Sir, must be corrected and such entities must be addressed upon to be diligent and timely in the submission of their Annual Reports which is tied to their audit accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure development will always be susceptible to internal and external shocks. And with the climate change occurring around the world, we have lessons that we must learn from and it becomes critical that there is readiness to address such recovery process when needed.

In the aftermath of *TC Winston*, so many of our infrastructure was badly affected and it has taken years for some of the infrastructural damages to be fully restored. For instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Nasavu Village in Naitasiri, the road slip along the main Sawani-Serea Road remains a one-lane road at present, and the risk of such road being further damaged in another severe storm is a high possibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will recall that for the Western Division, it took months for some areas to be fully connected back to the electricity grid and likewise, to access internet. I am well aware that as massive rebuilding and recovery effort got underway after *TC Winston* as captured by the World Bank Report, Fiji recognised that it would achieve resilience through stronger, faster and more inclusive post-disaster reconstruction. And I note that Government launched the Build Back Better Programme and as such, worked with the World Bank to develop the country's first ever Climate Vulnerability Assessment (CVA).

Underpinned by the live climate experience of the Fijian people, the CVA sought to quantify and better understand the threat posed by natural hazards and climate change in Fiji in order to help design Climate Adaptation and Risk Management Plans. I note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that CVA identified five main areas that could significantly reduce the country's vulnerabilities, including:

1. Inclusive and resilient urban development;
2. Enhanced and resilient infrastructure services;
3. Sustainable agriculture and fisheries conserving ecosystems;

4. Building socio-economic resilience through actions and early warning and preparedness; and
5. Social protection and healthcare.

The outcome of the CVA was a proposedly some 125 interventions across 10 sectors and these sectors include; housing and land use, hazard management, transport, water, energy, health, education, environment, agriculture, fisheries and social protections. I understand that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the total estimated cost to do all the interventions was about FJ\$9.3 billion, which is almost 100 percent of GDP over 10 years, plus additional maintenance and operational costs and social expenses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, such investments are justified and Government must do all it can to bring this to pass. Our future survival could very well depend on it when future superstorms are expected according to global meteorological experts. In short, I am one that will critic Government policies where needed, but I will acknowledge progress where obligatory.

As we all know during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, Fiji was met with a secondary shock - *TC Harold*, a Category 4 storm that hit the country and resulted in \$44 million in damages with, at least, 635 houses totally destroyed and 2,100 homes damaged. Sir, *TC Harold* was the first significant storm to test the more resilient standards used in the reconstruction of the 2016 *TC Winston*.

I am very pleased, Mr. Speaker, to note that of the 181 schools and 25 public buildings that had been completed to-date under the Build Back Better Programme, none were damaged. From a finance perspective, this progress delivered a twofold game for Fiji, primarily protecting the Fijian people during a crisis and the Government's budget from a catastrophic costs of rebuilding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Opposition, our job is to encourage Government to be more robust in its role to champion sustainable development for our national infrastructure. On that note, contrary to the positive report I have just highlighted, the QVS dormitories and school block rehabilitation was a disaster post-*TC Winston*, as we all know. Perhaps, that was due to poor administrative oversight where the buildings quickly deteriorated and has necessitated a rebuilding. Lessons learnt from this will hopefully assist in other similar projects around the country, like that at Lekutu Secondary School in Bua, which was damaged following *TC Yasa*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, experience from previous disasters in Fiji highlights the benefits from investing in resilience, and with increasing risks driven by the socio-economic development and urbanisation, the need to do more for resilience remains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to understand that the world is interconnected and our challenges will not be isolated. For example, in January this year, when the volcanic eruption and tsunami occurred in the Kingdom of Tonga, it damaged and disconnected severely the island's submarine internet cable for months. A lot of students studying in Fiji and businesses that have mutual interest in Tonga were severely affected and it was not an easy ordeal to get through. Sir, we acknowledge, therefore, the proposed submarine cables targeted to be connected in Lautoka and trust that such infrastructure will be climate-resilient and accommodate lessons learnt from those occurring around us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have just returned from Wellington in New Zealand in the weekend for which I thank the Parliament of Fiji and yourself, Sir, for allowing us to be part of the upskilling programme of the Australasian Council of Public Accounts Committees (ACPAC). We noted that the severe weather patterns been experienced was creating havoc for travellers and road-users, not to mention affecting flights into and out of New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, globally, it has been noted that in times of crisis, dependency on infrastructure becomes crucial to offer solutions. Take for instance when the COVID-19 pandemic hit us, there were massive lockdowns for communities and air travel almost grounded to a standstill with the exception of cargo flights. In those instances, much needed assistance was relied upon for struggling families and keeping in touch with families overseas not only meant people's stability and mental status were assisted. But the much needed financial support came in by way of global remittances. The use of internet was so crucial during that period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two years ago, we were not accustomed to virtual meetings, which was what we all turned to when physical meetings became unsafe because of possible transmissions of the COVID-19 virus. Sir, it is an eye opener to note that during the peak periods of the pandemic in Fiji and everywhere else around the world, digital applications that support online services delivery and remote work enabled firms, businesses, schools, courts and government to continue operating - I guess this is the new norm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will still remember the pictures of teachers climbing mountains and crossing rivers, some on horseback to get to areas where there was internet connectivity and to be able to download teaching materials that were to be distributed to students because schools were closed. We must, therefore, keep those pictures vividly in our minds and thank the many brave teachers who rose over and above their call of duty, just as the health workers and those in defence forces did to be able to serve our children in our communities.

Whilst I congratulate Fiji for our ability to be resilient as a nation when COVID-19 drove our nation to a standstill, Government must be encouraged to continue to invest in the infrastructure that will enable us to become even more resilient to crisis. Our internet cables and powers must be able to withstand such climate change and logistical arrangements that will now be inevitable.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of us today rely on the internet to make payments and communication. I raised in this august Parliament previously and through the relevant line Ministers that up in the hills of Naitasiri, a Vodafone tower in Taulevu remains under dispute and, therefore, affecting connectivity to those villages relying on the tower, like the villages of Naluwai, Waidracia, Serea, Waisere, Naterumai, Waisa and other surrounding communities. Similar incidents are most likely occurring in other areas around Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, including the maritime islands.

In the islands, we use the internet to purchase/top up bus cards, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as well as MPiSA transactions to pay for cash power in order to access electricity. The same is critical to allow social welfare recipients to access the assistance. Due to the unavailability of this Vodafone connectivity, people have to travel right down to Sawani, Suva and Nausori to access their needs. We seek Government's intervention accordingly and hope this brings the reality of the crucial role such infrastructure provides for basic living in our communities that are far-flung from the main commercial business centres and districts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investing in sustainable infrastructure that promotes social inclusion and addresses different dimensions of inequality is imperative. Despite the surge in *Digicel* connectivity during the pandemic in Fiji, people remained offline because of connectivity issues, limited by access to supporting infrastructure. This digital divide has led to serious inequities in development outcomes. Such limitations in Fiji's infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, continues to promote substantial disparities between urban and rural areas, the haves and the have nots and subsequently, disparities are exacerbated between men and women, girls and boys in some parts of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, according to UNICEF, lack of access to relevant technologies prevented, at least, 463 million or 31 percent of school children worldwide from participating in digital and broadcast remote

learning during the pandemic. We, therefore, must audit the One Laptop Per Child Programme, Mr. Speaker, Sir. How does that work in Fiji's geographical layout? When can we expect each child in Fiji to be able to be connected to the internet?

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the overall effect of physical infrastructure on development depends on how investments are coordinated with each other and complemented by supportive policy measures. I wish, therefore, to acknowledge the planned Viti Levu cross-country highway which is to connect Suva to the Western Division, as revealed by the honourable Minister for Economy in his Budget Address. My only issue here, Sir, is to encourage Government to enter into a joint venture by way of a PPP that can include transport providers and landowners, and primarily the infrastructure needs to be by way of tramlines that could better the time of travel and allow for mass cargo movement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, good infrastructure by way of necessary roads, for instance, allows for substantial economic benefits. Infrastructure has much to contribute to the post-pandemic recovery, as well as to long-term green resilient and inclusive development, especially in outer rural and maritime areas where the need for investment is especially urgent. Meeting that need will be a daunting challenge but also one that can be turned into an opportunity for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in summary, it is evident that the Government Budget provided will have to be increased further in the near future as we move to ensure resilience and effectiveness of such infrastructure. We cannot be complacent and we will need all stakeholders to play our part to ensure Fiji is climate-changed and disaster-ready for whatever lies before us. I will reserve any support for this Budget until I see that Government actually carries out its plan as captured in the 2022-2023 Budget. Until then, Mr. Speaker, this can all be pies in the skies.

To end, Mr. Speaker, I wish to very briefly respond to honourable Maharaj for what he mentioned in this Parliament yesterday.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Tell him!

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Honourable Maharaj should know that despite all the cloak and dagger activities happening, SODELPA is here to stay, and people like me will ensure our people are served by consistent able politicians who do not change political ideologies and principles because they follow a specific leader. Leaders come and go, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but our legacies will capture who we are and what we did. Sir, SODELPA will continue to be the voice of reason and hope for many who believe in the rule of law and in a future that promotes peace and stability for all who call Fiji home. *Vinaka vakalevu* and God bless Fiji and our people.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *bula vinaka*, good morning, *ram ram* and *namaskar*. I stand here today to support the motion by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy on the 2022-2023 Budget Appropriation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the onset, please, allow me to congratulate our Pacific Leaders on the adoption of the 2050 Oceans Strategy for the Blue Pacific Commitment with a special focus on climate change and disaster. The Strategy focuses on our faith, cultural values, traditional knowledge, resilience and a shared vision which will reflect as building blocks for the 2022-2023 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Global Assessment Report 2022 highlighted that extensive risks are growing at an unprecedented rate where the impact of disasters are cascading across all sectors, thus creating new challenges which need to be imminently addressed. From the recent flooding in New South Wales, Australia, to the volcanic eruption in Tonga and from the compounding impact of COVID-19 crisis to

the current war in Ukraine, we must come together as a country to ensure that we achieve the commitment set in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year's Budget is a budget that is prudent, responsible and visionary-focused, building the value of family, security, justice, true democracy and equal opportunity. Because of the Government's consistent, strong and innovative leadership, this Budget will allow our economy to recover smoothly over the worst economic crisis in history, providing the pathway to recovery of the national economy, as well as the pathway to recover right down to the family level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this 2022-2023 financial year, the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) has been allocated \$1.4 million to ensure that we are not only building back better, but building forward better through this inclusive and resilient Budget. The 2022-2023 National Budget aims to simultaneously facilitate Fiji's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate (as best as possible) the impact of the Russian war with Ukraine.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this war in Ukraine is significantly contributing to global inflation – the serious implication of global financial system. People globally are facing the cost of living crisis not seen in generations, according to the latest finding by the United Nations Global Crisis Response Group on Food, Energy and Finance. Here at home, we are not spared as we grapple with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. This is the reason, Sir, the strong leadership and innovation that is present in this Budget will pave the way forward for the nation. We cannot do this alone but together, all Fijians and with the timely assistance from our development partners, will bring us through this crisis.

On this note, I would like to acknowledge the Australian Government for its investment of \$1.3 million towards the renovation of our Western Division warehouse complex. This new building will provide the state-of-the-art and conducive building, and environmental first responders working tirelessly in disaster response operations in the Western Division. Further support was rendered to the construction of the NDMO Warehouse at the Back Rock facility in Nadi. This will also greatly improve the capability of NDMO to prepare and respond to disasters both, locally and regionally. Earlier this month, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over 90 pallets of non-food items was airlifted from Brisbane and it is now pre-positioned at the warehouse as we are now three months away from the start of the cyclone season.

In partnership with the Japanese Government, a total of \$8.9 million has been committed to the extension of tsunami sirens in strategic positions from Lami to Rakiraki. An additional \$25,000 has been committed this year to the maintenance of emergency equipment, such as tsunami sirens and high frequency telecommunication equipment installed across the four Divisions. Another \$9,000 has been committed to the maintenance of Flood Early Warning System in Nadi and Ba.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a people-centred disaster risk reduction approach is our way forward. In partnership with our Australian humanitarian partners, over \$1.2 million has been invested on upskilling our communities to be disaster ready. An additional of \$10,000 has been allocated to ensure this work continues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, data is key to making informed decisions for all stages of the disaster cycle ranging from baseline information on the availability and capacity of the risk community to provide the basis for target interventions on relief during short and long term recovery. This has been alluded to in the comment made by Deputy General-Secretary of the United Nations, Ms. Amina Jane Mohammed, that we need to invest in stronger data capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this regard Government has committed \$25,000 towards the maintenance and management of the National Emergency Operation Centre for Disaster Preparedness,

Monitoring, Coordinating Disaster Response and Relief Operations. We are also working with the Pacific Disaster Centre in Hawaii in harmonising datasets to improve our operations. The NDMO has also developed and will soon launch its revamped website that will be an online portal and one-stop-shop for disaster risk and emergency information for the general public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is also committed to ensuring that Disaster Risk Management in Fiji is multi-structural inclusive of embracing cross-cutting issues including gender, disability, environment and other areas which informed the whole of Government approach towards disaster management. Thus, this allocation by Government for strengthened and integrated data systems will decrease silos and increase interoperability and coordination across Government agencies and stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that Disaster Risk Reduction is not just a humanitarian issue but a development one and this Budget provides pathways for mainstreaming of disaster risk reduction into the pillars of infrastructure, health and education. Government recognises that just by investing \$1 into disaster risk reduction, we are going to save \$7 in disaster recovery when a disaster will hit us next.

The Government has approved a budget of \$50,000 for the mainstream of 122 action items under the National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy (NDRRP) across Government agencies and civil society organisations to enable a continued focus on priorities and plans for structural and non-structural measures to alleviate the impact of disasters. Such investments will help us navigate complex risks earlier, faster and in a more targeted and efficient manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even with the two years of COVID-19 impacts and lockdowns, the Fijian Government's work on mainstreaming Disaster Risk Reduction across thematic areas has continued. I am proud to say that we have achieved the following milestones thus far:

- Economic sector - 43 action items in progress;
- Administration sector - 36 action items in progress;
- Infrastructure sector - 23 action items in progress; and
- Social sector - 19 action items in progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I assure this august Chamber that we will continue this momentum and we are not going to make excuses that will prevent us from continuing to build forward better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NDMO is also developing an online Risk Training Tool that will equip Provincial Administrators and District Officers with the ability to safely determine the viability of proposed community development projects. This Risk Screening Tool will also help them determine risk reduction measures for these projects so that the Government and community investments are safeguarded from disaster, climate, health and social risks. This is all part of the contribution towards minimising development risks and to ensure that our hard-earned development gains are protected.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all must work together and ensure to give a voice to the marginalised group who are often amongst the most vulnerable to natural hazards and ensure that their interests are adequately addressed and their rights are protected. It is critical to consult the key implementers and beneficiaries in the policy development phase, allowing more opportunities for a bottom-up approach.

In partnership with the International Immigration Organization and KOICA, a total of \$12 million will see the construction of four evacuation centres and retrofitting a few more. This initiative

with our partners will enable the widespread dissemination of good practices in evacuation centre design and construction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these evacuation centres are multi-purpose in nature and during peacetime will serve as business incubation and promotion centres for rural communities. Furthermore, to complement this initiative, the Government has committed \$20,000 for the development of the evacuation centre retrofitting guidelines to standardise the construction and management of evacuation centres around the country.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the management and the leadership of schools, community halls and other buildings commonly used as evacuation centres for their continued support to Government in the use of their facilities as we are grateful for these vital community service that is a key component of disaster relief and response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must reiterate in order to collectively manage complex disasters, we have to work together and forge partnership at all levels. The National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) is working closely with government agencies and development partners to combat the impact of disasters and climate change and build resilience on all Fijians through Community Based Risk Disaster training and mainstreaming disaster risk reduction initiative at the national and sub-national level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to demonstrate strong political wing on innovative financial solutions, the Fijian Government over the past six years has committed over \$18 million towards disaster response operations. This year, the Budget allocates \$500,000 towards the Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation Fund that will enable NDMO to act swiftly of any needed humanitarian response to any climatic event. The Fijian Government continues to recognise that despite all our best efforts, we cannot completely remove risks and disasters as they will somehow or the other impact us.

To conclude, I would like to highlight that the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report has warned us that we are almost reaching the tipping point of 1.5 degree Celsius. Therefore, with less time on our hand, we require an all of society approach to fight this climate emergency together. We also require flexible conditions to disaster and climate finance to bring about more sustainable outcomes including long-term, programmatic delivery. Therefore Mr. Speaker, Sir, I convey my congratulations to the honourable Minister for Economy and his Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder, and his dynamic team for this inclusive and forward-looking Budget that will steer us out of this unprecedented time.

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members; the honourable Minister for Economy has, again, come to Parliament with this Budget just like previous ones, and it is another smokes and mirrors trick - another attempt to continuously hoodwink the people of Fiji. And for this one, it is simply a grandstanding electioneering Budget, targeting instant gratification and short-term benefits rather than sustainable economic recovery. Therefore, I hold a lot of reservation in supporting this Budget.

We will recall that in 2015, the Budget theme was "*Turning Promises into Deeds*" which we, on this side of Parliament had called it turning promises into debts. From then, our debt level has continued to grow and now it sits at almost \$10 billion or 85 percent of our GDP. And yes, the people of Fiji are alarmed because they know that our future generation will have to carry this debt burden.

Even with the rise in debt level, these capital projects that were promised from 2015 are still empty promises until to-date. The new Nausori Hospital, the new look CWM Hospital, the Nasinu

Swimming Pool, the Nabouwalu Town development, passenger waiting shelters and the Lomaloma Jetty which was supposed to be for permanent repairs to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2019-2020 Budget, there was the Bainimarama Boom but boom for whom? For in reality majority of our people have been left behind, our poverty level sits at more than 30 percent right now or even maybe more because of the effect or the challenges brought forward by the COVID-19. If, indeed, there was the Bainimarama Boom, why were majority of those who lost their jobs to COVID-19 had to resort to their FNPF retirement funds to sustain themselves according to the Bainimarama Government policy? And to make matters worse, there has been no commitment by the Government to reimburse members' FNPF contribution. Majority of those people are still out of job, some are unable to get their jobs back like flight attendants and hotel workers but many thanks to human resilience who have turned to entrepreneurial activities to be able to sustain themselves and their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people only heard about the Bainimarama Boom but failed to experience it in their daily lives. People only know about the “kaput” in the health service delivery and a good example in the CWM Hospital, just two weeks ago, a young boy was admitted and was scheduled for CT Scan which did not take place almost after one week because the CT Scan machine was facing problems and could only take a certain number of scans in a day because the machine gets heated up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one only has to go past the CWM Hospital to see the deplorable condition of our biggest hospital is in. Every year we hear of a budgetary allocation for repair and maintenance works for CWM Hospital but nothing substantial has really changed. The only obvious change we see is the change in the big sign board that shows the glamorous pictures of the projected new look CWM Hospital but being replaced due to fair wear and tear.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the five-year and 20-year National Development Plan that was launched in Bonn by the honourable Prime Minister as Chair of COP 23 states that for urban areas, 100 percent access to clean and safe water will be realised by 2021 and for the rural and maritime communities by 2030. Yet we continue to face water cuts and likewise, for the rural and maritime areas too. For example, I had been continuously requesting in this Parliament to have the water system in Yacata Island and Nabouwalu in Bua checked and improved but it has fallen on the deaf ears. In this 2022-2023 Budget, we hear another version and it is the Bula Boom but does this match the reality on the ground or is it just another grandstanding electioneering budget?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard that all tertiary students will be paid a total of \$180 in two instalments of \$90 in the next six months. It seems that right now six months is the FijiFirst Government's favourite timeframe and why? Is it because that the next six months ties in well with the upcoming election? We must not forget that COVID-19 is still very much around and the effect of the Russia-Ukraine War will not go away after six months. If the Government is really concerned about the future of our tertiary students, then they should revisit the failed policy that established the technical colleges, resulting in their closure and subsequently denied students in those areas access to those technical programmes and in some centres, buildings and other infrastructure are wasting away.

The Government must also reconsider the release of grants to USP as approved in previous Budgets. Unfortunately, the USP grant is being missed out in this year's Budget. In this regard, I urge the Government to graciously and sincerely persist in *talanoa*, regional dialogue and partnership to ensure that our USP students our future leaders are not left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now move on to the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. We acknowledge the additional benefits being given out to all categories of recipients

in the Department of Social Welfare. There are about 89,000 or even more recipients and numbers continue to increase every year, but on the flip side, we could be breathing dependency syndrome mentality on this Government handouts. To holistically address this, the Government must look at work fair initiatives to win out those that could engage in some self-employment programmes.

On our children, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we acknowledge the proposed Department of Children in this Budget and it is something that the Ministry and previous Governments have also considered in the past, and I am personally happy that it has come to fruition. The United Nations Pacific Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 Fiji Report highlighted that commercial sexual exploitation of children continues. The most common forms of child sexual exploitation are prostitution, pornography and sex trafficking, and often children involved in any of these activities are involved in all of them.

The Report further stated that this mainly happens in urban centres and the main drivers of sexual exploitation were poverty, homelessness and living away from parents. In this regard, we really hope that the new Department of Children will prioritise addressing this multi-led problem to ensure our children are not left behind and their interests are protected. Furthermore, we continue to see a lot of children selling mostly food around shopping areas as families, especially, mothers try and deal with the rising cost of living and unemployment. It is really concerning and sad to see these young children engaged in these activities even into the late afternoons and evenings.

It is also noted that the Budget has allocated, as part of the mitigation package, the \$1 per day per child for 18 years and below for the next six months to all families with combined income of \$50,000 or less. But people are asking why only for six months? Yes, people have worked it out very well because the six months again jells in with the upcoming Elections. The people know that this is not a constructive and sustainable approach to stop mothers from sending their children to sell food in very open and risky environment. It sure looks like another deceptive strategy where our children are being used to buy votes. It is heartless and hypocritical, to say the least.

We will recall the Free Milk Programme that was rolled out in schools for all Class 1 students, what has happened to that? Why has it stopped? Another nagging issue is the missing children, which we have also highlighted in this august Parliament. According to a recent newspaper article, the Commissioner of Police said that the high number of missing children is because of the lack of communication especially at home, and had rejected claims that children missing are linked to kidnapping racket. But has there been a report submitted in this Parliament to substantiate these claims?

We also noted that about 80.5 percent of Fijian children have experienced some form of violence and over 1,300 child protection cases have been reported to the Ministry. It is our hope that the new proposed Department of Children will look at harmonising the children's right with our cultural practices and context. We look forward to the country report to the Committee on the rights of the child also presented in this august Parliament so that we are informed on the status of all these challenges and recommendations to addressing them accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the Department of Women, the write-up in the Government's 5-year and 20-year National Development Plan 2017 to 2036, paints a very good picture of women in development. In that, it said the following:

- women will be empowered with opportunities for leadership and decision-making across all sectors;
- gender inequality and discrimination will be eliminated; and
- women will be included and consulted in all planning for future development projects and

their input will result in tangible project outcomes.

It also said that response to gender-based violence continues to be the strong focus of government policy and programmes, but all that talk is to mislead the women who makes up almost half of Fiji's population into believing that the Government really care about us women.

The reality is that the Department is allocated only \$4.2 million in this Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, how can all those targets in the National Development Plan (NDP) be achieved? These are just empty words, empty promises. Let us break down the Budget some more, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

With a total budget of \$4.2 million only about \$1.4 million is for empowerment programmes and \$1.1 million is for capital project that is, the Barefoot College which has been in the Budget for the last three years or so, \$1.6 million for operational costs. With that type of budgetary allocation, it reflects Government's lack of commitment and a government that does not really understand the special place women hold in our communities because with adequate budgetary resources, we can have stronger programmes soliciting effective responses and we build better and resilient communities.

In February 2020, the former Minister for Women gave a Ministerial Statement on Fiji's National Action Plan to prevent violence against women and girls, and she highlighted that meeting and consultations had been undertaken but to-date we ask, what is the progress on this national action plan? There is no specific allocation for the implementation of this plan in the Budget. The honourable Prime Minister once stated that violence against women and girls in Fiji is a national shame and, indeed, it is but if only he could put his money where his mouth is, then we would believe this Government.

The budgetary allocation for each Ministry and Department reflects the Government's priority so for a very insignificant amount of \$4.2 million, what does that tell us on how this Government places women in the development agenda? Let us compare that, Sir, with the Military that has \$94.1 million in this Budget with an increase of \$8 million and yet, the Department of Women's budget is only \$4.2 million.

With the Civil Service, we note that the budgetary allocation from 2013 was \$50.7 million; 2019, it was \$51.4 million; then it went down in 2020 to \$3.3 million and this one is sitting at \$2.7 million. I recall in those Budgets where the budgetary allocation had gone up, it was something to do with a payment of doctors' salaries.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Civil Service has only presented (if I remember correctly) one Annual Report and that was for 2014. As the lead Ministry, it has not provided any monitoring and evaluation report on the Civil Service Reform agenda. The removal of the Person to Post (P2P) listing as an attachment to the Budget Estimates has raised a lot of questions on each individual Ministry and Department's staff ceiling and recruitment.

However, we acknowledge the resumption of the payment of allowances, especially with the rural allowances as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Economy in his Address. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health staff have reached out and to say that their meal allowances have been ceased from 13th July this year and the rural allowances have also been left out for some and for overtime, only Band F which I believe are the nurses have been paid. The rest, for example, Midwives, have not been paid.

Also, an issue that had been raised is that for those Sisters in hospital that do undertake the nurses work in addition to their work because the nurses are absent for some reason, like sickness or

anything like that, they have not been paid any overtime allowance. It has also been raised with me that the village health workers, their last payment was in March 2022. But if the Government really cares and really values our civil servants, then I would urge the Government, particularly if the honourable Minister for Health could consider relooking at the payment of those allowances. Not only to the honourable Minister for Health but also to the honourable Minister for Education, those are the issues that our medical staff, particularly nurses and teachers have brought along to our side and have asked that we raise it in this Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, there are other options that the Government could consider and if they really value and care about our civil servants, they could consider removing the contractual employment arrangements. They could also consider flexible retirement age with voluntary retirement at 55 years and compulsory retirement at 60 years. And I note the recent retirees from Parliament itself, Mr. Speaker, they were really in good health and very young to retire. This could also be a sustainable manner of managing scarce skills retention and institutional knowledge which are vital in the success of any reform agenda.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- You do not care about the youth!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- The graduates are still looking for jobs.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.V. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, this Budget, just like previous ones, come covered in a blanket of deception and fancy words and big figures, only to hoodwink and make the people feel good. Their words and figures do not translate into action.

Implementation is their biggest problem and the biggest performance indicator of this Budget and previous budgets is the high level of poor public service delivery, increasing poverty and associated social problems which we can all see around us. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would urge all Fijians to open their spiritual eyes and open their spiritual ears and exercise wisdom and discernment and vote wisely in this upcoming Elections and vote this Government out. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. A.D. O'CONNOR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and those watching these proceedings from the comfort of their homes and offices – a very good day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the 2022-2023 National Budget delivered by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy on Friday, 15th July, 2022.

The 2022-2023 National Budget is an innovative and forward-looking Budget that is going to pave the way for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to re-establish itself and re-focus on the challenges ahead with the vision to consolidate and expand its service with appropriate reach and coverage. Most importantly, it will enable the Ministry to assist and facilitate the nation's objectives of building back stronger and better.

The allocation of \$395.1 million for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' budget provides the needed space that the Ministry requires to recuperate fully from the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic which has not spared any sector in this nation, and set in motion a series of actions and initiatives that will shape the future of health services in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our experience from the last 28 months of the pandemic has clearly shown us the potential in the private health sector and the role it can play, working hand in hand with the public sector to deliver quality health service to the people of Fiji.

The Government's innovation of engaging private General Practitioners (GPs) has greatly increased the accessibility of health services to the ordinary Fijians and has allowed for people to be able to get free health consultation at their local participating GP, instead of having to travel great distances and expand a considerable amount of their time and money to access the health service they need.

With the success of this new approach, the Government has now increased the allocation under this budget to be able to engage more GPs in this scheme. In addition, Government has also extended this engagement to include private Dental Practitioners, who will also be able to attend to members of the public, for which Government will foot the consultation bill.

With this Government support, members of the public will be able to access six additional new free services selected by Government under the scheme, and those are:

- Multi-urine dip stick to test for various chronic diseases;
- Electro Cardiogram (ECG) for those with chest pains;
- Nebulizer treatment of asthma;
- Oxygen treatment for those requiring oxygen;
- An ultrasound scan investigation for those needing this non-invasive test; and
- Blood sugar level pin prick test which are some of the most sought-after services in our hospitals and health centres.

Renal (kidney) and liver functional tests including full blood count tests will also be available through this Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those are the six common tests that people generally come to health facilities for, hence the greater availability of these tests means the timely availability of test results for better management of their health complaints and the reduction in time spent at the health facility.

Government's allocations towards the GP Scheme and the Dental Practitioners Scheme will surely ease the burden on public medical facilities and most importantly, it means that our people do not have to wait in long lines at hospitals and health centres to access health services in a timely manner.

The scheme can only be described as a win-win arrangement for both patients and participating GPs and Dental Practitioners, as it also provides an excellent opportunity for the GPs and private Dental Practitioners to grow their patient base as they contribute towards the provision of necessary healthcare for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this new Budget, GPs and private Dental Practitioners will be able to prescribe and dispense 24 hours' worth of medicines for their patients. This will assist patients seen after normal working hours when pharmacies are closed and the medicines are needed to provide immediate relief for their illnesses. This arrangement will help people to get the treatment they need immediately within the 24 hours and later get the rest of their medication when pharmacies open in the next day. The penalties in place will be a deterrent for those who intentionally wish to exploit this provision beyond its intended scope.

In addition to Government's efforts to improve and expand its services, Government will continue to engage the approved seven private medical laboratories for laboratory analysis and blood samples referred by GPs engaged under the free General Practitioners Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government's initiative to support GPs in setting up their clinics in rural areas, such as Nawaicoba, Malolo, Naidovi, Drasa, Sabeto, Seaqaqa, Dreketi, Nasarawaqa, Korolevu and Pacific Harbour is a commendable one. With the allocation of \$200,000, GPs would be in a good position to establish themselves in these rural locations and deliver much needed health service to these communities.

The initiative augurs well with the FijiFirst Government's dream of decentralizing and expanding its health services even to the rural remote corners of this country, so that no one is left behind in accessing essential healthcare. We can only encourage GPs to take up this offer and assist in extending the scope of their specialist care into rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this era of sophisticated medical technological advancement, outsourcing of medical testing is a way of ensuring better access to sophisticated technical investigation in a timely manner. Outsourcing of testing modalities during emergencies such as X-Ray, MRI Scan, CT Scan tests and ultrasound scanning helps to build capacity in private health facilities, thereby building resilience into the testing capacity of the health system, in addition to sharing the load that the public health facilities face each day. Overall, this initiative reduces the cost to the general public and improves the equipment performance and longevity and most importantly exponential increase service levels to the members of the public.

Globally, it has been shown that with outsourcing of health service can provide important benefits to payers and consumers, and they include:

- Improving health results through the new programme offerings;
- Reduced medical costs brought about by reduced operational costs;
- Cost savings are re-invested to finance new products and services;
- Increasing customer base through consistent outreach services;
- Improving customer/consumer satisfaction;
- Positioning for growth or expansion activities aimed at improving services; and
- Overcoming barriers like time zones with a workforce that provides 24/7 service.

The selection of the participating private health providers will be determined through a clear and transparent process, including Standard Operating Procedures (SPOs).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is also committed to continue to deliver specialist healthcare for those who need them in the new financial year. A total of \$2.25 million has been allocated to the Ministry and distributed to the three main referral hospitals - CWM Hospital, Lautoka Hospital and Labasa Hospital, for the emergency evacuation of patients to those Hospitals. This means that any patient from anywhere in Fiji can be evacuated to one of the three hospitals, if they need urgent high level medical care for their conditions. This allocation ensures the equitable, availability of high level healthcare to all Fijians, irrespective of their social or geographical locations in Fiji.

Government is allocating \$1.5 million to subsidise kidney dialysis treatment, providing a subsidy of \$150 per dialysis session for patients whose total household income is less than \$30,000 per year. These sessions can be taken at the Dialysis Unit nearest to them and patients will be required to cater for the cost above the subsidy amount. Since its inception, this scheme has proven to be very successful with those who could not afford treatment in the past, now able to access the treatment that they need.

In addition to the high level specialist care provided in our health facilities, patients can also access specialist healthcare that we cannot offer in Fiji through the Ministry's Overseas Treatment Scheme. Government has allocated \$1.5 million that will ensure that definitive treatment for those who need overseas treatment will be made more accessible now more than ever.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, three major capital projects earmarked for the Ministry for the new financial year with the total of \$5.2 million includes, the:

- refurbishment of the Savusavu Hospital;
- interior upgrade works for Labasa Hospital; and
- commencement of construction of the new Maternity Hospital at the Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital in Suva.

The work on these projects have been hindered by the pandemic as these hospitals were also required for the COVID-19 Response. The refurbishment work once completed, will help not to only provide a fresh look to these facilities, but also build resilience into this critical health infrastructure in times of disasters and health emergency responses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, human resources remains at the core of health services anywhere and Fiji is no different. In Fiji, nurses represent the majority of healthcare workers by far in the Ministry. However, the turnover of nurses continue to challenge the Ministry and we cannot deny the high demand that exists for our well-trained and highly competent nurses from overseas countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United Arab Emirates. We are continuing to train young and upcoming nurses at our nurses training institutions to meet these needs.

Currently, our three nursing institutions have a total of 235 student nurses, who are expected to join the nursing profession by the end of this year. Once engaged, this will bring the total number of nurses we employ in the Ministry to 3,267 giving us a ratio of one nurse for every 271 (1:271) Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addressing this need, the Ministry is working with the Fiji Nursing Council to identify the additional specialised areas of nursing to allow specialisation for nurses with the required skills and competencies who will be recognised and remunerated accordingly.

The allocation of overtime allowance and rural maritime allowance is an appropriate acknowledgement of the nurses' dedication and passion and will also provide and added incentive for the nurses to continue to deliver quality health service to our people. Government's move in providing for a transport allowance for public healthcare nurses in the rural areas is highly commendable, considering the difficulties that they often face to reach out to Fijians in the rural and remote corners of the country.

The scarcity of trained and qualified midwives remain a challenge for the Ministry and the provision of more training opportunities and appropriate remunerations will help in addressing the need we have in this area of expertise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have stated earlier and wish to reiterate that the new Budget is an innovative one for the Ministry. The Government is taking great steps in engaging the private health sector into the health services for all Fijians. The new Budget has also provided allocations for the engagement of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in providing services that support and complement the service that the Ministry is delivering to its people.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that cooperation and collaboration is the key for any successful service or programme and health service provision is no exception. We need to work together to build a Fiji back better and stronger; and I encourage all health stakeholders to take advantage of the opportunities that the Government is providing in the proposed new Budget 2022-2023.

With that, I fully support the proposed Budget before the House.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- *Ni sa bula vinaka*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament.

Bula vinaka to everyone listening or watching from the comforts of your home - urban, rural and maritime islands in the group of Kadavu, Lomaiviti, Lau, Rotuma, Fiji and overseas. I would like to acknowledge our *Mata ni Tikina* from Kadavu, Mr. Sailasa Mateya, who is sitting here with us who has helped in many of the things that happened in Kadavu especially the *Vanua* of Tavuki and also the nine *tikina* of Kadavu. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Mateya.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to debate on the motion before this august Parliament. I wish to start with an Old Testament verse because of some aversion which brought horrific memories of our past which may be acceptable to some hundreds of thousands and unacceptable to hundreds of thousands. I hope Exodus 20: 2–17 brings comfort and forgiveness to Fiji and I quote:

²I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

³Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

⁴Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁵Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

⁶And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

⁷Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

⁹Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

¹⁰But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

¹²Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

¹³Thou shalt not kill.

¹⁴Thou shalt not commit adultery.

¹⁵Thou shalt not steal.

¹⁶Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

¹⁷Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team from the Ministry of Economy for the Budget Address on Friday evening on the 15th July, 2022 - his sixth since my being sworn into Parliament on 26th November, 2018. Sir, I will take Fiji through His Excellency's speech at the Opening of Parliament last year and I quote:

"As we open this session of Parliament, each of you must answer the questions: are you a partisan or are you stateswoman or statesman? Are you here to better the lives of all people, or are you here because you see politics as a means to a pay check or a way to gain power. Words can't tell us the answer to those challenges — only your actions can show us.

Honourable Members, political life in a nascent democracy likes ours should not be seen as career, it must be a calling; one suited only to those who aim to serve the nation with dignity, decorum, poise and a consistent national focus. The people look to you for that, and they depend on your foresight to understand what we can achieve together. Do not fail them.”

That was the message from His Excellency the President for you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go into the nitty gritty of this 2022-2023 Budget Estimate, I wish to reflect my observations and the little experience gained from the past four Budget Addresses, plus the two Revised Budget Addresses by the honourable Sayed-Khaiyum. I will go back to the first term and session of Parliament Budget Estimate after the Military regime from 2014, which had estimate revenue of Two Billion Seven Hundred and Twenty One Thousand and Eight Hundred Million, which with the actual revenue that was collected was \$2370.8 billion with a variance of \$351million, uncollected.

In 2015, the revenue estimate was about \$3,122.4 billion. The actual revenue collected was \$2.9 billion with a variance of \$214 million uncollected revenue. In 2016, the revenue estimate was about \$1.2 billion, the actual revenue collected was only \$2.9 million with a variance of \$200.4 million. In 2017, the revenue estimate was \$3.175 billion but the actual revenue collected was \$2.8 billion, a variance of \$307.9 million. In 2017-2018, the revenue estimate was \$3.8 billion with the actual collected was \$3.244 billion, with a variance of \$162 billion uncollected. In 2018-2019, the revenue estimate was \$4.236 billion and actual revenue collected was \$3.18 billion, a variance of \$1.55 billion that was uncollected. In 2019 -2020, the revenue estimate was \$3.4 billion and the actual collected was \$2.1 billion with a variance of \$775 million. In 2020-2021, the revenue estimate was \$2.1 million and actual collected was \$2.4 million, and the variance was minus - we overspent.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- We collected more.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Yes. The variance on expenditure in 2014 was \$106.2 million; in 2015 was \$44.1 million; in 2016, the variance was \$122.3 million; in 2016-2017, the variance was \$583.1 million; in 2017-2018, the variance was \$614.6 million; in 2018-2019, the variance was \$1.05 billion; in 2020-2021, the variance was \$487 million (unutilised); in 2020-2022, the variance was \$26.4 million, which totals to about \$3.87 billion unutilised. This is since 2014. There is no savings in Government budgeting, they did not spend and they did not collect. To reflect - these figures were given by Government.

What I am saying, I can go on with the figures collected revenues, expenditures. I can talk about debt as a percentage of GDP. I can talk about GDP at market prices, net deficit as a percentage to GDP estimates and actual. Total government exposure, debt plus contingency liabilities from 2014-2015 we can talk about that whole day, government debt portfolio and total contingency liabilities from 2017-2022; the real GDP versus nominal GDP, our natural resource based sector contribution to GDP, our agricultural sector GDP growth, trends and total agriculture versus sugar and non-sugar GDP growth rate, forestry and logging GDP growth, trends and fishing and aquaculture GDP growth, trends and manufacturing GDP. Education versus health and social work activities, GDP growth rate. Sugar crushed and sugar produced versus TCT ratios, tourist arrivals to Fiji since 2005-2022. The question is are we going to reach the 500,000 visitors mark as announced in the Budget?

Highly likely, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you compare the arrivals in Bali, Mauritius and Maldives in the year 2022. There is too much grandstanding speeches on this bullish budget all...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- ... by the Government side trying so smartly to convince the citizens of Fiji, they cannot be fooled any longer, 16 years is too long FijiFirst, *cegu mada!*

The Government evidence since 2014 confirms our revenue has always been overstated and we have always been under expenditure. There is always a shortfall in revenue, there is always an increase in deficit and increase in our debt level making it none other than an election budget. More funds are allocated for freebies in the guise of inflationary mitigation measures which will lead to increase in debt with an over ambitious commitment without the capacity for implementation. All must know that receiving monies for six months makes one wonder whether they should vote for these people because of financial benefits encountered. *Vinaka FijiFirst Government - vesu mona.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2022-2023 Key Budget Allocations - FRA increased by \$38.5 million; WAF increased by \$9.1 million; LTA increased by \$1.8 million; EFL increased by \$3.5 million; RFMF an increase by \$8.0 million, Police has a decrease where it was supposed to be increased, Health was supposed to increase but it decreased by \$11.5 million; Education increased by \$42 million and scholarships is about \$162.6 million

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I will take us back to the 2018-2019 Budget where millions of taxpayers' dollars was spent on most of the famous farm care and home care giveaway and not limited to other Ministries before the 2018 November Elections where every Opposition Political Party struggled to maintain free and fair levels of service to the public, and to their individual loyalist supporters Fiji-wide.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- So, what are you suggesting?

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- You listen, you already stood down but we could learn from yours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these kinds of things that they do, we should engage FICAC as we are seeing similar and familiar deceptive political mileage in the guise of government business in 2018 now coming back alive before us and after the Writ of Election.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I am proud that Fijian citizens have continued to declare their right to vote since 2014 where 93,922 did not vote likewise the 168,221 for 2018 (I got these figures from the Elections Office) that did not vote for so many unknown reasons, but the public still disputes the 50.02 percent win of the FijiFirst Party to govern for the second time after a period of 12 years and now completed 16 years of failed deceptive leadership and non-bipartisan Government mismanagement. Are they going to regain their 50.02 percent win four years later? I do not think so - Fiji is ready for a change. We need our Fiji to regain its greatness once again. Change for the better is paramount.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget estimate for 2022-2023 should have been the highest, biggest or unprecedented ever, superseding the 2018-2019 Election freebies budget. Nonetheless, we accept the effects of COVID-19 pandemic since 2nd March, 2020 until 11th November when we were free to move around Fiji and the opening of borders in December 2021.

Mr. Speaker, I understand that you have been repeatedly reminded of the 2023 Elections and I am the 34th speaker since yesterday. But for the nine *tikina*, 75 villages and 23 settlements voters in Kadavu, the question is, what is in the Budget Estimates that resonates to them in their everyday lives and same goes for the other 13 *yasana* Fiji-wide inclusive of all indigenous people or *iTaukei*? They are landowners of *iTaukei* land, their unique culture, customs, traditions and language. The indigenous people or Rotumans from the island of Rotuma, the ownership of Rotuman lands, their

unique culture, customs, traditions and language. The descendants of indentured labourers from British India and the Pacific Islanders, their culture, customs, traditions, language and the descendants of settlers and immigrants to Fiji and their culture, customs, traditions and language, all ethnicities, political parties, religious denominations, employees and employers, keyboard warriors, poverty-stricken areas, wheelbarrow boys, shoeshine boys, golden oldies – rugby, soccer, athletics, basketball, retirees - the beggars and this is by all means necessary that all Budget Estimates, the revised ones has to be debated transparently in detail inclusive of the 11 Consequential Bills under Standing Order 51 to pass its amendment before the end of this week.

Evidently and hopefully everyone in Fiji should understand the secrecy and the kind of conditions that apply or comes with the changes and amendments. I try to resonate every budget address when the Consequential Bills are tabled under Standing Order 51. Laws are being amended without realising it. If 20 Consequential Bills were amended and passed during the last six Budget Addresses, you got to be thinking twice. I thank our party leader, honourable Gavoka for standing up every time for his right to debate according to law when anyone or everyone feels that there has been an abuse of process, the innocent people who voted us in here, God forbid!

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget comes on the eve of one of the most critical general elections to the indigenous Fijians. While we look forward to the budget policies and compliments, this Budget comes nowhere near what it aspires to. Again, the Government has vouched for another expansionary fiscal policy on the Budget by pushing another 7.4 percent net deficit of GDP, adding further to the already soaring national debt that is believed to be over 100 percent of GDP. This is expected to expand the size of our economy into \$11.7 billion by nominal terms largely driven by expenditures. This is very much contradicting all rules of economic theories and despite IMF annual recommendations, our economy cannot continue this way. The honourable Minister for Economy continues to portray his arrogance and deliberate way of making this country more of an impoverished State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA notes the insincere and overconfident revenue projection ...

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Listen so you can learn!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- ... noting the recession period faced by our economy contrary to the statement made by the honourable Minister for Economy. We cannot afford this behaviour unless we see sustained commitments to capital formation of our infrastructure to attract investors who are boosting our agriculture sector to generate jobs, more income and encourage food security.

The increasing influence of VAT on our revenue collection confirms the notion of indirect taxes on our total revenue collection. It also begs the question of prices on the commodities most regularly accessed by our people. Direct taxes and other forms of revenue continue to decline and tax policies continue to dishearten investors to come to our shores or domestic one's going elsewhere to do the same.

The total projected revenue to be collected is almost \$3 billion. Judging from the revenue collections over the last five years, it just hovers near \$2 billion. This will surely push more debt higher from increasing net deficit levels of GDP. While the indirect taxes are heavily impacting our vulnerable groups on the rising cost of goods, we should also ensure that the elites are also paying taxes, not rebates.

In 2019, the stamp duty was removed together with the \$60 million annual revenue mostly paid by businesses. Why was this tax removed? It was removed to favour businesses who are sponsoring the FijiFirst Party. It also removed the staff who worked under this Unit at Fiji Revenue Customs Service.

It is the ineffectiveness or monitoring of ECAL. Visitation to the remote and rural areas where logging has been practised, we note the enormous impact of these projects adversely affecting the environment. Our streams and rivers are continually affected by these operations, including river gravel extractions that are done without licence. This is so as operators continually fund customary owners without the knowledge of the Ministry.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- It seems like Government initiatives nowadays are targeting a few.

The recent sea cucumber (*bech-de-mer*) trade was opened but very few people knew that it was allowed with temporary conditions. Its strictness has not fully reaped its benefits as the two main species are not tradeable. Not everyone knew about its ceased or be traded.

Activities that negatively affect our environment must be fully dealt with and seen to be complying with our commitments to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Fisheries for his statement yesterday. I thank that his budget has increased to \$16 million, given that when I came into Parliament it was about \$21 million. But it decreased and now this is the first time it has increased.

(Honourable Member interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Your time is up.

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Yes, I will conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I would just like to thank all those families who remitted funds from overseas - \$548 million in 2016, \$542 million in 2017, \$577 million in 2018, \$600 million in 2019, \$774 million in 2020 and \$842 million in 2021. So we would like to thank those people.

Mr. Speaker, will all that was said from your loyal Opposition, this is part of our contribution to the Budget Address debate before you, it is our sincere trust that the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister for Economy will accept that our contribution from these past two days is the alternative budget in a bipartisan manner. Like the rest of us from your loyal Opposition, we reserve our support for this Budget until they are implemented from where we see fit. *Vinaka vakalevu*, Mr. Speaker, and happy belated birthday.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will continue with the debate after lunch. We will take a break for lunch now and take note of the first four Members who are going to speak after lunch:

1. Hon. V.K. Bhatnagar;
2. Hon. V. Pillay;
3. Hon. J. Saukuru; and
4. Hon. Howard Politini.

Make sure you are in place, I intend to move along. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 1.50 p.m.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Appropriation Bill 2022. Before I make my contribution to the Bill, I wish to congratulate the *vanua* and the chiefs in the Ba Province for coming together in solidarity during Council Meeting and the *Siga kei Ba* that was held on the 20th to 22nd July, 2022. I thank the *vanua* of Koronubu, Sue Levu i Ba, Momo na Tui Ba for hosting the events and a special thanks to the Soqosoqo Vakaramama ni Yasana o Ba for opening the *Siga kei Ba* fundraising. *Vina du riki vakalevu.*

Sir, this Government is showing symptoms of *pseudologia fantastica*. I had a lot of expectation from the honourable Minister for Economy and this Government to provide the necessary remedy to our ailing national economy but that was not to be as for them they have become so obsessed with power and winning the election by whatever means is utmost important. For more than 16 years in power, it was a pity, poor show and shame to sit here for more than three hours out of which the honourable Minister for Economy took a quarter of that time demonising and blaming the past governments, their leadership, policies and programmes for our current economic crisis.

A person having symptoms of *pseudologia fantastica* is very combative, arrogant, grandiose, condescending and definitely narcissistic. It was always about them. Everyone else is beneath them, wrong, stupid and at fault. They are perfect in their own eyes. You can say to such a person, let us agree to disagree but they will start fighting again and then the name calling, does that sounds familiar? This is what has been happening in this Parliament. These people are outright belligerent.

At least, the honourable Attorney-General needs to be reminded of few things which are as follows:

1. The military *coup* of 2006 qualified them to be where they are today;
2. They cannot hide their sins and omissions, now having been in power for over a decade;
3. Their time to deploy politics of diversion and excel in politics of convenience is over;
4. The people of Fiji can see the true colours of this Government through its transparent rules; and
5. No matter the grandstanding for the benefit of television cameras in public, you cannot fool all the people all the time.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Who is doing that?

HON. S.R. RASOVA.- Tell her, tell her!

HON. J. SAUKURU.- You have been weighed, you have been measured and you have been found wanting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is an insult to the intelligence of the people of Fiji and an act of betrayal by this Government upon its own voters. This Budget makes a mockery of the new albeit truncated mandate secured by this Government and is paving the way forward to an unprecedented socio-economic and geo-political disaster in the making which will render this nation and its people bankrupt.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Economy was very selective to talk about the National Bank of Fiji (NBF) crisis which past leadership properly mitigated by first owning up on the failures and mitigating by recovery which provided the then budding politicians and now trumpeters of this dictatorship their employment in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister should have also talked about how and why did Fiji lose on the €350 million from the European Union for the Alternative Livelihood Programme and another close to \$200 million from New Zealand to resettle our squatter dwellers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people who live in glasshouse should not throw stones. Never, ever give the FijiFirst leadership take any ownership of the downfall to the Sugar Industry. The carnage of democracy in 2006 left the glasshouse muddy and messy after its attempted clean up, following that a white wash or a hogwash are other relevant terminologies that one can use to hang this Budget up for public probity and skin the cat to the bone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to make a few comments, please, and suggestions on the 2022 – 2023 Budget Address as presented by the honourable Attorney-General. He said and I quote, “This Budget creates the certainty that our businesses need to plan, invest and hire and as prices for food, fuel, freight and fertiliser remain extremely unpredictable, this Budget provides a relief for the families who need it most.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was expecting the initiatives announced to aid those most vulnerable in Fiji would be extended to one year rather than to six months only. Little did I know that the lollies were prepared only to be consumed before the end of the Elections period. The allowances that he promised are temporary and will disappear after six months or even earlier. After that, the recipients will return to where they were while prices will continue to rise. For sure poverty, will again increase and our people will continue to struggle.

In my Revised Budget response on 25th March, 2022, I pointed out, and I quote; “the SODELPA Government would have taken back our port of entries operation in order for Government to absorb any fluctuations in freight charges at our ports”. In his reply, the honourable Attorney-General responded and I quote, “Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Saukuru said that the State should pay for all the freight costs. What is he saying? So when Vinod Patel is going to now import hardware to sell in their shop, we should pay Vinod Patel’s freight. That is what he is saying and they talk about giving money to private businesses so when Meghji wants to bring in his liquor for the freight cost, we should pay. What an absolutely silly proposition! The Government does not buy those things, the Government does not go and buy wheat, the private companies that buy it”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought the honourable Attorney-General would be smart enough to read between the lines and understand that I was asking Government to provide freight subsidy on essential goods and on basic food items in order to control price. Now, that would have been a better long-term solution for the most vulnerable.

On unproductive foreign reserves, as at the end of June, 2022 our foreign reserves was at \$3.6 billion equivalent to 8.4 months of retained imports. I call this unproductive because we never earn this foreign reserve to boast about it. Most of these are related to borrowing and remittances, while our export remains very low that it is something to be ashamed of with an increasing trade deficit. Anyway, I wish to offer suggestion to the honourable Attorney-General to encourage our foreign reserves.

On incentivising remittances, in talking about remittances, I take this time to thank our people who are living overseas for their financial support to their relatives here in Fiji. Thank you for supporting our economy.

A skilful invention by a master, politician, and a manipulator of symbolic meanings, the Balibkayan Programme was started by then the President Ferdinand Marcos to attract Filipino-

American tourists back to the Philippines. It has since become the most important source of foreign exchange, skills and income for the Philippines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Balikbayans are generally allowed to buy and register land bought in the Philippines under their own name. Under the same individuals are allowed to import used motor vehicles that have a gross vehicle weight not exceeding 3 tonnes under the 'No-Dollar Import Programme'. Then you have the Balikbayan boxes, the Filipino way of saying, "You cannot go home without a box."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to complement the Fijian Made Initiative, Government should explore this opportunity with the Fijian version of Balikbayan. I wonder what 'victory' was the honourable Attorney-General referring to when he said, and I quote: "We served the people by delivering historic economic victory after historic economic victory." Sir, the:

- Fiji's economic freedom score is 56.4 percent, making our economy rank 23rd amongst 39 countries in the Asia Pacific region and its overall score is below the regional and world averages.
- The people of Lautoka are still waiting for the completion of their \$12.6 million swimming pool.
- Where is the victory when your commissioning Minister is commissioning projects with no action on the ground?
- We are still waiting for the Waila City.
- We are still waiting for the Vunidawa Sporting Complex.
- We are still waiting for the Ba Hospital to open.
- We are still waiting for the new CWM Maternity Unit.
- We are still waiting for the Lautoka High Court complex.
- What has happened to the Technical Colleges and where are the teachers that taught at these institutions?
- Stop making splash about the increase in FNPF contributions which you reduced it yourself but reimbursed members that had withdrawn their FNPF money during the pandemic.
- You call it a 'victory' when the allocation to health services which is critical and a priority reduced by \$12 million.
- The allocation to agriculture is increased by only \$3 million compared to the increase in \$8 million to the Military. This clearly reflects the lack of support of this Government to resource-based sectors that we have been talking about.
- The \$6 million increase in allocation to forestry and fisheries will never arrest the decline in this important growth sectors.
- The allocation to education has been raised by \$42 million due to one-off allowances to school children that will cease after the Elections.

These are all pies in the sky.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on increasing debt, debt stock is at unsustainable level. It is the same Commodore Bainimarama that illegally took over a legitimate Government that had a debt of only \$2.5 billion that is now changing its tune saying that it is alright for our future generation to inherit a debt level that is already forecasted to be reaching \$10 billion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a debt of \$9.9 billion our total exposure is 102.2 percent which include a Government debt of 85.2 percent and contingency liabilities of 17 percent. A strong fiscal outlook is an essential foundation for a growing, thriving economy. Putting our nation on a sustainable fiscal path on a sustainable fiscal path creates a positive environment for growth, opportunity and

prosperity. With a strong fiscal foundation, the nation will have increased access to capital, more resources for future public and private investments, improved consumer and business confidence and a stronger social protection.

However, if we fail to act, the opposite is also true. If our long-term fiscal challenges remain unaddressed, our economic environment weakens as confidence suffers, access to capital is reduced, interest costs crowd out key investments in our future, the conditions for growth deteriorate and our nation is put at a greater risk of economic crisis. If our long-term fiscal imbalance is not addressed, our future economy will be diminished with fewer economic opportunities for individuals and families and less fiscal flexibility to respond to future crisis.

Rising debt threatens Fiji's future in a number of critical ways, as follows:

1. **Reduced public investment:** As our national debt mounts, the Government will spend more of its budget on interest costs, increasingly crowding out public investments. As more resources are diverted to interest payments, there will be less available to invest in areas that are important for economic growth. Although interest rates have been low for more than a decade relative to historical averages, we can already see that other factors can drive those rates up. As the interest rates rise, the Government's borrowing cost will increase markedly.
2. **Reduced private investment:** Government's borrowing competes for funds in the nation's capital markets, thereby raising interest rates and crowding out new investment in business equipment and structures. Entrepreneurs face a higher cost of capital, potentially stifling innovation and slowing the advancement of new breakthroughs that could improve our lives. At some point, investors might begin to doubt the Government's ability to repay debt and could demand even higher interest rates, further raising the cost of borrowing for businesses and households. Over time, lower confidence and reduced investment would slow the growth of productivity and wages of our workers.
3. **Fewer economic opportunities for Fijians:** Growing debt also has a direct effect on the economic opportunities available to every Fijian. If high levels of debt crowd out private investments in capital goods, workers would have less to use in their jobs, which would translate to lower productivity and, therefore, lower wages. In addition, high levels of debt would affect many other aspects of the economy in the future. For example, higher interest rates resulting from increased borrowing would make it harder for families to buy homes, finance car repayments or pay for college. Fewer education and training opportunities stemming from lower investment would leave workers without skills to keep up with the demands of a more technology-based global economy. Furthermore, slower economic growth generally would also make our fiscal challenges even worse as lower incomes lead to smaller tax collections and put our budget further out of balance.
4. **A greater risk of a fiscal crisis:** If investors lose confidence in the nation's fiscal position, interest rates on our borrowing could rise as higher yields would be demanded to purchase such securities. A rapid increase in rates could also lead to higher rates of inflation which would reduce the value of outstanding Government's securities and result in losses by holders of those securities which could further destabilise our economy and erode confidence in our Fijian dollar.
5. **Challenges to national security:** Our fiscal security is also closely-linked to our national security and ability to maintain a leading role in the Pacific. As the national debt grows, not only are we more beholden to creditors around the globe, but we have fewer resources

to invest in building resilience and strength at home. In the words of Admiral Mullen, former Chairman of the US Joint Chief of Staff, I quote: “The most significant threat to our national security is our debt.”

6. Endangering Social Protection: Fiji’s high debt jeopardizes social protection and the most vulnerable in our society. If our Government does not have the resources and stability of a sustainable budget, those essential programmes, and the individuals who need them most, are put in jeopardy.

In respect of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, there is a decrease of capital expenditure from \$5.1 million to \$4.6 million. I wonder with concern what the honourable Prime Minister has been telling the Provincial Council Meetings around Fiji in terms of rural developments. You only have to sit in the *Tikina* Council Meetings to witness firsthand the struggles of our people in the rural areas when the resolutions of these meetings are never resolved while out of their generosity are still able to host *Tikina* Meetings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people in the rural and maritime areas do not need all that pie in the sky, shallow promises of state-of-the-art road or shipping services. They simply need good roads, free from potholes and shipping services which are safe, regular and affordable.

Travel and communications is an important part of national development and human progress. It is rather unfortunate that despite exorbitant sum of monies poured in communications and infrastructure, these basic services continue to be of poor quality and depleting standards each passing day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will end my response to the Appropriation Bill 2022-2023 with climate change. In his own words, the honourable Attorney-General said, and I quote:

“Amidst all of these, as I have mentioned, *TC Winston* and the 13 cyclones that followed, the devastation we suffered required higher levels of borrowing to build back better. It was an injustice that Fiji had to borrow to rebuild from climate-driven disasters that we did not cause, and that was a point we made relentlessly to the world’s financial institutions.”

Mr. Speaker, I invite every Member of Parliament to listen to what God has to say about our situation through Amos 4: 6-12, and I quote:

“I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord.

I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up.

People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord. Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord.

I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord.

I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord.

Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in all these natural calamities, God was speaking to Fiji and its leadership, through *TC Winston* and the COVID-19 Pandemic. We have actually met our Creator and it came at a cost. My question is; are we prepared to lose more? Sir, it is never too late to humble ourselves before God?

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, and I quote:

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

1 Corinthians 1: 18-19 says, and I quote:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.”

Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank all the religious organisations and prayer groups in Fiji and abroad that have been praying for our nation and our leadership. May the Lord’s will prevail in our beloved nation. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your indulgence.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Wow! That is the quality of budget response we get.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in support of the 2022-2023 National Budget, as tabled and read by our honourable Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget is a very bold programme and is forward-looking. The Budget has been tabled at a time when everyone was anxious as how it can be formulated, given our state of the economy following COVID-19 crisis here in Fiji but our honourable Minister for Economy has once again outsmarted everyone by delivering a masterpiece of expenditure mix.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite concerns from some quarters, the Ministry of Agriculture has also been given a rise in their budget to capitalise on two critical objectives of food security of households and expanding commercial agriculture and exports of fresh and chilled produce.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a strong and prosperous agriculture sector is essential to the wellbeing of Fiji’s economy. The Ministry of Agriculture’s objectives remain a key part of the Fiji Government strategy to revitalise our nation, create jobs and build a more resilient Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the agricultural sector maintains its critical role in boosting the contribution of agriculture to Fiji’s economic growth. Fiji’s agriculture sector has been positively developing in the last decade, following which the value of non-sugarcane agriculture, GDP grew at an average growth of 6.6 percent per annum. This marked increase is from the FJ\$343.6 million in 2010 to FJ\$630.2 million in

2019, achieving a massive growth of 83.4 percent.

In 2021 alone, crop production increased from 296,579 to 320,806 metric tonnes which is also an increase of 8.1 percent. In addition, the volume of agriculture production also grew at an average growth rate of 6.6 percent. Export earnings of fresh chilled agriculture produce, crop and livestock recorded FJ\$121 million in 2021 compared to \$106 million in 2022, showing a 13.7 percent growth.

Our farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the 2020 census period, the total number of the farming households recorded was 70,991, following which 11.9 percent of those were female-headed households. The total population of farming household members were 300,861, however, given that some households consisted of more than one farmer, the total number of farmers in Fiji was 83,395.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture's budget has increased from \$61 million to \$64 million for the next financial year. Using the above budget, the Ministry will continue to push for food security and expansion of commercial agriculture, as well as push for continued export growth.

On reducing imports in the rice sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is mindful of our reliance on rice as one of the staple crops and our dependency on imports with an annual import bill hovering above \$44 million. On this note, the Ministry's objective is to expand rice production locally to reduce our vulnerability, whilst at the same time, save our foreign currency reserves by importing less. Work on this has begun a few years back and we are now noting an increase in rice production.

Production of rice grew from 6,500 metric tonnes in 2019 to 10,300 metric tonnes in 2021, a growth rate of 58 percent over the last decade. This is the first time that the sector has achieved over 10,000 metric tonnes in production of local rice. However, despite the increase in local production, Fiji's self-sufficiency level on rice is still very low – 17.5 percent in 2021. However, the Ministry is working closely with the farmers by introducing mechanisation and supporting the harvesting of rice, and we are noting a surge in new land brought under cultivation. While data collection of this year's production is currently ongoing, it is quite likely it has jumped over 20 percent self-sufficiency by July this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last financial year, we provided three rice harvesters to farmer co-operatives and this year, we are planning to provide 12 more harvesters under the Ministry's one-third/two-thirds machinery grant scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on women in agriculture, in the Ministry of Agriculture's 2022-2023 budget, Government continues to invest in women in agriculture initiatives worth \$300,000 per year. Again, the 2020 Fiji Agriculture Census recorded a total of 11,971 females who are engaged in either crop or livestock farming as their primary or secondary occupation. The 2020 Fiji Agriculture Census records further indicated that 46.6 percent of women participated in, at least, one crop activity during the Census period (12 months). This consequently means that 88,034 of the total 188,768 farming household members are women, who participated in, at least, one crop activity during the Census period.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture assisted more than 6,000 under the Women in Agriculture Programme from 2006 to last year (2021). This assistance provided included; training, provision of planting materials, infrastructure and small farming equipment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture is currently working towards implementing the Gender in Agriculture Policy in the agriculture subsectors, following which the intent of the Policy is to provide access to agricultural services and goods to women, capacitate women in order to reduce inequality in the agriculture sector, equality of access to finance, insurance, modern inputs, equipment and tools, as well as set a platform that will allow for equal participation of women in decision-making.

On reaching out to farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, reaching out to the least developing rural communities has been one of the Ministry's critical roles. Our Ministry staff recently visited the island of Koro in the Lomaiviti Group to handover small farming equipment, *dalo* suckers and improved pig breeding stock, as well as chicks and feed to farmers on the island.

To improve the Ministry of Agriculture's service delivery in the rural and maritime areas, outreach programme *talanoa* sessions were conducted all over Fiji scheduled at different venues, dates and time that fits rural village and community settings. The Ministry of Agriculture wants to further accelerate the growth of the agricultural sector in Fiji. The Ministry noted good participation at these venues and farmers greatly appreciated face to face meetings with them to discuss farming issues well, the various incentives for which they can apply for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture is extremely appreciative for the allocation of \$64 million which is adequate to cover both, our operational and capital programmes. Through this, the Ministry will further its delivery to provide effective and efficient support to farmers and stakeholders. The budgetary allocation will be distributed accordingly whereby \$19.2 million is allocated for crop extension services and a further \$6.8 million for agriculture crop research, enabling commodity development and improving provision of extension services to all farmers, including releasing of new resilient crop varieties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Animal Health and Livestock Division is allocated \$13.2 million to support both its extension and research services. This funding will facilitate provision of fencing materials, infrastructure support and stock development.

The Ministry's Operational Funding includes wages and salaries of staff and funding grants to immediate stakeholders such as Agro-marketing Authority of Fiji, agriculture schools like Navuso and Tutu, Fiji Crop and Livestock Council and Committee for Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years, the Ministry of Agriculture is committed to improving food and nutritional security for all Fijians through programme that will deliver improved production and excess to safe and nutritious food. Amidst the pandemic, the agricultural sector has stood tall amongst others to be the backbone of the economy, as well as being the stronghold of sustainable alternative livelihood for rural and urban households.

On food security, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture remains focused on ensuring food and nutritional security for all Fijians whilst expanding agriculture to address our economic challenges. The growth trajectory has been a positive one in these trying times and we will continue to deliver the vision of 'grow beyond' to enable agriculture standing tall in support of the Government in meeting its objectives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ongoing Home Gardening Initiative has provided more than 470,000 individual seed packs to households in the four geographical divisions since the pandemic began in 2020. This activity was ramped up in April this year where in three months alone, we managed to achieve a distribution of 27,000 seed packs, amounting to around 164,000 individual seed packs. In this latest operation run by Ministry of Agriculture 61 percent of the distribution was for the Central Division - the region that was hit the hardest with the current pandemic.

The success of our Home Gardening Initiative improved urban and peri-urban home gardens. As a result, positive progress has been identified with some households in the Central Division. The Budget includes other programmes to further all crops and livestock. The Ministry is coordinating with other Government agencies to support a strategy that will provide a pathway to resilient food security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now wish to turn to the Ministry of Waterways which is also supporting and protecting farmers and vulnerable households in Fiji for the onslaught of climate change. Waterways, Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction are matters of great national importance that the Ministry deals with. The Ministry carries out most of the disaster risk reduction and mitigation activities through its capital project implementation.

As such for fiscal year 2022-2023, \$14,314,800 million is allocated for the Ministry of Waterways to deliver these services. Approximately 77 percent of the allocation or \$11,010,000 million will be spent on numerous capital projects. The allocation is distributed as follows. An allocation of \$600,000 has been allocated for the maintenance of irrigation schemes with locations in the Central and Northern Divisions and \$3 million has been allocated for Drainage and Flood Protection Programme. The activities undertaken by the programme consists of river dredging, river bank protection, brick improvement and river training works. This allocation will be utilised for the roll-over of Nakaile River Bank Protection works in Tailevu, Bua river bank protection and Waidamu River Dredging works in Tailevu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address watershed problems and help us mitigate floods, the Watershed Management Programme has been allocated \$1 million for the 2022-2023 Fiscal Year. The total allocation will be utilised for the construction of Qalinabulu River Flood Retention Dam and roll over of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) study. Through the maintenance of drainage system for non-municipal areas programme, \$800,000 has been allocated for the maintenance of existing drains and schemes to the following Divisions:

- Western Division \$320,000;
- Central Division \$320,000; and
- Northern Division \$160,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coastal inundations and coastal erosions are an enormous undertaking of the Ministry. To address such needs, \$1.5 million has been allocated for the Coastal Erosion Protection Works Programme in the 2022-2023 Fiscal Year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the allocation will be utilised for the rollover of the Bau Island Coastal Protection and the Ovea Village Coastal Protection.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drainage for farmlands has a total allocation of \$500,000. The allocation for each of the divisions (Central, Western and Northern) is \$166,666. For the fiscal year 2022–2023, the drainage for rural residential areas programme has an allocation of \$500,000 with the three Divisions being allocated \$166,666 each.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the irrigation spot for farm development is a programme designed to increase the resilience of farmers from drought through the provision of micro-irrigation supplements to allow them to better manage water and increase their resilience to drought. Sir, \$110,000 is allocated for this programme in the 2022–2023 Financial Year.

From the total allocation, \$72,500 will be utilised to purchase 30 full sets of irrigation kits to be distributed to the farmers selected by the Ministry of Agriculture. These farmers will receive a full irrigation kit that will consist of water pumps, drip irrigation hoses and other fittings. Additionally, \$37,500 will be utilised to construct multi-purpose gravity third irrigation water sources. This will support a group of farmers with their daily farming practices in the following Divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outsourcing, dredging of major rivers and creeks is a programme designed to conduct dredging in rivers and creeks that are critical, with an allocation of \$3 million. Additional donor funding project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are currently on the planning phase of the

Nature Base Coastal Protection with FJD\$1.5 million grant provided by Asian Development Bank (ADB). This grant will stabilise approximately 4.3 kilometres in our four Divisions. In the Northern Division, it is Lakeba Village and Kanakana Village. In the Western Division, it is Navutu Settlement, Tagaqe Village and Saioko Village. In the Central Division, it is Veivatuloa Village, Toguru Village, Suvavou Village and in the maritime area, it is Qarani Village and Somosomo Village.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Waterways in partnership with European Union (EU) has started the upscaling of the Soasoa Drainage System work in March 2022. This project will oversee the construction of a new two double barrel flood gate structure, raising the existing level by 0.2 metres along the most vulnerable areas. This project is given a grant of €349,900 and in addition to this, we have received €39,770 which will be used to upscale the existing structures within the Soasoa Drainage Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will be signing the contract with Kira Initiative this month to receive a grant of \$730,000 for nature-based coastal protection. The projects will provide protection and enhance coastal communities for climate resilience with 1,500 direct beneficiaries and 10,000 indirect beneficiaries. This is for Mali Island, Nakawa Village in the Province of Macuata in the Northern Division, Navesi Village, Ligaulevu Village, Somosomo Village in the Province of Cakaudrove, Navala Village and Navolau No. 1 Village in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our tremendous effort in the current budget year has improved the situation to some extent. We, however, need to continue the same dedication improving to the next financial year. The Ministry daily receives enormous requests for coastal, river bank protection and provision of drainage. We will prioritise appropriately and attend to the most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will implement waterways capital works through nine programmes that are designed to support the Government in the implementation of the National Adaptation Plan, the 5 year and 20 year National Development Plan and the Green Growth Framework for Fiji through recognising the need to have resilient infrastructures to improve livelihoods and in doing so, reducing the vulnerability and the risk of climate change impacts. Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above programmes are in line with the International and the Regional Development Agenda and framework including the Sustainable Development Goals Framework for resilient development in the Pacific and the Blue Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by congratulating the honourable Minister for Economy and his team once again for a very bold and forward looking budget which in my view augurs well for our future economic growth. I join other honourable Members of the House that have commended the 2022-2023 Budget presented by the honourable Minister for Economy by offering my own commendations.

HON. RATU J.A.R. SENILOLI.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my response on the proposed National Budget for the 2022-2023 Financial Year, as presented by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, Civil Service, Communications, Housing and Community Development on the evening of Friday, 15th July, 2022. From the outset, for me, Sir, the Budget contains a lot of election announcements and less deliverables. It has just been the norm for this Government in the last seven years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no doubt that this Budget will surely increase our debt portfolio. It has now reached \$9.1 billion - an unprecedented 39.4 percent of GDP. This is a far cry from only two years ago when our debt portfolio in July 2018 was \$5.2 billion, which is 45.9 percent of GDP. It is unfortunate that we do not have the necessary endowments to cushion our outstanding debt such as oil reserves and gold reserves which bigger nations with broader-based economies have.

From July 2018 to today, our debt has increased by \$3.9 billion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we borrowed heavily about \$2 billion of which \$500 million was earmarked for unemployment benefits. The Government has borrowed because it tried to stimulate business. However Government, over the years, has always allocated a lot of funding to the tourism industry at the expense of the resource-based sector, particularly agriculture, forestry and the fisheries sector.

Those resource-based sectors will certainly make us self-sufficient and build a much broader-based economy. Heavy investment being made into our tourism industry has led us to be solely reliant on external factors which are totally outside of our control. We simply cannot build a stable and viable economy on such a fragile industry.

Government also borrowed to support unemployment by giving away free money. To support unemployment, Government should review its policies and laws to make it easier for people to do business, particularly in the private sector. We must grow the private sector to provide the employment opportunity for sustainable growth. Money must be spent in a productive way rather than giving it away as freebies or election gimmick. If we just continue to be giving money away for spending, we will just increase inflation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this current financial year, the Government is looking at borrowing a further \$1.179 billion. This is to help in funding an over-estimated expenditure of \$3.8 billion and a shortfall in revenue of \$2.9 billion, resulting in an estimated gross deficit of \$1.179 billion. It seems that Government's answer to all structural challenges is to borrow.

Debt is a debt. It has to be paid back and at the rate it is going, the Government is placing a bigger burden to our future generation to pay off its debts. Basically, they will not be able to borrow, but continue to pay for the debt accumulated by the Bainimarama Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, previous Governments were always very cautious in the way they borrowed money. They always ensured that the debt to GDP ratio always remained around the recommended 40 percent debt to GDP ratio for small vulnerable developing countries. At times, they do borrow exceeding the 50 percent of GDP ratio by borrowing for capital investment purposes to fund much needed capital projects. They were always prudent in the way they made informed financial decisions. We must acknowledge past Governments for being sensible and prudent about financial management decisions and, thus, allow future government the space to be able to borrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our revenue from direct taxes is estimated at \$573.8 million. Our debt repayment for the financial year is \$307.5 million. Sir, 53.5 percent of our direct taxes revenue go straight into our debt repayment. This is a fair portion of Government revenue and thus, a great opportunity is lost, which could be better utilised to invest and revamp our resource-based sectors through this effective participation of resource owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Economy, in his Budget presentation, reported that the economy is projected to grow by 12.4 percent this year - its highest rate of growth ever. How realistic and practical is this estimate or forecast? The estimated 12.4 percent economic growth is for 2022, and the claim that it is unprecedented is a fallacy.

In 1979, the Government had an actual growth of 12 percent and in 1989, the Government, again, had an actual growth of 12.9 percent. These are the highest growth rate achievements ever, based on actual growth and not forecast growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a comment on the First Home Buyers Grant. In 2014, the Government introduced the First Home Buyers Grant Programme with a grant of \$10,000 with those households

earning below \$50,000. In 2020-2021, the First Home Grant was further increased to \$30,000 from \$10,000, and this assistance was divided into two categories - those with a household income of \$50,000 or less and those with a household income between \$50,000 and \$100,000. This year, the Government has allocated \$7 million to the first category of those earning less than \$50,000 and \$2 million for those earning between \$50,000 and \$100,000. The Government should consider reviewing this programme so it can allow Fijians who want to build their first home in their village or landowning units can qualify for this grant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Water Authority of Fiji, we look forward to the Rewa River Water Supply Scheme Project which will be completed in May 2023 as it will include communities between Nausori and Korovou. The District of Namara which currently has no proper water reticulation system will benefit greatly from this project.

However, I would like to highlight that the Villages of Ovea, Cautata, Waikete and Nabitu continue to have no water in their village. Normally, water comes in certain times during the day and night, other times the pressure is so low, thus water flow is slow but recently, the Villages have no water at all. Carting of water is almost daily and this is a temporary solution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Ovea, there is a reservoir that sits up the hills and WAF should consider putting it into service again. Although there is a lot of money being allocated to providing water in the future, a lot of effort will also be placed to have water in the taps for now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now turn to my shadow portfolio, that is, on Communications and Information. The Ministry of Communications is responsible for keeping Fijians connected to each other and to the outside world by ensuring the provision of efficient, competitive, cost-effective and accessible telecommunication. Today, a lot of work and services are rapidly moving to online services, automation and digitisation. This will be the new normal, and we must continue to keep up with the rate of changing technology.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the urgency to stay connected and to work remotely from home. The uncertainty that we face nowadays has shown how critical it is for us to be connected and communication flowing even during lockdowns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should, therefore, continue to provide internet connectivity to unconnected areas around the country through the Connectivity Rollout Programme. It is vital that Government continues to invest in building towers in areas of poor internet connectivity. Assessment work being done has identified 240 unconnected and poorly connected sites which have been gazetted for phone connectivity to be implemented in phases.

Sir, \$11 million has been allocated for the construction of 15 towers and this will provide coverage to 96 areas identified with poor internet connectivity. Can the Government provide a timeline as to when the remaining 144 areas with poor internet connectivity can expect better internet coverage?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Connectivity Rollout Programme last November, Government was able to connect 26 Schools and 14 Health Centres in the Northern Division. This year, there is an allocation of \$2.5 million earmarked for 49 Schools around Fiji. Why is there no allocation for connectivity to any Health Centres for the year?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot has been invested to *Walesi* and a further \$14.6 million has been allocated for the Digital Switch-Over Awareness Project. The whole of Viti Levu switch-over has been completed, how long will it take to complete the switch-over project for the rest of Fiji?

Furthermore, an additional 50 villages have been identified to receive free installation to have access to the *Walesi* connected network. How are these villages being identified? Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Walesi* claimed that they have over 700,000 subscribers to *Walesi App* and that 700,000 people watch *Walesi* on their phones. Sir, 700,000 subscribers is commendable but how many of them are connected to both their phones and television at home? How many households have no connections at all?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I tried to install the *Walesi App* with a login from the *Facebook* account option on my phone and it does not work. This is a bit lax as this App is now being made available to the public, it makes the whole App seem like it has been rushed upon release without proper user acceptance and testing. In addition and sadly, the reviews have only one star rating out of five stars.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Walesi* is not even listed under State-Owned Entities in Table 14, on page 46 of the Budget Supplement Booklet. How is this *Walesi* being registered?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ease of Doing Business has increased its allocation from \$4.9 million to \$9 million and most of this will go towards Project bizFIJI 2.0 to create a centralised online application and approval system for starting a business and obtaining construction permits process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in improving the survey and development process, Government has approved access to the VanuaGIS and Vanua View Platform. Has land data being made available real-time or non-real-time?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government should be commended for investing in much-needed funds to improve communications in Fiji to be in line with the National Development Plan and the SDGs. The major challenge of digital technology is the rising threat of cybercrime. As more data is being made readily available, more Government services are being processed online and people are becoming more comfortable in the digital economy. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure increased awareness of cybercrime protected network with solid security systems. My concern, however, is that digital developments are going too fast whereby communications infrastructure in the rural areas still lag behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my maiden speech, I did highlight that my inspiration to stand in the 2018 Election was the opportunity to serve the communities and villages whereby I can make a difference in trying to bridge the disparity between urban and rural development. Urban bias exist and the rural communities are at times deprived of much needed development as it is being focused in the urban centres.

Mr. Speaker, this also applies in this digital divide. Most rural areas still lack the basic communications infrastructure – no power, irregular power supply, no internet connectivity, poor internet connectivity and difficulty to access smart phones and computers.

Mr. Speaker, it is best that Government considers to place more emphasis on developing a robust and reliable communications infrastructure so that people of Fiji can realise the full potential of digital technology available.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to address some constituency issues. The Ministry of Waterways and Environment has been allocated \$1.5 million for the construction of seawall for villages and communities faced with the threat of coastal inundation and erosion. I would like to thank Government for the seawall currently being constructed on Bau Island and work that is to start in Ovea.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight that there are neighbouring villages that are in dire need of a seawall, that is, Waicoka and Namuka. This is due to the fact that the sea has claimed a lot of villages' shorelines and the villages are waterlogged with seawater during high tide. They have been promised assistance in 2017, and are still waiting.

Nakoroivau has been requesting for a footbridge for its primary school students who attend school on Bau Island. They travel by boat everyday. At low tide, they walk along the muddy waterfront, laced with limestone and rocks which can be really painful. Sir, they have been requesting for a footbridge to allow primary school students to walk safely and going to and back from school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the village of Nakorolevu in Namara which hosts both, the Namara District School and Namara Health Centre, villagers of Natila, *Tikina* of Bau find it easier to attend both, the School and Health Centre in Namara due to its close proximity. Can the Government consider an old road that connects Natila to Naisausau to be upgraded and maintained by FRA? This will allow primary school students and villagers to access proper road to School and the Health Centre in Namara. Reaching Namara too gives the villagers access to public transport services through buses, taxis and vans. The new road through Logani/Sebi Road, unfortunately, does not have this service available.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, on Korovou Town Market, market vendors from Kumi Village want to sell *ivi* and seasonal fruits and are being denied tables inside the market since it is our seasonal fruit, Sir. They are then allocated a special place in front of the market whereby they have to bring their own seats and when it rains they are wet. Can arrangement be made to allocate proper tables for the villagers of Kumi in Korovou?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard in this Budget a lot of announcements and also heard how we have continued to borrow sparingly, we are simply living beyond our means. It is, therefore, for those reasons that I will not be able to support this motion before Parliament.

HON. H.R. POLITINI.- I was surprised yesterday at the gutter response coming from that side of the House and that was yesterday. Today we have been bashed again by the *Bible*. We must be reminded when Jesus was put before Pontius Pilate in front of the Israelites He was with Barabbas the murderer. Pontius Pilate asked the people, “who do you want to be set free?” Instead of picking Jesus who came to set everyone free, they chose Barabbas the murderer and that was his response to the guys from the other end.

If you look at the two terms FijiFirst has been the Government all the initiatives, grants you name it across the board it is all about the people. There is no self-indulgency in there. As the aim and prerogative of the FijiFirst Government is to continually progress Fiji into a modern nation and we are on that path right now. We are improving road infrastructures, bridges, jetties, education so we are getting there. Rome was not built overnight, Mr. Speaker, it took time.

HON. MEMBER.- 16 years.

HON. H.R. POLITINI.- Thank you Honourable Speaker. The fragile global economic recovery has been affected by lingering pandemic related supply disruption, the ripple effects of the Russian Ukraine War and the ever present threat of climate change and natural disaster.

The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and fellow Members of Parliament; first and foremost, I must acknowledge and say a big *vinaka vakalevu* to the Ministry of

Economy, its Permanent Secretary and team and the Honourable Minister for Economy for their time and effort in preparing the Budget Estimates for Year 2022-2023.

On infrastructure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) has been allocated a sum of \$376.7 million in the Financial Year 2022-2023. Of this, \$13.8 million will cater for FRA's operating costs and \$362.9 million is to carry out a comprehensive capital works programme to meet our country's growing need for new infrastructure and to maintain our existing road network.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must acknowledge the World Bank, ADB through the Ministry of Infrastructure and Higgins as the main contractor for the Kings Road Upgrading Project being carried out from Ba, Tavua, Rakiraki and as far as Wailotua in Wainibuka.

The project, Mr. Speaker, is a rip and remake of the Kings Highway between Ba to Wailotua in Wainibuka and also includes new footpaths, curbs and bus bays for villages from Ba to Wailotua. All these infrastructural developments are in line with our Government's Plan in modernising our nation's infrastructure that was left neglect by previous Governments in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the budgetary allocation for FRA is in conformation of our commitment and intends to serve, improve and provide better service to the general public in terms of quality roads, bridges, footpaths, with safety in mind and resilience to the test of nature with the ever prevalence of climate change.

The challenges, Mr. Speaker, because of weather and other calamities will be mitigated and the FijiFirst Government will maintain a transparent and accountable commitment to the public service delivery. We will endeavour to facilitate the process and be mindful of the timeframe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the ongoing projects, whether it be a bridge or bridges, foot crossings, major or minor road works, our honourable Prime Minister and honourable Attorney-General are committed in leaving no Fijians behind.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the 2022-2023 National Budget.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2022-2023 Budget is the product of an arrogant, out of touch and deceptive Government that has based its more than 15 years of military and parliamentary democracy rule on dictatorship and lies. And why am I saying this, Mr. Speaker? Because this is possibly the last Budget to be brought to Parliament whether FijiFirst Government before it is dissolved for the Elections. And this, in all likelihood, is the last time that I will be speaking on a Budget from the Opposition benches.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Parliament draws towards the end of its current term, I want to reflect on my journey of more than 3½ years since November 2018, that will show why this is a Budget by an arrogant, out of touch and dictatorial Government.

Mr. Speaker Sir:

1. How can I forget the dictatorial two-men rule that has trampled upon Parliamentary democracy, totally rejected bipartisanship and governed this nation by getting Parliament to enact legislation brought under Standing Order 51?
2. How can I forget the assault on me by the honourable Prime Minister in August 2019, concocting by Government of my statement as an attack on the Prime Minister's family and my suspension for six months because I refused to apologise for something I did not say or even mean?

3. How can I forget that another victim of that sordid act was the brave Parliamentary staff member who was terminated from his employment and left to fend for himself for his survival for shooting the video capturing my assault?
4. How can I forget my arrest by Police from my village home after midnight and during curfew hours in April 2020 for highlighting serious assault and human rights violation of a youth of Naqia Village by Police and remanded in custody for 36 hours at Totogo Police Station?
5. How can I forget the arrest of the honourable NFP Leader and I, as well as other honourable Members of the Opposition, again, during curfew in July last year for simply questioning why Government did not consult with landowners before introducing the then Bill No. 17?
6. How can I forget being almost locked inside a CWM washroom, whose broken door was held by an IV tube and a wooden block - a door that this Government took over 16 months to repair?
7. How can I forget the deaths of over 1,300 Fijians from COVID-19 and COVID-19 related causes at the height of the pandemic and the deadly sight of three 40-foot containers used as temporary morgues?

HON. F.S KOYA.- Slip of the tongue.

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can keep on counting and naming examples of false promises, deceit, political connivance, lies, of course, instances of the two-men rule trampling national interest just because it did not or does not suit them. But it would take hours, Mr. Speaker, so I will focus on two things - the 2022-2023 Budget and the address by the honourable Prime Minister when he opened the meeting of the Ba Provincial Council six days ago on Wednesday, 20th July, 2022, because that address was all about the Budget and featured lies and thoroughly incorrect statements deliberately designed to hoodwink delegates at that meeting.

No prizes for guessing, why, Mr Speaker. As the saying goes, “It’s the full-moon season - election campaign mode” and many, especially in Government, will tell the people that even the pigs can fly or they themselves can walk on water. Fortunately, Sir, our people are able to differentiate truth from lies and this is precisely what is happening, despite the honourable Prime Minister’s grave dislike for the truth. The same goes for his right-hand man and the *de facto* Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy. Sometimes, I do wonder who is clinging to whom, like the proverbial *bakewa*, Mr. Speaker!

That aside, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality of the matter is that the honourable Prime Minister regurgitated the Budget in his address to the Ba Provincial Council, just as this unaccountable FijiFirst Government has been regurgitating promises in every budget without fluttering an eyelid, obviously, thinking Fijians are fools and blinded by freebies. They are certainly not, Mr. Speaker! They know that it is not a dose of medicine with repeats labelled on them to cure their sickness - far from it!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the people want is:

1. A genuine reduction of their cost of living to be able to purchase quality basic food and essential items at affordable prices.
2. Timely, efficient, equipped and effective public health and medical delivery with fully functional diagnostics, surgical treatment and aftercare services.
3. Quality education where no student is discriminated and teachers impart knowledge and instil legally-allowed discipline without the fear of recrimination or fear of job losses.

4. Opportunities for meaningful employment paying decent salaries and wages.
5. Sound and sensible incentives to ensure creation of investment through formulation of policies through enactment of legislation that has a trickle-down effect to even benefit the grassroots and resulting in achieving milestones.
6. A fully-revived and profitable agricultural sector, including the sugar industry, dairy and quality cash produce like vegetables, *yaqona* and rootcrops.
7. Prevention of climate degradation by re-forestation, ocean and freshwater source protection.
8. Above all, a kind, compassionate, accountable, transparent and genuinely democratic government of, by and for the people.

Yet, again, unfortunately but unsurprisingly, none of the eight core objectives which are catalysts to genuine economic growth and making Fiji a land of hope and opportunity is successfully able to alleviate poverty and give a leg-up, as this Government likes to say, to the thousands of struggling families.

Why, Mr. Speaker? Because this Government lacks political morality and political credibility, and this has resulted in the creation of an “Animal Farm” where the Government thinks it, together with its business cabal, who are bank-rolling the ruling FijiFirst Party, are far superior to those who entrusted them with looking after them with empathy and compassion.

HON. MEMBER.- Who are the business cabal?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- You know them!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has resulted in “State Capture” where legislation is rushed through the floor of Parliament under Standing Order 51 to fulfil the needs of certain members of this cabal, which is clear as daylight in the financial donations list from 2014 to 2019 of FijiFirst, are enacted to benefit only a chosen few. Otherwise, which Government would, as an example of what I am saying, want to lose revenue and get Parliament to legislate, backdating to pre-2011, exemption of Capital Gains Tax for sales of shares?

Yet, Section 173 of the Constitution prohibits making changes retrospectively to Decrees (now Acts without ratification by Parliament) that impinge on the fundamental rights of our people. For example, trashing of the contractual obligation of pensions being received from FNPF from being challenged in any Court of Law or Tribunal or giving a Certificate of Termination of Proceedings to those forcibly and illegally removed from their positions after the December 2006 *coup*.

However, some so-called Consequential Bills tabled on Monday, like the Pharmacy Profession (Budget Amendment) Bill 2022 are designed for all intents and purposes to benefit big pharmaceutical chains. We know who they are, Mr. Speaker, and this is a matter best left for during the debate this Friday.

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, the Code of Conduct legislation first introduced in Parliament in April 2016, reintroduced during the last day of the first sitting of this Parliament in November 2018, has been gathering dust for more than six years. Without its enactment, the creation of Accountability and Transparency Commission is dead and buried.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Bill No.17 later enacted by Parliament around this time last year was done so without consulting indigenous landowners. That also resulted in quite a few of us being arrested, as I have said earlier, by police for publicly opposing the then Bill simply because it did not give a damn about the need to consult the landowners. If the above is not a case of double standards, then what is it, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister told the Ba Provincial Council that iTLTB was holding in trust \$40 million for 45,000 members below the age of 18 years under equal distribution of lease moneys, and that there would be several young millionaires when they turn 18, because they would be able to own a home, start a business or own a car.

Nothing can be further from the truth, Mr. Speaker. For argument's sake, if one divides \$40 million by 45,000 under 18 years *i Taukei*, this would only equate to a miserly \$888.88 per person, far from a millionaire from every stretch of imagination.

But we all know, Mr. Speaker, that it is wrong to average lease money. Young members of a bigger landowning unit like in Nadi, will get far, far more than the rest, which means that the rest of them will not even make the average threshold of \$888.88. They will have pittance in their pockets when they turn 18 years. So why did the honourable Prime Minister claim they would be millionaires? Is he hoodwinking the *i Taukei*? Is he deliberately or otherwise lying, or is he just reading what is written for him, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has destroyed the dairy industry. Despite its exclusive preferential treatment for 10 years given to a local corporate giant, Fiji still imports over 88 percent of milk and 100 percent of butter. Imported milk powder is reconstituted into liquid milk.

The pastures in dairy areas are covered by grass and weed, deteriorating quality of the pastures, resulting in declining milk production. The destruction of the dairy industry has been replaced by grass growing on the walls of CWM Hospital, Mr. Speaker.

Similarly, the high valuable and profitable mahogany industry is in a state of neglect. In one case, a land dispute ownership issue between landowners, a dairy farmer and Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL) have resulted in landowners incurring income losses because harvested logs are now rotting. I am raising this particularly, Mr. Speaker, for the Mataqali Ravouvou of Nasau Village, who have lost income because FHCL cannot resolve the dispute with a dairy farmer in Tailevu.

The outcome of that dispute is that, there have been rotting logs in the field and in the plantation. As a consequence, the farmers have not benefited financially from what they should be getting from the logs that have been fallen. So this is Mataqali Ravouvou in Waito, Tailevu, and I would ask the honourable Minister concerned to look into this, particularly the Minister responsible for Public Enterprises.

That brings me, Mr. Speaker, to the honourable Prime Minister labelling honourable Professor Prasad as telling lies about the lack of allocation for guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne of sugar in the 2022-2023 Budget for the 2022 harvesting season. He followed his *de facto* Prime Minister, the honourable Attorney-General, who told the State Broadcaster - FBC last week that the NFP Leader was lying and should withdraw his statement as a sum of \$8 million has been allocated, and this would be enough to cover the guaranteed price. Again, Sir, nothing can be further from the truth.

The inherent problem with the honourable Prime Minister is that, he believes every word that the honourable Attorney-General utters. Obviously, he has not read what his right-hand man churned out in

the Pre-Election Fiscal and Economic Update released on 9th May, 2022. So, who needs to return to school and learn mathematics, Mr. Speaker?

The same applies to the *de facto* Prime Minister. For him, reason and logic is out of the window if he is caught with his pants on fire because he is the one who first accused the honourable NFP Leader of lying about the guaranteed price. This is what the Pre-election Fiscal and Economic Update, released on 9th May, 2022, states in respect of guaranteed price allocation, and I quote:

“Further allocation of around \$8 million dependant on the cane harvest will be provided in the 2022-2023 Budget to meet the final payment for the 2021 season”.

That is precisely what has been allocated – only \$8 million to cover for the guaranteed price for the 2021 season. Where is the allocation for the 2022 season in this Budget?

That is what honourable Professor Prasad was asking. A legitimate question, turned into a lie by the FijiFirst Government because it thinks the price of cane will rise to \$82 per tonne due to the supposedly rise of sugar prices. Try telling this to the growers, honourable Prime Minister and honourable Attorney-General, because your lies are becoming moronic!

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is not correct, you are assuming.

(Honourable Member interjected)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, but translate it into price here.

HON. LT. COL P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, worse, we are told to base our manifesto costings on the Pre-Election Fiscal and Economic Update. No, Mr .Speaker, we would not do so. We do not want to base something on warped logic and cooked up statistics.

Mr. Speaker, the NFP and its honourable Leader, have been branded as lying by the Silent 25 for labelling this as a *Saqamoli* Budget.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- That is a lie!

HON. LT. COL. P. TIKODUADUA.- We have done so because \$1 is a *saqamoli*. That is what is allocated for every child up to 18 years old and tertiary students – provided they are from families with combined incomes of less than \$50,000 per annum.

A \$1 a day, \$180 for 6 months, while the honourable Prime Minister’s overseas travel allowance averages \$3,000 a day, Mr. Speaker. Cabinet Ministers are entitled to free meals and accommodation for local travel, and one wonders what is Parliament’s budget for our meals, morning and afternoon tea.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a *saqamoli* per day when the cost of living has skyrocketed to unbelievable levels with cost of living adjustment in salaries and wages in both, public and private sectors, to ensure our people have buying power.

Yet, unknown to the people of Fiji, the salary and benefits of the honourable people was boosted in his role as RFMF Commander because he was performing the role of the Prime Minister. This was in

January 2010, approved by the Office of the President, following a letter by the Attorney-General. That resulted in him earning as RFMF Commander, a total salary of \$316,250 per annum, comprising of the following:

- Base salary - \$230,000 per annum.
- Extra Duty Allowance - \$28,750 per annum (12.5 percent of base salary).
- Gratuity - \$57,500 per annum (25 percent Gratuity for every 12 month's of service).
- Total salary per annum - \$316,250.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this massive hike was seen as compensating the RFMF Commander for performing the role of Prime Minister and six other ministerial portfolios. And it resulted in payment of salaries for Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers being outsourced for payment to accounting firm - Aliz Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my point is, if the RFMF Commander was being compensated for performing the role of the Prime Minister and extra duties, why is the very same Government providing \$1 per day to its citizens and thinks it is good enough to meet the cost of basic food and essentials?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Where's your budget? You can't do it!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Mr. Speaker, this Government has created Fiji into an Animal Farm, where the chosen few and a business of cabal get the pie while the people get fed on crumbs. This will be the legacy behind by this cruel and heartless FijiFirst Government when it is booted out by the people at the polling booths during the Elections. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; greetings to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to commend the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and Minister responsible for climate change for delivering a very comprehensive, responsible, prudent and well thought-out National Budget for the financial year 2022-2023.

The honourable Minister for Economy and his team has provided us with a far-sighted and transformative recovery, growth and development Budget that will not only protect our households, the youth and students and the vulnerable, but will also stimulate private sector activity, empower women and youth and create green jobs that will maintain Fiji's macroeconomic fiscal sustainability.

The Budget was developed with extensive consultation with different cross-sections of the community. Unfortunately, some on the other side cannot see that the Budget process should be inclusive and should evolve out of the people. Instead, they labelled it as an electioneering process.

It reflects the wisdom and leadership of our honourable Prime Minister and his commitment to ensure that we all grow together and, therefore, any Budget must reflect the concerns and aspirations of all the people, be it in the urban area, peri-urban, deep-rural and maritime areas and that they are not forgotten; the dreams of the young students are not affected; and the welfare of the elderly are not affected by the adverse economic situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can, indeed, say that this Budget has not left anyone behind during one of the most difficult times in the history of this country. Unfortunately, those on the Opposition bench, who

spoke yesterday, continue to name-call this Budget without any merit. They are hell-bent in misleading the public that this Budget is not the best and, therefore, they must not vote for this Government. They have failed miserably to inform the people about their alternative plan and alternative budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the only correct thing they said yesterday was that, our people are indeed smart. They know the truth and they fully understand how our Government protected their welfare during the COVID-19 crisis against their calls for a complete shutdown of the country. Instead of supporting our calls for vaccination, some, with the likes of honourable Bulanauca, campaigned against it. Instead of protecting our national carrier which is the only airline to carry our agriculture produce out of the country, they wanted to throw it under the bus. God knows what the situation and state of affairs we would have been in, had they been leading the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was the decisive leadership by our honourable Prime Minister that we are now operating in a near normal state. This visionary leadership of this Government will go down the history books. Our grandchildren will read about this pandemic and realise how our Government used all its resources to minimise fatalities and protect people's welfare throughout Fiji.

To make matters worse, Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Qereqeretabua has still not made an apology to our honourable Prime Minister for making uncalled comment on his father. Honourable Professor Prasad, is she guilty or not? Is she guilty or not, honourable Professor Prasad?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You will read it.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Just say it. Just admit it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Just admit it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Do not carry out a conversation between you two.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I expect honourable Reddy...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, do not carry out a conversation between you two. We have too much of this. If you are going to make a comment do so, but do not carry out a conversation. Include me all the time. I will come and converse with you two. You have the floor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The point of order is this, Mr. Speaker, we heard yesterday and today, and honourable Reddy should understand the English language better, I do not think honourable Qereqeretabua at any point in time meant the honourable Prime Minister's family. She did not because what she said was not referring to the honourable Prime Minister.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- She said, "his father's money."

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is like making a statement - it does not mean that she was referring to the honourable Prime Minister. I mean, it is quite unethical and stupid, Mr. Speaker, for these Members to lie. They are misleading Parliament and it is irrelevant to the discussion.

The Point of Order is irrelevance. It is a lie that she said anything about the honourable Prime Minister's family, she did not.

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

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand by my comment. There are a lot of hollow-logs on the other side making a lot of noise. It is loud, but nothing inside.

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

I think we need a ruling on this because as I have said, the honourable Minister is lying. He is misleading Parliament. He is misleading the people of this country and what he is saying is irrelevant to the debate that we are having right now.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Do not carry out a conversation. Honourable Members, everyone is referring to this statement, but I have not heard the statement. If you want me to make a ruling, I have to see the statement. I have neither seen nor heard any statement.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They should refer the statement to you.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have the floor, honourable Minister.

HON. DR. M. REDDY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are talking about non-relevance, but they have been reading the *Bible* in Parliament during their budgetary speech and he never stood up and said this is not relevant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Tikoduadua was talking about corruption. He should be the last person to talk about corruption. He forced the Military and PWD to repair his house when he was on this side of the House. He should not talk about corruption. They are very quiet now, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of the pandemic and the war on production and supply chains have sparked inflation worldwide and we cannot be complacent. We need to be proactive to ensure that our households are insulated against any food insecurity. Therefore, it is imperative upon us to brace up and do what needs to be done to ensure our food security is not compromised at any cost. At the same time, we need to grab this opportunity to expand primary production, reduce our imports and increase exports to premium markets to bring in the much needed foreign currency.

In this regard, the Ministry of Agriculture acknowledges with gratitude the appropriation of \$64.1 million for the upcoming financial year. This is an increase of \$3.1 million from the Revised 2021–2022 Budget that was used to assist in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through a competitive, resilient agriculture sector for the growth and development of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to in detail by the honourable Pillay, the performance of Agriculture Sector over the last three years has been exemplary - production has increased in real terms and so has our exports. I am pleased to announce today in Parliament that for the upcoming financial year, from this Budget of \$64 million, we will be making a direct assistance package to the farmers worth \$29.2 million. Now, I want to see what the honourable Members from the other side have to say to this. We need to continue this momentum, albeit, smartly based on a sustainable agriculture model.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this \$29.2 million package will ensure more idle resources will be utilised, more people will participate and, therefore, they will all be rewarded with the surplus generated, imports will be reduced, exports will be increased to bring in more foreign currency into the country, more jobs will be created directly and indirectly, and our economy will grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the assistance is divided into two groups; firstly, about 14 of these packages will be for farmers who have never received any assistance, and the rest will be given to all the farmers, particularly the successful farmers, to give them leverage to another level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$29.2 million packaging includes the following packages:

- Small farming and agro-processing equipment - \$592,000 has been allocated where 200 farmers will benefit to buy small equipment with one-third contribution from them and two-thirds by Government.
- Irrigation kit support - An allocation of \$72,000 from the Ministry of Waterways' budget where 30 farmers will be assisted with the full irrigation package.
- Fencing kit to support for beef cattle farmers - \$68,000 has been allocated to assist 27 farmers.
- Fencing kit for sheep farmers - \$255,000 has been allocated to assist 102 farmers.
- Fencing kit for goat farmers - \$226,000 has been allocated to assist 90 farmers with fencing material.
- Hydroponic system - \$72,000 has been allocated to assist nine farmers with \$8,000 package of hydroponics complete set.
- Fruit tree orchards - \$150,000 has been allocated to establish 50 orchards which includes breadfruit, banana, avocado, mango, dragon fruit, guava, coconut and citrus.
- Equity support to agro-exporters/processors - \$150,000 has been allocated to assist 15 existing agro-processors and exporters with the \$10,000 grant to leverage them to another level, so that we can expedite export from the country.
- Gender and agriculture programme - \$300,000 has been allocated to assist 60 plus church groups and 300 individuals. Cluster groups will get \$2,500 each and individuals will get \$500 each to assist them in their businesses – floriculture, weaving, et cetera. This allocation has been basically targeting our women and women youth in agriculture.
- Smallholder Dairy Support - \$266,000 has been allocated to assist 22 farmers with dairy shed upgrading worth a package of \$12,000 each.
- Piggery Pen Package Support - \$211,000 has been allocated to support 21 farms to establish a piggery pen.
- Poultry Shed Package Support - \$206,000 has been allocated to assist 82 farmers with the \$2,500 package to establish small poultry sheds.
- Land preparation facility for young commercial farmers - \$400,000 assistance has been allocated for young graduates, youth and farmers who are getting into commercial farming, to clear and prepare five acres of land at 9/10 of the cost being contributed by Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for all the farmers who would be eligible to apply for other packages, we then have provision of farm machinery for any work that they want to undertake on their farm, whether it is land clearing, land preparation, farm road, in field drainage, et cetera. Sir, \$7 million has been allocated where 50 percent of the entire cost will be picked up by Government for any machinery they want to use, whether it is an excavator, digger, bulldozer or tractor, and the Ministry will pay 50 percent of the cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, farm shed establishment package for farmers whose house or farm is way away from the house. They spend one or two weeks on the farm, then they return home. For them, we have

got \$211,000 to construct a small farm shed on the farm with a \$5,000 package. Sir, 42 such farm sheds will be constructed.

Commercial *yaqona* farming equipment package - \$170,000 has been allocated to assist 34 *yaqona* commercial farmers to purchase small equipment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, borehole support - \$109,000 has been allocated to assist 21 farmers with one-third contribution of \$5,000 to establish a borehole on their farm.

Beef stockyard support - \$70,000 has been allocated to assist 10 farmers to establish stockyard on their farm.

Goat breeding package - \$375,000 has been allocated to assist 25 farmers for goat breeding worth \$15,000 to each of those farms.

Draft Animal Power Initiative - \$60,000 has been allocated to assist those farmers in the remote areas who are using draft horse, to buy basic equipment such as chains, et cetera. We are looking at assisting 30 such farmers who are using horse power.

Sheep Shed Package - \$175,000 has been allocated to assist 29 farmers who will be provided with sheep shed material worth \$6,000.

Goat Shed Package - \$160,000 has been allocated to assist 26 farmers to construct goat sheds with materials worth \$6,000 from the Ministry.

Commercial Farmers' Equity Package - \$500,000 has been allocated to support farmers who would want to establish a processing shed, who want to purchase a large equipment like an excavator, bulldozer or tractor. They will acquire a loan from the Fiji Development Bank (FDB) and the Ministry will pay as a grant the 20 percent equity contribution for these farmers to FDB so that they can acquire a loan.

Home Biogas Digester Equipment - \$88,000 has been allocated so that we can assist 22 piggery farmers with utilisation of the waste material that they have to generate biogas.

Pig Farrowing Crate Support - \$32,000 has been allocated to assist six farmers for the establishment of pig farrowing crates for their farm.

Farm Mechanisation - \$1.16 million has been allocated to assist farmers buy machinery. Mr. Speaker, 25 tractors and five diggers will be purchased for co-operatives with one-third contribution by these groups and two-thirds by Government out of this \$1.16 million under programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$340,000 have been allocated to assist 10 co-operatives to purchase or procure rice harvesters. Rice is becoming a big industry now, we have witnessed a massive growth in rice production this year and we want to ensure that harvesting is not a binding constraint.

Organic Manure Development - \$40,000 has been allocated to establish organic manure at 10 locations from which the nearby farmers will obtain their organic manure for use on their farm.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to those, we have got several other programmes running concurrently, such as provision of planting material, stray animal campaign, Mushroom Industry Support and Rotuma Island Development Programme. These with other 28 initiatives will provide direct assistance to the farmers worth \$29 million is now unveiled, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It will be advertised and

we are looking forward to farmers, co-operatives and agro processing and exporters to apply for assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above demonstrates that those on the other side, including Mr. Chaudhry, who was saying that there was nothing much for the agriculture sector, they either do not know how to read the Budget Estimates or the Budget document, or they are getting into that normal bandwagon of just opposing anything that Government will say.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as they have rightly said, the people are smart. They know what we have done and they will make the decision based on our track record. Let us all mobilise our resources, use Government support and make our agricultural sector an example for all the other developing countries. Other countries in our agriculture forum are writing to us and asking how we have done that, how we have mobilised the entire country into agriculture. They are copying us but unfortunately, honourable Members on the other side just do not know and cannot see what is happening on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on my other portfolio of environment, Section 40(1) of the Constitution of Republic of Fiji states, and I quote:

“Every person has the right to a clean and healthy environment, which includes the right to have the natural world protected for the benefit of present and future generations through legislative and other measures.”

While bearing this mandate is a huge honour, with it comes a huge responsibility and mammoth opportunities as well. The Ministry of Environment, in the next financial year, will continue to ensure that Fiji’s natural environment is protected, resources are sustainably utilised, all developments are sustainable, the ozone layer is protected and waste is properly managed and pollution controlled.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our pursuit for a cleaner environment, the Ministry of Environment will continue to enforce the Environment Management Act 2005 and amendments thereof, the Ozone Depleting Substances Act 1998, the Endangered and Protected Species Act 2002 and the Litter Act 2008. This Budget is weighed against Government’s commitment into safeguarding our natural environment through an integrated expedient approach, ensuring that development does not come at the cost of our environment, even during this trying time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, environmental conservation initiatives keep us on track towards achieving our environmental commitments we have set out in the National Development Plan strategies such as the National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan 2020-2025 and global obligations under the various multilateral environmental treaties that we are party to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Environment is \$3.4 million for the fiscal year 2022-2023 of which, \$3 million is for operating expenditure. Sir, \$297,000 has been rolled over for the payment of the Naboro Landfill Stage 2, Cell 3 construction to cater for the waste generated in the Lami, Suva and Nausori corridor.

The completion of construction of Stage 2, Cell 3 of the Naboro Landfill will provide an additional space of 200,000 cubic metres and is expected to last for approximately three years. This will also depend on the amount of waste generated and received in the Landfill. The Ministry is working with the private sector and the communities across Fiji on a number of recycling initiatives to reduce the amount of waste ending up in the Landfill and the environment.

The Ministry is cognisant of the fact that preventing pollution reduces our financial environment cost overlays. Hence, curbing pollution, conserving and protecting Fiji's natural resources, including the oceans and coastal ecosystems such as coral reef, our forests, rivers, lakes and wild life, as always will be our top priority. The Ministry will continue its enforcement work in these areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Environment has implemented several environmental initiatives in the 2021-2022 financial year and this will continue in the 2022-2023 financial year. Sir, the Ministry of Environment merits and appreciates all its partnerships and will continue to collaborate with all likeminded agencies in meeting our environmental protection, conservation biodiversity goals.

To conclude, there cannot be any better time than this to get into commercial agriculture, but production and supply should be in response to market signals rather than grants and subsidies. The support that we have announced are to provide the initial leverage to win the new entrepreneurs to start walking and running. Only then will our agriculture sector be sustainable. The agriculture sector is an economic sector not a welfare sector, so its growth and surplus creation process will look after all those who will participate in this process.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge all honourable Members in Parliament to join me in endorsing and supporting this Budget. It is a Budget with a vision for all Fijians, led by the exemplary and decisive leadership of our honourable Prime Minister.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Budget Address of the honourable Minister of Economy. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for some of us this would be our last Budget Address especially with nine political parties all contesting the elections making it hard for all parties to meet the five percent threshold.

I am not sure whether our Budget speeches this week will convince our voters to vote for us. We can plan, strategise campaign and give out handouts but it still does not guarantee a return for anyone back in Parliament. The appointment and removal of any authority including this Government, pass governments and the new incoming government, that appointment alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, belongs to our heavenly Father.

Our voters are more politically matured and I have no doubt that they will vote for a government that will better serve and empower them. I urge everyone to vote in this year's General Elections. In 2018 we had a total of 637,000 registered voters but on polling day only 458,000 voted. A total of 178,995 had registered but did not vote and the majority comprised of youth, age was between 21 years and 30 years and that was 58,776.

I am not sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what this "Bula Budget Boom" is all about as our Government debt stands at \$9.1 billion, a debt that our people today and those yet to be born will bear. This Budget offers a continuing entrenched dependency on government and any creativity, innovation and individualism is forfeited. While this Budget brings its usual promises for the next five months, the implementation will be another altogether and the nation will be watching.

In the financial year 2019-2020 Budget, this Government announced that they will mandate all political parties contesting the election, cost their budgets in relation to manifestos to grant full transparency to the Fijian people in assessing the viability of political promises. Rest assured had this requirement be mandated back in 2014, this Government would have hung itself like Haman from the *Bible* many times over.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard of the rhetoric unprecedented economic growth and yet this Government is so proud of facilitating opportunities for our citizens to pick fruits in Australia when the Australian citizens themselves do not partake in this work. For the past 16 years, why have we not developed groves of our own so that we employ our people to work in Fiji and at the same time strengthen our food security? I would like to highlight key issues:

1. Budget of public consumption: I reiterate what I said in my contribution in the budget for the last financial year. We are simply maintaining a regime of operations that is unsustainable and which is clearly not conducive with the realities of our small economy. This Government is borrowing for consumption. We have already heard it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Our military budget alone is \$94.1 million, I question the timing of this increase as it can be seen as vote buying incentive to the military, no matter the rationale behind the increase.
2. Investors, with the removal of restrictions...

(Honourable Member interjected)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Talk to the hand.

... under the Investment Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, more investors will be coming to Fiji. We welcome investments but it needs to be quality investments. This is elections year and investors will be cautious with their investments, and given the state of our economy, we must not be quick to approve any investment that does not add value to our nation.

3. Dependency syndrome, this Government has brought about a dependency mentality syndrome and this has enslaved our people. A legacy that no government wants to be known for except this Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I quote from Thomas Sowell, “The welfare state is the oldest con game in the world. First, you take the people’s money away quietly and then you give some of it back to them flamboyantly.” This is exactly what this Government is doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is giving out \$180 per child below 18 years of age to parents with a combined income of less than \$50,000. Mind you, the PAYE is exempted for those earning \$30,000 and below. So, is this Government alluding that the new poverty threshold is now \$50,000? The irony, all backbenchers from the Government side including those of us in the Opposition, excluding the LOP, our annual salary of \$50,000 and this has been reduced by 20 percent. Does this mean that we are potential beneficiaries of this assistance as being below the new poverty line as alluded to? I am not sure that this is the intention as this type of assistance should be specifically targeted to the poorest of the poor.

While there has been a lot of hype about these handouts, the details are hazy, Mr. Speaker. Will this Budget only benefit children who are still at school or only children whose parents are both vaccinated?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- *Areh!*

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- These handouts, Mr. Speaker, are equivalent to the inflammatory statements made by Marie-Antoinette shouting during the French Revolution, I quote: “Let them eat

cake.” Her response to the starving peasants and her lack of awareness of the daily struggle of the ordinary people and this is what this Government is doing.

On work scheme, we have seen hundreds of our people depart for Australia under the Pacific Labour Scheme. I support an individual’s choice to choose what is best for their family especially when employment opportunities are not available for them in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, all our *iTaukei* MPs should be concerned that our villages are becoming empty under this Scheme. Who will attend to the village activities, duties, *teitei* and look after their families who are left behind? The Australian Government mentioned about permanent residency for our Pacific labourers and this includes their families as well. If this does eventuate, I have no doubt that the *iTaukei* population will sharply decline under this Scheme as they are the ones that I am seeing on the mainstream media leaving our shores.

Mr. Speaker, I came across a presentation and the heading of one of the tables was – Fiji Population Dynamics. This data carries a 10-year census population from 1986, 1996 and 2007 for the *iTaukei*, the Indians and General population. The General population would include our fellow Fijian ethnicities from the Solomon Islanders, Vanuatu, Rotumans, Rabi, local Chinese and mixed race communities and the 10-year interval saw a gradual ...

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

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- ... 5,000 population increase

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Honourable Member said “Indians”. Is she talking about Indian nationals? What is she talking about because no Indian national in Fiji can come through the Pacific Labour Scheme. They are Fijian citizens only, so what was she referring to? I will need a clarification, Sir.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, had the honourable Member listened well to my speech, this is what I said. I did not make any reference. I did not state anything about Indians leaving. All I said was this, “I have no doubt that the *iTaukei* population will sharply decline.” I did not say anything about Indians.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, I will be guided by you. You have not said anything, I will continue, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, she just lied.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- The Census for period 2007 to 2017, the general population saw an increase from 47,000 to 115,000; an increase of 67,000 people, 56 percent within 10 years ...

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

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- ... whilst the same period there is a slight decline.

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, the honourable Member has just lied to Parliament. Honourable Professor Prasad even heard her too and he shook his head when she said it. Everyone heard it. Honourable Koya was outside the Chamber, he heard it too. She just lied, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you have the floor. But there is a Point of Order.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I appreciate that, Mr. Speaker. I am coming to a very important point, Mr. Speaker, and I can see why the distraction. The Census for the period 2007 and

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable, just hold it for a while. There has been a Point of Order here regarding you saying the word "Indians". Now it is either you said it or not. If you said it, what was the reason for it?

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- She said it. Please, do not lie.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Indian or Indians?

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Sir, what I did say in regards to the general population, I made reference to the *iTaukei* and Indians. If this is the one that they are referring to. This is the one I am referring to and this is the data that has come before me and I am talking about the other ethnicities as well, Sir.

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Nothing wrong.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Now, the census for the period 2007 to 2017, the general population....

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

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, under the Pacific Labour Scheme, Fijian citizens are allowed to go to Australia not Indians, and she has said *iTaukei* and Indians.

Legally speaking, Sir, under the Constitution, all citizens of this country are called Fijians and she said 'Indians'. So legally speaking (and she is a lawyer) if she is saying Indians that means she means people who are citizens of India.

What I am saying, Sir, if she means 'citizens of India' they cannot go under the Pacific Labour Scheme. If she means 'Indo-Fijians', then she should say it. They are not Indians they are citizens of this country. When the Australians come and recruit people, Sir, they do not look at us as Indians, Fijians and Others as she always says.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they see us all as Fijian citizens and we are all Fijians. The honourable Member for the record again initially lied. She said she did not say 'Indians' and not after much persistence she is now admitted she used the word 'Indian'.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to clarify that.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have heard that.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- I continue then, Mr. Speaker. Now the population show an increase from 47,000 to 150,000, an increase of 67,000 people or 56 percent within 10 years whilst in the same period, there is a slight decline of Fijians of *iTaukei* and *Indian* ethnicity - the two dominant ethnicities in Fiji and this will decline further with the Pacific Labour Scheme and migration of our people.

The 56 percent increase of our general population from 2007 to 2017 surely would not have come from this minority ethnicity group that I have mentioned above. My question, Mr. Speaker, who are these people? Where did they come from? Where are they staying and whose jobs are they taking up? Why is this information not disclosed to the public? It would be fair to say that this increase came from new citizens and new ethnicities to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, we all know the removal of the Chief Institution. As he released the 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, it showed that three-quarter of Fiji's poorest people are the Fijians of *iTaukei* ethnicity.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- Sir, a Point of Order. Sir, it has been mentioned on the floor of this Parliament so many times that that is an incorrect statement because the survey that was done was incorrect. We pointed this out so many times, it has been elucidated both outside and inside of this Chamber and she continues to harp on about that and she is misleading Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Take note of that, honourable Member.

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Now, to add insult to injury, the World Bank corrected the Bureau of Statistics' HIES Report that the National Poverty Rate for 2019-2020 is now estimated at 24.1 percent, compared to the 29.9 percent previously recorded. It is quite odd that the World Bank corrected this but when I see how they have given out money to our Government, perhaps it is in the interest that any restriction on investments should be removed, especially when their money is being used.

Mr. Speaker, I have heard it so many times when I came in to Parliament that we are being labelled as racists. When we called for any ethnic data, I am certainly not racist. However, when I see an ethnicity being marginalised and discriminated, rest-assured, Mr. Speaker, I will call it out.

All nations including Fiji are working towards the 17th Sustainable Development Goals. If the data is telling us that the indigenous people of this country are the poorest in our nation, it is all the more reason to bring back the affirmative action for the *iTaukei*. This is not racism, we are an ethnicity of less than 500,000 people in the world. Affirmative action for indigenous people, Mr. Speaker, in other parts of the world has been done and is still going on.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to Social Welfare Assistance, we need to have a holistic understanding of those that actually need it. Breaking it down to ethnicity, age, income brackets so when assistance is given it is targeted to those that really need it. The track record of the \$360 and \$180 handouts last year saw liquor shops benefitting the most. In fact the handout was discriminatory as it only benefitted the vaccinated and if this next one of handout has the same vaccination criteria then some families that truly need this assistance will not benefit at all.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- No vaccination requirement

HON. T. WAQANIKA.- Well, I am glad I am hearing that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we all know about this USP saga but what we did not know until we saw it on mainstream media was that, there were five inquiries carried out by respective organisations and an

independent person that cleared the USP Vice-Chancellor (VC) for any alleged mismanagement. How many inquiries will be done to satisfy this Government? In the event, an independent inquiry was sanctioned and chosen by the Fiji Government still clears the VC, this Government will still be displeased of the outcome as it does not fit into their narrative.

Since 2021, no grant has been released to USP and it may come a time that the USP Council makes the decision to increase student fees. I have no doubt that this Government will be the first one to jump and condemn the increase as majority of our USP students are Fijians. Withholding the USP Grant contradicts this Government slogan of “they leave no one behind”. The locals are the largest number of employees at USP and majority of the students are Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now address my shadow portfolio, first, the Local Government. The honourable Minister mentioned that there will be a review of the Local Government Act and I support it wholeheartedly. In fact, when I left Suva City Council in 2006, the review of the Act was always in the pipeline but for the Ministry it was never implemented. This Budget is Government Budget it is allocated \$145,000 for a pre-feasibility investigation of a construction of the Viti Levu Cross Country Highway. This money would be best allocated to the review of the Act as the priorities surely override the feasibility highway study.

On city rates, the biggest challenge for all Municipalities is the non-payment of city rates as most ratepayers do not see it as a priority. In March this year, the honourable Minister for Local Government reported that we had a total of \$62.8 million in unpaid debts. The loss of jobs during COVID-19 pandemic would have seen a lot of ratepayers falling behind in their city rates. To reduce this financial hardship, Government should consider ratepayers accessing their FNPF to clear their arrears as this scheme is currently not in place. To get a loan or the discipline of a compulsory monthly deduction towards the clearance of arrears would be a challenge for many, hence the proposal of accessing one's FNPF to secure their homes.

The other option, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to consider our young ratepayers to access their FNPF to pay for the rates on their family properties, despite their names not registered on the title. This is a way of securing their family properties and ensuring that it is not so low.

Even better, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had a discussion yesterday with the honourable Minister. Look at removing the interest component as Municipalities are not financial institutions and give a discount on the principal amount only. This should reduce the arrears and get money for all municipal authorities.

The other issue Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the increase of squatters within the municipal boundaries. This has put pressure on all Local Authorities but a majority of our unskilled force comes from squatter settlements. We simply cannot push them out to the periphery as this would have an adverse impact in terms of access to education and to employment. We need to accommodate and build more Public Rental Board (PRB) flats within Municipalities and make housing affordable and accessible to our low income earners.

The Housing Authority concept does not work for our low income earners. It works for our middle class, hence the push for more PRB flats. The demand for affordable housing will continue to rise but whether our people can afford it is another issue. We now have civil servants stay in squatter settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the 2014 Budget announcements till today, this Government has been saying that they will continue to help resettle and upgrade housing of those Fijians living in squatter settlements. While I acknowledge the newly-built affordable housing projects, this is not enough as

the demand for more affordable housing rise. We now have the Informal Settlement Act and this Government imposes a harsh penalty on a squatter settler when they refuse to move away from an area which they have no title to.

The penalty to the squatters, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is so ridiculous. They are already the poorest of the poor and yet, they are penalised with the \$20,000 penalty or a term not exceeding 10 years or both. Why are the squatters treated like common criminals with these harsh penalties? Such penalties are dished out for severe criminal offences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have 83 percent of Fijians of iTaukei ethnicity who reside in PRB flats and the high demand for PRB flats continues as the rental ranges from \$15 per week to \$25 per week. Then you have the new Raiwai PRB flats and that, I believe, is from \$99 per week for one bedroom to \$100 per week for two bedrooms. With such price range and the locations of PRB flats, we need to build more to accommodate our very low income earners.

Now, we are hearing of squatters getting evicted from Nanuku Settlement, Khalsa Road and many more will follow suit as the legal lessee has the legal right to remove a squatter from their land. I am concerned for the squatter settlers of Fiji, especially our minority ethnic groups as they reside on land that do not belong to them. These are the Solomon Islanders, the Vanuatuans, the Rabians, Wallis and Futuna. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same as well for our Indian ethnicities. In fact, they are the poorest of the poorest because we, the *iTaukei*, can always go back. This group of ethnicities needs security for tenure, land that they can call their own.

This Government budgeted \$9 million for the Fiji International Golf Tournament in their 2017-2018 Budget. If they can support such an incentive, surely they can set aside money to buy land for this group of people and give them ownership to land.

Now with restrictions, we move from the Investment Act, we will be having all sorts of investors coming to Fiji and they will want a return of their investment and our squatters are staying on land investors will find lucrative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen unprecedented laws passed in this august Parliament from 2014 till to date. Standing Order 51 is a weapon used by this Government to pass laws through a majority vote and this Bill does not go through a thorough consultative process. We are not giving enough time, our voters expect better from us and rushing a Bill through this Parliament questions the transparency that this Government harps on. The irony of Standing Order 51 when the new Government comes in, they will use the same provision to bring in quickly new laws and repeal some of the laws that they have already implemented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a point on justice, Resident Magistrates have contracts up to three years. This is totally unacceptable. The Director of Public Prosecutions is a constitutional appointment and under the Constitution, it is seven years. The same tenure should apply to all our Resident Magistrates.

Whilst we appreciate the presence of foreign Judicial Officers we have capable and competent Fijians that can take up these positions. We need to look after our people first. Overall, the appointment of the Judiciary must be totally independent from the Executive and remove the consultation provision with the Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, my party - SODELPA has two key values that guide us: our Christian faith and the *Vanua*. In 1835, the *Vanua* and our chiefs accepted and embraced Christianity. We open our Parliament sittings with a Prayer and the first time the Name of Jesus was mentioned

by the late Speaker in her Prayer, it was objected to by the honourable Attorney-General because we are a secular State (that is under the Constitution).

I cannot comprehend how the Christians who supported the FijiFirst Government accepted that. I guess they fear this Government more than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I look forward to the days sooner rather than later when the name of Jesus Christ is mentioned again in the Speaker's Prayer. Only Christians of this nation can vote a God-fearing Party that will bring back the Name of Jesus in our Parliamentary Prayer and this is what SODELPA stands for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problems of our nation including this deficit budget, it can be resolved when we put Christ first starting first from our homes. When we remove Christ as the head of our nation, we remove His blessings and His coverings.

The *Vanua*, the Surfing law legalises access to any surfing area and this includes water sports activities as well from the sea to the rivers and streams right up to the highlands. It gives absolute vesting of all interest in any surfing area to the Director of Lands. This surfing law was introduced by the Government in 2010, however, their initial support and idea was mooted by Rabuka back in 2nd September, 2006 where he said that "all *iTaukei* land and *qoliqoli* should be nationalised". On the same statement in 2006, Rabuka said "to remove the GCC" the same GCC that granted and supported him immunity in his 1987 *coup*, it was done, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It seems that whatever Rabuka says, FijiFirst implements it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reserve my support for this deficit budget as we have not seen whether the promises made will be implemented.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin, there is a famous English proverb, "No job is big or small, only thinking makes it so." Through performance of any odd job if one is respectfully able to earn a living, then it should not be considered too small or undignified. I say this because it is an insult to our people, the seasonal workers. I am sorry to say this, but honourable Waqanika, when you suddenly laughed and said that they went for fruit picking even when Australians are not doing that, I felt that it was an insult to our seasonal workers.

The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, our guests in the gallery and our fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula vinaka, salaam wale akum, namaste* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I humbly rise to address this august Parliament on the 2022-2023 National Budget, announced by the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy on Friday, 15th July, 2022. I applaud the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his very hardworking team at the Ministry of Economy for once again formulating a Budget that echoes the principles of our Government through fiscal policies.

The last few years have been nothing short of a horror movie which stuns the whole world and the plot just gets coming from living through a pandemic to facing the effects of war, fear and instability affected many countries, and Fiji was no exception. However, exceptional governance and the gallant leadership of our Government led by our honourable Prime Minister has given every Fijian a sense of security in the most darkest days of uncertainty that loomed over our people and our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our ship has sailed through dangerous waters but we all remained safe from the havoc. This was merely possible because our captain had only one interest at heart and it was the safety and security of our people, our Fijians. At this juncture, I whole heartedly thank our honourable Prime Minister for his decisive leadership and his vision for all Fijians.

Our economic recovery and our tremendous economic comeback is all to the foresight, the confidence and the decisiveness of our leaders and to the patience and belief of our people, our Fijians. With this together, I join the honourable Attorney-General and the honourable Prime Minister in thanking our people for their patience and support. *Vinaka vakalevu* to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation has been allocated a total budget of \$147.7 million and we are indeed pleased with this allocation as we continue to serve vulnerable Fijians. Overall, there is a 6.7 percent increase in the Ministry's budget from the fiscal year 2021-2022. Operating budget for the Ministry has increased by 9.1 percent and we wholeheartedly welcome this increase. The COVID-19 and the current situations around the world continue to impact and shape the future economy and the financial landscape.

The Ministry for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, with the budgetary allocation will continue to administer programmes that protect and serve the most vulnerable and contribute to the country's poverty alleviation strategies. The Ministry's focus remains, which is to ensure families and communities are supported through social welfare programmes, gender empowerment initiatives that enabled the protection of children and vulnerable persons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the World Bank states, social protection programmes are at the hard work boosting human capital for the worst most vulnerable. They empower people to be healthy, pursue education and seek opportunity to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. This National Budget reflects compassion and care for every Fijian, especially to the most vulnerable Fijians through the various social protection platform within the Ministry.

To begin with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Social Welfare under the Ministry is responsible for the administration of Government's social protection programmes which provide support to vulnerable families, children and persons living with disabilities and our senior citizens. I thank the budget for the continuation of funding for the following programmes administered by us:

1. Poverty Benefit Scheme with an allocation of \$34 million, whereby 22,622 households benefit from this assistance with an increase of \$1 million, we can now target 2,000 more households in the new fiscal year.
2. The Child Protection Allowance with an allocation of \$13.7 million which supports over 9,000 households with children under 18 years of age with a \$2.7 million increase we aim to assist 1,000 more households.
3. Food Voucher Programme for Rural Pregnant Mothers with an allocation of \$0.8 million, assist nearly 2,000 women.
4. The Social Pension Scheme with an allocation of \$55 million is the largest social welfare programme budget with 47,461 recipients, this is for honourable Leawere's information. With an increase of \$2 million, we aim to assist 3,000 more elderly persons. So, a total of over 50,000 Fijians and very shocking that Members of the Opposition consider these programmes as Freebies when access to social protection in all its form is a basic right for our people. Do they not want aging with dignity to be a reality?
5. The Disability Scheme with an allocation of \$10.7 million, an increase of \$0.7 million assist over 10,000 persons with disabilities and I would like to thank honourable Kepa for acknowledging the work done by our disability sector in Rewa. Thank you, honourable Kepa, we provide services not only to Rewa but throughout Fiji without any discrimination.

6. The Bus Fare Subsidy Scheme for older persons and Persons living with Disabilities with an allocation of \$10 million, currently a total of 51,700 recipients are benefiting from this Scheme and we acknowledge a budgetary increase of \$4 million to continue this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an estimated allocation of \$124.2 million and accounts for over 90 percent of the Ministry's total allocated budget. Our Social Welfare Assistance Allowances in most cases are the main source of income for destitute families and individuals and the Fijian Government has paid particular attention to ensuring that this sole source of income was not taken away or reduced for those dependent on it, even when the country suffered the greatest economic blow amidst the crisis, in fact top-ups were provided and another has been allocated in this year's budget to help our most vulnerable Fijians.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wholeheartedly welcome the additional payment of \$30 a month for the next six months to all existing social welfare recipients, government pensions and aftercare fund recipients. These recipients will receive a total of \$180 over a period of six months, this relief top-up is expected to benefit over 100,000 Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this budget pragmatically offers relief to those who need it the most. For instance, the Cash Support Programme for vulnerable families under this Initiative, Fijian families earning below an annual income of \$50,000 will be eligible for cash assistance for up to \$30 per month per child in each family which amounts to \$180 over a period of six months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the official opponents from the other side of Parliament continue to disregard and condemn every effort by the FijiFirst Government to assist ordinary Fijians. They call it handouts, they call it freebies and breeding a culture of dependency, et cetera. All I have to say to my fellow Fijians is beware, it will be all snatched away. God forbid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of child abuse and neglect can be profound. Research shows that child abuse and neglect is often associated with adverse health and mental health outcomes of children and those negative effects.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- There is a Point of Order

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think the honourable Assistant Minister is creating fear, lying and they do it outside of Parliament, they do it inside of Parliament. They go out there and say, "Oh, the next government comes in and take away your social welfare," that is what she is saying.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The Point of Order is that, she is misleading Parliament and misleading the people of this country. That is the fear, they go and talk in the community, Mr. Speaker.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You are a joke!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are lying!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Honourable Member, you have the floor.

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The impact of child abuse and neglect can be profound. Research shows that child abuse and neglect is often associated with adverse health and mental health outcomes in children and those negative effects can last a lifetime.

In addition to the impact on child, child abuse and neglect also has profound, broad implications on communities. Our children are the foundation and the future of this country and the Fijian Government has made commitments at local and international levels to ensure that Fiji is able to prioritise the safety and protection of our children. In recognising the Fijian Government's strong commitment to child protection, the Ministry has been mandated by various legislations to uphold the rights of Fijian children. Our aim to these mandates are recognising the importance of the ongoing work of the Child Services Unit.

Under the Department of Social Welfare, the Ministry has been allocated \$100,000 to start the process in establishing the Department of Children. This Department will be specialised to deliver services that are in line with legislative commitments and will indeed strengthen child protection and child welfare service across the country. Additionally, the Ministry has been allocated \$100,000 towards the refurbishment works required for the Fiji Juvenile Rehabilitation and Development Centre, showing Government's commitment to invest in our youth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry strongly believes in close working partnerships with organisations whose activities and output support the Ministry's strategic objectives and those who provide services in the area of child protection and child safeguarding, older persons, persons with disability, gender equality, women empowerment and ending violence against women and girls and in recognising the need to strengthen existing partnerships and to build on a new partnership.

The Fijian Government has provided the Ministry with \$588,000 for the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons, \$300,000 for grants to organisations for persons with disability, \$300,000 for grant to voluntary organisations which is an increase from the previous financial year, as this year the Government has included \$100,000 to support organisations assisting vulnerable women and men that are psychologically challenged and who find themselves homeless and living on the streets. We care! The Government cares!

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Hear, hear!

HON. V.K. BHATNAGAR.- This grant will provide shelter and care for this vulnerable group.

There is \$120,000 for the National Council for Older Persons and \$90,000 as grants to organisations for older persons. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we as a State, continue to include our senior citizens in all phases of development. The Ministry continues to oversee the responsibilities for both existing and potential platforms of enhancing service improvements for older persons in the community settings, as well as those in institutional aged-care settings.

Fiji's commitments to aged care settings is strengthened and projected in local, regional and global analysis towards progress on aging within different national context. It is in this regard that the Ministry has been allocated a new budget activity of \$45,000 titled as Aging with Dignity to achieve Government's mandate of leaving no older person behind. My humble respect to all our senior citizens of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government through the Department of Women is committed to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Before I highlight the programmes under the Department, I would like to highlight that our efforts in response to gender-based violence has been globally recognised which is the result of a coordinated response and targeted efforts by all stakeholders, including civil society partners and I believe everyone in Fiji needs to be proud of this achievement captured in the UN Tracker Report. Noting this, the Government will continue to provide budgetary support to ensure that the Department continues to provide an advisory role to Government to ensure

the integration of all women and girls' needs, interest, consoles, contributions and prospective into policies, strategies, programmes and budgets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2022-2023 Budget reaffirms this Government's commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women with an allocation of \$300,000 for the Department of Women, an increase of 63 percent. I wish honourable Salote Radrodro was here, from the previous fiscal year to implement its core programmes under the Women's Plan of Action (WPA). Under the WPA key thematic areas, the National Women Machinery will be focusing on ending violence against all women and girls, promoting women's economic empowerment and improving protection from their resilience to climate change and disaster for all women and girls.

These priorities and are complemented with four cutting areas including Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development; Women and Girls Leadership; Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights; and Gender Statistics. Major initiatives have secured donor funding for the design, development and implementation and the WPA will support this mainly for the participation of the National Women's Machinery and coordination advocacy role of the Department.

An additional \$100,000 has been allocated for NGO grants and \$400,000 for women institutions also an allocation of \$25,000 to the Fiji Women Federation will see a robust towards strengthening its role in safeguarding women human rights and interest. The Barefoot College Construction has been allocated \$1.1 million for the continuation and completion of the project. The challenges we face are interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, leadership, collective and coordinated efforts are needed now more than ever to transform structures of inequality and discrimination and put us firmly on a path towards substantive equality for all women and girls in Fiji. It is a process that requires partnerships, transformative approaches, new ways of working and solutions, improve data, sufficient technical resources, effective coordination mechanisms and structures and commitments to foster an enabling policy, and budgetary institutional environment that adequately ensures the rights of women and girls and tackles the barriers they face and meets their particular needs and interest.

Accordingly the Ministry has invested in and leads a whole of Government Initiative such as the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development (GTICD) along with the Gender Responsive Budget (GRB) which are crucial to ensure delivery for all Fijian women and girls. I am pleased to highlight that within the 2020-2022 fiscal years, the Ministry successfully rolled out the Institutional Capacity Development across nine agencies as pilots, engaging up to 80 Government Officials.

As an outcome of Institutional Capacity Development selected programmes from the nine pilot agencies were allocated Gender Responsive Budget to increase the participation and inclusion of women such as \$100,000 for Spice Farming Programme, \$50,000 for Vanilla Farming Programme, \$150,000 for poultry and \$300,000 for Women in Agriculture Programmes and Fisheries Food Security Programmes \$600,000.

The National Women's Expo has been a signature event for women economic empowerment in Fiji. This coming fiscal year Government will re-introduce the programme at the divisional level with the aim of recognising women's talents, skills and moreso valuing authentic art and crafts, and linking women to markets domestically, regionally and globally. Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$300,000 has been allocated for this initiative.

Furthermore, I am pleased to say that with the new Women Economic Empowerment Programme - \$100,000, the Ministry will provide grants to women entrepreneurs across the country, specifically those who operate their income-generating activities in the informal sector and single mothers working from

home. The grant targets women entrepreneurs who have already started their small businesses or are trying to build up, and for those who have already invested their own resources in one way or another and have potential, we will support them to become successful entrepreneurs. Sir, \$1 million has been allocated in Head 50 to assist women entrepreneurs who wish to loan funds from the Fiji Development Bank. The billions will be used as 10 percent equity contribution on the loan component specifically to women entrepreneurs, so I urge all my fellow women to go for it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fijian Government strongly believes in accountability and transparency and one of the tools for promoting this strong monitoring and evaluation system. Just in mind Poverty and Monitoring Unit with allocation of \$625,800 to continue to monitor and report on poverty alleviation programmes implemented by respective Government agencies.

Furthermore the Unit is tasked to review and develop a five-year integrated National Alleviation Programme Framework. Additionally the Unit will play an active role in the formulation of a national poverty advisory arm of Government, the National Coordinating Body for Poverty Alleviation Programmes (NCBPAP) which emanated critical pathways in fostering partnerships and addressing poverty through an integrated and coordinated effort. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also glad about the increment and the allocation to our Rights, Empowerment and Cohesion (REACH) project whereby we have been allocated \$110,000, allowing us to take services of the essential service providers right to the doors of our people in remote areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since yesterday, I have repeatedly been hearing my colleagues from the other side of Parliament saying that this Budget is an Election Budget. Basically Mr. Speaker, Sir, they wanted a Budget that provided no support to our ordinary Fijians – did they want that Budget? Some people are dealing with the soaring cost of living? Do they want us to discontinue our Social Protection Programs? Do they want us to cut civil service pays? Maybe instead of opposing our prudent National Budget, the Opposition Members should have put their heads together and come up with an alternative Budget rather than attending dinner parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, we are pleased with this allocation and I thank the honourable Minister for Economy for considering our needs and service oriented ministry assessing the most vulnerable groups in Fiji. We are also very happy with the overall Budget as it has been thoughtfully and compassionately crafted to support the ordinary Fijians in various forms. The Budget is in line with what that Government believes which is a better Fiji for everyone and ensuring no one is left behind.

I fully support this Budget because this is indeed a people's Budget. I thank you. Mr. Speaker, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu* and God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for a break and we will resume in half-an-hour. When we resume, these are the following speakers:

1. Hon. Lt. Col. I.B. Seruiratu;
2. Hon. P.W. Vosanibola;
3. Hon. J. Sigarara;
4. Hon. M.D. Bultavu; and
5. Hon. J. Usamate.

Honourable Sharma will not be speaking as he is sick, then there are five other speakers after that. I have given you the order so you can be here, not like the first session this afternoon. Thank you, we adjourn.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.32 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.06 p.m.

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in this august Parliament to lend my full support to the 2022-2023 National Budget. I would like to begin by congratulating the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team for safely steering our economy in the last two years under the most challenging of circumstances. Despite, our worst economic crisis in history, driven by the global pandemic and the all-time high global inflation this Government has taken the economy from the depth of its worst crisis to its greatest year ever of record growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately many of the politicians on the other side (I am using the word “politicians”) of this august Chamber have continued to distort facts and reality without offering and alternatives to move the country forward. In my last Parliament contribution to the Budget debate, I talked about the difference between politicians and true leaders, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because true leaders are focused on the good of the people and the future generation, whereas for politicians it is all about winning the elections. They must appreciate the fact that our journey towards economic recovery is progressing well as clearly manifested in this new budget. Through their cynical observation and comments, they missed the enormous evidence of progress amidst the smokescreen of extremist propaganda and the confinement of short-term perspective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the accomplishment of the FijiFirst Government under the visionary, strong and decisive leadership of Prime Minister Bainimarama will last, despite efforts by his critics and political opponents to extinguish them. We had promised the people of Fiji during the darkest days of the crisis that our economy would recover from the pandemic. It is through Government’s foresight and the decisive leadership by the honourable Prime Minister that we are able to stabilise our economy through this period of economic challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the many uncertainties grappling our global economies today, Government couched a compassionate, sensible and disciplined budget that provides the economic and environment to support recovery and stability. This Budget is projecting a future that can safeguard Fiji’s economy despite the circumstances. However, our collective national efforts to rise above the impacts of the pandemic and the global inflation is continuously being challenged by the increasing misinformation to discredit our genuine efforts to support those in need.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this Budget, the Government has rolled out some powerful and necessary stimulus to support individuals and families suffering from this global inflation. These includes; the removal of the VAT from 21 essential items, inflation mitigation package, which includes payout of about \$180 per child in a six-month period; \$180 pay out for all pensioners; \$180 for all tertiary students and a bus fare subsidy of 10 percent across the board. The Budget before this Chamber is one that helps us all and steers us to recovery and stability. The Government has yet again put Fiji first in our 2022-2023 National Budget by putting the needs of all Fijians first.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. LT. COL. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my contribution on the Bill before Parliament will be twofold. Speaking briefly on my portfolio responsibility as the Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management and later on as my portfolio responsibility as Minister responsible for Defence, National Security and Policing. Before I focus on the Budget itself, let me just make a few comments.

The 2022-2023 Budget is a good one - a Budget for all Fijians. Unfortunately, partition politics overtakes the greater good for most honourable Members of the Opposition. I wish to acknowledge the contribution by honourable Aseri Radrodro and honourable Naulumatua - very well balanced and it is delivered out of sincerity and honesty. I wish to thank them and acknowledge them for their contribution. Unfortunately, for the Leader of the National Federation Party, it is his worst budget address in the seven years that I have heard him in this Parliament. It is the worst address by the honourable Leader of NFP.

I am also concerned about some of the statements in this Parliament and I need to mention this as Minister responsible for national security. Let us not forget the fact that one of the most powerful and worrying forces which drives indigenous ethnonationalism in Fiji is Christian fundamentalism. We need to be reminded in this august Parliament because some are seeing themselves as spiritual guardians of indigenous rights. The *Bible* is clear in Mathew 5:16 and I quote: "Let your light shine before men, so that they see your god deeds and glorify your father in heaven."

Let me go onto, it says smokescreen, it is an election budget. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has been consistent all these years. As I have stated, we are not worried about elections, we are worried about delivering for the people. Let me give you a few examples. The Monasavu Dam was constructed way back in the 1980s. We have had elections after elections, we have had government after government, but electricity was not provided to the people of Naitasiri. Under the honourable Prime Minister and under the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government, electricity is now in Naitasiri. We have electricity in upper Namosi, we have electricity in Ba, we have electricity in Ra and we have electricity all over Fiji. It is not because of elections, but because people deserve it. They have been overlooked over the years. They deserve it.

The honourable Radrodro mentioned and emphasised on the importance of infrastructure because this is linked to economic development and progress, and this is something that we look forward to hear from the honourable Professor. Unfortunately, he is talking about the two-men rule. Infrastructure is so important. We tarsealed the Nabouwalu-Dreketi Road, not because of elections, because it is needed and it is important for the economy and development. That is a Look North Policy but investors would not want to go to the North, they are talking about investment in the private sector but there is lack of infrastructure in the Northern Division.

In Nadroga, we tarsealed the West Bank because of agriculture that is within the Sigatoka Valley. There are so many others. We have built about 63 bridges out of the 53 that were identified during honourable Tikoduadua's days as Minister for Infrastructure. We have constructed 63 out of those bridges that have been identified and that will continue. Yet they talk about the debt, logic and common sense will tell us that we will just do maintenance on the Nabouwalu-Dreketi Road and we will also look at maintaining all the other bridges that we have constructed.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition is now saying that there is lesser allocation for capital expenses, that is logical because we are doing most of the work now. When you top that and relate that to the debt level, in years to come, there will be less of our commitment into the capital expenses because we are now investing in infrastructure.

On that note, if we look at previous budgets by previous Governments, when you look at the ratio between capital expenses and operational expenses, it was on 80:20 percent ratio - 80 percent on operational expenses and 20 percent on capital expenses. We changed that - 60 percent operational and 40 percent capital and that is why you will see most of the investments are now happening throughout Fiji.

We are continuing to build Community Access Roads. Honourable Rasova, you go now to Kadavu, we are linking Kavala to Vunisea, something that has never been done before. Now, the road is in Naqalotu and we will take it to Tawava and then to Lomati and link it up from Daviqele. We have cut the road now to the last village in Namosi; Wainilotulevu. Right now we are linking Ra Province with Naitasiri, cutting the road to Roma. We are also planning to link the road between Namosi and Naitasiri from Wainimakutu to Nasava. There are plans. I do not know whether honourable Saukuru has been visiting rural Fiji and the one next to him as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Where are they getting their information from?

Rural Fiji now is thriving because the Government has invested heavily in infrastructure in the rural areas. When it talks about decentralisation of services, let me highlight this, this Government, not driven by elections have constructed a Government station in Kavala in Kadavu. We have also constructed a District Office station in Nasau, Koro. We have also constructed a District Office station in Qarani, Gau; Dada in Namosi, Wainikoro in Macuata, Kubulau in Bua, Lekutu in Bua and Namarai in Ra. You name it! Not because of elections, that is part of the civil service reform, decentralisation and empowerment of our people because they deserve it. It is not about elections and that is why the honourable Leader of NFP is so worried. He is strategically paralysed.

(Laughter)

He is just dusting cobwebs and sleeping with the Leader of People's Alliance Party but let us kill the spider, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me tell the honourable Leader of NFP, the people know the honourable Prime Minister. The people know the honourable Leader of SODELPA, they also know the honourable Leader of NFP, we do not have to talk a lot to them because our deeds and actions speak for itself and have proven record as well. I can go on with a list but let me go to my Ministries very quickly and then I will come back to some of the issues.

On Rural Development and Disaster Management, this Budget supports Government's aspirations to build stronger and more vibrant rural and maritime communities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they keep quoting about the HIES Report. I, for one, follow rural development very closely and am surprised but not surprised because things have changed but it is because of the return in investment that Government has done over the years. Honourable Waqanika probably talked about the 29 percent reduction to 21 percent poverty. Did she realise what the incidence of poverty in Fiji was few years back?

When I was Commissioner Northern, incidence of poverty in Vanua Levu was 53 percent. In that HIES Report that they are quoting, Mr. Speaker, what is surprising compared to the previous report, I know this very well, before the 2019-2020, rural poverty increased except Vanua Levu, urban poverty decreased. In this recent HIES Report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, urban poverty in all the regions (east, west, central and north), they all decreased. That is because of the level of investment, not because of politics, not because of elections but the people deserve it and we will reap the rewards in years to come.

Again, Government through this Budget has allocated \$15 million to FRA towards connecting our rural inaccessible communities to economic centres and key public services. It is encouraging to note that funding has been set aside to upgrade the Lagi to Tawake Village Road and to construct a new road from Tawake to Wainika near Udu Point in Vanua Levu. I wish to remind the honourable Navurelevu as well that we have already started the road to Valovoni that he has been telling us. We are also, for your information, considering cutting a road from Naiyarabale to Valovoni which is a better option rather than going through Nasasa in Macuata. So, it is all in place, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I wish to lend my support and appreciation on the plan to commence a pre-feasibility study in the construction of Viti Levu Cross Country Highway, as of course supported by the honourable Radrodro as well. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Government as well for the provision of \$19.3 million to EFL towards the rural grid extension and housing wiring works. Of course, the honourable Minister has talked about the solar systems. Let me also say that this Budget funding will provide \$4.9 million, allocated for rural water supply. I was in Sawa Village, Tailevu last week and next week, the Minister will also be travelling to Nasaibitu in Wainibuka. These are some of the projects that will improve rural water and rural sanitation.

On Government Shipping Services (GSS), the allocation of \$3.4 million which will subsidise and continue to cushion the impacts of rising fuel costs and ensure business continuity for vessel operators that service the uneconomical routes under the franchise scheme. The honourable Naulumatua talked about digital infrastructure in Fiji and I wish to commend the Ministry of Economy again for allocating funds for the construction of the 240 unconnected and poorly connected areas. The proposal for the financial year is to construct the first 15 towers to connect at least 96 out of the unconnected or poorly connected areas which will be a big boost to the rural economies in connecting Fijians locally and abroad. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to ensure that the rate of return on Government investment in rural infrastructure is realised, the Government through this Budget will continue to invest in the agriculture sector through the farm mechanisation and the Minister has already talked about that.

Let me go to the Ministry of Defence very quickly. I wish to focus my address on the Ministry of Defence, National Security and Policing. The Ministry provides leadership over Fiji's national security efforts through the formulation and effective implementation of policies, legislations, programmes and initiatives related to maintaining and enhancing Fiji's security and defence, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know, the strategic threat environment through comprehensive analysis by Regional Defence Coordinating Groups has been viewed to evolve rapidly and intensify the complex regional security dynamics. The diverse threats faced in the region inclusively captures both traditional and non-traditional security threats which position the region to be more vulnerable and susceptible to both traditional and non-traditional security threats, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I wish to again acknowledge the allocation given to the Ministry which, in fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, increased by 3.23 percent with the total allocation of \$14.9 million and I am also thankful because as the honourable Minister responsible for Veteran Affairs, I do acknowledge the allocation of \$12.4 million to the After Care Fund Office. Again, this is not about Elections, honourable Members, but this is the Government that remembered our veterans who went to Christmas Islands. Government after Government, Elections after Elections, no one addressed that issue. This is the same Government that increased the allocation to the *turaga-ni-koro* and the *mata-ni-tikina*, the advisory councillors, village nurses and of course increased the allowance for our peacekeeping troops. That is what this Government is doing.

On Republic of Fiji Military Forces, there has been some comments on it, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Again, they deserve the increase, particularly for the \$5 million increase in the Operating Budget and the \$1.9 million increase in Capital Budget, resulting in the increase of \$0.2 million. Of course, again the allocation that has been given for their capital works and most importantly, to subsidise the pay rates as from 2013 involving lodging allowance and service allowance, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I will not go into the details but I do acknowledge the work of the Commissioner of Police in his restructure as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and that will see that the police reform will continue and that will mean better security for our people.

Overall, I do support the 2022-2023 National Budget, a budget for the people by a Government that cares for all Fijians, and I have no hesitation and, again, reiterate my support for the 2022-2023 Budget.

HON. P.W. VOSANIBOLA.- The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public sitting in the gallery and to all Fijians watching and listening within the comfort of their homes; I rise to respond to the motion before the House and thank you, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to do so.

At the outset, the 2022-2023 Budget which was delivered on 15th July carries a backdrop of increasing global commodity prices which include foods and oil, the supply chain disruption emanating from the Russian-Ukraine War and continuous increase in debt which results in high cost of living in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has survived and moved on from the COVID-19 pandemic which forced the closure of international borders, resulting in two years of stagnation and negative growth experienced not only in Fiji but throughout the world. Fiji's COVID-19 cases recently increased to 67,191 and deaths reached 870. Sir, over 125,000 people lost their jobs and mainly those in the tourism sector. Some have returned to work while others are still in the process of securing an employment. The honourable Minister for Economy claims that this is the Budget for the welfare of all the people of Fiji but let us bear in mind that this Budget was delivered on a General Elections year and it is out to buy votes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji are not so naïve and cannot be fooled anymore as they know the truth about the state of affairs of our country. Although we have gone through three waves of COVID-19 with different intensities, we have to live with the pandemic and must continue to make necessary adjustments to live with the new norm. Again, we are now facing an uncertain future because of the crisis in Europe which has led to the increase in price of petroleum products and supply chains for goods and services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the latest economic review released in June suggests a growth forecast. In the 2022-2023 Budget, it has been revised from 11 percent to 12.4 percent, despite the fact that global trends have been revised downward from 4.1 percent to 2.9 percent in 2022.

In the honourable Minister for Economy's address, he declared very proudly that the "Bula Boom" is back, but we should keep in mind that the forecast is being derived from a lower economic base. Therefore, it is misleading that we will experience a Bula Boom as we are still on the journey towards economic and social recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that being said, necessary structural adjustments need to be made to ensure the survival of our nation, particularly important is the need to be very innovative and develop better measures and implement relevant and practical policies to cushion and address the challenges facing our small vulnerable homes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is one of the most developed island nations in the Pacific region, still more than 31 percent of the population lives under poverty and the country is heavily dependent on foreign aid and remittances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget, as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Economy is being termed as prudent, responsible, visionary and focussed on economic recovery and reducing the

impact of inflation affecting the people of Fiji and also this will be the last National Budget developed by the Government prior to the General Elections late this year or even early January next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bainimarama Government having power for the last 16 years and yet the honourable Minister for Economy continues to blame previous Governments or other extraordinary events such as pandemic or natural disaster for Government's failure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is so much on boasting and claim about the boom or the unprecedented growth, therefore, may I remind the honourable Members of Parliament of a Bible verse from the Book of Jeremiah Chapter 9:23-24 and I quote:

“The Lord says, do not boast about your wisdom or strength or wealth, if you feel you must boast, then have enough sense to boast about worshipping me, the Lord. What I like best is showing kindness, justice and mercy to everyone on earth.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the proposed 2022-2023 National Budget, total expenditure is \$3.8 billion, estimated revenue will be at \$2.9 billion. The net deficit of \$872 million which is 7.4 percent of GDP. This Budget is too ambitious. The honourable Minister for Economy knows very well that our current pace for recovery will be much lower than anticipated due to the uncertainty in the global trading environment. Sir, it goes to show that the real intention of such convincing presentation is to make the FijiFirst Government look good in the public domain as we move towards General Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, taking into account the shortfall of \$872million to the debt repayment of \$307million and with the rising national debt at almost \$9.97 billion or 85.2 percent of GDP and the inflation rate just sitting over 5 percent. Therefore, the true impact of this Budget would be known in the next 12 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a rule of thumb on debt benchmark in developed countries, a debt of GDP ratio is around 60 percent and developing countries such as Fiji, the debt of GDP ratio would be around 40 percent. Nevertheless, our current debt GDP ratio is 85 percent. Therefore, national debt affects everyone and the risks associated with unsustainable debt. Sir, it is unfortunate that today, we do not have that fiscal space to be able to manoeuvre but the only option available for us is to continue borrowing when our debt is already unsustainable at over 85.2 percent of our annual GDP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister for Economy talks about the benefit of concessionary loans and interest free loans but not on the risk associated with. Therefore, as national debt per capita increases, there is a strong possibility of default. Therefore, finance have to raise the yield of newly issued treasury securities to attract new investors. Increase in debt reduces the amount of tax revenue available to be spent on other Government services and the priority on Government revenue is payment of principal and interest of debt. This means that we should be experiencing a lower standard and high cost of living. Once the rate of treasury security increases, investors will increase their purchase of these new securities, therefore, they have to raise the price of their goods and services to meet the increased cost of their debt service obligation. Over time, this will cause people to pay more for goods and services resulting in inflation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the unprecedented ever-increasing growth by the FijiFirst Government is debt and it is the hallmark of their regime and its leadership and the impact will severely affect our children and our grandchildren in years to come. Sir, economic recovery, as stated in the Budget Address, should work on the failures in our economy and centred around the restructuring of the economy to make it more resilient to feature global shocks or natural disaster and to generate meaningful growth that creates wealth for all. Fiji is now ever relying on foreign tourists, foreign investment and foreign currency. This has made the economy defenceless against global shocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are in a desperate state whereby the cost of living is high and poverty is on the rise, graduates cannot get jobs, decent and affordable housing is scarce, health is declining, personal debt levels are unprecedented and crime escalated. Therefore, the Government attempt at import consumption and inflation-based economic growth has benefitted the wealthy while the majority has suffered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a need for a balance between global integration and a level of self-reliance through local production and local finance. Sir, diversification and building buffers should be the buzz words these days. All these have failed to acknowledge the potential comparative advantages in other sectors such as fisheries, forestry, mining, agriculture and others. We need to be more serious on developing these economic sectors and during the recovery period it is an opportune time to recalibrate the development agenda and work towards the sectors to bring about stability and sustainability economically.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Budget basically shows the Government is in a tight fiscal space and the debt burden has continued to rise. Sir, one of the key takeaways in this budget is the inflation mitigation initiative that is for Fijian families with a combined annual income of \$50,000 or less to be provided with \$180 per child over the next six months and also the 10 percent subsidy in bus fares during the same period.

Sir, I wish to highlight the timing of the two initiatives gels well with our preparation towards the General Elections. As the Shadow Minister for Lands and Mineral resources, the Ministry responsible for the effective and efficient administration, development and management of all State land initiatives including the facilitation of country's mineral sector and ground water resources. The Ministry of Land administers a total of 18,000 State land leases covering about 4 percent of the total land mass.

Sir, the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources for 2022-2023 is \$25.8 million which is an increase of \$0.6 million from the 2021-2022 allocation of which Operating amounts to \$20.1 million and Capital \$4.5 million with VAT at \$1.09 million. The summary of the total expenditure by the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources from the years 2013 to 2022 are as follows: Estimate amounts to \$207 million, the actual amounts to \$230.2 million and the variance amounting to \$57.4 million. The figures show substantial variation annually. Thus, may be it is an underutilised situation and being termed by the Government as savings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request, when funds are allocated, Ministries are expected to utilise those funds in accordance to the operations and capital allocation of the approved ministerial budget. This situation occurs every year and perhaps, over-budgeting annually or even non-implementation of capital works as outlined in the approved budget warrants an explanation as it also occurs in most Government Ministries.

In Fiji, nothing is more important than land. Land is the full cream around in which Fiji evolves. Majority of Fijians rely on land for their livelihood and it is a source of indigenous power, culture and identity. Some key critical issues on land in Fiji include; vast amount of land in Fiji currently lying idle or are greatly under-utilised and a major national challenge is not only to increase the supply of land under acceptable leasing arrangements for agricultural, commercial or social purposes, but also to transform the capital inherent on land that can be used either to develop the land or as collateral in the financial market or for other economic and social purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the budgetary commitment on operating and capital in this Budget for the Ministry, I hope it will also take into account some of the challenges and issues highlighted in the 2018-2019 Annual Report and the Ministry's costed operational plan which have not been addressed, which could be implemented in this financial year. It is also noted that the latest Annual Report produced by

the Ministry for the year 2018-2019, questions the Minister's adherence and compliance to the Financial Management Act of 2004, section 45(2), of which the Minister must table in Parliament the annual report for the financial year within nine months after the end of that year or within a longer period approved for that year by resolution of House of Representatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we are nearing towards our fourth year in Parliament, I wish to acknowledge and thank the Government for taking action to some of the issues for the Lomaiviti Province which I raised in this august Parliament. It includes, electricity and generators repair and maintenance in the villages; construction of sea walls and coastline rock barriers to prevent coastline erosion and sea water intrusion into the villages of Natokalau, Tokou, Vuma, Toki and Vatukalo on Ovalau Island; road upgrading in Ovalau and Koro Islands, water supply; river crossings, and solar power projects on Gau Island.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I also remind the Government on the implementation and completion of some of the ongoing and other projects which includes the construction of the Levuka Town Market, reconstruction of damaged Levuka Wharf, completion works on the Moturiki Island water supply project and also the solar farm project at the Bureta District and the construction of the communication connectivity towers to the identified areas in the Lomaiviti Province, as alluded to by the honourable Minister for Economy in his Budget Address.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now be able to have a better feel of the FijiFirst Budget in the last couple of years and it is anticipated that if they continue to govern this country, they will continue to have grandstanding and bullish budgeting, revenue overstated and under-utilisation of expenditure. There is always a short fall in revenue, increase in deficit and increase in our debt level. This is an election budget in the guise of inflationary mitigation measures which may lead to increase in debt and last but not the least, it is time for a change and Fiji needs a new Government.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; before I specifically respond on the Budget, I wish to take this opportunity to salute and commend the honourable Minister for Economy and his team for coming up with a prolific and prudent 2022-2023 National Budget, which has already been commended by the Fijians, as they see the real benefit every Fijian can get from this budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the health, economic and social status of Fijians. Several aspects of life were adversely impacted, though evidence shows resilience and we should congratulate ourselves as a country. After two years of struggling with the pandemic and as just as we were getting back on our feet, the Ukraine and Russia conflict struck another devastating blow to the world and Fiji is no exception. The rising fuel prices as a result has caused hike in price of imported goods and services worldwide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improving the quality of life of Fijians is central to our growth strategy. A healthy population and skilled workforce is a fundamental requirement for socio-economic transformation. Key interventions in education, health, water and sanitation are necessary to ensure effective human capital development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the economic growth strategy and budget priorities that have been presented in the 2022-2023 National Budget seeks to speed up economic recovery and drive more inclusive growth by creating an environment for increased socio-economic empowerment of the ordinary Fijians. I am very blessed to be part of the FijiFirst Government which puts Fijians first when it comes to the fundamental services and support that a Government needs to provide for its citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, who would have thought that Fiji would be on a convincing recovery economic path, especially after what we experienced in the last two years. However, let me inform you, Sir, THAT we, from this side of the House, are confident that life is getting better as people return to work, schools reopened and tourists are coming back.

Time and again, the FijiFirst Government under the decisive and prudent leadership of our honourable Prime Minister has steadily got things back towards normalcy – be it after COVID-19 pandemic, floods or devastating cyclones. We work hard, think outside the box and listen to our fellow Fijians to provide practical and long term solutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is one classical example of this. The honourable Minister for Economy with his team came up with a budget which many, especially on the other side, would not have even thought of, a budget which provides timely assistance and relief as we face inflation with food and fuel prices soaring all-time high.

The Minister for Economy derived this Budget by consulting people and organizations around the nation. This Budget was not done by sitting in his office. I thank the honourable Minister for Economy for reflecting the Fijians' views and solutions for issues in the 2022-2023 National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me now to briefly touch on the Ministry of Sugar, which has been working closely with its stakeholders to improve productivity and efficiency both at the farm level and at the mills. In the next financial year, the Ministry has been allocated \$45.3 million. This also ensures the guaranteed price of \$85.00 per tonne, though many critics thought that we would not be able to maintain this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government has continued to provide high levels of support to cane growers than any other government at any point in time in Fijian history. When the going has been tough for cane growers, the FijiFirst Government has extended its firm hand of support. Post-pandemic, the price of fertilizer almost doubled. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has since exacerbated the situation. International sanctions on Belarus which is a supplier of GMOP fertilizer, muriate of potash and the fertilizer export restrictions imposed by China, the largest exporter of di-ammonium Phosphate (DAP) fertiliser have both substantially increased prices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the South Pacific Fertilizer Limited is procuring fertilizer materials from alternative markets at a cost that has increased by two to three folds. For this reason, the Government has again allocated \$25 million in the budget to ensure that our growers continue to pay \$20 per every 50 kg bag Blend A, B and C fertilizer, they procure. Had this Government not increased the allocation of budget by more than \$10 million for fertilizer, it would have impacted the pockets of hardworking farmers drastically. In addition to this, Government will continue to provide assistance for the planting of cane, upgrading of roads, meet cartage cost from Penang to Rarawai Mill and provides subsidy for weedicides.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can clearly recall the loud noise made by the Opposition about the closure of Penang Mill and that farmers will exit the industry in no time. The reality is before us, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Allow me to inform this august Parliament that production in Penang Mill area was 118,231 tonnes in 2017.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Still a bad idea.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- It increased to 239,939 tonnes in 2018 and further increased to 152,984 tonnes.

HON. A. SAYED-KHAIYUM.- It is not working, honourable Prasad.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- In 2020, it was slightly decreased to 133,683 tonnes due to impact of *TC Yasa*. This year, again, it is anticipated that the production of Penang Mill area would be around 150,000 tonnes. That is a remarkable achievement. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the results speak for itself. The strategic decision was the correct one and is the correct one.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is the only one in history to introduce a guaranteed sugar price of \$85 per tonne, irrespective of the world market price. No other government has done anything.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- You never did anything to the farmers, why you want to complain?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. G. VEGNATHAN This has given security and certainty to farmers ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Lie!

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- ... by supporting the bottom-line.

HON. S. ADIMAITOGA.- Not a lie. It is a fact.

HON. G. VEGNATHAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is also working with other counterparts to ensure that the export of sugar to foreign destinations attract low or zero-rated duties to give Fiji a competitive advantage over other sugar exporting countries. The recent price review of sugar in the domestic market conducted by the FCCC has further consolidated the pricing for farmers. These together with world market price ensures FSC gets the right price for its product and generates revenue. As a result, it will require far less Government contribution from \$46.9 million to \$8 million towards the guaranteed price and channel funds into targeted investments to increase crop yield.

The Ministry has plans in place to continue initiatives to ensure our farmers benefit and the sugar industry continues to grow despite challenges which are at times beyond our control. Sir, the amount allocated in the next financial year will also enable the Ministry to continue with the subsidy programme for fertiliser and weedicide, including cane cartage support to farmers planting sugarcane around Rakiraki.

The increased funding support of \$1.13 million to Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) will promote quality in planting, improve research and development and technology transfer. This increase in Budget will enable SRIF to meet its basic requirements to carry out research in extension activities, classified in five broad categories which are:

1. development of high yielding cane varieties that are cultivated by canegrowers beside other cultivation management practices;
2. analytical services;
3. soil and plant testing free of cost to growers anywhere and advice on fertiliser recommendations;
4. field information days for the benefit of growers regularly; and
5. demonstrate the benefits of best management practices for achieving high cane yield.

As part of our technology transfer programme, SRIF conducted demonstration trials and training programmes on various aspects of sugarcane farming for extension personnel which is also benefitting growers in all 38 sectors across the cane belt. Mr. Speaker, Sir, SRIF regularly monitors sugarcane fields for pests and diseases and helps in the control measures and also helps FSC in providing seed cane to the growers. Apart from this, the Ministry will also improve road infrastructure through cane access roads

to provide access to farmers, where more than 3,800 kilometres of road are upgraded annually free of cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji being the Chair of the International Sugar Organisation (ISO) will host the 60th Council Meeting this year, providing an appropriate platform for capacity building and showcasing what we have. It will also contribute to our hospitality sector. Through Government's innovative strategies and timely interventions, the sugar industry has been benefitting from this 2022-2023 National Budget. It will further support and complement its pathway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I am calling on the farmers to take advantage of the support offered by the Government in continuing their hard work. I am also urging farmers to be wary of the Opposition who are misinforming them about the Budget as their political gimmick. They were not around in 2018, 2019 and 2020 but they are slowly creeping in and misleading our farmers and people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to sum up great strides have been achieved on both the economic and social front. This progress is a route of sustained effort by the Government to remove barriers to production and human capital development, as well as peace and security. We have provided a solid basis for the economy to grow, despite the setbacks we all know. The associate transformation in Fiji is unstoppable.

Having said this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly support the 2022-2023 National Budget as announced by the honourable Minister for Economy on 15th July, 2022.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my contribution to the 2022-2023 Appropriation Bill 2022 which is before the House. First, I would like to acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament for their contributions on the Bill so far, also those at the Ministry of Economy for compiling the Budget Estimates and the Budget, as well as the people who had participated in the Budget consultations around the country. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

The background of this Budget is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to understand that all economies in the world are on a recovery path post-COVID-19 and now have to deal with the global hike of food and fuel prices due to global supply disruptions and the impact of the Russian-Ukraine war.

The world over is affected by the global inflation and affected the economic growth at recovery stage to move beyond the pandemic. No doubt the Fijian economy has contracted in the last two years.

On our national response, the last two Budgets has seen policies directed to assist our economic recovery path post-COVID-19. I had supported the last two Budgets because I saw it as a patriotic stance to unite as leaders in a crisis and to see how to recover from it.

On our economic recovery path as we are on right now, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my fellow Opposition MP, honourable Mere Naulumatua, for her contributions this morning on the positive outlook of some benefits of the Budget from her perspective as a businesswoman and also my fellow colleague, honourable Aseri Radrodro, in his deliberation this morning for a much balanced contribution in terms of infrastructure development.

You might recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I was the only Opposition Member voicing my support for the Fiji Airways Guarantee motion last March and was subject to public criticism as to why keep our national carrier when our borders were closed. My reasons then were very simple, that we needed to keep our planes to help us in our economic recovery process. Now, the tourism sector has recorded 205 plus thousand tourist arrivals since the borders opened. I think that was a bold decision that we made.

The tourism industry has played a vital role in the projected economic recovery for 2022 which will be almost 12.4 percent. We have made a great rebound as a nation.

To support the recovery and enhance prospects for diversification, continued emphasis on macro structural reforms was needed. As you will recall, I had participated in a Parliament Standing Committee public consultations to pass amendments to the Investment Act 2022, to enable a more investment confidence environment with Investment Fiji which is tasked to promote Fiji's competitive and comparative advantages. This was part of the IMF 2021 Article IV Mission to Fiji recommendation, which was taken on board.

The amendment to the Investment Act was aimed at supporting the recovery and enhance prospects for diversification, especially the National Budget focus on agro-tourism, medical tourism and also now, the introduction of the hemp industry through the amendments to the Act, to allow value adding purposes in the textile industry in this industry, where seeds will be coming from Canada. We thank the recent ANZ CEO's announcement to assist in the vertical partnership, to assist local business ventures into the lucrative market. This will also greatly assist landowners who will offer their land to be leased and be also part of the farming cluster as part of the suppliers of raw materials for the manufacturers.

On support measures, what one needs to see in the Budget is the availability of strong policy responses that support measures post-pandemic, to enable economic activities to accelerate. In that regard, I would like to acknowledge the lifting of the *beche-de-mer* ban or *sasalu* for the province of Macuata, Bua and Cakaudrove. The ban has directly affected many in the past few weeks, especially in the buying of their household items and also the economy in the Northern Division. I also acknowledge those investors in the North who have provided the market to our local people selling *sasalu* in Vanua Levu, especially Mr. Richard Du.

Also, the other measures in place in any budget to show our post-COVID-19 response included the social welfare support and water and electricity subsidies which are very important. A very important one too from the Budget last year was that, it allowed the removal of consent that was through iTLTB and the fees that allowed many who are not on legal title to access electricity. This is very important for the alleviation of poverty in our country.

Now, have access to GPs and Medical Practitioners, no fees for market vendors stall which is something that has really assisted, no inshore fishing fees and PSV driver's licence and 10 percent reduction in bus fare which has really helped and will help assist the removal of poverty at the grassroots level.

Mr. Speaker Sir, there is the education assistance and also the allocation of \$60 million to mitigate the effects of rising inflationary pressures on household disposable incomes. Parents with a combined annual income of less than \$50,000 will receive a payment of \$180 per child over the next six months.

In addition, there is the removal of VAT on 21 household items and the removal of police clearance fees to assist people find employment. Those who are going overseas through the Pacific Labour Scheme are also assisted through that. In return, through our Vuvale Partnership, they have remitted money back to their families in Fiji and that has also assisted in the collection of revenue for our country. I think this has empowered many in the rural communities who are going in groups through this labour scheme to assist community projects in their various villages and also improving livelihood in our villages.

The open ranking taxi system is something that has really helped those in the rural community and out-based drivers have more income to take home to their families. Also the 300 percent tax reduction for hoteliers in hiring singers and *meke* groups will benefit our villagers and also other groups in the

communities who are into this. So those are the many opportunities available through the Budget that will assist our people in bringing more money to their household income and also put more food on the table.

In terms of the current financial status that we have, overall Fiji's macroeconomic fundamentals are strong. Our financial sector is strong and our foreign reserves is currently sitting at \$3.6 billion as at July this year. This has assisted in the stability of our liquidity levels and our banks in maintaining a low interest rate environment. This has assisted many businesses and individuals in their loan repayment plans, plus new lending. I think this is very important where Government has loaned to keep liquidity levels low for our loan interest rate which has allowed many Fijians with their business and also other individuals. If you just go into the bank, you will see a big line at the loans section for those who are going for soft loans and other loans, given that the rates and our liquidity levels are being maintained.

I move on to land development and how the budget targets land development. The budget will also cater for landowners in supporting development in terms of home or land buying, and opening up investment opportunities as follows:

- It is great to see the \$9 million allocation for the First Home Buyers Grant Programme and \$500,000 for the First Land Grant Programme. Not only does it assist people to own properties for the first time, more importantly it develops *iTaukei* landowners in offering their land to be subdivided. They will earn more money leases for which they venture into other investments and projects.
- Landowners partnership with Housing Authority Fiji and probably just last month a new subdivision in Tutua, Labasa where the Mataqali Navurevure of Nasekula benefitted. I thank the honourable Attorney-General for that land breaking ceremony and also development that has created employment for contractors who are involved in the development and more investors for landowners. These are some areas in the Budget on how it affects and empowers indigenous landowners.
- Land development project under the *iTaukei* Land Development Grant which has allowed the landowners in the Western Division to become developers. I think this has been an area that has been lying there for a while but it has picked up now where landowners have moved away from only becoming passive land providers in receiving lease but also become developers and owning development lease. This empowers *iTaukei* landowners in improving their economic status and accelerating them into the business sector. That is something that is very important.
- In addition, *iTLTB* awareness programme for landowners to draw plans to develop their land is something that *iTLTB* is currently doing. They are moving around to all landowning units for them to draw up plans to develop their land, et cetera, and to identify potentials on their land on what they can do - housing development, quarry and rock extraction, resource development and other investments. These are some of the programmes that will empower and create more information to our landowners to make economic decisions.

Sir, on the Committee for Better Utilisation of Land (CBUL) with an allocation of \$6.9 million, it really benefits landowners in terms of lease moneys to cater for their traditional obligations like funerals, weddings, church levies, buying of household items and investment. This initiative from CBUL which many landowning units look forward to whenever payment is coming up, one will probably be coming soon and many landowners are expecting that, has improved the living standards of many *iTaukei*, especially those in villages, in the construction of their homes and their everyday living.

On land use, the utilisation of land for economic benefits is another positive aspect of the Budget that I will touch on which needs to be given due recognition. One of the key measures in scrutinising the Budget and I am grateful to be given the opportunity is the benefits through land use, especially for rural farmers, the \$7 million for machinery outsourcing, \$1.5 million for farm mechanisation, \$600,000 for ginger farming, \$400,000 for *yaqona* farming, \$200,000 for *dalo* farming and \$300,000 for rice farming.

I would like to also to inform Parliament that Vunivutu Village in Macuata has formed clusters, moving into rice farming clusters and participating under this grant. Those are some of the areas on how indigenous people and landowning units are benefiting through Government programmes and allocations, wanting to move forward and they are assisted through the assistance that are in the policy lines and allocations in the Budget.

Livestock projects are in terms of poultry extension, beef extension, piggery extension and goat extension. Farmers have benefited a lot in the rural areas in terms of seedlings, *dalo*, *yaqona* suckers and livestock breed. The policies are targeting those in the rural areas and villages, especially *mataqali* who have land to move into livestock projects, owning poultries and piggeries which also help in their various traditional obligations and empowering small rural businesses in the communities.

Furthermore, climate change is also catered for in this particular Budget which one of the key issues which poses a risk to Fiji's survival. This Parliament should be proud in the passing of the Climate Change Bill, a much needed piece of legislation which provides all that is necessary to help Fiji play its role in reducing national emissions towards a net zero by 2050. At the same time, it allows initiatives to be put in place which accelerate to access our ...

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. I. KURIDRANI.- Point of Order! He is being irrelevant. We are here as an Opposition, to criticise the Budget. That is the Opposition's stand. Otherwise, Sir, just tell him to cross over.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, this is a debate on the Budget and he is doing exactly that, just like you.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think as national leaders, we are here to express our views on the Budget and this is one of our roles as Members of Parliament. We give our views overall on what the Budget Estimates look like and how it affects those who will be governed by it - that is our role.

Climate change will help and assist landowners. There are a lot of economic benefits for landowners in terms of the climate change programmes that are there, especially landowner participation in carbon trading projects. I think this is something that landowners are moving into - forest conservation and registration of carbon sinks and how they will benefit from carbon trading projects.

Building resilient structures in rural communities such as seawalls and also roads, planting of natural trees and fruit tree projects in the Ministry of Agriculture project which really helps our *mataqali* in our various catchments. We are moving away from the Ridge to Reef Project (R2R) and our aim of 50 million trees and I think these are directly benefiting our communities. Also communities participating in planting of trees and fruit trees are also getting some allowances that helps with their various community projects. Protecting our marine areas, *lumi* project, pearl, coral planting and mangrove planting. These are some of the benefits of climate change.

On infrastructure development, there is \$600 million for the essential maintenance of our roads and assets, \$50 million on ongoing programme renewal and rehabilitation of roads and remake programme and special thanks from Vanua Levu contractors who have now signed directly with FRA. Before, there used to be sub-contractors with Fair Deal but now they have directly signed contracts with FRA especially for the RIP Programme and we thank FRA for allowing that tender.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$15 million for Rural Road Programmes, we need to maintain our roads and also new ones in our rural communities. Special thanks on the announcement of the Lagi to Tawake Road, closer to where we are in Dogotuki and from Tawake to Wainika. This is an area which has been connected only by sea but these are some of the things that are benefiting our rural community and also the Nayarabale crossover to Valevoni, as alluded by the honourable Minister.

However, participation of our public infrastructure projects with contractors like Higgins, Flame Tree Development, Gold Rock Investments Limited, Fair Deal Earthmoving Contractors Limited and basic industries like Fijian Holdings Limited, Kashmir Civil Construction, Bula Earthworks Limited, Valebasoga Construction, NGCL Limited and others do much needed business to keep our economy rolling through much needed revenue projections for the Government.

This Government has provide employment for many Fijians who are truck drivers, machine operators, labours, dynamite rock explosives specialists who support their families and communities. On the other hand, the FRA contractors assist the landowners who consent to lease out of quarry through metal royalties. Landowning units are earning through arrangements as high as \$13 per cubic. The contractor pays \$3.31 to iTLTB as royalties, on the other hand pays a separate \$10 per cubic claimed by the *mataqali* for their development and investment. These are how those developments trickle down to how landowners benefit from the policies.

Landowners have built better cyclone resistant homes, built farm roads, moved into commercial farming, bought vehicles and trucks for hire business, bought houses in urban areas on rent income and have invested for their future generation's education at Unit Trust of Fiji and also Fijian Holdings Unit Trust. So, far during the debate and plus the other campaign materials that are going around which are trying to portray current policies and initiatives has not benefitted the iTaukei and trying to politicise indigenous economic imbalances. I have just outlined how Government's policies has empowered indigenous people of this country.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a patriotic Fijian and a national leader, we must ensure stability of our nation and a full fit recovery of our economy. Our economy is re-growing under our recovery path. Our national agenda is to guard our fragile economic recovery process. We need to guard the economy recovery from global disruption of supply and inflation, the trickle-down effect of the war in Ukraine on the increase of international food prices and fuel and also the effects of climate change, given our vulnerability to cyclones and floods.

The 2022-2023 Budget is prepared as the economy is regaining strength post-COVID-19. Through the tourism numbers that are coming in from January to June 2022 is almost the same as the period of 2019. We are now at the peak period (July to August) of tourist arrivals. The budget has no major tax changes and this is important in providing policy consistency to the private sector and the tourism industry. It is critical to maintain policy consistency given more spaces for more economic activities. This builds private sector confidence and it assists in our post-economic recovery. The Budget has a very simple and logical strategy by providing tax concessions to business to operate and in return the Government earns through revenue from personal and income tax.

The expenditure strategy is very clear through its key principles to guide expenditure policy in the medium-term. For example, the Budget is encouraging more in the private sector in public

infrastructure projects and delivery of other services in the PPP and other innovative arrangements, for example, the Aspen Medical PPP by choosing hospital services as we move into medical tourism industry.

With the recent FNPF buying of shares with Fiji Airways to capture the travel component of tourism at its fleet of hotels is part of FNPF members' investment. I think that is very important and that will be more returns to our individual FNPF accounts.

In view of those factors, we have a very critical role as national leaders in this august Parliament. We have to always put our country first. The survival of our economy is priority, therefore, the 2022-2023 Budget maintains a strong consistency of policies to maintain our stability towards a full economic recovery. Therefore, wholeheartedly with great patriotism, I support the motion that is before Parliament and the wellbeing of all Fijians.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems it is getting a bit hot in this Chambers today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji; I fully support this Budget. It is a Budget for the times - it is appropriate and it not only addresses the issues of today, but also sets Fiji on a course that will lead to our full recovery. I think today in this Parliament, we have seen that some people are seeing the light.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- We invite everyone else, see the light and get into the light!

There are, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of distinct hallmarks of this Budget that need to be highlighted. First of all, the Budget addresses the short-term immediate needs through inflation mitigation. It provides relief to the most vulnerable in Fiji. Sir, sitting here this week and listening to some of the comments made by honourable Members of the Opposition and talking about the Budget, it has been astounding. Their comments have shown their true colours. They just rubbish everything in this Budget. They referred to our past policies of helping to lift up and looking after our most vulnerable as freebies. They referred to them as freebies.

They say over and over again that the Government needs to look at the plight of the most vulnerable in our country, and then they said the Government does not understand the plight of our needy citizens. And in the same instant, they belittled what we are proposing in this Budget to address that exact issue. The thing that they complained about, we address and they belittle that too. I will not call them 'idiots', I will just say that that is incredibly idiotic. That is two-faced forked-tongue speaking and it would be hilarious if it was not such a serious matter.

They belittled what Government had been doing in these past few years - to address the plight of our most challenged citizens. Over the past few years, we have witnessed never before seen the assistance through social welfare for those who really need it. These are the provisions for the most vulnerable in our society.

Communities used to pay a deposit in order to get EFL grid extension, no more! Is the Opposition saying that all above the age of 65 years who are getting a social pension should not get that social pension - our uncles and our aunts in the villages, is that what they are saying? Are they saying that we should not have paid the \$360 and the \$50 and the unemployment benefits to those who lost their jobs during COVID-19? Are they saying that they should be left to fend for themselves?

Those Members of the Opposition are saying that they want to remove that assistance from those who need it. They are saying that the assistance should never have been given. They are implying that if they come into power, God forbid, that they would remove all those assistance. That is what the people of this country must listen to and this is what they are saying. That is what they are telling the vulnerable people of this country.

They are saying that the \$1 per day or the \$30 per month per child should not be given to our most vulnerable children - that is what they are saying. If you call it a freebie, that is what you are saying. They are saying that we should not assist our most vulnerable children. That is what they mean when they call inflation mitigation measures, freebies. They are saying, "Do away with it. Let them sink or swim."

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I raise a Point of Order regarding the misleading statement that the honourable Member made that we said that social welfare should not be paid. No one said that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What is your Point of Order?

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- The statement is misleading, it is false. That is the Point of Order, it should be withdrawn.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you have heard what has been said, take note of that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker Sir. When you say something, you have to think about the implication of what you say. If you say that support to vulnerable people is a freebie, you are saying that it is something that should not be given, and that is precisely what I am saying.

Carefully-formulated policies to assist our most vulnerable, they are saying, "Do away with it. Let them sink or swim." They are saying, "Let them suffer." This is the quality of this Opposition, this is their true colour, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Forked tongue, Sir, two-faced, shameless!

In the same breath, they said Government does not care and then that they rubbished what we proposed in this Budget to address the issues that they have highlighted such as:

- Means-tested subsidies for electricity and water;
- school bus fares which children do not have to pay;
- Not having to pay for school fees, textbooks, free medicine, unemployment assistance of hundreds of millions of dollars;
- Free General Practitioners' services;
- Market vendors not having to pay the stall fees; and
- Payment of licence fees by Government.

They called all of these things as freebies, and are implying that all these things should be taken away, that our most vulnerable should fend for themselves. They do not care what happens to the vulnerable people of this country.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Shame, shame!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- The second hallmark, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of this Budget is that, it maintains continuity and consistency with past policy and direction. It continues our focus of encouraging investment. It gives investors assurance that our past policies will continue, thus building confidence, which is very critical in these global difficult times when investment is hard to come by and when global investors are very choosy about where to invest.

The third hallmark of this Budget is that, it chooses to invest in areas that will lead to growth and returns in the future. There is a very strong focus on infrastructure on building a stronger, more amendable climate for investment which leads to better jobs, income and, therefore, better quality of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Meteorological Services will receive a budget of \$37.6 million, an increase of 58 percent. This will help the different Departments of the Ministry - Energy Department, Water Department, Works Department, the Directorate of Building and Government Architect and the Fiji Meteorological Services to be able to deliver its work.

Climate change is having a massive impact in our infrastructure and Government is focused on resilient infrastructure. Over the last nine years, Government has invested an amount of \$21.3 million to improve, secure and ensure safe and healthy living facilities for our public building tenants.

In this budget, there is a fund of \$1 million that is allocated to improve the Nabouwalu powerhouse and also to upgrade maritime government buildings. The Ministry will ensure that buildings are constructed to standards that are resilient and can withstand climatic changes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our national energy targets of getting 100 percent access to electricity by the year 2026. By 2017, we had achieved access to electricity of 96 percent of our population, up from 89 percent in 2007. Getting all of our electricity from renewable energy by the year 2036 and achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

The provision of electricity has a lot of major challenges, especially after the restrictions that were put in place during COVID-19. Our contractors were not able to mobilise to the project sites to complete the projects, there was shortage of materials in the market due to the closing down of suppliers mostly from China and delays in the shipment of materials to Fiji.

The Department of Energy and Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) were not able to travel to project sites to carry out inspections and verify the work that had been undertaken. Despite this, we still managed to deliver and provide quality services to our people and we have remained committed to meeting the total cost of all rural electrification projects.

In the past 10 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government has allocated around \$237 million for rural electrification for grid extension, house wiring projects and for solar home systems. This is a massive investment.

For 2022-2023, the Department of Energy has been allocated a budget of \$13.8 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$5.7 million of this has been allocated for house wiring projects where the grid projects have already been completed. This will electrify a total of 4,200 homes.

Sir, \$4 million is provided for the installation of solar home systems, benefitting 1,000 homes in rural areas and maritime islands that do not have access to the EFL grid. We are working on ways of introducing and implementing programmes for energy efficiency and conservation to reduce carbon emissions. A total of \$20,000 has been allocated for this.

A further \$19.28 million will be provided to EFL via Head 50 for grid extension and house wiring. The benefits of this investment are far reaching for daily living and also for generating income, creating sustainable livelihoods and increasing the productive capacity of our people.

The Fiji Meteorological Services has been given a budget of \$4.09 million and of that, \$0.5 million is allocated for Disaster Recovery Infrastructure Systems to reduce disruptions, recover as quickly as possible and ensure business continuity in the event of a disaster. The \$2 million upgrade of the Nausori Radar will improve forecasting and highlight areas of likely extreme rainfall and thunderstorms that will impact us.

Improving weather forecasts is very important. It helps all of us - farmers, citizens and everyone. The \$240,000 Water Level and Rainfall Equipment Project is crucial to the Fiji Meteorological Services as water level monitoring allows them to deliver early and advance warning of any likely flood situation and provides valuable time to protect assets, to move valuables and protect property.

The Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) has been given a budget of \$204 million, an increase of \$9 million. All this will assist WAF in moving towards the targets that we have in our 5-20 Year National Development Plan and also Sustainable Development Goal No. 6 which is all about access to water and sanitation. Currently, just over 80 percent of the total population has access to clean drinking water, whilst 28 percent of the population has access to WAF wastewater services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$11 million is allocated to address intermittent water supply areas nationwide and this, of course, is something that has been in the news over the past few months. This will eliminate nine intermittent supply areas, including:

- in the Central Division –
 - ❖ Wrong Turn Road in Sakoca;
 - ❖ Burebasaga Village;
 - ❖ Caubati koro;
 - ❖ Cunningham Stage 4;
 - ❖ Tovata areas;
- elevated areas of the southern end of Nadi and Sonaisali; and
- Uciwai to Yako Village in the Western Division.

Those intermittent supply areas projects will enable more than 7,000 people to receive normal water pressure 24/7 in the comfort of their homes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$5.5 million is allocated to address leakages through pressure management, service pipe replacements, air and boundary valve replacements and demand management with the aim to reduce non-revenue water by 5 percent nationwide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$4.9 million is allocated to provide access to clean water to rural communities, benefitting more than 20,000 people. These include the Burewai District School and Nawairuku Village in Ra, Nauluvatu Village in Naitasiri, Driti Village in Tailevu and Bucalevu Combine Scheme also in Macuata.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$3.5 million is allocated for water carting to rural communities in non-metered areas during periods of water disruptions.

Sir, \$5.5 million is allocated for electrical works at WAF's water pump and wastewater stations to ensure that backup Gensets are installed at critical sites to ensure water is supplied to customers during periods of power shutdowns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$300,000 will be utilised to continue the improvement of catchment areas to ensure our water sources are protected and secured for water sustainability.

Sir, \$1 million is allocated for rainwater harvesting programme. This will include the provision of 2,500 litre water tanks and WAF will also make arrangements for the base used for these water tanks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$4.5 million is for integrated meter management aimed at replacing 15,000 residential meters nationwide to bring about billing accuracy and \$60.3 million is allocated for the completion of Phase 1 of the new Rewa River Water Supply Scheme Project to address water challenges and to support sustainable growth and development in the greater Suva area. This Scheme will provide an additional 40 million litres of water in the Lami to Nausori corridor, benefitting over 360,000 people. It is scheduled to come online next year (2023).

Sir, \$5 million is allocated for the installation of pipelines from Sawani to Navatuvula to Waitolu to ensure that those communities living along these areas have access to this clean drinking water when the new Rewa River Water Scheme is commissioned.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$3.15 million is allocated for wastewater system improvements and upgrades which include sewer network extensions for Waidamudamu in Koronivia and Yalaha Pump Station construction in Sigatoka. This includes major wastewater critical pipes replacement at crossings on roads and bridges in the Central Division that will address the aged infrastructure that we still have.

Sir, for the next financial year, a key WAF focus area will be non-revenue water reduction through revamping pressure management and leak detection activities. This will:

- further reduce the non-revenue water levels by 5 percent, increasing water supply production capacity by 10 percent to cater for increasing demand; and
- increase wastewater treatment capacity and automation of the water and wastewater systems to increase efficiency and optimize operations.

Sir, WAF is now developing its Water Sector Strategy 2050. This will outline Fiji's water sector priority projects and programmes over the next three decades. This is aimed at:

- transforming how services are delivered;
- responding to climate vulnerability;
- further renewing our water and wastewater infrastructure;
- contributing to the circular economy; and
- taking the water sector to net zero emissions in enhancing the natural environment.

All of these activities will complement the things that we have already done.

As the honourable Attorney-General has talked about, WAF has acquired the Momi pipeline that will now provide water to people of around 4,000 households in that area, which complements all the other work that have been going on. At the moment, as I speak, we are completing the new 20 mega litre package plant being built at Nagado.

We have new water treatment plants about to be commissioned, as follows:

- 20 mega litre Waiwai Plant in Ba;
- 5 mega litre Savusavu plant;
- 3 mega litre plant for Nabouwalu; and
- 1 mega litre plant for Vunidawa.

We are also doing work on the islands. Right now, there is water in Moturiki that is sourced from Navuloa in Ovalau, it comes under the sea and now all the villages in Moturiki are getting this water. That project is about to be commissioned in the not too distant future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$376.7 million is provided to Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), an increase of \$38.5 million. The main effort is on the sealed roads where \$60 million has been allocated to ensure essential maintenance of FRA road assets.

The budget will allow FRA to execute the second phase of road improvements through its rip and remake programme. The second phase will give resilience to the roads. The second coat of the seal will protect the road pavement from rainfall intensity that is brought about by climate change and provide resilience for three to six years.

A budgetary provision of \$162 million will also allow FRA to continue with its critical bridge replacement programme, which is to replace all bridges that are coming to the end of their serviceable life. There are 10 bridges under construction: one in the tender stage, 40 in design stage and 60 in the prefeasibility stage.

To improve the inter-island services by sea, FRA is designing improvements and replacements for nine jetties through this budget and these will come into construction for the next financial year.

The FRA is also putting a lot more effort in preparing the Transport Infrastructure Investment Sector Project so that during construction, there are no unwarranted disruptions. To facilitate this, the Government has inserted \$145,000 to allow provisions of prefeasibility studies, feasibility studies and design in this budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has been allocated a total budget of \$25.9 million, an increase of \$1.87 million, and this budget will be used to further the Ministry's drive to ensure that State land is used productively and made available for housing needs, for business and tourism development, conducting of surveys and consumption of safe and clean drinking groundwater.

Some of the initiatives the Ministry is pursuing include:

1. The development of a lease digital platform that is supported by the digitisation of lease records. The first phase will be launched at the end of this calendar year.
2. The development of streamlined process of survey plan examination and approvals. The Ministry will also enable chartered approved survey plans to be viewed online via the

Vanua View platform and scanned plans will be freely available on the Ministry of Land's website.

3. Enhancement of Fiji's navigation system through the updating of Fiji's Geodetic Datum to comply with international standards. This ensures that Fiji is consistent with other countries in its shipping, aviation, communication and integration of geospatial information.
4. Boost development and fast track land survey, the Ministry will be purchasing the latest upgraded survey equipment that it needs.
5. Free access to the VanuaView online. From 1st August, 2022, members of the public will have free access to this online portal.
6. State land lessees are also being required to register on to the MyLeaseInfo platform as rental invoices and statements will no longer be sent out via post with immediate effect. So MyLeaseInfo App is accessible via mobile phones.
7. The adoption of electronic modes of payment, such as online payments, EFTPOS, MPAiSA, with other modes to be adopted in the near future for greater efficiency and better customer service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, two weeks ago, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources handed over an extension of the Special Mining Licence (SML) to Lion One Limited for the Tuvatu Gold Mine. This is a company that has already invested \$140 million into this venture. Before it sells an ounce of gold, it has already invested \$140 million. There are about 200 people being employed by the company.

With this SML, they will inject between \$50 million to \$100 million into this venture. This is a sign of investor confidence in investing in Fiji which will aid the country's economic recovery and boost the impact of the mining sector to Fiji's GDP.

We also have a provision for the Digitisation of Fiji's Geological Information. This will cater for the digitalisation and updating of Geological Maps that were published between the 1960s to the 1980s.

The Land Use Master Plan that is being developed in the Ministry will support the vision of Government in 'Building a Better and Resilient Fiji for all Fijians.' The plan will assist the Department of Lands to properly identify and plan the usage of prime State land, monitor and control illegal developments such as squatting on State land. It includes identifying of vacant State land for investment by both, local and foreign investors.

The Land Bank is a land reform initiative to complement iTLTB in making land more accessible to the people. It allows attractive lease terms to encourage more investment in such land, all of which is done with the best interest of the landowners, the tenants and for optimal returns to both, Fiji and landowners.

The Ministry of Land also contributes to improving water distribution network through the reticulation of groundwater resources in the maritime islands and the remote drought-stricken rural areas of Fiji. This initiative is supported through the provision of \$2.76 million for the Groundwater Assessment and Development for Large and Small Islands project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Mineral Resources Department has upgraded all seismic stations. Under the 2022-2023 Budget, a sum of \$300,000 is provided for a back-up system and spare parts for our seismic network. This strengthens and builds resilience in our earthquake and tsunami detection capability,

seismic data management and the timely dissemination of earthquake information to the public. The Budget also allows us to co-share satellite services through ITELSTAT based in Washington to monitor seismic activities and its operations.

The Ministry is allocated \$80,000 for the provision of geo-tech work through assessments of geohazards, landslides and relocation sites, to make sure that we build in the right place. The Ministry has been collating data on landslides in Fiji, and this budget will allow us to put together a landslide inventory for Fiji. It will help us develop landslide susceptibility maps which, in turn, allows better decision-making to minimise as much as possible the economic and human losses that we can face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past few days, there have been a lot of things that have been said in Parliament, so I would like to turn to some of the comments that have been made. Honourable Tikoduadua suggested that the \$1 per day is the total assistance that Government provides for our vulnerable children. He tried to compare that to the other allowances that honourable Ministers or the honourable Prime Minister receives when they move offshore. To say that this \$1 per day is the total amount of money that the Government provides for the vulnerable children, I think, is absolute rubbish. Government assistance to vulnerable children starts before birth.

Assistance is given to pregnant mothers, food vouchers, free healthcare, free birth certificates, free education, free transport to schools, free textbooks, social welfare assistance to families and children, subsidy for water and electricity, free medicine, free access to GPs, and the list goes on and on. These are all the kinds of assistance that are given to the vulnerable children that we have in Fiji.

Honourable Bulanauca made fun of the assistance that is given by Government in providing boats to those who request this. That is something that he needs to say to the children who have to cross streams to get to schools and whose lives are put at risk. This Government is there for safe transport, for conserving lives, for helping people make progress in their lives.

Honourable Leawere says we are surrendering our sovereignty at our national seaports. Absolute hogwash! We have partnered with Aitken Spence to run the ports but the Ports still belongs to Fiji. In so doing, we have seen massive improvements in efficiency and effectiveness of our Ports - a critical requirement to grow investment, and trade and economic growth.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition says Fiji should not try to compare with Singapore, nor try and be better than Australia and New Zealand. We say, why not? Why should we not reach for the stars? Why should we not work to make our tomorrow better than our today? Why not? Why should we not make the Fiji of our grandchildren, better than our Fiji today? Why not? Why dream small? We need to dream big. It is through innovation, investment and effective utilization of resources and dynamic powerful leadership that we will improve, ensure growth and truly leave no one behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government does not sell anyone short. We will not sell our people short. Unlike what we have heard thus far from the Opposition, this Government, this Party and this Leader thinks our people deserve the best. They deserve the best. We have been doing that for the past eight years under the FijiFirst Government, and the eight years before that under the Bainimarama Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally and unreservedly support the 2022-2023 Budget.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Budget 2022-2023. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, Leader of the Opposition and Members, I hope that the other side of the House will accept one of the Members

from this side and not *liumuri* him at the last minute and not accept him to be with them as a candidate to run down the Opposition side's contributions in not supporting the FijiFirst Budget.

Let me reiterate, the expectations and projection that our economy will grow at 12.5 percent is based on the 12.4 percent growth projections for tourist arrivals. It is unlikely that we will achieve the 12.4 percent growth projections because of the challenges due to increase in the fossil fuel price with corresponding increases. The Bula Boom catchphrase is a fraud on the nation. We accept that the real growth ratio as per Bureau of Statistics data – 1973, real GDP growth was 12.7 percent. 1979 – 12 percent and in 1989, our real GDP growth was 12.9 percent and in 1999 - 8.7 percent. The claim that we are going to achieve an unprecedented growth of 12.4 percent is not true and misleading because the global growth trend has been revised downward from 4.1 to 2.9 percent which means we have to make necessary structural adjustments. It should be clear that our real GDP per capita in 2020 using the 2014 data only – FJ\$9,970 which is equivalent to US\$5,000. Our per capita income in fact has declined from \$12,000 in 2018 to \$9,970 in 2020, meaning our purchasing power parity is also on a declining trend.

Let me reiterate that on the revenue side since 2014, the gap or shortfall between the budgeted revenue and actual revenue continues to increase substantially and has reached unprecedented levels. For example, in 2014, the revenue shortfall was only around \$350 million. In 2017-2018, the revenue shortfall increased to \$613 million, almost doubled. Such degree of error is unacceptable whilst on the expenditure side, there was an under expenditure of \$160 million in 2014. Again, in 2018-2019 financial year, there was a number of expenditure of over \$1 billion which is almost half the total budgeted expenditure. In 2019-2020 financial year, there was an under expenditure of \$487 million. Variations of margins of errors are too high which is unacceptable so is poor budgeting, poor forecasting and poor implementation as reiterated by the Leader of the Opposition.

I again reiterate that diversity and multiculturalism needs to be revisited and incorporated in the budget. The FijiFirst Government has failed to foster partnership and consensus building. There is more division and mistrust in the country because of FijiFirst's my way or the highway type of leadership. It does not believe in political consultation or partnership. FijiFirst is a threat to the nation and must go. We must all continue to be proud and embrace diversity within our cultural and multiracial society. It should be considered as our strength in moving the nation forward rather than as a hurdle or stumbling block.

I reiterate what the Leader of Opposition stated. Rather than embracing and promoting values and the richness of our diversity, the FijiFirst Government has tried to force cultural autonomy, integration and assimilation. Anything discussed about indigenous people's development, being targeted in terms of policy is immediately termed as racist. You people need to get away from ostrich-type of mentality. Open your mind. When you speak of diversity, I mean recognition of our differences which can be synergised for national development.

In New Zealand, it was identified that in order to build a thriving and inclusive Aotearoa New Zealand, policies need to reflect the communities they served, placing the community at the centre of policy making. Ethnic diversity is increasing in the public sector workforce. There is a necessary to integrate ethnic diversity into the policy agenda in local and central government and New Zealand businesses. There have been various researches carried out on this subject by Professor Wadan Narsey, Mick Beddoes, et cetera, and I saw one.

In Parliament, the honourable Attorney-General made a statement about the indigenous Fijians. This is in August 2019 at a COP he attended. It was uttered by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs who sat next to him in silence. Perhaps, the honourable Minister for Economy was speaking for honourable Bainimarama. The all-knowing Minister said in an exchange on native land - we have this slogan that has come up now – asset rich but cash poor. Exactly! We own 92 percent of the land but are

cash poor because of the fact that the transactions and the pervading political mentality stopped the iTaukei from becoming wealthy from the land use. He puts his finger on a crucial issue - the iTaukei nearly owned all the land but generally do not have much money.

Sometimes driven by sober confidence, the honourable Minister for Economy forgets himself so I will remind him of the facts that face him. He speaks of transactions and a pervading political mentality resulting in the iTaukei failing to achieve prosperity for the use of their land. He is right but they have been in virtual total control of Fiji for the past 15 or so years when they conducted their destructive coup. So, they were in a position to influence in a positive way the transactions to which he refers and to change the political mentality that worked against the indigenous people.

Obviously, they did not do this so it might be appropriate to suggest that they and their Government deserve the last part of the blame for the predicament of our indigenous people. If the Minister is true to form he will attempt to pass the problem off to previous governments but that excuse looks threadbare when they have been in office for such a long time. And what they cannot undo or escape is their so many oppressive Decrees against the indigenous people which remain in force today. That aside, they went through the motions which sounded like a big initiative to address the needs of the landowners.

I refer here to the iTaukei Development Fund which is in the Budget. In mid-March 2014 it was announced that there will be \$10 million a year to assist landowners develop their own land but five years later, only 28 percent or \$14 million of the \$50 million could have been utilised. That is a failure in any measure. In the 2023 Budget, this \$10 million a year for the iTaukei Land Development is demoted to Head 50 Miscellaneous and reduced to \$4 million. What a shame! Was this a genuine good effort to help or was it just to give an impression that something was being done. It is a gimmick just to create a false impression that this Government cares about the iTaukei.

Compare this \$14 million worth of assistance to our majority indigenous of community to the 8,071 building permit issue to citizens of the same periods valued at 41.4 million. The permits were for new buildings addition to dwelling, factories, shops, et cetera. Granted the money is utilised in the \$1.4 million, it would be paid for by the individual from loans re-negotiated but it is still for development - for personal and economic.

It seems that the size of the development gap between the indigenous citizens and the rest is very large. Unless of course, a high percentage of those who succeeded in getting these commercial loans were from the indigenous community. It is a doubt because the norm for loan approvals across all banks has been 50 percent indigenous and 75 percent for others. Would the bankers association care to publish figures on this? This is a glaring issue for many successful loan applications, the land they use as security may well be native lease from the indigenous community but the same landowners are not necessarily able to do the same when they seek finance.

The economic gap may even be widening currently at a breathtaking pace. For example, the \$1.4 billion value in building permits issued - 3978 valued at \$481.3 million - were for new private buildings and additions to buildings, 1416 permits were for new buildings and other miscellaneous buildings valued at \$940.6 million. This was for factories, shops, restaurants warehouses, et cetera.

If you are under the impression that the indigenous people owns 92 percent of the land and are earning millions, it should be noted that the iTLTB paid out an annual lease amount of \$73.5 million in 2017 for 447655 hectares of land, equivalent to 1.1 million acres. That means the landowners get a princely sum of 6647 per acre per annum of \$5.50 per month per acre.

It is also reiterated for Fiji's minority communities to remember that it was through the greatest act and trust of good faith in colonial history that the Great Council of Chiefs, through the recommendations of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, supported the establishment of the NLTB Act. All business land was then transferred to that Ministry on their behalf. This cleared the way for our indigenous citizens and investors to access and use Fijian land for their own development and for the nation. That happened 79 years ago on 7th June, 1940. It has been on the back of this Act of Trust that many of our successful businesses build their fortunes on and it helped make Fiji today.

In the complex and diverse society such as ours, it is vital for all of us especially for our leaders in politics and commerce to make every effort to understand, acknowledge and respect the value systems of each community, especially our indigenous Fijian citizens. Others may have value systems that give priority to immediate family, individualism and monetary and material wealth, as their measure of success, but our indigenous communities are still very much community-based, attaching great importance to the family groups, the village jointly owned land and *qoliqoli*, the church and the *vanua*. Therefore, the speed of action and priorities for the development are very different for those of others. That is not to say that there are no successful indigenous entrepreneurs because there are very many successful individuals and families abroad and you have to also look at the success of Fijian Holdings.

But given that they have played their role in well-earned success through a generous terms of lease, the rest of us need to pause and reflect. This should motivate us to reach out willingly and share entrepreneurial skills, and expertise with our indigenous citizens and businesses which can add to the lease income by developing some of the land with commercial and residential projects. This should build up additional resources and income for them and security for their future generation.

A happy and content harmonious people would produce a happy and productive workshop which would drive a successful economy. This research article of course is backed by data from the 2019- 2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) on page 9 where it confirms that 74.8 percent of the poor are iTaukei. We know the upheaval this created when this fact was shown and which has rapidly deteriorated under FijiFirst. The iTaukei must vote out this FijiFirst Government and save itself from future deterioration.

I recall the honourable Attorney-General saying that not voting for FijiFirst is like holding a dagger to your neck. This will not work as thousands of voters are now abandoning FijiFirst. I am calling on the Government in terms of the Budget to set up a Commission of Inquiry into the economic development state of the iTaukei indigenous people for inclusion for funding. The Terms of Reference (TOR) could be enquiry into opportunities and challenges of the engagement of indigenous traditional landowners, resource owners in the economic development of Fiji. We could look at the current engagement structure and funding of representative bodies including councils, native title bodies, native companies and businesses.

The road structure performance and resourcing of relevant government entities in relation to this, legislative and administrative and funding constraints and capacity for improving economic engagement, strategies for enhancing economic development opportunities and capacity building, establishing baseline data and frameworks, opportunities that are being assessed and can be derived and recommended from these frameworks. The overall impact of this will be on encouraging in investment and existing initiatives.

On baseline data on iTaukei, why is the Government paranoid about ethnic data? It needs to be open about this. All countries collect this and it is an essential tool for government policies and programmes. This paranoia resulted in the sacking of Mr. Kemueli Naiqama, the Fiji Bureau of Statistics Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In one study in Australia, the following was recommended to help overcome overlapping legislative regimes, administrative complexity and other barriers to representative

bodies attempting to make use of economic opportunity. The Commonwealth Government should give consideration to the creation of indigenous strategy in terms of establishment of an Indigenous Economic Development Board to provide tailored business development, legal and research support to such businesses. Why is this type of initiative impossible for FijiFirst Government to do for the iTaukei businesses?

On the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, the honourable Prime Minister has been attending and opening all provincial councils. He has stated at the openings how Government has contributed to the development in the provinces. While opening the Serua Provincial Council, he stated that the money spent right in the community includes more than \$20 million for roads, \$10 million for telecommunications and other connectivity, \$5 million for schools and in Kadavu over \$55.6 million, he added the investments on roads, bridges, jetty, networks we have listened to your concerns. The question is, what are the results of these in terms of economic empowerment?

These developments are, of course, commended as any development should be commended, but has this translated to lifting the indigenous people out of poverty. This must be clearly indicated and it needs to be assisted through further research studies with recommendations on the results of that - monitoring and evaluation of how this has lifted or moving the iTaukei away from that 78.4 percent of the poor.

I again emphasise that this might be a cry in futility given the FijiFirst Government misguided ethos for equal citizenry which has blinded them, and not even acknowledging or mentioning anywhere in their budget documents that 74.8 percent of the poor are *iTaukei*. They do not want to recognize that their false ideology of equal citizenry has left the indigenous *iTaukei* behind economically or maybe it could be deliberate.

What honourable Prime Minister has stated in his campaign speeches at the Provincials Councils reflects the limits of FijiFirst. They are chained to their ideology of equal citizenry (they are blinded by it) and this has left the indigenous people of Fiji behind. It has been taken to the extreme where ethnic data which reveal anomalies, is suppressed, kept secret and demonized. From the FijiFirst treason *coup* of 2006 and its' imposed 2013 Constitution and laws which are anti-indigenous and contrary to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. All these has clouded their thinking.

This FijiFirst Government will never change its ideology and the only solution from my perspective is to remove it. The *iTaukei* indigenous Fiji must vote out this FijiFirst Government for the very sake of survival. This is the last chance. A new partnership needs to be produced as we did; which produced the 1997 Constitution must arise.

On the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, no mention is made of any increases in the *Turaga ni Koro* allowances where there is a provision of \$1.49 million, the *Mata ni Tikina* allowance which has a provision of \$428,600. The honourable Prime Minister was questioned and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs did a question on this but their dancing skills was much better than other leaders. Unfortunately, they were over to dance away from providing clear cut answers. So, the question is - is the *Turaga ni Koro* allowances increased or not? They should be given increases given the important roles they play. I note a provision for \$4.24 million for Provincial Councils. This only covers the salary costs of staff but not the operations which has to be covered by the *Soli ni Yasana*. The Government should cover both salary costs and operations as the *Soli ni Yasana* is a burden on the *iTaukei* indigenous in the province and is a double taxation.

On the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Commerce, I would like to highlight that the total budget for Cooperatives is \$1.071 million. Of this \$495,000 is for General Admin, \$162,000 for Training and \$414,000 for Extension. This is totally inadequate and an injustice to our people. What I would like to

ask is what has the Ministry done to form and assist cooperatives for *mataqali*, *yavusa*, villages, *tikina*, and groups such as *Yaqona* Farmers, *Dalo* Farmers, Cassava Farmers, Ginger Farmers - where these groups are nurtured and mainstreamed into the national and international economy in terms of product development, capacity enhancement, value addition and market access.

Cooperatives are ideal for these groups given its communal nature and group wide benefits and pooling of resources by individuals into larger groups for economies of scale. I am very disappointed with the inadequate budget given the importance and potential of cooperatives. At least \$5 million to \$10 million should be allocated to Cooperatives especially for Training and Facilitation by the Ministry.

On the First Home Grant, this has been mentioned from this side of Parliament - that provision is discriminatory and no such grants exist for building on *mataqali* land except you have to use your FNPF. This grant needs to be extended to those who wish to build on *mataqali* land.

In terms of some of the issues raised by the other side of Parliament, I again reiterate that what they are saying is wrong that the Opposition does not want to assist people. Of course we want people to be assisted. And one of the comments stated that “the Professor should go back to school”. Do you understand that at the university that the Professor holds the highest level of academic position? Do you understand the academic requirements of a Professor?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- You need a PhD, you need to publish in the journals and et cetera. How can you say that to a Professor that he should go back to school? How many of you have PhDs? He has PhDs, so you cannot compare yourself to that.

(Chorus of interjection)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I mean you guys should go back to school. The other one called one of the Opposition Members as having a pea-sized brain. We need to ensure that this Parliament remains honourable. Judging from the amount of derogatory words thrown from the other side, I think they should be taken to the Privileges Committee before this Parliament ends.

The honourable Prime Minister mentioned Bill No.17 where consultations were done. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a joke to say that consultations were done, because there were no consultations done, and it was only done after. Even for us, we were enlightening the population on that, we were taken to CID and spent the whole night there and the next few nights being interviewed.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- I do not even know who complained which resulted in us being taken in.

They are always saying past Governments have not done anything. If they had not done anything, then why are the roads here, why is the airport here, why are the wharves here, why is Nadi Airport here, why is the Monasavu Hydro Scheme there? It has been repeated by you that past Governments have not done anything.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why are they always bringing up Mr. Sitiveni Rabuka and Ms. Lynda Tabuya? They complained about them and mentioned their names about 15 times, I was counting it. What are you paranoid about? Are you afraid or what? Are you afraid of the survey which was done where they were leading in the polls and that you will be voted out and that is what is going to happen? So stop having a phobia about them. You campaign in peace and let everyone else campaign in peace.

I would like to echo what honourable Attorney-General had mentioned where he stated that most honourable Members of the Opposition pulled out the ethnic card to threaten stability in the country. Who is doing that? We are just contributing in a meaningful way. My contribution today is backed up by research data. It is an alternative development and clear genuine partnerships, which is what I am talking about. It is not bringing about racial instability or threatening stability. So, please, stop misleading Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, time moves on and so will we. We will proceed to dinner. After dinner, we will take the last three speakers in this order:

1. Hon. J. Sigarara;
2. Hon. Dr. I. Waqainabete; and
3. Hon. P.K. Bala.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.13 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 8.20 p.m.

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, fellow Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I rise to affirm the Ministry of Health and Medical Service's full support as well as my support for the Budget.

I wish to commend the honourable Minister for Economy and staff of the Ministry of Economy, who had worked tirelessly particularly during that week, even though we were hosting the Pacific Island Leaders in the Pacific Islands Forum and also for the vision given by the honourable Prime Minister, his decisive leadership and willingness and urging all of us to deliver not only in terms of the Budget but all the services and encouraging all of us, whether we are Ministers or Assistant Ministers or Members of Parliament to ensure that no one is indeed left behind.

Our budget is \$395 million. Sir, it is actually \$413 million because \$17.2 million is in Head 50 for Public Private Partnership initiatives such as the Lautoka Health Care Fiji, the Private Partnership with GPs, Free Dental Practitioners Scheme, Private Laboratories, Radiology and Outsourcing Biomedical and Laboratory Services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the Budget book, it says very clearly what we have to do. We are going to ensure that we march towards universal health coverage and this is SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing. Sir, we want to be able to ensure that we continue to strengthen our primary healthcare system, also that our secondary healthcare system is actually stronger and more robust, but also our tertiary level healthcare system. And the tertiary level healthcare system is the work that is being done in our big hospitals at CWM and Lautoka, and more importantly now with Health Care Fiji and PPP that is happening in Lautoka where open heart surgery and radiotherapy will be available for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in primary healthcare, our major focus remains both in non-communicable disease and communicable disease, and ensuring that our children are given the opportunity of a good quality of life by being able to roll out programmes such as our expanded programme on immunisation, so that we can be able to mitigate against vaccine preventable diseases.

Mr. Speaker, we are in the new normal and the Ministry of Health continues to put emphasis on primary healthcare because we have found that working on primary healthcare, creating that surveillance systems, ensuring that we are liaising with a community health workers, having a zone-based approach to the whole of Fiji that we can be able to identify and deal with emerging threats.

There has been an allocation of more than \$1 million for the National Centre for Health Promotion, Communicable Disease Prevention, Non-Communicable Disease Prevention, WASH, Leptospirosis Control, Dengue Prevention and Control. This is not including the support that we receive from development partners.

Mr. Speaker, these public health initiatives will ensure that we treat and effectively manage emerging threats, such as leptospirosis, typhoid and monkeypox that we have seen have now become a public health disease of concern, and continue to work with COVID-19. In addition, we will continue to resource more than 200 facilities and work with the community, with our boots on the ground approach, to combat COVID-19, measles and NTDs.

Mr. Speaker, back in 1995, the Ministers of Health in the Pacific, in their biennial meeting, met together and they set out a concept called the Healthy Island initiative where they agreed that our children are nurtured in body and mind, environments invite learning and leisure, people work in

age with dignity, ecological balances or social pride and the ocean which sustains us is protected. We have found that in this intervening period with COVID-19, these concepts remain true.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President on 21st June, 2022, re-launched with genuine interest our Healthy Settings Approach. In this Parliament about two years ago, I talked about the health promoting schools concept where more than 300 schools in Fiji from more than a thousand schools are now health-promoting schools. You will see some of the signboards out there.

We now also have healthy settings, for example, in workplace organisations, because we found that in OHS, there is a bit of emphasis on the safety component rather than the health component. When this was launched, Mr. Speaker, there was a big uptake by Government Departments and corporate bodies that want to work with us. The next step is to move to faith-based organisations and health promoting communities, and we believe this is a way in which we could be able to target specifically the NCD surge that we have and also communicable diseases.

Mr. Speaker, with secondary and tertiary healthcare, the CWM Hospital has \$46 million allocated to it, \$20 million for Labasa, and as you are aware, Sir, personal emoluments, fuel and oil and oxygen are the major costs in running a hospital. Nevertheless, we will continue to ensure that we strengthen, not only secondary healthcare but also tertiary level care, where there is a higher level of specialised care within these hospitals and these may include some of the specialists that we already have and also specialists that we will have when Health Care Fiji is running well on its own.

Mr. Speaker, there is an allocation of nearly \$2.5 million for the purchase of equipment. Also, we have to remember that there is another allocation of \$3 million for Emergency Radiology and Laboratory Services. Honourable Salote Radrodro had talked about that case that waited for CT scan, Mr. Speaker, with this \$3 million allocation, we do not need do that because we can then outsource it, for example, to Oceania Hospital or to another provider that has a CT scan in private practice because that allocation has been made available.

Mr. Speaker, we have \$1.5 million allocated for overseas referral but understanding and knowing that Health Care Fiji is now coming on board and during this transition period, this amount that is needed may actually, over the intervening years, reduce.

We also have \$300,000 that is set aside for medical teams. Mr. Speaker, now that the borders have opened into Fiji, there are medical teams that come nearly every week and some of them need transportation, accommodation and this allocation is provided to ensure that there is a seamless organisation done for them.

Mr. Speaker, we also have \$900,000 set aside for early intervention, directed to the Frank Hilton organisation. This is a wonderful organisation and with this, we will ensure that they are equipped to identify early children needing support and sustain a programme to help them, including mainstreaming them. One of their successful programmes that we have been working on is identifying and treating deafness in children and also their wheelchair programme for disabled children, to ensure that they are robust wheelchairs that can be able to withstand the needs of our geography and also our environment.

We have \$2.25 million set aside for emergency evacuation by air from rural and maritime areas. Mr. Speaker, I remember the days when I was a young doctor and this allocation was smaller. There were times when patients were needed to come urgently but we did not have enough providers or we did not have enough funding. Therefore, they had to wait until the next boat. In some instances, some of them did not make it, and if they arrived they were too late. Sir, that does not happen anymore because we now have several providers that tender and provide that service for us, and this

budget is all throughout Fiji to ensure that if any Fijian in any rural or maritime area that has an emergency and needs to come over very quickly, a doctor and a team will go over and pick the patient up and bring them back. There have been instances over the last few years where a flying surgical team actually goes across and provides a much-needed operation to save the person, or in some instances, to save the mother and the child of a baby being born by caesarean section.

Mr. Speaker, \$211,000 is set aside for the Fiji Albinism Project, in ensuring that no one is, indeed left, behind because we know that apart from the social and psychological challenges albinism may pose, but there are, indeed, some significant medical issues that need to be looked after in those with albinism including the fact that they have challenges with skin diseases and skin cancer.

Mr. Speaker, with the PPP with Health Care Fiji in Lautoka, the Ministry and Health Care Fiji Management are facilitating the gradual handover operations through the transition period. I have alluded that \$30 million is being set aside in Head 50 to be able to help or support that, apart from the fact that \$28 million has also been appropriated for Lautoka Hospital in its operational cost, and this is an increase from \$780,000 from last year.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry led by my Permanent Secretary, remains fully engaged in the discussion and site visits to ensure that the transition is smooth and seamless, while maintaining full functions for the two Hospitals of Lautoka and Ba.

We have continued, as a Government, to provide salaries of all workers who are yet to make that transition and those who do not choose to join Health Care Fiji will remain and be redeployed within the Ministry's Health facilities. We look at opportunities for them to be able to strengthen some of the work being done in Sigatoka, for example, or in the Tavua Sub-Divisional Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, members of the public that go to Lautoka and Ba will do so at no cost as currently the practice. Health Care Fiji will be responsible for all aspects of delivery of services and some of the changes we can look forward to as a result of this PPP include:

- The commissioning of equipment and fully functioning of the newly constructed Ba Hospital which is actually continuing through its work and functioning, but they continue to put in new equipment, as we speak.
- The undertaking of an initial fix of the Lautoka Hospital infrastructure sufficient for it to provide appropriate support to service delivery.
- Construction, commissioning, and equipping of new facilities at Lautoka Hospital as they come online.
- Implementation of a new ICT System that features patient management administration, enhanced communications facilities, financial management and building management.
- Construction and commissioning of 100-bed staff accommodation facility.
- Provision of Open Heart Surgery and later on radio therapy.
- Achievement of accreditation utensil standards for the services delivered to both hospitals that are involved in the PPP. These actions will continue to strengthen and enhance the integration of Health Care Fiji facilities, the other healthcare providers in the Western

Division. We are confident that with the PPP, what it will bring into the Health Care Service Fiji is brighter and better future for health in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, we have set aside in the Budget about \$2 million for maintenance works in our Sub-Divisional Hospitals, health centres and nursing stations. Again, as I have alluded to, this does not include some of the funding that is available that is coming through donor support.

Mr. Speaker, in Head 50, \$2 million is set, aside as I have alluded to, for the maintenance of all health facilities but there are some payments that we have outstanding, like the upgrading works for Lautoka Theatre and X-Ray Department that has to be paid.

In this Budget, there is \$2.2 million for the Labasa interior renovation and the beginning of work at Savusavu Hospital which is \$2 million which is for the initial stage of land stabilisation and further refurbishment.

We are committed to the upgrading of these new facilities and as discussed in Parliament also earlier, Mr. Speaker, some of our nursing stations have been changed and they have been upgraded to health centres with a nurse practitioner, and in the case of Tau and Nawaicoba, even a doctor is now available there.

Mr. Speaker, in his response, honourable Seniloli remarked on IT connectivity for health facilities. I need to point out that Government has allocated in this Budget \$1.3 million for ICT infrastructure and network for the purchase of hardware network infrastructure. In addition, we have support coming through World Bank to be able to support us with the new connections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, we have installed and is now functioning the Recompression Chamber at the CWM Hospital to the tune of \$680,000. We have funding available during this Budget and we are thankful to the Ministry of Economy and the honourable Minister for giving us funding so that we can continue to train practitioners to be able to provide treatment for those who have decompression illness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the free General Practitioners (GPs) Scheme has been talked about in detail by quite a few of my colleagues but sufficient to say that \$1 million has been set aside and there are now 38 GPs. I have talked to a few of them and they are very excited to be part of this programme. As you know, a lot of our GPs began their service within the Civil Service and at some stage in their career, they were looking at ways to be able to contribute back to the Civil Service and they find that this works well for them because they are able to do that and by contributing to nation-building by seeing ordinary Fijians that come through their door, but at a cost so that their businesses can remain viable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded by the honourable Minister for Economy, there is an incentive now for GPs to establish new clinics in rural areas, like Nawaicoba, Malolo, Drasa, Sabeto, Seaqaqa, Nasarawaqa, Korolevu and Pacific Harbour, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have \$500,000 set aside in the new budget for the General Practitioners Scheme - this is the private Dental Practitioners. Again, there is a lot of excitement within the oral health community on the ability to be able to also contribute in this area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been some discussions this week about the *Nasi ni Koro* or community health workers. We have \$3 million set aside for the 1,582 community health workers or *Nasi ni Koro*. What we do is, every working day, there is an amount of money that is paid for them so all of them do not necessarily receive their wages on the particular Thursday that civil

servants will get theirs because there are certain times during the week in which their payments are made. It is dependent on ensuring that their paperwork comes through and is seen and processed. We have also worked hand in hand with the Ministry of Economy to ensure that this process becomes simpler, so that they will be able to receive their wage when it is due.

The decision by the honourable Prime Minister has ensured that we have a stronger foot on the ground in our communities. What we do know is that, this programme, since we have started incentivising community health workers with allowances, we have had more community health workers because even in places such as the Lami-Nausori corridor, some of the informal settlements now have community health workers who are on this scheme and they actually receive allowances.

We liaise with them, they are our hand and foot on the ground. They do their surveillance, they identify those who are unwell and they tell the zone medical officers and zone nurses, so we see that this system is working very well. That started before COVID-19. One of the strengths of our response to COVID-19 and also the response to the vaccination campaign was the work of the community health workers, and I would like to thank them at this juncture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have talked about how social determinants of health are so important. As the Minister for Health with my senior officials in the Ministry of Health, we are so pleased to see the work that has been done in other areas - the infrastructural work, the roads that are being built and bridges because these all contribute towards the social determinants of health because when there is access by roads, then people can come to our health centres. We can be able to go and visit them.

We are also thankful and grateful that the Budget also sets aside a significant portion for social protection because this social protection will ensure that if there are three young children in your family, they have the mechanism where the parents would be able to ensure that they have a good diet because there is obviously \$30 a month available to be able to use that for their good diet or take them to the hospital, for example, when they are unwell. These all contribute to a healthy society, it is just not health on its own. So, in a way, those social determinants are all indirectly affecting health - the access to roads, proper water supply, water sanitation and hygiene, and a few others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I finish, I just also want to say that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government led by the honourable Prime Minister showed that we cared for our civil servants by ensuring that their salaries were never touched. There was suggestion by Opposition to cut their salary by 20 percent up to 35 percent. We never did it.

Not only that but we have restored their allowances - maritime and rural allowances and overtime beginning with nurses with the Supplementary Budget at the beginning of this year and now for the other technical officers within the Ministry of Health up to Band F. This is a true sign of the Government putting the Civil Service first and understanding the important roles they play with regard to health in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to finish just on two things before I sit down. I know the first bell has rung. This is now my fourth or fifth Budget and one thing that has become very clear to me is whenever we have Budget debates, the Opposition has not ever come up with an alternative budget. They have never ever told us an alternative budget to hear....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- Hold on!

I have never heard the honourable Leader of the Opposition or one of the leaders of their Party

stand up and say, “We are going to have a budget of \$3.2 billion. We will get \$2 billion from this, this and this. We will loan \$1.2 billion”. They never have. They have never even told us how much they will set aside for health itself. They have never told us.

Throughout this week, all we have been hearing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the same complaint and complaint. It is not easy to be able to balance a budget. It is not easy to be able to ensure that a budget is provided that sees to all Fijians. We have heard from the Opposition, “We want budget for the *iTaukei*. We want budget only for the sugarcane growers.” This Government creates a budget for all Fijians.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. DR. I. WAQAINABETE.- All Fijians are affected positively by the Budget. This, again, is another sign that we truly put Fiji first.

It may be the last time for majority of the Opposition Members to be here in Parliament so before they leave this Parliamentary sitting, they have to reflect on the fact that they have never given us an alternative budget because a truly functioning Opposition will do so. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. J. SIGARARA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament: Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my full support to the 2022-2023 National Budget.

First and foremost, I must thank the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy together with his team for preparing a Budget that does not only have resilience but provides a platform for all Fijians for the road to economic recovery. Allow me to also thank the honourable Mosese Bulitavu, honourable Mere Naulumatua and honourable Aseri Radrodro for their contribution, giving their heart out with their mind and their support. I think credit should be given when it is due and I thank them for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is very deserving for all Fijian because it is structured with the vision to strengthen support for individual families, providing a safety net for our senior citizens, providing equal opportunities for students with the education and opportunities cementing the aim of ensuring economic stability and growth and many more. Given the nature of the impacts of the two global crisis such as COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukraine war, we as a nation, demonstrated persistency throughout the cause of the obstacles and the difficulties. But one thing is clear, the Budget echoed a very strong message that even in the darkest days or crisis of our economy, Fiji would not just recover, but would emerged from the pandemic with base and resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is truly empowering that we fought and moved together as a nation. With decisive leadership of our honourable Prime Minister, he has put in place a Government to trust to put our hopes and confidence in. Additionally, I know that the honourable Prime Minister knows where he is taking us and for us as followers, know that he is leading us to a better future. Similar to the 40 years Moses led the Israelites, God heard his promise to always lead him and in Fiji, God kept and anointed our honourable Prime Minister with the vision of equality, harmony, unity and modernity by building a fair and just society for all Fijians. I can confidently say in this august Parliament that the cause of the direction that was started by the honourable Prime Minister was not altered and neither disturbed, but it remained steady till today. This is the kind of leadership Fiji needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2022-2023 Budget has been well crafted with the tremendous support and participation of the Fijian people. The true Fijian spirit of never giving up in the face of adversity has propelled us to the road of recovery. The payout assistance under the inflation mitigation package is not

a hand out or a freebie, as most of the Opposition Members are indicating. However, it is targeted to useful resource to ease the struggles of every individual family to provide more food on the table. For example, the \$180 per child for the next six months, \$180 payout for the Government pensioners, \$180 aftercare fund, \$180 for social welfare recipients, \$180 for all tertiary students and bus fare subsidy by 10 percent across the board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also noted the existing incentives and subsidises that will continue for the next financial year. The removal of the VAT from the expanded list of 21 essential items, the continuous subsidy such as the direct subsidy of water and electricity, bus fares, removal of market vendors fees and many more. These targeted resources are strategies that will address inflation. Reacting to the Bible scripture in the *Book of Mathew 7:9*: It says and I quote: “You parents, if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give him a stone instead.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most certainly not. As we parents, we will provide for whatever need for our children. Therefore, the basic metaphor for this verse is that, a human father would not refuse a basic desire for his son. So God too would not refuse a basic need for one of his followers. Similarly, through this promising compassionate Budget, the Fijian Government will not turn a blind eye to the struggles of every Fijian but it will make every means to make the struggles of everyone, a priority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I lend my full support and appreciation on the introduction of the new scholarship scheme known as the Skills Qualification. Sir, such a Scheme is very rewarding because it will provide a platform for every student, irrespective of their background or geographical setting with opportunity to afford higher skill education. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what a beauty with this Scheme, there is a Chinese proverbs that says and I quote:

“If you give a man a fish he will be hungry tomorrow, but if you teach a man to fish, he will be richer forever”.

And it is in the proverb that the Skills Qualification Scheme will be the right tool to empower, give students an occupation that will feed them for over a lifetime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the launch of the Ministry’s 10 Year Strategic Plan last year, it was provided that the way towards transforming rural areas to be resilient, productive and sustainable it is with the ambitions that the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management is grateful for its Budget allocations of \$15 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to utilise the funds allocated to the Self Help Programme, Community Access Roads, Footpaths, Foot Bridges, High Priority Water and High Priority Sanitation to implement projects aim to benefit the communities in the rural and maritime areas in Fiji and with the forward looking vision to build up a rural economy to be a transitional pillar in meeting the central efforts of reducing poverty and increase in economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$2 million is budgeted for the next financial year to cater for the community access roads, footpaths and foot bridges through this budget allocation, the Ministry is confident that it will continue to place more importance in opening up greater opportunities for the rural and maritime communities such as roads and community access roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by saying this, we want to provide assistance by not only improving accessibility for the communities but particularly for the children. Sir, the Fijian Government is doing this so that we can help these children from walking for several hours and even crossing creeks and rivers just to get to their school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to enlighten this august Chamber for the past three years, the Ministry implemented 278 projects with a total cost of over \$6 million on average 31 percent projects were implemented each year which is equivalent to 86 new projects. These projects were the strategies to improve communities' access to services, maintain the safety of all Fijians to either exclusive disability or older person accessibility, improving productivity and maintaining the higher socio-economic quality with the aim to alleviate the struggles of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Self Help Programme is one of the key capital programme under the Ministry to ensure communities have sustainable living standards and providing sustainable growth through the resilience communities. Therefore, in the next financial year, the Ministry has been allocated with a budget of \$1 million for this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at the past three years, the Ministry implemented 411 projects with the total cost of approximately \$5 million. With all these development projects, the Ministry has witnessed the communities' improvement to access clean and safe drinking water, proper sanitation for toilet facilities, better and affordable access to training centres and improvement in the standard of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to fulfil the constitutional rights of all Fijians in accessing quality and safe drinking water with adequate quantities in all the rural areas, the Ministry commends the additional budget allocation for \$300,000 towards the high priority water and sanitation. A total of \$800,000 for the next fiscal year will be consistent support to meeting the global efforts in ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation to benefit all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, furthermore under the Ministry's Public Sector Investment Programmes (PSIP), the Government has now extended the reach of its services to the rural communities through strategically placed government stations to serve the provisions and districts throughout remote rural communities in Fiji. This would include the establishment of a new government station and yet to be commissioned in rural remote areas such as Namarai in Ra, Wainikoro in Macuata, as well as the construction of the new government quarters in duplex in Kubulau in Bua. About 14,000 Fijians from more than 3,000 households from the surrounding villages and settlements near the government stations are expected to benefit from the implementation of these projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the final payment of these projects will be available in this new financial year 202-2023 before they are ready for commissioning. Such a development is a testimony of government intention of ensuring that every Fijian in our rural communities are able to access our service at their doorstep. In the recent months, there has been an increase in collaboration with key State agencies to prepare the Ministry in improving its planning for inclusive rural development implementation of programmes. A pilot project is currently being sampled at Wainilotulevu and Nasoqo Village in the district of Veinuqa in the province of Namosi. These two communities have been identified as vulnerable communities who have just been accessed by road this financial year 2021-2022 and the integrated government approach would be the dawn of the new era in the whole of Government approach in uplifting the livelihoods of all Fijians.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, partnership collaboration with other government ministries, the private sector, CSOs and development partners are going to be at the heart of this new radical transformations in the rural areas. The old Fijian custom of *solesolevaki*, meaning community cooperation is so important at the national level, as it is an internal approach which is even more needed in today's context. Through such incentives and collaborations, not only do we ensure that we develop a culture of resilience, productivity and sustainability in development of rural areas but more importantly, that we are united in tackling today's ever changing global challenges together as Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this strategic, inclusive and integrated approach in rural development is in line with the Government's vision to build a better Fiji for us all and leaving no one behind, especially post-COVID-19. The Ministry is forever optimistic and more determined than ever to spread positive change in this new journey ahead for we can only achieve much if we unite in this august Parliament, if all civil servants are united and all Fijians are united.

Mr. Speaker, I fully lend my support towards the 2022-2023 Budget. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset, I wish to thank you for accommodating my request. The honourable Prime Minister, fellow Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to speak in support of the 2022-2023 National Budget delivered by the honourable Minister for Economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me join my Government colleagues and congratulate the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Economy and his team led by Mr. Shiri Krishna Gounder for a smart, sustainable and fit-for-purpose Budget. Allow me to make few general comments before I turn to specific remarks relating to the areas of employment productivity, industrial relations, youth and sports that falls my ministerial portfolio.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a profound and a solid vision of our honourable Prime Minister and our Government in ensuring that we deliver the best to all Fijians despite the impact of COVID-19 that was felt heavily in our small island nation. Added to this, the current Russia-Ukraine conflict is having a major impact on our economy and also on the livelihood of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite this external pressure this Budget builds on the strong foundation laid out in previous budgets under this Government. The projection of 12.4 percent economic growth this year is another milestone achievement for our Government. It gives us confidence in planning for the future. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Members from the Opposition side fail to accept these figures. The Opposition views lack substance or any form of informed intelligence to back any of their claims.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is an impressive documentation of our consolidation and recovery that underlines how this Government has dealt with the external or global and internal challenges through these difficult times. Sir, today, we are proud to say that the Bula Boom is already being felt by our nation. It is unfortunate that the Opposition does not have any vision for this nation. They are only concerned about petty issues while the FijiFirst Government has carefully crafted this Budget for the betterment and wellbeing of all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is a solid indicator of our honourable Prime Minister's leadership and the commitment that we all should put our people first in our agenda. The FijiFirst Government has stood by all Fijians in various crisis whether it be natural disasters, effects of climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic. We stand united with our people and we will continue to deliver the best for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government through the visionary and responsible leadership of the honourable Prime Minister will not be stopped by short-sighted and ridiculous ideas floating from the Opposition just to please a few or overblown ideas to massage their inflated egos. Through reforms we have taken Government services right to the doorstep, of all Fijians no matter where they are and we will continue to serve our people and place them in the centre of our reforms, as we have done during these past two terms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a progressive, inclusive and people-focused Government that puts Fiji and its people first every time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to specific remarks relating to the areas of employment, productivity and industrial relation, youth and sports, that falls under my Ministerial portfolio. During the recent Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Meeting I met the honourable Prime Minister of Australia when he visited the Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) Age Care Pilot Programme that prepares our Fijian candidates to meet the industry's standards in Australia.

The Australian Prime Minister stated that there was a high demand for aged care workers because of Australian's high ageing population. Mr. Speaker, Sir, when our borders were re-opened in December last year, there was a lot of noise from the Opposition except honourable Bulitavu that a wrong decision has been made. This is when we began to meet the demands in Australia and New Zealand for our workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, may I also congratulate our honourable Prime Minister for bringing unity amongst the Pacific family. Today, I stand in this august Parliament to announce that another milestone has been achieved under the Vuvale Partnership which was signed by the FijiFirst Government and the Australian Government. A total of 1,820 Fijians exceeding the estimate target of \$1,000 are now participating under the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility Programme from January 2022 to the first week of July, 2022 alone. But in total Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have 5,986 for the PLS and the seasonal work for Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a huge positive outcome that ensures that our economic recovery starts sooner rather than later, following the re-opening of Fiji's borders in December, 2021. It means that thousands of Fijian households have a long term and secure source of income with great spin-off benefits to local communities and businesses.

While this schemes are greatly welcomed, my Ministry will be pro-active in ensuring that our own employment market is maintained to meet our own labour market demands. This means following through on the measures for skills training for greater local employment ability in this Budget. This 2022–2023 Budget as the honourable Attorney-General has outlined in detail means we will build on our recovery and not simply reactivate measures to external pressures through the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Europe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this also means that we must be innovative and creative in using our resources to sustain ourselves better despite ongoing global conditions that make it difficult for us. I will outline some of these innovations among our youth and in this sporting arena later in my presentation. As outlined in the Budget, the starting point is the cutting of the Budget deficit almost into half. This makes for a smart budget for its vision and financial planning to continue to look after all Fijians and at the same time build our economy in a sustainable and fit-for-purpose manner. By continuing the wide range of tax benefits, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and improved policy and structural conditions for business, the ball is now firmly in the court of the business sector to continue the post pandemic recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this regard, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations will continue to play a positive role in supporting both sides of the economic equation equally for the employers and the employee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has enforced compliance to the National Minimum Wages and the 10 sectoral base minimum wages. This ensures employers pay the right wages to their workers with effective audits conducted by the Compliance Officers at the Ministry. As announced in the Revised Budget 2021-2022, the National Minimum Wage Rates and the 10 sectoral based minimum wage rate was said to be increased in four stages. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first two have already been implemented on 1st April, 2022 and 1st July, 2022, while the other two will be implemented on 1st October, 2022 and 1st January, 2023. Increasing the National Minimum Wage to \$4 per hour is a great achievement of this

Government. This will ensure that we will continue to enforce the minimum terms and conditions of employment and engage in good faith employment relations with the employers and workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in the FNPF contributions to workers' wages is another step in the right direction that will help workers save more through their FNPF contribution for a secure future. I was surprised with the comments from the National Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress in his recent media statement on why FNPF contributions were not restored to its original level. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems that he fails to understand the meaning of recovery, maybe to attract media attention. He is ignoring the fact that 92 percent of the employed in the formal sector are back at work compared to the pre-COVID-19 levels. I hope that he reads the Budget Address in a fair manner to appreciate and know exactly what the FijiFirst Government is doing to benefit all workers in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$2 million initiative announced for the 'Stronger Together Job Support Scheme' for 1,500 out of work Fijians is an excellent opportunity for our Fijian workers to secure employment at the same time help the industry to grow. Sir, the rebranding of TVET to Skills Qualification is an excellent move that will attract more students to take up skills qualification at tertiary training institutions and at the same time assist in the skills shortage faced at the industry level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also welcome the effort in extending the Employment Tax Scheme until December 2024 with the 300 percent tax deduction of the amount of any salary or wages paid for the first time workers. In particular, the tax deduction of 400 percent for the salary and wages paid to persons with disabilities who have been employed for a period three years. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is another positive and inclusive step in narrowing the employment ability gap of persons with disabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we encourage and support social dialogue as an effective mechanism paving the way to bring about resolutions to disputes and conflicts amongst disputing parties, unlike what I read in the newspaper with honourable Leawere misleading Parliament yesterday about the compliance. Sir, this will strengthen the consultation and co-operation between workers and employers within the labour market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Minister for Economy for the allocation for improved productivity. On 13th June, 2019, Fiji launched its first ever Fiji National Productivity Master Plan 2021-2036. Productivity is an important agenda, Mr. Speaker Sir, for all developing countries and is an effective way for constant improvement and economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we welcome the allocated budget for the Ministry of Youth and Sports. This continued level of funding during this difficult time is testament to the importance that the FijiFirst Government has given and will continue to provide for the youth and sports. As the honourable Attorney-General has outlined over 70 percent of Fiji's population can be classified as youth and it stands to reason that with this youthful population, and support from the other not so youthful demographic, Fiji is also a great and growing sporting nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key focus areas for the Ministry remains in youth and sports, development programmes. The Budget submission for 2022-2023 is aligned closely to these areas and continuing to drive Government's agenda that development programmes, developed and managed by the Ministry is made available to all eligible Fijians and it is inclusive.

As we continue to grow the sector and this sector grows on its own accord, we will focus on new game plans that consider the socioeconomic impact on angles to this growth. This means that we need to move towards development models that are in touch with global developments. Sports is now big business, Mr. Speaker, Sir - while we work on and achieve our goals in that direction as a responsible Ministry of a responsible Government we will not forget the small picture that sports is for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will ensure that our local communities and community sports, get all the attention and care that it deserves. In terms of youth development initiatives with an allocation of \$516,000 the Ministry continues to work with youth groups. This includes providing empowerment and developing training programmes and initiatives to enable young people in our Fijian community.

We must realise the potential they have in the vast unutilised land and local resources, and we have found that the youth farm initiative while providing immediate relief during the worst of COVID-19 is a viable means of growing the sector beyond that. It has now grown into a long term and sustainable project that provides food security, economic opportunities, gainful employment and employment creation opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry also intends to increase youth enrolment into our TVET, as we see this as a meeting local employment needs in key areas as well as continuing a workforce that is work ready for initiatives such as the Pacific Labour Mobility Scheme. Sports as an enabler of sustainable development has continued economic impact, not least through sporting remittance but also through the growth of Fiji as a regional sporting power house. This has included the hosting of a growing range of Oceania level sports as well as more international events that bring in revenue, recognition and promotion of brand Fiji as well as sports Fiji. We will continue to grow in this rea.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from a sports development point of view, the key focus of Government is to continue to invest in local infrastructure. The growth of high profile Fijian sports people and our sporting teams in the last decades or so has been among other factors due to the investment by this Government as local level infrastructure.

We will continue to upgrade the existing facilities and development of new facilities across Fiji to enable all Fijians to have access to world class facilities to maximise participation of all Fijians in sports. This will also involve working with the range of development partners to promote inclusive sporting programmes, in particular in terms of gender inclusivity and promotion of women and girls in sports. Fiji continues to be the leader in the Pacific region in terms of promotion of gender equality. This has seen women participation continue to increase on a yearly basis with notable achievement for women in sports like the bronze medal won by the Fijiana 7s team at the recent Tokyo Olympic Games and the Fijiana 15s women claiming the 2022 Super Rugby Women's Competition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the competition of the teams and others such as the Fiji Women's Soccer and Netball team shows that this programme has reached across Fiji, including the remote and maritime areas, and is not restricted to narrow urban corridors. Again, this is a result of the combined effort with the National Sporting Association for promotion of sports across Fiji with equal opportunities and access for all Fijians. Considering the power of sports in community building, the Ministry has worked closely with the Fiji National Sports Commission in empowering communities to take ownership of sports. The Commission through Government funding has helped set up 46 Community Sports Associations around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Community Sports Association is an association of members of registered youth clubs, single and multi-sports club and work together to facilitate community sports and physical activities. The Government is providing funding this year for this Community Sports Association to grow and lead the revival of community and *tikina* provincial based competitions with the multi-sports focus. This \$3.81 billion blueprint by the FijiFirst Government only reassures that people and their rights, needs and aspirations are at the heart of our economy. It is a people-centred budget; a kind, considerate, yet robust budget designed to heal, build and consolidate a prosperous, peaceful and progressive Fiji for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been in this Parliament for the last eight years and this is the first time I have observed an Opposition Member making a Point of Order against an Opposition Member. In fact, it is a very historical day and I will tell you the problem. The only thing that I can make out is that they are totally confuse, they are divided and the worst thing is, that they do not have any trust in each other. They are the ones who want to run the country. It is a shame! Not only that, I even heard them saying, “Times up, times up” to their own colleague. It is really a sad day for the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank this august Parliament for the privilege to speak and I fully support the motion to approve the 2022-2023 National Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, as you will realise, that brings to an end the number of speakers for today. We have a full day tomorrow where we will have the Right of Reply from the honourable Minister for Economy, followed by the Committee of Supply. Your attention in both the cases is required, so I require a full House tomorrow. We have a lot of work to do, we have a full day, we can do it. We now adjourn till tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.21 p.m.