

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 5TH APRIL, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 5TH APRIL, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.40 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration and 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 Tuesday, 4th 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

Welcome

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. Welcome to Parliament and I hope that you will enjoy and also learn something from today's proceedings. You are most welcome to Parliament.

Tabling of Written Responses

At this juncture, I wish to inform honourable Members that the Secretariat has received written responses from the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration to Written Questions 9/2023, 10/2023 and 29/2023 asked by the honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua. Honourable Members, the responses have been conveyed to the honourable Qereqeretabua and copies will be made available on the Parliament website.

I would also like to add that I thank you so much for the quickness in response to written questions, honourable Prime Minister and your team. That is so reassuring, Sir. Usually written questions takes a while before the responses are received and even acknowledged in Parliament as we see, but the quick responses so far just trigger the Speaker and the Secretariat to acknowledge it with great appreciation how quick the responses have been.

Visitation-Medical Team

For the information of honourable Members, a medical team from the Ministry of Health and Medical Services have set up on Level 2 to undertake medical check-up for honourable Members. Please do so, it is free and it is available. You honourable Members are very busy and health to some of us becomes secondary, but Parliament would like to see that we have these free check-ups when Parliament sits, so just make yourself available and present yourself to the medical officers on the top floor.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report – Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2018-2019 Annual Report

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the report of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Annual Review of the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for the Period of 1st August, 2018 to 31st July, 2019. 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 term of Parliament was referred this Report. The same Report had been reintroduced in this new term of Parliament and have been referred to the current Standing Committee on Social Affairs. As per the normal process for report scrutiny, the current Committee was mandated by Parliament to review the Annual Report and report back on its findings.

The Committee deliberated on the work done by the previous Committee and the Report will therefore reiterate the work done by the previous Committee in reviewing and highlighting the contents of the Ministry's Annual Report. The Committee will also make recommendations on the anomalies noted in the report and it will highlight the discussions held by the Committee with the Ministry in relation to the issues noted from its report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this financial year, the Ministry received its highest budget enabling it to better provide for the welfare of the neediest Fijians, by sustaining all existing social protection programmes that was administered by the Ministry. The Ministry continued to work in collaboration with its stakeholders and partners from Government and the Civil Society Organisations to ensure the best possible results were obtained from its work and reviewed areas that needed improvement for better service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continued the implementation of its plans in place for policy changes, projects, programmes and better adherence to international governing instruments of the United Nations and other international and regional organisations that Fiji has ratified in relation to the benefits of its clientele. Mr. Speaker, Sir, together with its partners, the Ministry continued to deliver on the National Development Plan goals for the disadvantaged Fijians based on the foundation of the 2030 Agenda

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs in the last term of Parliament for all their efforts and contributions which has greatly assisted our Committee in the completion of 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 deliberations in this new term of Parliament.

I also extend my gratitude to the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry for Women,

Children and Poverty Alleviation, Ms. Jennifer Poole and her staff for their timely assistance in this review process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no doubt that under the able leadership of the honourable Minister for Women and her Assistant Minister, be rest assured that they will thoroughly look into issues surrounding women, children and poverty and take the Ministry to even greater heights.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- 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 be initiated at a future sitting.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now note.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, 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, National Development and Statistics;
- (2) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation;
- (3) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications; and
- (4) Honourable Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes and after that, then I will invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the statements for no more than five minutes. (I am kind of stressing on the time here, honourable Members, please take heed) and there will be no other debate.

2023 National Economic Summit

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to provide a statement on the upcoming National Economic Summit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, led by our Prime Minister, honourable Sitiveni Rabuka believes in genuine dialogue, effective consultation, participatory governance and collective decision making. We are Government that is here, not to rule but to serve our people and to serve each and every one with humility and fairness. We are here to work together with our people and collectively

tackle our challenges and devise solutions that benefit all of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this philosophy of inclusiveness in decision making lies at the heart of the Coalition Government's style of leadership and governance. Since coming into Government, we have introduced a number of inclusive decision-making structures, including the formation of the Fiscal Review Committee to advise us on taxation policies, expenditure allocations and other broad fiscal policy issues. We have also established a Cabinet Sub-Committee on Budget and an Economic Strategy Committee chaired by the honourable Prime Minister to oversee the formulation of the National Budget and coordinate our economic policy agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those times are over when one or two single person(s) will dictate the Budget process and change economic policies overnight as we saw happen in the previous government. We are back in a democracy and the dictatorial style of leadership which we experienced for the last 16 years is over and it is never going to come back.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, yes.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in January as soon as we came in Government, Cabinet approved the 2023 National Economic Summit (NES) to be held on 20th and 21st April, 2023 after a period of almost a decade. The theme for the 2023 National Economic Summit is, "Reshaping our Future through Genuine Dialogue and Collaboration".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the aim of the Summit is to bring our people together and create a collective national vision, with adequate sector policies and most importantly an implementation framework for the Government's plan to chart a path towards economic success.

The Summit has adopted a consultative and collaborative approach towards addressing sustainable development issues at national levels, by engaging various Government ministries, various segments of society including the public sector and our honourable Opposition Members. I can inform everyone that I have sent personal letters to all honourable Members of the Opposition and I hope that they will participate in the National Economic Summit. We are also including the private sector in a big way, industry groups, civil society organisations, academia, trade unions, women and religious groups, development partners and members of the general public.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Fiji moves into an era of change, engaging with all segments of society is essential to achieve the Government's overarching objectives of the following:

- (1) inclusive economic security;
- (2) social justice;
- (3) conscientious governance;
- (4) political stability;
- (5) indigenous people's participation in development; and
- (6) environmental sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the main objectives of the 2023 National Economic Summit are to:

- (1) set an economic policy agenda for an accelerated economic growth, underpinned by sustainable and inclusive development;
- (2) deliberate an actionable framework for transformative and effective economic governance;
- (3) build consensus on the imperatives for transforming Fiji's immense human capital into a nationally productive and innovative capacity that creates a secure collective future of prosperity for all;

- (4) identify pragmatic initiatives to elicit economic leadership at the sectoral level, adopting a bottom-up approach to sectoral competitiveness that contributes to national economic growth and development; and
- (5) articulate the framework within which economic priorities for Fiji are set out over the next four years.

The National Economic Summit will be held over two days and participants will be divided, Mr. Speaker, into Thematic Working Groups to encourage an integrated approach to addressing development challenges. The twelve (12) Thematic Working Groups are:

- (1) Macroeconomic management;
- (2) Key growth sectors – includes tourism, manufacturing and commerce. micro, small and medium enterprises, financial services, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and the construction industry;
- (3) Governance and reforms – includes law and order, reform of state institutions and foreign affairs and external trade;
- (4) Human development – includes health, education and training, housing and urban development, youth and protection of children, culture and heritage, sports development, poverty alleviation, employment and labour market, women in economic development;
- (5) Rural and outer island development;
- (6) Land based activities – includes sugar, non-sugar crops & livestock, forestry, land resource development & management and mineral water and ground water resources;
- (7) Marine based activities and resources;
- (8) Technology - includes information & communication technology;
- (9) Indigenous people's participation in development;
- (10) Water resource and waste management - includes waste and wastewater and waste management;
- (11) Transport; and
- (12) Energy and electricity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, each thematic working group will have a chairperson and the role of the chairperson will be to facilitate the discussions of the thematic working group. The chairperson is to also provide necessary leadership and networking for their thematic areas. The chairperson will also ensure that sufficient time is allowed for complex or contentious issues and encourage active engagement and effective communication by all members. These thematic groups will encourage open, frank and thorough dialogue discussions and every member's opinion will be sought, acknowledged and respected and we will ensure that discussions are in line with the vision, policies and strategies of the Coalition Government.

The cross-cutting issues like climate change, environment, disaster mitigation and management and gender is being integrated and mainstreamed into the different thematic areas. Mainstreaming cross-cutting issues are critical and requires institutional commitment. The Ministry of Finance is playing the lead role in organising the Summit and facilitating papers, discussions and outcomes of the Summit, which will feed into the upcoming 2023-2024 Budget, and potentially, a new National Development Plan in the future.

As part of this work, the Ministry is currently developing the baseline strategy papers on various thematic areas which will form the basis of discussions during the Summit. In addition to the thematic working groups discussions, there will five plenary sessions held over the two-day Summit with the following themes:

- (1) The state of the economy and future of fiscal policy;

- (2) Responsible, responsive and resilient leadership;
- (3) Universal coverage and basic health care;
- (4) Research and innovation - pathways for economic prosperity; and
- (5) Transparency and accountability priorities for effective governance.

Among others, the key discussions around the thematic working groups will be around addressing the following issues:

- (1) How to improve macro-economic management and financial and fiscal stability;
- (2) How to transition away from a largely public sector-led growth in the past model to a more private sector driven economy;
- (3) What are the measures that are needed to diversify the Fijian economy and create more jobs and income for our people;
- (4) How can we be improving our health care facilities which are, as we all know, in a poor and dilapidated state, an insufficient programme for maintenance and upkeep, poor hygiene and sanitation facilities are well known;
- (5) How can we address the challenges in our water sector. We have had a lot of debate and discussion on this. The task for the Coalition Government is to address these challenges, which is exacerbated by aging water infrastructure, a growing population, rural to urban drift and the impacts of climate change on our raw water sources. The Summit is expected to set out strategies and address some of these issues;
- (6) How can we make growth and development more inclusive and what are the measures and incentives to be provided to increase indigenous participation in development;
- (7) How can we grow our agriculture sector, expand our rural economy and support MSMEs;
- (8) How do we improve ease of doing business (I know the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica is working very hard on this and we should have more discussions) on how to remove the bureaucracies and lengthy approval processes to support the private sector, and other important questions of national importance and other important questions of national importance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outcomes of the Summit will be fed into a communique which will contain economic measures, strategies on various thematic areas and sectors and that is expected to chart a path towards economic recovery and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can inform Parliament that the preparations are going very well. The main venue of the 2023 National Economic Summit will be the Grand Pacific Hotel, and of the 12 thematic working groups, eight will be based at GPH and four at Albert Park. I want to thank Suva City Council for making this available. Around 500 delegates and participants are expected to attend the 2023 National Economic Summit. In fact, we are extremely oversubscribed and we are trying to accommodate as many people as we can.

On the logistics side, the 12 thematic working groups have been finalised and invitations are being sent out and we are awaiting confirmations. As I said before, invitations have also been sent to all the Members of Parliament, including as I said the Opposition Members, all the Ministers who would be participating, other political parties, diplomatic missions, international and regional bodies, civil society organisations, trade unions, academia, women and religious groups and many important players in our private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the Economic Summit as I said, we will have a great opportunity to meet, discuss and understand the views and ideas of so many different people. We have said that it is important for any government to understand that a lot of wisdom, ideas reside outside of government as well. This Summit is an attempt to create a very genuine forum so that we can

genuinely dialogue, collaborate and work out how we can take this country to greater heights.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their response.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to acknowledge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for his Ministerial Statement this morning on the NFP-led and NFP dominated National Economic Summit.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know what you are trying to do. It will not work.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We look forward to the ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It will never work.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ... outcome of the Summit, because in his eight years as an Opposition and government-in-waiting, we keep hearing this from the honourable Member when we were in government. This is a Government that has run out of ideas, this is a Government that has no money, this is a Government that has no plan.

HON. J. USAMATE.- No plan.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We look forward to his plan, but definitely the economy is important for all Fijians and I, as a former Minister for National Security, I always stressed in this august Parliament that we need economic security for national security.

We also need national security for economic security because it is national security that stabilises, that creates that environment for growth and stability. So, we look forward to the ideas and the plans that the honourable Minister has and, of course, the Members of Government through this Summit.

I like the statement by the honourable Minister stating that they are a Government that is genuine and they are talking about dialogue, but in his statement yesterday, Mr. Speaker, this is what he mentioned and I quote: "... to understand some of the pain that you need to go through when you sit in Opposition."

HON. J. USAMATE.- Where is the love?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you want dialogue, we hear every word uttered from the other side. That is a very vengeful statement.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Well in response to what he said.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We have been accused of two-men rule. We have been accused of dictatorship but we see a change now in the current Government as well and we are worried that, that will be a one-man rule and the silent 28, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Is that the way forward?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Good try, good try!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- But I stated in my initial response to His Excellency the President's Address, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are here to help.

I received the letter first from the Permanent Secretary for Finance dated 14th March, 2023 and then I just received this week a letter dated 9th March from the honourable Minister. I am sure this letter must have been backdated because I received the letter from the Permanent Secretary well in advance when we were still in Bahrain.

Let me go to the dialogue. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the dialogue that we undertook and I can go into the details. Let me just read it for the benefit of this and this is what guided our policies - the voice of the people and, of course, the environment keeps changing. We looked at indicators and we have to make re-adjustments along the way. Mr. Speaker, let me read it out.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Everything you are saying we can hear.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The honourable Tuisawau loves doing this.

(Laughter)

(Honourable L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I quote:

“There are many reasons for the poor performance of Fiji's economy over recent decades.”

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- 16 years.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.-

“The persistence of political instability, particular in the wake of *coups*, incidence of inter-communal violence, erosion of confidence and increase in crime exacerbated the country's economic problems. Investors, both local and foreign seek stability and certainty because this reduces the risk of their investment decisions.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it talks about the role of Government, role of the private sector and the role of the civil society. It talks about the areas of focus and, of course, marco-economic stability, the development of the resource-based sectors....

HON. J. USAMATE.- There you go.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I would urge the honourable Minister,...

HON. J. USAMATE.- He will not come up with anything new.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ...you had the advantage of learning from us,...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ...from our policies, from our successes and, of course, from our failures as well.

Let us be transparent about this, but may I suggest to the honourable Minister, this is a good guiding document for this National Economic Summit that you intend to conduct on the 21st to 22nd April. We wish you well, Mr. Speaker. I wish Government well in this process.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Tourism Sector Performance

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, Members of Parliament and fellow countrymen. Thank you for the opportunity to share with Members of this Parliament how Fiji's tourism industry has been performing. Since taking office, I have spent a fair amount of time with the tourism industry, I have mostly been in the West but I intend to visit everyone across Fiji including the outer maritime islands. I want to do so to hear their concerns and to pay my respects for the sacrifices over the last few years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United Nation World Tourism Organization's forward-looking scenarios for 2023 shows that international tourist arrivals could reach 80 percent to 95 percent of pre-pandemic levels this year, depending, of course, on the extent of the economic slowdown, the ongoing recovery of travel in Asia and the Pacific and the evolution of the Russian offensive in Ukraine among other factors.

More than 900 million tourists travelled internationally in 2022, double the number recorded in 2021, though still 63 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Every global region recorded notable increases in international tourist numbers. Asia and the Pacific reached only 23 percent due to stronger pandemic related restrictions which has eased only in recent months, China being the main case here.

On Fiji's performance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite lagging behind as a region, the Fiji tourism industry has been doing well beyond what we expected. This strong performance has put us on the path of recovery. Next year, we expect visitor arrivals to return to pre-pandemic levels and in 2025, we expect to grow by 3 percent.

Since reopening our borders in December 2021, Fiji's hotel occupancy rate has soared, consistently tracking above 2019 levels. In 2019, Mr. Speaker, being the benchmark going forward after the pandemic. Last year, we recovered 71 percent of pre-pandemic visitor numbers. By value, we reached 73 percent of tourism earnings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Tourism administers Fiji's International Visitor Survey (IVS). The IVS essentially collects data from departing visitors due to determined key indicators such as tourism spend and travel trends. This is quite widely used by shareholders such as the Fiji Bureau of Statistics and the tourism industry.

Data from April to December 2022 showed an estimated \$1.67 billion in tourism earnings. If you take into account the airfare component, we are looking at approximately \$2 billion in earnings already. Total per person per trip was \$3,572, an increase of 6 percent from 2019's (\$3,379) which

means every trip the visitors make, they spend more. And per night earnings were recorded at \$376.40, an increase of 7 percent from 2019 of \$353.

The Nadi to Coral Coast corridor accounted for just over 60 percent with the North accounting for 4 percent. Vanua Levu and the surrounds which promises high yield is a region we are looking at specifically with the World Bank to grow.

Mr. Speaker, Sr, we recently launched the “Fiji where happiness comes naturally” brand. While we know there is great competition ahead, I am happy to share that we had close to 50 percent repeat visitors showing good brand loyalty. Overall, visitor satisfaction too increased to 93 percent, meaning people enjoy coming back to Fiji.

On flights, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are seeing increase capacity into Fiji through our national carrier; Fiji Airways who are recording bookings exceeding 2019 ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- *Vinaka* Fiji Airways.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... growing at an average 7 percent every week. The forecasted operating capacity in each quarter next year is above 2019 with a network growth of 23 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Sunday this week, we welcomed back twice weekly flights between Nadi and Hong Kong.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you Fiji Airways.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The first flight was operating at 90 percent, or in the language of airlines, “that there is a fully booked flight” with forward bookings for 12 months recorded at 16,193 (both ways).

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you Fiji Airways.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Besides resuming direct service to Hong Kong, we welcomed back our direct flight from Narita, Japan. This will also be a twice weekly flight. Like the Hong Kong flight, this is a huge win for tourism, trade, business and investment. The Japanese market, Mr. Speaker, Sir, contributed close to \$40 million in earnings in 2019, so they are an important market for us, and soon, we will also be flying to South Korea. Bookings from Asia are growing with Hong Kong already ahead of expectation.

There is also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the call to fly directly into mainland China and that is also in the books; choice between Beijing and Shanghai. So, while we are seeing exceptional numbers from Australia, New Zealand and United States of America, we can soon expect the gradual return of the Asian market. While we have natural friends such as Australia and New Zealand, we have a vested interest in diversifying our market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, soon we will be adding two new A350-900 aircrafts, adding 60 more extra seats for each aircraft and 16 extra tonnes of cargo by mid-2023. That means, potentially new routes over the next two or three years including in Asia. We are also looking at Seattle, Dallas or Houston or Chicago. It is quite impressive. We are going places we never thought we would, potentially connecting all the way to Chicago on the East Coast.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have been supported by partners such as Fiji Airways, Tourism Fiji, Fiji Hotel and Tourism Association, Society of Fiji Travel Associates and the entire industry working

behind the scenes to position Fiji as a desired destination. But there have been challenges, some like labour are more profound than others then there are greater issues such as price competitiveness and impacts of climate change. All these require stronger than ever partnership between the Government and the private sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have shared in this Parliament, we will use every avenue - the National Economic Summit, the National Sustainable Tourism Framework Consultation, the National Budget to ensure we create the right environment for tourism to flourish. The update I have shared, the number of recovery means more jobs. It means more employment, demand for food produce, opportunities to invest, opportunities to build and create.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this year's ANZ Fiji Excellence in Tourism Award, I shared with the industry that their success is our success. When the tourism industry thrives, so does the economy and related sectors and when the economy prospers, so do the lives of our people in communities. We build roads that connect people and markets, we invest in education and health care, take water and electricity to the most remote communities - that is the bottom line.

To conclude, I would like to thank everyone who has in one way or the other contributed to where we are today in tourism. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you again for this opportunity to deliver my Ministerial Statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate for their response.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I want to take just maybe a minute to reflect on what has been told to us and to thank the honourable Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation. Mr. Speaker, having sat in that chair for quite a substantial amount of time, I do understand how it works, but I am so grateful that after eight years, the honourable Minister has now seen the light.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I see a glint in his smile and I am happy to say that it took us eight years, but now you understand.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, all that he has said completely acceptance and I think, we need to give credit to where credit is due.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We recovered post COVID-19 because of the strong policies that were put in place by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- You cannot deny that, Mr. Speaker, We ensured that the country would be ready to welcome back our tourists with strong decisions that were made during that post COVID-19 period and we owe a great deal of gratitude, not just to those who worked within the ministries, we owe a great deal of gratitude to the private sector because of the participation they had throughout the period of COVID-19. Without them, we also would not have been in a state of readiness to welcome back our tourists. At every step of the way, we had consultations with them and we owe

them a debt of gratitude because Fiji is now back in that particular space.

Might I remind the honourable Minister also, we, because of our strong policies became the admiration of quite a few countries around the world and we got asked at every international forum; how did you guys do it?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not about always recovery, this is the greatest international crisis; give credit where credit is due, honourable Minister.

Again, all these talk about bipartisanship, we want to be nice to you and dialogue, it comes out, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The love to all comes out as soon as they get told, “please just acknowledge what the FijiFirst government had done.”

HON. J. USAMATE.- True colours come out.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We had actually hit the worst global economic crisis in history, but FijiFirst stepped up to deal with it. It is so nice to hear also that the honourable Minister continuously for eight years bashed Fiji Airways...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ...he bashed up for buying airbus. Today he can stand there and pontificate about two new A350s that we are buying - airbus! What happened to Boeing, what happened to Qantas, honourable Minister?

HON. J. USAMATE.- His seen the light.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I am so happy the honourable Minister has seen the light ...

(Laughter)

... and I pray that you continue to see the light.

Mr. Speaker, one more, just the last one, yesterday he also gave statements with respect to sporting activities, et cetera that actually happened. I was sitting here waiting and listening to the honourable Leader of the Opposition when he mentioned something about golf. The honourable Minister actually grimaced; why? Because he was there standing pontificating about sporting events and how much money it was going to bring in terms of SPARTAN. Now he realised that. Again, honourable Minister, thank you for seeing the light.

With those few words, I commend him on what he has actually said, may you continue to see the light, honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You have a very good memory.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for morning tea and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.08 a.m.

Digital Television Initiative (Walesi)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you today to make a Ministerial Statement on the Digital Television Initiative commonly known as *Walesi* – Fiji’s National Digital Platform. The story of *Walesi* is a classic example of government overreach, excessive control, wastage, mismanagement and it does not stop there, Mr. Speaker, Sir. There is potential abuse of office and even possibly misleading Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We continue to hear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other side talk about legacy. They all talk about legacy, very proudly. I hope today that the learned Members on the other side will embrace the *Walesi* legacy with the same vigor and gusto. I would like to report to Parliament that the total amount spent on *Walesi* so far as at the 10th March, 2023 (we are still discovering some other payments) is \$125,571,388.87.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Allow me, Sir, to return to this a bit later.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-Whilst the amounts are staggering, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the actions of the previous government has left me no other choice but to use the words of the honourable Usamate -flabbergasted, absolutely flabbergasted.

(Laughter)

To explain what happened to *Walesi*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or what *Walesi* is, it is probably best to listen to a description that was offered by celebrated lawyer, Mr. Richard Naidu.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Speak about someone else.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He said in his *Fiji Times* article on 18th December, 2021 with some additions from me and I quote:

“Imagine you own a bus. You’ve bought your own buses. You’ve got bus route licenses. Your business and your buses are running well. You have competition with other bus companies as is the case but that is okay because that is business. All of a sudden, the government wakes up one day, turns up on our routes with their own shiny buses and no one is quite sure, what is government doing? But the government seems to be saying to all the bus operators, our buses are for all the people of Fiji. You need to start using the government buses. You have no choice because otherwise you might lose your license, if you do not agree. The poor bus operators then asked, what about our buses? The answer from the government is, ‘that is not our problem.’”

HON. J. USAMATE.- Get off this bus.

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-

“The bus operators then ask, ‘how are we going to pay for these new buses?’ The government says, ‘let me talk to FCCC.’”

In other words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the government had no idea on how they were going to charge for *Walesi*. I will come back to this point later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is, how did *Walesi* get conceived? To be fair, the thinking was honourable. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a specialised agency of the United Nations that focuses on information and communications technologies started pushing the transition from analogue to digital technology.

As a member of ITU since 1971, Fiji became a signatory to an international Treaty known as GE06 in 2006. This Treaty was adopted by 119-member countries and aimed to encourage the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. Since then, 40 countries including Australia, New Zealand, Unites States of America, United Kingdom and closer to home, Samoa, have adopted this switchover.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in light of that global transition, the FijiFirst Government recognised that perhaps there was a need for a better coverage in digital television. In 2012, the FijiFirst Government engaged the ITU to come up with a roadmap for transition from analogue to digital terrestrial television broadcasting. This roadmap was designed to ensure that Fiji deploys infrastructure that meets best practices and that the people of Fiji could enjoy the same quality of television in those more developed countries.

On 2nd January, 2013, the roadmap was officially launched in partnership with ITU. The roadmap identified the most efficient manner for Fiji to undertake the transition which involved the establishment of infrastructure that would be used by all broadcasters both existing in radio and television. This common infrastructure, they decided was to be known as *Walesi*.

By using a common infrastructure, the theory was Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Fiji aimed to significantly reduce capital and operational cost for all broadcasters while ensuring that they no longer needed to upgrade their own individual infrastructure. This is where the good theory and the intent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ended.

As usual and true to form, when the ITU produced the report, it made two recommendations which were very clear at least to me as the new Minister from my viewpoint.

- (1) The need to have a business case to justify the significant investment that government was making to ensure that the investment was justified; and
- (2) That there was extensive consultation with all stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no business case was ever tabled in Cabinet, nor was there proper consultation on *Walesi* with the stakeholders. I am told by the stakeholders that they were basically forced on to *Walesi*, Mr. Speaker, Sir, or they ran the risk of losing their licenses like those bus operators I was talking to earlier. So, from the very beginning, the *Walesi* setup was all wrong.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst government and its economic manager, I am disappointed he is not here today to answer for this, decided to spend money with no business case. Imagine this, if you or I were a CFO or a Finance Manager of a company that went to its Board to setup a business project with no idea of what the total cost of the project was or how you would recover the money you are going to spend, we would be laughed out of the board room or we would be fired, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the case may be. With the support of the silent 26, they allowed the Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, the former Minister for everything including communications to spend the \$125 million with no business case and no proper consultation.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Flabbergasted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, flabbergasted!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolute hogwash!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Whilst I have put on hold the continued migration of *Walesi* to the radio operators, the fact Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the FCCC is right now trying to work out the pricing for the television operators and the radio stations demonstrates clearly my point. This is the height of economic mismanagement. When you invest, Sir, and you do not know how you are going to recover the cost of your investment - \$125 million.

In terms consultation like I said, Sir, it was limited and virtually non-existent and it is actually true to FijiFirst government fashion - My way or the highway. I also suspect, Sir, the usual modus operandi of the previous Government came into this. There was a desire to continue to control the media. It was not enough to have MIDA and thank God this Government is getting rid of it.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The FijiFirst Government also wanted to control the distribution network. Total and absolute abuse of power...

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is the platform.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ... and media control.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a piece of advise maybe to the other side of Parliament but to all of us, for someone who has spent 33 years in the private sector, when governments try and get involved in areas that are best left to the private sector, it ends in disaster. Telecommunication, Sir, is a very complex business, assets get obsolete very quickly and it is capital intensive. Because of Government overreach, \$125 million of taxpayer's money is wasted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the picture gets darker from here. Out of the \$125 million spent so far, about \$42.5 million came from the Telecommunications Development Trust Fund, a trust funded by telecommunication service providers and \$83 million came through budgetary channels. Why is this disclosure important? It is important because it shows a deeper concern on how the money was being spent and how it was being disclosed in this august Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will just give you one example. As per the information provided to me by

the Ministry in 2016 to 2017, there was \$23.7 million spent from the Trust Account. In the Budget for that year, there is only disclosure of \$2 million.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What does this mean, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- This suggests that the FijiFirst government did not disclose to the people of Fiji how much it was spending on *Walesi* out of the Trust Account and can be deemed as misleading the people of Fiji, in my view.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I agree, Sir,

(Honourable J. Usamate interjects)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Wait, wait, wait!

I agree, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that these are very serious allegations and this side of Parliament is not taking it lightly. So what is this side of Parliament doing about *Walesi*?

Firstly, with Cabinet approval, an investigation ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Do it.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ... is being undertaken into this excessive abuse of funds. It will establish how the funds were spent, whether due process was followed, Mr. Speaker...

(Laughter)

See, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they laughed. They lighten what is a serious issue for this country and they are saying they are the government-in-waiting.

(Honourable A.A. Maharaj interjects)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I give up.

(Laughter)

The selection of vendors, Sir, and how procurement was made will be looked at.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I will report back to this august Parliament once this audit investigation is carried out. No stone will be left unturned.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Make sure.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The Board of *Walesi* is in the process of being changed, Mr Speaker, Sir. I have discussed this with the current Chairman on my trip to Auckland who has graciously offered to work with the new Board and its Chairman to ensure a smooth transition and handover. I would like to thank Mr. Robert Khan for his support in this regard.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S. N. KAMIKAMICA.- The new Board, Sir, ...

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- ... will be tasked to finding out how we can get out of this mess created by the FijiFirst Government and they will have the full support of the Ministry of Communications which I lead and the Government of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the other side of Parliament, as I mentioned before, keeps on harping about legacy - I hope that they will accept the mess of *Walesi* as part of their legacy.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- On the achievement of the 100-day objectives, Sir, I know they keep on telling us about the 100-day objectives. Its debacles like this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, absolute debacles this, like *Walesi* that is causing a lot of distractions for us.

(Laughter)

The FijiFirst has left a litany of messes that this Government will have to fix whilst trying to run business as usual. Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will hear the other side of Parliament trying to convince us that there are some positive things about *Walesi*, maybe the app for the Seven's or something like that.

By spending \$125 million, Sir, in the process, this is not acceptable. Sir, since I am still in time, address three other points:

- (1) The reason why there are three Deputy Prime Ministers. It is very simple, Sir, I have just talked about one mess that the FijiFirst government has created. It needs a lot of bandwidth to try and make sure that things are fixed and I am sure they will agree with me.
- (2) They keep on saying one-man rule. The team on the other side knows, there is one person leading the country. That document that the honourable Leader of the Opposition was holding, that was generated by one person. They did not have a summit of 500 people to discuss a document of that nature. I just thought I would share that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to enlighten my colleagues on the other side.
- (3) I truly hope that the people of Fiji (watching here today) will understand some of the real challenges the People's Government is facing. We have to clean up the mess left by the FijiFirst government.

Two projects that we have discussed yesterday and today, talk about the wastage that the former government has created - \$125 million for *Walesi* and up to \$400 million in terms of tax

rebates. Ultimately, Sir, this Government and the Peoples Coalition will redefine the legacy of the people on the other side. I would like to offer my view on the legacy. It is a legacy of government overreach, it is a legacy of excessive control, it is a legacy of financial mismanagement, it is a legacy of wastage and potentially, Sir, a legacy which involves misleading Parliament and misleading the people of Fiji and potentially abuse of office.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to talk on *Walesi* today.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate to deliver their response.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am flabbergasted with all that hogwash.

(Laughter)

Absolutely, we have heard nothing but a bunch of drivel.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- In the earlier statement, we had the honourable Deputy Prime Minister who revealed that he had finally seen the light of all the drivel that he has been putting across from this side, he has finally realised it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Tell them!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Today, when the FijiFirst government put up something that will make an immediate impact on all the lives of the people of this country and they were watching you on *Walesi*.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- All the investments, the \$125 million is not just about the tangible benefits, it is all the intangible benefits that ultimate lead to tangible benefits. Let us see what did *Walesi* do? Sir, 100 percent digital television accessibility, the terrestrial network, the scoping for the IOS sites, develop and build, testing of the sites, commissioning (did I get the wrong one, sorry).

I think you poltergeist something, I got the better of this one.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hang on, it is coming.

The cost of the digital switchover, free to air education programme, free Wi-Fi services in the FNU campuses, all the school children in these campuses benefit from this.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Services, community and village installations, free *Walesi* boxes to every family that earns \$30,000 or less, telecentres in all schools, communities, information that they never had before, they finally got it.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Information is something that builds people, when you do not know what is happening, you grovel around in darkness. *Walesi* made that dramatic change to all the people in this country all over; Government installations, residential installations, school installations, commercial installations all of these things have been done.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hogwash!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Commissioning of 27 sites, Nakobalevu as the first site, remaining 27 sites were developed; not only that. *Walesi* is not only terrestrial, also satellite. *Walesi* paid for that satellite. We wanted to make sure that the people of this country have access to information and knowledge because it is something that frees people. The honourable Minister there went and chastised and made accusations of corruption. If you have the proof, put it on the table.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Let those who have done wrong, do not go and stand and talk about something you do not know is true – put it on the table.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Stop preaching rubbish all over the world! If you have any proof of what you are doing, put it on the table.

Serving people is not wastage!

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Giving information to people is not wastage! It is doing the best for the people in this country. If you have anything, put it on the table. We will make sure if someone, what is all this pointing, put it on the table. So I say, all of this is absolute drivel. The benefits are profound, the benefits will be generational, it is not just for the people of today, we are moving this country from the old age into the digital age.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- We need to drag. When you want to make a transformational shift, you must invest in that transformational shift. They do not come from some willy-nilly type of developments, you must invest and make a change. The people who watched the *Drua* play last week, they are thankful for *Walesi*. You will not be able to quantify in terms of dollars and cents the pleasure that they got from watching those matches.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- When they watch the Fiji 7s, you will not be able to quantify the pleasure that they get from that. When you watch the *Fijiana* win two games in a row, watching on *Walesi*, you will not be able to quantify that. People now sitting in buses can watch *Walesi* anywhere. That *Walesi* has been something that is being phenomenal. The challenge for you is to try to come up with your own projects. Stop whinging, stop complaining, get on with the job! Take the legacy of what we put there and build on it. Stop complaining! For some honourable Ministers, if you are a Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, why do you want to become the Minister for Waterways or why

do you want to become the Minister for CWM? Focus on your job! Everyone here wants to be superman. Focus on the job, take it to the next level! Stop complaining, get on with the job!

(Chorus of interjections)

Progressive and Inclusive Rural Development

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address this august Chamber on the state of the Ministry, its key achievements to-date and future plans for easier access of members of the public to the Ministry's services and development assistance programmes through digitisation, collaboration with key Government agencies planning and resource mobilisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament. I rise to enlighten this august Parliament on the role of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, its achievements in reducing development gaps and how the Coalition Government sees its role in national development as well as our future intentions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management has two broad functions:

1. Planning and implementation of development assistance programmes; and
2. Co-ordinating disaster preparedness, response, rehabilitation and recovery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Statement today will focus on progressive and inclusive rural development whilst the Ministry's role in the disaster management space, I will cover in a Ministerial Statement at a future sitting. According to *2021 World Social Report - "Reconsidering Rural Development"*, about 67 percent of the population of low income countries and 60 percent of the lower middle income countries live in rural areas. Moreover, about 80 percent of those living below the international poverty line reside in the rural areas and about one-fifth of rural people live in extreme poverty and have less access to education, health and other essential services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2017 Fiji National Census estimated that about 44.7 percent of the national population (an equivalent of 386,632 persons), dwelt in the rural and maritime areas of Fiji. There was a general decline in the overall population in the rural areas while comparing the 2007 to 2017 population census data. The survey noted that out of the total rural population, majority are living in the Western Division – 40 percent and the least in the Eastern Division of about 9 percent. The rural population growth was generally negative for the Eastern, Northern and Western Divisions, with the only increase noted in the Central Division. There was a significant decline in the economically active age group from 15 to 59 years, but increase was noted in the elderly age group.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2019 to 2020, Household Income and Expenditure Survey indicated that despite relative abundance of rich natural resources and key exports based in the rural areas, such as tourism, sugar and agriculture, poverty rates in the rural areas was 36.5 percent, which was above the national poverty rate at 24.1 percent and more than doubled in terms of the urban poverty rate at 14 percent. Our fellow citizens who live in the rural areas continue to face multiple and inter-related challenges that prevent them from fully enjoying all the human rights and development aspirations.

In 2019 to 2020, 38 percent of people in the rural areas compared to 23 percent of those in urban areas were classed as multi-dimensionally poor, living on low incomes and unable to afford basic essentials. I am sure most of them would not have been able to afford the *Walesi* that we were talking about.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is free.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- According to the 2017 Census Report, significant portions of the rural population across all Divisions lack basic services. The statistics reflect that only 35 percent of rural households are connected to metered tap water supply and 10 percent are still reliant on high-risk water sources for drinking. About 30 percent of rural households depend on high-risk sanitation facilities and around 5 percent of rural households have no reliable source of electricity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, more than ever, it is critical that we ensure that all rural and maritime communities have sustainable living as a key priority. This Coalition Government will work to ensure, in collaboration with all stakeholders and donor partners, that this is achievable. The rural poor face different challenges in different part of the country. In the Eastern and Northern Divisions, skilled jobs are limited, lowering returns to education.

The rural poor in the Western and Central Divisions have better access to public services due to being located on Viti Levu, but are still in predominantly agricultural and low wage jobs. The lack of private sector investment and formal employment creation in rural areas continues to prevent rural Fijians from accessing reliable employment opportunities.

Extending infrastructure development and transport services to rural and maritime areas, particularly in the Northern and Eastern Divisions require extensive investments due to higher costs associated with limited availability of materials locally, costly transportation and limited number of private contractors. The expansion of the communications network and the increasing ability of rural and remote communities to utilise mobile banking and payment mechanisms is critical for ensuring no one is left behind as part of digital transformation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the past decades, important progress has been made but development gains are fragile and are undermined by the devastating impacts of climate change and disaster. Our country is highly exposed to natural hazards such as tropical cyclones, floods, coastal erosion, storm surges, drought, earthquakes and tsunami.

The economic and social costs of these events to infrastructure, tourism facilities, markets and agricultural goods in Fiji are extremely high. I do not intend to specify details of costs of some of these but it is common knowledge that some affected from previous disasters have not fully recovered from the damages that were caused to them and their livelihoods. Nevertheless, my Ministry will try to address whatever we can with the resources that we have, working in partnership with development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to shed some light on the Ministry's development priorities for rural and maritime development. There are eight priorities in the National Development Plan that are aligned to the global 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. These are:

- (1) Access to clean and safe water;
- (2) Access to safe and adequate shelter and sanitation facilities;
- (3) Improving community access and rural roads;
- (4) Improving communication and infrastructure;
- (5) Improving transportation;
- (6) Wealth Creation;
- (7) Establishment of Rural Growth Centres; and
- (8) Incubation of Rural Development Models.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to highlight that the Coalition Government is holding a National Economic Summit this month and we envisage that the outcomes of the Summit will have an impact on any revision that will need to take place in terms of our National Development Plan. At this stage however, it is imperative that the work to be done by the Ministry towards these priorities is highlighted.

In the last five years, the Ministry has implemented over 1,000 projects with a total value of \$15.3 million. These projects were funded under the existing Self-Help Programme (SHP), Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) and High-Risk Water and Sanitation Programmes. Also included are 99 Rural Housing Assistance Projects with a value of close of \$1 million that were implemented in one financial year (2017-2018) just before the transfer of the programme to the Ministry of Housing and Community Development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our efforts to accelerate holistic rural development, the Coalition Government has recognised how fitting and practical it is to bring back for the people of Fiji the Rural Housing and Rural and Outer Island Development Programmes to the Ministry. The budgetary allocation currently provided to the Ministry and the work we do, will be complemented by these two programmes to ensure greater impact to the communities, and at the same time enable planning for better intervention, coordination and implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's vision is to ensure inclusive development for productive, sustainable and resilient rural communities. The Ministry aims to strengthen its partnerships and work towards creating an enabling environment and resilience for our rural communities.

The Ministry has already embarked on a consultative approach to better collaborate with its key agencies within Government for the design of the revamped Rural Housing Assistance (RHA) and Rural and Outer Island Development (ROI) Programmes. The Ministry will be tabling to Cabinet the outcomes of the consultations and recommended approaches for implementation.

Both these programmes will ensure collaboration with key stakeholders that heavily engage in rural development, particularly with the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, Ministry of Public Works, Ministry of Communication and Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. We will ensure that this is an inclusive and consultative approach.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this ROI programme will also be based on statistical evidence to ensure we target those sectors that are in real need of intervention, in particular our subsistence farmers. It will also be based on certain rural development principles to ensure that the usual rhetoric of "no one is left behind" is put to action immediately and the impact must be visible in the rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government will empower our rural dwelling population, incentivise them, guide them to ensure that they can sustain themselves and reduce the dependency culture that has been the practise of the previous administration. Our focus is very clear, we will be increasing income potential through aggressive sustainable income generating activities and the improvement of market access.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theory of change towards rural development needs a holistic approach to ensure we reduce rural poverty rates, decrease income inequality, improve rural living standards, improve economic opportunities and increase access to basic infrastructure. All these elements Mr. Speaker, Sir, play a significant role in addressing the rural to urban drift issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will be formulating a Rural Development Policy, under its partnership agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Governance for

Resilience Project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will be formulating a Rural Development Policy, under its partnership agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Governance for Resilience Project.

The development of the policy is crucial to national governance given our Ministry's significant role in coordinating rural development and disaster management at both the national and sub-national levels. The formulation of this policy is also important to guide and set the model, concepts and strategies for rural and maritime development in Fiji. The policy in particular is intended to document how the Integrated Rural Development Framework in Fiji can be strengthened.

It is the intention of the Ministry to have thorough consultation of this policy at the national and sub-national level. Similarly, the outcome of the National Economic Summit in terms of the thematic areas on Rural and Outer Island Development will certainly provide guidance to the Ministry on the broad principles of the policy.

I also would like to note that the Ministry is committed to improving its administrative services through digitisation of its business processes. The Ministry is working on a digitisation plan to guide the implementation of changes in this important area. We are determined to make the changes to enable easier access to services as well as streamline processes for faster decision-making. We will ensure that governance mechanisms are in place to maintain integrity in our service delivery.

I would like to refer again to the *2021 World Social Report "Reconsidering Rural Development"* which noted that on a global level, the standard of living for approximately 3.4 billion people residing in rural areas can be raised without them having to migrate to cities. This is due to new approaches made possible through improved access and internet connectivity.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic generally threatened progress in development for the world's rural population, the pandemic proved that new technologies can enable rural populations to flourish. The rise of new digital technologies provides an opportunity to bridge the rural-urban divide by providing rural populations with access to digital finance, precision tools for better crop yields as well as jobs that can be done remotely.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres said, and I quote:

“Opportunities exist to build a greener, more inclusive and resilient future. The experience of the pandemic has shown, for example, that where high-quality internet connectivity is coupled with flexible working arrangements, many jobs that were traditionally considered to be urban can be performed in rural areas too”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst Fiji may be a very small dot on the global scene, we can still pursue progress and development by contextualising learnings from larger and more advanced economies when designing our national development programmes, and this is what we intend to do. It is common knowledge that in Fiji, the agricultural sector features predominantly in our rural and maritime area. Furthermore, there is huge potential to increase production in this sector if we improve access to mechanisation.

In the rural areas, there is also a need to increase connectivity if there is to be improvements in the use of technology and exposure to modern agriculture practises to enhance the quality of produce and commodities for both domestic consumption and export. The support for packaging and value adding facilities is another area being considered to ensure reduction in wastage and efficiency

in production.

It has been reported that progress in agriculture and rural economy can have a preceding role in the overall socio-economic transformation of a country, and this was experienced in both the early and newly industrialised countries. This was the case in countries such as England and France in Europe, Japan, Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Provinces of China and later China in Asia. Furthermore, the experience of the Green Revolution has showed how agricultural productivity growth can have an autonomous and catalytic role in spurring national development.

Whilst there is an inclination towards strengthening the agriculture sector under the revamped ROI programme, the Ministry is also wary of challenges that we now face such as the capacity of rural areas to operationalise development. In addition to climate and natural disaster hazards, human capital availability is a possible threat to effective implementation of the Ministry's development programmes. This is due to the continuous rural to urban drift and recent rural to overseas drift arising from the Pacific Access Labour Mobility (PALM) Schemes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues to consider rural development models including Saemaul Undong from the Republic of Korea, Sufficiency Economy from Thailand, Bumiputera from Malaysia and Ruhunu Sahara in Sri Lanka as it develops the Rural Development Policy. It will also consider in-situ urbanisation which is a model of rural development in which improvements in the standard of living in existing rural communities take place without migration or conversion into urban areas. The "place-based" model has been implemented in China, Japan and Sri Lanka, and has proved effective in fostering long-term economic growth and spatial equity between rural and urban areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry plans to also consider other non-agriculture sectors as improvement in agricultural productivity alone will not be the only solution for successful rural transformation. There has to be strong linkages between different sectors so that gains from agriculture can be transferred into demand for labour, inputs and services in non-farm activities. As rural economies thrive, this could also encourage investment, entrepreneurship and job growth in the non-farm economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously, other factors are critical for improving both agriculture productivity and the development of a strong rural non-farm economy. These include;

- (1) The stability of prices of agricultural products in global markets;
- (2) Sufficient investment in agricultural research; and
- (3) Farmers access to technology.

These are factors that contribute to higher agriculture productivity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, inclusive rural financing also helps by expanding the options for households and firms to adopt more advanced technologies, to invest in education and capacity building and to scale-up their productive activities, thereby improving productivity in both rural farms and non-farm sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, new digital technologies could offer new opportunities to accelerate rural economic transformation by helping to make agricultural production more efficient and profitable. Rural business ventures and start-ups based on digital technologies make it possible for goods and services to be sourced and sold directly in rural communities helping to build the local economy and narrowing the rural-urban divide. Whilst these may be some things that we aspire to as ideal scenarios for rural and maritime development, these are areas where Government can pursue

partnerships and engagements with the private sector and development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also planning to ease access to its services by digitizing some of its business processes. It plans to make available online forms that are required for processing of applications to reduce processing time of applications and decision-making. The Ministry is also embedding risk informed development as it attempts to mainstream Disaster Risk Reduction in its development programmes. The world is now facing a number of development challenges or global risks.

At the beginning of the decade, when we are returning to the “new normal” following the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to face the brunt of the outbreak of the Ukraine war. This brought another set of crises in food and energy. In addition, we have observed the return of older risks namely, inflation, cost of living crises, trade wars, capital outflows from emerging markets, widespread social unrest, geopolitical confrontation and the spectre of nuclear warfare, and of course the growing pressure of climate change impacts and ambitions for transition to a 1.5 degrees celsius world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having mentioned all these, the achievement of sustainable development, including the Sustainable Development Goals will require the re-setting of rural development for the 21st century. This will require resetting of rural development for the twenty-first century. This will require re-settings strategic principles, having cross-cutting programmes and developing, implementing, monitoring and improving sector-based policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, we are very much looking forward to the upcoming National Economic Summit discussions on the thematic area of Rural Development. This is a forum that will enable stakeholders to provide their views and contribute to better designing our rural development programmes.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate with a response.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement. I wish him well and, of course, the plans that he has as well because we have a significant number of our people still living in the rural areas, as he has alluded to according to the 2017 Census figure of more than 44 percent.

I also listened to his Statement about the National Poverty Level, I have heard it from two members of Government in recent statements, initially from the honourable Esrom Immanuel and, of course, this morning with the honourable Minister for Rural Development and Disaster Management stating that the national poverty level is at 24.1 percent.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Ah! His seen the light now.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- But perhaps you need to consult the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Statistics because he does not agree with that figure - the national poverty figure of 24.1 percent despite the report from World Bank, he said that that was cooked up within the government. So, he does not agree with that figure. I asked him the other day but he did not respond. I am waiting for it to come from his own mouth, but his going to talk about it.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again Rural Development is so important because we need to create the environment for our rural people because they deserve the best as well. I know Mr. Speaker, Sir, that for us, that was always the statement from the then Prime Minister, let us leave no one behind.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Everyone in Fiji deserves the best of what the government can offer within the resources that it has and I only hope that the government through the Minister and his Ministry will continue with that. We will continue to have disasters, climate change and then the other external factors that will sort of provide that distraction, but again Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that they will continue, and of course, ensuring as well to create that better environment for our rural people.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we admit the fact that we did not do everything and we cannot complete everything. The funding, therefore, is very important. You can have all the plans, all the strategies but without the money you would not be able to fulfil those programmes. He has talked about a few programmes that have returned to the Ministry on Rural Housing and I wish to also commend Government on the initiative to shift Rural and Outer Island Allocation back to the Ministry because the Ministry knows that in the previous discussions, we have made suggestions particularly to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Why not have the Ministry of Rural Development deal with the subsistence farmers and then once they become subsistence market oriented and they can then be graduated to the Ministry of Agriculture to deal with the semi-commercial and the fully commercial farmers as well. We thank the Government for that initiative. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I urge the honourable Minister, this was our guiding document.

(Laughter)

I will not go into the list of people who contributed to this, under the working groups. Maybe, I will just read out one, because they will say, “oh, that was a one-man document”; no it was not.

(Honourable Prof. B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Working group 1 on governance leadership and constitutional and electoral reform - Reverend Akuila Yabaki, Mr. Filipe Bole, Mr. Daniel Urai, Mr. Rajesh Kumar, Ratu Epeli Ganilau, Mr. Josefa Seruilagilagi, Ratu Meli Vesikula, Mr. Aiyaz-Sayed Khaiyum. And we have non-Government members – Professor Rajesh Chandra, Mr. Shantel Khan, Mr. Taniela Bolea, Mr. Atu Rasoki, Mr. Josaia Gucake, Father David Arms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Working Group 2 on Institutional and Public Sector Reform – Mr. Josefa Seruilagilagi, Ratu Filimoni Ralogaivau, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, Ratu Meli Bolobolo, Ratu Meli Vesikula, Mr. Winston Thompson....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is the consultation ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- That’s consultation.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- These are the members of this Working Group.

Honourable Minister, again, Pillar 7 of the People’s Charter because of the State of the Nation and Economy Report that led us to the People’s Charter – Pillar 7 was on the Integrated Rural Development Framework which led to the Cabinet Paper in 2009 that set everything in place. In terms of the decentralisation and the providing of the services under the FijiFirst Government, we

had a DO's Office at Kavala in Kadavu, in Qarani in Gau, in Nasau in Koro, in Kubulau in Bua, in Wainikoro in Macuata...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ...in Namarai in Ra, it never existed but because of the nine consecutive years growth in the economy...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- ...we were able to do that. I have talked about transportation and infrastructure in the rural areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I continue to say we handed over a better Fiji from the one we inherited.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government fleet when it comes to Government Shipping Services, there was only three Government vessels. Today, honourable Minister for Transport, you have more than 10 Government vessels there.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The challenge, will you even ever purchase one Government vessel to add on to the fleet?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just one.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- There is a lot to cover in rural Fiji, of course, we will assist the honourable Minister and we will also ensure that our rural people are given the best. There is so much to cover and five minutes is insufficient, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I thank you for this opportunity and I wish the honourable Minister all the best in the consultations that will be undertaken soon.

PROTECTION OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN AND ITS RESOURCES

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament:

- (a) supports the Forum Leaders desire to secure our Pacific Ocean's future and condemns any action that will threaten it; and
- (b) calls on our partner Governments, including international agencies to ensure the protection of our oceans and its resources.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the Forum Leaders' call to secure our Pacific Ocean's future and condemn any action that will threaten it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it might seem incongruous that the Minister for Trade and Investment, normally we are accused of being capitalists, but I would be talking about the environment but let me assure you, Sir, that the two are very much interconnected and that is why I am rising today to move this motion with honour, Sir.

I understand that we cannot achieve this goal alone, thus I call upon all our partner governments, international agencies, to ensure the protection of our oceans and its resources. I am sure, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that every honourable Member in this Parliament can agree on this. We are all passionate about our natural resources and any threat to our resources that raises red flags threatens our very existence.

As guardians of the ocean, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our way of life is underpinned by the ocean. Our culture, food, livelihood and national economy rely on our oceans. The guardianship is central because the ocean provides half of our breathable air and provide food security and livelihood. The survival and wellbeing of the Pacific Ocean is linked very much, Sir, to the survival of our planet and thus, should be a concerned for every global citizen.

I am hoping that this august Parliament will send in one loud and clear voice send a message, “that the Pacific Ocean should not be seen as an easy and convenient dumping ground for unwanted and dangerous material and waste that other bigger nations produce and would not want to use in their own ecosystems”.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We, the defenders of the ocean, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may be small, but our voices can be loud and effective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, internationally, thankfully our voices are being heard. A recent *Time Magazine* article dated 6th February, 2023 says, and I quote:

“But Pacific Island nations have particular reason to be anxious. There is a noxious legacy of nuclear testing in the region, and other countries have historically treated the Pacific as a dumping ground for their waste. The US conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1957 and disposed of atomic waste in Runit Dome, where it’s still stored. That testing led not only to forced relocations, but also to increased rates of cancers.”

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a concern that the Dome is leaking and that rising sea levels might impact its structural integrity. France also conducted 193 nuclear tests from 1966 to 1996 at Mururoa and Fangataufa Atolls in French Polynesian.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at a recent press conference, in the absence of the honourable Prime Minister, I expressed my honest views about Japan’s decision to discharge ALPS treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station into the Pacific Ocean. I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if it so safe, why do they not use it on their own farms in their own country.

The Japanese Government announced on 13th April, 2021 its basic policy to discharge 1.5 million tonnes of Advance Liquid Processing System (ALPS) treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station into the Pacific Ocean rather than release it by vapour. According to Japan, Sir, its basic policy is based on over six years of comprehensive study and research by experts, reviewed by the International atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and engagement with other parties’ concern.

Subject to the approval of its nuclear regulation authority, namely, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings (TEPCO), it will conduct discharge into the Pacific Ocean, envisaged to place approximately after two years, and over period of up to 40 years the discharge. This announcement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is shocking, and will directly impact the Pacific Region. We must not rest on our

laurels and sit on this invisible fence about the ongoing nuclear legacy facing our region. Simply, Sir, we must not.

We, as the Pacific, cannot be continued to be made the dumping ground of the so-called bigger nations. The social and economic impacts of this irresponsible behaviour is catastrophic, particularly to our vulnerable communities. As we all know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our vulnerable coastal communities and their marine life will definitely be impacted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, needless to say, coastal communities survive on marine life, not to mention the impact of radioactive chemicals that can have on our people. Internationally, Fiji is recognised as a popular tourism destination and well-known for its sun, sand and sea. If this release occurs, there may be an impact on our tourism earnings. We cannot let this happen, we have to protect what is ours. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must commend the recent efforts of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to raise concerns and seek more information and consultation with Japan before a decision is made by the Japanese Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are hoping that at some point, the Pacific Forum Leaders may get access to the results of this testing and understand what it says. That is why our regional position should be one of solidarity.

I thank the Forum Secretariat for immediately communicating and raising awareness on this issue with members and the general community through media statements, expressing concern over Japan's decision.

In February this year, the Prime Minister of Cook Islands, the honourable Mark Brown, led the delegation from the Forum to Tokyo to convey our concerns and request all Pacific Leaders for the deferral of Japan's planned discharge of treated nuclear wastewater in the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what we need - we need on every platform possible collectively to continue to raise our voices, but more importantly, we must protect our oceans. Regionally, we have a 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Ocean and such actions will threaten that mission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must not fail to recollect the PALM 9 commitments and the thoughts of PIF Leaders. Do we really want to imperil our Blue Pacific, the health and security of our people? We need to have demanding dialogues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to guide our decision on this discharge.

During the Pacific's Special PIF Leaders Meeting in Nadi in February this year, the Forum Leaders supported the importance of science and data to guide this decision and they are continuing dialogue with the Japanese Government about the discharge. Like as I said, from my personal opinion, if it is safe, use it in your own country.

I had expressed my stance on this release as I have mentioned, and it is incumbent for us as a region to have a shared understanding on the implications. Our regional position and Fiji's position must be one of the same opinion as we progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is our time to secure the future of our Pacific Ocean through concerted effort, commitment and investment in our ocean and lands. Our policies, partnerships and investments must be farsighted. We must protect the region's biodiversity and reaffirm the importance of ensuring international consultation, international law and the independent and verifiable scientific assessments under the PALM 9 declaration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I wish to reiterate that the ocean is our greatest natural resource and the Pacific's sanctuary. Let us protect our oceans to protect our future.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members before I offer the floor for debate on the motion, I would like to inform you that we have nine speakers and the list has been supplied by honourable Whips on both sides. The order is as follows:

- (1) Honourable V. Naupoto;
- (2) Honourable S. Kumar;
- (3) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation;
- (4) Hon. K.K. Lal;
- (5) Honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services, and Transport;
- (6) Honourable J. Usamate;
- (7) Honourable F.S. Koya;
- (8) Honourable Leader of the Opposition; and
- (9) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion that is before us. Sometimes, we think of our ocean as a faraway place, but the reality is, it extends to the water that laps your feet when you walk on the beach. I think like the Amazon jungle, it has been said that it is the lungs of the world, I think our ocean is in the same way, it is the lungs to us small island States.

Our ocean connects us. Our Pacific Ocean is becoming, if not the richest ocean compared to the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, simply because the other Oceans are surrounded by big population bases that have the capacity to explore the resources from their ocean while we, in the Pacific, are small island nations and in the process, we manage to preserve and conserve the resources that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a share of that Ocean that is being talked about today, the Pacific Ocean. We have 1.3 million square kilometres of it. Sir, 12 miles from the shore is the territorial seas which is almost an extension of our land, and then 188 miles is normally known as the international waters but combined becomes our EEZ, which is 1.3 million square kilometres. That, in comparison to our land area, which is 18.27 thousand square kilometres, it is by far the biggest resource that we have.

The ocean is a live entity and in my 20 years of working there as a sailor, I understand it very well as a live entity. It is a provider - provides for food, sustenance, provided for my food when I was a kid on the most beautiful island in Fiji called Vatoa, it was the playground for me when I grew up, and it provided the money for my education when I went to secondary school. When I joined the Navy and spent those years, I usually tell people, "Maybe it is the ocean claiming back its pound of flesh from me. It is the giver, and it is also a taker. It has eaten away chunks of our shoreline. It takes lives and ships for that matter. Our tuna fishery here in Fiji in that 1.3 million square kilometres of ocean, employs people.

I always see the fisheries sector as a sector that picks up those that other sectors would not, as sailors to go out and brave the rough seas, to go and fish and it is a sector or an industry that picks up all those whom we would have, otherwise, leave behind and allows them to improve the living standards of their families.

In Fiji, the target tuna species is Albacore, one of the best in the world. Albacore is the white meat tuna that you will see when you buy tuna and the Northern part of the Pacific it is mostly skipjack that turns into the light meat tuna that you see.

Our ocean also is part of the bigger connection of oceans that allows 90 percent of world trade to happen. We, in Fiji, are signatories to so many Conventions that relate to the ocean - the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Fiji is very much a big part in the creation of that Convention; we are signatory to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) which is the Convention for the Prevention of Pollution, and we do it because as I have said, the ocean is really the lungs for us. It allows us to survive. It determines the type of weather that we have. The temperature of the ocean heats up too much, hot air begins to rise, cold air comes in to replace it, cyclone begins to fall.

Our Pacific Ocean must be left as it is, must be. It must be left as pristine as it is and we cannot definitely allow those from other countries or those developed nations as a result of their development, then come and dump their waste on us. It cannot, we rely on it so much.

Amazingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way the ocean behaves, I remembered we were rescuing these two girls from Vanuavatu, we were not too sure whether one of them was alive but we knew that one was. In the most difficult of circumstances, the ocean was so angry and as we were trying to rescue them, the small little punt that they were in was almost flipping over, half-filled with water and at the background you see this huge wave picking this up and then beginning to flip the boat. And this is me on the ship and I am talking to ocean, "Please do not, please do not" and to that warm feeling that you have when you see the boat flipping slightly, the two were still on the boat. We managed to rescue these two girls.

I wrote a story about it and it is, perhaps, the best ever moment of my career as a sailor, I was rescuing these two girls. But that is the ocean, it gives, it takes. We need to keep our Pacific Ocean. It is so connected that it has to be dealt with regionally because what happens in the ocean of another country affects us too.

When they overfish in one part of the Pacific Ocean, it affects the stock that we have. In Fiji, we have a pocket of high seas just above our EEZ, commonly referred to as the common heritage of mankind, it belongs to everyone. But if you overfish in that pocket of high seas, the resources in our EEZ which has a boundary to it is also affected. So, when we deal with matters relating to the ocean, we cannot afford to deal with it as individual nations. We are so connected that it can only be dealt with regionally because what happens in one affects the other.

It is our responsibility, Mr. Speaker, Sir, here in Parliament, every person, every older generation that was served so well by our ocean like me, like most of us sitting here, we must make sure that our ocean remains that excellent service provider. Our ocean is a big sequester of carbon through the planktons that live in the warmer waters. If we begin to pollute our ocean, we are not sure whether these planktons will live and then it affects the amount of carbon that our oceans can sequester, so it is our responsibility. In my view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, the current generation, must make sure that we leave the ocean behind to provide that service that we so much enjoy to the highest.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to suspend proceedings for lunch and Parliament will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.27 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.36 p.m.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make contribution on the motion by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications on the Pacific Ocean's future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ocean is the largest ecosystem on earth and it is the planet's life support system. For far too long, many people assume that ocean was limitless and immune to human impacts.

The Pacific Ocean is the world largest ocean and plays a crucial role in global economic, social and environmental systems.

The Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Leaders, a regional intergovernmental organisation, recognises the importance of securing the ocean's future and have highlighted this as a priority in their agenda.

In 2017, the PIF Leaders launched the Blue Pacific Continent Concept which seeks to enhance specific regionalism and promote a collective and sustainable approach to ocean governance. The Concept recognises that the Pacific Ocean provides significant cultural, economic and environmental benefits to the region, hence the Leaders aim to protect these resources through effective management and conservation efforts.

The Pacific Island Forum Leaders have also identified several key challenges that need to be addressed to secure the Pacific Ocean's future including overfishing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ensuring the protection of our oceans and, yes, resources is critical to the sustainable development of our planet. A healthy ocean regulates climate and reduce climate change impacts. Hence, here are some ways in which we can achieve this:

- (1) Adopt sustainable practices which includes:
 - reducing waste;
 - conserving water, and
 - reducing carbon emissions to help to keep our oceans clean and healthy.
- (2) Establishing Marine Protected Areas:
 - where fishing activities and other harmful activities are limited; and
 - can help protect the biodiversity and ecosystem of our oceans
- (3) Regulation of fishing activities - governments and international organisations can regulate fishing activities to prevent overfishing and reduce bycatch.
- (4) Advocacy and awareness:
 - People can raise awareness about the impacts of marine pollution and climate change on our oceans; and
 - Advocating for better protection and conservation of marine resources.
- (5) Scientific research and data sharing - research and data can help us in better understand the impact of human activities on oceans and its ecosystem so that effective and informed policies and actions can be taken.

- (6) Collaboration and partnership – Government, the private sector, civil society organisations and individuals should collaborate and form partnerships to develop and implement effective strategies for protection and conserving our oceans and its resources.
- (7) Waste management - proper waste management practices including recycling as well as avoiding the use of plastics and other non-biodegradable materials can help in minimising the amount of waste that ends up in the ocean.
- (8) Reduction in greenhouse gas emissions - we can reduce our carbon footprint using renewable energy, public transportation and reducing reliance on single use materials. This can help to mitigate the effects of climate change which affects the health of our oceans.
- (9) Reducing oil spills - companies involved in oil drilling and transportation should be held accountable for their actions and should implement proper safety measures to prevent oil spills in the ocean.
- (10) Economic incentives - it can be provided to companies and individuals that promote sustainable practices and conservation of marine resources. These incentives can help promote sustainable development and support the livelihood of local communities that depend on marine resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial to take immediate and long term action to mitigate these issues and promote responsible environmental practices to ensure a healthy and sustainable future for the world's largest ocean. Allow me to quote Sylvia Earle, and I quote: "With every drop of water you drink, every breath you take, you're connected to the sea."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I support the motion by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also contribute to the debate and support the motion before Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have always maintained that the island countries of the Pacific can create great wealth for themselves by harvesting the resources from the ocean. I remember some time ago when I was a hotelier, there was a conference in my hotel that brought in countries into Nadi to discuss about the tuna arrangement at that time. And I remember one of the resource persons from New Zealand who knew me and I knew him very well said, "Bill, the island nations are not getting a fair price for their fish", and it has always stuck with me, Mr. Speaker, and the more I get into this, the more convinced I am that if you are able to secure a fair price for the harvest from our ocean which is feeding millions of people in the Northern part of the Pacific.

As I had mentioned two days ago in my Ministerial Statement, when I went to Doha for the Lesser Developed Countries Conference, three of our neighbouring countries are in the LDCs - Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Solomons. These are three countries with very fertile seas for tuna and the like, Mr. Speaker, and yet they are there as lesser developed countries.

I have raised this within our Cabinet that we need to perhaps, take a leadership role in this and create the kind of dialogue that will raise the profile of this globally and for the island countries to start harvesting their sea resources in a manner that creates the wealth that they deserve.

I always go back, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). They formed OPEC in 1960 and people were extracting oil from their countries, yet they

remain poor. Until around about 1972 or 1973 when they decided to start taking control of their oil resources. And what we see today, Sir, the wealth that we now see in the Middle East is because they decided to secure a fair price for their oil collectively. The whole world was benefitting from their oil, yet they were remaining poor.

When I was in Doha, I was told that 50 years ago, Doha was a small fishing village, but today it is a metropolis - one of the most modern in the world. And it is because of that, when they realised, “We are giving our oil away too cheaply. The world needs it, so let us get a good price for it”, and their decision is evident in the way they have developed up to this day. And I believe, Mr. Speaker, the same can be done for our small island nations.

I shared with the Parliament the other day that I had audience with the Deputy Secretary-General to the United Nations, Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, and I raised this with her. I said, “please, see if we can alleviate this dialogue into the United Nations and start having this conversation on how the island countries can uplift their economy by getting a fair price for their resources, tuna in particular, and other species of seafood.” That to me, Mr. Speaker, when we talk about the ocean today, there is so much focus now on the Pacific Ocean, that wealth must translate to the betterment of our people.

I have heard people who fly over that area, they see all these huge ships and they are like factories, fishing in the waters of Kiribati and Tuvalu and manufacturing whatever they catch in those big ships. People have shared that with me, one of the High Commissioners was telling me that. So, you ask the question, if this is happening in their seas in the EEZ, why are they poor?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, part of the dialogue today is to look at the ocean from that economic perspective and in a direct way, to benefit our island neighbours, and Fiji will benefit from it also because we are the port nearest to them. This is where we can carry out repairs, replenishment of supplies, et cetera.

As already stated, Mr. Speaker, we want to see those boats back into Suva. There used to be about 400 vessels here every year. The FijiFirst Government had made some changes and they have all gone to Pagopago. We are told that it is easier to go back to home base, it is not true because they have relocated to Pagopago. We need them back in Suva. So, when fishing begins to translate to wealth for our neighbouring countries in the manner that is fair, Fiji will benefit from it. They will come to Fiji as a base. As we all know, it has happened in the past - change of crews. They come here at Nadi Airport and they fly back to their home base.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion, we do not want anyone to be dumping anything in the ocean and for me, I look at it from an economic perspective and I think if we support this initiative that we get fair price, our country and our region as a whole will benefit from it.

When I last spoke with the Deputy Secretary-General, Ms. Amina Mohammed, she was also quite impressed with the unity that we now have in the PIF. They have noticed this, and then she just said to me, “I wish the whole world could follow what you have done in the Pacific. There is so much turmoil around the globe. I wish they would follow the example of what you have accomplished in the Pacific region”.

So, Mr. Speaker, with unity, will be our strength, as it protects our ocean and at the same time, make sure that we benefit from it economically in a direct manner that I believe is still lacking today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is my contribution in support of this motion.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion that is before Parliament. I rise to speak about one of the most important bodies of water on our planet, the Pacific Ocean.

The Pacific Ocean is the largest ocean on Earth, covering over 60 million square miles and spending over one-third of the Earth's surface. It is home to a vast array of marine life and supports countless human communities around the world.

However, this vital resource is under threat and it is our responsibility to protect it. Unfortunately, the Pacific Ocean is facing a growing number of threats. One of the biggest threats to the health of the Pacific Ocean is pollution, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Every year billions of tonnes of plastic waste, oil and other pollutants are dumped into the ocean, causing devastating harm to the marine life and ecosystem. For example, plastic pollution has been found in the stomach of over 90 percent of all seabirds and it is estimated that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Climate change is also having a profound effect on the Pacific Ocean. Rising sea levels and increasing temperatures are causing coral reefs to bleach and die, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and are disrupting the migration patterns of marine species.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ocean acidification caused by this option of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is making it harder for marine organisms to build shells and skeletons which is affecting the entire food chain. So, what can we do to protect the Pacific Ocean and ensure its continued health for the generations to come?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must congratulate the FijiFirst Government for introducing the Fiji Oceans Policy. It was and is a remarkable initiative that will significantly enhance Fiji's oceans' governance framework and promote sustainability in the area. The FijiFirst Government had taken many initiatives to ensure that its domestic laws were aligned with international legal obligations to protect and manage the world's ocean.

Among these initiatives is the Ocean and Climate Change Policy which outlines the country's action and policy for achieving sustainable oceans and climate resilience. The implementation of this Policy is vital as it provides a coordinated approach to ocean management, conservation and development. It highlights the need for the Fijian Government to work together with stakeholders in ensuring the sustainable use of ocean resources for the present and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Ocean Policy aims to address many issues that threatened the ocean, including climate change, overfishing, pollution, illegal unreported and unregulated fishing. The Policy recognises the importance of addressing these challenges in promoting ocean sustainability in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Policy's implementation involve the use of advanced technology, the inclusion of traditional knowledge and raising awareness about the significance of oceans in Fiji. These actions will lead to the development of a robust ocean management framework that will effectively regulate all ocean activities, promote conservation and support the sustainable use of ocean resources.

Mr. Speakers, Sir, this Policy provides economic opportunities for Fijians while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry. By promoting sustainable fishing practices, the Government can attract more eco-friendly tourism and increase its revenue, while protecting its precious ocean resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's Ocean Policy is an excellent initiative that has significantly boosted the sustainability of Fiji's oceans. It is a critical step towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 14, which focuses on life under water. The FijiFirst Government has set an excellent example for other countries and also for the Coalition Government to follow, and I hope that this Policy will soon become a model for sustainable ocean management worldwide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, other initiatives undertaken by the leadership of the FijiFirst Government was to address ocean conservation and management, and these are:

- (1) establishing Marine Protected Areas and promote community-based sustainable fisheries management;
- (2) to be actively involved in the regional and international initiatives to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; and
- (3) to launch an initiative commonly known as the Mangrove Management Plan.

Mr. Speakers, Sir, Fiji has a strong commitment in reducing marine pollution. The FijiFirst Government banned the use of single use plastic bags and straws and a levy was put on plastic bags.

Fiji is actively participating in the UN Global programme for action for the protection of marine environment from land-based activities. The FijiFirst Government has ensured that its domestic laws were consistent with the international legal obligations on ocean conservation and management, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the climate change policy represents a significant step towards fulfilling Fiji's international obligations on ocean conservation and management. The Policy recognises that the ocean is crucial to the wellbeing and livelihoods of people in Fiji, as well as to the global ecosystem. It sets out actions to enhance sustainable management of marine resources, reduce pollution and promote marine biodiversity conservation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through collaborative efforts and partnership with stakeholders, Fiji has taken a leadership role in addressing these global crisis. The FijiFirst Government's effort to promote sustainable development, combat illegal fishing and protect marine habitants are very much commendable.

Mr. Speakers, Sir, nuclear waste dumping in the ocean is a grave environmental concern. Nuclear waste is the byproduct of the nuclear power plants which is highly radioactive and dangerous to human and marine lives. The disposal of such waste is a significant concern for nations worldwide and especially the Pacific countries, as it poses severe threat to the human health and the environment. Nuclear waste dumping in the Pacific Ocean has become a significant concern and measures must be taken to address this issue.

The Pacific Ocean is a vast body of water that connects many nations around the world, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and many countries have used it as a dumping ground for their nuclear waste. This has led to severe environmental concerns as nuclear waste can cause devastating effects on marine life, ecosystem and human health. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the nuclear waste deposit in the Pacific Ocean is not limited to any particular area. It spreads throughout the ocean and the site of the largest man-made nuclear disaster, Chernobyl, is also situated near the Pacific Ocean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has made a firm stand in its decision to ban nuclear waste dumping in its waters. Fiji has taken steps to ensure that water surrounding it are free from nuclear waste.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has always been a ban on the entry of any ship carrying radioactive material into our waters. The ban includes ships carrying nuclear waste, ships used in nuclear tests and ships carrying radioactive material for research purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's stand to ban nuclear waste dumping is commendable as it shows its commitment towards protecting the environment and marine life. Fiji should not compromise on the safety of its people and the environment. The ban on the nuclear waste dumping is an essential step towards a sustainable future. It is crucial that other countries follow Fiji's example and take steps to prevent nuclear waste disposal in the ocean.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the effects of nuclear waste on the ecosystem can be severely long lasting. Governments around the world must take action to ensure that nuclear waste is disposed often in a responsible and safe manner. The oceans are one of our planet's most valuable resources and we must protect them from any harm caused by human activities, including nuclear waste dumping.

Mr. Speakers, Sir, the participation and facilitation of international agencies and partner organisations and partner governments have been and is critical in achieving these goals. The pooling of resources, sharing of knowledge and the expertise has provided Fiji with the necessary spot for tackling these issues head-on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the best way forward is for the Coalition Government to continue with the work FijiFirst has done to further strengthen its partnership with international agencies and governments. By working together, we can ensure the protection and preservation of our oceans and resources for the future generation. With those words, I support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there has been a slight reshuffle and I will be offering the floor to the honourable Prime Minister now and is to be followed by honourable Usamate.

HON. S. L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend all the speakers - honourable Members from both sides of Parliament for their support. T

Mr. Speaker, Sir, his motion is one that the Government expected to be taken up at a common cry for consideration of our environment. The dealing with the discharge of what we now still call contaminated water from the nuclear plant in Japan and when we look at the history of Japan, we are touched by the fact that they were the first to be bombed, by a very high yielding bomb that ended the World War II. Since then, they have suffered. The same with Germany, Sir. They have suffered since the end of World War II.

While they were hamstrung, they were given a period of reparation where they had to pay so much initially to the legal nations and the United Nations for the damages caused during the War, they were forbidden from building up their military capabilities. They were allowed to develop their own self-defence capabilities, and while they were doing that, they developed their own engineering capabilities and became phoenix in their own right in manufacturing, the development of technology, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, as the world moved away from war-like developments of nuclear, atomic and hydrogen energy into the use of these sources of energy in development of the the industries, they got into an accident.

They are very sympathetic to our concerns and like all of these international concerns, we have to rely on the experts or the universally acclaimed or acknowledged experts, in this case the nuclear energy agency. We are relying on them to give us the word that it is now safe to discharge these water into the Pacific.

I am sure, Sir, the Japanese would not want to discharge into the Pacific if they knew it was not safe because they will be the first shoreline affected by the discharge. But we would like to be assured, and all the countries in the Pacific, particularly the Pacific Island Forum countries would like to be assured that it is safe.

At the PIF Leaders Retreat in Nadi earlier on in the year, there was common cry, 'If it is safe, keep it'. We have received some expert advice that it is safe and there are others saying, it is not safe. It is the same as COVID-19 when WHO said, "It is okay to use these vaccines" and some other authorities said, "No, it is not right."

The doctors and international law students in Parliament would know that those experts are immune from prosecution. If they give the advice, you cannot go and prosecute them. If they say it is safe and we use it and we find out that it is not safe, you cannot go and sue the pharmaceutical companies, like not being able to sue the vehicle manufacturers for the accidents you have on the road. You may be able to sue the driver, but you cannot sue the manufacturer of the car. These are the sort of things that the world is going through at this time, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We must be very cautious as we debate this in this Parliament. I am sure other countries in the region are watching us when we can come up and be united with a concerted effort to pass this motion - a motion cautioning our friends, the Japanese.

Japan is a very sizeable contributor to our development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and on our our bilateral relationship, we do not want to hurt that relationship. On our regional concern for our neighbours in the Pacific, we do not want to hurt them by saying, "Alright, we are sure that it is okay, let us tell them it is alright." We may think it is safe, but the region is still unsure, so let us tread cautiously.

On the international scene, the honourable Leader of the Opposition had been identified as Champion of climate change and global warming. We have been talking all the things that have happened. Some of us read the *Bible*, some of us read the *Koran*, some read the Hindu religious books, and we have our own interpretations of creation, the wisdom of creation and the dangers that have affected the perfection of creation by perhaps, the greed of humankind. We look at and we marvel at the sequence with which the Creator created. First of all, there is water, and then the light, and then the grass and all those things, and then the animals. Imagine if the animals had come before the grass. Imagine if the human beings were created before the other things, how would we survive?

When we try and get back to the wisdom of creation and try and dovetail our need for development and also our need to make the environment habitable for all of us - not only human beings but also for the animals who help provide food for us (we are not kind to them) but there are considerations we have to make.

When we, the Republic of Fiji, can show that we can have this bipartisan approach at this universal requirement, we are creating an image of a responsible nation. We have come out of some very dark years in our development. From 1987, 2000, we are just moving away from that and it is time for us to say, "We are here, we have developed, do not mind our past, look at where we are going to the future."

When we have these responsible debates, we show ourselves as progressive thinkers, objective thinkers, and show that we can lead our country, we can lead the region, we are a reasonable player in the world, very soon, Mr. Speaker, Sir, people will open up for us, countries will open up to us. We are worried about the size of our economy, that can grow. We have bilateral, regional and international cooperations with our bigger partners in the development of the universe and our region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for this motion. I thank all honourable Members who have contributed in support and I support the motion.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in support of the motion. I do not think there is anyone in this country or in any small island State in the Pacific or the world for that matter that would not support this motion.

I think as the honourable Naupoto has so eloquently described today the importance of this Ocean for us, not just in terms of its physical terms but in terms of our very essence of being as Pacific Islanders and as island people.

The Pacific, we know it matters to us for all sorts of different reasons - for our past, our heritage and also for our future. That is what it is for us - our climate and food security. We know that it makes up half of the earth, that is ocean, and it is home to more marine species than any other ocean basin on the planet - actually the home to more, and it provides 70 percent of the verbal fish catch. So, it is not only important for environmental issues but also economically in the supply of fish which is our very source of protein for people all over the world.

The Pacific has most of the islands of any other Ocean. The figure that I have is around 25,000. It is bigger than the total size of all the Continents on the Earth combined. So, I was thinking about what the honourable Prime Minister was saying, being here in Fiji we are asked to be part of the other countries to be actually stewards of this great Ocean. We are put in place to be stewards of this Ocean. The deepest spot on the Earth can be found in the Pacific - the deepest ravines.

Rainwater, drinking water, weather systems, climates - they are all ultimately provided and kept in balance by the ocean and, of course, also the Amazon Forest, which has been described by others as the lungs of the Earth, making sure that life can be sustained into the future. We rely on it as a major source of the food that we eat and even for oxygen that is produced. Oxygen is also produced by all of these green things that we breath.

We know all the changes that are coming, some of them are induced by climatic changes and I think the ones that have been discussed at length today is man-made. We also know about this warmer atmosphere. We all know about the changes to our global climate, oceans are becoming warmer, more acidic, and when you have warmer oceans, it means stronger cyclones. That is what it means - higher sea levels and larger changes in precipitation patterns. When the rain falls, it falls very intensely in a very short period of time and I think the Minister responsible for Disaster Management will be very familiar now with the impact this is having all across our country.

We all know that the extent of our future climate change depends on what we do with the greenhouse gas emissions and we as a country, our leaders, have been at the forefront of this fight because we know that the more we emit, the larger the changes will be. People are saying in the world now, 1.5 is probably gone. So, I mean that is, I do not know. Sometimes when I think about it, I prefer not to think about it - what it means for my grandchildren and my grandchildren's grandchildren. But I think for us, the feelings that have been expected by the Pacific Island Forum Leaders is that we, in the Pacific, need to remain strong and reach out together as it is critical.

So, I am glad to see that we had the Forum Leaders Meeting in February this year. When we were in Government, our Prime Minister had one in June or July last year where there was gathering together so we need to maintain that togetherness of all island countries, not only in the Pacific, but across throughout. This is very important because we are small island nations but that combined working together can have an impact on things that are happening around the world.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition talked about the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) and Small Island States work together to get oceans onto the global agenda. So, it actually had an SDG on its own and that shows what can happen when Small Island States with small population bend together and are able to project what they want.

I can remember being at the Paris in 2015 when the Small Island States were trying to push this agenda and it was very, very difficult - about oceans and about 1.5. It did not get through but I think, at the end of the day, we managed to get it as part of the SDG. And I am glad to see the developments that Fiji had a part to play.

The Suva Agreement of September 2015 which articulated some of our major concerns and which other countries in the Pacific signed on to, to express our concerns about what is happening and the kind of messages that we, as a region, needed to pass on to the world so that the world could decide to take actions on things that can have an impact on us here in Fiji.

We had an Ocean Conference that we co-chaired with Sweden in 2017. So, Fiji has been right there in the battle to preserve oceans. We have all the oceans work that we have done with AOSIS. Over the past years, we have had the COP23 Presidency and we have been able to push very strongly for this agenda. Of course, during our advocacy and working with G77 in China we have been able to use that platform to push the agenda of the Oceans. I think that has been a good platform that the FijiFirst Government has built over the past years and we look forward to this current Government to continue that fight and make sure that you continue to take it to another level.

So, we have worked hard to make sure that the Island States get the benefits. There is this separation between LDCs and countries like ourselves. So, LDCs get special concession in terms of loans, et cetera. We have worked very hard to make sure that some of those concessions were also given to us, not because we are an LDC but because of our vulnerability. We fought on the basis of vulnerability. We are a very vulnerable island nation, even though we are not LDC, give us those concessions. It was a long hard battle but we got there, and that is why we are beginning to get some of those concessional loans because of our extreme vulnerability.

Today's issues are the preservation of the Pacific Ocean. As I have said, it influences the global climate, it is a largest ocean, et cetera.

Preservation of oceans is not something that we can own it, we need to battle it out on the global front – the SDGs, et cetera, at the UN, but we also need to battle on it at home.

There are lot of things happening in our country. We are talking about tourism as a biggest earner of income for Fiji. We know what is happening to our coral reefs. Coral reefs are dying in a lot of parts of Fiji. Sea levels are rising which has an impact on our infrastructure, fisheries acidification, coral bleaching, sediments killing the reefs - we have seen this in Nadi in particular where the sediments, cutting of trees, agriculture brings the sediment down as an impact on all of those areas.

So, there are also a lot of things that we need to do in-country to try to address these things. But when we try to address them, there is a price to pay because a lot of people will resist the things

that we have to do. If you have to cut down indiscriminating cutting of trees or agricultural prices, there is a price to pay in those things. There will be a push back on those things.

I think as we are looking at the global agenda, we also have to think seriously about what we need to do in-country, and it is not an easy thing to do but we will have to go against what a lot of people want for their own personal interest. Sometimes, what is best for their own interest is not what is best for the interest of the country at large.

I think there is going to be something, that over time, Government will have to take the bull behind the horns and must become a catalyst for the change that will impact on peoples lives by doing the necessary things.

Just like this Government did in terms of *Walesi*. We took the bull by the horn, we grapple it, but we made sure we push that through. Sometimes you have to do that. So, be strong, do not give up as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica said you are thinking of giving up, do not give up, be strong.

I am supporting the motion but I am just giving some encouragement because of our linkages too, he knows. But today we are talking about the nuclear threat. I remember when I was a student at USP, together with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Biman Prasad, we used to fight against this nuclear thing. We marched on the street of Suva. I do not know whether the honourable Minister for Infrastructure remembers this - marching the streets against nuclear threat is beginning to come up again.

So, there has always been this stride. We remember the Green Peace/Rambo warrior. Now, we have this particular issue. I have listened very carefully to what the honourable Prime Minister has talked about, the Fukushima Wastewater. As he has said, some people say it is safe, other people say it is not safe. I think for me, Japan is such a strong allie of us, but whatever happens, it must not be at the expense of our people. So, we have to be perfectly sure - absolutely 100 percent sure if that wastewater is going to have an impact on the ocean and us.

I have also been thinking about these AUKUS nuclear submarines. While they do not carry nuclear war heads, they do have nuclear things in them and I hope that those nuclear submarines might not have an accident which then might lead to some radiation type of things, so that is another issue. I know our Government is committed to that in partnership with the Australia, but we have to be very careful that the protocols or whatever need to be maintained, so that our oceans and our people are not harmed by the potential of nuclear radiation in the world.

One of the things that we have fought very hard for, and I think we need to keep on strengthening this, is our fight for loss and damage. I remember in Paris, the fight for loss and damage we never got an inch. Loss and damage when we say, the countries that caused the calamity because of their greenhouse gas emissions should pay some compensation to us who are suffering the brunt of that.

For many years it did not move but now it is beginning to move. Now, finally, it is beginning to move. So, I encourage the Government, as you go out there, please, fight on the behalf of the people of the Pacific to move that loss and damage forward so we can get some of that money across to help our community, and we here on our side will offer our support in that battle.

The last thing that I wanted to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I talked about the importance to fight the nuclear impact on our people, the need for us to remain strong, not only as a country, regionally

but with all other island States. That is why AOSIS is very important. That is why it also important to align ourselves with big blocs that have a lot of power in the world, such as G77 and China.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this afternoon, the honourable Prime Minister has talked about Japan and Germany. In the aftermath of the World War, they were completely devastated, but we had the victors in the war. I think one of their benefits during that war is that, the people that have victory over them came to help them. We had the Marshall Plan in Europe that led to the resuscitation of Germany.

We had the same sort of assistance given by the Americans to Japan that led that transformation in that country so it became an industrial super power over time. I think we need something like that for the Pacific Island nations. We need someone somehow to get that injection of funds or expertise to help us.

There has been an interesting suggestion made by Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister Barbados. We have been following what she has been talking about over the past few months, talking about building a coalition of nations committed to overhauling the financial systems in the world and unleash trillions of dollars to address this. She is talking about World Bank and IMF because these funds are managed by those people. There needs to be a revolution in the way they address those issues so that fund can be used to help us who are facing these calamities today. And the outcome of that is called the Bridgetown Agenda.

The Bridgetown Agenda is designed to reform the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These are institutions set up at the end of World War II and the powers that be are the ones in Europe who were involved in that world war so all of the parameters and how it operates is towards their benefit.

So, it has been about a revolution. I would suggest also that the Government seriously look into the Bridgetown Agenda and how we can also join that battle so that we can begin to get these funds to assist us in our battle to preserve the ocean for our current generation and the generations to come, that one day our generation will ask us, what did you do for the Pacific Ocean?

I fully support the motion, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may, please, forgive me if I go a few minutes extra on this because this is a passionate call on behalf of all Fijians. I say that, Sir, because I was actually a part of the discussions when it had actually commenced with respect to Japan's request.

I want to quote something, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that everyone in Fiji can know what it is like to be the recipient of what happens when you store nuclear waste. I am actually quoting from the *Washington Post*. This was an article that was actually published more than three years ago, and I quote:

“At 6:45 a.m. on March 1, 1954, the blue sky stretching over the central Pacific Ocean was split open by an enormous red flash.

Within seconds, a mushroom cloud towered 4½ miles high over Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The explosion, the U.S. government's first weaponized hydrogen bomb, was 1,000 times as powerful as the “Little Boy” atomic bomb blast that flattened Hiroshima - and a complete miscalculation.

Scientists had underestimated the size of what became known as the “Castle Bravo” test, resulting in an explosion that was 2½ times larger than expected. Radioactive ash dropped more than 7,000 square miles from the bomb site, caking the nearby inhabited islands.

“Within hours, the atoll was covered with a fine, white, powder-like substance.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just from that message, you will understand what can happen if you are the recipient. Along the same lines, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a message then that was reiterated by the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, on a tour of the Pacific Islands to discuss climate change. Again, I quote:

“In Fiji on Thursday, he told a crowd about the huge “a kind of coffin” built by the US in the Marshall Islands to house the deadly radioactive debris from the 1980s.

The structure, however, was never meant to last.”

There is a reason for me quoting this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I quote:

“Today, due to disrepair and rising sea tides, it is dangerously vulnerable. A strong storm could reach the dome, releasing the deadly legacy of America’s nuclear might.”

Now, this is very important Sir, again, I have not finished the quote:

“In 1980, a massive concrete dome – 18 inches thick and shaped like a flying saucer – was placed over the fallout debris, sealing off the material on Runit. But the \$218 million (£172 million) project was only supposed to be temporary until a more permanent site was developed, according to *The Guardian*.”

Fellow Members of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, this is a quote:

“That dome is the connection between the nuclear age and the climate change age.”

That is a quote from an Australian broadcaster.

Now, just to put it into perspective, the ABC, according to a 2017 report, said that the fallout included Plutonium-239, an isotope that is one of the world’s most toxic substances and this is what should hit onto us and one with a radioactive half-life of 24,100 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the request that has been made by Japan, they are friends of ours, they are development partners of ours, but you must remember for years and years, we in the Pacific Islands, have been in control of some of the largest ocean in the world that we have always have the smallest voice. In any forum, we were stepped on, moved aside - no more, Mr. Speaker, no more!

We cannot let this happen; we must not let this happen. It is imperative upon us, we do not need the scientific results on this. We have to be the protectors of our ocean. We have to ensure that our future generations are protected and the reason why Mr. Speaker, is exactly what I just said.

So, many years later, now what has transpired is that particular dome is leaking. It is leaking, we are 18 inches away from absolute disaster in the Pacific Ocean. Guess what, Mr. Speaker? Everyone has washed their hands off it because of the documents that were signed when the Marshall Islands became free from the United States and it had covered, it had future proofed itself. So, the

US is no longer responsible for it. But they do not have the necessary funding to ensure that, that leakage does not go into the ocean. It has been raised; it is something that the Forum is very well aware of.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the hard reality of what happens when there is nuclear waste that you have to deal with. And the honourable Minister is actually correct, if in their opinion, it is safe to do so, what is the harm in the release in their rivers and streams? Why our Pacific Ocean? That is the question.

As I have said, Mr. Speaker, I have been a part of the discussions on this right from the outset and I know, Sir, that there are conflicting scientific reports that say one thing and the other says another. How are we to ascertain what is going to happen to our future generations? We live by the sea, we eat from the sea, we rely on the sea. Many countries do not actually realise that, but it is a source of literally everything for us.

It is a decision that is actually quite simple and Fiji, as the champion of the course of climate change, we have been at the forefront of discussions. We should not even blink when making and deciding as to what the answer should be to the request. Simply flat, “No”, because we are still not sure of what may happen.

The Secretary-General for PIF actually made a statement just recently and he gave a piece in the newspaper. I think it is actually quite important that everyone is quite aware of, and he gave an opinion on this. He said that over the past 20 months, Pacific Island Forum members have actually been in dialogue with the Japanese Government with respect to all these, but he raised some issues that are quite correct. He said that the discussions in the past year have actually not been encouraged.

There are serious information gaps that exist and grave concerns with the proposed ocean release. Simply put, of course, more data is needed before any ocean release should be permitted. But despite this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Japan is continuing the plans with respect to discharge in the spring of 2023. These are the words of Secretary-General from PIFS.

Relying on the next four years of discharge to figure it out, that is about as dangerous that you can get. We must not forget also that we have to uphold the commitments with respect to the Treaty of Rarotonga, which is quite important. We cannot allow nuclear waste to go into the ocean, that is one of our obligations.

Again, and I quote this and I think Parliament and everyone in Fiji needs to hear this. We respect Japan for all that is, but there was a conversation according to the Secretary-General that was heard, it is not a new one, it was about four decades ago, and he refers to it by saying:

“The Forum leaders also urged Japan and other shipping States to store or dump their nuclear waste in their home countries rather than storing or dumping them in the Pacific.”

A mere four years after that political statement in 1985, the Forum welcomed Japan’s Prime Minister’s statement that Japan had no intention of dumping radioactive waste in the Pacific Ocean in disregard of the concern expressed by the communities of the Region. The decision for any ocean release should not only be a domestic matter for Japan, but a global and transnational issue that should should give rise to the need to examine issue in the context of obligations under the international law.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned by honourable Usamate, Vanuatu took it upon themselves on behalf of the Pacific and we supported them, who went to the ICJ to get a decision with respect to

climate change and the catastrophic events that come out of climate change and who is going to be responsible for it. And I know that they got a positive response from the ICJ with respect to that.

All of these things matter, Mr. Speaker, and in order for us as responsible citizens of Fiji and the Pacific Island Forum and as protectors of the ocean, we need to say, 'no'. It is as simple as that. There is no waiting for the scientist to come up because the scientist can tell you one thing today and another thing tomorrow. There is too much unknown quantity with respect to nuclear waste after being pumped into the Pacific Ocean. It cannot happen, Mr. Speaker. It is something that would be a legacy that we would leave behind as Fijian people for our generations in the 30 years, 40 years or 50 years.

In light of everything that I said, Sir, on behalf of everyone here and our leader, I want to thank the honourable Minister for raising this motion and I want to tell all Fijian people, this is the one time you will get a thousand percent support from this side of Parliament with respect to this motion.

Mr. Speaker, I support the motion wholeheartedly.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion at hand. I note the various opinions that have been expressed. Of course, it is very important for, we, as Pacific Islanders to understand the subject matter and how critical it is to share this not only within our Parliament, but also with our people and with the Pacific regarding the plans to dump nuclear wastewater. It presents a clear and present danger with the people of the Pacific.

There have been various opinions expressed on this, not only in the international media but closer to Japan. For example, there was one opinion in the Korean news agency, stating that there are, at least, five options for dealing with nuclear contaminated water from the Fukushima Nuclear Plant, including evaporating and storing it underground. But the Japanese Government chose the cheapest and fastest way and it has not prioritised reducing the damage to human health.

There is also the opinion that the Japanese Government has ignored domestic and international opposition in terms of dumping of contaminated water and it is putting ahead economic interest.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also the issue regarding international geopolitics regarding the Japanese and the West, including the US and the UK. Those are also issues which might be hindering what we are talking about today - prioritising our environment and our Pacific Islanders and Pacific Islands.

In terms of the dumping of nuclear waste into the ocean, it has been happening for a long time with the nuclear powers - the US, UK, Russia. For example, from 1946 to 1993, 13 countries used ocean disposal as a method to dispose of nuclear waste of approximately 200,000 tonnes, sourcing mainly from medical research and mostly from the nuclear industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members have said some research in the issue and it is important that we also understand that in terms of the seriousness of the issue and also from the perspective of what the Japanese authorities are saying. Let me read out what they are saying, I quote:

“There have been claims to clarify that all traces of highly radioactive elements (tritium and cesium) have been removed from the storage tanks containing the treated wastewater.”

It should be noted that less radioactive elements of tritium and radioactive isotope of hydrogen, which the Japanese claimed to pose a low risk to human health.

The US Secretary also stated it lauded Japan for its transparent efforts in following globally accepted standards of nuclear safety. Again, as already expressed, there are various opinions and it is a concern for us that those opinions have been expressed.

Let me share this, in the same article, it states that the storage tanks at Fukushima held wastewater that have been contaminated with nuclear types, such as cesium, et cetera, including protonium. The Japanese Government has claimed that this have been removed.

Critics argue that the advanced liquid processing system which was the treatment process used at the Fukushima Plants fails to capture dangerous isotopes such as tritium, tritium, cobalt and strontium with absolute accuracy. This is at risk when it is dumped in the Pacific of being coming into our ocean. Not only that but also into the food chain.

There are issues regarding trust and that needs to be built up. There are limits to international law regarding this and concern has been expressed that the discharge might not even get covered under International Dumping Convention. Sir, there is also the climate change agenda, the clean energy and nuclear energy has always set those question marks.

Sir, regarding the situation with Fiji, I applaud the honourable Members who have expressed their views. We have to understand the magnitude of nuclear waste dumping. It is not normal pollution, it goes into the food chain and Fiji has a very reproductive forest ecosystem - beaches, mangroves, et cetera, and more than 10,000 kilometres of coral reefs which support marine and coastal diversity and 1,200 fish species, 800 different species of molluscs and 350 hard coral species. This has played a critical role in subsistence and artisanal fishing to thrive and help our communal communities and also in terms of our cultural practises.

Sir, regarding the monetary value, attempts have been made to estimate the monetary value of the marine eco-systems. However, this metric fails to account for the multitude of domestic benefits, the support for the Fijian way of life, our fishing communities and maintenance of such subsistence livelihoods. That monetary value has looked at some sectors, for example, shark diving was estimated to contribute US\$42.2 million to the Fijian economy. I am quoting from the report which has been mentioned by the honourable Members, "National Ocean Policy" just to emphasise the point in terms of the impact.

In terms of the whole marine ecosystem, the estimated value of Fiji's marine ecosystem services was about \$2.4 billion annually and fisheries is estimated to contribute \$123 million annually from subsistence farming. Small inshore commercial fisheries produce a total national value of up to \$54 million while commercial offshore fisheries based on albacore tuna produce a total net of \$20 million per year. I thought I just share that information for us to appreciate the magnitude of the issue before us and also the very critical motion. I thank the honourable Members for your contribution in our national understanding in unity in terms of our support for this motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, can I simply put to you, when debating on issues such as this, we try and come up with hard core facts rather than quoting these paper clippings et cetera, because this is Parliament and it is just like going to university. You give your views and your source as well, otherwise it will be just like how we are addressing this now. It is a very your issue but we really need to rely on hard facts.

The Embassy of Japan is somewhere here in Suva and we could easily access that by just tapping into those kind of resources rather than quoting from clippings from this newspaper to that newspaper. That is what big countries are encountering now because they are being controlled by what is being dished out by the newspapers rather than the hard-core facts coming from the governments. That is all I want to ask you - please observe that before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief and I thank all honourable Members who have contributed and let me assure Government and the mover of the motion that we are in total support of the motion.

What other options have we got? I thank the honourable Koya for quoting the Treaty of Rarotonga, that is the guiding document for all Pacific Islanders and perhaps that will also leave Government and the honourable Prime Minister in a difficult position as well particularly when it comes to our bilateral relations.

Article 7 of the *Treaty of Rarotonga*, honourable Deputy Prime Minister and mover of the motion, specifically talks about the environmental protection and how we deal with nuclear wastes. I was in Vienna last year on two nuclear related meetings as Minister for Defence. I have seen with my own two eyes how people suffered.

This is the second generation, they were brought to the meetings to testify about the danger of dealing with this. They were arm-less and deformed. Let us be cautious, science has a role to play. Will we believe the science? That is another question, but to give assurance to this august Parliament, Article 7 of the *Treaty of Rarotonga*, it was open for signing to all Pacific Island countries in 1985 and it came into force meaning that we have ratified in 1986. It just took that short period for us to ratify because it was so important for our survival. Our ocean is our life, it is our very existence and it defines us. This is for the future of every Fijian and every Pacific Islander. We support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the floor to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister to make his reply.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present some closing remarks to the motion before us and before I do, I would just like to thank everyone, the honoured Members of this august Chamber who have contributed to the debate today. I was smiling when the honourable Usamate mentioned a question that I first started asking myself when I started hearing about what the Japanese were trying to do in terms of waste disposal. The question was, as the honourable Usamate put it quite aptly, what will be the answer to our children and grandchildren regarding the attempts by our friends from Japan to dispose waste into our oceans?

I have been listening quite intently to the debate and a few things are quite clear or obvious as well that we only have one ocean and one chance always to protect our ocean. When you look at the history of the Pacific, it is almost as if the larger countries have been playing Russian Roulette with us in the Pacific. Now and again, they developed some testing or conduct some testing in the ocean that presents a clear and present danger as the honourable Ro Filipe Tuisawau had mentioned in our ocean.

The honourable Gavoka spoke about the harvesting of great wealth that is in our oceans and the concern that we all have if that wealth is threatened or somehow destroyed. The honourable Members talked eloquently about the size of the Pacific Ocean and its criticality and importance to our lives. The honourable Usamate has said that it is the essence of our being. I could not help but note that some of the honourable Members too at least had to give their Government some credit in terms of their contribution to climate change and other honourable initiatives on the global stage.

Perhaps, just to balance it out, let me just say that the honourable Prime Minister has been instrumental in bringing the region back together and in doing so, allowing us to stand up here today and speak as a region once again with confidence and in many respects, Sir, reclaiming that unique position that Fiji does hold in the Pacific region. It is clear that our ocean is vulnerable. When I thought about this particular motion, I was hoping that the support would be unanimous or to put it in the words of the honourable Koya, “1000 percent”.

On that note, Sir, I wish to thank all the contributors to the debate today. I hope that in due course we will continue to push for the preservation of our ocean and protect it as one of the last bastions of our existence in the globe as we know. With those few words, I thank you for this opportunity to provide some closing remarks and I revert the motion to Parliament for a vote, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just for housekeeping, honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6 that so much of Standing Order 23(1) be suspended so as to allow Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. to complete the remaining items 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, we have few more items left on the Order Paper including a debate on a Report as well as Question time. So we will need to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. to cover this. I ask the Members of Parliament to support this motion.

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 more to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture, I want to adjourn Parliament for afternoon tea and as such, Parliament is now adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.59 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.44 p.m.

REVIEW OF THE AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT ON COVID-19 COMPLIANCE AUDITS

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

That Parliament debates the Review of the Auditor-General's Report on COVID-19 Compliance Audits - Management of Unemployment Benefits, Management of Concessional Loan Packages to Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) which was tabled on 1st September, 2022.

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

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament. Sir, as the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and mover of the motion, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion for debate on the Review of the Auditor-General's Report on COVID-19 Compliance Audit on the Management of Unemployment Benefits as well as the Management of Concessional Loan Package to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

This Review Report was prepared and tabled in Parliament by the previous Standing Committee on Public Account in the last term of Parliament. In this regard, I thank the former Chairperson and Members of the previous Public Accounts Committee for this detailed Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Review Report follows the Report of the Auditor-General on the Compliance Audit that was carried out and discussed yesterday and focused on:

- (1) Management of Unemployment Benefits for COVID-19 which was facilitated by the Ministry of Economy and administered by the Fiji National Provident Fund in 2020; and
- (2) Management of Concessional Loan Package to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

Sir, the audit was conducted in accordance with the functions of the Auditor-General's specified in the Audit Act of 1969 and Section 152 of the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, particularly section 6(a) of the Audit Act of 1969 which provided powers to the Auditor-General to conduct compliance audits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Auditor-General carried out compliance audits on both programmes to obtain sufficient and appropriate audit evidence and form a conclusion on whether in all material aspects, the processes and internal controls surrounding the programmes were adequate and effective in ensuring that only eligible people and MSME businesses benefit from the initiatives.

Sir, in addition, the audit on MSME Loan Package covered both the design and implementation of the programme, including the review of the framework or policies and guidelines and the loan applications, assessments and approval process for concessional loans registered by the Ministry of Commerce, Tourism, Trade and Transport as at 23rd September, 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be very brief on the Committee's findings. Firstly, on the Management of Unemployment Benefits. There were significant findings identified during the time of the audit and this includes:

- (1) SOPs were not designed by the Ministry of Economy for disbursement of assistance, process for unemployment in the informal sector and COVID-19 lockdown areas;
- (2) Applicants who were still employed received Government subsidy;
- (3) Double payment of FNPF and Government subsidy to eligible applicants;
- (4) Government subsidy incorrectly calculated and paid out;
- (5) Extra Government subsidy paid to approved applicants;
- (6) Government subsidy paid to ineligible applicants;
- (7) FNPF not providing system closure report for each payment phase;
- (8) Incomplete informal sector approved applications still received payment; and
- (9) Some approved applicants from the informal sector in the COVID-19 lockdown areas assisted by the Ministry of Economy also benefited from FNPF, Government Subsidy COVID-19 Formal Sectors Financial Assistance Programme.

Secondly, Sir, on the Management of Concessional Loan Package to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, a sum of \$15.2 million was allocated by Government and paid to FRCS for the purposes of Concessional Loan Packages during the financial year ending 31st July, 2020. As of 8th October, 2020, a total of \$13.4 million had been disbursed by FRCS to 2,220 MSME enterprises.

The Committee noted the following governance issues from the audit findings on the Management of Concessional Loan Package to MSMEs:

- (1) Assignment of roles and responsibilities between the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Commerce, Tourism, Trade and Transport was not clearly demarcated at the beginning of the programme;
- (2) There was no documentation to support that risk assessment was performed for programme implementation to identify risks and internal controls to mitigate such risks in a systematic manner;
- (3) The assessors turnaround time of seven days as stipulated in the Memorandum of Agreement was not met;
- (4) It was not mandatory for assessors to declare any potential conflict of interest during the assessment of loan applications;
- (5) The minimum assessment qualification scores as per the assessment forms, that is, 60 percent for micro business and 80 percent for small and medium businesses was not aligned with approved assessment qualification scores of 50 percent as per the COVID-19 Concessional Loan Package Guide;
- (6) The assessors scored did not have a bearing on the loan amount approved for its business, therefore, loan applications assessed that were eligible or did not meet the 50 percent qualification score threshold were still approved;
- (7) There were instances when loan amounts that were approved by the business assistance Fiji panel was different from the amount assessed and recommended by the assessors; and
- (8) There were instances when application forms were not signed-off by the receiving and verifying officers which indicates that the vetting processes was not strictly followed hence contributed to the delay in the assessment process as the application submitted were incomplete.

Given the lessons learnt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Committee recommended the following as at the date of the report. It was pleasing to note and heard from yesterday's debate that responsible ministries and departments have not only taken steps to set up their SOPs but also reviewing for improvements to the current ones. The recommendations are as follows:

- (1) The ministries mentioned here or any ministry in the future, while implementing the programme or a new one to take heed of the lessons learnt and develop proper SOPs for

- future use;
- (2) The Committee notes the challenges faced by the Ministry of Economy in implementing this programme during the COVID-19 period and recommends that regular consultations with the stakeholders and review the Management of Unemployment Benefits and Management of Concessional Loan Packages issued to MSMEs.
 - (3) The Committee commends the Ministry of Economy for using alternative modes of payment for easier distribution of unemployment benefits to the general public.
 - (4) The Committee commends the concessional loan packages issued to micro small and medium enterprises towards their sustainability during COVID-19 pandemic and further recommends to continue with such initiatives in the future should an unprecedented event occur.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee in conclusion commended the COVID-19 Responses provided by the Government and the progress made by the responsible ministries and departments in addressing audit issues that were identified. However, as I mentioned in the first review report for COVID-19 responses that was debated yesterday, 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, procedures and legislations that are in place.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you honourable Chairperson. The honourable Members the floor is now open for debate on the motion and before I offer the floor, I would like to inform you honourable Members that six honourable Members have registered their interest to speak on the motion and since this is a Government's motion, the batting will be led off by the Opposition and then it will alternate that way until we complete the six.

The Members are:

- (1) Honourable V. Naupoto
- (2) Honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation;
- (3) Honourable J.N. Nand;
- (4) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (5) Honourable P.D. Kumar;
- (6) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Committee for the work that they are doing and coming up with the report that we are debating today. I just like to use this opportunity Mr. Speaker, Sir, to share a little bit of something that happened during the COVID-19 crisis that I think we can learn from given that we are asking ourselves now - what happens, what will we do and when the next one hits?

When the pandemic hit, I think we were lucky because the Ministry of Health was just towards the tail-end of their trying to contain the measles outbreak and I think the health officials will know that the way you deal with measles outbreak was similar to the way you deal with containing coronavirus. They were into isolation for those that found that had measles.

When the crisis hit, the RFMF very quickly offered assistance and tagged into what the Ministry of Health was already doing in doing contact tracing. They taught us how to do contact tracing in isolation. Very early we were told Mr. Speaker, Sir, by WHO that there was a lesson learnt from the *Ebola* crisis in Africa that when the frontline workers were going out to help the people that had *Ebola*, when they contracted the disease and came back to be treated, they found out that the facilities were full from the patients that already had *Ebola* and that made them reluctant to go forward and help the people who needed help.

The RFMF took that up and we offered what was our court room for court martials. Given that we have a level 2 hospital at QEB to build a facility to look after our frontline workers, to give them assurance that if they get sick upfront, they know that they will always come back and these facilities are ready for them. So, now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a fully functioning and well equipped ICU facility at QEB. I am not too sure whether the honourable Minister for Health has been to the facility, it is there for the nation and if the capacity for CWM ICU is full, there is always that facility available there that people can use.

Again, in a crisis you start off by reacting to what is happening and through that reaction you will learn some lessons and that will allow you to put plan in anticipation of what could be coming next, I know Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Minister for Health is listening, there is one room there also that has the machine for dialysis there is a little bit of work to be done and again I hope the Minister for Health can go and visit. It will be good for the Ministry of Health to help complete that setup and again there is a reserve for our dialysis unit when patients needs dialysis.

I would like Mr. Speaker, Sir, given I was very much involved in the work to thank the frontline workers who worked tirelessly throughout and stayed away from their families in that pandemic time. I thank their families also for enduring the time that they were away, they would look to, to look after them whilst they go and look after others. Again, I thank the Committee and I support the motion that is before Parliament.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion. Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, they are a key role in job creation providing two-thirds of all formal jobs in developing countries and 80 percent in low income countries but in any crisis situation, they create jobs, cash flows. They understand the needs of the time and can easily tailor their products and services for the time. We were told by the ILO and the government at that time that 120,000 jobs were lost in the formal and informal sectors mainly around the tourism sector. Something like 30 percent of women employed in lower income bracket in the sector lost their jobs.

The loss of employment during the pandemic had a mega impact on our small economy. Many of the breadwinners were supporting multiple families in their extended networks. I met a parent who lost her income looking after 10 children only one was hers. From maritime and interior areas many children were being billeted and these affording families were hosting them to be educated or to be employed. Shock of loss of jobs and the way it was done caused a lot of confusion, pain, depression and shame to many who were used to being the providers. For their dignity they needed quick support and alternative livelihood Mr. Speaker, Sir, but they could not access loans from the bank. Many struggled to pay their bills, mortgage, medical and needed the support this package could have provided.

Was this support responsive at that time? Not entirely. There were many requirements - business registration, tax ID, business plan, cash flow projections when families just needed an income to survive. At a time like that when we needed to just enable and support those in need to find sources of income, they had to relearn how to do business. For example, a chef who lost his job ended up losing his home had five children. His wife remembered her sewing skills learned from her

grandmother and she started doing patchwork but had to borrow a machine from neighbours who was charging her rental. An input of \$1,400 worth of a commercial machine, she started making \$500 a week selling her pieces to diaspora through social media pages and until then, she could find that \$1,400 support through a Civil Society Organisation, the family had to scavenge to survive. We discovered that those working in the hotel industry needed support in restarting food gardens, we heard yesterday about agriculture support and how it was done and the issues that were around it.

We realise when we were on the ground trying to support people and I was working for FRIEND, we were on the ground and we understood, many families who were working in the tourism sector on shift work were no longer gardening. Some of the families in the Denarau area said they have not gardened for 20 to 30 years and they needed to re-learn some of these techniques and needed, other than seeds, some training, awareness and some support and mentorship.

People also needed mental health support at that time and to apply for this support, they needed financial literacy around cash flows which was a requirement for this application. They required business planning et cetera, they could not just apply for the support. At that time, if you remember the reports we saw increase in scavenging, increase in sex work, we saw bartering for families to just be able to survive.

A civil society organised listening exercise led by FRIEND and Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, no eyes were dry in the room listening to the struggles of the people. A mother shared how she could not afford to purchase medication for her child. Another mother shared she lost her child because she could not afford medication and had to carry her child to the morgue herself as medical staff were stretched. It was a very painful time.

Many civil society organisations came together to step in to provide medication, support to frontliners, provide food resources and livelihood support. Sir, FRIEND provided hotlines for people to call for food, health support including patients with Rheumatic Heart Disease (RHD), St. Giles patients and NCDs needing COVID-19 care. Whole of the country rose to support their nation come out of the crisis, never ever acknowledged by the previous government.

Thank God for the many concerned citizens and diaspora who supported their families out of the crisis, helping their relatives start small enterprises and I acknowledge and thank the many donor partners including the governments of New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States of America who worked with Civil Society Organisations to help provide quick and easy support to the people in need on the ground.

I visited a mother in Malolo Village in Nadi. She learnt how to bake on *YouTube* after her husband lost his job in the hotel sector and she started selling cakes from a very small microwave oven, so she needed an oven. With the micro support system, when she got an oven, she could make \$200 a week easily by learning on *YouTube*.

In crisis like that, our very talented population needed business support, finances, training, unregulated enabling environment that could have come about if the administration had taken time to listen to the people and their need. There are many lessons learnt and recommendations in this Report that needs to be taken on board for or any government to be responsive to the needs of the common people, needs of micro enterprises who were not in the space for unending paperwork in a crisis like a pandemic.

Support to micro enterprises meant food on the table, bills, dignity at a time when there was a shock at economic level and a core of human level as frustration and depression set in. It was a difficult time when people who were always in a high-level status, economic status found themselves

completely helpless. There was an urgency and there was an urgent need for this service but it had to be relevant for the time. There has been many lessons that has come out of the crisis and many of the recommendations from the Report makes a lot of sense and I support the recommendations.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Review of the Auditor-General's Report on COVID-19 Compliance Audit in regards to:

- (1) Management of Unemployment Benefits;
- (2) Management of Concessional Loan Package to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee requested for written responses from the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport (MCTTT) on the audit issues that were raised and after reviewing the responses received, it was agreed that two ministries to have a face-to-face public hearing session with the Committee. Therefore on 17th June, 2022, the Ministry of Economy appeared before the Committee and presented the responses on the questions that were posed to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommends that whilst the Ministry was implementing their programme take heed of the lessons learnt and develop proper Standard Operating Procedures for future use.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me highlight the work of the Ministry of Economy at a time when COVID-19 restrictions was in place and I would like to commend the work done by the Permanent Secretary of Economy, Mr. Shiri Gounder and his team. The Ministry of Economy designed the programme and developed the implementation plan for the MSME Concessional Loan Package which was documented in a Cabinet Paper.

The Ministry of Economy also carried out consultations with the Ministry of Commerce Trade, Tourism and Transport, Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, Reserve Bank of Fiji, Fiji Institute of Accountants, Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, Fiji Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Women in Business, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service and the Office of the Solicitor General.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following numerous consultations with all the stakeholders, the Ministry of Economy designed the Concessional Loan Package Programme and advised the FijiFirst Government that the COVID-19 crisis had significantly affected the MSME businesses and as such, many were struggling with cash flows as revenue levels had declined due to weak demand and therefore many are finding it difficult to continue doing business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government through a Cabinet decision dated 4th June, 2022 agreed to the Concessional Loan Package Funding to be provided to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and resolved that the Memorandum of Agreement to be circulated to the Fiji Institute of Accountants, Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, Fiji Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Women in Business for assessment, verification and approval of MSME loan application and the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services for the disbursement and collection of loans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Ministry of Economy, the FijiFirst government for the first time had engaged the private sector professional bodies with the likes of Fiji Institute of Accountants, Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, Fiji Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Women in Business in such a manner and scale to carry out verification, assessment and recommend approval or otherwise for MSME loan application.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the arrangement was formalised with the signing of agreements with these agencies. While the Ministry of Economy was involved in the initial planning and design of the programme, the Ministry of Commerce, Tourism, Trade and Transport was tasked to provide secretariat support and business advisory for applicants and be the lead ministry in the roll-out of the programme which involved receiving and sorting applications, maintaining records and storage of all loan application forms received and disseminating them to the respective organisations engaged to carry out assessment of the loan applications.

In addition to that, MCTTT's role was also to advise the FRCS of the approved loan applications for the disbursement of funds. Sir, MCTTT has also developed the COVID-19 Concessional Loan Package Guide which was approved by the Permanent Secretary of MCTTT on 15th July, 2020 to act as a guideline to support the implementation of the programme. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Guide describes the process used for processing, assessment, disbursement and collection of funds under the Micro, Small, Medium Enterprises and COVID-19 Concessional Loan Package.

However, the Office of the Auditor-General noted that the Guide was not effectively used during the processing of the loan applications as discussed the Report. Moreover, there was no Memorandum of Agreement between the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport to clearly demarcate the roles and responsibilities of each Ministry in rolling out the programme. Absence of roles and responsibilities of each party can cause accountability issues in terms of delivering the outcomes of the programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the executives of the Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport just provided clarification on technical issues raised by the Office of the Auditor-General. Most importantly, we acknowledge the two ministries effort in addressing the gap that were identified during the audit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these remarks, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff of the Ministry of Economy and all other ministries involved for their tremendous work and we all appreciate the commitment in providing the service during trying times. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the motion before Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise just to provide contributions on the debate on the Review of the Auditor-General's Report regarding the COVID-19 Compliance Audit.

The honourable Joseph Nand has kind of stolen my thunder by talking to some of my points which I thank him for, which I means that I will be short.

Sir, just a couple of things, again just reflecting on the Report, it is clear that we need to just have a think about what this Report can teach us or what they are telling us. I think the honourable Sashi Kiran who has left room was probably very polite in her contribution today because as is typical, the other side has always praised themselves for the work they have done in this space. But if we listen clearly to what the honourable Sashi Kiran said, what she said was there quite a number of people who were not assisted properly during the pandemic and it was left to the NGOs like FRIEND to actually assist.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I said, I will be brief because the honourable Nand has already stolen my thunder and also thank those that I thought I would thank. But I think it is important, Sir, when we are in service and sometimes perhaps, we step back and realise that sometimes when we self-praise, things are not perfect.

The honourable Sashi Kiran, actually what she said outside last night when we were having supper was a lot more damaging than what she kindly mentioned today. There was actually a lot of collaboration happening behind the scenes without the knowledge of the FijiFirst government in order to ensure that our people got the assistance they need. So, perhaps it is a learning for us all as we are in public service and I hope that rather than indulgence in self-praise, we can self-reflect, learn and move the country forward together.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also thank the Public Accounts Committee for the Review Report. As mentioned by the Chairperson, the Review Report specifically looked at two issues:

- (1) Unemployment Benefits; and
- (2) Concessional Loan Package to MSMEs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during COVID-19 it was crucial for the government to focus on saving lives and livelihood, unemployed people needed food on their table and as the government then, our effort was to minimise the economic impact as well. Uncertainties were too many and MSMEs needed assistance to continue operations. They were facing a high risk of folding up. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I agree with your observation that the Office of the Auditor-General stepped in too soon when the assistance was still being rolled out.

Let us talk about the situation. During COVID-19, it was not normal, it was an abnormal situation. People were falling sick because of COVID, the quarantine periods were longer, isolation periods were longer and no one knew what, when COVID-19 would end. It was a deadly virus, life was at stake, civil servants were in fear and so many times just because one person had COVID-19, the whole building had to be quarantined, people were sent home - it was a very unusual situation.

I can share one incident that I will never forget. The incident is related to the opening of Nausori Market. There were so many COVID cases in Nausori market that it had to be closed, quarantined and then the staff who were looking after the market had to go through so many tests and so many of them were down. So this Saturday we had to open the market and there was literally no one available to really go and open the market because most of the staff were in quarantine and isolation. We had to then use staff from Nasinu Town Council to go and assist and open the market.

So, you can imagine, it was a do or die situation and at that time the government could not force anyone; not a single staff to say that you have got to be here, we have to do this and this. It was impossible and not like the way Zoom has developed. Initial days, even the electronic devices were not that many and the people were not used to using Zoom for communication, et cetera. So, it was a very difficult situation, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Despite the difficulty, every effort was made to assist the people during that period. I recall the Ministry of Housing setting up Veilomani Food Bank and through this food bank we were assisting people living in informal settlements and again, Fijians are resilient.

We help one another. We help our neighbours. We help one another during crisis. It is not just the Government, NGOs, religious groups and people living abroad, they all came on board; that is how we survived the situation. One institution cannot because it is a pandemic. Once in a hundred years we faced this. No one had a blueprint, no one had a plan that if something like this will happen, this is how we are going to react. But we have learned from this pandemic and there are a lot of lessons we have learned and through this lesson, we are better prepared for the next time.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Fiji's always prone to natural disasters. We do come out and help our people whether it is individuals or even MSMEs and the lessons learnt from this COVID

crisis, we can use that in developing better SOPs and structures so that in a crisis situation, no one has to really run around. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also tend to forget that during COVID-19 there were so many restrictions, lockdowns which meant that one could not do the normal things. I heard honourable Sashi Kiran talk about why there was a need for paperwork?

Paperwork was required and then there were people to help to do all these work. For example, one could just go to any Legal Aid Office and this office is everywhere in Fiji. One could go to the BDM Office or they can go to their District Office and there were people who could assist them in filling the initial form and submitting it. But then on one hand she says that the paperwork should not have been there, but on the other hand she is saying that more training should have been organised.

With restrictions you cannot organise training. I hope we all can understand the crisis and if you can reflect, when you heard the first case in your neighbourhood how we all panicked, I mean that was the crisis. Do not expect normal things in a crisis situation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, reading the verbatim, it is pretty clear that the institutions had developed SOPs, recovery of overpayment of FNPF. Sir, FNPF is recovering the overpayment of money that was disbursed and it would be interesting to see the final of the Auditor-General and then we can discuss the report further.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during COVID-19, World Bank came on board and they helped the Ministry of Economy to adopt a cash transfer operations manual for the Unemployment Cash Assistance Programme. So all these manuals are going to help further in any other crisis situation the country may encounter. Once again, I want to thank the Committee for the Report.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had some very good contributions already. The Report is in two parts – one, which was managed by the then Ministry of Economy (now Ministry of Finance) and the other one by the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, Tourism and Transport at that time.

Mr. Speaker, just on the Ministry of Economy (now Ministry of Finance), I have been in the job for three months, I can tell you one thing about the Ministry. We have a very competent, very determined and a very loyal Permanent Secretary. When I talk about loyalty, Mr. Speaker, I talk about loyalty to the work. What I have also found out, Mr. Speaker, in three months was that majority of the staff, I can say with confidence within the Ministry are very hardworking staff, competent and again I can see their loyalty to the work. That is how, Mr. Speaker, civil servants ought to be, loyalty must not be to individuals and that I think, Mr. Speaker....

HON. J. USAMATE.- You just realised?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am trying to tell you something. I am sure you are not that dumb, honourable Usamate not to understand what I am saying.

Mr. Speaker, that is why this Government is determined to stop any politicisation of the civil service of the kind that happened under the FijFirst government. We are told by people everyday now, how that was done. So I want to thank the Permanent Secretary and all the staff who were involved in managing the COVID-19 crisis and if there is going to be any crisis of that nature or similar to that nature, I am confident that there are people who can do the work and handle the situation very well.

Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to say one more thing and this is very important. Honourable Premila Kumar talked about it. No audit, Mr. Speaker, is really a premature audit. In fact, good audit officers around the world, I know where this whole idea of auditing started in UK many years ago. They still practice this idea of auditing while the expenditure is being undertaken. I know and understand that COVID was a very, very abnormal situation, I fully agree with that and not everything can be done in the way that you could do it in a normal time. However, Mr. Speaker, sometimes the biggest abuse of funds happened in an abnormal situation. We have seen that happening in this country.

We were dealing with the Auditor-General's Report after 2006 *coup* when we got into Parliament in 2014, we had this big pile of Auditor-General's Report which was never made public and a lot of things happened during that period, Mr. Speaker. So the Office of the Auditor-General is a very, very important one and every institution, every civil servant and every Permanent Secretary's responsibility is to ensure that they co-operate and work with the Office of the Auditor-General and not, even if they have doubts about certain situations about what the Auditor-General does, that should never be a situation because the people who are responsible for managing the funds, they will have an opportunity to appear before the Public Accounts Committee, they have an opportunity to respond to but the work of the Auditor-General should never be hindered by anyone including the Permanent Secretaries or Ministers. I think this audit is very important.

The other point that I want to make and I think has been very well made by the Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica and I think honourable Premila Kumar also alluded to that. This is what we are saying, Mr. Speaker, in fact the crisis was so unusual, it was so damaging that you can never expect a government alone to handle it.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, even if it is a small crisis, for example if there is a flood in a particular area, cyclone and we have always seen this. I have experienced this over the last 20 and 30 years as a student at the University of the South Pacific where we used to get into groups. I remember *TC Kina*, we were distributing food, water and governments at that time were very supportive. There was never any hindrance, there was never any criticism about the way in which NGOs, organisations and individuals were helping. I know, Mr. Speaker, during *TC Winston*.

If you are moving into the Western Division, you look at the number of people who were travelling from Suva helping people. The same happened during COVID-19, Mr. Speaker, why people were apprehensive, why people were afraid of getting COVID-19, there was equally a determined approach by individuals, organisations to help people. Even those who were having difficulty in overseas (our family and friends), millions of dollars were sent to Fiji and many of them are still sending. I know, Mr. Speaker, in supermarkets around the country, at least in Labasa in one supermarket thousands of families are still receiving support from their families outside of Fiji. If you look at the volume of remittances that are coming, it reflects the support that we got.

The point that was raised by honourable Kamikamica and honourable Sashi Kiran supported slightly by honourable Premila Kumar is that the NGOs were on the ground. Unfortunately, there were unnecessary, undue criticism of some of the NGOs by the then Government and that was very unfortunately.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, about unusual situations, *TC Winston* and linking it to the Audit Report. That is the point that I was trying to make that audit in a unusual situation is very important. We had this support scheme for building houses after *TC Winston*. In fact, Mr. Speaker, I raised that in this Parliament. There was a massive abuse of funds in terms of the support that needed to go to the people who were supposed to receive that. Three hardware companies made a killing. Some of them didn't reach the people who deserved that and those that

got it, got it at a very high price because the system that was developed was designed for that kind of misuse and abuse...

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we had an audit team at that time on the ground looking at how the hardware companies, what was happening, what volume of funds was getting there, where the people were getting the corrugated iron, nail, timber, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would have helped more people, we would have saved millions of dollars. Just because we did not do an audit while it was happening, we did not discover that.

I know the honourable Minister at that time then found out and two hardware companies were actually penalised by small amounts, a few million dollars but they actually made millions of dollars. It was a much bigger scandal than some of the ones that we talked about before like the agriculture scandal in the late 1990s where people were talking about. But that played into insignificance compared to the scandal that happened in the last several years and including during *Tropical Cyclone Winston*.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to conclude by saying that the Ministry of Finance has now refined a very good Standard Operating Procedure, they are also looking at some of the systems that were there, it has been refined and I am sure that the payment systems and the way in which we can help people.

One final point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which was pointed out by the Audit Report is also trying to understand or identify those who need the support, especially those in the informal sector. So it is not always easy and I do not blame the government for that when they did that because it is not easy to identify who actually in the informal sector, the information is not there so some of the things that happened there, that is understandable. That would happen under any government, or any process that you put in place to identify people that you want to help in the informal sector. The Ministry is looking at that and hopefully there would be a much better understanding and data that we can use if there is an emergency or if there is a situation where it requires Government to provide help.

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

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate and most importantly the Committee noted the responses and actions taken by the responsible ministries and departments in addressing the audit issues that were highlighted.

Even though there were some negative instances in the report, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were some favourable commentaries as we move to prepare for such crisis such as the COVID-19 in the future.

- (1) RFMF has a hospital that could be used apart from the RFMF personnel who are used a lot in the crisis.
- (2) There is also a need for more help and consideration of flexibility for micro-businesses as they are the ones who are adversely affected most, especially those tied with NGOs such as FRIEND, Council of Social Services, food banks, churches and the late Mr. Allen Lockington (RIP) et cetera, who stepped in to help during this kind of crisis.
- (3) To acknowledge the help of agencies including the World Bank in assisting the SOPs and manuals of the ministries. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to reiterate what I have stated on Tuesday that the Public Accounts Committee looks forward to Government

Ministries and Departments to learn from the experiences faced during COVID-19 pandemic and continue to improve the internal controls and governance systems and processes to be adopted when such crisis happens in the future.

With those final comments 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.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this juncture I wish to inform this august Parliament that Parliament has now completed the debate on all Committee Reports that were reinstated from the previous Parliamentary term.

HON. MEMBERS.- *Vinaka!*

MR. SPEAKER.- There were a total of 21 reports. I congratulate all honourable Members for your due diligence in discharging your oversight and representative roles, and I also keenly look forward to your continued enthusiasm during this first session of the Parliamentary term.

I have been informed that the honourable Assistant Minister Jovesa Vocea is awaiting to cast his vote on what we are prepared to do and since he is quite busy there in India and he needs to attend another meeting or the closing ceremony immediately as well. Based on that, as well as another message from the Government and the Opposition, I have been given to understand that the general feeling is to continue with the Questions and when it is all finished then Parliament can adjourn to have dinner. The Government has also informed that they will not ask any supplementary questions therefore they request for only two supplementary questions for the Opposition.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that is something that the Government has freely offered and I made my position known yesterday, the supplementary questions would be three and will remain at that even though the Government has decided that they will not be offering any supplementary questions. So, that will be the position that we take whilst we continue.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Formalisation of Informal Settlements (Question No. 65/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament on how Government is dealing with the formalisation of the 47 informal settlements that the previous government had begun processing?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first I must thank the honourable Member for the question. Please, allow me to give some background on the question that has been posed to me

this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, upgrading is a mainstream government response to deal with the rise in the number of informal settlements due to urban drift or urbanisation. However, prior to upgrading an informal settlement, consent in the form of development lease is often sought to ensure that Government rightfully enters into the land boundary and carries out development works. It is also important to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the upgrading of informal settlements (I think I have also mentioned this in one of my earlier statements) contribute directly to Sustainable Development Goal 11.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to Fiji Informal Settlement Situation Analysis Report that was published in 2016, it indicated that the official figure of informal settlements in Fiji was 250 with lesser number of large settlements but a greater number of small settlements. In 2019, the Ministry in collaboration with UN Habitat and assistance from iTLTB and Ministry of Lands identified a total of more than 300 informal settlements. This indicate the growth in urban areas being accommodated through informal settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also important to note that informal settlement upgrade projects date back to 2006. It was formerly known as Squatter Settlement Upgrading Programme and later complemented by Town Wide Upgrading Programme in 2014. Under the programme, there were 10 development leases that were acquired prior to 2015.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2017, the Ministry of Housing further acquired 80 development leases, an additional 17 in 2018. In 2020, one development lease was acquired, and in 2022, an additional 2 which resulted in a total of 48 development leases. Out of these 48 development leases, 44 settlements are located on *iTaukei* land and four on State land. The informal settlements are spread throughout Fiji with 13 settlements located in the Central Division, 14 in Northern Division and 21 settlements in the Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, four out of the 48 development leases had surpassed its lease validity period of five years. These were for Qauia in Lami which expired in 2020, Tomuka in Lautoka, Nakodi in Labasa and Varavu in Ba expired in 2022. The Ministry is currently liaising with the Ministry of Lands and iTLTB to have their lease renewed in order to proceed into preparation works. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 20 development leases had been renewed for another five years until 2027. The remaining 24 development leases are still valid. I wish to highlight that since the acquisition of the 48 development leases, only three – Cuvu in Nadroga, Ledrusasa in Nadi and Waidamudamu Informal Settlement in Nausori have adjust their upgrades completed in 2022 (more than eight years after it was acquired).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is quite unfortunate that upgrades for the remaining 45 informal settlements that were acquired has still not proceeded to construction works over the last 8 years. This is due to no proper planning carried out when these development leases were acquired. However, the Ministry has progressively planned and prepared these elements for upgrade. The preparation work like topographic surveys, scheme plans, Environmental Impact Assessments, geotech survey and engineering plans are part of the process. At the completion of this preparation stage, construction work commences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to the three that have been completed, three have kindly commence construction in the current financial year. These are the Sakoca Squatter Settlement in Nasinu which comprise about 174 households, Tavele in Nadi consist of 68 families our households and Field 4 in Lautoka comprising of 77 households altogether and estimated project cost is around \$15.2. million.

In addition to that Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are 10 more settlements that are currently in preparation phase - Tore, Lovu Seaside, Nabare and Delaisaweni Informal Settlements in Lautoka, Valeyaquyaya in Ba, Vunika in Labasa, Caubati and Wakanisila in Nasinu, Sasawira in Nausori and Nadonumai in Lami are earmarked to complete their engineering plans by end of this year before they can progress into construction phase. The total estimated cost is around \$80 million.

The settlements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are earmarked to be completed over the next four years and subject to budget allocation. It is very interesting to note that the remaining 32 informal settlements are in preliminary phase and most probably because they are in preliminary phases, they are most probably going to begin preparation works by the end of 2025 to the beginning of 2026.

It is also important Mr. Speaker, Sir, to note that we all should support this programme because it contributes to alleviating poverty, addressing climate change impacts and reduce inequality across all diversity residing in informal settlements. Hence, the Ministry will continue to renew policies and implement strategies in collaboration with our stakeholders to improve on the implementation of the programme to ensure that it is effective and achieves the SDG Goal that Fiji is aligned to, while also providing security and long tenureship.

I have just mentioned earlier Mr. Speaker, Sir, like at the moment, we just completed only three out of the 48. If there were proper planning done in the past eight years, minus one and half years of COVID-19, we could have done better, we could have done more and we could have upgraded more settlements. That is what the Ministry is currently intending to do, so in the next four years, we are planning to at least complete the 13 settlements that were already identified. It is a challenge for the Ministry and for the country, as I have already said, there are more than 300 informal settlements around the country.

It is very important that when these informal settlements were identified, there was no clear directive policy on which one should be prioritised and which one to be prioritised later. As I have said, there are more small settlements in most of these are informal settlements than bigger settlements. I was asked by the honourable Usamate on Qauia, unfortunately the development lease for Qauia has expired. We are currently liaising with the Ministry of Lands and iTLTB to try and at least give an extension to that development lease at Qauia.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I allow supplementary question to be raised, I seek your indulgence again honourable Members if we could go straight to Question No. 6 with the approval of Parliament so we can get honourable Jovesa Vocea to ask his question and then we will get back to this one. You still on the supplementary.

Incentives for Rural Communities
(Question No. 70/2023)

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

Can the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the Ministry's plans to incentivise rural communities and use mediums such Co-operatives for encouraging entrepreneurship?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you honourable Jovesa Vocea for the question. In terms of how we are planning to incentives or encourage more co-operatives in the rural community, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just by way of background, the co-operatives have been operating in Fiji for some time, since 1940s and is one of the most enduring forms of business globally. There are currently

about 484 co-operatives operating in all four Divisions across Fiji and are involved in 14 different sectors.

These co-operatives operate predominantly in wholesale retail, administrative and support services, agriculture, food and industry, bank real estate activities and transport. I was just mentioning to the honourable Gavoka that we probably need to do a bit more in terms of tourism especially in the backpackers space where he was making some valuable comments today. Out of the 484 co-operatives, 161, are in the Western Division, 138 in the Central Division, 129 in the Northern Division and 56 in the Eastern Division. In summary, Sir, the co-operatives in Fiji hold about \$132 million worth of assets, revenue turnover about \$18.1 million and cumulatively a net profit of around \$2.5 million in the last financial year.

I did not quite appreciate this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but we have more than 25,000 Fiji citizens who are members of co-operatives and these numbers are continuing to grow. Just for the information of Parliament since the Coalition Government forming, the request for the formation of co-operatives has increased significantly. let us say. With over 65 co-operatives to groups, clusters from villages and communities and more than at least 20 have registered so far.

The mode of encouragement, Sir, that we are using, surprisingly just a word by mouth and talking a lot more in engaging across the Ministry, particularly focusing on some of the ministries that are very close to our people particularly the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs. Not because the Leader of the Opposition and I are from Tailevu, but some of the initial interest has come from the Province of Tailevu and we are trying to encourage other provinces to have a look and start registering.

Interestingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have not informed the Cabinet so I held off on my Trade Mission update some so once that is done than I will do more detailed update.

One of the things that I sort of rediscovered (if you like to use the word probably) is how successful the New Zealand has been in terms of agriculture through the co-operative model. Two models in particular that are of note is obviously the Qera success story around a milk production and Zespri which is to do with kiwifruit.

For a small island for New Zealand to be supplying about 30 percent of the supply of Kiwi fruit into the global market, it means that there is so much promise and potential in the co-operative model if they are set up well, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

So, in terms of how we are trying to incentivise or encourage, obviously at the moment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are finding that just by communicating a lot more, interacting a lot more with the government agencies, interacting as well with the private sector which has come in in a big way to support some of the MSMEs initiatives that are currently in place. You would have noticed one of them is launch by the Bank of the South Pacific of cohort programme where they train at least 25 entrepreneurs every couple of months. These are then encouraged to continue to setup their businesses. Some are in co-operatives, some are working as individuals.

So, I think to answer the honourable Vocea's questions directly, I think if we just continue to focus on more collaboration. We do not need to put advertisements in the paper. I think the awareness and the keenness on the ground to form co-operatives is quite clear. Like I said, 65 awareness sessions in three months is not a bad outcome with 20 registrations so far.

I thought I just share one positive story and from the co-operative module, that is Wai Farmers' Co-operative Limited in Ra. The Co-operative comprises of 42 farmers in the Mataqali Wai in Burenitu Village in Ra and were assisted with a brand new tractor. The Co-operative made a

cash contribution of more than \$18,000 through one of the programmes, the Ministry contributed close to 56,000. The farmers who collectively owned 600 acres of land have been able to modernise their farms to increase farm yields and supplier farm produce on a weekly basis through their buyers.

One of the co-operative members who currently owns one of the sugarcane farms and cassava was able to plant and harvest five times more cassava and three times more from the used of the tractor. Additional income, his greatly assisted his family and he is now able to plant more and reap the reward of his hard work. So, like I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by continuing to target assistance to those that required assistance by collaborating more with the Ministry, we are keen to engage more with the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to see what can be done in the co-operatives. I think there are some significant potentials, Sir, to really activate the rural economy which is probably one of the areas where, I think, both sides of the House agrees that we need to activate a lot more.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister, for your answer. Just quickly, we do have quite a few success stories within the co-operative sector and we are talking about Lawaki, the Northland farmers, Lovia and Wai Farmers. My supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, will you be engaging with these particular co-operatives, seeing as they have been flying our flag and have been really successful, to assist in your quest to encourage more in other rural and maritime areas? It would be most definitely a good tool to use.

Secondly, I hope you will seriously go and have a look at the Wai Farmers' Co-operative because they wanted some trucks and they now want to get into the trucking industry and they are a shining example of what hard work can do.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you honourable Koya for that question. I think one of the things that the team on the ground has always told me and it is common sense, is using success models breeds further success.

To answer your question, yes, some co-operative farmers will continue to be used as models for other farms or points of reference in terms of trying to encourage more of our people to get into co-operatives. I know with some of the recent trips that have been happening, they have been taking along the success stories to go and share their experiences with other interested farmers or entrepreneurs.

One of the other things too I thought I would mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, we have noticed a lot of co-operatives, for want of a better word, a lot of the members have moved on and their co-operative is inactive. Some of those co-operatives actually own some very good assets. So one of the focus that we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to try and relook at those co-operatives, try and regenerate them and because they already have an asset base, use that asset base to try and develop some economy. That is another opportunity too that we are exploring.

As I have said, co-operatives going back to the 1940s and interestingly enough, some of our elders have actually acquired assets, like the Kadavu Co-operatives have own some land in Vunisea. So, we are trying to see whether we can reactivate it. We already have some large companies that are wanting to use that space.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that I cannot ask three questions anymore but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of three, only three people showed up at the Fiscal Review Committee in Nausori.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Show some respect to the Speaker.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I am talking to the Speaker. Calm down!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question I have for the honourable Minister, is that what are the commitments to enhance gender equality and social inclusion when incentivising rural communities for entrepreneurship?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to assure Parliament that, that is an absolute focus in terms of how we are conducting ourselves in the propagation of MSME opportunities and as well with co-operatives. Interestingly, I am actually talking to quite a large financing organisation that is predominantly women. They have 10,000 members and we are trying to see how we can partner up with them because they are already on the ground, they actually have small businesses and we can see how we can turn it into large businesses.

Honourable Sharma, you have my assurance that it is part of the focus, it is a key KPI for the team in terms of how we conduct our business and hopefully, when we have some statistics we can report back in terms of the gender mix. I think it is fair to say that a lot of the entrepreneurial activities at the moment seems to be happening with our women which is pleasing to see. We will certainly continue to encourage that momentum.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister for his replies to questions and the work that he is doing in co-operatives. I can see that there is a continuation of the work. I have to ask the Deputy Prime Minister to forgive me my question is dumb because I have been referred to as 'dumb' in this Parliament this afternoon. So, please forgive me if that happens.

On the island of Lakeba, Deputy Prime Minister, there is only one village co-operative left and that is on my village of Nasaqalau. I must say that one of the things I found very useful is when the Commissioners or Ministers do their visits, in the last year people have come from Co-operatives to join those meeting in the *Talanoa* session, so I thought it was excellent way to get that message across.

I will get back to the question. In our co-operatives in Nasaqalau, we found that they had assets, but two things seem to be inhibiting them - not having the ability to look outside what they were used to doing and, secondly, the cost of transportation to Suva. So, I am wondering if incentivising, you are looking at anything to try to address that issue.

I think you are talking about the successful co-operatives, some those might help expand that, but the other thing about the cost of transportation to Suva, would there be a possibility of looking at that as a way of incentivising co-operatives that are quite far away from the centre?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you, honourable Usamate, for that question. I think we are trying to target it at two levels. I think what is happening at the moment and you are probably not aware, there is a bit of collaboration with all the Ministries, to try and bring the market to the doorstep of co-operatives as opposed to them sending them to the main centre. I think if we do that, that would be transformational and be successful.

The other way of subsidising transportation, as you know Government has limited resources, and I will not go into the reason as to why it has limited resources. We have talked about two of them in the last two days.

I think what we have to do is just re-look at the model. There has been a lot of good work that has gone in over the years but perhaps, bringing the market, particularly, the remote islands.

Also, creating the industry that is high yielding enough so that it can absorb the cost, something like virgin oil, some of these other produce.

We are certainly looking at that seriously in terms of how we can try and activate the rural economy. There are some initial collaboration initiatives happening that hopefully, will bring the buyers closer to the point of where production is happening in the islands and if that happens, that will alleviate the issues that you correctly have mentioned because as we all know, the cost of transportation out in the islands is just as astronomical. Certainly, we will continue to look at it and for me, I am trying to just look at it a bit differently and try and push the buyer out to the island so that they absorb that cost in the process as well.

MR. SPEAKER.- Now, we will go back to the first Oral Question and we are on supplementary questions.

HON. V. LAL.- My supplementary question is, while the Government is dealing with the formalisation of informal settlements, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament if there will be any relocation or displacement of current tenants? Are there any plans to ensure that current tenants are not relocated or displaced?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Thank you, honourable Member, for the question. One thing that should be clear is that this kind of subdivision we are doing something that is called in-situ capital projects. I think I have already mentioned this because the occupier is already residing on the land and what is normally done is, we try and do our way around the area that you are covered by development lease and in this case, the project. From the subdivisions that have happened to date, there is no relocation.

What actually happens is that, if there is a Scheme Plan that needs to be done, it is a duty of whoever is drafting the Scheme Plan to ensure that he draws the Scheme Plan based on the arrangements that are there on the ground. I think in a few areas, like in Qauia, because those areas are prone to flooding, they are exceptional cases where there will be central locations that will be required. So, if there are issues for relocation, it is the duty of the Ministry to identify the land to relocate them before we can actually go in and do the formalisation of that particular settlement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just an issue there, he mentioned tenants and honourable Minister in your reply, you mentioned settlers.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tenants. These are the tenants who are residing on these informal settlements.

MR. SPEAKER.- Interesting!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Thank you, honourable Minister for the update. You mentioned something on development phase. My supplementary question is, how do you address the basic necessities in those locations in terms of water, electricity and perhaps, the roads that will be constructed while awaiting because you mentioned that the development will await the budgetary allocation? That is quite a long wait and a big task for your Ministry. How do you address those basic necessities while awaiting the full development of those locations?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- One of the features of these informal settlements is that some of them have access to some of the basic utilities and when it comes to engineering plan a good example would be sewerage. Those that have been easily connected to the main sewer line can be easily done but for some settlements that do not have proper or easy connection to the sewer line, there is a

provision for settlements to have a common sewer while at the same time, they also provide connections for future connections to those sewer lines that they have to create, if there is an extension by WAF to cover those areas that are about to be developed.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I thank the honourable Member for his response to the various questions that was asked. It is quite interesting listening to you giving your update. This is precisely where FijiFirst had ended, so your update was basically the work.

My supplementary question is, what new things have you done in the last three months in acquiring the development lease, particularly Cunningham Stage 1 to Stage 4 which was in discussion stage? Where you able to conclude that discussion?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- That is a very good question and thank you, honourable Member, for asking. I had said that we are reviewing the process - the actions we need to take because there were some consultations done for those settlements but they were never completed. So, this is some of the things that the Ministry is currently doing to ensure that we also cover those areas also mentioned by the honourable Member and also identify some more new areas.

The issue here is that, there is a mix between bigger settlements and those in small settlements. So, we are trying to get in some kind of good mix so that we will be able to cover a lot of areas in ensuring that we are able to formalise some of the settlements.

As I have said, we are in the process of reviewing. We are trying to focus on whatever has been done and have them cleared. We cannot be acquiring new leases when we have leases that are there and needed to be attended to because if we keep on acquiring and do not attend to those, then we would keep on be extending some of those development leases.

I have noticed that before, iTLTB used to give 10 years but now, they are limiting it to five years and they will only do that if you have not been attending to the upgrades. These are some of the issues that we need to consider before we acquire more development leases.

Back to School Support Payment
(Question No. 66/2023)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the one-off \$200 per child back to school support payment to all students from Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Year 12?

HON. PRO. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Just by way of background, Mr. Speaker, within two weeks of the Coalition Government under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, we recognised that families were struggling and going through a tough time and to help ease that financial burden on Fijian families.

The Ministry of Finance rolled out the Back to School Support in January to assist parents and guardians purchase school items like school bags, shoes, stationery, books, lunch boxes and other supplies for the children for the school year 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the support for students in ECE, primary and secondary, up to Year 13, support was provided per student basis for families earning less than \$50,000 in combined annual household income.

The Ministry of Finance, Mr. Speaker, worked very closely with the Ministry of Education and I want to thank the honourable Minister for Education and his staff, for coming out, even though (principals and head teachers, I want to thank all of them) it was a holiday but they all came back to the schools to ensure that the application forms were available. It was also available online and parents and guardians were required to fill those forms and submit them. There was ample time given, Mr. Speaker, a time of two weeks to lodge their application and the whole process of applying was very successful.

A total of 224,825 applications were received from the parents and guardians from every corner of Fiji, and the Ministry of Finance paid \$44.5 million to 222,682 eligible students. This timely support was critical in ensuring that our children were well prepared and equipped for the new school year with few hassles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it also generated a lot of economic activity and the feedback we got from the business community throughout the country was that, because of the timeliness and the point at which the payments were made, parents and guardians mostly used it for the purposes that it was given.

Also, Mr. Speaker, in order to make it more convenient, more than 98 percent of the payments were made through mobile digital wallets (M-PAiSa and MyCash). We also partnered with Post Fiji Limited to roll out assistance for those students in the interior and maritime islands. So, we send the money through Telegraphic Money Orders (TMOs) and all those students who were eligible in the maritime islands and in the interior areas were also able to access the funds.

Just to give a background of the areas in terms of assistance, 50,671 students were from Suva; 40,251 students were from Lautoka/Yasawa Zone; 39,902 students from Nausori; 23,410 from Macuata/Bua Zone; 16,231 from Cakaudrove; 16,091 students from Ba/Tavua Area; 15,042 from Nadroga/Navosa Area; 11,571 from the Eastern Division; and 9,540 students were from Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once again, I want to thank all the dedicated staff from the Ministry of Finance, including the Permanent Secretary, who led the whole process and also the staff from the Ministry of Education (as I have said before). I want to thank, again, the honourable Minister for Education for facilitating and thank all those head teachers, principals and school management who came in and ensured that all our students were able to apply on time.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his answer and thank him for increasing the payment by \$20 that was given by FijiFirst for the students to go back to school.

Coming back to the policy, I believe the honourable Minister was part of the team that used sit on this side and always comment on the fact that when we talk about Tuition Fee Free, they always say it was not free because lunch was not provided to the students. Can the honourable Minister inform Parliament if there is plan to provide lunch for the students when they go to their schools?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as usual, they sometimes ask good questions but they muddle it up with all kinds of stupid statements about what happened before and where it happened.

(Honourable Members interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just tell honourable Maharaj that I remembered everything I said in this Parliament before. What I said was and what they were bragging and some of them quite dishonestly were bragging, including him that FijiFirst was the first government ever to provide scholarships and free education.

I kept telling them that I am product of fee free education scheme in the 1970s and 1980s. I studied on full government scholarship, but sometimes I think the way they talk that the sun started shining in this country since FijiFirst came into power and somehow they have this weird sense of propaganda planted into their mind that it is only when FijiFirst ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is the Point of Order?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, today I have been called dumb. The honourable Member here has been called stupid. The question is very simple, please, answer the question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I did not say stupid to anyone, all I said was that there were stupid comments and I am entitled to say that if the comments are stupid.

The simple answer to honourable Maharaj is, that is a good question. In many countries where parents have difficulty providing appropriate lunch for their children. That is something that we need to discuss and consider in certain areas for certain categories of income households and I am open to the idea. That is something that we should look at in consultation with the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry that looks after the children. The question was quite sensible.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And I appreciate that. The comment was stupid.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Back to School Support was provided to students and parents at the beginning of Term 1 and money that was given to them was utilised. Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister inform Parliament if similar support will be provided in Term 2 and Term 3?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member has spent a lot of time in the Ministry of Education and he knows that the beginning of the school year is one time. Beginning of school terms are different, three times. I do not know what he means, but let me just say in relation to that question and perhaps wrap it up with others.

They talk about some of these supports, none of them talked about that in the last session and this session. They ever said how good and how timely the support that the Government provided to their students for back to school.

I know some of the programmes they rolled out. One of the things that we have learnt from them is sometimes, they come up with good policies, no doubt, but the implementation and the execution of their policies was a disaster. We remember the Wheat Bix and the Milk Programme, all

these failed because they just did not know how to implement and execute it. So, that is the point I want to make in relation to the earlier comment by honourable Maharaj and the comment that honourable Hem Chand has made.

The programme was for the beginning of school year because that is when the parents faced most difficulties. Once the school starts in Term 1 and Term 2, I think that is manageable but these are things that we can discuss and talk about.

Equal Distribution of Lease Money
(Question No. 67/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament whether the Government will continue with the equal distribution of lease money that was implemented by the previous Government?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, be informed that the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs has already given notice that he will be providing the answer in the *vosa vaka Viti*.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The issue of equal distribution of lease money has been an issue for the iTaukei, especially for the *Vanua* leadership since 2015.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, iTaukei land is owned communally. In some provinces, it is owned by the *Mataqali*, some *i Tokatoka* and some are owned by the *Yavusa*.

Please, Mr. Speaker, allow me to speak in the vernacular, just to explain the system in which the equal distribution of lease money has been carried out from 2015 to date.

¹ *Au gadreva me'u vakamacalataka taumada na yavu ni mai taurivaki kina na i tuvatuva oqo. Na Matanitu sa oti e mai vakarota ena 2010 me sa veisautaki na I walewale ni kena wasei na i lavo ni lisi me valuti kina na veivakaduiduitaki.*

Na lawa sau ni qele ni Taukei me baleta na lisi kei na I laiseni ni 2010 e yavutaki kina na wasei vakatautauvata ni lavo ni lisi. Oqo me qai tekivutaki ena 2011. Ia, ena vuku ni bolebole era sotava na veiqaravi, e qai taurivaki na i tuvatuva oqo ena 2015.

Au vinakata me'u vakaraitaka na bolebole e se sotava voli ga Tabacakacaka ni Qele ena gauna oqo ena veika era gadreva, ka ra ciqoma voli na lisi ena gauna e daidai. Oya e taura e lima na yabaki me qai vakavotukana na I tuvatuva oya me yacova mai qo.

Ena gauna oqo, na iTLTB esa wasea tiko e sivia na dua na drau na milioni na dola ena veiyabaki. Sa dodonu me laurai na betena ni oti na vitu na yabaki, ia e ka ni rarawa ni se sega ni vaka kina.

E dua ga na tikina e vakabulabulataka, oya na vakasama ni nanumi koya ga vakataki koya, ia na i tovo ni bula oqori e veibasai kei na i tovo Vakaviti. Na iTaukei e kaukauwa ka qaqa ni dua vata ga na keda i wau, ka da cakacaka vata.

Editor's Note: Translation of Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts' iTaukei speech is appended as Schedule I.

Na wasewasei ni lisi ena gauna e liu e virikotori ena Lawa Sau ni 1984. E liu, nib era na kena taurivaki tiko ena gauna oqo, ni musu oti ga na I lavo ni veiqaravi ni Valenivolavola, sa musu sara na i votavota ni Turaga iTaukei, oya e lima na pasede – tini na pasede vei ira na Turaga ni Yavusa, ka tinikalima na pasede vei ira na Turaga ni Mataqali. Na vo ni vitusagavulu na pasede, sa qai votai vakatautauvata vei ira na lewe ni Mataqali. Ia, ena gauna oqo, sa wasei vakatautauvata ga na i lavo ni lisi vei ira na i taukei ni qele.

Me'u vakamacalataka mada na yavu e dabe toka kina na i walewale ni votai ni lisi ena gauna e liu. Taumada, na i walewale makawa e yavutaki vakaivolatabu ena vakasama ni Sevu. E rokova na nodra i tavi na Turaga ni Vanua ena vuku ni kena qaravi vinaka na Vanua. E rokova na umani vata ni iTaukei ena bula vakavanua ka yavu ni veiqaravi na solesolevaki. Au gadreva me'u na wilika na ripote me baleta na railesuvi ni veiqaravi ni iTLTB ena 2006, ka qarava na Board Room mai Niusiladi.

“Na yavu ni bula ena gauna e liu, oya ni o ira na Turaga era dau taqomaka na nodra tamata, era qai dau bolea na lewenivanua ena nodra vakarautaka na i sevu ni nodra i tei, lewe ni qoli se i yau tale eso.

Na i vakarau ni bula oqori e rau veirokorokovi kina na i liuliu ni Vanua kei ira na nona tamata.”

Na cava beka na i naki ni kena wasei vakatautauvata na lisi?

E tutaka ga na valuti ni veivakaduiduitaki, ka sega ni yavutaki ena i naki e tauyavutaki taumada kina na wasewasei ni lisi. Na i walewale vou sa taurivaki tu oqo, e vakaleqa vakadua na i vakarau ni bula vakavanua era maroroya tu mai na qase.

E dau tiko na revurevu ni noda vakatulewa. Na i walewale ni wasei ni lisi ena gauna e liu, e vaqacacotaka na nodra veiqaravi na veiliutaki vakavanua. Na i walewale vou oqo, e vakuwai ira na i liuliu vakavanua.

E dua na kena revurevu, oya na noqu mai vakaraitaka ena Vale ni Bose oqo na dredre ni kena vakatawani na i tutu vakavanua. E limasagavulu-ka-tolu na pasede ni i tutu vakavanua era se bera ni vakatawani. Oqo e via vakatakila ni limasagavulu-ka-tolu na pasede ni iTaukei sa sega tu na nodra i liuliu vakavanua.

Turaga na Sipika, ena noqu veisiko yani ena tinikava na Yasana me tekivu mai ena vula o Janueri, e vakaraitaki mai vei au na dredre ni veiliutaki vakavanua ena noda Yasana, ka kerei kevaka e rawa ni laurai mada, e dua na ka era raica ni sa dredre, oya na kena sa ra sega ni rokova na lewenivanua na veiliutaki vakavanua.

E dua na yavu ni veiqaravi ni Matanitu Cokovata, oya na kena railesuvi na i walewale ni kena wasei na lisi. Ena matai ni bose ni Board ni Tabacakacaka ni Qele Maroroi ka vakayacori ena tekivu ni Maji ena vula sa oti, sa mai vakaraitaki kina vei iratou na i vakalesilesi ni Qele Maroroi kevaka eratou rawa ni raica tale mada na i wasewase ni lisi ka cicivaki tiko ena gauna oqo.

Ena gauna oqo, sa ratou gole tiko yani kina na vakalesilesi ni iTLTB ena veiyasai Viti vei ira na i taukei ni qele mera raica na kena vakavotukana ni kena mai wasei vakatautauvata na lisi ena loma ni vitu na yabaki sa oti. Na vakatutu oqo ena sega ni vakuwai ira na i taukei ni qele mai na nodra ciqoma na i votavota ni nodra lisi.

Turaga na Sipika, ena i tinikava ni Me 2015, e a vakatututaka kina ena Vale ni Bose oqo na Turaga Vunivalu na Tui Namosi, Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, ena nodra duavata e 446 na nona lewenivanua, me railesuvi tale na votai vakatautauvata ni lisi. Na vakadidike e qarava na iTLTB ena qai raica na dina me baleta na wasei vakatautauvata ni lisi.

Turaga na Sipika, na Bose Yaco sa tokona na duavata ni Matanitu o Viti me baleta na United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). O Viti esa tu sara e liu ni bera ni qai ciqoma na Matabose kei Vuravura na UNDRIP ena 2007. Ia, eso na i tuvatuva ni Matanitu ena veiyabaki sa oti e sega ni salavata kei na UNDRIP.

Na dina me baleta na revurevu ni wasei vakatautauvata ni lisi sa vakatakilai koya ga mai. E dodonu me railesuvi ka vakarautaki e dua tale na i tuvatuva e rokova na veiyasana taucoko. Au a tekivu na noqu vakamacala ena noda qaravi vakatautauvata, ka 'u tinia tale ena vakasama ni noda qaravi vakavinaka.

Na noda yadua taucoko na i vava, e vakaraitaki ni noda qaravi vakatautauvata. Ia, na kena soli vei keda na i vava donu, sa i vakaraitaki ni veiqaravi vinaka.

Vinaka saka vakalevu, Turaga na Sipika.

HON. N. TUINACEVA.- Turaga na Sipika, e dua saka ga na noqu taro. Turaga na Minisita, vinaka saka vakalevu na nomuni vakamacala. Au taura rawa mai na nomuni vakamacala ni na vakamuri tiko mada ga na i vakarau ni wasei vakatautauvata ni lisi oqo, me yacova ni sa vakacavara vinaka na Matabose o koya e qarava na kena veitalanoataki tale na ka e baleta na kena wasei vakatautauvata na lisi, ni la 'ki caka e dua na vakatulewa.

E dua saka na noqu taro, baleta ni o ni tukuna tiko na dredre e yaco ena kena wasei tiko vakatautauvata na lisi. O ni cavuta tiko na dui nanumi koya vakataki koya, esa basika ena noda bula vakavanua. Au sega saka tiko ni taura se o cei ena saumi taro ena tikina oya. Au kawaitaka saka ga kevaka ena yavutaki ena veiliutaki vakavanua me tiko na i lavo, ka ra qai qarava na nodra i tavi, e vaka au ririko kina ni 'u vakananuma na yasana oya.

Na ka ga au vakananuma saka me 'u tarogi kemuni kina, ena kena i lakolako o koya esa lako tiko oqo me na vukea me kakua ni talabusese tu vaka oya, kakua ni ra kakavidavida na noda lewenivanua ena vuku ni kena wasei na lisi, e tiko beka eso na parokaramu dou sa rairai vakadavora tiko na nodatou Minisiteri ni Taukei me vukea na nodra vakararamataki vakavinaka na nodra vakasama ka ra kila vakavinaka tiko na lewenivanua na nodra i tavi, e matata tale tikoga vei ira na noda veiliutaki vakavanua na nodra Yasana, ka vukea talega na ka e baleta na nodra vakaitavi ena kena, na vosa beka vakaPeretania na investment, me vukea na nodra ka vakailavo mera na raica, ra taleitaka, ra marautaka, ra qaravi kina vakavinaka, ka sega ni na vakatubura na bula ni kocokoco beka, se nanumi koya vakataki koya? Oya, saka, na noqu taro.

[Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a question. Honourable Minister, thank you for your answer. From what I understand from your speech is that the equal distribution will continue, until the Board will decide.

I have a question, you did mention about the challengers with the equal distribution of lease money. You mention about individualism in itaukei life. I do not understand you will answer to those concern. My concern is that leaders need money to lead, my concern is that leaders will need money to lead.

My question, in order to address those issues, and that there will be no segregation due to lease distribution, are there programs by the Ministry to address the issue and awareness to the people to know their roles. To assist leaders in investment, their wealth, that they are happy with it and are served properly, this is to avoid selfishness. That is my question.]

HON. I. VASU.- *Au vakavinavinaka vakalevu ena taro. Ena gauna ogo, na veika beka ga e bolei ira tiko na Turaga ena veiliutaki vakavanua ena gauna ogo, vakabibi na gauna e vakacolati mai kina na i tavi vei ira. E liu era dau toso mai na lewenivanua mera qarava vata, se sa dau bau wase toka yani na i wase ni lisi me qaravi tu kina na vei qaravi vakavanua me vaka na mate, se so na veika e lavaka mai na Vanua se na Lotu. Ia, ni sa mai sega vaka ogo, ni ra sa wase vakatautauvata, esa dredre vei koya ni saga na Vanua, qai vakabibi ni levu era wasea vata oya era sega ni tiko ena koro. Era sa dui tu ena vanua ni nodra cakacaka, eso esa tu mai Vavalagi. Ena gauna ogo, sa o iratou sara ga na toka e nakoro, vata kei koya mera qarava na veika e vinakata na Vanua.*

[Thank you, for the question. The main concern of traditional leaders nowadays is when traditional obligations are vested on them. Before, the people use to work with leaders, the distribution of lease money easily assist with traditional obligations like funerals and church obligations. Now that the lease is being distributed equally, it is hard for them to carry out traditional obligations, especially those that have shared do not reside in villages. They reside at their workplaces or leave abroad. Today, it is those that reside in the village that carry out the vanua obligations.]

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his reply. I am glad to see that the matter is still under review, I disagree with some of the issues that he has raised, linking the difficulty of filling chiefly positions with not being able to get a higher portion of the lease.

I come from the island of Lakeba, my village – Nasaqalau, we do not receive any lease money. We are the only village, *mesa vakadaberi kina na neitou Liuliu ni Yavusa* (to have installed our tribal leader), so I beg to differ on that particular point. But what I would like to ask, the current way in which this distribution has been done is making a huge change on the lives of children and the young. So, I would suggest that if we are going to carry out that review and ask for the opinions of iTaukei, please, ask every single one. Ask the young, ask the parents of the young, some of whom when they reach the age of 18 years old, they had enough money to pay for their education or buy a house. So, if you are going to make that survey, is that something that you are going to do, or is it just going to be talking to a selected few? I request the honourable Minister just to give some advice on that?

HON. I. VASU.- *Vinaka vakalevu. Na ka ena gadreva na Tabacakacaka i Taukei me na saga me vakadewa vakararaba sara ga na veika me baleta na noda qaravi na i Taukei. Sa dua na ka na levu ni nodra marau ni sa lako yadudua na sausaumi. Ia, au kerea meda na raica tale tikoga na vei qaravi levu eratou qarava tiko na liutaka tiko na Vanua. O koya oya na vanua e nanuma na Tabacakacaka ni Qele me na qai soli vei iratou na Board, ratou raica tale mada na kena i walewale, se dua tale na kena i walewale mera na raica na lewenivanua, raica talega na veiliutaki vakavanua, ke rawai mani raica talega o ira na noda kawa mai muri. Oya beka na vanua mera na raica sara vakavinaka.*

[Thank you. The Ministry will try to look at the broader issues about the itaukei. They are happy that lease money are shared equally. We will also need to look at the issues faced by those that serve the vanua. That will be proposed by TLTB to the Board, for them to see some alternatives, or the leaders and people to propose some alternatives. And for future generations to be aware of. These are some issues that will need great emphasis.]

HON. A. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, prior to the piloting of the equal rent distribution policy, one major issue that arose that was that the Turaga ni Mataqali or Turaga i Taukei would not share the lease money with the members of the landowning unit. *Na i tuvatuva cava beka e tiko me na tarova na veivakaisini vakaoko?* (What strategies are there to stop this kind of corrupt behaviours)

HON. I. VASU.- Au kila e dina sara ni so era vakayagataka vakatawa dodonu na i lavo e a wasei vei ira. Na ka beka me rawa ni walia kina, mera laurai ga o ira oya, mera vakavulici vakavinaka ena i naki dina ni kena soli vei ira na i wasewase oya ena i matai ni gauna me rawa nira qaravi kina na lewenivanua.

[I know that some use those money in a corrupt way. The issues is with those people and try to address the issues with with them. There are to be taught on the proper ways of utilising lease contributions and its main purpose is to serve the *Vanua*.]

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I would just like to get some clarification from the honourable Minister as a tenant, at the moment, we have a pool of lease money that is distributed equally to everyone – landowners. If he is going forward to actually increase the amount that is given to the chiefs, my simple question would be, whether there is a going to be a decrease from ordinary iTaukei people who are receiving the money, or there is going to be an increase in the lease to cater for that increase that is going to be given to the chiefs.

MR. SPEAKER.- Perhaps, if I may reply to that, honourable Member. The honourable Minister has stated that he wants to review the process. Honourable Tuinaceva has touched a bit on that, so they are reviewing the process.

Update on the 16th Session of CCNASWP
(Question No. 68/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways update Parliament on the 16th Session of the Codex Committee North America and South West Pacific (CCNASWP) which met from 30th January, 2023 to 3rd February, 2023?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question by the honourable Member and I thank the honourable Member for the question.

By way of background the Codex Alimentarius or Food Code, is a collection of standards, guidelines and codes of practice adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The Commission is an intergovernmental body, whose aim is to implement the joint Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Food Standards Programme. The principal objective is to protect the health of consumers and to facilitate the trade of food by setting international standards and other tax which can be recommended to Government for acceptance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Codex is important as it is recognised in the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements as the international reference point for safety, quality and fair trade in food. Codex Standards may also be used as benchmarks in WTO dispute settlement processes. The WTO members that wish to apply stricter food safety measures than those set by Codex, may be required to justify these measures scientifically. Sir, WTO member countries are also required to harmonise their national food safety measures with Codex standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me move to the Codex Committee North America and South West Pacific (CCNASWP) proper as per the question posed by the honourable Member. Fiji took the leadership role as the Regional Coordinator for CCNASWP in November 2020 during the Codex Commission's 43rd Session.

As Regional Coordinator Fiji recommended to the Commission for the development of global standards for products of interest to the region and those products that have an international market potential in the future. Two such projects Fiji leverage through its leadership role were kava (*Yaqona*) when mix with water and noni juice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji hosted the 16th Session of CCNASWP from 30th January, 2023 to 3rd February, 2023 at the Sheraton Fiji Golf and Beach Club in Denarau Island in Nadi. The Ministry was allocated \$89,350 for hosting this event, and I would like to thank the Fiji Government for the tremendous support. The event was co-funded by FAO and WHO, WFP, PHAMA Plus and other line Ministries, including the Ministry of Health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was the first international event hosted by this Government since taking leadership of this country. At this juncture, I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister for his support and the Deputy Prime Minister for opening the meeting. I would also like to thank the Officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence for their support in making this event a success.

The Permanent Secretary for Agriculture Chaired the weeklong session. The session was attended in person by delegates from 12 member countries in North America and the South West Pacific, six member countries from other regions, one member organisation from outside the region and two Observer organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that the Chairperson of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, Mr. Steve Wearne, also attended the session in person. Other high-level delegates that attended the session included those from the FAO and the United Nations FAO Sub-Regional Coordinator for the Pacific and the WHO Representative to the South Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now turn to the outcomes of the session. The two main agenda of particular interest to the region that were discussed and brought to closure were the regional standards for *kava* when mixed with water, as I have already stated, and the regional standard for noni fermented juice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to have a standard adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, there are eight steps to go through. The regional standard for *kava* when mixed with water was at step 5 for the last 10 years, and to arrive to this step 5 was quite a journey.

During the 16th session of CCNASWP, Fiji in collaboration with Vanuatu presented the SOP for the determination of *kavalactones* and flavokavain in fresh and dried *kava* products. This was finally adopted by CCNASWP as the regional standard for *kava*. Mr. Speaker, CCNASWP 16 agreed to submit the developed SOP to the Codex Commission on Methods of Analysis and Sampling 42 by 1st May, 2023

This SOP will ensure that Steps 6 and Step 7 are omitted and the process is accelerated and that the regional *kava* standard is adopted at Step 8 in the upcoming Commission meeting in November 2023.

With the adoption of the standard at Step 8, Fiji's chances will increase to tap into other potential markets, away from traditional markets, as Codex Standards are acceptable globally and there will be no barriers to trade.

On the regional standard for Noni fermented juice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was sitting at Step 4, even before the regional standard for *kava* when mixed with water was initiated. In the CCNASWP 16, the Committee adopted it to Step 5 and further agreed to make submission of the draft standard to CAC 46 for adoption at Step 8.

Currently, the Regional Coordinators Office is working closely with Samoa and Tonga to have a written submission to the Codex Committee on contaminants in foods and the Executive Committee of Codex Alimentarius before 1st May, 2023. The submission will include the high performance liquid chromatography method to identify *scopoletin* and *dithiodiglycolic* acid due to advantages in accessibility of analytical equipment.

I apologise for the technical terms, Mr. Speaker, I hope I have not sworn at anyone.

MR. SPEAKER.- We thought you are in a different planet.

(Laughter)

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- High sensitivity compared to the thin layer chromatography method and capability to produce quantitative data.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, CCNASWP 16 also discussed proposals on new Codex work on breadfruit flour, garlic nut and fish products as possible topics for regional development. Member States also agreed on the need for technical support in food safety actions to aid and complement Codex actions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, CCNASWP 16 applauded Fiji for its excellent work and unanimously decided to renominate Fiji as Regional Coordinator for the NASWP region for the second term of three years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji was the first member in the world to kickstart the Codex 16th Anniversary Celebrations as part of Standard. The Codex Committee Secretariat after every event conducts an evaluation exercise and, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am proud to say that this event was rated as one of the highly successful events hosted by any CCNASWP member country. And remarks from the top officials of the Codex Committee Secretariat who travelled from Rome says it all, that Fiji raised the bar to the next level.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji as the Regional Coordinator and representative of 14 countries will attend the CC Executive Committee in Geneva in June 2023.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, first let me thank and congratulate the honourable Minister for pursuing the work on Codex. Again, it gives us hope, huge potentials, particularly for our rural farmers. My question to the honourable Minister is, I have noted that CCNASWP is now shifting to North America and South-West Pacific.

You would recall, honourable Minister, when we started Codex, our Ambassadors in Brussels were very much in the lead, particularly Roy Mickey Jnr of Vanuatu, we were focusing on ACP

countries. This is a new market segment. I just wanted to know how are we now with the initial focus which was on ACP countries, honourable Minister?

HON. V.T.T. K. RAYALU.- During the CCNASWP Meeting, there was no mention of the ACP region, but we will try and find out and come back to you on that.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Codex definitely in a developing standards for food safety and addressing pesticide residues and antimicrobial resistance, the Codex Food Safety Standard aims to help overcome some of these trade barriers that we experience. My question to the honourable Minister is that a working group has been developed to establish the ground work call the National Codex Committee in Fiji. He has enlightened us on the budget of the event but has a budget been allocated to the National Codex Committee or how will they be financed to reach their outcomes?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- The Codex Committee is a normal programme for the Ministry in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, so it is a normal operating activity for the Ministry.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I just ask another question and thank you for this opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is just on the work on the *Kava* Standards and we were supposed to have a *Kava* law as well in order to support that. How are we on that, honourable Minister?

Perhaps, you need to warn those who consume a lot of *kava* too about the danger of *civicivi*. You talked about the lactone because that is the harmful substance in the grog that can damage the liver.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.-. Mr. Speaker, there was a *Kava* Bill developed but I cannot ascertain whether the *Kava* Bill has reached Parliament yet or not, but I will find out and inform the honourable Member.

Appointment of Government Statutory Boards
(Question No. 69/2023)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL 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 on what guideline was used in the recent appointments of Chairpersons of respective Government Statutory Boards?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question on what guidelines was used in the recent appoints of Chairpersons of respective Government Statutory Boards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members know that there are standing rules and laws that direct the appointment of Board of Directors on Government companies and statutory bodies and they play a crucial role as they provide oversight and strategic directions to ensure improved performances in service deliveries of those bodies.

The selection of the Board of Directors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Government companies and statutory bodies is subject to the relevant laws, including the Public Enterprise Acts 2019, as well the

Articles of Association, Shareholders Agreement and Entity Specific Laws and a background check to verify that the person is deemed fit to undertake the role as a Director.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have inherited an appointment process that we believe, I am sure the previous Government probably also believed, does not and did not serve the best interest of the people.

Under the Public Enterprises Act 2019, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the appointment of Boards, such as Tourism Fiji, Civil Aviation of Fiji, the Land Transport Authority, Water Authority of Fiji is done by the Minister for Public Enterprises.

The current legislation concentrates the power of appointment to a single Minister rather than to the respective line Ministries and Ministers, who have the expertise and also the overall responsibility for the performance of those Boards.

The responsibility of appointing Boards, we believe, should be aligned to the assignment of portfolios for each Ministerial appointment. I have also heard from the honourable Cabinet Ministers in Cabinet where I now lead and we intend to address this matter in the coming months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the current appointment processes and appointing authority, under the Public Enterprises Act 2019, entities are divided into two categories - Schedule 1 are entities designated as public enterprises under the Public Enterprises Act 2019; and Schedule 3 lists statutory bodies where operational oversight rests with the line Minister but the Board is appointed by the Minister for Public Enterprises.

Despite the powers given to the Minister for Public Enterprise under the Public Enterprises Act as amended in 2019, I believe, it is appropriate to consult with the respective line Minister to the appointment under Schedule 3 and this process has been followed by the Coalition Government.

Appointments in 2023, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to now talk about the guideline that was used in the recent appointment of Chairpersons of respective Government statutory Boards. This guideline is being implemented right across the board in all the Ministries.

To ensure the appointment of Board and Directors follow a transparent process, Government has implemented a guideline for Merit Based Selection and Appointment Processes Board of Directors Guideline. This Guideline was shared with all Ministries on 27th of February, 2023 as a benchmark in their respective board appointment processes.

The Guideline incorporate a transparent Board appointment and re appointment process. The requirements include but are not limited to:

- (1) All Boards should meet the minimum number of directors at all times as stipulated in the relevant legislation.
- (2) When a vacancy arises on the Board of the Government company or statutory body or a current member term is about to expire, the appointing agency shall identify.
 - i. Skills, knowledge and expertise currently represented on the Board; and
 - ii. Skills, knowledge and expertise required to fill the skills gap on the Board.
- (3) Advertising for Expressions of Interest can take place and consultation with the honourable Prime Minister and the relevant Minister and Permanent Secretary.
- (4) The Minister in consultation with the Prime Minister subject to Coalition Government Agreement may recommend nominees for consideration by the appointing authority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Guideline promotes diversity and encourages more female participation to promote gender equality on the Boards of Government companies and statutory bodies.

The Ministry continues to encourage female participation to promote gender equality in Boards and has set the target to achieve a 30 percent women participation on Boards of Government companies and statutory bodies in the near future.

Mr, Speaker, Sir, in line with the Merit Base Guideline, the Government, through the Ministry of Public Enterprises, had advertised for Expressions of Interest earlier this year in January 2023, inviting qualified and reputable individuals to serve on Boards of Government companies and statutory bodies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over 2,000 Expressions of Interest were received from talented, dedicated individuals, with a diverse mix of skills and experience from various sectors. This confirms the confidence and the willingness of the people to work with the Government,

The recent appointments on Board of Directors in Government companies and statutory bodies also includes successful applications from the Expressions of Interest received based on the prerequisites provided in the Guidelines and the relevant guiding legislations.

These appointments will be uploaded on to the Fiji Government Digital Directory once the directors have provided their consent to serve and declared any conflict of interest under the Companies Act 2015 and formally appointed. Some appointments will be done sooner, while others will require consultation with relevant line Ministries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, preliminary due diligence and necessary credibility checks are being conducted on the proposed directors prior to appointment to ensure that they meet the requirements outlined in the applicable Government companies and statutory bodies guiding legislation and Constitution of the company or body. These include, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Public Enterprises Act 2019, as I have mentioned, Articles of Association, Shareholders Agreement, Entities and specific Acts.

Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me assure my fellow citizens and the honourable Members of the Opposition that some of the recent appointments of Chairpersons were based on merit and their ability to provide strategic leadership and contribute towards the enhancement of the entities performance which will translate into improved shareholders return and efficient service delivery to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also update Parliament on a number of key initiatives that the Ministry plans to implement in the coming months, the:

- (1) Ministry is looking into relevant training for current and new directors. It is important that we continue upskilling our directors to equip them with the tools to navigate the business environment.
- (2) The Ministry and relevant entities are also carrying out appropriate Board inductions for newly appointed directors to ensure that these directors are well-versed with their respective entities and the responsibilities expected of them during their tenure.
- (3) Is also a priority for the Ministry to design and implement a comprehensive framework for director performance evaluation. In fact, the director has to work together in harmony and to give their best whenever they are making key decisions for the entities.

- (4) The Ministry is also working to review the 2009 Policy and Remuneration and the Benefits for Directors of Government Commercial Companies and Commercial Statutory Authorities.

This policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is outdated and requires considerable changes to ensure we attract the best available personnel to be our directors. The Ministry is also looking at the possibility of expanding the policy to become a uniformed policy for all Government Boards across the different Ministries. The Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, intends to re-establish the Higher Salaries Commission.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, honourable Prime Minister, for your response to the question. At the very end of your response, you did mention about the review of the Director's remuneration package and likewise, the reviving of the High Salaries Commission. My question is, is there consideration for that to be included in the selection of the Executive Management as well, not only Directors but Executive Management as well?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, yes.

HON. V. LAL.- Sir, some Board Members were appointed prior to the closure of the applications, can the honourable Prime Minister explain that?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Honourable Member, that was the transitional measure at the time the Government came in. We had to fill those posts quickly, for example, the Fiji Development Bank had to be filled very quickly before we brought the motion on the guarantee of the loan.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a supplementary question to the honourable Prime Minister, he had mentioned the appointments which were made when the Expression of Interest (EIO) was still in progress was requisite to the transitional measure. So in making those transitional appointments, I am sure the emphasis would have been on fit and proper people, and not necessarily failed candidates or other people like that, that are just associated with the Party because that seems to have been the impression that has been created.

So, I just want to clarify. Is there an emphasis on fit and proper Directors or it has sometimes been seen as the people that were not successful in the Election or related to a Party become appointed by virtue of their association?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I took responsibility for the selection. I selected on merit and we can also disappoint, if they do not live up to the expectations we have.

Purchase of New Fiji Airways Aircraft
(Question No. 71/2023)

HON. F.S. KOYA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics confirm as to how many new aircraft Fiji Airways is actually planning to purchase over the immediate future and what are the plans with regards to new routes?

HON. PROF. B.C.PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Koya for that question. I can confirm, Sir, that Fiji Airways will be acquiring two more Airbus A350 900 XWB aircrafts in July/August, 2023 to meet its growth in travel demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these new A350 new generation aircraft are considered to be the most advanced, wide-body aircraft in the world. They generate fuel savings of around 15 percent to 20 percent with the full load of 360 passengers and can carry about 30 tonnes of freight.

Fiji Airways and land the Apex Five Star Major Airline rating in November 2022 and partly based on the excellent service that the Airline provides to passengers.

Mr. Speaker, after this addition, the group's fleet which comprise of the following:

- Four Airbus A350s;
- Four Airbus A330s;
- Five Boeing Max 8s; and
- One Boeing 737NG.

Mr. Speaker, for the company's domestic and regional services, the fleet as follows:

- Three ATR42 and ATR 72
- Four Twin Otter DHC-6

Mr. Speaker, by August this year, Fiji Airways will have a total of 21 aircrafts and the addition of these two new A350s will make Fiji Airways fleet one of the youngest in the world.

In terms of new destinations, the two new Airbus A350s will substitute the A330 flights currently operating on San Francisco, Vancouver, Singapore and Hong Kong. The Airbus A330s released from these destinations will be used to introduce additional flights to Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Auckland to increase capacity and match customer demand and offer more freight space. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. You have mentioned about these domestic flights, plus the kind of fleet that intend to bring. You mentioned about the ATR 42?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sorry.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- You have mentioned about the fleet that is going to service our domestic destinations. Just keep within the question and qualify me to ask this supplementary question. When are you going to get this ATR 42 over to Savusavu?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation mentioned, I think, yesterday, he revealed that there is a major World Bank project that is still under negotiation. We hope to sign the agreement for that project around June and that, Sir, includes the upgrade of Labasa and Savusavu Airports. There are other components of the project but the important ones are the upgrade of the Savusavu Airport and Labasa Airport and hopefully, ATRs, at least not 72s but ATR 42s would be able to land there. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, through you, can you just reveal the funding arrangements that we have - source of funding?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have the exact details but I can tell the honourable Leader of the Opposition, unlike the previous Government, this Government is going to present to Parliament Fiji Airways' Financial and Annual Reports and I am sure honourable Members of Parliament, including our colleagues on the other side, will have the opportunity as part of the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise those financial reports and annual reports.

MR. SPEAKER.- Is that the last question?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I love the second bite. A very quick question, honourable Minister, with respect to the last peak season that we have just gone through and the routes that we have which touched into USA, meaning Los Angeles and San Francisco. The load factor that we had in the last season, bearing in mind that we have just gone through COVID-19, do you have any idea what the load factor is?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is an important question. I do not have the exact details of the load factor but I think what has happened after COVID-19 is Fiji as a transit route has become more prominent. A lot of our passengers from Canada and the US are passing through Fiji and going back to these destinations through Fiji, so I think that led to the increase in the number of tourists and also the load factor would be determined by that as well.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members I only have one question and that is we came across Fiji Airways parked in Abu Dhabi somewhere. I do not know what it is doing there, work up there, a charter or something. Anyway, we will go on to the last Oral Question.

Code of Conduct for Tourism Providers
(Question No. 72/2023)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the Code of Conduct for Tourism Providers.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, following Cabinet's endorsement in March this year, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has begun reaching out to partners for the implementation of the Code of Conduct. As the leader of Pacific tourism, we want to defy status quo, we want to position ourselves as the tourism destination of choice, we want to position ourselves as a high value and low impact tourism destination. That requires us to live up to the standards that are expected of us. We have a strong brand and while we need to deliver, we do not forget our people and our environment.

Fiji as a member of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), has been encouraged to adopt international recognised standards and best practices aligning it to 2030 SDGs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, about the Code of Conduct, for the benefit of the people of Fiji, I will share a little on what the Code of Conduct for tourism operators is. The Code of Conduct encourages ethics and conduct that all guide the tourism industry operators, especially when engaging with clients, other businesses and host communities. It gives recognition of the need of the Fiji Tourism Industry to be responsible and conscious of the conduct of the vulnerable and disadvantaged group.

Tourism in Fiji as a sustainable tourism destination aligns with the global demand for ethical travel where visitors seek meaningful engagement of the destination that are socially responsible for

tourism activities. Tourists want value for money, as we do. This means higher standards across the sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Code of Conduct guides dealings in protecting staff and visitors during emergencies, maintain integrity and professionalism in how we market ourselves, ensuring cultural and traditional protocols are observed in host communities and being conscious of the impacts on the environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while this policy is not legally mandated to address every issue we face, it does set a benchmark for what we can deliver as an industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has worked with and consulted several stakeholders including key licencing authorities, the Fiji Police Force, academic institutions, tourism operators - large and small, and Government stakeholders. Earlier this year, we have consulted several communities who are indirectly linked to the industry such as Navala in Ba, Abaca, Biausevu, Nakabuta, Lomawai, Sawani Village, Colo -i- Suva and Nabalasere in Ra.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of implementation, we are now securing funding in the next financial year to visit communities and tourism operators to advocate the Code of Conduct. We are also securing support of development partners such as UNWTO, who can provide training on the various areas of Code of Conduct.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Australian Volunteer International and the volunteer hub for their support. This is what it looks like. The Code of Conduct is quite well presented and very comprehensive and readable.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, probably the only question. Just quickly, honourable Minister, is there any compulsion that comes out of this Code of Ethics? I know you have spoken about the guidelines that you have received from the UNWTO with respect to this particular code. Is it a document that this is a national guideline on a voluntarily basis or is there a compulsion on it in terms of all the operators? Because I am the only one standing so if I could just get a quick answer from him regarding the education that will happen now with respect to all our operators. How will you go about that?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no compulsion on people to observe this. It is not legally binding for people to practice what is in here. It just that driving factor of customer satisfaction and of exceeding expectation. You cannot be a business in Fiji that would be known that it does not subscribe to those Code of Conduct. It would be very, very detrimental to you.

If I could just look at our experience, I was part of a global chain - Shangri La, we did something like this and it was known as the Shangri La Way. So wherever you stay in Shangri La anywhere in the world, the Code of Conduct was consistent. And I am sure Sheraton and Intercontinental has it, and all the global big boys have their Code of Conduct.

What is happening here is that the Code of Conduct will also be observed by other operators in this country. They will benefit from the Code of Conduct of the big chains. Like I said, you cannot afford not to be part of this. Fiji will be known, when people book Fiji, they will always be in a country where cancellation policy will be this. If you are hurt, this will happen to you. It is all in this and it gives a sense of comfort to visitors to come to a country where a Code of Conduct is observed by the majority of the players.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Thank you for that explanation. I was going to ask the question on compliance and I think you have answered that. Since you have already explained that, this will depend on the individual operators. How does this come to the Ministry level, if the complaint comes up from the various players. They have their own Code of Conduct, they have their own standard but then there are still breaches in their respective areas of operations?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- If you break the law, then you can be liable in Court. If you break a contract, every contract is observed and honoured by any operator with another operator from overseas. I can tell you, as an operator in Fiji, you do not want to be on the wrong side of your producers. We strive very hard in the industry not to upset because words go around very quickly. There is a Trip Advisor (that is one of the most frightening websites in the world today) for tourism operators.

If people say something about a hotel, you are virtually dead. It is not so much as the legal aspect of it, its just expectation that you promised to deliver something and people hold you to it. In this day and age, whether the visitor is from Moscow or Helsinki, you are held to what you are expected to provide.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you honourable Minister for a very clear explanation. Just a last one, I know you mentioned the UNWTO. With the UNWTO, there is a global code of ethics specifically for tourism. Was that the actual foundation of what we had before us today and I would love to receive a copy of what you have?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I would presume honourable Koya that the UNWTO have contributed to this, but I go back to what I said about the big chains. When I see this, I see Shangri-La in this, I see Sheraton in this, I see the big boys having a big influence in this one. The comfort of the big chain is that whether you stay in the Hilton in Denarau or Hilton in Beijing or wherever you know, their standards that are consistent. That is the kind of stuff that we want everyone in Fiji to observe. I think it was more driven by our people in Fiji, of course UNWTO is always there to back us up with what they have.

Written Questions

Entitlements for Board Directors of FRCS (Question No.73/2023)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the name, fees, claims and entitlements for Board Directors of FRCS for the period 2014 to 23rd December, 2022?

² HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will table my answers now according to Standing Order 45(3).

Vatis Communications (Question No.74/2023)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU asked the Government, upon notice:

² Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 73/2023 tabled by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is appended as Annexure I.

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 following –

- (a) How long was the firm Vatis Communications managing the social media platforms of various ministries' through the Department of Information;
- (b) What was the duration of every contract between the Department of Information and Vatis Communications;
- (c) What was the monetary value of every contract between the Department of Information and Vatis Communications;
- (d) Was the company Vatis Communications awarded the contract and formed before or after the publication of the first tender advertisement or expression of interest published (but not before the Tender or Expression of Interest officially closed);
- (e) Whether or not the company complied with the Expression of Interest or Tender provision of being "highly experienced and motivated;
- (f) Whether or not the two main personnel of Vatis Communications were closely connected to a political party and in charge of the party's social media platforms; and
- (g) The total amount of public funds paid to Vatis Communications by the Department of Information until the termination of their contract earlier this year?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought the question was very long. As Standing Orders 45 says, all the honourable Member had to do was to refer to the number of questions in the Order Paper and not go right through the question.

Anyway, with your permission Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to Standing Order 45(3), I ask³ that I table my response now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, would you take note of the comments made by the honourable Prime Minister?

Components of WAF
(Question No. 75/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport update Parliament on the list of all the projects under the various components of Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) Capital and Maintenance budget below to include –

- (a) the budget for each project;
- (b) the amount committed and sent as per the end of Quarter 2 for the Financial Year 2022/2023;
- (c) percentage completion of the work undertaken; and
- (d) reasons for any delays and how WAF will be addressing problem areas to the following –
 - (i) Water sources and water treatment plant;
 - (ii) Water distribution;
 - (iii) Integrated water meter management;

³ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 74/2023 tabled by the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs is appended as Annexure II.

- (iv) Non-revenue water;
- (v) Water catchment management process;
- (vi) Wastewater treatment;
- (vii) Improvement and upgrade of wastewater distribution system;
- (viii) Rural water supply systems;
- (ix) Relocation of existing wastewater and water pipeline;
- (x) Electrical Upgrading works; and
- (xi) ICT Infrastructure upgrades?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Member for the question. I will table the answer at a later date as allowed for under the Standing Orders.

Domestic Violence Statistics
(Question No. 76/2023)

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

The Government funds the National Domestic Violence Helpline run by the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre. Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation update Parliament on the monthly statistics from 2019 till March 2023 on the nature of violence against women.

⁴ HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to table my Written Response now as allowed under Standing Order 45(3) and just to inform the honourable Member that we have not been able to compile much as we have literally just had March behind us. It is only up till February but we can provide the statistics for March once we gather that information.

Completed Projects - Rural Electrification Programme
(Question No. 77/2023)

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

Can the Minister of Public Works and Meteorological Services, and Transport update Parliament on the list of projects that were completed under the rural electrification programme since its inception until to date and the breakdown through divisions and the cost of individual projects

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, honourable Maharaj, I will respond as per your suggestion. Thank you for the flexibility.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. I thank you all for your contributions and Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.55 p.m.

⁴ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 76/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is appended as Annexure III.

SCHEDULE I

**Translation of the Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts' iTaukei speech in reply to Oral Question No. 67/2023 by Honourable A. Tuicolo.
(Ref: Page 946-948)**

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question raised by honorauble Tuicolo on whether government will continue with the equal distribution of lease money.

Let me begin by providing some context to that policy. The previous Government's decided to change distribution formula in 2010 based on the principle of equality.

The Native Land (Leases and Licences) (Amendment) Regulations 2010 was the basis for the equal lease distribution policy. This was to be effective from 2011. However, due to logistical issues, the policy was finally implemented in 2015. It took five years to roll it out.

iTLTB now distributes over \$100 million equally in lease money annually under the current policy. What do we have to show for it? After 7 years, the positive effects of the policy on the itaukei should now be very clear. But sadly, this is not the case.

If anything, it has supported the culture of individualism which is against the grain of iTaukei life. We are better and stronger when we do things together.

The previous lease distribution policy was under the 1984 regulations. After iTLTB deducts its admin cost known as poundage, 5 percent would go to the Turaga iTaukei, 10 percent to the Turaga ni Yavusa, 15 percent to the Turaga ni Mataqali. The remaining 70 percent would be shared equally amongst the remaining land-owning unit members. The current policy distributes it equally amongst the LOU after iTLTB deducts its admin cost.

Let me provide some context to the old distribution formula. It recognized the biblical principle of first fruits. It recognized that our tribal leaders must serve their *vanua* through our traditional governance system. It recognized that we the iTaukei exist communally and the *solesolevaki* custom holds us together. I want to quote from a iTLTB Review Report in 2006 by boardroom practice of New Zealand.

“The origin of the [old policy] is that in former times, chiefs at various levels provide protection and security for their people and in return the people provided fruits of the first harvest or fish or like items.

The principle was one of mutual understanding with a two-way flow between the people and their leader.”

What has the equal lease distribution policy done? It applied the principle of equality without a situational analysis on what was the rationale behind the previous lease distribution policy. In the process, it significantly contributed to the breaking down of the iTaukei society.

Decisions have context. Chiefs were empowered under the previous policy because they have a duty to do. The current lease distribution policy dis-empowers them.

A direct effect was highlighted in my response on the vacant chiefly titles last week. 53 percent of the total chiefly titles in Fiji are vacant. It essentially means that 53 percent of the iTaukei are without leaders from a traditional governance perspective. The good news is that the coalition government will address that.

Mr. speaker, a priority item under the Coalition Government's Manifesto is the review of the equal lease distribution policy. In January when i visited the iTaukei Land Trust Board as part of my familiarization tour, I instructed them to carry out an impact evaluation of the policy.

Based on the outcome of that exercise, I will recommend to Cabinet how to restructure the lease distribution formula to recognize and support the iTaukei *vanua* structure, Without denying iTaukei who reside in Fiji access to their lease entitlement.

Mr. Speaker, this Parliament will recall that on 14 may, 2015, the Turaga Vunivalu na Tui Namosi, Ratu Suliano Matanitobua, presented a petition, signed by 446 members of the public, for parliament to instruct iTLTB to stop and review the effects of the lease distribution to personal accounts.

The impact evaluation, I have directed iTLTB to undertake will essentially quantify those benefits. For example, "assist LOUs to contribute to growth of small businesses and micro enterprises if they think of establishing them from lease monies received".

How many small businesses have been established and how has it benefitted them?

Some perceived benefits are redundant because of the counter effects of the equal lease distribution policy. For example, it hasn't enhanced good leadership within the LOUs. The vacant chiefly titles I had mentioned earlier points to this.

Sir, iTLTB's submission also highlighted criticisms and concerns from LOUs on the equal lease distribution policy. They are genuine concerns which the Coalition Government will consider.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet recently endorsed Fiji's support of the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples or UNDRIP. Fiji was way ahead of other countries before UNDRIP was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007.

However, some policies adopted over the past 16 years including the equal lease distribution are against the UNDRIP. The effects of the equal lease distribution policy are self-evident. It will be reviewed and restructured under an equitable arrangement.

I started with equality and ended with equity. This is the difference. Equality is giving everyone the same pair of shoes while equity is giving everyone a pair of shoes that fits.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 73/2023 tabled on Tuesday, 4th April, 2023 by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics (Ref. Page 960)

PARLIAMENT WRITTEN QUESTION

Wednesday 5th April 2023

Response to the Question by honourable Sakiusa Tubuna is as follows:

Please find below details on Board Members since Financial Year 2014. This information is at 31st December, 2023. The Board members are only paid monthly allowances as stated below. However, the board fees accrued to PS Economy/Finance who is a civil servant was deposited in the Government Consolidated Fund.

FRCS Board Members from 2014 to 23 December 2023

	Board Member	Start Date	End Date	Member Type
1)	Mr. Ajit Kodakoda	28 th July 2011	31st December 2019	Chairperson
2)	Mr. Jone Vatukela	29 th October 2009	31st March 2020	Board Member
3)	Mr. Faiz Khan	23 rd September 2010	31st December 2019	Board Member
4)	Mr. Filimone Waqabaca	10 th February 2011	20th December 2015	Board Member
5)	Ms. Makereta Konrote	21 st December 2015	15th March 2021	Board Member
6)	Ms. Fay Yee	1 st January 2020	31st December 2022	Chairperson
7)	Mr. Arif Ali	1 st January 2020	24th May 2021	Board Member
8)	Mr. Mahmood Khan	1 st January 2020	31st December 2022	Board Member
9)	Ms. Lala Sowane	1 st January 2020	31st December 2022	Board Member
10)	Ms. Naomi Vuibureta	3 rd June 2020	21st September 2021	Board Member
11)	Mr. Parvez Akbar	27 th September 2021	31st January 2023	Board Member
12)	Mr. Shri Gounder	16 th March 2021	15th March 2024	Board Member
13)	Ms. Umesh Prasad	27 th September 2021	26th September 2023	Board Member

Board Allowances

	Board Allowances	Amount per month
1)	Chairperson	\$1,416.67
2)	Board Members	\$958.33
3)	Sub-committee members	\$250

ANNEXURE II

Reply to Written Question No. 74/2023 tabled on Tuesday, 4th April, 2023 by the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs (Ref. Page 960-961)



PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT, CIVIL SERVICE, INFORMATION, PUBLIC ENTERPRISES AND VETERAN AFFAIRS (HONOURABLE SITIVENI L. RABUKA)

Response to the Question by honourable Iliesa S. Vanawalu is as follows:

- (a) How long was the firm Vatis Communications managing the social media platforms of various ministries through the Department of Information;

Response: From September 2019 to January 2023, Vatis had been engaged by the Department of Information to provide social media management services for the Fiji Government social media platforms. Please note that the Department of Information does not have the specifics for the engagement of Vatis by other Ministries.

- (b) What was the duration of every contract between the Department of Information and Vatis Communications;

Response: The Department of Information entered into two one-year contracts with Vatis, commencing on September 24th, 2019, and October 1st, 2022, respectively, which also included provision for extensions.

- (c) What was the monetary value of every contract between the Department of Information and Vatis Communications;

Response: The first contract between the Department of Information and Vatis commenced on September 24th, 2019 and was valued at \$280,000 (VIP). The second contract which commenced on October 1st, 2020 was valued at \$295,412 (VIP).

- (d) Was the company Vatis Communications awarded the contract and formed before or after the publication of the first tender advertisement or expression of interest published (but not before the Tender or Expression of Interest officially closed);

Response: According to the Registrar of Companies records, Vatis was established on January 22nd, 2018, while the advertisement for the initial expression of interest for a social media management firm was posted on 17th August, 2019.

- (e) Whether or not the company complied with the Expression of Interest or Tender provision of

being "highly experienced and motivated;

Response: It was noted that Vatis had previous experience working with multiple and diverse range of stakeholders, including government ministries, statutory organisations, independent agencies, and private organisations. Their experience included crisis management and strategic communication services on social media platforms, among other things.

- (f) Whether or not the two main personnel of Vatis Communications were closely connected to a political party and in charge of the party's social media platforms;

Response: The Department of Information is unable to provide any comments regarding this matter as it was not privy to this information.

- (g) The total amount of public funds paid to Vatis Communications by the Department of Information until the termination of their contract earlier this year.

Response: To date, the Department of Information has spent \$889,234.84 on social media management services offered by Vatis.

ANNEXURE III

Reply to Written Question No. 76/2023 tabled on Tuesday, 4th April, 2023 by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation (Ref. Page 962)



**MINISTER FOR WOMEN, CHILDREN AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION
(HONOURABLE LYNDA D. TABUYA)**

Response to the Question by honourable Alvick A. Maharaj is as follows:

	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	Total
August	57	70	149	432	116	824
September	69	86	97	190	96	538
October	53	93	155	227	122	650
November	71	58	150	173	143	595
December	158	98	147	401	85	889
January	98	105	172	338	61	774
February	82	87	287	235	235	926
March	76	185	202	203		666
April	50	803	245	177		1275
May	59	309	817	73		1258
June	60	296	513	123		992
July	94	132	678	154		1058

- Since August 2018 to February 2023, a total of 10,445 calls have been intercepted by the Domestic Violence Helpline (1560).
- The lowest number of calls received was in the fiscal year 2018-2019 and this is probably due to lack of awareness on the existence of the helpline which was introduced in that fiscal year itself.
- The number of calls has gradually increased over the years as the service has gained more recognition through awareness and public information released by the Ministry.
- 2021 as a calendar year saw the most number of calls being intercepted. This was also the year that most parts of the country was under lockdowns due to the COVI19 pandemic and studies from across the world have shown links to the pandemic and an increased in the rates of gender based violence, especially domestic violence.
- Calls intercepted from August 2022 to February 2023 totals to 858. Out of these calls, 38 percent are from DV survivors themselves and 17 percent of the calls were from bystanders. 78 percent of these calls were from females and 22 percent of the calls were from men.
- From August 2021 to July 2022, a total of 2,726 calls had been intercepted by the DV Helpline.

Out of these calls, 39 percent were from DV survivors and 14% were from a bystander. 81 percent of the calls were females and 19% were from males.

- From August 2020 to July 2021, total calls received on the DV Helpline were 3,612. Out of these calls, 37 percent were from DV survivors and 14 percent from bystanders. 78 percent of the calls were from females and 22% were from males.
- From August 2019 to July 2020 a total of 2,322 calls were received on the DV Helpline. Out of these calls, 46 percent of the calls were from DV survivors and 16 percent were from bystanders. 73 percent of the callers were females and 27% were males.
- Calls intercepted from August 2018 to July 2019 totalled at 927. Out of these calls, 46 percent of the calls were from DV survivors and 15 percent from bystanders. 87 percent of the callers were female and 13 percent were males.