

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

FRIDAY, 31ST MARCH, 2023

[UNCORRECTED COPY]

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FRIDAY, 31ST MARCH, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable S.S. Kirpal and honourable A. Bia.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 30th March, 2023 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's Sitting. I thank each and every one of you for your great participation throughout the week, even extending it to Madam Deputy Speaker, who was able to take us slowly through yesterday's proceedings.

I thank those joining us in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Fiji National University – LLB Students

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming another group of LLB students from the Fiji National University. Welcome to Parliament and I hope you will enjoy and also learn something from today's proceedings. Please, only take what you see and hear what is good from both sides.

Official Photo Shoot

Honourable Members, at this juncture, please kindly take note that on Tuesday, 4th April, 2023, there will be an official photo shoot at the parliamentary steps (in front of Parliament) and this will take place during the morning tea break. Please, note that in your diaries.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Deteriorating Road Conditions – Northern Division (Question No. 30/2023)

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on how and when will the Government address the deteriorating road conditions experienced around the country - in places such as Natewa West Roads, the Natewa East Roads, Buca Bay and Natewa/Tunuloa Road, Nabalebale to Kubulau Road, Naikawaga Road, the Hibiscus Highway from Labasa to Savusavu (and the one from Savusavu to Labasa via the Wainigadru route) and the Nadi to Lautoka Highway?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to answer the question from the honourable Member, not really from him maybe the honourable Prime Minister and Mr. Speaker will also be listening to my answer.

The question specifies mainly roads in the Northern and the Western Divisions. The Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) is currently undertaking a feasibility study in the Northern Division to check on the viability of projects. Pre-feasibility study includes determination of technical, economic, environmental, social and gender, land acquisition and other resettlement aspects regarding the construction of roads. All roads mentioned are in the FRA's planning and design phases in terms of major improvements. There are usually four phases that are undertaken by FRA on road construction - planning and design, procurement, construction and the last phase being operation and maintenance.

In terms of unsealed roads, these will be looked through in terms of routine maintenance and normally it is monthly and secondary routes in a span of two to three months. For sealed roads, there is a rip and remake treatment, as you already know, which was undertaken from the last Government and is continuing. Sir, FRA will continue with this aggressive maintenance, especially after the Budget, and joint and better efforts to address the urgent needs.

On the specific roads mentioned from Natewa West Road to Naikawaga, these are all currently accessible and undergoing maintenance. Under the revamped Public Works Department (PWD), we will undergo full rehabilitation of all rural roads during the next four years.

On the Hibiscus Highway, this is fully opened and following the routine maintenance, but as stated, we had issues regarding the FijiFirst budget, but this is being rejigged to cater for the ongoing situation.

For the Nadi to Lautoka Highway, we have rectified the Saweni-Lautoka stretch which has been a subject of a lot of complaints and also Nadi is currently being worked on, especially the roundabout in front of the temple and a few other key areas. I will be following up on that personally in terms of those areas.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will also declare my interest, I was born and bred in Lautoka, so I am going to ask a supplementary question regarding the Nadi-Lautoka Highway.

Just quickly, honourable Minister, the FRA was engaged in a rip and remake programme and

Just quickly, honourable Minister, the FRA was engaged in a rip and remake programme and there are also plans afoot and in place with respect to the four-lane that was going to be done between Nadi and Lautoka, considering there is quite a substantial amount of traffic that now actually travel between Nadi and Lautoka. Will the Government continue with the rip and remake between Nadi and Lautoka, or are we going to be going ahead with the four-lane highway that was scheduled to happen between Nadi and Lautoka?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously, the rip and remake will continue. On the four-lane highway, as I have mentioned, the feasibility study is still being carried out, continuing from what the FijiFirst Government promised. I am commending you for that, but we will continue that work, given the economic aspects in terms of that area.

Let me just emphasise in terms of FRA, they had a budget of \$365 million, but most of that was expended for December. In terms of maintenance, it should have been \$100 million but only \$70 million was budgeted for and not only that, \$25 million had been spent on emergency works in the previous year which was supposed to offset in this financial year which it did not happen. Those are some of the legacy issues which, I as Minister, have inherited. We are working on addressing those.

There was also mention by the FijiFirst Government before the Election that there will be a supplementary budget on the road rehabilitation and contractual obligations, assuming that you will win the Elections, but you did not.

(Laughter)

They did not win, Sir. They had the wrong assumption in terms of that and overspent, so now we have to struggle. Anyway, we are rectifying that and as you have mentioned, we will take it and address it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has spoken about the supplementary budget, likewise, I would like to ask, where is the mini-budget?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Address the question.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Coming to it, do not worry. Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament whether the roads within the Municipalities are still under Fiji Roads Authority (FRA)?

(Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Can you keep shut, please?

(Laughter)

Honourable Prime Minister, please, warn him!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why I brought this matter to the attention of Parliament is because it seems that no one is bothered to repair the damaged roads within Municipalities. It is more or less a blame game. I just want to know whether it is still under FRA, and they will continue repairing the roads, or no?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, did you get the question that was raised?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, I understood the question. The arrangement when the FRA was set up was for them to cover the Municipalities and Municipalities to refund the cost to FRA. FijiFirst was supposed to do that, but they did not.

(Laughter)

So, to continue, with the Coalition Government bringing back Municipal Council elections, that will be the start of the process - to rectify that issue regarding municipal roads. So, again, another legacy issue which is on my table to fix.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me say to the honourable Minister, it is not an issue related to FijiFirst budget or what we promised or winning the elections, you are in Government, you are in control.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Everyone is looking up to the Minister to get the job fixed.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know these road conditions before we handed over in December, because I am from the North too as you know. My question is, the children in Adi Eleni District School, that is, between Wainunu and Kubulau are walking kilometres to get to school, when will you get that fixed? This is just one of them. We do not want to hear about the plans that you have, those are long term projects, but get those ones that need to be fixed to be fixed now. When are you going to fix it?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- *Vinaka.*

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I mentioned yesterday, they do not seem to understand the organisational and change process.

(Laughter)

First of all, they bugged-up the budget.

(Laughter)

And that is what we are trying to fix, and now we are fixing it.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- You know very well it was good before you came in.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- On that particular issue, yes, that is an existing issue and it involves a major slip and FRA is already working on it. There are geo-technical issues there so it is just not a small and simple slip, and definitely I will be following up on that.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the deteriorating road condition is due to the Coalition Government, not doing proper consultation and I will give an example. For the Natewa West Coast Road...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Question?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- ...the main FRA contractor in Vanua Levu is Fair Deal Earthmoving Contractors Limited and the sub-contractors are Kashmir Civil Construction and Bula Contractors Limited. The issue is, the honourable Minister did not consult with the main contractor and the sub-contractors. Now, the subcontractors are not getting jobs.

They had depots there that fixed those roads, now all those depots are closed, and all the sub-contractors have moved back to Labasa. Why did the honourable Minister not do proper consultation with FRA and the main contractor in Vanua Levu, Fair Deal Earthmoving Contractors Limited with the sub-contractors who maintained those untarsealed roads? Why?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Very poor.

MR. SPEAKER.- Long winded one but he ended up by asking a question.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of basic legal understanding, you have a contract and there is a sub-contract to the main contract and under that there are sub sub contracts. As a Minister, I cannot interfere because that was

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Let the honourable Minister finish his reply, honourable Bulitavu.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Because that would constitute abuse of office, and I do not want, after four years, when you come into government you might investigate me.

(Laughter)

So, I am proceeding very carefully with these contracts.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- No, no, the work is being done, but the original problem is you. You spent most of the budget on campaigning, that is the problem.

(Laughter)

On fixing roads where your voters were, that was the problem and that is why the budget is bugged up. We are fixing it with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think the second Oral Question has lapsed since the author of the question is not present today and now we will move right onto the third Oral Question for today.

(Oral Question No. 31/2023 lapses)

Government Funding for New Ministries
(Question No. 32/2023)

HON. J. USAMATE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on how the Government is funding the new Ministries and Departments for which there was no specific budgetary allocation?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Member for the question. In fact, Mr. Speaker, this question is really based on a lack of understanding of the Financial Management Act of 2004, so let me contextualise the issue by quoting a few sections of the Financial Management Act of 2004.

“Reallocation of appropriations on assignment of government business

21. (1) If ministerial responsibility is assigned by a ministerial assignment in a way that is not reflected in the most recent Annual Appropriation Act or in the budget estimates tabled with the Bill for that Act, the Minister may authorise amounts appropriated by that Act to be reallocated -
- (a) to new heads of appropriation and appropriation categories to be administered by the same or different budget sector agencies; or
 - (b) between existing heads of appropriation and appropriation categories to be administered by the same or different budget sector agencies, or both, in order to reflect the new assignment of ministerial responsibility.”

Sub-section (5) states, and I quote:

“(5) In this section -

ministerial assignment" means an assignment by the President of responsibility to a Minister under section 103 of the Constitution.”

So, Mr. Speaker, section 22 of Act which deals with the redeployment of appropriation states, and I quote:

- “(1) The Minister may, with the approval of Cabinet, authorise the redeployment of amounts appropriated by the most recent Annual Appropriation Act for administration by the Ministry to the heads of appropriation and appropriation categories to be administered by one or more other budget sector agencies.”

In simple terms, this means that with Cabinet approval, budgeted funds can be moved across appropriation Heads or Ministries. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in line with section 7 of the Act, the financial responsibility of every Head or appropriation is under the management of the head of the agency referred to as the responsible officer and in most cases, these are the respective Permanent Secretaries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the appointment of the Coalition Government, the honourable Prime Minister assigned various ministerial portfolios to each one of us, including some reshuffle of certain programmes to different Ministries. This happens every now and then. The honourable Prime

Minister has the prerogative, even with the existing Appropriation Act, to assign ministerial responsibilities and change from one to the other. For example, the Department of Public Enterprises and Climate Change was moved from the Ministry of Finance (formerly Ministry of Economy) to the Office of the Prime Minister. Similarly, from the former Ministry of Waterways and Environment, the Department of Environment was moved to the Office of the Prime Minister while the Department of Waterways, Sir, was moved to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the movement of programmes, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation was created as a new Ministry which included the merger of the Departments of Tourism and Civil Aviation, and we are happy that it is now a full-fledged Ministry. Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Multi-Ethnic Affairs was included as part of the Ministry of Sugar to become the Ministry of Sugar and Multi-Ethnic Affairs. So, how do we operationalise these changes, which means change in financial responsibility?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier, there are adequate provisions in the Financial Management Act to operationalise the changes in ministerial responsibilities and align financial responsibilities with ministerial assignments. As such, we have managed to effectively change the reporting lines and responsibilities for programmes that have been affected and eventually in the new budget, we will fully move these programmes under the appropriate Ministries and Heads.

Also, Mr. Speaker, within the first month in Government, we undertook a redeployment of \$100 million which catered for almost \$44 million towards the \$200 Back to School payment which benefited 222,000 students throughout the country at a very appropriate and critical time where the parents and students needed support. We got a lot of positive feedback from people throughout the country that, that money was used properly.

Sir, \$10 million as first tranche of payment to USP was done, \$7.5 million was also put aside to extend the 10 percent bus fare reduction for six months from February to July 2023 (the previous Government had allocated it until February and I know why), additional funding for the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) and other funding allocations to meet some of the immediate priorities of the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, as pointed out by the honourable Minister, there was an allocation for FRA - \$200 million for the whole, apart from the ones that we had to borrow. That \$200 million was spent in six months. By 31st December, they had used all the money because they were campaigning.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He yells because he knows that is what he was doing.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Talk about yourself.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The newly-established Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation is operating on the current financial year budgetary allocation of \$35.2 million. This includes a total of \$30.3 million allocated to the Department of Tourism and \$4.9 million to the Department of Civil Aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, slightly different from the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs had no budgetary allocation when it was formed and as such, its operations are currently funded from the Ministry of Sugar's budget, and the honourable Minister is

preparing all the responsibilities and briefs and aligning it for the next budget so that the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs within the Ministry of Sugar and Multi-Ethnic Affairs will get the appropriate budget.

Apart from that, we are also redeploying staff, Mr. Speaker, within the Civil Service to ensure that the Ministries are adequately staffed to effectively deliver on Government priorities. For example, certain staff from within the Corporate and Human Resources Division under the Ministry of Waterways and Environment are being transferred to the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs because the Ministry of Waterways is merged with the Ministry of Agriculture, and Environment is shifted to the Office of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are being efficient and smart about resource allocation and see how best we can cater within the available resources before mobilizing new resources. And as I have pointed out, there were a lot of things happening within the Civil Service in terms of appointments, in terms of the appropriate budget, so the responsibility of the Ministry of Civil Service now is under the honourable Prime Minister.

The Public Service Commission is being revamped. They are taking a handle on appointments and looking at appropriateness, not only the number, but the effectiveness of staff within the Civil Service. This is important, Sir, as we have to learn to actually live within our means.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I want to say in response to the question that we have already started preparations for the next Budget. We will be receiving submissions from different Ministries by 6th April, 2023. We are also receiving a lot of submissions from the private sector, civil society, youth, women's groups, trade unions and the general public.

The Fiscal Review Committee is doing its work and, obviously, all these works will feed into the National Economic Summit, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I will give a Ministerial Statement on the Summit next week, so that is how we have managed these things. Thank you, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you for the response, honourable Deputy Prime Minister. We have heard you - you have stated about the \$400 million allocation and where you are deploying those funds. But one thing that I did not hear in your answer this morning is from which allocation because deploying funds to another entity means depriving services, projects, whatever that have already been lined up. We need to be clear on that because there are expectations and there are services that need to be delivered. So, how do you prioritise those redeployment?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a rather new question, but I will answer that. I think the question was, how we are funding new Ministries and I have answered that effectively. The question now is, where did we get the redeployment? That is an appropriate question.

All I can say to the honourable Leader of the Opposition and as my colleague said, their Budget was bugged, we have used the Financial Management Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that we identify all the wastages and where the expenditure was not done. We have seen that this expenditure cannot be disbursed or used in the next two or three months.

We have had appropriate consultations with the Ministry, with Permanent Secretaries, people who had worked with them and they are the very same people who are giving us the advice that this money was just an allocation. And some of the allocations, Mr. Speaker, before the Election, was all about campaigning. They said, "Aww, we are allocating this much." They made all these big announcements when, in fact, the money was not there. I will give you an example, Sir, of what I

said yesterday.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, if they let me speak, they are becoming a nuisance.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is a very important point I want to make which I said earlier.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You haven't answered my question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have answered your question.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- No!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If you heard, Mr. Speaker, of what I said yesterday about the Ministry of Agriculture's budget, that for over eight years, the allocation was \$603 million. But what was actually spent on agriculture in those eight years was only \$400 million.

So, what they were doing, Mr. Speaker, and this was like hiding from the public and lying to them, you come to Parliament for the Budget before Election...

HON. P.K. BALA.- You're full of drama.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- and you say, "We are going to do this. We have allocated this much." But they actually knew that the money was not there, and they will not be able to spend that money within a year because nothing was planned and nothing was done. So, it was all about political gimmick. For them the Budget was a political gimmick.

The last Budget was precisely that, and we are glad that we did not bring a supplementary budget because it gave us an opportunity to understand the mess that they made, and we have given ourselves time. So, when we come into the next Budget, it will be a budget that will be transparent...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It will be a transparent budget, it will be an appropriate budget, it will not be a political budget, as we did, Mr. Speaker, without deployment. We put out that \$50 million allocation to help our students not for politics, not before Election.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Soon after coming into Government, we felt the need, we heard the people and we did that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- A supplementary question for the honourable Minister of Finance. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do understand that the Coalition Government's 100 day promises is just around the corner but what else is around the corner is April Fool's Day.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people have greatly suffered during the pandemic and the ramifications and consequences is still felt. However, the honourable Minister of Finance had gone about the redeployment of funds. But what funds does he have allocated for the next pandemic or any calamity for our people to sustain themselves?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember many years ago, one of my friends played prank on me on April Fool's day. So, I said to him something, and he said, "Well, only fools understand April Fool's Day."

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- But let me answer the question. The question from the honourable Member was good, it was an appropriate question. What is the Government doing to plan for emergencies?

Mr. Speaker, COVID-19 is one thing. In this country and throughout the Pacific, we hope and pray for six months that we do not have cyclones and flooding. There is always this impending threat on budgets, and I think the question is appropriate.

As a Government, we need to look at how we can build into our budget or within the budget of the Ministry of Health, and we must always keep that fiscal space to ensure that when we do have emergency, we will not end up with what we ended up with when the COVID-19 pandemic hit us because we had to rely on our overseas partners, our development partners, and we had to borrow more.

We need to manage our budget in a proper way so that there is always fiscal space and if there is an emergency, the Government is in a position to borrow and the Government is in a position to redeploy funds immediately to ensure that we deal with that.

Bus Fare Subsidy Scheme
(Question No. 33/2023)

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the Bus Fare Subsidy Scheme?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- I thank the honourable Member for the question. The Transport Assistance Scheme is only given to those students who met the eligibility criteria or for those whose parents or guardians' combined household income is \$16,000. The threshold of \$16,000 was never formalised in the Transport Policy and this was only done through the Cabinet approval this year. The current scheme only allows students to use the subsidised bus fare cards from 6.30 a.m. to 9.00 a.m. and from 2.30 p.m. to 5.00 p.m.

The Transport Assistance Unit at the Ministry of Education is responsible for registering a card for a particular student and sending it to the Education District Office. The various District

Offices then informs the school for card pick up.

When a particular student loses a card, he or she needs to get a lost card letter from the school, from the District Office or from the Headquarters. This letter is then taken to Vodafone where students get a replacement card and Vodafone charges \$5 for a second or third replacement card, et cetera.

Once a student receives a replacement card, the student is to inform the school of their recent card number so that the replacement card can be updated on FEMIS system which will allow the Ministry to top up and transfer funds to the correct card number.

The application for transport assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is done annually and cards are topped up by the Ministry on a termly basis. The number of students assisted so far in Term 1 2023, a total of 145,000 students have been assisted under this initiative. Out of this, 70,000 students have been assisted with e-ticketing where 30,000 students have been assisted with Stage 1 fares, 26,000 with Stage 2 and 13,744 with Stage 3 fares. The other 35,000 students are those who travel by RSL and boats.

There are few challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding this assistance. One is the lengthy timeframe that Vodafone takes to activate the topped-up cards which is three working days, and this is what we are currently working on to address. Concerns have also been raised by parents of students who are not able to travel on earlier buses, such as 6.00 a.m. buses because the activation time is 6.30 p.m. Approximately, 2,000 taps for students' fares are between 5.30 a.m. and 6.30 a.m. using unsubsidised cards because it is not until 6.30 a.m. when the subsidised cards are activated.

In case of emergency and unforeseen circumstances that will lead to school closure during the day, these are not being considered under the current activation period, and we are currently working on that to improve the activation times on cards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we wish to reassure the students, parents and guardians that bus fares, RSL and boat fare subsidies will continue, and the Ministry of Education will consistently undertake monthly reconciliations to reconcile the records with those maintained by the provider of the e-ticketing services, including the close monitoring of the utilisation of cards. The necessary policy review will take place to enable a more efficient process, ensuring that no one is deprived of access to education.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister explain how the Ministry ensures that the unused money in the card is returned to the Ministry?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have not had any experience where students come back with unused monies on their cards.

HON. H. CHAND.- The bus fare scheme was rolled out by the FijiFirst Government. Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament on the Ministry's plan to ensure that the bus fare assistance is not abused?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is not the FijiFirst, it was the Military Government that started it. That is not part of the FijiFirst initiative.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- But they are continuing.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Seriously!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! Could I hear from the honourable Minister?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a correction, the bus fare subsidy started in 2009. It was not the FijiFirst Government's initiative, so it has to be corrected.

In terms of the abuse, I think the honourable Member ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Who is providing the answer, honourable Minister for Education?

(Laughter)

Thank you. Carry on, honourable Minister for Education.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- ... as a former staff of the Ministry of Education, would be well aware of the amount of abuse that have been undertaken in the Ministry of Education regarding this transport funding.

The question is probably relating to their Minister who had probably been sleeping on the job at that time. I think we are well aware about those who have been referred to FICAC for such abuse and this is what the Ministry is trying to adhere to, to ensure that these events are not repeated in the Ministry.

HON. H. CHAND.- You did not answer my question.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Already answered.

Responsibilities – FRA to PWD
(Question No. 34/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on which responsibilities will be shifted from the FRA to PWD, and how will these be financed?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the honourable Member had been paying attention to my response to His Excellency the President's Address, I had clearly specified there the answer to his question on institutional strengthening and revival.

I had mentioned that the focus of Public Works Department (PWD) will be primarily on rural development and connectivity. Its responsibility will include the maintenance and upgrade of rural roads and river crossings, initially, and we are also discussing about water, electrification and sanitation. This is an ongoing process. I wish to reiterate that this PWD will be a new PWD, not the old one. The process of rural roads from Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) to PWD will be ongoing until this Government has achieved its objectives.

They have mentioned about the staff. The fact of the matter about Civil Service is that they have been mentally imprisoned in the last 16 years.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- This Government came in to unlock them from their mental imprisonment. It is a process that we are currently undergoing and that has been experienced in the whole Civil Service.

There are ongoing consultations between the Ministry and FRA and there is agreement that rural roads will be an area which will be our focus. You will also note that some of the roads are classified as non-FRA, so these are various roads, including approaches to villages, some of the farm roads, et cetera.

Unfortunately, the FijiFirst Government ignored those, and that is what we will also be focusing on. The total length of this is about 1,300 kilometres located mainly in the two main islands - Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, including some of those we have already mentioned. We are looking into PWD now into delivering what we have been tasked with. Sir, I also mentioned in terms of the process, you will understand that, Sir, and that will be included in the Budget process which we are currently undertaking.

Not only that, we have also discussed with our international development partners and they are willing to assist. I would like to share here that in terms of the FRA Depots, which was mentioned, a lot of these are in neglected conditions and those will be reinstated, rectified and also assets placed in there in terms of quick response, in association with FRA.

Some of the issues that are brought up can be immediately addressed in a timely manner, especially for our rural roads. We have to be cautious of our school children who are struggling on these rural roads to get to where the bus comes in. Sir, that is my answer to that question. Thank you very much.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, a supplementary question in relation to the question that I had asked before. Given that the announcement of introducing PWD now has somewhat affected the FRA giving out contract tenders for unsealed roads, while we wait for PWD and also the re-establishment of their depots and buying of the machines to attend to the various roads that will be in their area, can we keep the current structure between FRA and the main contractors and subcontractors to maintain the current conditions of the road? What other systems do you have in the meanwhile before we wait for the re-establishment of PWD so that our roads are not affected and unattended?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is acknowledged and that is why I said that we will be working with FRA on that. It is not that I have ignored the issue, I have actually met people who have been affected and we are working on that in terms of the issues regarding the contractors. Of course, as I have mentioned, it is not for one to replace the other, it is to complement each other, and that is why we are going through it carefully so those issues that you have mentioned can be addressed adequately.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to add to that I wanted to mention that another area in terms of road construction was the quality of the roads. Before we used to have the PWD Lab, unfortunately, (I wanted to say that it was closed by FijiFirst Government) it was done away with. So that is something we need to reinstate because at the moment, those labs are run by contractors and there needs to be independent analysis of the quality of the roads. For example, one of the Engineers told me that they are using red basalt rock on the surface of the Walu Bay Road which that should not be used because that dissolves easily. So, it should not be used near the surface, but as a base.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Wrong material.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- So that is the kind of testing which we need to do in terms of ensuring quality.

Also, in terms of cost, I did my own research on some of the cost comparisons. For example, PWD still engages in some road construction and Irish Crossings. In Lautoka, they did three - Koronubu Irish Crossing which costs \$375,000; Benai Irish Crossing - \$647,000; and Drasa Irish Crossing - \$953,000. So, the FRA contractor, the cost of one Irish Crossing at Paipai, Vakabuli, Lautoka was \$1.6 million. So, on average, PWD-managed Crossing without the contractors was \$658,000. So, \$1.6 million compared to \$650,00, so that is the kind of analysis we are doing now, moving forward in terms of ensuring cost effective use of taxpayers' fund.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister, you raised a very general statement -rural roads. For someone who has worked in the rural areas, rural roads are categorised. Can you tell me what are the categories and which ones will be priority to you as far as rural roads is concerned?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I do not have the categories with me but I know that there are community roads, farm roads and main access roads. Some of that are managed by FRA, so what is not, we will be working for them.

(Hon. I.B. Seruiratu interjects)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- We will also tarseal the road to your village in the North so that will be priority.

(Laughter)

Since I came into office, a number of people have visited my office and some of their concerns involve roads to communities where subdivisions had been done but there are no proper roads there. So, I had visited one in Labasa where the iTLTB did the subdivision but there is a virtually no road but just a path. So, we can work with the subdivision provider on that, of course, they need refund the cost.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister, for the answer. I think, perhaps, a little bit more familiarisation with the rural roads might help with your answers.

Just quickly, honourable Minister, we understand what you said with respect to PWD, we understand what the future holds for us with respect to that. But if you are going to be doing primarily just rural roads (I see the honourable Attorney-General shaking his head)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- It could be expanded.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- If it is, but for the time being, you are saying primarily it is just rural roads, it will still require asset purchase. Will you be engaging in the asset purchase that will be required with respect to doing these rural roads because it is phenomenal exercise and a massive expenditure?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, honourable Member, that is an exercise we are currently undertaking and one of the priorities is the equipping of depots. We have already engaged with our development partners in terms of assistance regarding that.

We have seen that the Australian Army has an agreement with the Republic of Fiji Military Forces in that regard, and that is also an area which we can partner in terms of optimising the use of resources. We will also be making Budget submissions on that.

As I have said, it is a gradual process in terms of assessing the needs for a particular depot, the population and determining what kinds of assets will be placed there, of course, taking into account the contractors who are already there, so it will be complementing each other.

Rural Housing Assistance Programme
(Question No. 35/2023)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on Government's intention to revamp the Rural Housing Assistance Programme?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question on the update of the revamped Rural Housing Assistance Programme. As a matter of background, it was first established in 1976 by the Government of Fiji to provide affordable housing assistance to support the housing needs of rural and maritime communities.

It had been administered and implemented from its initiation by the same Ministry until 2018-2019 Financial Year, when the last Government moved it over to the Ministry of Housing and Community Development. We were going to return it to the schemes that used to be provided before. There will be three schemes:

1. Scheme 1 involves the procurement and cartage of housing materials. Applicants can pay for building materials through a deposit made into the Ministry's Trust Account and the Government will cover storage and cartage cost of the building materials.
2. Scheme 2 is the construction of a 24 foot x 16 foot housing structure, through a specifically designed funding arrangement. The applicant provides a one-third cash contribution towards the total cost of construction while the Ministry contributes the remaining two-thirds of the cost. It also includes completion extension of an existing structure.
3. Scheme 3 involves the one-third component provided by the individual who is applying, providing the building materials themselves, and that is what we have worked out with Fiji Pine and the Ministry of Forests to help with the villagers or the members of the rural community providing the one- third component through providing timber and other structural materials in-kind.

At the moment, the budgeted amount that we have is already in place. We are thinking of having about 10 established staff and 19 unestablished staff. That is the planning that is going on with the \$2.9 million projected budget - \$2 million capital and \$900,000 operating budget. That is the planning that has gone into it.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in regards to the building code, will the Ministry also provide engineering plans, there should be cyclone resistant structures. Even if they have already built the one-third and Government brings the two-thirds, will there be any standard that the Ministry will do as a compliance or requirement for applications?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. All the plans that we have are going to be consistent with the structural standards. I think one thing that we would like to be thankful for, in that last cyclone that we had, what we found that most of the structures that were built by the Ministry of Rural Housing using these structures withstood the cyclone that came, and we are very thankful that these structures have proven themselves. Yes, we will continue with that.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I if may just offer an advice on Scheme 3, before I raise my question. One lesson from the past, and I ask that the honourable Minister consider this, when you Scheme 3, most of them build the house without a plan and then they come to Government to complete the house. If we can ensure that if they build on their own and then come for Government assistance, they must build according to a certified plan because of your DRR policy.

My question is, just confirm you are now going back to the 24 foot x 16 foot plan, because when it was under the Ministry for Housing and Community Development, they had developed a new plan according to the Koroipita model? I just want confirmation on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition. Yes, we are going back to the 24 foot x 16 foot plan, but also making sure that the structural standards withstand the Cyclone 4 category will be maintained.

Yellow Ribbon Programme
(Question No. 36/2023)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice inform Parliament whether the Government is still committed to the Yellow Ribbon Programme?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it behoves me given how this issue was ventilated yesterday in terms of your direction from honourable Naivalurua and from the honourable Prime Minister that this question is being asked. Yes, certainly, so let me give some perspectives.

Rehabilitation is, of course, a key part of any justice system. Yellow Ribbon is a very core. I need not explain again the history of Yellow Ribbon. Obviously, you have been here for the last two sessions. But if I may, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the benefit of those listening in today, just give a brief breakdown or history of Yellow Ribbon, which I did not capture in my response earlier.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Yellow Ribbon is based on a model that was devolved in Singapore. The Yellow Ribbon motive was drawn from a song, *“Oh tie a yellow ribbon around the Oak tree.”* The song tells a story of a prisoner who sought assurance from his wife that on his release, she would still want him to be part of her life. He wrote to her saying that if she was still interested, she could let him know by tying a yellow ribbon on the Oak tree in the City Square.

On his homecoming to the ex-convict’s relief, there were hundreds of yellow ribbons on the tree. Three lines from the song sums up the helplessness of the offender on his knee for forgiveness from the family and the community - *“I am really still in prison, and my love she holds the key. A simple yellow ribbons what I did to set me free.”* Yes, it was launched in Fiji and sitting on the other side, the honourable Naivalurua, was the Commissioner then and initiated the process.

But let me remind this Parliament that the initiation of the Yellow Ribbon comes from the passion of those who hold position. It is not the creature of FijiFirst, it is the most humane thing one

can do when you have the passion to serve, and that is what honourable Naivalurua did. It was continued by honourable Vasu.

I have had the pleasure of visiting the Corrections Service more than once, I would say probably three or four times in my interaction with the Fiji Corrections Service. That just goes to show that I am deeply committed to it. I have also had the pleasure of as a civil servant on a policy level looking at the prison system, both at the Ministry of Home Affairs and at the Attorney-General's Chambers. I was privileged to continue that capacity as a presiding Judicial Officer (Magistrate) dealing with convicts. I also had the pleasure in the last two years as a private lawyer to represent people who have interactions with the law. Yes, they are broken people.

On my visit to Naboro, this is what I said to them, "You are not here forever, it is only a short learning curve. You will be released into the community. It is very important that you take up the skills, learn from the opportunity and take it home." Yellow Ribbon provides that extension from prison as articulated by honourable Bilitavu. The community, and may I say this, let us not be stuck with what the offender did. When that offender is convicted, that is the end of the process. The prison system takes care of it.

One day at a time and hour, that person will be released into the community. We must be grateful with open arms and welcome them irrespective of what offence they did, whoever is listening out there. The problem we have here is, we have certain members of a community who have perceptions that certain people cannot be released even though if the law provides for that.

In my duty as an Attorney-General, I am going to make sure that the lawful process must be complied with – no one is above the law. The law speaks for itself, and we must respect that. It is important where people are making judgement on who should be released and when. The law will dictate that process, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

What I invite here is our co-operation, your open arms. We must be humane. Our faith tells us that we must love them. The principles of love as advocated by the honourable Prime Minister. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this country is filled with people of faith and let me say this, we should not be put down, let down, ridiculed on the basis of faith. The honourable Leader of the Opposition is a man of faith. In our maiden speeches, a lot of us do speak about faith. What is the problem with that? Read your history.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Standing Order.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- 1835, so what I am saying is this. All this faith, they encapsulate the principle of love and forgiveness. Now, having said that, let me just go into

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I am just reminding the FijiFirst that they cannot take credit for the Yellow Ribbon Programme. You were in government, do your business.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Are you?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I am doing. You are going to watch what I am going to do.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- What is the Point of Order?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- You just sit. You are not the Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order, honourable Koroilavesau.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Can he just concentrate his answer to the question?. Stop preaching to us, please.

(Laughter)

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Yellow Ribbon, if I may remind and honourable Naivalurua knows, it encapsulates four principles. One is awareness, acceptance and actions; all of them summarise to what is love. They are the Yellow Ribbon Walk as you understand, and I invite honourable Members, let us participate in this Walk. Let us show that we care for them. There is the Yellow Ribbon Employment Expo, the Expo was first convened in 2018 in Suva.

The objective of the programme is to market the skills, competency and professional expertise of offenders to prospective employers. Since its inception in 2018, FCS managed to obtain the support of 220 companies both in the private and public sectors and has secured employment for 47 prisoners. The challenge now is to increase the number engaging. Mr. Speaker, I am asking the honourable Naivalurua and honourable Vasu who are going to assist me in this regard. I am going to capture there the skills so that we can move on to another level as the essence of your question.

The other is more important which I did not touch on the other day, it is Yellow Ribbon Provincial Faith-Based Symposium. This is where civil societies come into play and provide support to the Corrections Service.

I am told that there is a formation of a Community Actions for Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (CARE). The CARE network has engaged the services of provincial councils and religious organisations to assist in the reintegration of ex-offenders back into society. There has been a MOU signed.

I note the provinces of Serua, Namosi, Rewa, Tailevu, Lomaiviti, Lau, Kadavu, Nadroga/Navosa have signed. I note that Cakaudrove is not here, nor Bua nor Macuata – I encourage the CBM provinces to join. As you understand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of our offenders are *iTaukei*, so for them to feel the compassion, and for us to show what we preach, we really should step in, and the provincial council is critical into this approach and likewise the church.

The last programme is the Yellow Ribbon Sow a Seed Programme. The Programme was launched in 2018. It is a volunteer mentorship programme for young, first offenders between the age of 18 to 25, and these basically are young offenders (first time offenders), who come from dysfunctional families. This is a common occurrence in prisons, the systems betray these young people because of the circumstances. This is a very positive project that needs to be encouraged so that they can come out and be a responsible member of society.

I have volunteered, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be the ambassador for this Programme because it is very critical. It is important that we need to provide the opportunity, another good future, no one

should be left behind and that includes the members who are in the Corrections Service.

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, we all understand that the Yellow Ribbon Programme is about giving people, ex-convicts, a second chance of life and their successful reintegration back into the community. My question is, are there plans to extend this Programme to those previously with conviction and discharged, who are seeking employment under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme facilitated by the National Employment Centre?

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Did you get the question?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- No I did not, can it be asked again?

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, are there plans to extend this Programme to those previously with conviction and discharged, who are seeking employment under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme facilitated by the National Employment Centre?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, if I may answer, Mr. Speaker, because recently there was a delegation from Australia who provides employment for unemployed youths and I did explore this issue with them. They were receptive, but the mechanism as how it will be done is yet to be determined. But that is a matter of principle.

Obviously, it will involve the permission and negotiation with the Australian Government. There is also an issue, and it is a recurring matter. If you have a previous conviction, we understand you cannot go. Your previous conviction lasts for 10 years, so if you convicted those 10 years, you cannot go. The current arrangement with NEC, if you have a previous conviction, even though it is over 10 years, you cannot go and that has been a subject of discussion with my Ministry and the Ministry of Employment because it is a recurring issue, especially so where people who have more than 10 years, they cannot go and more importantly those who are caught for minor offences – drunk, annoyance, curfew.

A lot of *iTaukei* from the villages, from Nadogo, Macuata cannot go because of curfew, and this is sad. If I may, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of them because of the circumstances they were in, they were kind of forced to plead guilty because they were arrested in groups. Lawyers were not allowed to see them, Legal Aid, there were like 30 or 40 contained in a cell for one or two days

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Which government, which government?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- The FijiFirst Government did that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is the police.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- And when they were produced, if I may ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- Do not pick and choose.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- ... and I did say this from personal experience, when they are produced, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have no other option but to plead guilty not knowing that one moment or five seconds of saying that will stop them from going abroad. That is being addressed now for the simple reason we want our unemployed youths to go.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- First I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his response and his offer to be the ambassador but normally when you become an ambassador of

something important like the Yellow Ribbon Programme, you have got to be outside the walls but you cannot be an ambassador inside the walls. So, I thank the honourable Minister for his commitment to that.

Furthermore, the Yellow Ribbon Programme was imported from Singapore through the kind heart of the Commissioner then at no cost to Fiji - that was in 2008. Since then, this particular programme has been developed, improved and it is now a Fiji product so to say. There is also now a realization that from being a successful rehabilitation model programme, it can also be an exportable product. Therefore, my question to the Minister is are there plans to export the Yellow Ribbon Product to other countries?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, no policy decision has been taken but I guess the way to answer it, Fiji being the leader in the Pacific, there is no harm, we should.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Yellow Ribbon Programme is assisting a lot of prisoners. There are two aspects of it - one is training the prisoners when they go out of prison on how to get accepted. The other aspect is the community accepting them which FCS for some time has been having issues on how to go about dealing with the fact that there are communities and families and the honourable Attorney-General rightly said that they children from broken families.

No matter how much we train them, when they go back to their broken families, they are actually in the same situation which led them to commit a particular crime. So, are there any concrete programmes or if you are going to develop any concrete programmes to create this awareness in the community whereby the community starts accepting the prisoners when they complete their term in prison.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What is your question?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I will answer that from experience. This is an ongoing programme but one would say, for example the Methodist Church because it is the largest denomination and it is all over the place. They have monthly meetings, they have meetings on a quarterly basis. Those are the avenues that can be used and obviously the provincial councils. It is a problem that we cannot solve. What we can do, we can reduce. Unfortunately, some of these inmates when they do come out, will never be accepted.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament since we have a short day today to prepare us for our End of the Week Statement. We still have a Question to go and then we will return when the bell is sounded after 20 minutes. Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.59 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.32 a.m.

Border Management Information System (BMIS)
(Question No. 37/2023)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration inform Parliament of the current Border Management Information System (BMIS)?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for her question.

Mr. Speaker, to put it simply, an Integrated Border Management System or IBMS is a system that consolidates all the necessary information for our dealings at the border. This includes permits, border control visa processing, citizenship appeals, refugee management, passports, controversial list and payments processing for all these activities.

The current IBMS, Mr. Speaker, that the Fijian Immigration Department uses was introduced in 2013 by a Sri Lankan company called Informatics International Ltd (IIL). In the past 10 years, three components of the IBMS have not been operational and we are forced to do them manually at present. They are refugee management, appeals and citizenship processing and certificate printing. In fact, in the last few days of the Sitting, I have been sitting here in Parliament to sign some of these documents myself, Mr. Speaker.

Since 2013, the Government has spent in excess of \$2.8 million to maintain the system. In truth, Mr. Speaker, we are even paying for those modules that I mentioned above, that are not functioning. In addition, if the Immigration Department wants to make small changes to the current system, they must ask IIL to do that which requires an expensive fee and this is a waste of money, Mr. Speaker, and I would like to inform Parliament that the Immigration Department is in the process of acquiring a new IBMS with the help from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

I am also glad to inform the House that this will be at no extra cost to the Fijian taxpayers. The new system will be set up by IOM and then it will be handed over to the Fijian Immigration Department, who will then own the system in its entirety. We expect the new system to be online by the late 2015 with an initial trial period where the old system and the new ones will be running in parallel.

Mr. Speaker, we also placed greater emphasis to our border security and the security of the information that deals with that. When I was in Australia in February, I had the opportunity to meet with the Australian Minister for Home Affairs, the honourable Clare O'Neil, and we shared our common concerns on data integrity and border control.

The outcome of that conversation has resulted in closer collaboration with the Australian Ministry of Home Affairs and the Australian Border Force. In two weeks, Mr. Speaker, a team from both these organisations which include the Australian Border Force Commissioner will be in Fiji to do initial scoping work on how Australian partners can help us in this area.

Before I take my seat, Mr. Speaker, and answer supplementary questions, may I just take this time to digress a bit and I want to offer my sincere condolences to the *Vanua o Lalagavesi*, in particular *na i Tikotiko e Vuniduva*. I think the funeral service is being held right now for the late Ratu Epeli Ganilau and later on his interment at Vuniduva.

Sir, I would like to offer to you and the people of Lalagavesi, particularly the Ganilau family, *ena i Tikotiko Vakaturaga e Vuniduva*, my sincere condolences at his loss and I am sure many of us in this Parliament have been affiliated to Ratu Epeli in more than one way or another.

And on a brighter note, Mr. Speaker, now that I have got the floor, I would like to congratulate my good friend, the honourable Seruiratu, on assuming the Office of the Leader of the Opposition. By the same token, I would just like to add that seated right behind him is honourable Naivalurua. Both honourable Seruiratu and I, were once carved by that old man. *Oya na kena i tukutuku ga va Waini 'eli* - old man.

But seriously, Mr. Speaker, and I am sitting here, you have come a long way and this Team A, Team Alpha, Team Bravo, Team Charlie, long way back in the 1990s under honourable Naivalurua's leadership and it is such an awe today, even for me sitting on this side, I know we are on different sides of the House but we share respect for each other in many regards that the captain has taken the back seat and the crew member is now the captain of the ship. So, once again, I congratulate not only the Leader of the Opposition, but may I acknowledge that in very great part, the shaping done by the honourable Naivalurua. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, supplementary question. You have forgotten honourable Naupoto. The floor is yours, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Maybe today is Naivalurua Day. He was my Commanding Officer in Lebanon, a really tough taskmaster.

But thank you honourable Minister for enlightening us with the BMIS. My question is, the BMIS at its current stage, does the blacklist or the watchlist system work well and is any of us sitting on this side in that list?

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Before you answer that, honourable Minister, I just want to share a short story. I encountered my *Tavale*, honourable Naupoto, at one of the barber shops here in Suva. The first thing that I asked him, "Hey, *Tavale*, is my name on the blacklist or what? Thank you, honourable Minister. You may carry on.

(Laughter)

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the supplementary question. I, perhaps, will address later on some of the major gaps in the IBMS at the moment and one of those is exactly that, the blackholes within.

We have had people who have come through our border that the system cannot detect and through the intervention of other international law enforcement agencies, we have found out that they have already been here for quite a while. I am going to later on, maybe address this issue differently. I want to assure the honourable Members of the other side, there is no cause for concern on any other matter. One thing I know that I only have the powers to reopen matters for prohibited immigrants, not for anyone that is here to leave Fiji or anything. This information on individuals that is captured and kept by them - the Department of Immigration, is something that each individual can go and ask for themselves, but we can assure Parliament today that there is no cause for concern, honourable Naupoto.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his answers and, of course, for acknowledging the honourable Naivalurua as well. But I also thank him for not revealing how we used to be back then as young Subalterns, and I have asked honourable Naivalurua not to share that information as well to the public.

A simple question to the honourable Minister and maybe we seek assistance as well, the honourable Koroilavesau has raised a question about him being pulled aside in Nadi, going through Immigration. It has happened to me as well, Mr. Speaker, when we went. Although carrying a blue passport, I am still pulled aside at Immigration. The same thing with Veena, when she was coming back, she was pulled aside as well. She returned her diplomatic passport on the day she left office.

For the rest of us, we were awaiting instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but we have now taken the initiative to return it, although we kept it with us, but we did not use it. We are using our blue passports but we are still being harassed at the airport. Can the honourable Minister assist in this, please?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his question. Let me first offer my apologies for that. It is not necessary, and no one should be subjected to that, particularly any Member of this august Parliament.

Let me assure the honourable Leader of the Opposition and all my colleagues on the other side of the House that it is not our intention to create any hassle for anyone and that really should not be the issue at all. I am sure there is some elements of confusion that needs to be cleared and this, I am going to look at according to the request by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. I apologise, once again, thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being no other supplementary question, that brings us to the end of the Oral Questions. We will go straight into the first Written Question.

Written Questions

Municipal Councils and Rate Arrears (Question No.28/2023)

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

Rates are an important source of revenue for Municipal Councils, however, over the past years, collections by Councils have been in dire arrears, as reported by the previous Auditor-General's Reports. Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament on the following:

- (a) The arrears of annual situation for each Municipal Council spanning the period January 2007 to 23rd December, 2022; and
- (b) Current strategies being put in place by the Ministry to improve rates collections, and when the Ministry anticipates seeing some turnaround?

¹ HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

Fiji Passports
(Question No.39/2023)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration inform Parliament of the following:

- (a) how many applications were received from former Fiji citizens to obtain Fiji Passports pursuant to Section 5 of the 2013 Constitution between the periods January 2007 to December 2022;
- (b) how many Fiji Passport applications have been processed and issued to former Fiji citizens who made such an application under Section 5 of the 2013 Constitution;
- (c) can the Ministry list the graduation of fees for the issuance of Fiji passport to former Fiji citizens as per the prescriptions of Section 5 of the 2013 Constitution, from the period January 2007 to December 2022;
- (d) what is the approximate time taken to process an application by a former Fiji citizen in order to obtain a Fiji passport as provided for by Section 5 section of the Constitution, and
- (e) how many Fiji citizens living in Fiji with a Fiji Passport also possess a second passport to another country?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for her question and I will table my response at a later date as allowed under Standing Order 45(3).

END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

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

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

Social Pension Scheme

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is an important Government Ministry as we deal directly with the most vulnerable in our society.

The Ministry has been mandated to administer Social Protection Programmes that include:

- care and protection of our children;
- provision of income support to families to address poverty;
- provision of policy intervention for older persons;
- Provision of policy intervention for persons with disabilities;
- community-based correction; and to
- monitor, evaluate and report on progress and impact of Government's Poverty Alleviation Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, in this fiscal year, had been allocated \$147,684,400 of which Capital Budget is \$2.1 million and Operating Budget is \$144.7 million. It must be noted that 85

percent of Operating Budget or \$124.2 million is allocated towards the Social Protection Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these Social Protection Programmes are designed to reduce vulnerability and poverty while increasing resilience against sudden shocks, like pandemics and natural disasters. Currently, there are six major Social Protection Programmes that are implemented by the Ministry, as follows:

1. Social Pension Scheme; a non-contributory pension for older persons (ages 65 years and above) and it was meant for people who have never received superannuation through Fiji National Provident Fund.
2. Poverty Benefit Scheme; aimed at providing a safety net to the poor and vulnerable. Poverty targeted cash transfer aims at improving welfare of the poorest and to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.
3. Care and Protection Allowance; a child benefit for vulnerable children under the age of 18 years. Support is available for single parents, deserted spouses, death of breadwinner, prisoners dependent, foster parents/guardians, and children in foster or institutional care.
4. Rural Pregnant Mothers Programme; was established in 2014 and is designed to support women who are pregnant and living in rural areas.
5. Busfare Subsidy Scheme; it was introduced in 2011 and is aimed at supporting older persons aged 60 plus and persons with disability who uses the bus fare services in Fiji as a mode of transportation.
6. Disability Allowance; assist individuals with permanent disabilities.

These Schemes added together as of 5th March, 2023 have been assisting an estimated 96,966 recipients:

1. Poverty Benefit Scheme - Government from 2016 to 2021 had committed \$185,696,446 and assisted \$127,082 recipients.
2. Care and Protection Allowance - Government from 2016 to 2021 had committed \$46 million and assisted 34,797 recipients.
3. Social Pension Scheme - Government from 2016 to 2021 had committed \$212 million and assisted 199,331 recipients.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Poverty Benefit Scheme and Care and Protection Allowance are meant to be safety nets for individuals for a certain period of time until they can be enabled through graduation support programme to ensure all deserving families are assisted.

Since joining this Office, I have discovered that our staff are overworked and burnt out because there are no clear pathways in most of the Poverty Alleviation Programmes.

Welfare Graduation Programme has been halted by the previous Government and does not exist since 2019. So, those on the Scheme have stayed, for example, families impacted by *TC Winston* in 2016, who had lost their homes now have rebuilt their home and livelihood are still on the Scheme, just to give an example.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot had been said by politicians about what I said in a meeting in Ra to

gain political mileage. At that meeting, I discussed stories of many relatives who are taking care of their vulnerable, even if they have migrated and I know our people have strong sense of values and do not tap into services unless they are in need and Government has a responsibility to take care of the most vulnerable.

However, we are finding that means test was not always applied and our teams have shared that in some cases, there were political pressure applied on them to validate the cases who did not qualify. So, I call out the politicians to stop using poor people for their personal gain and if you really care about the vulnerable, work with our Ministry and identify pathways for these individuals so they can enjoy a sustainable livelihood.

Sir, social protection should be responsive to the needs of the people and there should be support system to help them improve their status in life. Post pandemic, we met many single mums who had lost their jobs and could not get on Social Protection Scheme. During that time, I was involved in design and implementation of the Livelihood Support Programme for single mums offered by FRIEND.

Assistance varied from \$600 to \$3,000 and evaluation of the programme indicated that assistance yielded income of \$500 to \$2,000 a month for these recipients. Families are able to cater for their various needs.

Through social protection, the amounts they receive are very limited and while we are looking at improving these, those who are able-bodied and need support should be supported with livelihood options - a programme we are working on developing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally, we discovered that State Homes are dilapidated, and elders and Wards of State kept in these facilities have had to live in really poor condition.

We have been working on renovations and repair of these facilities with various partners. There were no clear plans for girls who are Wards of State living in Institutional Homes when they turn 18 and boys at the age of 12.

Foster Care System has lapsed over the past years. We are meeting with various stakeholders to plan and improve delivery of services to address the issue of care for our children, people living with disabilities and street dwellers. So, trust me, Mr. Speaker, we have been cleaning up and trying to fix the many challenges left behind while they politicise the issue of care of the people in need.

What is also interesting is that in the Election year, the Bus Fare Programme amount was accumulated and not based on usage method which created a shortfall for the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, no Government or Ministry will be so cruel to terminate allowance of welfare recipients without a proper reason or justification. Every government around the world strives to have programmes and policies which are sustainable and promotes a resilient society. We need to analyse, understand the challenges, before tackling issues surrounding our most vulnerable. That is what, we, at the Ministry are currently working towards.

The Australia Government through its flagship social protection programme - Partnerships for Social Protection Programme (P4SP) is currently conducting a review of the social assistance programmes that will provide key recommendations around strengthening the processes and systems that underpin the assistance schemes.

Additionally, the Ministry is also working with the World Bank to design a draft Adaptive

Social Protection Strategy and Implementation Plan for Fiji, with a view to enable key government agencies to respond to covariate shocks, such as national disasters, by investing in the capacity of poor and vulnerable households to prepare for, cope with, and adapt to shocks.

The World Bank is also providing technical assistance to the Ministry in reviving the Welfare Graduation Programme with stronger linkages with the new employment programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, as the Government, take our commitment to take care of the most vulnerable of our society very seriously and we will continue to serve the most vulnerable. So, I call on the stakeholders, please, let us pitch in together and work for the greater good of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg your indulgence. I heard with a lot of interest today and earlier this week the conversation around the Yellow Ribbon Programme.

The origins of the Programme began under the leadership of Commissioner Aisea Taoka between 2003 and 2006. It was borne out of an initiative of rehabilitation as part of an income initiative for prisoners I had designed when FRIEND started working with the prison. It was one of the first income generation programme for inside and outside prisoners and it was funded by DFAT and after reevaluating successes and failures, the programme kept evolving in design.

The Australian consultants evaluated and indicated that the reoffending rate had dropped by 80 percent, which was hailed as a huge success at their time.

The Programme was then adopted under the Yellow Ribbon Programme so we do have experience of looking and rehabilitating and that is something we are looking at the community programme. But I think while the methodology was taken on, the credit was never given to the people who developed the initial framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, I would like to wish our children a very blessed Palm Sunday coming this very blessed weekend and I thank you for this time.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for her response.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for sharing the Programmes of the Ministry, and I will not repeat them.

Mr. Speaker and honourable Members, perhaps we are hearing from the other side about what the Government has been doing for the last three months. Yes, there are certain things that coming in as Minister that we have discovered in the Ministry that we believe can be improved upon. I know that the honourable Assistant Minister has shared some of those concerns that we are working on.

Mr. Speaker, firstly, our beneficiaries on the Social Pension Scheme are very happy that we are now extending under Fiji Care Insurance the funeral benefit and Term Life Benefits whether or not they are vaccinated. So, this has been removed. This was a condition from the previous Government, and I thank Fiji Care Insurance for coming on board as soon as I came in in the first couple of weeks, we addressed this issue and it was backdated to 1st January, 2023. So regardless of being vaccinated, I want to inform the public, there is a member of your family who is on the Social Protection Scheme that has passed on, they will be entitled to this funeral benefit and term life benefit under the Fiji Care Insurance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would have heard from the honourable Assistant Minister about the Bus Fare Subsidy which is being given to our recipients. One thing we have noted, the amount that is being paid every month which is \$25 continues to be paid in even though the recipients are not using the entire amount, so it keeps accumulating, Mr. Speaker, Sir, keeps rolling over and, of course, this is a big cost to the government. We plan to revert to just topping up as needed or whatever is used so that money is not wasted and also the cards not abused because there is a balance in it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our beggars and street dwellers, we see an increase in number continually. We are thankful for the meeting with the Ministry and churches, the Fiji Council of Churches as well as His Grace the Archbishop of the Catholic Church and the Head of the Methodist Church. They are willing to come on board to create a safe space for our beggars and street dwellers.

What we often find, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that when welfare officers visit our beggars and street dwellers or try to visit them, they run away. They are afraid of the welfare officers as well as the police officers who accompany them. We would like to reach out to them and so the safe space that we would like to create is what the churches and other good Samaritans have been doing which is feeding our street dwellers and beggars.

We hope to be able to do this in a permanent space where they will be able to come there and be in a comfortable environment where they have a meal but also, we will be able to sit with them and profile and find out what do they really need. It includes providing psychosocial services because few of our street dwellers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, face these mental issues and they do not necessarily like to be locked up in St. Giles or attend to the hospitals and health centers that provide the service. So, we hope to bring them together in that space.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last couple of weeks the Pearly Gates Home where our girls at risk are housed had a fire incident and due to the fact that the Home itself is dilapidated, it has got exposed wires, tiles are exposed but it is really in a dilapidated condition as the honourable Assistant Minister had mentioned. As a result, we had to intervene and for the safety of these girls transfer them to St. Christopher's Home. I thank Sr. Kalo who was accommodating to take on these teenage girls while we renovate the Pearly Gates Home. I thank the management of the Pearly Gates Home who do their very best, Ms. Kesa especially who manages the Home, who does her very best to take care of our girls at risk.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another thing that I would like to share is that the current food vouchers that are being given to our recipients which is being only where they can redeem it from Max Value Supermarket. We have received numerous complaints, the fact that when our recipients go to the supermarket, quite often there is a lack of items on the shelves as well as spike in prices when they go to try to redeem this \$50 food voucher.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on a study by the World Food Programme, it proves that when you give cash to those in need, they attend more to the needs rather than being forced to receive vouchers. So, this is what we intend to do. Unfortunately, we are not able to do it in the remaining months left to the next budget because the food vouchers have been printed and distributed to all the Divisions. So, they have been given out to our recipients. We are currently in talks with Max Value Supermarket to ensure that they have their items stocked as well as to control the prices and not to see this spike in prices that are complained of by our recipients.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue too with giving them that \$50 cash, we are looking at commencing it from August this year after the budget and this gives our recipients the option, not just to shop at a supermarket, but they can spend it out in the market and get fresh food and vegetables. So, it gives

them that option to do so. It is liberating for them to be able to receive that cash.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things we also discovered coming in, as soon as I assumed the portfolio, our overtime allowances for our Social Protection Programme especially have been exhausted. So, our drivers and all others who would like to be paid overtime allowance unfortunately, what had been happening too was that to make up for that shortfall, the money allocated to our programmes were being vired for operational expenses.

I know this was mentioned earlier by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, querying about to ensure that the money that is supposed to be for the programmes are not being used for operational expenses. This is exactly what was happening because moving from our programmes and the one in particular I am talking about is the Rural Pregnant Mothers. The money was being vired from that programme for our Rural Pregnant Mothers and going to cover overtime.

There was a spike in it interestingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first six months leading up to elections which was indicative of the number of hours our drivers in the Ministry driving around. I have heard reports back that they were being used for the campaign unfortunately. They were taking out officials and Ministry officials out on the campaign.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Lodge a complaint.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- There is no need to lodge a complaint, we are now the Government, we will change it. So, just take that as a review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this issue about using money from the programmes and going to operational, this needs to stop. This is all part of the wastage that we as a Coalition Government have inherited, we need to change that mindset. Our civil servants are used to it, they suggested it and I said, “no, you cannot do that.” That is actually unethical, and it should not be done.

In conclusion, we are doing a review of the Social Protection Programmes with the World Bank and DFAT and we hope to look at having a more effective adaptive strategy should there be another shock like a pandemic or natural disaster. We need a proper plan, and we need to continue to review our programmes so that all the beneficiaries on the programmes should not be there anymore and that we are committed to the economic empowerment of our people living in poverty to take them out of poverty and into a life of dignity and respect.

Preparations for the Ratu Sukuna Day Celebration

HON. I. TUIWAILEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to update Parliament on the progress taken regarding the Ratu Sukuna Day celebration. Please, allow me, at the outset, to pay tribute to the life of a soldier, high chief, scholar and statesman and let me read this description of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna.

Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna was the best equipped Fijian leader in the 20th century. He was born a chief of the royal house of Bau, his grandfather was a cousin of Ratu Seru Cakobau the *Tui Viti* who with several other chiefs ceded Fiji to Great Britain. His mother was the eldest child of the *Tui Nayau*, the paramount chief of Lau and as *vasu levu* of Lau, his chiefly status was greatly enhanced.

His work in the Native Land Commission which he occupied most of his working life gave him unique insights in all the landowning *mataqali* and *yavusa* and thereby, became the authority on all matters for Fijians - a man of noble birth and soldier of heroic deeds and a scholar of a world-renowned university where the most enviable statesman proves to be in his later career as a civil

servant, politician and ultimately as the first Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just quoted the late Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, who wrote the foreword for the book “*Ratu Sukuna; Soldier, Statesman, Man of Two Worlds*” by Deryck Scarr. The theme of this year’s Ratu Sukuna Day celebration is “Celebrating visionary leadership for Fiji”. Visionary leadership influence and will continue to shape Fiji’s development - past, present and future. We look to the past and help us form the present and future. We stand at the crossroad and look, ask where the good way is, and walk in it.

The Coalition Government thought that it would be best to look back and learn from Fiji’s history, at the heart of our history is Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. Mr. Speaker, Sir, preparation towards the Ratu Sukuna Day celebration is well underway after the Cabinet decided to reconvene the celebration. The celebration will open on 23rd May and conclude on 29th May, 2023. It is resuming after 16 years, so this year’s celebration will raise awareness on the life and work of Ratu Sukuna to the young generation.

The National Committee for the Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day celebration chaired by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts has met and endorsed the tentative programme and the budget. In addition, there are working committees appointed from relevant agencies of Government, statutory bodies, universities and NGOs to facilitate the detailed planning on the logistic and execute the plan.

I am pleased to state that a lot of positive response have been received. The celebration will coincide his Excellency’s announcement of the Great Council of Chiefs meeting in May 2023. The Great Council of Chiefs and Ratu Sukuna’s works cannot be separated, where possible the two events will intersect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like before, the celebration will include participation from schools, universities and all communities under the four divisions. There are other targeted locations to ensure that a wider section of the population in both urban and rural are covered. The activities of the event will include public lectures, oratory contest, cultural exhibition, cultural sports, arts and other related display that depict the life of Ratu Sukuna. It is a time of reflection and reconciliation as we celebrate Ratu Sukuna’s role in national unity. An effective media strategy is needed to ensure the widest possible coverage of the event. Consultation with available media outlet is currently in progress and we anticipate the widest possible coverage. The media strategy will be rolled out from early May.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the celebration will promote inclusiveness with all segments of society and more importantly allow our young generation to appreciate Ratu Sukuna’s life and work.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to respond to the Assistant Minister’s speech on the celebration of the life of the late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. I move on to add a few educational achievements from Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna.

He also completed his secondary education at Wanganui in New Zealand. In 1913, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna went to England to study for a Bachelor of Arts Degree at Oxford University and was a resident at Wadham College when World War I broke out. By 1921, he had obtained his Degree as a Bachelor of Art at Oxford University and had been called to the English Bar by the honourable society and middle camp.

In regard to work, he was then 19 and was appointed as a Clerk in the Colonel Secretary’s

Office where he stayed for about five years. He spent a short period of time at the Lau Provincial School in Lakeba as its Acting Head Master.

The late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna had a colourful career serving more than 51 years of continuous public service. He retired from full time duty on Tuesday, 22nd April, 1958. He continued being a personal advisor to the Governor of Fiji on Fijian affairs until his passing away.

Few things regarding his military decoration, in 1913 he volunteered for active service and joined the French Foreign Legion in Paris where he served for 30 months and had distinguished himself in battle. Upon being wounded in action, Ratu Sir Lala was discharged and for his courage and ability, he was awarded a military decoration on the French Republic for his service and act of bravery in the action against an enemy force.

In 1946, King George VI made Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna a Knight of the Order of the British Empire for his outstanding and loyal service to the Crown. Earlier, he had been made a Commander of the Order. When Queen Elizabeth II visited Fiji in 1953, he also bestowed upon Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna the Honour of Knight Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this week we discussed about great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Today I also ask us to look at great leaders before us and one of the visionary leaders is Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. He has taken us this far and I understand, with the celebration we are planning for 29th May, will really educate our children of the great achievements of a great leader.

I thanked the honourable Minister for Education in yesterday's speech, he mentioned that the education system is looking at the iTaukei Language and Culture for the schools. Our children need to know the important roles that our visionary leaders have played, and we need to appreciate what they have done and guide us on our way forward for our beloved country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the celebrations, the University of Fiji, the Fiji National University and the University of the South Pacific will be fully committed to accommodate in terms of lectures that will attract professors and high scholars to speak on the life of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna and his leadership. We are looking at more publications of the books - *Three-Legged Stool* to give to our primary schools and students to learn the great achievements of a great leader of Fiji. We are also looking at Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Memorial School.

We are looking at upgrading the school to make sure it be one of the top schools in Fiji that will bring our future generations and students around the Nabua, Cunningham, Kinoya and Vatuwaqa areas, which are very close. In upgrading this school will really help our future generations in terms of education. When we look at iTLTB today, we really appreciate the great work that is being done by Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. His foresight to establish the iTLTB really helps the landowners of today on how their land is managed and how it helps their daily livelihoods in regard to land lease.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the resources that we have is a major economical revenue for our nation. For these two days, the resource forums are conducted by the iTaukei Trust Fund where we will bring in all the *iTaukei* resource owners and the users to discuss the way forward on how we can utilise our resources to make sure the *iTaukei* contribute into the economy of the nation.

We have been discussing here for one week, I am very fortunate to witness the discussions and debates. I think with the Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna's vision and achievements, he can bring us together to celebrate the life of the high chiefs of Fiji. I invite the Members of Parliament from the other side to join the Committee for the Ratu Sukuna Celebration Committee to make sure the

celebration will be a memorable one after 16 years. We will finish off from here with all the debates and I do hope we will go outside as one holding hands to take this nation forward.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a Suspension Motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6 that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended so as to allow Parliament to sit beyond 12.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure I speak for all of us that we had hoped to finish by 12.30 p.m. after a long week. However, there are two more End of Week Statements from the honourable Naupoto, as well as honourable Usamate. It is Friday and it is Members' day, so we look forward to hearing from them, as well as their replies. So, I beg the Parliament's indulgence that we agree that we sit beyond 12.30 p.m.

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

As there are no responses, then I call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament if she wishes to make a reply.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing more to add, thank you.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

END OF WEEKS STATEMENTS

Maintaining Institutional Integrity

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I commence, you would notice that my lectern is a little bit slanted towards you. This is to confirm with your direction to me on the first day that I have to learn to be an MP, to remind me that I have to direct my speech to you. I hope that later on, you might give me some feedback if my skin is thick enough also as an MP.

I rise to deliver one of the two End of Week Statements from this side of Parliament. It is on maintaining institutional integrity, a subject that is close to my heart. Given the past lives that I have had and heads of some of these institutions as a Permanent Secretary, as a Director and just recently as the Commander of RFMF.

Mr. Speaker, institutionally integrity in the public sector especially is particularly important due to the public character of these institutions that implies public trust in the institutions' practices, operations and policies.

Mr. Speaker, there has been a relentless attack on our public institutions since December 2022, and if I can just use one. On 29th December, 2022, five days after being sworn in, the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration announced to the public that he had asked the Commissioner of Police to resign and the reason stated to the public was that, he did not trust the Commissioner due to his previous affiliation with the previous Government. And I emphasise, Mr.

Speaker, Sir, that this was aired in public.

When it is publicly stated that the Minister does not trust ahead of a Disciplined Force, it resonates down to the lowest rung of the organisation. It creates doubt, it creates uncertainty in their minds as to how they should behave. Their own integrity is watered down, and it has a negative effect on the institution.

In major leadership, there is a golden rule and that is, you never criticise an officer in front of his men or women, and criticising heads of institutions publicly has the same effect as breaking that golden rule.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to this example, the Judiciary, the Civil Servants are suffering the same fate also Permanent Secretaries have been terminated, they have been forced to resign. In the words of one, he said that he was advised by the Public Service Commission Chairman of the discontinuation of his contract, and he claims that this is based entirely on the Government's preference and not on performance. No consideration at all on the impact of their decision, on the faithful Civil Servants who work under his very experienced and hardworking PS.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that Ministry, I was their Permanent Secretary for approximately three years. If you go and ask the staff, "What did your PS did wrong?" They will tell you, "Nothing" or "we do not know, he was a good PS." I have, no doubt, that his former Minister who is here, will say the same if you ask him.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Is that professionalism?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Acting Permanent Secretaries have been appointed in very questionable circumstances. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the integrity of the institution is violated. Government statutory bodies, Government owned companies, iTLTB, Boards are all suffering the same.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It started in 2006.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, those who were at the top were removed or forced to resign, replaced by another Board. The Chairman was replaced by the founder of a political party. He wanted to show his power and organised the lavish party to unveil the new logo of the company, a logo that is available online for free, turn the *Davui* around a little bit, only to return to the original logo the next day or few days later and in the process, according to the honourable Minister of Finance, wasted over \$26,000. Just like that.

Mr. Speaker, I had just returned from Tonga last Sunday, as you had directed, to attend the CPA MP induction event that was held over there. One of the Tongan MPs or Emele to be exact, told me what he said in their assembly and this what he said to the Tongan assembly, and I quote: "*Tapau tekeuki Falealea , o ko e ha fiekaia, kua pau kekeulu akai kai koe.*" In English it says, "If you come to Parliament hungry, you will eat first. If you come to Parliament hungry for power, you will eat first. You will target those that are in power. If you come to Parliament hungry for political vengeance ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- 2006 and it continued for 16 years. Talk about that.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- ...you will eat first. You will abuse your political power for political vengeance.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- And we have seen the results already.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I apologise for the noise coming from the other side, Mr. Speaker, I think I must have hit the wrong note. But if they say or if one says that they come to Parliament hungry for service or hungry to serve, I will say that this Parliament is the wrong place for them because if you say that you come here hungry to serve, what have you been doing? These opportunities to serve are just all around us in all facets of our lives – in our family, in our *mataqali*, in our village, in our communities, to the Vanua, to the Church.

Mr. Speaker, if they say they are hungry to come in to serve, it implies that they have not been serving.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance talks about a mess that they have to clean.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- But the way they are operating – listening to the question and answer sessions in this Chamber and watching what is happening outside, some of which I have highlighted today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is akin to someone who is trying to mop an already clean floor with a pair of muddy boots on.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- You reach the other side and look back and see the big mess that you have created.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to build up our institutions instead of diluting its values, weakening the spine that holds these institutions together. We need to maintain our institutional integrity.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Yes!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Our public institutions – the Civil Service, the Police, the Military, they prop up and support our young democracy. They provide continuity of governance during elections, during the formation of governments, even a change of government like now.

Since Election began in Fiji, members of these institutions have been going out to vote – like everyone else with the freedom to choose whoever they wish and after Elections, they will go back to work, regardless of who is in power and who they voted for.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- They do that because their intuitional integrity is maintained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, politicians like us, governments will come and go, but it is the loyalty and integrity of these institutions that holds our democracy together, that allow us to do that transition. They need no interference, unnecessary interference from politicians or governments for that matter. The integrity of these institutions must be maintained.

Before I sit, Sir, I send my wishes to the Fijian Rugby Teams that are playing this weekend and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his End of the Week Statement. I would like to assure this august Parliament and the nation that we will try and do what you are asking us to do, even though you may not have done what you are asking us to do.

(Laughter)

Sir, in accordance with Standing Order 35(2), I asked for leave to be given to the honourable Attorney-General if he wants if we do not have the bell on time and also the honourable Minister for Defence to also respond to the End of the Week Statement, if they wish to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 35(2) states that the Right of Reply to each of these speeches by the Minister or Ministers as you emphasised also in your instructions, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or the subject matter of the Member's speech.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Prime Minister, can I just intervene, I will be asking an advice from the Secretary-General on that.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Right, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

Honourable Prime Minister, the answer is in the affirmative and the only thing that I would like to insist is you will be sharing the 10 minutes with your colleagues.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, that is what I made clear, if the bell does not go while I am still on my feet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government acknowledges the Constitutional integrity. We know that it is of utmost importance to ensure that those who make decisions on behalf of the people, or the public do so fairly and in a transparent manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know that we are in very powerful positions, and we pray that God will grant us the right character to exercise power, and also exercise it in accordance with the rules of law and that we remain accountable to the people that we serve.

As provided under the Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitution shall be upheld and respected by all Fijians and the State, including all person holding public office. Therefore, in order to maintain the integrity of the Constitution and our system of Government, adherence to the provisions is essential.

That being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitution does have provisions for amendments, so a review of the Constitution is followed by the Constitution itself because it is not set in stone, but it is very difficult, as we all know.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I started by saying that we heard from honourable Naupoto of what we should all look out for, that we do not do what he has accused us of having done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought it is a bit rich for the Opposition to go on about the rule of law and respect for the integrity of institutions of the State and I believe they have not been very honest in observing that simple rule.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have not had Municipal Councils elections. They are institutions that are set in our Statutes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Constitutional Offices Commission recognises the fact that Fiji's Constitution frame the rule of law by which all citizens live, including us the Members of the Commission.

We also know that recently, we have not been able to hold meetings since the resignation of the former Leader of the Opposition and now that we have honourable Seruiratu as the new Leader of the Opposition, we look forward to getting his participation in the Constitution Officers Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure that we all learn from our own experiences. For some years, Sir, while some Members of the Opposition now were members of the Regime, my pension entitlement was taken away and I was not given any reason. Some of it was restored a few years later but it was not enough to cover for the bank penalties when I was late in the repayment of my loan in the bank. It did not pay for the hardship that I and my family had, but I agree we must all respect the institutions we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member of the Constitution Offices Commission, we have had to recommend the suspension of some of our Constitutional Office holders. They have been on full pay on the assumption that accused persons are assumed innocent until proven guilty, and I hope that we can do that and apply back. I had mentioned many times something that I got from the biography on Abraham Lincoln - Do what is right, have malice towards none.

We get the message from honourable Naupoto that we must respect the integrity of the institutions and we will try and do that. Our transitional period is coming to an end. Our 100 days is coming up, so if you have noticed that we have misbehaved in this period, I ask that you bear with us, it is coming to an end and from here on, we will not be able to make any excuses for being new on the job.

I encourage all of us to bring to the attention of Government and those of us in Parliament, any concerns you may have about what we may be perceived to be not doing correctly. I feel for those that get displaced, I feel for those that get subjected to the law and I feel for those that will eventually suffer the consequences of their actions if they are proven guilty and it is difficult. I am glad that we all have had experiences, or some of us have, of going through this difficult periods in our lives. It teaches us to be humble, to be law-abiding and to avoid them happening again.

In this case, it is the respect for the various institutions, I have a list of persons who were not properly treated by the previous Government, and I do not want to mention their names. I think they are already embarrassed enough at this time, probably suffering already, and I do not want to twist

the knife in their wounds.

But I thank honourable Naupoto for bringing this up and I expected no less from a person who has had a good run of whom much had been expected and now he expects much from us, and I call on this side of Parliament that we listen to what he said, we do what is right and let us have malice towards none. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank you, honourable Members. I thank honourable Naupoto for his End of the Week Statement. It is the first time that we have managed to seek advice again as to how many Ministers can reply to your statement.

Infrastructure Development Growth

HON. J. USAMATE.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I thank you, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to talk on this issue that I regard as a very important issue - infrastructure - infrastructure development and the importance of infrastructure.

No one in this Parliament is not aware of the importance of infrastructure. It is critical to development, growth and as a result of that, critical to making sure that we develop or build a better quality of life for all the people of this country.

People everywhere want –

- good infrastructure;
- smooth and safe roads;
- timely boats that move passengers and freight around a wide range of destinations;
- clean water;
- reliable sanitation;
- easy access broadband internet connectivity and electricity available 24/7;
- well managed and functional airports and seaports to enable connection with the rest of the world and even within our country;
- schools and hospitals to ensure wellbeing, including a healthy and well-equipped workforce and they want the delivery of services.

Economic and social infrastructure is amongst the most important functions of Government, and it is a key to how citizens perceive the role and effectiveness of Government. This is something that we have understood during our time, and I am sure that the current Government is very, very well aware of that also.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure is not an easy thing to keep up to standard. The state of infrastructure in this country, where we have had massive infrastructure progress over the years, and we all know that. Back to the 1970s we have seen them.

The Monasavu power, this is huge infrastructure project and had a huge impact on a large number of people in Fiji. It had a huge impact on lives in a daily basis, on businesses and schools. The Nagado Water Project, which is now feeding Lautoka and Nadi, which is the growing hub of the tourism sector.

Already they are beginning to face problems and it will be incumbent upon those that are now in charge of this area to make sure that we can provide enough water to that area which is going to be the growing part of Fiji over the next 10 to 15 years.

The Suva-Nadi Highway, and there are so many others, that various Governments along the way have been able to improve. But if you are improving, Mr. Speaker, infrastructure is always a challenge. Every single government will see infrastructure as a challenge that needs to be addressed because the needs grow, the demand grows, the existing infrastructure becomes old, and it needs to be upgraded and targets begin to change. What is important in one era changes over time.

Since the Bainimarama Government came into power, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also came across those challenges. Especially for the roads, we looked at the acid deterioration that was there. A lot of the acid deterioration was because of historic underfunding on maintaining the assets. That is always the challenge - finding the assets to maintain your existing assets as you want to grow and build new assets, as more people want to get benefits from the infrastructure that we have.

Vehicle overloading, resource availability - we talked about sand and gravel aggregates today. The importance of having access to those, whilst at the same time maintaining their pristine nature of the environment that we have.

Design and construction capabilities are our abilities to be able to do that and uncontrolled development sometimes makes it hard to be able to manage infrastructure.

Over and above this, is now the big problem of our time and our age - the climate change. The impact this is having - phenomenal impact, huge impact on our infrastructure because a lot of it was put in places before we got so worried about sea level rise. Before, we were not so worried about sea level inundation.

Lots of bridges needed to be fixed, a lot of roads, crossings, all of these were the problems that we had to deal with.

On water, access to water, getting water to all of our citizens - a clean, reliable and safe water is not always easy. A lot of our parents when you go to the villages, people drank from the streams. Now, people do not want that anymore, that is a huge challenge to be able to move in that direction.

Then the issue of sanitation, the Deputy Prime Minister talked about it as a challenge. There have been improvements made to this area - sanitation, but it is still a major challenge. Rural sanitation, challenges for power - rural and urban. ICT connectivity for ports and wharves all around our country, airports, schools and hospitals. All of these always have significant problems.

I am not saying that the Governments that existed before that did not have problems. All governments always see that these are problems because the goal posts are always changing, and the context is always changing.

But since then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Bainimarama Government came in and the FijiFirst, there were some things that they have tried to do to try to address this, and one was the manner in which we try to deliver on the services.

In the past, the focus was within Government to deliver the services through Government operations. But over that time, looking at the dilapidated state of the infrastructure at that particular point in time, there was a move to move away from that to develop semi-autonomous bodies that still operated under the ambit of Government, but they had the freedom to develop themselves to deliver the services on their own.

That was what you have seen with the development of Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) in 2010 - take it out of the Water and Sewerage Department, establish it as a body, so they can begin

to do the service and can be more nimble on its feet. This will not be restricted by the restrictions that might cover a government department and go out and do its work.

The same thing we also saw for the development of the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) in 2012. So, there is a massive change from the way we deliver this service in the past - from Government doing on its own, setting up bodies, independent, semi-independent, autonomous with the freedom and flexibility to go out and deliver addressing these very important issues.

This also bought with it the opportunity for us to build a local industry in these areas - a lot of capacity to build roads, a lot of capacity to develop water. When we move these services out and we allowed others in the private sector to take on these roads.

There was the ongoing development of Energy Fiji Limited (EFL). If you go back many years, you will remember that the big power producer in Fiji was not FEA, it used to be the Suva City Council (SCC). The FEA used to be a small entity in the West but over time that has been changed. Now, FEA has become EFL and has grown. It has become this entity that will move forward. It is now become (if I am not mistaken) a liability company. It has been privatised to some extent, although Government still has its major focus there.

Ports - there have been massive changes in the structure and approach of Ports. The management systems they have in Ports have really changed. It used to be just run by Government, now it has been broken up into different companies. The assets are maintained with Government, but different companies are operating on the ports to raise its effectiveness and efficiency. So, we have seen massive investments over the past 16 years in infrastructure - roads, water, power, wharves, jetties, crossings, wastewater, ICT, schools – all have huge increases in investments in this area.

We have seen the developments - roads being built, highways, others in the pipeline at various stages for four-lane highways Suva-Nausori, around Nadi, around the Tourism Sector which has been at the heart of our economy, rural roads, the fixing of jetties, crossings, all of these have been impacting the people's lives. It has allowed accessibility - the economy to grow, and it has allowed to grow on all of us. Massive investments in roads.

In water, have you ever seen the biggest problem in water over these past decade that we are feeling now? I am feeling it now in my own home the access to water - the access to the water in Viria Project which is one of the major projects that we have had.

There have been major pressures because of rural urban drift into these areas that has brought restrictions in water. We are now currently in phase 1 of this project, \$270 million has been paid, the pipelines have been built and coming down from Viria to Waila. Now, the tanks are already built in Raralevu. The tanks are ready, all they need is the water to come from Viria, fill those tanks and they will fill the Rewa Delta. They will meet the needs there. Many rural water projects are going.

Major increases in access to power. Rural access to power has been increased. We removed the deposit for grid extensions, so now when you want to bring the grid to your area, you do not have to pay a deposit, Government pays that.

The emphasis on solar home systems - all of these has brought massive changes. Massive transformation in the ports to an extent where our ports have been recognised internationally for how effective they have become. It has also raised efficiency. I think they won the Oceania's Best Cruise Terminal 2021 Award at the World Cruise Awards.

Sir, ICT infrastructure - we removed the restrictions in ICT, we broke down the monopoly. We brought down the charges to an extent now where a lot of people have one or two phones and as a result of that, we built the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, may I remind you a Government is in place now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir. Can I just get to my conclusion then?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, I have tried to identify the massive improvements that are being undertaken, but there are few things that I want to ask. Is everything perfect now? No, it is not!

I think it will be very hard for anyone to ever come to a point in time when we say that it is not perfect. But what we did, we prepared the 20 Year Strategic Development Plan because we know for infrastructure, you have to lay it out over a long period of time. It is not something that you can do in a short period of time. We also had the National Climate Finance Strategy to cover all the things that needed to be addressed as a result of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the important questions as I have been standing in Parliament, I have been listening to all the Ministers asking, "I need more money for this sector, and I think this is going to be the critical question for Government.

Infrastructure is going to require funding and all the other sectors. The key question is, what are we going to prioritise first? When? Do we first give our emphasis on structures like infrastructure which, in turn, can help grow other sectors, or do we do other sectors first? I that is the key question for us.

In my own mind, I believe that infrastructure is a sector that if financed well, managed well, will help all the other sectors in Fiji. I know that it is the role of Government to keep taking this forward, and I believe all the citizens of Fiji would like you to succeed, to take what you have been given as a legacy from FijiFirst and take it and make it work better to the best of your ability because when we come back, we will make it even better.

(Laughter)

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to wish everyone in Fiji and all the children of Fiji in particular, a happy Palm Sunday this week. *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister for Public Works, I think I will not allow a response on that because he was just complementing what was already here, what is already running, as a result of the Elections that we have just completed.

ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns to Monday, 3rd April, 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our Sitting for this week and I thank you all for your contributions throughout the week.

I now declare Parliament adjourned until Monday, 3rd April, 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.06 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 38/2023 tabled on Friday, 31st March, 2023 by the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government. (Ref. Page 666)



**MINISTER FOR HOUSING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT
HONOURABLE MACIU KATAMOTU NALUMISA**

Parliamentary Response - Friday, 31st March, 2023

Mr. Speaker Sir, rates is a major revenue stream of Municipal Councils, as rightly pointed out by the honourable Member in her question. If all Municipal Councils were collecting all the rates, they would be able to undertake a lot of investments in their Municipalities and enhance service delivery to ratepayers.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Cities and Towns in Fiji have an estimated 44,749 ratepayers with approximately 85 percent of ratepayers being residential ratepayers. As residents of towns and cities, people of Fiji are required, in accordance with the Local Government Act 1972, to pay town/city rates.

The rates assist Municipal Councils in providing services, such as solid waste management services, beautification and open space upkeep, sanitation control management, organising national events and the performance of regulatory and enforcement functions, inclusive of transport, traffic, building and litter, whilst also investing. Municipal Councils are able to use the revenue to improve and enhance services and create an environment to encourage investments and economic activities within their Municipalities.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Suva City Council has the highest number of ratepayers with 9,441 or 83 percent residential ratepayers, out of the 11,468 ratepayers. Nasinu Town Council comes a close second with 11,377 ratepayers, of which 10,953 are residential; whilst the Lautoka City Council has the third highest with 8,169 ratepayers of which 91 percent (7,419) are residential.

The delay in rates payment has severely hindered the service delivery capacity and implementation of capital projects by the Municipal Council. I wish to re-emphasise that the ratepayers have an obligation to contribute to the cost of running the cities and towns, to be able to receive the best services and have good infrastructure in place.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as per section 64 of the Local Government Act 1972, Councils are required to carry out Sexennial Valuation every six years to determine the unimproved value of rateable land. It is worth noting that the Councils carried out the Sexennial Valuation between the years 2007 and 2021 upon the required interval and rates were increased and implemented.

Municipal Councils implemented the increases in rates as follows:

- Tavua Town Council increased rates based on the 2002 valuation. Following the 2020 valuation, the Tavua Town Council requested the Ministry to implement the rates increase in 2021, but the Ministry had asked them to put it on hold.

- Rakiraki Town Council undertook Sexennial Valuation in 2012, hence rates increase was implemented in 2013.
- Lautoka City Council and Ba Town Council increased rates in 2021, based on the 2020 Sexennial Valuation.
- Nausori Town Council valuation was done in 2022, but the increase in rates was put on hold, as per instructions from the former Minister.
- Nasinu Town Council undertook Sexennial Valuation in 2013 and the rates increase was implemented in 2020.
- Labasa Town Council implemented rates increase in 2017, based on the 2016 valuation. The Council is currently undertaking the valuation, which may have an impact on rates in the future.
- Suva City Council and Lami Town Council implemented the rates increase in 2012, which was a result of the valuation done in 2011.
- Levuka Town Council had the last Sexennial Valuation done in 2021, but yet to be implemented. The current rates are based on the valuation done in 2013.
- Savusavu Town Council last valuation was carried out in 2022 and yet to implement, the rates are based on the 2013 valuation.
- Nadi Town Council undertook the Sexennial Valuation in 2017 and the rates increase was implemented in 2020.
- Sigatoka Town Council rates are based on the 2013 valuation. The 2021 valuation is yet to be implemented.

Mr. Speaker Sir, when there are outstanding rates, it attracts 11 percent compound interest rate, as per Section 78 of the Local Government Act 1972. Compound interest does not apply interest rates fairly for the ratepayers. The Ministry of Local Government is working on reviewing the 11 percent compound interest to ensure that the application of interest is changed from compound to simple.

Mr. Speaker Sir, one of the factors for massive arrears in rates is the Covid-19 pandemic which has not only affected rates but also other aspects of economic growth. Another reason for the increase in arrears is the new subdivisions and rezoning of land/spaces in respective Municipalities. The new subdivisions and change of zones mean that the rates will have to be imposed on the subdivided lots and a new rate to be imposed on the new zoning of the lot rezone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, replies to the Written Question are as follows:

- (a) Collection of rates is the most critical issue. All Municipal Councils records reveal that at the end of 2007, they were owed \$28.3 million in rates. This indicates that over 50 percent of ratepayers in the country have some outstanding rates and charges.

I wish to highlight three Municipalities that have the highest amount of rates arrears. Due to the arrears prior to 2007, approximately \$2.3 million has been accumulated in interest rates due to the compounded interest rate of 11 percent.

Suva City Council has the highest outstanding rates. However, collection rates (arrears and current year) for the last 16 years ranges between 80 percent to 99 percent. The Council has a good collection for the current year's rate. Suva currently has approximately \$32 million in outstanding rates. It is important to note that for 2023, the invoiced amount was \$18.5 million, and Suva has collected \$15.3 million.

The Nasinu Town Council, being a Medium Council, has the second highest outstanding rates of \$12 million as of 2023, while Lautoka City Council's outstanding rate is \$11.5 million or the third highest.

I wish to highlight that the Small Councils, such as Savusavu, Sigatoka, Tavua, Rakiraki and Levuka are performing well in rates collection, both current and arrears. It is important to note that rates are the source of revenue for Small Councils, and they ensure that collection is done on time. Comparing outstanding rates from years 2007 to 2012, the arrears had decreased.

However, due to changes in rates, following the Sexennial Valuation and compound interest, the arrears started increasing from 2013. The arrears increased significantly in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. This affected the rates collection by the Small Councils, as ratepayers faced difficulty in paying the rates. After recovery from the pandemic, the Councils are back on track with innovative ideas and strategies in place for collection. (Please refer to **Annex 1** for the Municipal Council Rates Information from 2007 to 2022).

- (b) Municipal Councils, in consultation with the Ministry, have prepared their rates plan that will assist ratepayers facing financial difficulties. We have witnessed job losses in our country due to the pandemic. Hence, the plan will accommodate those financially affected, given that ratepayers liaise with their relevant Councils on the way forward.

To ease the burden of rates arrears, the Ministry of Local Government has provided three rates amnesty periods (one in 2017 and two in 2019). During the amnesty period, all compound interest on arrears was waived, if any residential ratepayer paid their principal amount of rates in the given time. This arrangement allowed residential ratepayers to pay off their principal rates in arrears and at the same time, enabled Municipal Councils to clear their books.

The Ministry of Local Government intends to provide rates amnesty in 2023, which will be in two phases. This will be submitted to Cabinet in the next Sitting for consideration. Furthermore, the Ministry has been continually providing waiver on interest and rates for cases where ratepayers have been facing genuine hardship as per the Local Government Act 1972.

The Councils are now improving in their rates collection after recovering from the pandemic. The Councils overall have managed to collect 74 percent from the current rates billing.

The Ministry together with the 13 Municipal Councils, conducted a Rates Profiling exercise to ascertain the total outstanding rates and to identify the challenges in rates recovery processes faced by the Councils. By identifying these challenges, the Councils have been working on strategies to improve rates recovery and enforcement powers.

The Rates Profiles compiled by the Councils will provide important data to the Ministry to provide policy direction to the Municipality on rates recovery. The provisions will have simple and practical methods to collect rates arrears and interests therein.

Councils have implemented strategies to encourage rates payments and they include:

- Extension in the discount period (5 percent to 7 percent).
- Payment of rates by installments under an agreement.

- Liaising with the Ministry of Lands and Housing Authority as landlords of large number of ratable lots.
- Online payment is already in place on MPAiSA platform and with BSP Bank.
- Issuing reminder notices once invoices are raised (quarterly basis).
- Attornment of lease – relevant to commercial properties.
- Small Claim Tribunal – less than \$5,000.
- Placing of charge or caveats on properties.
- Deduction at source (payroll).
- Arrangements with law firms (transfer of properties to settle rates).
- Arrangements with Banks (client to arrange settlement of rates whilst seeking loans).
- Online banking options and MPAiSA agreement to be drawn with Vodafone and Banks.
- Legal actions to recover rates, for example, sale of properties.

In addition, positive steps have been taken by the Councils to ensure that all developers will now be required to clear their rates owed to the Council prior any further development being approved. This is now a mandatory check prior to accepting building applications.

MUNICIPAL COUNCIL INFORMATION ON RATES 2007-2022

| | Councils | No. of Ratepayers | Year | Percentage Rate Collection | Remarks |
|------------------------|----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------------------|---|
| LARGE COUNCILS | | | | | |
| 1 | Suva | 11,468 | 2007-2011 | 80-86% | These years from 2007-2011, the Council's outstanding rates ranged increased from \$2 million to \$2.5 million due to change in new subdivision and introduction of new Unimproved Capital Value (UCV). |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 81-99% | The rates outstanding increased from \$2.5 million to \$3 million in year 2012 was due to the implementation of the increased rates from Sexennial Valuation. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 81-91% | In the year 2020, the rates collection dropped to 81 percent due to COVID-19 and there was an increase in the rates outstanding to \$3.1 million. Hence, rates collection increased in 2021 post-COVID and the rates outstanding reduced to \$2.5 million. |
| 2 | Lautoka | 8,169 | 2007-2011 | 65-89% | The Council's invoice is around \$2 million and the Council had around \$820,000 arrears from previous years. The Council had last rates increased in 2009. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 68-98% | The Council managed to collect rates from the current and outstanding, yet the arrears from previous outstanding increased due to the accumulating compound interest. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 68-83% | The Council has a good collection of rates, however, due to the COVID impact and compound interest on arrears have led to vast increase in the outstanding from 2007 to 2022. |
| MEDIUM COUNCILS | | | | | |
| 3 | Nasinu | 11,377 | 2007-2011 | | The Council does not have proper records on rates data from 2007-2011. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 58-67% | In 2014 the rates were increased through Sexennial Valuation and this led to an increase from \$7 million to \$8.7 million. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 51-83% | The collection rate reduced in 2019 and 2020 and the outstanding increased to \$12 million. The Council have lodged long pending dues with the Court. |
| 4 | Nausori | 4,554 | 2007-2011 | | The Council does not have proper records on rates data from 2007 to 2011. The figures have been pulled from audited FS which does not show rates collection separately but collective figure for receipts from customers as the revenue for the Council. Thus, rates increased in 2014 through Sexennial Valuation. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | | |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 46-67% | |
| 5 | Nadi | 3,022 | 2007-2011 | 45-77% | The rates collection increased every year and in year 2011, the Council collected 77 percent of the rates. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 77-94% | The Council, again, in these years managed to collect a good percentage of rates through waiver of interest and ratepayers settled the principal amounts. |

| | Councils | No. of Ratepayers | Year | Percentage Rate Collection | Remarks |
|-----------------------|----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------------------|---|
| | | | 2017-2022 | 70-85% | The collection of rates reduced in these years due to COVID-19 effect yet managed to collect over 50 percent of the rates. The rates were also increased in 2020 through Sexennial Valuation. |
| 6 | Ba | 1,666 | 2007-2011 | 24-52% | Comparing collection from 2007 till 2011, the Council had gradually increased in the collection of rates. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 36-50% | The Council managed to collect 50 percent in the year 2012. However, in the next four years, the rates collection reduced to 36 percent. There was increase in invoicing due to subdivision and rezoning. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 39-80% | Due to COVID pandemic, the rate collection really reduced to 39 percent collection and gradually increased in its collection. Also note that the rates were increased in 2021 through Sexennial Valuation. |
| 7 | Labasa | 1,408 | 2007-2011 | 89-93% | Good collection. Outstanding was around 7 percent to 11 percent of the invoicing amount. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 91-95% | Good collection. Outstanding was around 5 percent to 9 percent of the invoicing amount. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 65-93% | Good collection from 2017 to 2020 ranging between 93 percent to 86 percent. However, collection dropped in 2021 to 65 percent and then increased in 2022 to 77 percent. The reduced collection would have been due to the rates increased in 202 through Sexennial Valuation. |
| 8 | Lami | 1,220 | 2007-2011 | 74-90% | The Council had good collection of rates and reduced the outstanding from \$6 million to \$1 million. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 40-66% | Collection reduction dropped due to the increase in new subdivisions, revaluation of properties and increase in unit cent, and also increase in rates through Sexennial Valuation. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 57-75% | The Council collection reduced in 2019 and 2020, however, regained its collection to 71 percent after COVID-19. |
| SMALL COUNCILS | | | | | |
| 9 | Savusavu | 634 | 2007-2011 | 89% | The Council does not have proper record keeping and documents to determine the percentage collection from 2007 to 2010. Thus, 89 percent collection indicates for 2011. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 67-90% | |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 63-93% | Due to increase in rates in 2016 through Sexennial Valuation and COVID, the rates collection fluctuated in these years, yet managed to collect more than 50 percent per |

| | Councils | No. of Ratepayers | Year | Percentage Rate Collection | Remarks |
|----|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| | | | | | year. |
| 10 | Rakiraki | 527 | 2007-2011 | | Rakiraki was declared as Town in 2010, the rates valuation was received on 20 th April, 2012, then the awareness was carried out and rates was charged from 2013. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 69-94% | In the initial years of rates, the Council collected good percentage from the ratepayers. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 52-77% | Rakiraki, being a small Town with less facilities, good percentage of ratepayers are paying the rates. Only in 2020, the rates collection was 52 percent while other years was around 70 percent collection. |
| 11 | Tavua | 311 | 2007-2011 | 78-88% | The rates have not increased since 2002. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 72-96% | The Council is performing better in rates collection. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 84-92% | Sexennial Valuation took place in 2021, however, rates increase has not been implemented. The Council's invoice per year is around \$64,000 and total outstanding is \$35,000 from which \$10,000 is the accumulated interest portion. |
| 12 | Sigatoka | 249 | 2007-2011 | 79-85% | The Council already had an arrears around \$71,000 and gradually the team improved its collection and managed to collect 85 percent of rates by the end of 2011. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 78-88% | The Council managed to collect majority of the current rates while the arrears had been accumulating. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 77-94% | The Council's collection dropped in 2020 due to COVID-19 to 77 percent, thus regained its collection to 82 percent in 2021. The rates also increased in 2021 through Sexennial Valuation. |
| 13 | Levuka | 144 | 2007-2011 | 48-81% | The Council already had an arrears around \$110,000 and gradually the team improved in its collection and managed to collect 81 percent of the rates by the end of 2011. |
| | | | 2012-2016 | 83-91% | The Council managed to collect majority of the current rates while the arrears had been accumulating. |
| | | | 2017-2022 | 77-93% | The Council had an increase in rates in year 2021 through the Sexennial Valuation. |

Summary of Rates Arrears 2007-2022

| Years | Suva | Lami | Nasinu | Nausori | Sigatoka | Nadi | Lautoka | Ba | Tavua | Rakiraki | Labasa | Savusavu | Levuka | Total |
|-------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| 2007 | \$ 2,127,288.00 | \$ 4,989,658.00 | \$ 7,099,784.00 | \$ 1,824,290.00 | \$ 64,804.81 | \$ 2,426,764.17 | \$ 836,481.00 | \$ 1,119,495.00 | \$ 17,588.00 | - | \$ 68,802.25 | \$ 178,683.00 | \$ 110,455.00 | 20,864,093.23 |
| 2008 | \$ 1,823,253.00 | \$ 5,418,595.00 | \$ 8,949,581.00 | \$ 2,239,186.00 | \$ 69,158.45 | \$ 2,706,815.38 | \$ 852,546.00 | \$ 1,131,938.00 | \$ 28,073.23 | - | \$ 40,654.50 | \$ 191,412.00 | \$ 82,618.00 | \$ 23,533,830.56 |
| 2009 | \$ 2,543,285.00 | \$ 6,010,140.00 | \$ 9,440,877.00 | \$ 2,132,528.00 | \$ 65,173.55 | \$ 2,046,755.86 | \$ 4,945,701.00 | \$ 1,161,971.00 | \$ 25,886.74 | - | \$ 41,897.50 | \$ 222,233.00 | \$ 73,937.00 | 28,712,394.65 |
| 2010 | \$ 2,500,499.00 | \$ 1,230,642.00 | \$ 10,260,604.00 | \$ 2,080,517.00 | \$ 61,302.77 | \$ 2,006,038.49 | \$ 5,188,779.00 | \$ 1,183,349.00 | \$ 29,486.51 | - | \$ 47,482.50 | \$ 271,192.00 | \$ 74,573.00 | \$ 24,934,465.27 |
| 2011 | \$ 1,996,954.00 | \$ 1,201,684.00 | \$ 8,153,841.29 | \$ 2,261,131.00 | \$ 69,857.35 | \$ 1,984,760.19 | \$ 4,860,809.00 | \$ 530,684.00 | \$ 4,068.94 | - | \$ 41,836.50 | \$ 321,513.24 | \$ 112,234.00 | 21,539,373.51 |
| 2012 | \$ 3,230,683.00 | \$ 1,164,944.00 | \$ 7,820,383.32 | \$ 2,261,131.00 | \$ 73,215.68 | \$ 1,309,074.21 | \$ 5,113,540.00 | \$ 631,471.00 | \$ 6,114.82 | - | \$ 68,475.20 | \$ 389,349.42 | \$ 104,453.00 | \$ 22,172,834.65 |
| 2013 | \$ 75,975.66 | \$ 1,196,773.00 | \$ 8,153,841.29 | \$ 1,836,120.00 | \$ 78,926.36 | \$ 1,502,543.54 | \$ 5,575,704.00 | \$ 637,102.00 | \$ 6,574.69 | \$ 23,805.45 | \$ 65,318.41 | \$ 464,793.44 | \$ 122,231.00 | 19,739,708.84 |
| 2014 | \$ 2,700,971.85 | \$ 1,211,176.00 | \$ 8,126,483.40 | \$ 2,314,262.00 | \$ 59,963.23 | \$ 1,764,334.91 | \$ 5,681,960.00 | \$ 756,436.00 | \$ 9,898.78 | \$ 54,743.11 | \$ 99,021.41 | \$ 411,857.20 | \$ 132,675.00 | \$ 23,323,782.89 |
| 2015 | \$ 2,119,184.23 | \$ 1,368,152.00 | \$ 8,862,593.49 | \$ 2,385,187.00 | \$ 61,892.78 | \$ 1,851,987.62 | \$ 5,011,035.00 | \$ 829,977.00 | \$ 21,060.44 | \$ 92,321.00 | \$ 58,426.81 | \$ 491,549.20 | \$ 130,352.00 | 23,283,718.57 |
| 2016 | \$ 2,380,608.84 | \$ 1,558,625.00 | \$ 8,772,569.80 | \$ 2,655,349.00 | \$ 60,215.68 | \$ 1,822,587.97 | \$ 5,716,490.00 | \$ 967,780.00 | \$ 31,260.95 | \$ 141,098.55 | \$ 83,849.21 | \$ 494,443.21 | \$ 173,078.00 | \$ 24,857,956.21 |
| 2017 | \$ 2,414,760.54 | \$ 1,489,577.00 | \$ 9,225,672.19 | \$ 2,670,443.86 | \$ 75,256.69 | \$ 1,513,484.20 | \$ 5,739,606.00 | \$ 899,746.00 | \$ 26,361.34 | \$ 134,739.41 | \$ 81,944.17 | \$ 381,872.99 | \$ 134,562.00 | 24,788,026.39 |
| 2018 | \$ 2,150,831.66 | \$ 1,587,542.00 | \$ 9,195,428.00 | \$ 2,497,314.29 | \$ 79,684.29 | \$ 1,617,347.80 | \$ 5,734,321.00 | \$ 897,609.00 | \$ 30,676.37 | \$ 49,338.62 | \$ 183,975.21 | \$ 428,596.41 | \$ 102,000.00 | \$ 24,554,664.66 |
| 2019 | \$ 2,060,159.48 | \$ 1,481,014.63 | \$ 7,657,680.00 | \$ 2,689,534.05 | \$ 69,993.71 | \$ 1,485,106.05 | \$ 4,331,116.00 | \$ 750,091.00 | \$ 24,922.95 | \$ 86,262.83 | \$ 211,205.07 | \$ 488,046.23 | \$ 123,435.00 | 21,458,567.00 |
| 2020 | \$ 3,146,253.82 | \$ 1,565,565.02 | \$ 9,147,158.00 | \$ 2,732,861.25 | \$ 78,236.36 | \$ 1,881,745.61 | \$ 4,904,568.00 | \$ 848,599.00 | \$ 32,395.83 | \$ 95,975.71 | \$ 168,760.06 | \$ 583,944.34 | \$ 145,000.00 | \$ 25,331,063.00 |
| 2021 | \$ 870,279.51 | \$ 1,665,316.42 | \$ 10,311,742.00 | \$ 3,162,456.88 | \$ 54,895.36 | \$ 644,652.26 | \$ 4,989,216.00 | \$ 984,571.00 | \$ 38,128.10 | \$ 91,800.61 | \$ 330,234.43 | \$ 649,970.77 | \$ 129,886.00 | 23,923,149.35 |
| 2022 | \$ 2,597,230.88 | \$ 1,591,036.27 | \$ 11,754,069.00 | \$ 3,533,036.39 | \$ 49,623.32 | \$ 683,732.94 | \$ 3,673,339.43 | \$ 1,362,452.00 | \$ 37,901.87 | \$ 107,425.13 | \$ 289,354.66 | \$ 747,204.38 | \$ 94,062.55 | \$ 26,520,468.82 |