

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 4TH APRIL, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

CONTENTS

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	792
Communication from the Speaker	792
Presentation of Reports of Committees	792-795
(1) Review Report – Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission 2018-2019 Annual Report	
(2) Review Report – Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations 2016-2018 Annual Reports	
Ministerial Statements	795-818
(1) Girit Day Celebrations – Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad	
(2) 5th UN Conference on LDCs – Hon. V.R. Gavoka	
(3) Commission on the Status of Women – Hon. L.D. Tabuya	
(4) 100 Days Achievements – Hon. Dr. Ratu A.R. Lalabalavu	
Review Report – Auditor-General’s Compliance Audits Relating to COVID-19 Response	818-836
Suspension of Standing Orders	835
Consolidated Review Report – FMIB 2015-2017 Annual Reports	837-847
Review Report – Office of the Auditor-General 2021 Annual Report	848-856
Questions	857-875
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) 2022-2023 Budgeted Infrastructure Projects (Q/No. 52/2023)	
(2) Electoral System for Municipal Elections (Q/No. 54/2023)	
(3) Development of Community-Based Tourism (Q/No. 55/2023)	
(4) Removal of 20 Cents Per Litre Fuel Duty (Q/No. 56/2023)	
(5) Nature-Based Seawalls (Q/No. 57/2023)	
(6) Guideline for Ministry of Education Appointments (Q/No. 58/2023)	
(7) Status Tax Rebates (Q/No. 59/2023)	
<u>Written Questions</u>	
(1) Exclusive Government Newspaper Advertising – Fiji Sun(Q/No. 60/2023)	
(2) Grid Extension Projects – Energy Fiji Limited (Q/No. 62/2023)	
(3) Number of Recipients – Social Protection Programmes (Q/No. 63/2023)	
(4) National Budget – Multiple Tax Benefits (Q/No. 64/2023)	

TUESDAY, 4TH APRIL 2023

The Parliament met at 9.35 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable S.T. Koroilavesau.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 3rd April, 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

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those joining us in the gallery, as well as those watching the live proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming another group of PL100 Students from the University of the South Pacific. I also welcome other members of the public in the gallery, especially the former Member of Parliament, Mr. Peceli Rinakama. I hope that you will enjoy and also learn something from today's proceedings.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report - Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission 2018-2019 Annual Report

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Review Report of the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) 2018-2019 Annual Report.

The Committee is aware of the significant role played by FCCC in ensuring that consumers in Fiji are protected from unfair and unethical market practices. It works with the vision to create a dynamic and competitive market in Fiji.

The Committee was pleased to note the array of information that was available in the 2018-2019 Annual Report which helped during deliberations. Sir, FCCC had submitted a written submission which provided the Committee with a better understanding of the operations during the period under review.

While reading through the analysis that was provided by FCCC, the Committee noted that a number of rental complaints increased by 58 percent and recommended that further consultations are held with all stakeholders. It further noted that the three worst industries in terms of complaints received included automotive, construction and white goods with automotive comprising 57 percent and made recommendations on the same.

Further to this, the Committee noted that petroleum and LPG prices comprised a major component of not only cost of business and households but also a key factor in national economic performance. It further noted that the review based on submissions and analysis had aligned the regulatory pricing for petroleum products from quarterly to monthly mechanism with the aim to ensure that the volatility of petroleum prices at world market gets reflected in a shorter span of time. The Committee commended FCCC for the successful implementation of this change.

The 2018-2019 period was when the FCCC had launched its five-year Strategic Plan which was from 2018-2023. Given the important roles played by FCCC, the Committee looks forward to future reporting against its yearly Business Plan.

I would like to thank the former Committee Members who were part of the team that produced the Report. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the current Members of the Committee - honourable Sashi Kiran, honourable Tomasi N. Tuinabuna, honourable Semi T. Koroilavesau and honourable Premila D. Kumar for their contributions towards the Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Review of the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission 2018-2019 Annual Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now note.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report – Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations
1st August, 2016 – 31st July, 2017 and 2017-2018 Annual Report

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, I am pleased to present the Report of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the annual review of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations Annual Report 1st August, 2016 - 31st July, 2017 and 2017-2018 Annual Report. This review was undertaken in accordance with Standing Order 109(2)(b) which mandates the Committee to look into issues related to health, education, social services, labour, culture and media.

The Standing Committee on Social Affairs of the last Parliament was referred this Annual Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the same Report had been reintroduced in this new term of Parliament and have been referred to the current Standing Committee on Social Affairs which was mandated by

Parliament to review the Annual Report and report back on its findings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Report will emphasise and clarify the work done by the previous Committee in reviewing and highlighting the contents of the annual reports and make recommendations on the anomalies noted in the Report. It will also highlight the discussions held by the Committee with the Ministry in relation to the issues noted from their Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the period under review, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations continued to support workplaces to become compliant, productive and inclusive, in response to important legislative changes, complex issues and growing community expectations. The Ministry's internal processes were changed and upgraded for re-certification to ISO 9001:2015 international standards in growing an efficient and effective work culture.

The Ministry significantly expanded its service offerings through the launch of its Customer Service Centre, ensuring that more workers and businesses understood their entitlements and obligations. There was also easier access of services for the general public as well as the implementation of Fiji's first-ever National Employment Policy aimed at reducing unemployment. It also continued to work with its tripartite partners and strived to find the best ways to achieve decent work and employment growth in Fiji.

I would like to acknowledge the Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs in the last term of Parliament under the able leadership of the honourable Pillay and all their hard work and input which has greatly assisted our Committee in completing this Report. I would also like to thank the honourable Members of the current Standing Committee on Social Affairs and wish them well in their Committee deliberations in this new term of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also extend my gratitude to the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, Mr. Osea Cawaru, and his staff for all their assistance in this review process.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, I commend this Report to Parliament and request all Members of Parliament to take note of the Report.

(Report handed to Secretary-General)

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion, without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report be initiated at a future sitting.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report - Consolidated Review Report of PAFCO 2018 and 2019 Annual Reports

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report of PAFCO 2018 and 2019 Annual Reports. Sir, PAFCO is one of the largest fish processing companies in the Pacific Region. It is the

largest employer in Levuka and immensely contributes to the economic activity on the island. The years 2018 and 2019 were filled with its own unique opportunities and challenges for the company.

In 2018, PAFCO achieved a milestone when the honourable Prime Minister of Fiji visited the factory to officially open the new cold storage facility. During the year, PAFCO continued its efforts to upgrade its infrastructure, plants and equipment. However, the company faced significant challenges during 2018 and 2019 due to inconsistent supply of albacore tuna. This led to the factory aligning its processing operations throughout to adjust to the incoming fish stock.

While deliberating on the Report, the Committee noted that one of the causes of the \$3.2 million loss in 2019 was due to the low supply of tuna. Apart from the 20,000 metric tonnes of albacore supplied by Bumblebee, the Committee recommended for PAFCO to explore engaging other suppliers under strict contractual terms to ensure consistency in supply of tuna and to ultimately optimise the plant's productive capacity.

The Committee also noted the need for the company to have a comprehensively documented Risk Management Policy for high-risk areas that are not covered. Given the two years of consecutive losses from 2018 to 2019, the Committee recommended an overall organisational review be conducted to assess both short term and long-term strategic issues and determine future directions.

The Committee noted that during the year 2019, the company recruited five graduate cadets in the Quality Control and Production Departments and an accountant. It also celebrated the success of PAFCO's Apprenticeship Programme. Five apprentices successfully completed their 4-year programmes and one was a Runner-Up in the Apprentice of the Year Award given by the Fiji National University. The Committee commends such initiatives and encourages PAFCO to continue its effort in upgrading the skills of their workers.

I would like to thank the former Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this Report. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the current members of the Committee - honourable Sashi Kiran, honourable Tomasi N. Tunabuna, honourable Semi T. Koroilavesau and honourable Premila D. Kumar for their contribution towards the Report.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend the Consolidated Review of the PAFCO 2018 and 2019 Annual Reports.

(Report handed to Secretary-General)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

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

HON. S. KIRAN.- I second the motion, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- The following Ministers have given notice to make Ministerial Statements under Standing Order 40:

1. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning and National Development and Statistics;
2. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Tourism and Civil Aviation;
3. Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation; and
4. Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services.

Ministers may speak for 20 minutes. After the Ministers, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the Statement for not more than five minutes. There will be no other debate.

Girmit Day Celebrations

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my Ministerial Statement on the Girmit Day commemoration and celebrations. On 29th December, 2022 during the inaugural address to the nation, the honourable Prime Minister made a pledge and I quote:

“I made a pledge to legislate for a Girmit Day public holiday to honour the settlers from India who began arriving here from 1879. They were starting a new life in an unknown land and stayed to become an integral part of our country. I reconfirm my promise to inaugurate that new national holiday in 2023.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has declared and gazetted 15th May, 2023 as the day to mark the occasion for Girmit Day as a national holiday. In the history of Fiji, this is significant and also a significant as 11th May of each year marks the *Syria* shipwreck and the associated selfless efforts by our indigenous Fijian people in rescuing indentured labourers from the sinking ship, thereby marking the first major historical event, creating bonds between our indigenous people and the indentured labourers. This was, Mr. Speaker, on 11th May, 1884.

The heroism of the indigenous people, the original inhabitants of the land was exemplary. It deserves recognition because it was an act of valour. They demonstrated tremendous courage and put their own lives in great danger by trying to rescue as many as endangered labourers as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they did not know them. They had not seen them at all before, let alone even talk to them. However, this was a valiant act of humanity, and this humanity has been the cornerstone of peaceful, mutual co-existence of the *iTaukei* and Indo-Fijian communities, living side by side for the last 144 years since the beginning of Indenture with the arrival of the *Leonidas* on 14th May, 1879. Of course, Mr. Speaker, this mutual peaceful co-existence has been shattered a few times, but it has not dented this bond. It was, is and will be unbreakable and it deserves our accolades.

Mr. Speaker, more than 60,000 Indentured Labourers were brought to Fiji from India to work in the sugarcane plantations between 14th May, 1879 and 11th November, 2016. While some returned to India, a vast majority chose to stay back and call Fiji their home, working and contributing to the Fiji economy and overall growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the term “girmit” as we all know is coined from the word “agreement” – the binding document between the workers and the British. They were collectively referred to as “*Girmitiya*”. For Fiji, the significance of the Girmit Day is monumental. It is with the sole objective of making “One Fiji” a reality – a nation genuinely united in harmony – true nationhood of vision, hopes aspirations and a land of vast opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Indentured Labourers and their descendants over the last 100 years have significantly contributed to the economic, social and political development and advancement of Fiji.

This is well recognised. They have lived peacefully and harmoniously, side by side with other races.

Overwhelmingly, Sir, this peaceful co-existence and cooperation, the willingness of our landowners to share their resources and land and the freedom for the descendants of our Indentured Labourers to put in practice their language, culture, tradition - an integral part of the Indian civilisation, together with the blood, sweat, toil, tears and lives sacrificed by our forefathers, as well as the immense contributions of other races has made Fiji what it has been for decades – the hub of the South Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, honourable Justice Jai Ram Reddy, whose speech as a grandson of an Indentured Labourer and as the Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the National Federation Party to the Great Council of Chiefs on 6th June, 1997 will go down as a defining moment in Fiji's history rightly said, and I quote:

“The Indians of Fiji, brought to these shores as labourers, did not come to conquer or colonise. Our ancestors came to this land in search of a better life, in search of a future they dreamed of for their children and their children's children. Though they travelled to these islands long after your ancestors, surely the dreams and hopes of those who landed from the *Leonidas* were not that different from those who came ashore after the epic earlier voyage from the West.”

Mr. Speaker, after 144 years, the time is right, not only for the celebration and commemoration of our rich history in this multicultural society, but for a reflection of the freedoms gained and lost on the journey. Our forefathers operated on the basis of freedom, human rights, dignity and a virtuous living – the values that over a period of time guided our fight against the vices of the indentured system.

Today, Mr. Speaker, many seem to have forgotten and some would have us forget, those hard fought for virtues and principles in support of those who have taken our freedoms in the past, but we have the perfect opportunity to put this right.

In the Cabinet meeting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 14th February, 2023 and as announced by the honourable Prime Minister, Cabinet approved the Girit Day commemoration and celebrations to be held on 15th May, 2023 including the establishment of a National Committee, chaired by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Girit Day celebrations, a two-day International Girit Conference will be held on 12th and 13th May, 2023. An amount of \$500,000 has been approved for the Girit Day celebrations including a two-day conference.

The Government, Mr. Speaker, has also approved a 200 percent tax deduction for entities which provides cash donations in an account approved by Government to that will be used to fund activities related to the Girit Day (including conference, sports, et cetera). The same amount, Mr. Speaker, has also been allocated to celebrate and commemorate Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day. Moreover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade will also reach out to relevant donor agencies to solicit their support for this national initiative through direct financial contributions as well as support in kind.

As stated, Mr. Speaker, the National Committee on Girit Day has been established to organise and oversee all official Government funded activities and events to mark the intent and purpose of Girit Day on an annual basis. The other members of the Committee include the:

- Honourable Charan Jeath Singh;

- Honourable Agni Deo Singh;
- Honourable Sashi Kiran;
- Representatives of the Girit Council;
- Representatives of the *Giritiya* Non-Government Institutions such as Global Girit;
- Representatives from the academic institutions (USP, FNU and University of Fiji);
- Representatives from the Ministry of Education; and
- Other Government Departments and co-opted members.

Amongst others, the National Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is responsible for:

- Organising all official/Government funded activities and events to mark the intent and purpose of Girit Day on an annual basis;
- Ensure that conference and the Girit day events are conducted and organised within the approved budget;
- Ensure that a financial audit is undertaken in a timely manner and also that the sub-committee(s) keep and submit all the acquittals for budget utilised; and
- Consider the adequacy of risk management and internal controls as well as the accuracy of financial reporting in a timely manner including developing necessary standard operating procedures for ease of operations and for audit purposes..

The National Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has also established two sub-committees - Sub-Committee on Conference and Sub-Committee on Girit Day Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a Sub-Committee on Conference has already been established. The Sub-Committee on the Conference is responsible to hold an international conference on *Giritiya* to mark the historic National Girit Day holiday. The conference with a theme, ‘Giritiya’s Celebrating Fiji Inclusivity and Diversity’, aims to create a dialogue among scholars from different disciplines on the selected themes and to celebrate *Giritiyas’* lives and identities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sub-committee on Conference has already advertised and are calling for papers for conference. Papers are due on 1st May, 2023.

The Sub-Committee on Girit Day programme is responsible for finalising plans for celebration and agenda for the Girit Day which will be held at Albert Park as the main venue. The celebrations are planned to be held from 12th to 15th May, 2023. Mr. Speaker, this will be a wonderful opportunity for us to recollect our *Girit* history and show case these through the programme.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Sub-Committee is currently planning the programme and it will be inclusive which may include:

1. Essay/poster/poetry competitions through schools and various mainstream media.
2. Posting of videos of elders in the family and their recollection of *Girit* stories to be done through FBC.
3. Songs and storytelling from stories we know, including riddles/quiz and poetry.
4. Food and culture festival of different ethnic Indo cultures showcased at the Albert Park and maybe street markets during the week.
5. A Parade of different eras of progress of many descendants of the *Giritiya*.
6. Archives to complete and launch digital Plantation register and *Girit* pass in partnership with Australian National University (ANU).

Some of the key features of the programme are likely to be:

1. Recognition of the *vanua* of Rewa for adopting descendants of *Girmitiya* including a visit to Navilaca with traditional ceremonies.
2. Recognition and appreciation of Indo cultural groups for keeping culture alive.
3. Recognition of different eras of development during and post *Girmit* era.
4. Acknowledgment of Methodist/Anglican Church for promotion of Indian girls' education during a church service on Sunday at Dilkusha which was the first boarding for Indian girls at that time.

Mr. Speaker, the Girmit Day celebrations will be a time for us to understand the history and context of how Indentured Labourers from India came to Fiji. The event will commemorate the many sacrifices and contributions our ancestors made to the country in terms of shaping the early economic landscape of our nation.

Girmit history is an integral part of Fiji's and Pacific history and a day to mark this day acknowledges the significant social, cultural, economic and political contribution the *Girmitiya* and their descendants have made to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the importance of making this event a wonderful memory as this is the first national-based celebration on *Girmitiya* after the 100th year celebration in 1979, is of historical and will be remembered forever. To mark this momentous occasion, we must reiterate our need, as diverse communities of a great nation, to work together for our collective free and secure future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be a celebration as well as a commemoration of that single momentous event that forever changed the destiny and the landscape of Fijian society. While the atrocities, trials and tribulations of the Indenture System in Fiji have been well documented, the descendants of the *Girmitiyas* have moved on. This is evident in the way the third and fourth generation Indo-Fijians have integrated themselves into Fiji's landscape. As such, they have tied their own personal circumstances to the destiny of this country. This Coalition Government under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister recognises this aspect.

The celebration, Mr. Speaker, will be a paradigm shift; that is, we are moving away from the rhetoric of the past. The Coalition Government is inculcating a new culture of dialogue, unity and cooperation with political leaders as well as leaders of other ethnic groups to forge a new approach to politics in this country. This culture of dialogue will incorporate diverse opinions from a broad spectrum of the ethnic groups that make up this nation. As such, celebrations like this, highlighting a specific group of people in all their diversity must be the cornerstones of processes of nation building.

This is why, Mr. Speaker, this Government (led by the honourable Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka) believes Girmit Day is important to remember and reflect on the struggles and sacrifices of our forefathers for equality, dignity and justice for all our people. It will be a celebration where the nation comes to grips with the diversity that is its essence. A diversity that demands mutual respect on the basis of lasting social, economic and political advancement of our nation.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately I do not have the same privilege in terms of time like the honourable Minister of Finance. I rise to respond to the statement by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister on Girmit Public Holiday and its celebrations.

First of all, I would like to congratulate all *Girmitiya* descendants and all Fijians to recognise this important day in Fijian history. Sir, 14th May each year marks the arrival day of the first *Girmitiyas* to Fiji from British India who arrived off Levuka Harbour on the evening of that day in 1879 on the *Leonidas*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first large scale celebration of Girit was on its centennial to mark its 100th year on 14th May, 1979. For those who may remember, the years of the newly independent Fiji between 1970 and 1977 was marked by rising racial tensions and divisions. The bipartisan celebration of the Girit Centennial in 1979 provided an opportunity for the whole of Fiji to get behind the occasion, not like the approach by this Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also provides the first national occasion for Fiji and all Fijians to learn about this often dark and inhumane part of our history. That would lay down the foundations of the modern Fijian society and economy as we now know it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I note the Public Holiday, but there is no evidence of inclusive organisation of the celebration. In fact, no one actually knows until these statements on who is organising the celebration, what level of public consultation and inclusion is involved and why public funds will be spent in the way it is. This seems more of the Coalition Government's approach of jobs for the girls and the boys who have come from the three parties and not a case of best people for the best job.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Government looks to provide a Girit public holiday, what is it doing about the attack which is in contrast to the celebration of Girit.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER- No, you carry on.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me put it on record that it was the FijiFirst Government that brought back the national celebrations of Girit after a long break since 1979.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Control your leader.

(Laughter)

During this period, celebrations were organised at the local level or through the local Girit Interest Groups, there was no government support under the SVT government in the 1990s and the government that followed until 2006.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government organised Fiji wide celebrations including one of the largest ever public events on 11th November, 2016. It is on record, Sir. This national and inclusive event marked 100 years on the arrival of the last shipload of the *Giritiyas* from the British India to Fiji on board the *Sutlej V*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government Girit celebrations continued each year until 2019 and was revived after COVID-19 in 2022. It was inclusive. It was not Suva centred, in fact, we took it to all towns, cities and communities around Fiji.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are an absolute disgrace.

HON. P.K. BALA.- We all know it is a one-man party so it is obvious you are going to speak.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Speak on the topic.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Control your one-man guy there.

(Laughter)

We made sure of *iTaukei* and other races population and events including large multi-faith events in the tradition of the inclusive bi-partisan ethos of the 1979 celebration.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- The FijiFirst Government invited all religious groups, social groupings and ensured that all *Girmitiya* descendants were celebrated in the public events.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- You will be invited.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Regardless of official programme outlined, we will continue to honour and remember the contribution of all *Girmitiyas* in building modern Fiji.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- The FijiFirst Party will continue to recognise and honour them in an inclusive manner, recognising their diverse backgrounds and to ensure , Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we never forget their unity and commitment to Fiji in their contribution in providing Fiji with its economic platform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also note, and we must never forget these contributions which were made by the *Girmitiyas* despite the abuse, inhumane treatment and lack of resources of the law of the basic essential humanity. It is a sad thing.

On a bipartisan level, we welcome the public holiday and events to mark Girit Day but note with concern that once again the Coalition Government is not walking the talk when it comes to inclusive and consultative approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank Parliament and wish all Fijians a Happy Girit Day for the upcoming event and I would also like to say to the Coalition Government, happy 100 days.

(Laughter)

Outcomes of 5th United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow countrymen; I rise to provide an update on the key outcomes of the 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (UNLDC-V) that was held in Doha, Qatar, from 5th to 9th March, 2023 and which I had represented the Fiji Government.

Let me just digress a bit, Mr. Speaker, and I am sure the people of Fiji are asking this question, who is calling the kettle black? We are hearing a lot of these tirades from FijiFirst and it is a repeat and they are just pointing at themselves on the way they conduct the affairs of government over the last eight to sixteen years. But we are bringing enlightenment to the country and things are changing and there is a spring in the step of everyone in this country, celebrating the change that they have

been waiting for, for quite some time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while Fiji is a developing country, our commitment and participation at the Conference solidifies our commitment to our Pacific Island neighbours and the global community in progressing graduation of States out of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) status.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, globally, there are currently 46 LDCs which are home to about 1.1 billion people and these States host about 40 of the world's poor with many in conflict countries or emerging from one. These countries account for 13 percent of the world population but contribute about 1.3 percent of GDP and less than one percent of global trade and Foreign Direct Investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, out of the 46 LDCs, 33 are in Africa, 12 in Asia and the Pacific, and one in the Caribbean region. For the Pacific, Solomon Islands is due to graduate, together with Kiribati and Tuvalu. The graduation is in the pipeline and will be happening over the coming years.

Mr. Speaker, a thought that I planted with the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Chairperson of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, is that the small island nations of the Pacific are big Ocean States, whose ocean resources are feeding billions all over the world, especially in the Northern part of the Pacific. They should not be poor, if their resources are fetching prices that are fair, and I have urged Madam Deputy Secretary-General that the UN should take this up and create dialogue at the appropriate level to ensure the resources of the island nations are properly rewarded to enable them to grow their economy and grow wealth.

Mr. Speaker, the UNLDC Conference first started in 1971 and is held every 10 years. For this year, lately it was held in two parts - the first was in New York on 17th March, 2022 and the second part in Doha from 5th to 9th March, 2023 under the theme, 'From Potential to Prosperity'.

The first part of the UNLDC-V resulted in the adoption of the Doha Programme of Action which outlines a 10-year plan to tap into the potential of the LDCs by implementing renewed and strengthened commitments between the LDCs and their development partners.

I was quite amazed, Mr. Speaker, on the first day, that majority of the leaders from Europe were there in Doha. This is the commitment that they have to uplift the lesser developed countries. But, Mr. Speaker, despite some positive results, progress is still falling short of the goals and targets, hence the support that we saw in Doha from the world leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, LDCs like Fiji depend on global commitments, especially from developed countries. For the benefit of our people, we are not an LDC - Fiji was never in that category. We have always been a developed country, and that is something that we should celebrate as our leaders from the beginning had set us on a platform that has helped grow Fiji to what it is today.

We need partnerships if we want to meaningful progress towards the 2030 SDG Agenda. During the UNLDC-V, countries and key partners announced several commitments to bring LDCs back on the pathway to achieving the SDGs and this is welcomed. These commitments include addressing immediate challenges such as climate change and progressing towards sustainable and irreversible graduation, meaning we do not want to go back, we need to move forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the key commitments made at the UNLDC-V include:

1. A financial package to support the implementation of the Doha Programme of Action;
2. A pledge by Germany to finance LDCs;
3. Financial commitment from Canada to deliver vitamin supplements in 15 LDCs;

4. Co-operation agreements;
5. Research commitments;
6. A new project by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) of US\$80 million in equity to offer green guarantees to businesses in LDCs, bringing down the cost of capital;
7. A new Tourism for Development Fund for LDCs announced by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO);
8. Pledge of US\$50,000 by Kazakhstan to continue supporting the most vulnerable countries; and
9. Announcement of a US\$800 million loan package by Saudi Arabia for the LDCs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we are a developing country, there is a lot we can learn. I would like to share in this august Parliament and with the people of Fiji a few policy recommendations stemming from our participation at the UNLDC-V.

Firstly, we need the right mix of policies for an enabling environment that supports sustainable growth and development. We have four main enablers: technology, access to finance, international trade and capacity and human capital. We cannot focus solely on finance, what we need is a balanced approach, structural reforms and multi-sectoral cohesion which are key to economic resilience. We need to look at reforms more holistically and inclusively and it must be long-term, not reforms that take us through a year or five as we have been doing, but reforms that take us into the next decade.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji also needs to focus on high-yielding productive sectors such as manufacturing, circular tourism, primary industries that can enhance growth, add value and ultimately, create meaningful jobs for our people.

Secondly, National Debt Restructure under Systematic Reforms to Global Financial Architecture. We were quite saddened when we learnt that some of the LDCs, 20 percent of their government revenue goes towards debt financing to pay off their debts. These are very vulnerable countries, and it was something that really commended the dialogue in Doha.

Under the Doha Programme of Action, there are calls for a systematic reform of the global financial architecture, addressing both the lack of adequate access to development finance and the challenges posed by precarious debt sustainability by LDCs, whose debt levels have soared due to COVID-19 and other external shocks.

We are no different in Fiji with our debt levels. If we remain in this situation in the next few years, we risk losing the progress we have made. Reform of global financial architecture provides an opportunity for Fiji to negotiate and manage debt repayments while at the same time, restructure its economy to raise government revenues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is optimism from the private sector around the Coalition Government's policies for investment. Last week, we held the first Tourism Investment Summit. As I have shared in Parliament, we need more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), especially in hotel beds and infrastructure. We need to incentivise additional financing and investments, strengthen regulatory and policy environments, and develop pipelines of investable projects. For Fiji, practical areas can be better categorisation of investments and further streamlining of processes.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can better use trade as a true engine for growth. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has been providing technical support and assistance to LDCs in reviewing their trade policies, structural economic transformation, increasing productive capacity and building resilience.

I know UNCTAD has already been supporting us in this area, so we need to take full advantage of this. Last week, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications shared that trade facilitation is a top priority in Fiji's development agenda. Even UNCTAD could assist Fiji in reviewing more of our trade policies. Bilateral partners such as the United Arab Emirates, Gulf Cooperation Council have been proposing bilateral trade agreements to allow Fiji products to enter their markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking at one of our most immediate and long-term priorities, we need to invest more in our people to increase productivity. The brain-drain syndrome has been a constant challenge for developing States, including Fiji. We need to be more serious about incentivizing our youth population that make 70 percent of Fiji's population. Sir, we need to look beyond ad-hoc trainings or pockets of funding. We need more programmes with greater focus on inspiring creativity and innovation for our young from very early stages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we often overlook the value and opportunities of the Fiji diaspora overseas. They already play a huge role in remittance contribution, and we should encourage investments through more tailor-made incentives. As we speak, Sir, there are a number of big projects in Fiji today - one in Suva, where developers are not even selling to non-Fijians in terms of those living overseas nor are they promoting developments, the lots, to them but to the Fiji diaspora overseas, and they are being taken up. We will be seeing a lot of these happening, Sir, and it is from our own people living overseas who want to invest back in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I want to reiterate that while Fiji is a developing country, it is important that we continue to show support and solidarity with LDCs, especially our neighbours here in the Pacific. We know first-hand the disparities in the global economy, so we need to know what we can do to increase our engagement with LDCs to correct severe economic imbalance.

Kiribati's return to the Forum is a great example of this. The Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Amina J. Mohammed, had commented on this, that the world should follow the peaceful manner, the unity on which we relate to each other in the Pacific, instead of the turmoil we see in most regions of the world. Incidentally, she is coming down here around June, so we will see big things happening in terms of our relationship with the United Nations. For our part, the remaining years need to usher in new stronger partnerships, and we need to synergise our multilateral commitments.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition to make his reply, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for tea.

There is a bit of a slight change in our housekeeping this morning. We are hoping that the honourable Prime Minister would be present for our photo shoot, but it seems that he is busy, so we are hoping that he will be here during lunch break so we can then have a photo shoot. Parliament is now adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.33 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.08 a.m.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation for his statement on the outcomes of the 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Development Countries or LDCs, as it is commonly known.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first question that I had in mind when I saw the Ministerial Statement information this morning is, what on earth are we doing? Why are we attending this conference? Despite the justification, despite the learnings that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has stated and perhaps some of the side meetings or bilaterals that they had, a key question that we have is, why is Fiji attending a meeting that concerns LDCs?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not that we are not taking responsibility on our international commitments and, of course, it is not that we are not showing international solidarity on issues as such, we are a responsible global citizen punching above our own weight when it comes to issues, not only of national or regional, but global importance and significance as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Is it the right choice made by Government and particularly involving a Deputy Prime Minister, Sir? For me, it would have been more acceptable if it was an Alliance of the Small Islands States (AOSIS).

You would recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we were in Bahrain, the AOSIS identified themselves with Fiji. Seychelles came to see us, the Bahamas came to see us, Mauritius came to see us, and the list goes on and they are looking forward to the next conference in the Democratic Republic of Congo because that is where they identify themselves with us because in the geopolitics, we are part of a region, we are part of an alliance.

The Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), their link into the global forum is the AOSIS. It is our link to the G77 China which is the biggest bloc within the United Nations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is not that we care less about the LDCs, no, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but it is about prioritising. We have to have the right priorities as a Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I am concerned about the visits that honourable Ministers are making, of course, they need to have these visits, but what is the benefit that it brings to our country?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What tangible benefits is this bringing to our country?

The honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry was in New Zealand a few weeks back to mee the diaspora. Is that his responsibility as the Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Travel the world.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Minister for Youth and Sports went to Vancouver and came back to Sydney..

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- A Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Could you cite the Standing Order that you are referring to?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, Standing Order 60. He needs to refer to the speech by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister which was to one particular location.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Sit down!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- But now, he is going all over the world.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Continue, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let me again tell the honourable Members across the floor that the 100 days is over and according to your Leader, the honourable Prime Minister, no more excuses from the 100 days.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- So, no more excuses, please, honourable Minister for Infrastructure and Public Works.

Ministerial visits are good, but it is the benefit - taxpayer's money. It is unfortunate that the honourable Minister of Finance is not here because he has been blaming us on wastage, wastage, wastage. But is this not wastage?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when it comes to our international commitments and showing solidarity as I have stated earlier, we have been championing issues that is not only relevant to the LDCs or Least Developed States but almost every global citizen. Mr. Speaker, Sir, COP23, we were the first Small Island Developing State to be the President of COP23.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We all know how climate is related to oceans, we again were the first co-chair of the first ever World Oceans Conference in New York in 2017 with Sweden.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- What did Fiji get?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Let me answer that, Mr. Speaker Sir, what did Fiji get? Yesterday

we were just talking about infrastructure from the Global Climate Fund. We were able to get funding for the Viria Project because of our championing.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is the tangible benefit.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is what you need.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We do not go to conferences just to be an audience, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I did not hear from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister on whether he delivered a statement --+on behalf of Fiji or the region. Is the Pacific Islands Forum there, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the region? Was he just there as an audience? The contributors are there, he mentioned about the European Union, these are the countries that contribute.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell them!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Wastage, wastage, wastage, no more excuses.

Now, the honourable Minister of Finance is walking in, I am glad that he walked in at the right time. Let us stop these Ministerial visits that do not bring any benefit to the taxpayers and to the people of this country. Again, I wish you a happy 100 days but there is nothing to celebrate.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Commission on the Status of Women

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, I rise this morning to share on the very first participation that I had since taking up the office after the 2022 Elections at the 67th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women convened at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Mr. Speaker, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is a functional commission of the economic and social council and is the principle global inter-governmental body dedicated exclusively to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. The CSW as it is called for short, is instrumental in promoting women's rights, documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world and shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women and also place a leading role in monitoring and reviewing progress and problems in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and in mainstreaming a gender perspective in the United Nations activities.

Mr. Speaker, during the Commission's Annual two-week session, representatives of the UN Member States, Civil Society Organisations and UN entities gathered at the UN Headquarters in New

York to discuss this progress and gaps in the implementation of global women's empowerment and gender equality programmes and also emerging issues that affect women and girls. The Member States agreed on further actions to accelerate this progress and promote women's empowerment of their rights in political, economic and social fields.

The outcomes of this meeting, Mr. Speaker, and recommendations of each of the sessions are then forwarded to the Economic and Social Council for follow-up. From the 6th to 17th March, 2023 the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women was convened. Every year, there are two themes. The priority theme for this year was on "Innovation and Technological Change and Education in the Digital Age for achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls". The other theme which is called the review theme was on, "Challenges and Opportunities in achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls".

As the Minister responsible, Mr. Speaker, I led a seven-member Government delegation to the CSW. With their own funding support, the delegation included a Senior representative of a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Ms. Nalini Singh, who is the Executive Director of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement (FWRM) funded by her own organisation, we had a female youth representative, Ms. Bulou Gavidi, who is an ICT entrepreneur funded by SPC and also other members who were also funded by their own organisations have been included.

The inclusion of the CSO representative, Mr. Speaker, is for the very first time since a lapse of 11 years. The last CSO representative to be invited by the Government was under the former late Minister and late Speaker, Jiko Luveni, who took CSO representative from the Catholic Women's League, Mrs. Susana Evening. That was the last time that a civil society was invited by Government. But coming in this year, I felt this is very important that we work in partnership with our civil society and to take them along on this trip, and of course, a very critical role that they play in advocating for women's empowerment and also the work they do on grassroots.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our youth representative participated in a number of side events, as a panellist and spoke on issues that young women face in line with the theme of the CSW, which is on ICT sector. The CSO representative was present in the negotiations and had a very key role in the outcomes of the negotiation team and the conference.

Our Ministry fully utilised this opportunity to participate in high level bilateral meetings and side events. Not only were we able to secure these bilateral meetings that we requested, but these were outweighed by the number of requests that came from our bilaterals to meet. The bilateral meetings we held with the United States Special Envoy on Human Rights, Ms. Jessica Stern; the European Union Ambassador, the Canadian Minister for Women and Gender Equality, the honourable Kirk Humphrey of Barbados, the Executive Director of UN Women, Ms. Sima Bahous, and we also met with, as requested, the permanent representatives to the UN for the countries of the US, New Zealand and Australia. We met with the Heads of the UNDP and UNICEF as well as the UN Special Representative on Violence Against Children, Ms. Najat Maalla, who is visiting Fiji next week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a major highlight of the meetings that were held was the courtesy visit to our United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Safety and Security, our very own, Mrs. Unaisi Vuniwaqa. She is a role model and a strong inspiration for our Fijian women in the disciplined forces and in Fiji as a whole. Our meetings focussed on how we could secure support and learn from States and Parties that were successful in implementing activities that were in line with the strategic priorities in our Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the support of crop agencies, namely, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat as well the Pacific Community (SPC), the Cook Islands as the Chair requested that Fiji present the statement on behalf of the Pacific Islands. As you know, Sir, the Cook Islands is not a member State of the United Nations, but they were present there and they chaired all the Ministers Round Tables of all the Ministers that were present from the Pacific Region. But they asked Fiji to present the statement and it was certainly an honour to do so on behalf of the region. The focus, of course, was on climate emergency and the importance of technology as an accessibility tool for quality education, and on e-commerce and how we can empower our women in the region, this was in line with the CSW theme.

In my national statement on behalf of our country, not only did I highlight the major initiatives we are currently undertaking in line with the theme, but also the possibility of empowering the lives of Fijian women and girls with the use of technology in e-commerce. Our people are actually connected to the internet, about 80 percent are connected with about 70 percent women in Fiji who are connected to the internet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of e-commerce for our Fijian women, especially those in the informal sector, that can also look at the area of agriculture and fisheries and forestry, or wherever women are engaged in e-commerce both in urban and rural areas, this was something we discussed at length. We also can use technology to improve access to health, access to information, education, but also address the gender-based violence and women in disaster resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we were forthright about in our statement when we got there in terms of the negotiations, we actually added this to the Pacific Region Statement, was that, while digital technology and innovation can create new possibilities for climate change mitigation and adaptation, it can also expand the carbon footprint of the ICT sector. The ICT sector and artificial intelligence have a huge carbon footprint, and this is something if we are advancing the rights of our women and girls in this sector, we also need to be mindful of the carbon footprint of the ICT sector. This was then included in the outcomes because Fiji and then the region endorsed it, pushed for it to be included in the language of the outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to highlight the immense work undertaken by the region and Fiji in the negotiations referred to at CSW as the informal discussions for our input into the agreed conclusions of 67th Session of the Commission. Fiji did not only speak in our national capacity, but also as the lead negotiator for the region. Again, I do acknowledge my predecessors and the previous government in sending our Ministers every year to the CSW because of the need to report on how Fiji is going but also as a leader in the region, as Fiji was the immediate past chair of the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in being true Pacific Islanders, the team of negotiators were able to negotiate on issues related carbon footprint, e-waste and sustainable technology. The inclusion of the climate change cluster in the outcomes document to include a paragraph on the use of technology and innovation to help promote climate change adaptation and mitigation, particularly, on the efforts to limit global temperature increase to 1.5 Degrees Celsius, ensure conservation and sustainable oceans management and the protection of diversity.

In response to the negotiations to remove the language on maritime areas from the document, the negotiation team was able to retain this, because they had wanted to remove the reference of the words “maritime areas”. But the negotiating Asian team was able to retain this and also included the language on “islands” to make specific reference to our region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a very important part of the Conference was the discussion of technology-based or technology facilitated violence. It is known as online violence, and I wanted to share some

statistics on this. Two-thirds of Fijians of all races have access to the internet and the number of mobile phones is equivalent to 139 percent of the population. It is widely recognised that the incidence of online discrimination, harassment, threats and exploitation is surging around the world, and it has serious direct consequences for many of its victims.

Fijian adolescence is at heightened risk of online exploitation. In Fiji, it is more than six in 10 adolescence or 61 percent are found to have low to very low levels of media literacy. That is the ability to discern and deal with online threats, manipulation or misinformation. The wide availability of online pornography that can be downloaded, saved, reviewed and retransmitted on mobile phones appears to be a factor exacerbating sexual abuse that is perpetuated not just by adult men, but also by teenage boys.

Revenge pornography that occurs when men or boys host sexually explicit images of women or girls online without their permission, especially, in situations where couples breakup after a romantic relationship has also been seen in Fiji. It has led to women and girls being stigmatised by their families and communities with emotional consequences that can last for years. Sexting and cyberbullying are also occurring in Fiji schools, and we really need to educate both girls and boys on the consequences of such actions.

A recent research, Mr. Speaker, investigated attacks on Fijian politicians for their political beliefs, views and affiliation. Online comments were directed at male politicians four times more often than female politicians. However, Mr. Speaker, 83 percent of the comments directed at female politicians was sexist or misogynist in nature.

While there are several issues pertaining to gender-based violence have found a home with digital and technological facilities, mainstream media and digital technologies also provide critical violence against women prevention settings and at the same time there can be vehicles that perpetuate and aggravate violence against women. So, it is a catch 22 and it is something that we, as a Government or as Parliament or as legislators, need to look at our legislation and look at our Online Safety Commission and whether it really has teeth when it comes to addressing online violence and especially this huge percentage of comments directed at women and girls.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, I must acknowledge the Government in its support to ensure that Fiji was represented at CSW. It was something that I literally came upon in the first few weeks that I had to prepare for and I can assure you, honourable Leader of the Opposition, it was not a waste of taxpayer's money. It was certainly a continuation of the previous Government's commitment, and we will continue to do so in terms of our presence at CSW to report on the status of Fijian women.

I also acknowledge the:

- Government of Australia through the SPC that supported Fiji's Chief Negotiator which is our Director for Women and our youth representative to CSW.
- Chair of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Cook Islands and their representative that was in New York to support the region and for giving the honour for Fiji to present the region's statement.
- support of PIFS and SPC Secretariat. They had their secretariat support on the ground to assist myself as well as our Chief Negotiator throughout the participation at the Commission on the Status of Women.

I am also very grateful to all the women and girls of Fiji for their support and, of course, Mr. Speaker, we have a big challenge in front of us. I shared about the statistics on Violence Against Women and Girls yesterday, it was part of a question and the trends on domestic violence, online,

violence which was addressed at this particular meeting is a big problem that we need to deal with, as legislators, and it is upon us to protect our women and girls and to protect our most vulnerable because of this growing threat because of our presence online.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their reply, I would like to acknowledge the presence of a former Member of Parliament from Raiwaqa, Mr. Rasova, and a long lost colleague of mine who has been away in the United States of America for donkey's years now and has just returned, Mr. Jone Sokia, all the way from Newtown.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. That is the type of Ministerial Statement that we need to hear in Parliament. I commend the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think I will decide on that, honourable Bulitavu. Leave that to the Chair.

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- *Vinaka vakalevu*, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Carry on.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The content, the amount of intervention that the delegation did at that CSW 2023, it was really educational and also it showed that the honourable Minister was getting on with the work, not like the rest of the Ministers, especially the three Deputy Prime Ministers.

If you hear the honourable Deputy Prime Minister (one) and Minister of Finance, always going back to the past. Same as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister (two) and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications and even the last Ministerial Statement by honourable Deputy Prime Minister (three) and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation where he did not mention anything. It was just like a trip to the dump, but if you listened to the honourable Minister for Women, thank you very much, Madam. I hope you will soon become a Deputy Prime Minister too.

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- And I know it is coming.

Back to the theme of the CSW 2023, 'Innovation and Technological Change and Education in the Digital Age of achieving Gender Equality and Empowerment Women and Girls', I think under the FijiFirst Government, there has been an ongoing programme. If you see the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES) Programme, I think that also enables women and girls to participate as entrepreneurs for more innovation in technology. There is an existing policy that the Women's Ministry can work with the Ministry of Trade on those programmes that are already there.

The alarming figures have been revealed by the Minister today in terms of harassment online, but we thank the FijiFirst Government for bringing that Online Safety Act which the Opposition then did not support. That is the first legislation that is there that gives some protection at least for cyberbullying and all other online violence that could take place. I agree with the honourable Minister for Women that there can be more actions taken and more measures implemented to ensure the protection of women and girls.

There is a rise of violence on social media. The honourable Minister is a master of *TikTok* and she will probably be the best person to champion this online on how we can control online behaviour, especially those who targeted, based on race, not only targeting women but other vulnerable groups.

I urge the honourable Minister for Women as someone who is really specialised on *TikTok* videos to advance this because this will be really helpful. Given she has many followers online, that will assist. Many of those too are using fake profiles and those are the very people who always do these kinds of coward attacks.

Back to the Beijing Declaration and the Platform of Action, and I think the various policies that will be coming, domesticated by the honourable Minister through her Ministry and the policies that will be coming from the framework that she has already in place plus the outcomes of the 2023 CSW and how will that trickle down to workable policies at national level. I thank her also in involving the NGOs, plus those who were part of her delegation, that is a big achievement too. Moving forward, given they have data and networks linking up with the Government, they will clearly identify to the honourable Minister where the money should be directed.

Again, the honourable Minister, I will remind her to make submissions during the Budget to the honourable Minister for Finance on many programmes that could achieve the goals that are there under the SDGs which this Beijing Declaration aims to achieve by 2023 on the goals that are there under the SDGs goals.

I again commend the honourable Minister for the work she has done in her recent trip to New York; a very good ambassador for Fiji plus other side activities that happened too in her trip there in the US. She wore a beautiful dress that was designed by Tagimoucia Designers, I love that dress.

The Ministry of Women is in good hands now if the Minister continues in the path she is going. I wish her all the best.

100 Days Achievements

HON. RATU DR. A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Members, honourable Members of this august Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka* to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 48 days ago in this august Parliament, I delivered my Maiden Speech as Minister responsible for Health and Medical Services and highlighted the significant challenges that the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is facing now in the state of its infrastructure.

I also highlighted the two key elements essential for our vision for excellence in healthcare and these are, firstly, dramatically improved and maintained infrastructure of the 220 medical facilities around Fiji and, secondly, a well-supported, appropriately remunerated and competent healthcare professionals.

On our achievements so far, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today is my 100th day in Parliament and I wish to highlight the achievements by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services. Since my Maiden Speech, the Ministry has worked on re-prioritising funds within the budget and working with the Ministry of Economy to streamline approval processes to reflect these intentions. Indeed, a team led by the Head of Finance and Assets, including a senior member of the Ministry of Finance, are continuing work to ensure these intentions are reflected in the new budget year.

We also embarked on a number of initiatives that have been able to supplement our revamped infrastructure, building and maintenance programme by calling for greater community engagement and strengthening the Board of Visitors programme. I called on community leaders, youth groups, business houses, faith groups, rural and urban communities, villages and non-governmental organisations to step forward and lend a helping hand.

We then followed this up with community visitations where we visited our healthcare workers working in their various health facilities and discussed their challenges with them, as well as encouraging them on the important tasks they are performing for the people they serve in their communities. We also sat down with members of the community, including representatives of local business communities and encourage them to assist in the upgrade of their local healthcare facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on reviving the Board of Visitors (BOV), at the start of my term in office, 15 of the 22 or 68 percent of Divisional, Sub-Divisional and Specialist Hospitals which are St. Giles Hospital and Tamavua Twomey Hospital, under the Ministry of Health and Medical Services did not have an active Board of Visitors. This points to a “disconnect” that exists between the community and their local health facility, and it needed immediate actions.

The Ministry has since instigated an application and appointment process for BOV members that is fair and transparent. We are pleased with the response we have received so far and anticipate completing the appointment of BOV members over the next few weeks.

For some of our hospitals, this will be the first time that they will have a BOV in place, and this is a great step forward in our efforts towards collaboration and community partnership. The BOV is a legislated body under the Public Hospitals and Dispensaries (Amendment) Act 2012. Members of the BOV are appointed by the Minister from the local community. The functions of the BOV as stated in the Act include the following:

1. The maintenance and repair of the hospital or dispensary under its care and control.
2. The beautification of the hospital or dispensary under its care and control.
3. The hospital or dispensary under its care or control is well equipped and has the necessary technology to provide high quality care to patients.
4. Assist the Ministry of Health in encouraging good health and prevent communicable and non-communicable diseases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BOV is also the voice of the community to the management of the healthcare facility, and they work with the management of the healthcare facility to ensure that health service is responding effectively to the health needs of the community it serves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the revival of the BOV is in progress, please, allow me to share a few success stories which depict the level of collaboration and partnership between the health facilities and their local communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) in Suva, the state of Fiji’s largest hospital came to light in January when members of the media took a ‘State of the Nation’s Infrastructure Tour’ around CWMH. After the tour, an Infrastructure Working Group (IWG), Chaired by the Hospital’s Medical Superintendent, Dr. Luke Nasedra, and with membership from the Hospital’s BOV, Hospital Administration, the Ministry’s Asset and Management Unit and Executive Support Unit, was set up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the IWG have quickly developed processes, trackers and actions in response to the list of urgent CWMH works and organised for a number of fundraising drives for the Hospital’s

infrastructural development.

A major fundraising event held at the residence of the British High Commissioner in Fiji located in Suva, and hosted by the British High Commissioner himself, His Excellency Dr. Brian James Jones, was a success where about FJ\$1 million of pledges and commitments have been made towards the CWMH infrastructure works.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Savusavu Hospital, it was good to hear from the Sub-Divisional Medical Officer, Dr. Talei Jioji, upon our visit. The Savusavu community have rallied around her to assist with the much-needed infrastructural upgrade work for the Hospital.

The Ministry wishes to acknowledge Mr. Graham Haynes, the community workers of Nawi Island, volunteers, business organisations, non-government organisations and residents of Savusavu here and abroad, who have pledged donations in cash and kind worth \$49,000 towards the much-needed minor repair works and maintenance works for the Hospital.

The donations are currently being put to good use as minor works carried out at the Hospital will include:

1. patching of the roof;
2. replacement of fly screen;
3. water blasting, wiping and painting of the exterior and interior walls and ceiling;
4. replacement of ceiling fans; and
5. refurbishment of the Hospital Notice Board;

The Savusavu community have also assisted in repairing an old power generator at the Hospital that has been restored to full function, and the repair of an old ambulance which once fully functional, will assist to serve the transportation of patients from Tukavesi Health Centre, Natewa Health Centre and Rabi Health Centre.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the Cicia Health Centre in the Lau Group, the Divisional Medical Officer Eastern, Dr. Sravaniya Dasi, worked with the Cicia Health Centre Team to identify and engage local community with carpentry skills to undertake minor infrastructure at the Health Centre with the material bought by the Ministry. The Health Centre was last renovated 41 years ago in 1982 and needed much work in plumbing, repairing of the roof, floor and painting.

With the support of Tarukua villagers and supervised by a single technical person from the Ministry, more than 90 percent of the total labour cost was saved through this Health Centre-community partnership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the examples of CWMH, Savusavu Hospital and Cicia Health Centre are impressive and heartwarming. There are more examples, but time is not on my side. However, I am most certain that with more collaboration and teamwork, many more great things can be achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very pleased to inform Parliament today that our communities throughout the country have responded in a heartwarming way, showcasing their love and pride for their local health facilities and the resident healthcare workers.

Within 10 days of delivering my Maiden Speech, more than 1,000 people from Suva as well as other parts of the country, converged at the soon-to-be 100-year-old CWMH for its first Clean-Up Campaign for the year. People from all walks of life joined hands to clean up the ageing Hospital infrastructure and gave their time and effort for a worthy cause.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was attending a Ministerial Forum abroad at the time but managed to catch a glimpse of the event on the Ministry's social media platforms, and I must say I was emotional and at the same time, overwhelmed with pride. Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I was physically away, my heart and soul yearned to be part of the Clean-Up Campaign back here at home.

I am also informed that the initiative has since snowballed into other hospitals and divisions around the country where community members have stepped forward and assisted in the clean-up and beautification of their local health facilities.

The late 13 year old American poet, Mattie Stepanek once said, and I quote:

“Unity is strength when there is teamwork and collaboration. Wonderful things can be achieved.”

This quote best depicts what transpired at the CWMH Clean-Up Campaign, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as well as the effort exhibited in other healthcare facilities around the country from the main hospitals and right down to the rural nursing stations.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the villagers, community leaders, *Mata ni Tikina*, *Turaga ni Koro*, local businesses, community groups, civil society organisations, religious organisations and our bilateral and multi-lateral partners, who have supported us and will continue to support us as we move ahead in this endeavour.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both, improved infrastructure and well supported healthcare professionals have a significant impact on the quality of care, the morale of staff but also on health seeking behaviour of all Fijians. If people's confidence in the Fiji's healthcare system and in their local health facility is high, they are more likely to seek healthcare earlier which can lead to earlier treatment, recovery and care and increased productivity in our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, community engagement and partnership is one way we hope to remove the fear of hospitals and improve health seeking behaviour for our people. That is why we are encouraging and engaging members of the community to take ownership of maintaining their health facilities. It is a win-win scenario and promotes the Ministry's vision for a healthy population in Fiji, supported by the Ministry's effort to empower Fijians to achieve optimal health and well-being through the delivery of cost-effective, quality and inclusive health services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to touch on human resource for the Ministry of Health. One of the Ministry's greatest challenge it is facing now is maintaining its human resource at an optimal level for the service we provide. The attrition rate for healthcare workers have been abnormally high over the 12 to 24 months and facilitated by many pull and push factors that include, emigration, the search for greener pastures, education, family welfare, higher salaries and aggressive recruitment techniques by overseas recruitment agencies and local private hospitals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 12 months, the Ministry has lost some 800 nurses from its workforce which includes, nurses who have moved to the Aspen Hospitals in Lautoka and Ba. The loss is reflective of similar losses noted in other healthcare cadre such as doctors, pharmacists, laboratory technicians, medical imaging technologists and others. These losses impact our ability to deliver quality services, and also increases the burden of those who remain with the Ministry.

This, however, is a global phenomenon that is currently experienced all over the world. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, earlier this week, the United Kingdom (UK) placed Zimbabwe in a group of eight countries in the world that the UK is banned from recruiting health and social workers from, to

safeguard the country's health system. This ban followed the World Health Organization's Health Workforce Support and Safeguards List 2023, which highlights countries with dangerously low number of healthcare workers. This List exists because many countries, including Fiji, are facing this human resource predicament of healthcare worker attrition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address this, the Ministry has been working hard in recruiting healthcare workers through the following:

- For nurses, through our Open Merit Recruitment System (OMRS), a total total of 206 nurses were recruited in November 2022 (2022-2023 financial year). A further 18 nurses have been recruited after November 2022, and a further 162 registered nurses are expected to be recruited in May this year, followed by another cohort of 44 registered nurses in November, bringing the total number of registered nurses to be recruited to 206 in 2023 (412 registered nurses in the current Budget year). Furthermore, 237 nurse graduates will be recruited as Inter Nurses in June this year.

The Ministry will establish 50 new Nursing Assistants and 50 new Nursing Aide positions and will be advertised shortly for recruitment to support other nursing teams at our hospitals and healthcare facilities.

- For Doctors, a total of 150 Medical Interns were recruited in January of this year, while 80 Medical Officers have been recruited as of today, with the remaining to be recruited as soon as they complete their internship.
- For Oral Health Practitioners, a total of 205 Oral Health Practitioners with another 25 to be recruited before the end of 2022-2023 financial year which will bring the total to 230.
- For Allied Health workers such as Dietitians, Physiotherapists, Pharmacists, Medical Imaging Technologists, Laboratory Assistants and Environmental Health Officers and Biomedical Technicians, 558 of the 717 positions have been filled through an ongoing recruitment process and 87 more posts are processed to be filled during this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, in addition to our recruitment efforts in recognition that we are losing experienced personnel, the Ministry has also pursued capacity building for its workforce with the support of the central agencies of Government and supplemented by our development partners.

The in-service training budget of \$776,476 for Medical Officers have ensured that our doctors are upskilled and updated in knowledge, skills and competencies, while attaining post-graduate qualification.

For the 2023 academic year, the Australian Government Pacific Scholarship for Midwifery sponsored 20 registered nurses and the Ministry of Health sponsored an additional 20 registered nurses through its in-service training budget. As such, a total of 40 registered nurses are expected to graduate as Midwives at the end of 2023 academic year, and they will be formally recruited in 2024. This is in addition to the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade sponsoring 249 registered nurses in the years 2019 to 2022 for the Post-Graduate Diploma in Midwifery offered by the Fiji National University (FNU) in Suva and TISI Sangam Institute of Nursing in Labasa.

The Ministry also negotiated with the World Bank who sponsored 10 registered nurses to pursue their Post-Graduate Certificate in Mental Health offered by the FNU for the 2022 academic year. An additional 10 nurses are anticipated to be sponsored in 2023. Similarly, the Fred Hollows Foundation is sponsoring two nurses for the Post-Graduate Diploma in Eye Care at the Pacific Eye

Institute, in addition to the 44 registered nurses who have been sponsored by the Foundation from 2006 to 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges the challenging financial situation that the nation is in and will continue to work with the Central Government agencies to advocate for the appropriate remuneration of its healthcare workers for the sterling work that is carried out in all our health facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has worked hard to improve its ability to effectively engage with its health development partners. The Ministry is establishing development partners coordination to make use of the opportunities provided by the development partners for the delivery of quality health services and the upkeep of health infrastructure.

The Ministry has so far held two donor partner coordination meetings attended by a number of important health partners, such as the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, JICA, KOICA, World Bank and UN Offices representatives, to name a few. These meetings have been positive and have provided the platform for the Ministry to share its plans and visions for health and Fiji and solicit the support of the health partners towards these programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, as alluded to earlier, today marks my 100 days as the Minister for Health and Medical Services. A lot have been achieved and a lot more needs to be done.

I wish to acknowledge the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, who despite the many obstacles before them, continue to work hard and remain passionate and committed to their work towards the vision of a healthy population in Fiji. I wish you all a blessed Easter. *Vina'a vakalevu* and thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak in response to the Statement.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give a response to the Ministerial Statement given by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services. We were waiting to hear the new policy that would have come out in the first 100 days.

We are happy to learn from the honourable Minister about the improvement of the outlook of the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH). Let us not forget that health services are just like water issues, influx of population, and the influx of people in Suva demand more services by the health sector as well. So, we thank the honourable Minister for engaging with stakeholders and the business community, the re-appointment of the Board of Visitors (BOV) while looking after several health facilities in the country.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have heard about the 'No Jab No Job' Policy that was repealed by the Coalition Government. I was hoping to hear how many joined the Ministry of Health after the repeal of that Policy.

We know for the fact and also alluded to by the honourable Minister the mass resignation of nurses and other allied healthcare workers living our shores going to greener pastures. Less than one month ago, we heard from the President of the Fiji Nurses Association, Dr. Alisi Vudiniabola, taking a swipe at the Permanent Secretary for Health. She said, "Stop behaving as if everything is fine."

We have heard that the Intern Nurses will try to fill the vacuum, however, we must not forget that these Intern Nurses were trained through online platform during COVID-19, and they do lack competency in clinical skills. That is the challenge the Ministry is facing right now. Not only that, but they are also new in the profession, and they need a lot of mentorship.

With the FijiFirst Government after the Job Evaluation Exercise of 2018, nurses were given a huge pay rise from 50 percent to 75 percent, and that saw the influx of nurses as well as doctors and dentists who are in the private sector to come back to the public sector, because of the incentives that were provided by the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we heard this morning that there are graduates coming out from Post-Graduate training for nurses and doctors and that was the initiative put up by the FijiFirst Government.

I know that the status of the health facilities is not in so good conditions. I used to watch from home the debate in this Parliament and I used to hear the honourable Member who was sitting here in the last term of Parliament always saying, 'no money, no money.' I was a bit worried when the People's Coalition went into Government, I thought there is just really no money in the kitty, and I have not heard that in the last 100 days.

Hospitals need medicine and tenders for consumables are on hold at the moment. This week, we are hearing about COVID-19 vaccines but at the moment, vaccines for five years to 11 year olds are also out of stock.

Pharmacies who are participating in the Private-Public Partnership programme, most of them still do not come on board to take the 100 percent of this good initiative helping all Fijians. It is interesting to see that there are no more contracts for staff who are recruited, and we want to know from the Government the recruitment guideline that is used in the public service and how staff will progress on their salary band.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement and we wish him well in the coming days, months and years. We thank and urge the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and staff to stand firm and be strong as resilient Fijians.

REVIEW REPORT ON THE AUDITOR-GENERAL'S COMPLIANCE AUDITS RELATING TO COVID-19 RESPONSE

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review of the Auditor-General's Report on Compliance Audits Relating to COVID-19 Response, which was tabled on 31st August, 2022.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I, as the Chairperson of the Standing on Public Accounts who moved this motion, take this opportunity to speak on the motion to debate the Review Report of the Auditor-General's Compliance Audits Relating to COVID-19 Response.

This Review Report was prepared and tabled in this august Parliament by the previous Public Accounts Committee and contained report on five major areas, which I will explain later on, while

one report will be tabled for debate in tomorrow's session. I wish to thank the former Chairperson and honourable Members of the previous Public Accounts Committee on its detailed Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Government announced various measures to counter its impact and to stimulate growth in the economy. A budget of \$100 million was committed by the then Government for COVID-19 responses, as announced and presented in the COVID-19 Response Budget by the then honourable Minister for Economy in Parliament for the year end 31st July, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the primary objective of the five compliance audits that I am going to discuss today were carried out by the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG), were mainly to assess specific controlled procedures implemented by responsible Government Ministries and Departments on their different COVID-19 response programmes. Audits were carried out to assess compliance to the controls and processes for each programme.

Sir, the Committee reviewed and consulted the responsible agencies on the issue identified in the following five Compliance Audits. They are the:

1. Implementation of COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan which was looked after by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.
2. Facilitation of the Procurement of Bio-Medical Equipment and Quarantine Accommodation and Stock Management for COVID-19, which was managed by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.
3. Management of COVID-19 Aid, which was administered by the Ministry of Economy or now Ministry of Finance.
4. Administration and facilitation of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Credit Guarantee Scheme, which was handled by the Reserve Bank of Fiji.
5. Management of Agricultural Assistance Farms Response Package, Home Gardening Seed Packages and Improvement or Farm Genetic, which was coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief on the Committee's findings. On the Implementation of COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan that was carried out by the previous Administration, significant findings were identified and highlighted and they are:

- The Fiji COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan was not submitted for Cabinet endorsement;
- Detailed breakdown of budget approved was not provided against which actual expenditure could be compared;
- Expenditure was incurred mostly for operational purposes such as overtime; and
- Expenditure was not recorded using a reporting framework that enhances the monitoring and evaluation of the plan.

On the Procurement of Bio-Medical Equipment and Quarantine Accommodation and Stock Management for COVID-19, the Committee noted from the Audit findings the following governance issues with Ministry of Health and Medical Services:

- Absence of approved Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to guide the COVID-19 response;
- Absence of a reconciliation process between flight manifests and the Quarantine Accommodation listing; and

- Lack of documentary trail between stock card and evidence of items received.

The audit review of the procurement of Bio-Medical Equipment noted that all processes and procedures were followed in accordance with the Fiji Procurement Regulation 2010 and the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Finance Manual. However, Sir, as at 31st July 2022, it was noted that all the procured bio-medical equipment were yet to be received by the Ministry. The Ministry can update Parliament on the purchase done and where those Bio-Medical Equipment are.

Overall, the Committee was informed that the Incident Management Team has done really well in terms of procurement of goods and services, given the unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic. However, there are opportunities for improvement to enhance accountability of funds allocated and donations received.

On the Management of COVID-19 Aid, the Committee was informed that the OAG is determined that there was general compliance for aid funds with international agreements, except for the conditions by DFAT that National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) to be also allocated funds for COVID-19 responses, but this was not actioned. Documented and updated policies and procedures for management of all forms of aid will further improve accountability, monitoring and reporting of external assistance received.

On Small and Medium Enterprises Credit Guarantee Scheme (SMECGS) with the Reserve Bank of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to highlight the significant findings identified during the audit, it was noted that:

- Majority of the loans that had been registered since the inception of the Scheme were not eligible to be covered and, therefore, have not complied with all the requirements of SMECGS Guidelines 2016.
- A claim of guarantee of \$36,066.57 was approved and paid to the LCI 1 on 23rd July, 2018, even though the effective interest rate of loan was 14.13 percent, exceeding the interest rate threshold of 10 percent. The payment represents 14 percent of the total approved claims payout made since the inception of the Scheme in 2012.
- The average annual turnover of some of the businesses whose loans were registered for cover under the Scheme since its inception in 2012, had exceeded the \$500,000 threshold, hence they did not comply with the SMC GS Guidelines.
- A total of 1,223 active loans valued at \$67.5 million that had been registered for guarantee cover from prior years were de-registered in June to July 2020 as the effective interest rate was above the 10 percent threshold. These loans related to LCI 1 and LCI 2 that were reporting the flat rate to the RBF instead of the effective interest rate charged which was higher than the interest rate threshold set for the Scheme, hence were deregistered from the Scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee was informed that the major cause for the deficiencies identified from the audit above were due to the absence of detailed review and verification process from the Reserve Bank of Fiji as it has relied heavily on the lending institutions for the correct submission of the data and information. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is worth noting that the RBF has taken stringent actions against institutions that provided incorrect information to the Bank.

Lastly, on the Management of Agricultural Assistance Farm Response Package, Home Gardening Seed Packages and Improvement of Farm Genetic Attributes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for the administration and delivery of the COVID-19 agricultural assistance to farmers and individuals meeting the eligibility criteria for those gardening, farm support and large commercial farming.

Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture was allocated \$1 million to bolster Fiji's food security in the 2019-2020 COVID-19 Response Budget.

The Home Gardening and Farm Support Assistance constitute as one of the three initiatives undertaken to assist in maintaining food security. The objectives of the home gardening initiative were to assist the people who were affected by COVID-19 in urban and peri-urban areas through the provision of home gardening and farm support seed and seedling packages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee was informed that the Home Gardening and Farm Support Assistance noted that there was no SOPs nor plan developed by the Ministry to guide the overall procurement, assessment and distribution of home gardening and farm support seed and seedling packages.

It was noted that the absence of proper planning was evident as the Ministry had not performed any prior assessment to ascertain the divisions and areas that needed assistance for immediate relief from the impact of COVID-19.

The audit recorded that there was a short delivery of seeds, weak controls over the management of seedlings and farming equipment and engagement of unauthorized vendors for the supply of seedlings and farming materials were also noted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic the Committee recommended that:

1. That there is a need to have a proper dissemination of information within Ministries and Departments on a regular and timely basis on the implementation of new policies, especially on urgent programmes such as these.
2. Standard Operation Procedure (SOPs) developed by different Ministries and Departments during the pandemic period should be fine-tuned and used as a reference, should there be any other similar situation or disaster arising in the future. In fact, we should have one for normal and one for urgent programmes, such as COVID-19.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee commended the COVID-19 responses provided by the Government during that difficult time. However, for accountability and transparency purposes of public funds, the Public Accounts Committee will always examine all Government programmes and expenditures to ensure that it complies with all relevant policies and procedures, and legislations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, as a Member moving the motion, I thank you for this opportunity. Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there are six speakers that have been identified both by their Whips on both sides and the batting is as follows:

1. Honourable A.A. Maharaj;
2. Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services;

3. Honourable P. Ravunawa;
4. Honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways;
5. Honourable M.D. Bultavu; and
6. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications.

Before I offer the floor, honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch. We will resume at 2.30 p.m. and I wish to remind you, honourable Members, that the photo shoot is now going to be taken on the front steps of Parliament and staff will be there to assist you in taking your seats. Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.23 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.40 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think it would be remiss of me, honourable Members, not to mention a few more faces in the gallery - the former Minister, Asenaca Caucau, all the way from United States and other members who are listening now to our sitting. I think I have ran through the list of speakers and now we will offer the first batting to the honourable Maharaj.

HON. A. A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I stand to give my contribution to the Motion on the Compliance Audit relating to COVID-19 Responses that was conducted by the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG). Basically, the five compliance audits on this particular Report that is being debated in this Chamber's today are the.

1. Implementation of COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan;
2. Procurement of Bio-Medical Equipment and Quarantine Accommodation and Stock Management for COVID-19;
3. Management of COVID-19 Aid;
4. Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise Credit Guarantee Scheme; and
5. Management of Agricultural Assistance Farm Response Package, Home Gardening Seed Packages and Improvement of Farm Genetics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the compliance audit relating to COVID-19 Response focuses on specific control procedures, implemented on the different COVID-9 Response Programmes. The mentioned five Audit Reports were thoroughly scrutinised by the Committee in consultation with the relevant Ministries and Departments, and relevant stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, I will actually discuss the Report in detail but before I do that, it is important to note and I urge honourable Members of this Parliament to note that as per the Public Accounts Committee back then, we figured out that this was a premature audit that was conducted by the OAG. I will give certain examples, after which we had thorough discussions with the OAG and they also agreed to the fact that that was premature.

What is actually required by the OAG is to carry out a follow-up Audit Report so that we can get indepth findings of how the Government responded through these eight Programmes, five to be debated today and three to be debated tomorrow, and how the Government responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Mr. Speaker.

As I have said, at the height of the COVID-19 we were caught by surprise, not just Fiji, but the whole world, and what we went through no one had seen or experienced in the past. The COVID-19 Pandemic caught everyone by surprise.

So, on the one side, while the whole of Government approach was to curb the outbreak of COVID-19 in Fiji, on the other side we heard the OAG carrying out an audit at the same time while the Government was trying to respond to the plea of the Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, having said that, we all know and understand that we never had a pandemic like COVID-19 and as I have said before, the audit was conducted. There were certain things, for example, when we carry out any scrutiny, we actually see the recommendation that is provided by the OAG. In this audit, one thing that we figured out from almost to all eight programmes that were audited by them, they were basically talking about SOPs.

Now, if they are recommending about SOPs and as I illustrated earlier on, Mr. Speaker, we had never seen a pandemic of this magnitude. Government was caught off guard, so what was more

important at that point in time for the Government, to respond to the plea of the people or to prepare SOPs? That was a question that we needed to ask at that point in time.

One of the recommendations by the OAG was that the policies that were made by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services as the powers were vested on the Permanent Secretary through the Public Order Act at that point in time, did not have Cabinet endorsement. But what they failed to realise was that at 10.00 a.m. everyday, the former Prime Minister with all his Ministers were actually having Cabinet Meeting at the Ministry of Health and Medical Services whereby confirmed statistics were given as to what has transpired within the last 24 hours.

Having considered all those and when we actually went and further scrutinised the report, we realised and this was confirmed by Ministry of Economy, that Fiji received more than \$450 million in Aid in total towards combating COVID-19 in Fiji. But when the audit was carried out, only \$23 million was actually given to the Government.

Mr. Speaker, the question we then asked as Public Accounts Committee was to either go along with the audit that only audited an amount of \$23 million, or we needed to carry out another audit that would actually cover more than \$450 million that came as Aid to the Fijian Government. Most of them came as a direct support to the Budget itself.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, we had a thorough discussion with the OAG and we actually agreed to the fact that there needs to be a follow-up audit conducted at a later stage and I believe at that point in time, the OAG was gearing up to conduct that particular follow-up audit with relevant agencies and Ministries.

Mr. Speaker, on the Implementation of COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan, the audit was undertaken to obtain sufficient appropriate evidence to form a conclusion on whether the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, through their Incident Management Team, had implemented response actions in accordance with Fiji's COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan for Levels 1 and 2.

The Ministry of Health and Medical Services through responsible lead, has generally implemented appropriate response action in accordance with the Fiji's COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. Implementation of the Response Action has enabled the State of Preparedness for addressing the occurrence of COVID-19 in Fiji. In light of the identified findings of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, it has taken into consideration the lessons learnt and improvements.

Mr. Speaker, as alluded by the current Chairman, the communication that used to go from Ministry of Health to other agencies at that point in time was very critical. This is something that was picked up by the OAG and Public Accounts Committee concurred with that recommendation that there needs to be smooth flow of information from one agency to the other.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry was further planning on stimulation exercise and had conducted refresher training on communication and advocacy, to maintain a high degree of awareness in responding to COVID-19.

On the Procurement of Bio-Medical Equipment, Quarantine, Accommodation and Stock Management of COVID-19, the result of the Audit had indicated that the Ministry of Health and Medical Services has a number of policies and procedures that were still in draft phase. The audit review of the procurement of biomedical equipment noted that all processes and procedures were followed in accordance with the Fiji Procurement Regulation 2010.

On the Management of COVID-19 Aid, Mr. Speaker, the primary objective of the audit on this was to obtain sufficient and appropriate evidence to form a conclusion on whether the process and control that existed were effective to manage the COVID-19 aid.

It was highlighted that the management of COVID-19 aid was generally being administrated well with areas of improvements, such as updating of the SOPs in consultation with other stakeholders to capture additional operational matters and the Ministry of Economy is in the process of developing a tool that will capture aid-in-kind at whole of the Government level as a strategy to increase accountability of Government Ministries and to ensure duplicity of projects and resource allocation is well utilised across Government.

Mr. Speaker, on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Credit Guaranteed Scheme (MSMECGS), the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted all businesses, especially the MSMEs. The Scheme was established in 2012 with an aim of expanding lending to MSMEs and support the Government initiative to promote MSMEs development, investment and local business activities.

The Fijian Government had allocated funding through its COVID-19 Response Budget with the view that the Scheme encourages private sector lending to MSMEs. Government had allocated an additional \$5 million to assist MSMEs affected by the pandemic, raising the total amount allocated to \$9 million. The major highlights identified that the MSMEs Scheme had been expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic to include micro enterprises administered by the Reserve Bank of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in April 2020, the Scheme was enhanced where the Government raised its guarantee to 60 percent of the principle outstanding on default MSMEs loans up to a limit of \$60,000 per business from 50 percent or \$50,000 previously.

It is important to note what the OAG has picked up as an issue and made recommendations that are not practical, as the RBF will only be duplicating the process of commercial banks and this will only increase bureaucracy. The reason why we are saying this, Mr. Speaker, is that the RBF gives money to commercial banks. Now, commercial banks have their own criteria before they actually give out loans to a recipient and in ensuring that the recipient is in a position to pay back the loan.

The recommendation of the OAG was that they needed the same process to be carried out by RBF, which to the Public Accounts Committee at that point in time did not make sense because they were not the ones who were handing out the money to the recipients. It was going through the commercial banks and these banks have their own checks and balances in place before the money is handed out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, even though it was a recommendation, the RBF strengthened its procedures and added checklist that reflects the updated guideline. The RBF also revived its reporting template effective from 1st June, 2020 and the annual turnover is now the requirement under the new MSMECGS reporting template in line with the revised definition of MSMEs. The RBF had issued the reporting template to financial institutions to submit turnover data of their respective registered MSME loans.

With respect to no. 2, Mr. Speaker, again, the OAG failed to realise that if a company started its operation in 2012, for example, company x, and had a turnover of \$50,000. At that point in time in 2012, they were within the criteria to get the loan but after eight or 10 years when the OAG conducted this particular audit, definitely, the turnover of that company x would have grown to an amount, for example, \$100,000.

We cannot actually compare the audit recommendation of 2020 to what was that company earning or what the total turnover of that company was in 2012. Looking at the turnover of that company in 2020, the Office of the Auditor-General actually recommended that these companies do not fall under the criteria to access this loan under the concession scheme. That was the issue there.

Mr. Speaker, on the Agriculture Assistance Farm Package, again, there were lockdowns and people were not allowed to move. One of the biggest hindrance in terms of food security was that people were not able to bring their produce either from Korovou or Sigatoka to Suva and that was during the lockdown. So, the Ministry for Agriculture decided to give seedlings to encourage people because they were staying home during lockdown to do backyard gardening.

What some people failed to realise was that this initiative was for backyard gardening and not large-scale farming. When they were handed a handful of seedlings, some of the commercial farmers said that that was not enough. So that was because assistance in the form of seedling was given only for backyard gardening. That was the misunderstanding that led to people complaining that they were not receiving enough seedlings, thinking that the Government at that point in time was distributing seedlings for farming purposes, but it was designed for backyard gardening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to bring to the attention of Parliament and thank the two Permanent Secretaries and their team, the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Health, Dr. James Fong, and the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Economy then, Mr. Shiri Gounder. These two gentlemen with their team, spent most of the time in their office during COVID-19. I can say that Dr. Fong never visited his family. He was mostly sleeping on the floor of his office, and that was to safeguard his family and to put the safety of Fijians first. Also, that was the case with Mr. Shiri Gounder and his team at the Ministry of Economy at that time. They were down with COVID-19, tested positive, and yet for the love of the country and for the security of the people, they did what any good civil servant would have done. So, hats off to those Permanent Secretaries and their team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I commend this Report and I support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- I am surprised to hear that a premature audit was done by the Office of the Auditor-General. It is quite interesting and confusing as well.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion for debate this afternoon and, that is, on the Review of the Attorney-General's Report on Compliance Audits Relating to COVID-19 Response. Before that, I would like to thank the previous PAC Committee for scrutinising the Report, deliberating on the Report and tabling it back to Parliament and I also thank the new Committee as well for tabling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to be brief and keep my comments on the three programmes that came under review this year on the Auditor-General's Report, the:

1. Implementation of COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan;
2. Procurement of Bio-Medical Equipment and Quarantine Accommodation and Stock Management for COVID-19; and
3. Management of COVID-19 Aid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 outbreak was an unprecedented event that tested all our existing processes. We note the OAG's recommendations in the following years and update on our response to date. Firstly, there has been ongoing discussions with NDMO in facilitating a collaborative framework through the National Emergency Response Team Mechanism, to ensure there is interoperability between agencies to enhance disaster response.

Secondly, the facilitation of the simulation exercises and facilitating better communication and advocacy. Capability as an ongoing exercise with development partners and is a key part of level 2 of the preparedness and action plan. The key focus is on maintaining high level of readiness within the Ministry and nationally.

As alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition earlier on in terms of our preparedness, preparedness, as I had mentioned, started with a programme that the previous Government had initiated and their terms of preparedness in terms of what the Ministry of Health is doing - in terms of our preparedness for any overseen or any pandemic in the future or any national disaster that is continuous and we are trying to strengthen that as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned in the Report, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Emergency Response Team (ERT) has developed an expenditure matrix with 10 key objectives, and this is being used to manage current COVID-19 funds. We will maintain and refine this framework with NDMO through an ERT to ensure better resilience.

We note in the Report that there was no Cabinet endorsement but as mentioned by the former PAC Chairperson that at that time, there was a need for work done first and endorsement maybe to come in later. But I am proud to say that a Cabinet paper is being prepared to endorse our Border Health Protection Unit, so as to better coordinate quarantine processes, including its financial management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all equipment projected for COVID-19 Response were received and payments remitted to the awarded vendors. There is equipment such as ventilators, bedside monitoring equipment, air hose, hospital beds, thermal scanners, bio-safety cabinets, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the management of the pharmaceutical stocks is currently being strengthened. The implementation of the mSupply system that was installed in the first quarter of 2021-2022 financial year.

All donations received dispatched are managed through the Standard Operating Procedure, driven through this new warehouse information management system. Sir, mSupply is a warehouse information and management system that covers end to end processes from procurement right down to distribution.

With those few words Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you honourable Minister for Health. Now, I give the floor to the honourable Ravunawa and before I do so, honourable Members, just a quick intervention, there is a slight reshuffle in the list. After honourable Ravunawa, we will then have the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance before honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways continues after that, and then it will be honourable Bulitavu followed by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communiations.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Committee for the presentation of this motion for debate this afternoon.

COVID-19 pandemic has a devastating impact on our national economy. The review that was carried out by the Committee highlighted the audit issues that were identified within the Management of Unemployment Benefits and Management of Concessional Loan Package to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pandemic is not a word to use lightly or carelessly. It is a word that if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, unjustified acceptance that the fear is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death. Describing the situation as a pandemic does not change WHO assessment and the threat that poses with this virus. It does not change what WHO is doing, it does not change what countries should do.

We have never before seen a pandemic sparked by coronavirus and this is the first pandemic that was caused by this virus. We have never before seen a pandemic that can be controlled. At the same time WHO has been in a full response mode since we were notified on the first case. They called everyday for countries to take urgent and aggressive actions, and the Director-General of WHO mentioned that we have rung the alarm loud and clear.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has never walked this road before and the motion before Parliament, the Concessional Loan Package that was provided to eligible MSME businesses with a five-year repayment plan, including one year grace period with no principle or interest payment. The loan repayment was to commence from the second year with a flexibility of a single annual repayment and even with payments spread over the years with interest calculations, will be based on a simple interest method.

Fiji was one of the worst affected countries with a cumulative decline of almost 21 percent of our GDP - the largest ever economic contraction of 17.2 percent in 2020, with a further 4.1 percent contraction in 2021. We lost a total of \$4.6 billion in GDP over the last two years.

We lost around \$4 billion in foreign exchange from tourism earnings due to the impact of Coronavirus pandemic. Government tax collection also declined by 50 percent on average, it has lost a total of around \$2.8 billion in tax revenue.

Over the 100,000 Fijians were either unemployed or have reduced hours of work. Socio-economic conditions become challenging, and the Government have to step in to assist in the situation. Government ensured macro-economic stability during the crisis, critical to maintain the confidence and for economic rebuilding. Exchange rate stability, first major crisis without the devaluation, unlike in the past we enter the crisis with a strong foreign reserve position supported by external government borrowing.

Fiscal stability despite the 50 percent decline in our tax revenue Mr. Speaker, Sir, we managed to sustain public spending, including the \$500 million livelihood support by the Government. Investment received, budget support, grants and increased concessional borrowing. Financial sector stability, financial sector remained sound with adequate capital and liquidity.

Government introduced various measures to support businesses, rebuild the competitiveness of the tourism industry and also enticed new investment. At the same point, ECAL has been removed with the departure tax reduced from \$200 to \$100. Removal of stamp duties and 6 percent STT import tariff reduction across the board and removal of business licences. Businesses were provided relief through deferment of tax payment, reduction in the FPNF contribution from the normal 18 percent to 10 percent and loan repayment holidays' concessional loans to MSMEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 Recovery Guarantee Scheme of \$200 million for working capital support, zero rated VAT on 21 essential items to reduce the inflation prices on our local consumers. Income support of over \$500 million assisted those unemployed and in reduced hours, provided much needed physical stimulus for business activity and help increase our vaccination rate. This was on top of all other expenditures to ensure that there is no major disruption to our normal public services.

Government had to increase its borrowing to sustain the economy. Economic decline and the socio-economic consequences would have been much more severe, Sir, including a large devaluation if we did not take this concessional loan.

Almost every country increased its borrowing, Mr. Speaker. The levels of sustainability and mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic and Fiji is not isolated. There are gaps identified in the two Audit reports in which the relevant Ministries involved are taking necessary measures to address issues that are put in place, including the SOPs and guidelines for further use of such initiative. This experience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this review can be used as a learning curve for the whole of Government and the respective stakeholders as our way forward.

I also wish to extend my appreciation to the honourable Members of the Committee who are part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan Report.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just be very brief. I think a lot of detail was covered by honourable Maharaj and the Chairperson of the Committee.

Just on the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and policies to govern the management of Aid, it is very important. The International Co-operation Unit of the Ministry of Finance is currently reviewing the SOPs and policies for Aid management.

I think it is very important. The Unit, Sir, is responsible for providing financial advisory and policy support to the whole of Government in the management of cash grants, either budgeted or unbudgeted, or any *ad hoc* kind of support by any agency and aid-in-kind so that we ensure that release of such cash grants from development partners are in accordance with the Financial Management Act, Financial Instructions, Procurement Regulations and the Finance Manual of the Ministry's Unit.

Obviously, circulars to Government Ministries and Departments and checklist for release of *ad hoc* donor funds, so I just wanted to say that to the discussion already which I know dealt with those five different programmes during COVID-19. I will reserve my comment on the seed distribution for another time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the motion before Parliament. Let me begin by stating that my response is solely on the clarification of issues with regards to the Ministry of Agriculture. The first issue raised in the Report is the absence of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Plans on Home Gardening and Farm Support Assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that honourable Members of this august Parliament understand that the nature of intervention required during the period of the pandemic was a bit abnormal, given the uncertainties and the huge expectation from the general public for food and nutrition security. But I am glad to say that the Ministry rolled out the Home Garden and Farm Support initiatives and was concurrently developing the policies and SOPs at the same time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Backyard Home Gardening Policy was signed by the Minister for Agriculture on 21st August, 2019. The Policy highlights the process of implementation which is the SOP for the Programme that is currently in use.

On the short delivery of seedlings, the Ministry acknowledges the shortfall as stated in the Audit Report. However, we must understand that we are dealing with biological processes. Despite having the best of the seedling raising facility, you would always have challenges achieving 100 percent germination and survival till the hardening process. As such, we want to assure Parliament

that all seedling suppliers honoured their contracts.

On the weed control over the management of planting materials and seedlings, Mr. Speaker, Sir, production of seedlings and planting materials is not as simple as it may seem. If we are to depend on the natural processes, *dalo* suckers can be harvested nine months after the mother sucker is planted. The shelf life of the *dalo* suckers is between three to four days and as such, it needs to be delivered and planted without delay. Therefore, seedling production and harvesting must synchronise with land preparation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, delivery had to be made at multiple sites and to a centralised facility and it takes time to collate multiple deliveries simultaneously. And we note the concerns by the Audit team and assure the Parliament that all tally cards have been updated.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now turn to the opportunities that have been presented as a learning or a takeaway from this exercise. The Ministry of Agriculture does not have a nursery facility that can facilitate the production of seedlings of the magnitude that was required. However, there had been talks with the British American Tobacco Company during the time when the honourable Leader of the Opposition was the Minister, to make use of the tobacco seedling production facility for the production of vegetables seedlings during the tobacco offseason. The Ministry of Agriculture is already on to that initiative as we speak.

There were also other developments that could have contributed to the efficiency of the whole process. In terms of our tissue culture facility, there is only one functioning tissue culture facility which produces seedlings from tissue culture, and it belongs to the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Apart from that, there is another private facility that is located in Wainibuku, but it also does not have the capacity to meet the demands as in this exercise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of concerns on supplies, I want to assure this august Parliament that a proper market survey under the Ministry of Agriculture Procurement policy was conducted and price was the only factor that was considered for vendor selection. Variety, quantity, quality, vendor reputation, as well as other value-added services were the other factors considered.

On the vetting and assessment of Home Gardening and Farm Support Application, the Ministry acknowledges the finding of the Audit Report. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it should be noted, again, that these were abnormal times and movement was restricted. So, we had to rely on remote verifications either by phone or email, as well as that from our own Ministry of Agriculture records as information on the recipients.

Post COVID-19, I want to bring the attention of honourable Members of this august Parliament that the Ministry has a Monitoring and Evaluation and the Risk and Governance Unit that regularly checks the policies and procedures across the Ministry to ensure compliance. I think I had already alluded to this in one of my earlier speeches. All Audit findings were revisited, and appropriate measures were put in place.

The Ministry of Agriculture has now established a database of potential suppliers and we are also building the capacity of the Research Division in the production of planting materials. In extreme cases, the Ministry will work with Biosecurity Authority of Fiji for the acquiring of seeds from restricted parts of Fiji due to the risk of diseases.

Before I finish, Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to thank the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Agriculture for their efforts in carrying this assistance through. I have been told that they ran an operation called Green Link, which involved the traffic of farm produce at their checkpoints

and for that I must salute them.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity and I rise to give my short contribution on the Motion that is before Parliament. Most of the points have been covered by the former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. I also agree with you, Sir, that if this was a premature Audit, I do not know whether to support or do not support the recommendation that is in the Report. But, again, it is now before Parliament for debate, so we will go along with the recommendations that are there in the Committee's Review Report.

I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services and the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. I think they have done their right approach into Annual Reports and Review Reports, not only appraising the Civil Servants who had worked hard during the crisis, but also the decisions that were made, given that they were in abnormal times, as the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways had put.

Yes, Fiji was in a new norm. We all heard that because of COVID-19, we had to readjust ourselves and things were not done in the usual manner. Again, what has been identified by the Auditors are lessons to learn in preparation for any other pandemic that will be coming our way.

As the honourable Minister for Health had said, it was unprecedented. Nothing of that sort that Fiji had faced but we have gone past that, Sir. Even the COVID-19 Response Budget that came after that, plus the 2021-2022 Budget, has policies that we are already now on our recovery mode in regard to our economy. That goes down, again, to sound leadership and very decisive decisions that was done by the Government at that time that allowed us to sail through the pandemic and from that, building in one as a nation.

We would like to thank everyone. The crisis actually called for our patriotism and also built up that resilient Fijian spirit within us to work together in moving our nation forward during those hard times.

Apart from the various assistance that were there, the Aid, plus the Agriculture Assistance that the honourable Minister for Agriculture has alluded to- the home gardening support, agriculture commercial support, farm support, Abattoir upgrading and all those programmes that assisted many who had lost their job and had to go back to farming to find alternative forms of employment as life moves on, while others were trying to politicise the people being laid off from work. But, again, this kind of crisis calls on the talent that God has placed within us that makes us think hard and also regain other things in our life that directs to our very own purpose that God probably created us for.

The MSME assistance in various villages that assisted many saw the Auditor findings and recommendations but, again, we understand that the RBF probably have made improvements on the things that the Auditors have highlighted that were some of the things that probably could improve the system as we go along.

The other thing that was approved during the COVID-19 was the assistance that was to cushion, called the stimulus package mainly for our citizens. The \$360 assistance to our citizens at that time was labelled as a handout by the Opposition. But this is assistance targeted to people who were really in need at that time. So, we are thankful that the systems in place, such as the M-PAiSA and MyCash are now systems that are also used by the current Minister of in the disbursement of the Back-to-School Assistance. But, again, these are the system that were put in place by the FijiFirst Government that the previous Opposition used to criticise, but they become very useful and very handy now. I hope the honourable Minister for Finance will learn. But these are the things that were

put in place by the FijiFirst Government that the honourable Minister can continue moving on from the good works that has been done by the previous Government.

Rather than talking about the wastage and criticising things that were done at that time, he should follow the responses done by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services and the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, defending the civil servants and the system that was in place, not politicising it, as he usually does.

Those are the few things that I would like to say in my contribution to Parliament on the debate that is before us, and we look forward to the other Audit Report tomorrow on the same issue of COVID-19. I commend the Report that is before Parliament.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I will be brief and will go straight into perhaps, the areas where I think the Government can focus on. Again, I am referring to my previous question to the honourable Minister for Health, how well prepared are we for the next one.

I would like to acknowledge the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways for the actions that the Ministry has undertaken to rectify and improve some of the issues that were raised, likewise to the honourable Minister for Health and, of course, from the Ministry of Finance as well on procurement systems. We are thankful that we are taking positive steps to bring efficiency into the system.

Likewise, I also wish to acknowledge the Office of the Auditor-General because the only positive that we can get out of this is the key lessons that we learn from it and how can we use those learnings in order to prepare us better for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to be proactive rather than reactive. I would admit that initially, we were reacting when we were overwhelmed. Let us not forget the fact that there was a double blow during this period, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the catastrophes that we faced. Right in the middle of COVID-19, we had *TC Harold*, a Category 4 cyclone in April 2020. We were stretched to the limit. I wish to, again, acknowledge all those who contributed, not only from Government, but non-government organisations, civil societies, Fiji Council of Social Services and the list goes on, the Opposition for criticising and ridiculing, FRIENDS, definitely, although they were a proxy NGO to the NFP but, definitely, FRIENDS is a key player in our response.

This is my plea to the Government, honourable Attorney-General, we have some archaic laws. I know that the Disaster Management Act 1998 is currently under review, and we need to bring in Local Government into the machinery of emergency response. That is something lacking in the current Disaster Management Act 1998.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our response when it comes to the laws, was merely based on the Public Health Act 1965, if I remember correctly. There were lots of challenges. We were the ones in that room trying to make things move and happen. The former Commander knows it very well, because of cross cutting issues, the duplication and overlaps that we have, we need to review the Acts because it will simplify things, particularly make things easier in terms of guidance to our operators, particularly, the Permanent Secretaries, who are Chief Accounting officers as well, and then it trickles down to the men and women on the ground who are going to implement the plans that we have.

The other major request that I have on Government is, it is not too late for us to have a national audit of our response. We are thankful to the Office of the Auditor-General. In the Military the honourable Minister for Home Affairs is well aware of the term 'after action review'. It is simply just a debrief. Mr. Speaker, NDMO does that very well and NDMO is where it is today because of

these debriefs. There is nothing to be hidden, but it is about effectiveness and efficiency. We need to always prepare better for the next one.

My experience in NDMO is, a lot of good reports from previous disasters were there but, unfortunately, it is kept on the shelf, and we wait for the next one. That has always been the challenge and when we were in Government, honourable Attorney-General, we changed what we call shifting from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention. That was the major statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that we can be more proactive, look at what were the lessons learnt, what needs to be done, who are the key stakeholders who can help us on this and what are the resources that are needed now.

You see at Black Rock now we have the warehouse, strategically reserved not only for Fiji but for the Region, so I would say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because, again, there was a lot of frustration behind the scene. We have come through it, but there are still major lessons that we can take on so that we can bring efficiency into the system.

My last request, if the honourable Minister for Home Affairs can take the lead in this, we need an overarching National Emergency Response Framework. I will say that again, right now it is time. Based on the lessons learnt from COVID-19, we, as a country, need an overarching National Emergency Response Framework.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Trade always talk about the compartmentalisation, it is difficult when we are protective, we have our own areas, empires we may call it, but I think of the national interest, and the Ministry for Defence then has already undertaken that, but we need to look at it holistically and see if we can bring these together.

Again, we have talked about the 1965 Public Health Act and then a framework that was brought in by WHO. Mr. Speaker, WHO is important, they are a key stakeholder. Ministry of Health is the lead agency and the rest of Government machinery support the Ministry of Health. That is very, very critical and that is why we need this National Emergency Response Framework that will help us in terms of the way forward.

Thank you, once again, to all those who contributed and may I say, I also need to acknowledge the decisive leadership of Government, so no more excuses honourable Deputy Prime Minister and carry on with the work.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured to be the final speaker on this side of Parliament with regard to the motion in front of us.

Perhaps, just by way of context, I quite concur with the honourable Leader of the Opposition that when we see reports, particularly, of global crisis such as COVID-19, the obvious question that comes out of this report is, what do we do next? So, the honourable Leader of the Opposition has alluded to some solutions that we need to look at and I am sure we all agree that we will look at that.

I thought I just take us slightly back in history just to make one pertinent point about what do we do next. In 2018, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the economy was starting to slow down, by that time the other side of Parliament was spending quite excessively. When we got to 2019...

HON. P.K. BALA.- 100 percent lies.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ... the economy was in recession, it had actually taken a downturn, 1.9 percent I think was the number that was quoted by the Reserve Bank of Fiji. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were facing difficulties already and then COVID-19 hit and then it showed up all the issues that had been build up over time as the honourable Minister of Finance said, the wastage that had accumulated over time.

(Laughter)

I know the other side of Parliament Mr. Speaker, Sir, loves to praise themselves saying, "decisive leadership". One thing that they failed to say, for the first time in the history of Fiji, we got budget support.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, \$400 million came into the system, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to help us through the crisis. It was not exactly good financial management, there was a lot of assistance from our partners.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Humanitarian assistance.

(Honourable I.S. Seruiratu interjects)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Let us not get carried away, I am just taking us slightly back in history, just to make a point.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Can I just make a point?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The point I would like to make is this, apart from all the changes of legislations, apart from all the things that we would like to do, I think what this country needs to do is seriously look at some sort of financial buffer. I always go back to the biblical story of Joseph in the *Bible*. Seven years of plenty so when the famine came, they were ready, he was ready. That is where Fiji needs to move.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- *Vinaka*.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We need to look forward and what I am suggesting and I would love to get the views on the other side, Sir, because we need to attack this as a national issue. We seriously need to look at a sovereign wealth fund for the country. I know that at the moment when I look at the budgets of the other side (former government), they were putting aside \$5 million in the budget as an emergency fund and that is essentially what a sovereign wealth fund is. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the difference is, you do not overspend and then put \$5 million into that.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought I just offer that suggestion to Parliament for us to think about because ultimately when the next COVID-19 hits, even with the situation we are in right now, we will all be climbing for coconut trees given what happened around that side of Parliament.

The other thing that I would just like to do, just from my Ministry to add to the findings of the Report. Some of the data that they collected, just in terms of the assistance that was given during COVID-19. We all agree in Parliament, despite our political views that the assistance given to the various sectors was worthy and appropriate.

In terms of the MSME Assistance that I am referring to, it was quite substantial. The funding approved was about \$48 million altogether. A lot of that went to businesses, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and interestingly this is good for the honourable Minister for Women, 54 percent of the recipients were men and 46 percent were women-led businesses.

The assistance that came at that time was quite appropriate, a lot of people had lost their jobs and so this assistance was very welcomed. We acknowledge the work of the Government in actually providing that assistance. I am told that in carrying out that provisioning of that assistance, it was a multi-sectoral approach. We had the Ministry of Finance, the Fiji Institute of Accountants that assisted in terms of assessing of the loans, Women in Business, Fiji Chamber of Commerce, Fiji Commerce & Employers Federation (FCEF), Reserve Bank of Fiji and the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service.

Some of the entities had actually supported the initiatives and I just thought I would share that here and just to place on record the gratitude to those that assisted in giving up their free time in weekends to actually ensure that these loans were processed and that the people that needed loans got loans at the appropriate time.

Also, I would like to acknowledge the people in the Ministry of Trade and Commerce as well like the other Minister said, they actually also had to spend the long hours in the office processing all the business permits and licenses that had to come out during that hard time. Some of them actually resigned after the crisis was over because they were just so exhausted from all the work they had to do at that time. We acknowledge them as well on this side of Parliament and thank them for their service to their country. I think we all agree that it is indeed appreciated in terms of everything that the civil servants of this country did in a very trying time. With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to support the motion before Parliament and thank everyone for their contributions today.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the honourable Chairperson of Public Accounts Committee for his reply.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate this afternoon. From the responses today especially from the ministries concerned, there have been improvements in the internal control and governance and that is a favourable sign for us. However, I wish to comment on the question about the wrong timing of the audit by the Office of the Auditor-General or a need for a further review after the programmes are fully expanded.

I will add here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that this audit is a compliance or a performance audit which is needed to be carried out on this programme. It is necessary, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the process of a programme or a crisis such as this. It will make every stakeholder to be on their toes whether in the beginning, middle or in the end. It is shown in this instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost all Ministries were reviewed and they improved their processes and put in place SOPs in preparation for any future

programmes or crisis. With that final comment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to bring to your attention a bit of housekeeping and that is to ensure that we comply with Standing Orders, and this is with respect to sitting times.

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 4.30 p.m. today as to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we see from our Order Paper, we have two remaining reports left as well as question time; both oral and written. I ask the indulgence of Parliament to agree to this motion, so that we can complete what is left on the Order Paper today.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is now open for debate on the motion, if any?

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, I have nothing further to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for afternoon tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.52 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.52 p.m.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT –
FIJI MEAT INDUSTRY BOARD 2015-2017 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Meat Industry Board 2015-2017 Annual Report which was tabled on 1st September, 2022.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and Members of Parliament, I rise to speak on the Review Report of the Fiji Meat Industry Board (FMIB) 2015-2017 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs tabled its Review Report of the FMIB 2015-2017 Annual Reports during the 2022 Parliament sitting by the former chairperson, honourable Vijay Nath. As part of its deliberations, the Committee invited executives from the FMIB to provide a submission for the period under review. It was noted that the industry had been facing numerous challenges which included but are not limited to dwindling livestock numbers and the high maintenance costs due to the aged abattoir facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee made recommendations for FMIB to develop a multi-year Strategic Plan which systematically addresses these challenges and sets the organisation in the right direction. Furthermore, the Committee during its deliberations also noted the need to review the Meat Act 1970.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommended for FMIB to consider the option of vertical integration which would entail exploring the viability of having its own supply farm as well as a retail butcher. It would also enable FMIB to complement its supply of live animals and maintain the minimum throughput necessary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the former Committee Members who were part of the team that produced this Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Before I do so, I would like to inform you that there are about eight speakers who submitted their names to their respective Whips. We will begin the batting by having:

1. Honourable V. Lal;
2. Honourable N.T. Tuinaceva;
3. Honourable Minister for Agriculture;
4. Honourable M.D. Bulitavu;
5. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation;
6. Honourable Leader of the Opposition;
7. Honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services; and
8. Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Review Report of the Fiji Meat Industry Board 2015-2017 Annual Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the

Committee's scrutiny of the Report in terms of Sustainable Development Goals specifically in areas of gender equality, empowerment of women and girls and promotion of sustainable agriculture.

The FMIB's effort to encourage people to venture into livestock farming in the area of poultry and beef farming is a step towards achieving SDG2, ending hunger, achieving food security and boosting the local economy. The efforts made by the FMIB in ensuring the safety and quality of meat consumed by Fijian families through the provision of internationally benchmark facilities is commendable.

I support the recommendations made by the Standing Committee in the Review of the Fiji Meat Industry Board Annual Report 2015-2017. It is imperative that the FMIB develops a Strategic Plan to address the challenges it faces and ensure its sustainability in the long term.

The Report accurately highlights the challenges faced by the FMIB including dwindling livestock numbers and high maintenance cost due to aged abattoir facilities. The recommendations made by the Committee such as developing a multi-year strategic plan and exploring the option of vertical integration are constructive and will benefit the FMIB in the long run.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation to consider vertical integration which includes exploring the viability of having its own supply farm and retailed butcher is a smart move that will not only increase supply consistency but also reduce the number of bush skills and allow farmers to receive a fair value for their animals. Additionally, exploring the possibility of a mobile slaughterhouse will increase the number of animals coming through FMIB which has a positive impact on both the industry and the farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the FMIB to take the Committee's recommendations seriously and work towards implementing them. This will ensure the sustainability and growth of the Meat Industry in Fiji providing safe and thick meat for consumption by Fijian families while contributing to the country's overall economic development.

I fully endorse the Committees recommendations and commend the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for their efforts in producing this Report.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion before Parliament is to debate the report and recommendations of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs on the Fiji Meat Industry Board Annual Report 2015-2017. The Report by the previous Members of the Standing Committee was tabled in Parliament in September 2022. I thank the honourable Members of the previous and the current Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for the preparation of this Report and its production for us to debate on this evening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Meat Industry Board was established by the Alliance Government in 1976 under the Meat Act 1969. The Board was declared a Commercial Statutory Authority and as a re-organisation enterprise. When the whole world was going through an era of corporatisation and privatisation and right-sizing of government, et cetera, and the SVT Government that I led at the time enacted the Public Enterprise Act of 1996. Under the new Public Enterprises Act of 2019, the Board is now a public enterprise and the key functions of the Fiji Meat Industry Board include the following:

1. Construct and operate public slaughter facilities;
2. Protect, preserve and expand meat industry;
3. Borrow capital monies when required; and
4. Purchase trade or deal in livestock or meat.

I might add at this time, as the honourable Leader of the Opposition would understand, this is an area that whole world is looking at, livestock and their contribution to emissions that might mitigate or militate against us in our fight to be compliant with what the world is trying to do. This Board, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an important agricultural asset for the nation as it serves the purpose of providing slaughter services for not only the general public, but also in assisting the Ministry of Agriculture with the slaughter, marketing and administration of compensation to farmers for cattle with tuberculosis reactors. We know that over some periods in the past, we have had some livestock destroyed when TB was around and rampant at the time.

As part of fulfilling its commercial obligations, the Public Enterprise Act and its own statute, the Board encountered several challenges in achieving profitability over the years under review, which further worsened during the pandemic. During the pandemic, Mr. Speaker, Sir, FMIB was deemed an essential service and continued to provide its services. The Board operation was severely impacted due to the decline in the supply of pigs, goats, sheep and cattle during the pandemic.

As a result, the Board adopted a strategy to work with stakeholders to source livestock for slaughter purposes. There had been some other attempts in the past to import beef cattle from New Zealand. I was personally involved in an attempt, but my recommendation did not go beyond the Minister for Home Affairs Office who was then working in the Prime Minister's Office. We tried to do that, and other people have also tried to do that and improve the breed of livestock we have available for our meat industry.

The Board has continued to be affected by the aftermath of the pandemic and the current national and international economic situation. While the cost of providing their services has significantly increased, slaughter fees have remained the same since 2006, when it was last reviewed. Many farmers in the livestock sector are slowly recovering their livestock population and returning to the numbers prior to the pandemic, with the assistance of the Ministry of Agriculture. Despite these challenges, I am pleased to note that the Board achieved a net profit in the 2022 financial period, after four years of consecutive losses and I thank those involved with the industry at the time. I would also like to thank the Fiji Meat Industry Board management and staff for their diligence in looking after their services for the people and into the future.

Fiji Meat Industry Board, Mr. Speaker, Sir, commenced with developing a 5-year Strategic Plan from 2024 to 2028 in January of 2021. A workshop was organised in April that year, inviting stakeholders from Fiji Crop & Livestock Council, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Finance, Vuda Piggeries Limited, Tebara Halal Meats Limited, Leylands Fiji and farmers involved in the livestock industry for their feedback in developing the Strategic Plan.

It was noted that the FMIB encountered three major challenges, such as a decline in livestock numbers, aging abattoir buildings and equipment and the outdated legislative framework of the Meat Industry Act of 1969. The Strategic Plan will aim to:

- deliver the relevant obligations as mandated to the Meat Act;
- define service requirements to inform other key strategies such as financial management, asset management, people management and governance;
- ensure that there is an understanding across the Government on the long-term aspirations and desired outcomes of FMIB businesses;
- ensure connection between FMIB goals and objectives to its day to day operations; and
- provide a basis for decision making to continuously improve FMIB's operations, and as such, confirm long term capital and operational expenditure plans.

The Strategic Plan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in the final stage of completion and is expected to be

completed by the middle of this year.

Recommendation 2

The Committee also noted from the Report the need to review the Meat Industry Act 1969. The Committee concurs with this and recommends this to be done with urgency.

The response, and I believe everyone involved is working towards this. The Committee's recommendation is noted, the review of the Meat Industry Act 1969 comes under the ambit of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). In February 2022, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) completed the assessment of all legislations related to MoA, including the Meat Act, and based on this assessment, MoA has been exploring options to review all outdated legislations.

Recommendation 3

In light of supply consistency, the Committee recommends for FMIB to consider the option of vertical integration. This would entail exploring the viability of having its own supply farm as well as a retail butcher. In addition, this would enable FMIB to complement its supply of live animals and maintain the minimum throughput necessary.

The Committee's recommendation, I believe, is being accepted and noted. The opportunity to consider vertical integration is limited by the Meat Industry Act of 1969. However, as per the Meat Act, one of the FMIB's core functions is to construct and operate public slaughtering facilities. As such, FMIB is currently focused on refurbishing its Nakasi and Vuda Abattoirs to acquire Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) certification which will improve its performance in providing slaughtering services.

Sir, FMIB has been allocated approximately \$1.2 million of Government grant from the Ministry of Agriculture in the past three years to upgrade its Nakasi and Vuda Abattoirs. The investment in the facilities ensures that it remains functional and compliant to safety standards and it will also enhance the profitability of Fiji Meat Industry Board as the production of high quality and hygienic meat products will generate more revenue for it. In addition to that, FMIB is working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture in assisting farmers to increase the number of livestock to ensure a consistent supply is maintained at the abattoir.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends for FMIB to explore possible options in terms of mobile slaughterhouse. The Committee believes this may increase the number of animals coming through FMIB and reduce the number of bush kills. It may also have a positive impact on the farmers as they are maybe able to get a fair value for their animals.

The Committee's recommendation is noted and FMIB will work closely with stakeholders and development partners in exploring these options:

1. The provision of mobile slaughterhouses may increase the number of livestock coming through the FMIB and reduce the number of bush kills leading to a positive impact for the farmers as it will also allow them to get a fair value for their meat that is slaughtered in hygienic conditions.
2. The FMIB is also currently exploring potential locations to relocate its abattoir services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very much aware that we have some honourable Members who do not take meat and I hope they will pardon me for what I am going through here. At this point, I would like to just go back a few years when I raised a point here about some bush farmers in Vanua Levu

who had lost herds of cattle. I had to call my friend, honourable Bala to release them from a bush killing abattoir we had in Cakaudrove at that time. He obliged and released the animals, but we had to pay for the collection – you promised me that you will refund me.

(Laughter)

With that short contribution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you and I commend the motion before Parliament.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do acknowledge the statement made by the honourable Prime Minister particularly in the positive steps that the Ministry for Public Enterprise is taking to assist FMIB. I am thankful for the allocation from the Ministry of Agriculture because this is one entity that never receives any assistance from government since its existence and that has always been an issue that the Board brings in almost every meeting that they have because they never receive any assistance. Because of the aging infrastructure has a piece of critical requirement when it comes to food processing, and we have to upgrade the facility. I am thankful that the Ministry of Agriculture is working on this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to talk about the opportunities that are there. Sir, FMIB relies on the efforts of the farmers and unfortunately, livestock level in Fiji has been declining over the years. When FMIB was established, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the turnaround was around 20,000 animals slaughtered per year. They used to have a tannery and take the leather across to Australia or New Zealand for processing, but all these were closed. Maybe the honourable Minister for Agriculture knows the exact time.

It depended on the farmers. If we go back to history, we had Verata Beef Scheme, where is the Verate Beef Scheme now? Non-existent. We had the Uluisavou Beef Scheme in Ra, it is no longer in existence. We have Yalavou Beef Scheme in the interior of Nadroga/Navosa, it is no longer in existence. We are thankful to the honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture, a few years back he revived Tilivalevu. What I wish to emphasise here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, huge opportunities particularly for landowners.

We have to pick up these projects, it is unfortunate. I know Mr. Speaker, Sir, particularly Yalavou and Uluisavou as well, even when Verata Beef Scheme started, the honourable Sakiasi Ditoka and I know the Verata Beef Scheme very well. A few of the problems was, I think because they were financed by the Fiji Development Bank, but I think in terms of the capacity development, the entrepreneurial skills for the farmers so that they can repay debt and one of the big challenges too is our communal way of living. I know this because my namesake, in fact, utilized our *mataqali* land, he was a beef farmer. I will use Verata, for example. When the farmers go to the village for a death or whatever, they will spend about three weeks over there and they will come back to the farm. When they come back to the farm, the animals have gone astray.

It is that communal way of living and I am glad that are few years back when we went to Malaysia, we saw how Malaysia succeeded in such projects. They were taking away the farmers from their communities but whatever is needed in the community, they also established it in the estate, the community halls, churches, temples, mosques, schools et cetera. These are some of the factors that contributed to the farmers living the farm because their children needed to go to school. The honourable Minister for Agriculture knows the steps that we have taken a few years back and I was looking forward to hearing his statement first because he was the one that we sent to Rockhampton to go and get the new breeds.

Right now, we have the new beef breeds in Nadroga, Mr. Speaker, Sir – Senepol, Droughtmaster and Wagyu. Two are already here and we have gone into the new technology - embryo transfer rather than the artificial insemination. We have even brought in the new dairy breed - Brown Swiss.

I do acknowledge the work undertaken by my successor, we are not blowing our own trumpet here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we saw the potentials, we have done the initial work. The honourable Minister knows it well and this is one of the things that I emphasised with him, “please pick up and carry on with the work that we done in the livestock sector.”

With sheep, we have brought the Dorper Sheep to be in cross bred with the Fiji Fantastic, likewise the Boer Goat. I will not go into the details; we have started some of the work but let me go back to the potentials. I hope that we, honourable Members of this august Parliament will go back and try and convince our people that we need to be involved in livestock farming.

Although I am well aware Sir, that in climate change, we are looking at trying to reduce but animal waste as long as we convert that into methane gas, it is still acceptable. This is one of the challenges that we have, but then SDG2 is about Zero Hunger and in the Paris Agreement, it talks about the common and differentiated responsibilities based on capacities. We have a responsibility to feed our own people, therefore we will gradually go towards zero grazing so that we can minimise and particularly with the pigs, they have now come up with digesters and hopefully the beef sector will go into this as well.

I also thank Government for the commitment to review the Act because the private sector can invest but they are restricted by this Act. The current Act says that you cannot establish another facility, but you can do slaughterhouses because I know few of the operators, particularly from the private sectors, those that own butchery, they want to invest in these areas.

To those in the rural areas, one of the big markets in Fiji Meat Industry Board is the *magiti* sector, particularly with pork, slaughtered in, they are from the outer islands. But to the the honourable Minister for Transport, one of the issues coming up now is the cartage fees. This is major issue that will be raised regularly in the provincial council meetings; Lau Provincial Council meeting, Kadavu Provincial Council and Lomaiviti. So, probably this is something that can be looked into, but it is a big market segment with FMIB – the *magiti* market.

I wish to conclude by again saying that there is huge potential because FMIB is dependent on what the farmers raise in the paddocks or in their projects. If the livestock sector performs better, FMIB will definitely be able to break even in terms of cost and even make huge profits but particularly based on the farmers’ efforts.

I would again urge the honourable Minister, I know that he is passionate about this because probably that has to be his legacy too, because he went to Rockhampton to go and look at the opportunities and he is very close to the technician that is doing all the embryo transfer and we look forward to the day where we will have sufficient and even abundance supplies so that FMIB can perform better.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to show my support for the motion before Parliament that is the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Meat Industry Board 2015 – 2017 Annual Reports. I think the honourable Prime Minister has touched on most of what I had intended to speak on, but I will try to speak on others that he may have left out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FMIB is a commercial statutory authority of Government with a core

function to protect, preserve and expand the meat industry in Fiji. The Board's mandate is to control and regulate slaughtering of livestock in Fiji and it has continuously worked with the industry stakeholders to develop standards that meet Fiji's Food Safety Act 2009 as well as benchmarking it to international standards.

In terms of FMIB's financial position, I think this has been alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister, after successive losses which shows in this Report, it has finally made a profit. The important thing to note that the bulk of revenue generated by FMIB is from the slaughter fees and not from the sale of carcass. A small portion of revenue is generated from the sale of processed meat meal and fish meal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me provide some insights on the partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and FMIB and its challenges. All meat inspection services at both the abattoirs are provided by the Ministry of Agriculture Meat Inspectors. From 2015, the Ministry and FMIB have worked together in disposing and compensating for tuberculosis and brucellosis infected animals. The Ministry further collaborated with FMIB to ensure that productive female cattle were not slaughtered. They have continued to work together on meat surveillance to ensure that all animals slaughtered for sale are safe for human consumption.

In this regard, I want to inform Parliament that we have extended these services out from the abattoirs to special gatherings and events such as funerals, religious festivities, *qurbani* and the recent chiefly installation on Bau Island, our meat inspectors were active right throughout the function.

Through its Assistance Programme in the Livestock Sector, the Ministry ensured linking up of small holder farmers to formal markets, for example, the Goat Partnership Programme and the Beef Development Programme. In terms of the challenges, the Meat Industry Act 1969 is way too old and needs to be reviewed. The slaughter fees are outdated and was last reviewed in 2005. There has been low throughput and only two days of slaughter per week with barely enough to cover the operational cost.

In terms of the location of the Nasinu Abattoir, it is situated in a highly populated residential area and central business district. If you look around the surroundings of where the abattoir is located, Sir, the landscape has changed so much over the years. It is now becoming a commercial centre. I have told the Chief Executive Officer of FMIB that he needs to start looking for somewhere to move because sooner or later we will be told to move.

In terms of illegal slaughtering, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in fees and charges may have a negative effect of increasing illegal slaughtering but the Ministry officials are prepared to work around the clock on supervising. The cost of operations at the abattoir has been increasing over the years. Due to the degradation of the abattoir and equipment, there also has been a high staff turnover. Most of the workers from the abattoir, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have left for the Pacific Labour Scheme to work in the Australian meat works industry.

In terms of cattle supply, the main source of beef supply to the abattoir is from the dairy sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your information, those cattle that suffer from tuberculosis and brucellosis, at one year they can still be slaughtered and safe for consumption.

In terms of cattle that come from Vanua Levu, a good number of cattle comes from Vanua Levu and I know there are a lot of Vanua Levu associated parliamentarians here. However, the cost of bringing the cattle over to Viti Levu to be slaughtered in the abattoir is a disincentive to Vanua Levu farmers and it is all the more reason to review the Fiji Meat Act 1969 to allow for the setting up of an abattoir in Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of opportunities in capital production, the opportunity is in intensive cattle rearing. This is where you rear cattle in a controlled environment and use silage and other forms of feed to feed cattle without the cattle running around or in open pasture.

The Ministry had embarked on an Embryo Transfer Programme back in 2017 as alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. I was the unfortunate one sent to Rockhampton to do the selection. We came back with four breeds of cattle, in fact, one of them is the most expensive beef in the world which is wagyu. To-date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have nine wagyu calves that are in Koronivia and are now around three months old.

The other breeds, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are Droughtmaster, Senepol and one beef and dairy breed which is the Brown Swiss. We made the selection of this breed because we visited a farm in Rockhampton where the farmer changed his whole herd of about a thousand cattle to Brown Swiss. We were convinced there and then that this breed should be good enough for Fiji because the weather in Rockhampton is just like Fiji. For wagyu, we were fortunate because there were only two *iTaukei* members of the team and the rest of the team were all Hindus, so we managed to eat all the beef BBQ. We told them that if they eat BBQ, we would tell their parents in Fiji. Sorry, Mr. Speaker, that is just a joke. The wagyu steak virtually melts in your mouth. It has got that marbling rate which is the highest for any cattle in the world and we have that here now in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion I wish to highlight the following. In order to address the supply of throughput issues, the Ministry of Agriculture has been working with the farmers at farm gate as well as those throughout the value chain. Over the years we have seen a rise in illegal slaughter and sale of meat and the Ministry has been working with the Ministry of Health, Biosecurity of Fiji and the Fiji Police Force in raising awareness.

During the current financial year the Ministry and FMIB will work together with the Office of the Solicitor-General to start the review process of the Meat Act 1969 and a draft review shall be taken for public consultations.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Agriculture has provided FMIB a capital grant of over \$380,000 in the 2020-2021 Budget, \$400,000 in the 2021-2022 Budget and the 2022/2023 Budgets respectively. The funds have been used to upgrade the Nasinu and Vuda Abattoirs to ensure the facilities are certified.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government will continue to assist in providing strategic direction and support to FMIB in leveraging the standard of meat that are internationally benchmarked for safety, hygiene and quality. Therefore, I am in support of the review Report before Parliament.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my contribution will be very short and I will speak on the subject through the lenses of tourism. We have a very vibrant tourism industry and, in a year or two, we will be hosting or welcoming about 1.2 million visitors to the country. The tragedy here is that we will be importing all the beef to feed our tourists. We talk about the high leakage factor in tourism and that is something that challenges us to ensure that the tourism dollar remains in the country and that the leakage is reduced. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is an example of the leakage we have in tourism through the importation of beef. I am heartened about what I hear today.

I was part of the Economic Affairs Committee who put this report together and it was sad that we saw the reduction in livestock in this country over a period of 10 years or so. We must do what we can to rebuild the stock in this country of the quality that meets the expectations of our tourists. I liked what the honourable Minister for Agriculture said, the steak that melts in your mouth is possible for Fiji. That is what we want. We have tried some models and we should apply ourselves in this

area.

Some years ago I spoke about Vanuatu. They were able to export beef to Japan. If you know the Japanese, they are very discerning consumers for them to buy beef. You heard about Kobe beef, one of the best in the world. So to export beef to Japan is quite something and the Vanuatu people did it. I do not know what model they used, but that is our very close neighbour. If they can do it, we should also be able to do it and meet the needs of our tourism industry. That is all that I want to contribute to today, speaking of the lenses of tourism. It is very urgent, we must apply ourselves to ensure that we can produce beef of the quantity and the quality that meets the needs of the tourism industry.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion. I would like to thank our Chairman, honourable Vijay Nath, who was instrumental in this Report. But as I contribute today, I am just contemplating in the last few days of Parliament, not only this one, but in the last session, I do not know whether others are also thinking of what I am thinking.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Just hearing what the Opposition is saying, it seems like they are still in Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Talk on the report.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Think about the cattles.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, I am getting to that end.

I am very concerned about them because it is like they are in a psychological stalemate.

(Laughter)

The other concern is, we can also think as Ministers about what we will do in our ministries. So, there is no need for you to regurgitate - keep on revegetating what we have done and what we need to do. If you focus maybe on your role as Opposition, that will be great and we will focus on our role as Ministers. After a month, we can see what is there and we know what to do.

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Koya.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What number?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Standing Order 60. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we on this side of Parliament thought there was only one meanderer, now we have found another one. Please, relevance, if we are praising a report, what is the problem?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just listen!.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I think you also need to keep quiet for a change.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please ask them to stay relevant. There is a reason why the Standing Orders are there, and that relevance provision is there. Please, stick to it, be relevant and talk about the report.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is related to the report because ...

(Laughter)

... as I stated, we are going back and forth. So let me emphasise the Opposition's role, I know it very well, I was in the Opposition for four years.

(Laughter)

I know what the role is. I was there with honourable Mosese Bulitavu. He was one of my key colleagues and we used to conspire together on the Government.

MR. SPEAKER.- His seen the light.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The reason I am saying this is because they have always expressed the view that Fiji must be like Singapore. But where is it today, what happened? One of the big Singapore dreams was the direct route from Suva to Nadi across the mountains, and they quoted the wrong figure of \$2 billion when it should be \$12 billion.

On the report itself, it is another delayed annual report. If you look at it, it is 2017, and we asked the CEO what was the reason and what he explained was there was a change in leadership and due to lack of proper handover records.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- If you just hold on.

Just expressing what the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Minister had mentioned. The Meat Act, of course, that is overdue for review. If you look at the functions, it is quite wide ranging. For example, take steps deemed desirable for protection, preservation and expansion of the meat industry. It can operate as it is going to retail, et cetera.

In terms of the Committee's recommendations, our colleagues have mentioned the Strategic Plan. I believe that that is ready. However, I would like to stress that the profit was realised mainly through the sale of the land on which they are sitting on to the Fiji Police Force. We have expressed and also the Opposition side on the numbers. Cattle slaughter numbers and the weight and that has been decreasing from 2000 to 2017 as expressed there - from 10,779 to 8,381. We understand other sectors have grown as a percentage of GDP, but agriculture has not really grown.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking about livestock, I recall in the FijiFirst campaign during their term, their leader was supposed to present 100 horses to Navosa. Unfortunately, this did not happen.

MR. SPEAKER.- We are talking cattle here.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- It is a concern regarding the people of Navosa, so the honourable Minister for Agriculture is working on that.

MR. SPEAKER.- You should be talking on cattle, now you have gone to the horses.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is part of livestock, that is livestock, Sir.

(Laughter)

Because it was also dealt with by the former Minister for Agriculture, Dr. Mahendra Reddy. He presented during the campaign a horse which was confiscated by the roadside to a village in Nadroga and that was in the papers. I think at that function honourable Bala was also there.

(Laughter)

He was presenting as usual knives, forks, weed killers, et cetera to the youths. I commend you, honourable Bala, I mean it is a simple vote buying exercise my friend.

(Honourable V. Naupoto interjects)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is another important information in the Report which has not been mentioned that the Fiji Meat Industry Board owns land in Wainibuka, Naitasiri and in Naciriyawa, Vuda, Ba. The explanation on that was that they use for the cattle to be herded before they are slaughtered (brought to Suva or Vuda for slaughtering). We had requested that they reassess the use of this land as it is currently underutilized and maybe it could be used for more commercially viable alternatives. With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Chairman and the members of the Committee.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all I would like to thank the honourable Members of Parliament for their contribution and input into the report. Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the inherent problem in the industry is the declining livestock numbers and that has been brought up in a number of contributions.

Of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise the huge potential of livestock in this country particularly in terms of addressing food security. We have to look at innovative ways of how we can develop and increase the livestock numbers, and of course the livestock enhanced the industry in the long term. There are some innovative ways that has been brought up by some of the Members particularly relating to setting up of an abattoir in Vanua Levu, the new breeds and amending the current Act that is there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the former Members of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for their contribution and also the current Members of the Economic Affairs for their input into the Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT OF THE OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL'S 2021 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the review Report of the Office of the Auditor-General's 2021 Annual Report which was tabled on 1st September, 2022.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament. As the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to move the motion, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion, on the review of the 2021 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OAG is established under Section 151 of the Constitution of the Republic of Fiji and the Audit Act of 1969 further specifies the powers of the Auditor-General to audit the Whole of Government financial statements and reports of all entities of government. It also empowers the Auditor-General to conduct Performance Audit of government entities to ensure Parliament that the entities achieve their objective effectively and doing so economically and in compliance with all relevant legislations.

The OAG is responsible, on behalf of Parliament to audit accounts of all government agencies, state- owned entities, statutory authorities, municipal councils and provincial councils except for its own office and those entities that may be exempted by law.

The OAG carried out the audit in accordance with the relevant provisions on auditing issued by the Fiji Institute of Accountants or other relevant standards considered appropriate. Moreover, Section 152 of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji states and I quote:

“At least once in every year, the Auditor-General shall inspect, audit and report to Parliament on:

- (a) the public accounts of the State;
- (b) the control of public money and public property of the State; and
- (c) all transactions with or concerning the public money or public property of the State.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2021 Annual Report was compiled in the height of COVID-19 pandemic and its review was carried out by the Members of the previous Public Accounts Committee. Like any other office, the OAG was not spared from the pandemic. As highlighted in the Report, there were few setbacks faced but it is encouraging to note that despite the setbacks, the office continued to carry out several audits, reaffirming their commitment to promoting public sector accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee in its review highlighted some of the notable findings which includes:

1. Stakeholders' engagement – in the OAG's plan to improve interaction with the stakeholders, the office initiated a nationwide essay and drawing competition targeting primary and secondary school students which received a lot of responses. In addition to this, there was also a workshop planned by the office and UNDP which targeted civil society organisations. However, it was postponed due to the pandemic. Sir, these engagements were intended to inform stakeholders on the roles, responsibilities and

- expectations of the OAG and obtained feedback from stakeholders on the work of OAG and their expectations.
2. In April 2021, the office automated audit software called TeamMate, the accounting software Navision and Payroll Software and Pay Global were affected due to a significance cyber security incident which affected the Government's ITC services, both of which were fully restored a month later.
 3. In terms of improving audit conduct for Municipal Councils, Provincial Councils, Whole of Government, Government Commercial Companies, Commercial Statutory Authorities and other entities whose audited reports are delayed to be tabled in public. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OAG continues to strive and improve the timeliness of reporting of the outcomes of audits to Parliament. In April 2021, OAG issued a revised reporting guideline to clients with an inclusion of changes which the OAG hopes will impact the timeliness of audit and the reporting of audit outcomes to Parliament.
 4. Section 7A(1) of the Audit Act of 1969 empowers the Auditor-General that it may by contract authorise a person to conduct audit or special investigation on behalf of the Auditor-General. The basis to outsource audits arise from updating of backlog audits, resource constraints in terms of shortfall in annual man hours, unplanned audit request as well as requirement of expertise.
 5. Even though the office was affected by COVID-19 implications, it continues to carry out its work both virtually and in office. In 2021, the Office of the Auditor-General issued 70 audit opinions as compared to 150 during the year 2020. There were 40 modified or qualified audit opinions compared to 115 during 2020. Reports to Parliament, there were 16 reports tabled in Parliament, same number in 2020 which includes Performance and Compliance Audit reports. There were six completed. There was also a special investigation on Housing Authority on Lots Allotment and Awarding of Tender for the various subdivisions since 2010. In financial audits, 293 was planned for the year but only 164 draft financial statements were received, out of which 94 was from the backlog and some from 2020 and beyond relating to provincial councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 14 audit reports were issued with 42 draft management letters for comments in the 2021 year. The relationship with Parliament as well as PAC is satisfactory as depicted by the 2021 PAC Survey Result.

Engagement with clients and other stakeholders through the entry and exit bi-annual survey showed that Office of the Auditor-General is being independent and adds value to their organisations through the audit. They utilised \$4.7 million in 2021 compared to \$5.05 million budgeted for them. They have 258,000 debtors, however we noted that fee payments of around \$134,679 was made by the iTaukei Affairs Board for the auditing of the 42 financial statements for the 14 provincial councils for the years 2008 to 2010.

In professional development, this is a major initiative for the Office of the Auditor-General due to manpower demand and also work demand on the areas of audit and will continue for 81 technical staff, 5 executives and 16 support officers. All in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the office has moved up several knots to where it was five years ago and the output was notable with the reduction in backlog, with the leadership of Mr. Ajay Nand, the former Auditor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the findings, the Committee recommends that the Office of the Auditor-General partners with the ministries, heads, provincial councils and municipal councils in

providing training for their staff to prepare and submit quality staff, annual financial statements for audit in a timely manner as set out by the office. That a proper training plan be developed to be in line with the audit training needs of the staff so that they are able to better and improve their performance and productivity. The Office of the Auditor-General should conduct comprehensive exit meetings all the time to allow ministries and departments to rectify pertinent issues before tabling or forwarding a report to Parliament.

The fourth recommendation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to address cyber security issues and the Office to invest in technology by developing data recovery and business continuity plans.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to take this time to thank the Office of the Auditor-General for the outstanding work they are doing in terms of highlighting issues and promoting public sector accountability. With those words, as the Member moving the motion, I thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Before I offer the floor, I have in front of me a list provided by both Whips of the list of speakers:

1. Honourable J.N. Nand;
2. Honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government;
3. Honourable A.A. Maharaj; and
4. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise contribute to the debate on the Review of the Office of the Auditor-General 2021 Annual Report. The Committee noted that pursuant to Section 152 of the Fijian Constitution, the primary role of the Office of the Auditor-General is to inspect, audit and report to Parliament on the public accounts of the State, the control of the public property of the State and all transactions with or concerning public or public property of the State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee requests the Office of the Auditor-General to take note of the recommendations and implement accordingly. Recommendations such as the Office of the Auditor-General to partner with the line ministries, permanent secretaries, provincial councils and municipal councils with regards to training of the staff and submit quality draft annual financial statements of audit in a timely manner.

The next recommendation is providing proper training to the staff to better their performance and productivity and also conducting a comprehensive exit meeting to allow ministries and departments to rectify pertinent audit issues before tabling of the report to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee notes the Office of the Auditor-General's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG target 16.6 which is to develop accountable and transparent institutions at all levels. In this regard, the Committee noted that whatever questions raised by the Office of the Auditor-General in terms of utilisation and management of Government expenses, it was always responded in line with SDG target 16.6. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is my short contribution and I fully support the motion before Parliament.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion for debate that is before Parliament. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government acknowledges the very good recommendations by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts on the Review of the Office of the Auditor-General 2021 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendations by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts are

very important and critical for improvement in the quality of draft annual financial statements. I also commend the work of the Auditor-General because he always ensured that all ministries, departments, authorities and local authorities maintain transparency, accountability and good governance at all levels.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, training is therefore important or critical to enhance the performance and productivity of relevant staff. One of the recommendations that the Ministry of Local Government concurs with the Committee for the Ministry to partner with Municipal Councils to train the staff on the preparation and submission of quality draft annual financial statements for audit. I think we must not see the Office of the Auditor-General as a partner, I think it is a catalyst. A catalyst that will ensure that the preparation of draft annual statements is done in the most efficient and most effective manner.

The collaboration between the Office of the Auditor-General and the Council or any Ministry and Department for that matter will allow staff of the Council or any Ministerial staff to understand the specific requirements of the financial statements and the significance of submitting the Annual Financial Statements and the Annual Reports in a timely manner. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the officers will also have a better understanding of the legislative requirements as well as the fundamental requirements of the Office of the Auditor-General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Municipal Council, it is indeed a very sad situation because some of the Councils are very far behind in their submission of Annual Reports. There has been a culture of complacency and lack of accountability. But the Ministry is now having further discussions with the Administrators as well as CEOs on how best the Councils will be able to fast track some of the outstanding financial statements that have to be submitted and completed by the respective municipalities.

In addition to that, we are trying to organise a forum where we encourage all the CEOs and one fundamental issue that is going to be discussed is for them to ensure that they look after the operational affairs of the Councils. It is paramount that they ensure that the financial reports are prepared in order for the Office of the Auditor-General to audit the respective reports.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government accepts the recommendation of the Office of Auditor-General to partner with the Municipal Councils to develop training, I think that is very important which will assist the Ministry and the Municipal Councils to coach staff and the timely preparation and submission of quality draft Annual Financial Statements for audit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Ministry's monitoring role is a fully fledged internal audit team, something that the Ministry lacks at the moment, that is, to audit Councils. They will establish a new financial year and it is in our hope that that is going to assist the Councils so that the timely preparation of financial statements and the statements are ready for audit by OAG.

The Ministry not to be hesitant to enhance policies and set specific KPIs for Councils, CEOs and Special Administrators in the preparation and submission of financials. Needless to say, the importance of the preparation of the Council's Annual Reports.

Another very important issue is the importance of having exit meeting. Whenever the OAG completes its audit, it is always important that they discuss some of the audit issues that are raised by their team with the respective Councils, so the Councils are going to take all these issues on board before they present their report to PAC. I think this is very important because it is also going to assist the Councils in addressing the core issues that are raised by OAG, otherwise if these issues are not

addressed then there will be recurring issues and will continue to be reported by the OAG.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the recommendations by the Standing Committee.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, before I actually start, I would just like to inform the honourable Minister for Public Works, definitely his thought is independent and our thoughts are independent as well. So, we do not think the way his thinking.

Mr. Speaker, as background, these were our Reports. We were chairing the Committee then, which is why we are talking in favour of this Report because we know the importance of it.

Mr. Speaker, under the Constitution, the OAG is a Constitutional Office. It is independent and we need to give the Office the independence and the support it deserves.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Really?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, OAG and PAC at least under my term as the Chairperson had come together and started working very closely.

As alluded to yesterday, we used to have meetings in the OAG whereby following that meeting, we actually allowed OAG to come and sit on the side of PAC whenever we used to conduct a public submission. This actually gave a lot of opportunities to OAG to pinpoint issues that they used to face with Ministries. One thing we saw, by doing so, most of the issues were actually resolved at the Committee stage itself because if any entity came before PAC and tried to lie, OAG was there to rectify there and then on that what is happening on the ground and what is actually been said before PAC. I thank the new Committee as well, Mr. Speaker. Recently we visited the new office of the OAG in Vatuwaqa and we again went through the same session that we did four years ago.

I would like to thank OAG and the Acting Auditor-General in accommodating the PAC and presenting to us the way the audits are carried out and basically what were some of the audits they conducted in terms of ministries and other relevant agencies.

Mr. Speaker, the Supreme Audit Institute plays a critical role in the governance, accountability and transparency in the Government. As such the OAG is expected to promote transparency and accountability through good governance of its own affairs in an ethical manner and within the ambit of law in order to fulfil its mandate.

Mr. Speaker, while we are talking about ethical audits, one thing that we were told during our meeting with OAG that the OAG has developed their own mechanism of having an internal audit team. So, basically in audit language they would actually call a auditor auditing the auditors. So, they have an internal audit team which ensures that the process that is followed to carry out audits for all the Ministries and other agencies is done up to par as required by Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) and Pacific Association of Supreme Audit Institutions (PASAI) expectation. To assist in this crucial role, it is important that the OAG leads by example and be are good model organisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN Resolution acknowledges the role of Supreme Audit Institute in forensic Government accountability for the use of resources and performance in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16. To promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, build effective accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Auditor- General plays a critical role in ensuring efficient and transparent use of resources and achievement of SDG target 16.6, which is to develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

In this regard, the Committee noted that whatever question was raised by the auditor in terms of the utilisation and management of Government expenses, is related to the achievement of SDG target 16.6. Through the execution of its mandate, the Office of the Auditor-General promotes efficient, accountable, effective and transparent public administration and governance in achieving nationally and internationally agreed development plans.

The SAI can also be considered as an oversight mechanism under the review and monitoring framework as evident in its inclusion in the National Development Plan 2017. For your information, Sir, the Office of the Auditor-General now prepares its annual financial statements using International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) for small and medium-sized entities as required by the financial reporting framework. It is important to note that the Office of the Auditor-General is funded through an annual one-line appropriation by Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this actually brings to an important point that was raised while we were at the Office of the Auditor-General and held discussions with regards to the virement of funds and approval by the Auditor-General. One of the things as mentioned by the Chairman is the backlog. While having discussions, there is a fund provided to the Office of the Auditor-General, whereby they actually outsource the audits. But the problem there is, whenever they go to institutions that carry out the audit, as soon as they get to know if there is a backlog, they are not interested in carrying out this backlog.

What the Office of the Auditor-General would suggest, if that money can be vired to have project staff rather than outsourcing this audit to auditors which are very expensive, time consuming and they are not interested if we are giving them a backlog of two years or three years. So, if the honourable Minister of Finance during his reply can enlighten Parliament if this virement can be done by the Office of the Auditor-General whereby, almost \$1.2 million is allocated to the Office of the Auditor-General to have project staff rather than using that fund just to outsource auditing to other firms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this enables the Office of the Auditor-General to fulfil its audit mandate on public sector entities and this includes financial audit, performance audit and special investigation. In the 2021 financial year, the budget appropriation stood at \$5.04 million compared to \$5.6 million in 2020. It was noted that only 93 percent of their budget was utilised due to COVID-19. The Committee, after carrying out a thorough review on the Office of the Auditor-General, 2021 Annual Report, came up with few recommendations:

Recommendation 1

The Office of the Auditor-General partners with line Ministries, Heads (Permanent Secretaries), Provincial Councils and Municipal Councils to train their staff to prepare and submit quality draft annual financials.

This will prevent the backlog and going back and forth within the Ministries and the Office of the Auditor-General. Recently, we were again informed that they have actually started conducting trainings for relevant agencies and Ministries.

Recommendation 2

That a proper training plan be developed to be in line with the auditing training needs of the staff, so they are able to better improve their performance and productivity.

While we were discussing about COVID-19 related schemes this morning, I think I brought this up. These people cannot get expertise, if you are getting an accountant to carry out an audit. So proper training needs to be conducted for the staff of the Office of the Auditor-General so that

they are well versed in the sector they are going to conduct the audit; and

Recommendation 3

The Office of the Auditor-General to conduct comprehensive exit meeting.

We have been reliably informed that the current Acting Auditor-General is ensuring that he is part of the exit meeting to ensure that all the issues raised during the audit can be resolved at the exit meeting before the report is tabled to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I commend the motion before Parliament.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try and be brief. The honourable Members who have spoken before me, have highlighted very clearly the importance of the Office of the Auditor-General, which is an independent institution that provides external oversight on financial management and good governance. In any democracy, in any Parliament, the importance of the Auditor-General's Report and the importance of the role of the Public Accounts Committee cannot be underestimated in terms of ensuring that there is accountability.

As a government, we should always be mindful and we on this side of Parliament, as a new Government, we want to ensure that every dollar that comes into the coffers of Government is accounted for, there is value for money and that we should try and put all our effort in ensuring that it is not wasted, it is prioritised and that the people eventually benefit from it. I am, of course, not saying that pilferage, wastage and mismanagement can never happen, and that is why it is important that the Office of the Auditor-General is well resourced.

The Auditor-General's Office gives that framework and provides an opportunity not only for those who manage funds, but also those who want accountability to actually work together. The Auditor-General's Report, whenever it comes out, does provide a sudden degree of excitement and scrutiny and therefore it is a constitutional body.

The other day, Mr. Speaker, I heard the honourable Viliame Naupoto giving an End of Week Statement and he talked about institutional integrity. In fact, I agree with him whole heartedly with whatever he said. We always have to remember history. I know honourable Usamate was talking about hypocrisy, but when I hear them talk about institutional integrity, talk about what happened.

I think we, sitting in the Opposition, were contemplating - we were actually learning not what they were doing right, but learning what they were doing wrong. So, I feel that it is always good when you sit in the Opposition and come into Government, you actually understand and learn and that is why we always talked about the importance of the role of the Opposition. I hope the honourable Members on the other side and those new honourable Members would learn and understand the importance of what they say from the other side with respect to Government accountability.

Sir, the OAG came under attack in this Parliament by the previous government, a massive attack not just a side jab, a massive attack and governments never do that, governments have a process. When you start attacking an independent institution in Parliament then Mr. Speaker, Sir, you reduce the importance of that institution, and they did this. So, I wanted to just remind honourable Naupoto that next time when he talks about institutional integrity, he should remember what his colleagues on the other side did. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are a lot more than I can say about wastage, about not following this Financial Management Act, not following Procurement Regulations and you Mr. Speaker, Sir, know very well we were raising some of these issues with evidence in Parliament.

I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I was actually quite amazed that he was attacking the Deputy Prime Minister for attending the Least Developed Countries conference organised by the UN at their invitation. I thought that he should have been thanking Fiji and thanking the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for making high level...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order!

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is half-past six

(Laughter)

We are talking about a report and as usual the honourable Deputy Prime Minister is becoming irrelevant. He needs to focus on the topic, Sir. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- What is your Point of Order on?

HON. J. USAMATE.- 60.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What number? What point of Order is that?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Relevance, he is leaving the topic alone and he is meandering, and it is half-past six, please stay on the topic.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am actually amazed at the hypocrisy that comes from honourable Jone Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You are always amazed.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He should learn Mr. Speaker, Sir, to understand some of the pain that you need to go through when you sit in Opposition.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He will grow into a better Opposition Member if he is able to take a little bit of pain....

MR. SPEAKER.- He has seen the light

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think he has seen the light, Mr. Speaker.

(Laughter)

You cannot use the word “hypocrite” in this Parliament, but I am saying that honourable Usamate....

(Honourable J. Usamate interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just relax, you will learn in the course of time and you have to spend some time in the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to point out that the Government acknowledges as part of recommendation 1 the need to obtain a quality draft financial statement on a timely basis as this area needs improvement. At the Ministry of Finance, we already had a good meeting with the Acting Auditor-General, their staff. We are looking at the review of the Audit Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Learning from the experience of what we heard, what we know, how the Auditor-General was attacked.

We want to look at the Audit Act and ensure that the Audit Act provides safeguards, gives more teeth to the Auditor-General's office not only in terms of resources so that they can work effectively to hold ministries and departments accountable. We are working with the OAG, ministries, departments, agencies and we feel that there is a lot more that can be done around that area. I know that the honourable Minister for Housing gave a very good account of what is happening within Municipal Councils, an area that we were concerned about, the training plan agreed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was this concern that they were not having this exit plans, these are normal audit processes that the OAG conducts and as a government, we must stay away from dictating to independent offices even if we feel that there are problems. There are ways in which those offices may not do the work. So, the OAG must be left as an independent institution, the Parliament's job is to make sure that we provide the appropriate resources, provide the appropriate legislative framework so that they can work effectively. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are determined to ensure that the OAG's office remains an independent office, well-resourced and one that can work with all government departments, entities and bodies and make sure that we have timely, properly audited reports presented to Parliament so the Parliament can scrutinize that and the public can know what is happening to their dollars and cents.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts Committee to speak in reply.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all those Members who contributed to the debate and hope that the OAG will work with relevant government ministries and departments who are in delay in the submission of their financial statements for audit, particularly the provincial councils and the municipal councils plus carry out proper exit meetings with all the stakeholders to improve reporting and audit results for the stakeholders. The only additional comment I wish to make is that the OAG is to be independent all the time as it is a constitutional office and to maintain institutional integrity. With those final comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we really get into asking our Questions, I would like to adjourn Parliament now.

Honourable Members, you could have your dinner in the Big Committee Room and we will resume, going straight into the Questions but I would like to limit the number of supplementary questions to three only. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 7.38 p.m.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

2022-2023 Budgeted Infrastructure Projects (Question No. 52/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services inform Parliament whether the infrastructure projects that were budgeted for the 2022-2023 financial year will be completed, and what is the progress?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr Speaker Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. The Ministry, together with our statutory agencies such as Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) and Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) was given a total of \$535.7 million to carry out comprehensive capital works. Some key areas include road networks (\$362.9 million), water sector infrastructure primarily to improve Fiji's long-term standing water supply and wastewater management needs (\$115.1 million), Grid Extension and Housewiring Projects for a total of 178 schemes (\$19.3 million). The Ministry, together with our statutory authorities, received budgets in the different sectors to enable the development of infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for roads projects for this financial year, FRA was allocated \$60 million for road corridor maintenance, streetlights maintenance and structure maintenance; \$50 million for the renewal of some roads and services; \$31.4 million for renewal of bridges and crossings; and \$998,368 for the renewal of six jetties.

The FRA worked on a total of 88 projects, of which, 33 ranged from bridges and crossing renewals, new jetty construction to road upgrades in the three Divisions - Central/Eastern, Northern and Western.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the remaining 55 FRA projects, 23 have been completed, 23 ongoing and nine have been cancelled.

In the financial year 2022-2023, the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) had requested \$437.3 million through the capital grant of which \$162.5 million for Transport Infrastructure Investment Sector Project (TIISP) loan funded projects. However, only \$362.9 million was approved. The approved sum reduced the maintenance and renewals budget by \$84.7 million, in addition to no provision for the emergency response works. It did not allow for the \$25 million spent on emergency works in the 2021-2022 financial year.

Of the \$362.9 million budgeted for FRA's capital works, \$219 million had been expended by December 2022, \$291 million by February 2023 and \$314 million envisaged by end of March 2023, so around 86 percent was utilised. The rising cost of inflation and freight is also a major factor as contractors have sought compensation in this regard.

The WAF's capital investment allocation for the financial year 2022-2023 was \$115.1 billion with a total number of 189 capital projects. Projects in the Central/Eastern Division are 74, Western Division - 35 and Northern Division - 14 and nationwide support programmes are 40 projects. There are a total of 137 projects currently in progress.

The actual committed budget to utilisation is 45 percent as at end of March 2023. It is anticipated that 113 capital projects should be included in the next financial year. I have stretched to WAF the utilisation Quarter 4.

The provision of affordable and sustainable electricity services is intended to enhance the living standards of the rural people. A total sum of \$5.7 million was allocated for Housewiring of Grid Extension projects. These house wiring intends to connect an additional 6,695 houses to the grid which will benefit a total of 33,475 ordinary Fijians throughout the Central, Northern and Western Divisions. To date, a total of 25 percent has been utilised and work is currently ongoing to assist more Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an allocation of \$350,000 as part of the rehabilitation works on diesel schemes for our rural communities, a total of 60 percent has been utilised. In addition, a total of \$4 million was allocated for the installation of solar home systems. To date, the team has prepared all documentations and have awarded the tender for the implementation of the projects and the contract is currently being finalised.

We included the Fiji Meteorological Services, given its importance in times of natural disasters. The Fiji Meteorological Services was provided with \$2 million for the upgrade of Nausori Radar - \$1.6 million has been paid as Phase 1 for purchasing equipment. Phase 2 will include using the \$400,000 from the balance to purchase equipment totalling \$2 million. The balance is expected to be paid in the 2023-2024 Budget.

Finally, for the installation of the Nausori Automated Weather Observing System (AWOS), Sir, \$674,000 was paid for manufacture and balance of which \$272,000 has been rolled over to the 2023-2024 Budget.

Work has started on the repair of the Nabouwalu Office and construction of Grade 6 Quarters totalling \$300,000. This is expected to be completed in July 2023. On the upgrade of Udu Point Meteorological Station, \$150,000 has been allocated and the contract has been signed and work will begin this week. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his update on the infrastructure projects at the Ministry. Just one small question in relation to the Fiji Meteorological Services. You had mentioned the upgrading of the Nausori Radar which is very critical for the cyclone season and also for the automated weather stations at Nausori. I think you also mentioned Matei and Nabouwalu.

The other one that is very important that is also in the Budget is your hydrological equipment and I think in your corporate plan for this year was Elevuka, Rakiraki, Qauia, Korovou, Navakasili and Mt. Kasi. I think especially for flooding, this is very important. I would just like to ask if you might be in a position to give us an update if those equipment have also been put in place.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, honourable Usamate. I do not have specific details but in our meeting today to finalise the budget, we have included some equipment for hydrology and I cannot really specify which ones. However, that budget has been increased to take into account the additional equipment. This probably includes what you have mentioned but I will need to confirm the specifics.

HON. V. NATH.- Just a supplementary question to the honourable Minister, for your information, Nakida is in the centre of Viti Levu. We went there once, we took a walk from Nawaisomo Village, it was about six and half hours walk. We took a track, walked and stayed a

night at Nakida and then while returning, we turned from Nakida to Wairuarua. We crossed one river 23 times and then it took us about three and half hours and then we took a two-hour boat ride and came back to Waisomo. That cut which I am talking about honourable Minister, can you provide an update on phase 2 of the Nakida Road Project and Waisomo and Wairuarua project?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That project is the one which is done in association with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and from my understanding, it is about 80 percent completed. We should be commissioning that, hopefully, within the next two to three months and I will give you the update as soon as I can.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just a quick question, honourable Minister, with respect to what is left to do and in terms of the 2022-2023 financial year, is part of the programme including a gantry system being put in place with respect to weigh-in-motion that needs to be done and I think it puts both the Ministry of Transport and both of these things into the same basket?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sorry, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- As part of the programme, will there be installations of gantry systems where you can use the weigh-in-motion that needs to be put in right throughout Fiji, that is helpful to the Ministry of Transport also with respect to how they weigh trucks, et cetera? Is that going to be part of this particular session or is it something that you will be doing in the next budget process?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Currently, the one on the way to Ba, it should be completed and commissioned shortly, so that is part of the programme which we will also look into the future for additional weighbridges. There have also been consultations with the Fiji Haulage Association. There are differences in terms of what LTA views as the gross net weight. That is an area which we will need to iron out.

We have established a working committee to look into that as to what would be the most practical because business owners have complained about the high cost. Not only that but also in terms of the fine whereby instead of penalising one vehicle for not complying, they fine the whole fleet. That is an area which we are working on and looking at the regulations as well.

(Question No. 53/2023 was withdrawn)

Electoral System for Municipal Elections

(Question No. 54/2023)

HON. P.K. BALA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice update Parliament on the electoral system to be used in the proposed Municipal Elections?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr, Speaker, Sir, on 31st January, 2023, Cabinet approved a working group for Municipal Council Elections to be set up to prepare for a detailed action plan to conduct the Municipal Council Elections.

The Cabinet endorsed the working group to be chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Local Government and to include other key Permanent Secretaries, namely, Finance, Solicitor-General, Acting Supervisor of Elections and Chief Executive Officers for all 13 Municipal Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the working group has been tasked with various responsibilities. This

includes recommending the most appropriate electoral system to be used for the Municipal Council Elections. At this stage, I am unable to inform this august Parliament as to which electoral system will be used, as I would be pre-empting the work of the working committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current electoral system as set out under the Local Government Act 1972 is a block vote method. In this method, each Constituency or Ward elects more than one representative, and voters can cast as many votes as they are available seats.

The working group is in the process of carrying out reviews of the current legislation in place and holding consultations with important stakeholders to identify the most appropriate electoral system. Once finalised, they will table their recommendations to Cabinet, and thereafter I will be able to provide an update in this august Parliament.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government will ensure that thorough awareness is carried on whatever electoral system is identified for the Municipal Council Elections.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Is there a timeframe within which this working group is to come back to you and we can look forward to the election being conducted, say in December, or whatever it is, whether a year, 12 months or two years? Is there a timeframe that has been given to this working group to come back so that we actually have some firm dates with respect to the elections?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- No timeframe. We can update again probably in the June Sitting and provide a realistic timeframe.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- My question to the honourable Attorney-General, how would the electoral system encourage or discourage political participation and impact voter turnout at a national level?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- That is a new question. I am unable to respond to that at this stage.

Development of Community-Based Tourism (Question No. 55/2023)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the works currently being carried out on developing community-based tourism?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I thank honourable Vakalalabure for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know that Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are the backbone of our economy. They are essentially in every sector. As I have said earlier in this august Parliament, we want to pay the same attention to community-based tourism businesses as we do with any other. We want global communities to have full ownership and management of their business so that the economic benefits of tourism stay within their community.

We have already seen a considerable appetite in resource owners wanting to be part of this sector. This could be a community up in the highlands, who have unique traditions, or a village on the coast Savusavu, who wants to provide horseback riding. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these communities have great potential to be included in the tourism value chain and fill gaps in the market that tourists actually wants.

To promote diversification and inclusivity, the Department of Tourism continues to visit communities in partnership with other Government agencies such as the iTaukei Affairs and MSME Fiji, to provide technical advice on tourism development and identify needs to provide targeted assistance. We will look to support businesses such as Bouma Waterfalls through the programmes such as the Integrated Human Resources Development Programme (IHRDP).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most recently, the Department of Tourism and MSME Fiji visited 20 Villages and about 50 tourism MSMEs in Nadroga, Ba, Tavua, Rakiraki, Naitasiri and Namosi Provinces. The Villages include, Biausevu, Nakabuta, Lomawai, Abaca, Natalau, Tavua Village, Colo-i-Suva, Solevu, Yaro and Sawani, to name a few.

Some of the expected outcomes of the community awareness and engagement are:

1. Take stock of current and potential tourism products.
2. Supporting infrastructure and services and needs of the communities.
3. Advocate responsible tourism such as child safety.
4. Create awareness and advocate on the code of conduct for tourism service providers which Cabinet recently endorsed.
5. Identify key barriers faced by MSMEs and communities in order to provide targeted assistance such as training and access through finance.
6. Promote ecotourism to promote our unique flora and fauna, cultural diversity and adventure tourism such as whale and dolphin watching, hiking, waterfall tours as the best form of community-based tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry endeavours to continue with this exercise in the coming months and years. Our immediate need is ensuring that we have a dedicated team to support community-based tourism work, to better address the needs of the community.

Since taking office, I have already spoken to a number of development partners, such the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to support the Ministry in promoting more community-based tourism.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament, with respect to community tourism and in terms of the tourism dollars that we actually earn, what percentage of those dollars earned comes from the community tourism sector?

Secondly, Sir, with all the development plans that you are actually going to undertake, does that also mean that you are going to incorporate SDG 5 which is gender equality into those particular programmes?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, is it me or the sound system? I could not understand the question.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am sorry, my apologies. Can you hear me now?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.-We all go and say that tourism earns \$2 billion, but what percentage of those earnings is actually derived from the current community tourism? Also, whether the development plans will ensure that SDG5 – gender equality, is actually incorporated into those development plans?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Are you asking how much of the tourism earnings received today comes from community tourism? I really cannot give an answer right now, Mr. Speaker, I think it is still quite small. If you look at the pricing situation in the country and you talk about a \$2.2 billion receipt, it is mostly with the bigger resorts - the more established ones.

Community tourism is still very small, but we hope to grow that because one of the challenges for us is to spread tourism. It is for the tourists to have more meaning to their visit. As opposed to the old sun, sand and sea, we are trying to encourage them to be involved and most are showing interest in that area. But in terms of the relationship, in terms of the income we derive from it, I am afraid I cannot give you a figure right now.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a supplementary question. Before that, I would like to make a wish within the minute I have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they say that our success is shaped from our failures, and I would like to wish the Coalition Government a happy 100 days. My question is, can the honourable Minister for Tourism enlighten us on the limitations of community-based tourism related to cultural sensitivity issues?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- If you are you talking about the limitations that we face, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the challenges that we see is the management of these types of operation. We still do not have that capacity to fully run properties like that in the manner that it can continue to deliver consistently on standards.

There is still quite a lot of intervention that we need to do, intervention in the sense that there is going to be a lot of handholding. In my years in tourism, I see something come up, it runs hot for a while and then it collapses. A lot has happened in this country in that area.

Currently, we are working with about 35 backpackers' operations in the country. Some have struggled and some have fallen by the wayside, but we will intervene and prop them up. That is where the challenge is, the capacity to be able to manage this operation consistently at the standard expected by the visitors.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I thank the honourable Minister for his feedback that he has given on community-based tourism. I remember may be in 20 or 30 years ago, there is always a concern about leakage from the tourism industry. Of course, in the community-based tourism all that money is coming there to stay. The question that I was going to ask was related somewhat to what you have just talked about.

Some of the names you have mentioned have had these things in the past. I do not know whether they continued, whether it is Abaca or whether it is visit to village gardens. As we move into what might I call 'community-based tourism 2', I am just wondering whether there has been a systematic way of identifying what went wrong in all of what you have mentioned already – the management of handholding, what went wrong and what are your plans to make sure that community-based tourism 2, as I will call it, will be more effective than what happened in the past because we know how things happened? So, if there is a specific approach for that to happen.

HON.V.R. GAVOKA.- Thank you, honourable Member. As I had indicated here, we are visiting a lot of these Provinces and visiting the specific properties and attractions that are there, and we have identified what needs to be done.

As I have highlighted in my other reply, it is the sense of consistency. However, what is encouraging though is that a lot of these people may be struggling but they have been in the business for 20 to 30 years and that, to us, is quite encouraging that we can build on that. The commitment to continue their business is there, it is a matter of intervention at this time.

In some areas, it is the number of cyclones that came in there, and at one time there were quite some serious ones and, of course, COVID-19. I can say that because of their weak structure, a lot of them could not survive those types of catastrophes - the disaster and the epidemic. But the redeeming factor to me is that they have been there for quite some time, they have been weak, but we can intervene now and prop them up. So, there is a lot of learning to be done from that. In some cases, it is now the second and third generation who are showing interest and we are there to prop them up.

There is something about tourism in Fiji, it is always sad, and this is what people always say, "When you build a hotel in Fiji, it is the third owner who makes the profit. The first owner builds it and does not make it. The second one buys it and does not make it. The third owner is the person who makes the profit." That is about the story of tourism in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, so it is a matter of time and learning and if you persevere, it comes right, and I believe this will happen in community tourism, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, my sincere apology for raising this question but it is an excellent idea. One of the challenges in the rural areas is transportation and, of course, the existing infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker knows the limitations at Matei Airport, the honourable Prime Minister knows the limitations at Savusavu Airport because if you load a surfing board, that is three or four passengers offloaded for the Taveuni flight. So, having served in the rural areas, I know the concerns that they have - opportunities are there, so will this be part of package as well?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, most definitely. Perhaps, I can disclose here now that there is a huge initiative for Vanua Levu - to develop tourism in Vanua Levu with the World Bank at a value of some US\$60 million. It is a holistic one, including the upgrade of the airports to take full-loaded aircrafts consistently and strengthen the night flight out of Labasa. Let me just speak on Vanua Levu.

Vanua Levu is a high yield market because of its adventure. Those who go there are normally divers (adventure) and they can do that the whole day, say around the Savusavu area to Natewa, and then travel late in the evening to Labasa, fly out by the evening and connect to Viti Levu or Nadi. That is the kind of development that we are looking at in Vanua Levu, to be easy as it is in Viti Levu.

The infrastructure will also improve. We will also share with you about the Blue Township in Savusavu. So, all these things will come together and Vanua Levu in particular, will see a huge improvement in tourism.

In other parts of Fiji, you have to invest in the equipment that is best suited for those rough terrain. There are now people in Nadi who provide that kind of equipment that can go through over the hills of Sabeto and into Nadarivatu. A special kind of vehicle is now available for tourists. So, all in all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is all beginning to come together.

Removal of 20 Cents Per Litre Fuel Duty
(Question No. 56/2023)

HON. K.K. LAL asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament if the 20 cents per litre fuel duty will be removed?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I think the honourable Member is probably confused and may also be confusing everyone else in this country. But, let me just contextualise the issue, Sir.

Diesel fuel used to attract 20 cents per litre while motor spirit was 46 cents. In the COVID-19 Response Budget in March 2021, the FijiFirst Government introduced an additional excise duty of 20 cents per litre on fuel. This meant that the duty on diesel fuel became 40 cents a litre and the duty on motor spirit became 66 cents per litre.

The justification during COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Government was that it will then help induce more revenue or reduce revenue loss because the consumers are not going to be paying extra price than what they were paying before. That was the logic. So, if global fuel prices went down, the Government raised the tax to 20 cents per litre, saying that the original price would remain the same because the global price has gone down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was there for two years. When it was introduced, we opposed it very strongly and the reason why we opposed it was that, if the global fuel prices are going down and the consumers and the people in the country were suffering, the cost of living was going up, you let that reduction in price be passed down to the consumers and the businesses. That would have been the right logic or the right thing to do because, yes, we were in a difficult economic situation. We were getting budget support, we were borrowing, but we were also struggling to help the people. So, instead of helping the people, in two years, that \$112 million that should have gone into the pockets of the consumers went to Government.

(Hon. R.R. Sharma interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I just explained to him, he is talking about revenue - yelling from there. I am just saying that, that was the time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to put money into the pockets of the people. The Government were saying all that but then, the actions they were taking was quite contrary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in March 2022 after all that pressure and call from the people generally and the businesses because when the fuel price went up, the Government put the tax, the businesses are alright, but they pass it on to the consumers. So, the ordinary consumers were facing this transmission mechanism where businesses...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Well, I am answering the question. You do not understand it, this is the trouble with you. I am trying to explain the context....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They do not like that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I am telling the truth.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And the truth was that they are sitting on the other side now, talking about cost of living where the people who supported an action that put them further into trouble.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what happened at that time was because when the price went up, by the time they reduced it, they had taken \$112 million but by that time some of the passing on remained. In economics, we always understand that - that prices are always sticky-upwards. Honourable Usamate understands that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just answer the question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Even after they reduced the 20 cents tax in March 2022, some of the prices would have already gone.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the simple answer to the honourable Member's question is that it was the FijiFirst Party which raised the 20 cents tax, then they reduced it and that is where the matter is.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is, can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister inform Parliament if the 20 cents per litre fuel duty will be removed?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Again, Mr. Speaker, she is totally confused. I have just explained...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... that the 20 cents additional tax was put on by the FijiFirst Party. Then they reduced it.

Mr. Speaker, as I have said, motor spirit has a 46 cents tax and diesel fuel has 20 cents. They are asking now, after dumping onto the consumers, making them suffer, they now want to know whether we are going to reduce the tax by 20 percent...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- What is your answer?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Wait for the budget.

(Laughter)

HON. K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the honourable Minister is confused. The question is very clear. It is a 'yes' or 'no' answer question, very simple.

However, the honourable Minister is trying to evade the question. My supplementary question is, before you were appointed, you are a vocal critic of the fuel tax. Can you explain why you have changed your position now that you are in office?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me explain to you why the honourable Member is totally confused and it has confused others.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, no!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And I will tell you why.

HON. K. LAL.- No, you are the only person who is confused on that side, the only person talking.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- His question is, why would you reduce 20 cents tax?

HON. K. LAL.- Yes or no?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He does not even know that on motor spirit, the tax is 46 cents. He is not asking about 46 cents, he is asking about 20 cents and I am not sure whether 20 cents should be reduced on 46 cents or 20 cents reduced on the diesel fuel. That is why he is confused, and I will let them remain confused, Mr. Speaker, thank you.

(Laughter)

Nature-Based Seawalls
(Question No. 57/2023)

HON. A.V.B.C BAINIVALU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways update Parliament on the nature-based seawalls project that has been agreed to between the Ministry and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Kiwa Initiative?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question by the honourable Member. The Kiwa Initiative is a multi-donor programme by the European Union, the Agency for French Development, Global Affairs Canada and Australia, that aims to strengthen climate change resilience for Pacific Islands ecosystems, communities and economies through nature-based solutions.

The initiative aims to combat coastal erosion and reduce the vulnerability of communities to the effect of coastal degradation and riverbank erosion by establishing nature-based solutions which includes integrated infrastructure and planted vegetation, stone blocks with mangroves and vetiver.

The project will further help improve coastal livelihoods and build community resilience to natural disasters and climate change impacts.

The Ministry of Waterways signed an agreement with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on 13th March, 2023 as an implementing agency for the grant of €326,000, equivalent to over FJ\$700,000 under this Kiwa Initiative.

The six sites identified under this initiative are Nakawaga Village, Vesi Village and Ligaulevu Village on Mali Island; Nasarata Village in Somosomo, Taveuni; Navola Village in Sigatoka' and Navolau No. 1 Village in Rakiraki.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask, we are asking someone to reduce the fuel prices, that very someone...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.-... who has failed to reduce the prices of lamb chops in Fiji.

Speaker, Sir, I understand nature-based seawall project is the great initiative to help vulnerable....

(Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad interjected)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Listen, listen, please!

Mr. Speaker, I would like to repeat my question due to the indifference from the honourable Minister of Finance.

The nature-based seawall project is a great initiative, and it will definitely help our vulnerable communities along the coast lines. The question for honourable Minister for Agriculture is, if he can precisely clarify the possible risks to and from the project and the strategy to mitigate them?

HON. V.T.T. K. NAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot understand the question. Can you rephrase it, please?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will repeat the question. Can the honourable Minister precisely clarify about the nature-based seawall project, the possible risks to the project and from the project and the strategy to mitigate these risks?

HON. V.T.T.K. NAYALU.- I will try and answer the question but, first of all, can I ask a question also?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. V.T.T. K. NAYALU.- What kind of risks are your referring to, is it financial risks or environmental risks?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- All.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- In terms of finance, I think one of the reasons why we seek donor funding is to help us with the financing of projects of this nature. The enormous work that is involved and these coastal degradation is not confined only to a few areas in Fiji, it touches the whole of our coastal areas. So, if you are talking about the risk to our coast, the risk is enormous than the risk from sea level rise and the cost to mitigate these risks is also enormous. That is why we have to seek donor funding.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his response. One of the things that we find whenever we go for *talanoa* sessions all around Fiji, there is always one thing that you almost get requested for, that is seawalls. We know that the cost of seawall made out of concrete is very expensive.

Over the past few years, Waterways has been doing a similar project where they plant vetiver grass, they lay the rocks and they plant the *dogo* (mangrove). So, I am just trying to work out, moving to this mode, is it just because of the funding or is the modality that they use for the nature-based solution is better than the one that was being used before? Is it the funding, plus a better product, or is it just the funding? I am just trying to get to grips with that.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- I have a very good answer for you. Go to Ovalau, there is a similar project in front of PAFCO, that was done by the Japanese. I saw it when I was a five-year-old student in Ovalau when my mother was posted to Ovalau as a teacher. That nature-based seawall is still there today. I am now 56 years old, so that is proof to you that the concept works.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Is that the same thing?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Yes, same kind of thing. This nature-based solution is a Japanese model.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Just a supplementary to the honourable Minister, thank you for your response. It is just a contribution from the community that I am interested to know, because I know that apart from the vetiver grass, you already have the nurseries for that, but a lot of boulders and I discussed this with the honourable Minister for Lands the other day because this is an opportunity as well for our people, particularly landowners. So, contribution from the community, particularly boulders or any financial contribution from them.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has answered the question himself because the boulders, yes, that is the contribution from the community and the labour to plant mangrove or vetiver grass.

Guideline for Ministry of Education Appointments
(Question No. 58/2023)

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask my question, on a lighter note, I know and understand that the honourable Minister, in his response, will say that as a former Assistant Minister for Education, I should know better, but the answer we are seeking is in the interest of the general public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is as follows:

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament as to which guidelines does the Ministry use to make appointments?

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you still asking your question or you have answered?

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you like to attempt that one?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- A simple answer to that question without adding what he has already said, it is the OMRS Guideline as already stated yesterday, and that is something that we are currently reviewing now, to improve the internal processes of the appointments that have been made within the Ministry.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very happy to see the honourable Prime Minister today and, of course, what he delivered in terms of his assessment of 100 days. But what I would like to tell the honourable Prime Minister that we have two Ministers, Minister of Finance and Minister for Education, they need to switch their places.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, both of them try and avoid the question. It looks like they do not know their portfolios. Please, it is my humble request, honourable Prime Minister.

Now, my question is related to a letter that was written by the Fiji Teachers Union (FTU) to you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- She is getting there.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- There was a letter written by the Fiji Teachers Union to the honourable Prime Minister and it was in regards to the appointment made by the honourable Minister for Education and the appointment was made not using the Guideline. So, it is not, we are raising the issue, the issue was already raised in the public arena. So, my question to you is, how are you going to rectify that problem because you have made appointments without using the Guideline.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- You have to be corrected on that, honourable Member. All appointments were made according to Guidelines and according to PSC appointments.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, the FTU is lying.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- That is the opinion that you are carrying, so you can

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, three appointments were done - appointments of two Advisors to Minister and appointment of Deputy Secretary Primary and Secondary. These positions are not on the approved structure of the Ministry. These are new positions that should first be evaluated and then they can be advertised and filled. Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament if the positions were evaluated and approved? If, yes, who evaluated and approved those positions?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, can I ask the former HR Manager what structure he is relating to?

HON. H. CHAND.- I am talking about the Ministry's structure.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- What structure it that?

HON. H. CHAND.- The Ministry's organisational structure.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Perhaps, just to assist the honourable Member, the structure that you are referring to may have a 20 percent implementation rate, is that the one? I thought the question coming from the honourable Member would be relating to whether the Ministry is going to compensate one of the Officer that you have highlighted, the Deputy Secretary, on the amount that was owed to him because the Ministry is not engaging him since he had been cleared by the Court.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- We now cross over to the eight Oral Question for today and I now call on the honourable Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development, and Disaster Management to ask his question.

Status of Tax Rebates
(Question No. 59/2023)

HON. J.R. VOCEA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the status of the tax rebates provided to investors using Fiji as their location for film production?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I thank the honourable Member for the question. I thank him for participating in Parliament from India.

Mr. Speaker, let me start by saying that the Government fully supports film production in Fiji and, obviously, both the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications are, obviously, working very hard on getting the investors to Fiji and also streamlining a lot of the processes. So, that is an important point I want to make.

Mr. Speaker, the film incentives are regulated under the Income Tax Act 2015 called Film Making and Audio-Visual Incentives Regulation 2016. Under the previous Government, film production in Fiji were eligible for a 75 percent rebate on expenditure incurred in Fiji with the minimum expenditure of \$250,000 and a maximum rebate cap of \$15 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this basically meant that if a production company spends \$20 million in Fiji to produce a film, the taxpayers or the Government will provide a direct subsidy of \$15 million, even though it was disguised as a rebate when, in fact, it was a direct subsidy. That was a very generous subsidy paid to foreign filmmakers, in fact, the highest subsidy that we pay to any industry in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the coverage of qualifying Fiji Production Expenditure was restricted in the 2019-2020 Budget to spending undertaken only in Fiji and thus, excluded director's fees and charges for foreign cast members. However, the rate was increased from 47 percent to 75 percent.

Mr. Speaker, just to be clear, when the rate was 47 percent, the qualifying expenditure for the rebate also included director's fees and charges for foreign cast members which inflated the cost and the rebate per hour. I am told that there were some productions where rate rebate subsidy payments even exceeded because if you look at the 10 percent qualifying expenditure for foreign cast members and director's fees then, the rate rebate or the subsidy payments even exceeded what was spent in

Fiji under that criteria. So, you could be spending \$100,000 but getting more than \$100,000 in rebate or subsidy.

Mr. Speaker, over a short span of time, Government had paid out subsidies of \$235.5 million, while we still have an outstanding balance of over \$180 million to be paid out. This is, Mr. Speaker, over \$400 million.

Following the COVID-19 crisis, the Government had announced a temporary suspension of outstanding film rebate payments and had made arrangement with Film Fiji for a five-year payment period to settle the outstanding film rebate payments. Nonetheless, for the outstanding rebate payment, Government has a legal obligation to settle these dues. As such, for each financial year from 2021-2022, \$40 million has been allocated to settle that outstanding film rebates according to the production payment plan or schedule developed by Film Fiji in consultation with the Ministry of Finance. That is the legal obligation, Mr. Speaker, that has to be paid.

Since the 2021-2022 Budget, \$68.7 million has been approved and paid out to production houses, Mr. Speaker. In the 2021-2022 financial year - \$38,567,000 million; 2022-2023 - \$30,097,000; so total rebate paid - \$68,664,000 million.

In the 2021-2022 Budget, Mr. Speaker, the film tax rebate was reduced from 75 percent to 20 percent of local expenditure with a cap of \$4 million - sounds reasonable thing to have been done. Despite this reduction in rebate levels, Film Fiji has received three applications for the new film tax rebate. These productions have been furnished with their provisional approval to shoot in Fiji. The approved productions are US *Survivor* Seasons 45 and 46, including *Flight to Survive*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial that a comprehensive review is undertaken, and I know that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications, is doing that to ascertain the effectiveness of the film tax rebate. When you make this kind of incentives or policies where taxpayers funds are directly involved, this is like taking out tax dollar and giving out as a subsidy. You have to have a very, very clear and thorough cost benefit analysis - look at the multiplier effect and how is it going to be effective. But without doing that, you pay this kind of taxpayers' funds - hard-earned dollar, Mr. Speaker, which is not a wise way of making policy. That is where we are and, hopefully, as I have said, we have a legal obligation - we have to pay whatever is due and that will be done.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister of Finance for pointing those things out. I think it is not good when you only sell half the story. I have got a question, but I think you need to be fair.

One of the reasons why that incentive and rebate was put in place, Mr. Speaker, so that we would entice the bigger productions out of Hollywood and Bollywood, et cetera, to come here. We all know because of COVID-19, everything came to a standstill and most of these were actually caused by COVID-19, the fact that we still owe.

I hope the honourable Minister of Finance is listening. My question is, what was the benefit that accrued to Fiji when these big production houses came with the actual in-country spend, the communities that actually benefitted, the training from Film Fiji, et cetera? All of those.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, quite a substantial benefit was actually accrued to Fiji, so we cannot just say, "Oh, we still owe that much money". They did spend a lot of money here, so we need to know what was the benefit that was accrued to Fiji.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, that is a good economic question. As I have said, when you make this kind of policies, that is the first thing you try and do.

The other thing that we always talk about in economics, Mr. Speaker, in policy making is looking at the opportunity cost. If you are looking at \$400 million in subsidy, and I pointed out - I am not disputing the fact that if an investor comes in and spends some money, there is always a multiplier effect, there is always an economy generated.

But, Mr. Speaker, all of us agree that the subsidy was just too generous. It was like throwing money at something to get some benefits of which you do not know. I mean, imagine if we had put that \$400 million into something else, other priorities. This, Mr. Speaker, is a very good example of....

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just answer it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have answered your question. I am just saying that there was no study done by the people who made this policy.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, we will do it. We are going to make policies based on that.

Mr. Speaker, it is so obvious - anyone listening to what I have just said, understanding the original subsidy, it is just mindboggling how they would do that. It is actually quite sickening, it is actually criminal negligence in policymaking, Mr. Speaker, this is an example.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, it is not an easy thing to build an industry that can become a very lucrative industry, especially as you are competing with other markets around the world. So, in this, when we were trying to attract huge companies from Hollywood and Bollywood, there is a lot of investment that is done upfront. So, the calculations are calculated if you invest this upfront, you create an industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FNU starts training people. We develop that industry here. We develop a reputation and overtime, I am sure the calculations were done, those benefits will come. When that happens, we have created that industry.

So, the important thing, as we are pointing out the cost, we also need to do a good estimation of what those benefits are. Not only of today, but the likelihood of this industry continuing in the future, especially with the kind of pristine assets that we have in this country.

I am just wondering what else is in line to get a real understanding of the cost benefits because no Government would ever want to do something that is just a cost. This is an investment. So that is sort of assessment needs to be done and I hope that you might already have the answer to that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I thought my friend here was a little bit of an economist. I remember taking his tutorial in economic statistics.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Usamate loves to use the word 'hogwash', all he said was really hogwash.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you very much.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What he does not understand Mr. Speaker, I know what he saying. He is saying, “Oh, you make an investment, it is a lot”, yes, I understand that. But in this particular case, Mr. Speaker, the throwing away of enormous amounts of taxpayers’ funds and now, we have been landed with a liability and if we are not going to look for money to settle, we could actually strangle the whole industry.

Sir, what they did has actually created a perverse incentive, in the sense that we are at the point where we could have said, “No, we are not going to pay this. We do not want this”, because right now the amount of money that has been wasted is just too much. But despite that, Mr. Speaker, we, on this side, because we do not want to send a wrong signal to our investors, despite the blunder that those in Government made, we are trying to correct that but, at the same time, we want to make sure that we get the investors to come on board.

The investors, Mr. Speaker, would understand that. They themselves would have known that this was a damn good generous subsidy, why not we go there, put the director’s fees up, the staff fees up and you spend \$100,000, you come back with \$120,000 in your pocket because this is the Government that is giving you that subsidy.” That was what happened, Mr. Speaker, so it is no point in them trying lecture us about what is the benefit and how it would have been done.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yes, that is the point.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is a very, very glaring and clear example of a kind of disaster that they created, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move on to the first Written Question and I would like to thank the honourable Assistant Minister Jovesa Vocea for staying up late or early in the morning in India. Thank you for being attentive to the call from here.

Written Questions

Exclusive Government Newspaper Advertising – *Fiji Sun* (Question No. 60/2023)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs inform Parliament of the cost of exclusive Government newspaper advertising in the *Fiji Sun* from 2014 to 2022 excluding advertising by Government commercial companies, statutory organisations and independent institutions that came by way of a directive?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as allowed for under Standing Order 45(3), may I table my response before Tables.

(Written Question No. 61/2023 – Technical fault in hearing Hon. J.R. Vocea’s question, connecting virtually from overseas)

MR. SPEAKER.- My apologies, honourable Assistant Minister, it seems you are still muted there but we will have to move on.

Grid Extension Projects – Energy Fiji Limited
(Question No.62/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on a complete list of all grid extension projects that Government has paid to the Energy Fiji Limited to complete from 2017 onwards –

- (a) The percentage of completion of each project;
- (b) Reasons for any delays; and
- (c) How these delays are being addressed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank honourable Jone Usamate for the question and I will table my response at a later date as allowed for under the Standing Orders.

MR. SPEAKER.- You talking to me or honourable Usamate?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, Sir. I was just trying to get him to my position.

Number of Recipients - Social Protection Programmes
(Question No.63/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation update Parliament on the number of recipients that were assisted through the following programmes since inception until to-date:

- (a) Disability allowance;
- (b) Care and Protection Allowance;
- (c) Poverty Benefit Scheme.
- (d) Social Pension Scheme;
- (e) Bus Fare Subsidy Assistance; and
- (f) Expanded food voucher for rural pregnant mothers.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, under Standing Order 45(4), I would now like to ¹table my written response.

(Response handed to the Secretary-General)

National Budget – Multiple Tax Benefits
(Question No. 64/2023)

HON. P.D. KUMAR asked the Government, upon notice:

During the National Budget, multiple tax benefits were announced to encourage the private sector investments for housing to increase both house stocks and rental homes in the market, can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic

Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 63/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is appended as Annexure I.

Planning, National Development and Statistics update the Parliament on the following information:

- (a) The type of tax incentives and the number of investors who took advantage of the incentive in the last 5 years; and
- (b) What was the total cost of incentives given by the Government and the number of new house stocks and rentals homes added to the market.

² HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now table my response as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

(Response handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you all for your contributions. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.56 p.m.

² Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 64/2023 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is appended as Annexure II.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 63/2023 tabled on Tuesday, 4th April, 2023, by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. (Ref. Page 874)



**MINISTER FOR WOMEN, CHILDREN AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION
(HONOURABLE LYNDA DISERU TABUYA)**

Response to the Question by honourable A.A. Maharaj is as follows:

There are currently six major Social Protection Programmes that are implemented by the Ministry and are outlined below:

(a) Disability Allowance

The Disability Allowance assist individuals with permanent disabilities. In this financial year, Government has provided a budget of \$10.7 million and is currently assisting a total of 11,437 persons with disability.

(b) Care and Protection Programme

The Care and Protection Programme is a child benefit for vulnerable children (under the age of 18 years). Children's vulnerable type of households include single parents, deserted spouses, death of breadwinner, prisoner's dependent, foster parents/guardians and children in foster or institutional care.

In this financial year, Government has provided a budget of \$13.7 million and is supporting a total of 10,646 families with children. This would be 41,518 Fijians.

(c) Poverty Benefit Scheme

The Poverty Benefit Scheme is the Government's flagship programme established in 2014 and is aimed to provide a safety net to the poor and the vulnerable. It is a poverty-targetted cash transfer aiming at improving the welfare of the poorest and break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. The maximum value of allowance is \$127 with a \$50 food voucher.

The Programme has a budget of \$34 million in this financial year and has a current total of 24,000 families or beneficiaries assisted under the Scheme.

(d) Social Pension Scheme

The Social Pension Scheme is a non-contributory pension for older persons (aged 65 years and above) who have never received superannuation through the Fiji National Provident Fund. The Social Pension Scheme provides a monthly social pension of FJ\$100.

As of 5th March, 2023, a total of 50,883 older persons are beneficiaries. The 2022-2023 budgetary allocation for Social Pension Scheme is \$55 million and is the highest budget amount among all other social assistance programmes.

(e) Bus Fare Programme

The Bus Fare Programme 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.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation, in partnership with Vodafone Fiji Ltd facilitates a top of \$25 per month on all active e-transport cards. It is paid on quarterly basis with effect from May 2022. Any unused funds are rolled over to the next month.

Currently, with a budget of \$10 million, as of February 2023, the Programme has 59,724 active cases on the system.

(f) Rural Pregnant Mothers Scheme

The Rural Pregnant Mothers Scheme was initially established in 2014 and is designed to support women who are pregnant and mothers living in rural areas with the objective of improving the maternal health and reducing child mortality. The Rural Pregnant Mothers Scheme incentivises the early access to reproductive healthcare by providing 10 food vouchers (nine months of pre-natal and first month of post-natal) or the equivalent cash transfer of FJ\$50 per month.

Over the last five years, Government had invested \$4.5 million towards this Scheme with an average of 2,611 mothers assisted each year. With the \$0.8 million allocated for this financial year, a total of 1,354 mothers have received assistance under the Scheme.

On the allocated budget and number of recipients, the table below summarises the six Social Protection Programmes and the budget that was allocated from 2014 till 2020-2021:

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMME DATA 2014-2020/2021

PROGRAMME	2014	2015	2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Poverty Benefit Scheme								
Budget Allocation	22,011,220	22,040,000	22,000,000	\$29,478,355	\$40,217,757	\$39,237,767	\$38,425,809	\$38,336,758
Actuals	19,559,714	19,948,541	17,916,587	\$28,999,836	\$40,102,286	\$39,237,767	\$38,180,776	\$33,489,339
Recipients	18,167	23,235	22,571	25,491	25,696	26,927	25,106	23,862
Child Protection Allowance								
Budget Allocation	4,530,000	2,000,000	3,300,000	\$5,195,679	\$7,081,389	\$9,821,782	\$12,386,631	\$12,387,241
Actuals	1,902,488	2,892,077	3,139,557	\$4,724,376	\$7,062,188	\$9,821,782	\$11,948,641	\$11,153,925
Recipients	2,309	3,141	3,458	4,216	5,562	8,106	8,049	8,864
Social Pension Scheme								
Budget Allocation	3,000,000	8,000,000	13,000,000	\$13,659,341	\$37,200,350	\$50,921,568	\$54,981,735	\$55,441,389
Actuals	2,428,819	8,856,822	7,345,025	\$13,361,513	\$37,116,301	\$50,921,567	\$54,367,763	\$51,904,581
Recipients	11,615	16,472	19,174	26,332	38,285	44,547	45,206	44,961
Food Voucher								
Budget Allocation	1,300,000	11,000,000	500,000	\$500,000	\$1,502,510	\$724,357	\$1,003,400	\$1,238,451
Actuals	609,927	558,985	305,206	\$458,394	\$966,152	\$724,356	\$1,003,348	\$669,450
Recipients	1,673	2,899	1,721	2,165	3,321	3,747	3,279	2,980
Allowance for Persons with Disabilities								
Budget Allocation					\$3,598,515	\$4,506,878	\$6,457,819	\$9,176,758
Actuals					\$1,290,980	\$4,506,877	\$6,457,811	\$9,007,574
Recipients					2,744	7,003	8,228	9,129
Bus Fare Scheme								
Budget Allocation					\$20,000	\$11,619,636	\$12,375,000	\$6,299,854
Actuals					\$19,989	\$11,619,636	\$11,595,000	\$3,450,000
Recipients	43134	49793	55295	65618	38260	52150	46247	28476

ANNEXURE II

Reply to Written Question No. 64/2023 tabled on Tuesday, 4th April, 2023, by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National development and Statistics. (Ref. Page 875)



**DEPUTY MINISTER AND MINISTER OF FINANCE AND
STRATEGIC PLANNING, NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND STATISTICS
(HONOURABLE PROFESSOR BIMAN CHAND PRASAD)**

Response to the Question by honourable P.D. Kumar is as follows:

- (a) The residential housing development package was introduced in 2016 which provided investors with developer profit exemptions from income tax and customs benefits and rebates.

In the last five years, three companies have been granted provisional approval under this package.

- (b) So far, all the recipients are on provisional approval (establishment phase) and the government has not incurred any costs as far as the tax benefits are concerned. Additionally, none of them have carried out any importations under the customs exemptions available so there are no costs to Government under the customs benefits as well.

As mentioned above, all the projects are in the establishment phase. Once complete, around 150 housing units are expected to be created. These units will range between 1-bedroom, 2-bedrooms and 3-bedroom apartments.