

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 12TH JULY, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 12TH JULY, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.42 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 11th July, 2023, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's Sitting. I also understand that most have not been feeling very well during the long sitting hours and I hope and pray that we will all be present when we try and finalise the very, very important paper that is before us.

I also welcome those joining us in the gallery. I am told that there is a Dr. Jioji Tabudravu, who is from Wainunu in Bua. He has a PhD and is a lecturer in Natural Products and Analytical Chemistry at the University of Central Lancashire in the School of Natural Sciences in the United Kingdom. Welcome, Sir.

Tabling of Written Responses

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat has received responses to Written Questions and those have been provided to the honourable Members who had asked, and copies have been uploaded on the Parliament website. I would like to thank the honourable Ministers who have provided their Written Responses, as follows:

1. The Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs to Written Question No. 50/2023 asked by honourable Maharaj.
2. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications to Written Question No. 48/2023 asked by the honourable Assistant Minister of Finance.

3. The Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport to Written Question Nos. 49/2023, 62/2023 and 75/2023 asked by honourable Usamate and Question No. 77/2023 asked by honourable Maharaj.
4. The Minister for Housing and Local Government to Written Question No. 86/2023 asked by the honourable Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs.

SPEAKER'S RULING

Point of Order - Honourable S.T. Koroilavesau

Honourable Members, I will now go on a ruling, especially on the Point of Order that was raised by honourable Semi Koroilavesau in yesterday's sitting. I will now address Parliament on the Point of Order raised yesterday under Standing Order 60 by honourable Koroilavesau and I remind honourable Members that whilst the *Daily Hansard* has not been circulated, I have obtained the relevant excerpts.

Honourable Koroilavesau stated, and I quote:

“It has been the protocol in Parliament and has become a tradition that when a Member presents his maiden speech or makes a contribution to the Budget, normally there is no Point of Order when the Member is on the floor. This allows the fluency and for the Member to stay within the timeframe of 20 minutes. Normally, if there are any questions, it is directed towards the mover of the motion who will answer all their queries and, in this case, the honourable Minister of Finance. I just wanted a clarification from you Sir, if this has moved away from the normal protocol and tradition of Parliament.”

Honourable Members, Standing Order 60 which is on Speech Must be Relevant provides guidance to honourable Members when speaking during a debate or in cases where amendment motions are moved.

The Point of Order raised by the honourable Koroilavesau can be considered to be on the issue of interjections, heckling and banging of the table by other Members whilst a Member is on the floor delivering his or her speech as opposed to the normal protocol and tradition of Parliament when accorded to a Member who is delivering his or her maiden speech. That is the first speech the honourable Member has just made in this august House. There is usually clapping that follows that.

At this juncture, I wish to reiterate some of the accepted protocols and traditions accorded in the House.

1. During the opening of Parliament when His Excellency addresses Parliament, honourable Members are expected to maintain courtesy, decorum, and not interrupt.
2. During the delivery of the National Budget Address, Members are expected to maintain courtesy, decorum, and not interrupt nor interject the Minister of Finance. Honourable Members, the same is also upheld when the Shadow Minister of Finance delivers his or her response.
3. During the delivery of maiden speeches, Members are expected to maintain courtesy and decorum, and not interrupt or interject.
4. During the second reading of the Appropriation Bill as well as all other debates, Members are not precluded from engaging in free flow of Parliamentary banter with the exception of completing or drowning out the Member who is on the floor.

Again, let me reiterate here the clapping that goes on. I have just stated earlier that, that is only shown after an honourable Member has delivered his or her maiden speech. The clapping continues from both sides of Parliament. Yesterday, I saw that the Leader of the Government in Parliament was leading the clapping here. I am sorry to be saying this, but I hope we will all take care in observing the respect and decorum of Parliament.

In that respect, having reviewed Standing Order 60 and the relevant excerpts of the *Daily Hansard* for yesterday's sitting, I hereby rule that the Point of Order raised by honourable Koroilavesau is out of order.

REVIEW OF THE STANDING ORDERS - PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

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

That the amendments recommended by the Standing Orders Committee in the review of the Standing Orders of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji be adopted by Parliament.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to debate the amendments recommended by the Standing Orders Committee in the review of the Standing Orders of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. I had tabled the Report of the Standing Orders Committee on 30th June, 2023 after the Budget announcement.

Mr. Speaker, as I had alluded to when I tabled the Report of the Standing Orders Committee, I had mentioned that the Committee met on three separate occasions. Firstly, on 1st March, secondly on 11th May and finally on 5th June respectively to discuss the amendments to the Standing Orders. There were amendments proposed by representatives of three parties that are represented in Parliament namely the People's Alliance Party, National Federation Party and the Social Democratic Liberal Party.

As you had addressed in Parliament before, I tabled the Report that it was unfortunate that the FijiFirst Party's proposed amendments were not included due to a misunderstanding in the mode it was received by the Secretariat. However, as you had mentioned, Mr. Speaker, that another meeting will be held after the Budget this week to allow their proposed amendments to be deliberated at the next Standing Orders Committee meeting. At this juncture, I convey my appreciation on the extensive deliberations and work undertaken by the Standing Orders Committee. I seek the honourable Members' support for the motion this morning.

Mr. Speaker, in its meeting on 11th May, the Committee agreed to allow the Secretariat to finalise the verbatim notes, minutes of the meetings and drafts of the amended Standing Orders as well as the Committee Report. Subsequently these documents were then conveyed to the Committee Members for their perusal, comments and finalisation.

On the proposed amendments to the Standing Orders, Mr. Speaker, the proposed amendments to the Standing Orders which had been circulated to all honourable Members of Parliament are necessary because they impact the way Parliament conducts itself. These proposed amendments relate to the performance, functions and the working of Parliament. In considering and reviewing the practices and procedures of Parliament, the proposed amendments which the Committee agreed

to are hereby presented to Parliament as mandated by Standing Order 128 which all Members have received a copy.

Mr. Speaker, I will now proceed to the proposed amendments starting with the provisions relating to the voting procedures for the election of the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, Speaker, Deputy Speaker and the President. These are Standing Orders 13, 14, 17, 19 and 136 respectively.

The first set of proposed amendments intends to remove the secret ballot voting procedure for election of the mentioned officers and replaces it with the roll-call voting procedure. Mr. Speaker, the roll-call voting is consistent with the Constitution and ensures accountability and transparency as each Party represented in Parliament would be able to know how each Member voted. Roll-call also caters for cases of false or glitches in the Electronic Voting System that we have here in Parliament, Sir, whereby there is a need to have other options available. That is the first set of amendments, Mr. Speaker.

The next set of amendments are relating to the use of vernacular languages in Parliament mainly the *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and *Hindi* languages. The relevant Standing Orders to which these proposed amendments relate to include:

1. Standing Order 28 whereby a Member of Parliament may speak in the English, *Vosa Vaka-Viti* or *Hindi* language and that interpretation of these are provided.
2. Standing Order 29 whereby there is a reference to an exception to the rule regarding documents in Parliament being in *English*. This exception is captured in an amendment to Standing Order 37 which provides that petitions to Parliament by members of the public may be in English, *Vosa Vaka-Viti* or *Hindi* language provided that if it is in *Vosa Vaka-Viti* or *Hindi* language that an English translation should also be provided.

Finally, Sir, Standing Order 32 which is amended as a consequence of amending Standing Order 28. This amendment will provide that speeches in *Vosa Vaka-Viti* or *Hindi* languages will be captured in the *Daily Hansard* with its English translation also attached. This will ensure consistency in the Standing Orders namely those that related to the *Daily Hansard*.

The next amendment is on Standing Order 30 which relates to the choice that is given to the Speaker of Parliament or a Member that will be presiding as Speaker whether to recite the prayer provided in opening prayer that will be recited when starting each sitting day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the next amendment is on Standing Order 34 which relates to the Order of Business of a sitting day. After discussions amongst the Committee Members representing all members in this Parliament, we believe that the Order of Business is to be amended so that questions are considered earlier on in a sitting day and giving prominence in the Order of Business of Parliament, thus the reason for the proposed amendment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the remaining amendments are considered equally as important as those that I have mentioned. And the first of which relates to the general voting procedures in Parliament as provided under Standing Order 54. The amendment here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, looks to again cater for the possibility of their being false and glitches in the electronic voting system whereby we have agreed to provide another option such as having votes cast through acclamation. But these options will be at the discretion of the honourable Speaker.

The next amendment is on the maintenance of order and decorum as per Standing Order 75 and Standing Order 76 whereby the amendment seek to fortify and provide a clear guidance for the

processes and avenues available to the Speaker when maintaining order and decorum of Parliament during a sitting day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a proposed amendment to Standing Order 111 which relates to the functions of the Standing Committees specifically on the function of making inquiries and investigating into certain matters within its mandate. We believe that this function needs to be fortified with additional checks so as to ensure that any matter intended to be investigated by such Standing Committees, adheres to certain guidelines that are within the jurisdiction of Parliament.

The second last amendment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, deals with Standing Order 121, Presentation of Standing Committee Reports whereby the amendment proposes to minimise the time given to the Minister responsible for the government department affected by the report from 60 days to 21 days to submit a response to Parliament.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and Members of Parliament, the last amendment is on Standing Order 124. It relates to the decisions of the Business Committee whereby the amendment proposes to provide the Business Committee decision making functions that ensure the proper functioning of the proceeding of Parliament during a sitting week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion by convention, the report of the Standing Orders Committee is a functional document. The recommended amendments are reflected in annexure 1 of the Report and the minutes of the proceedings of the Committee are reflected in annexure 2 of the Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier, I convey appreciation on the extensive deliberations and work undertaken by the Standing Orders Committee. I thank the Members of the Standing Orders Committee from both sides of Parliament, and I hereby commend these amendments to Parliament and seek your support.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to speak on the Standing Order Report, basically the Review Report of the Standing Orders of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. I, as a member of this Committee, would like to thank each and every one who had participated as member during the deliberation and as you might see, my signature is missing from this Report, but nevertheless, Opposition did participate and the only reason why my signature is missing is due to unforeseen circumstances that our submission was not presented and we took a principle decision to wait for your decision and ruling on what is going to transpire with regards to our submission that was given to the Secretariat.

There are a couple of amendments with regards to this Report that I would like to highlight. Firstly, Business Committee Rulings is going to be recorded. We agreed to this. We also agreed that the response from the Ministers is now 21 days instead of 60 days, so we look forward to getting those responses from the Ministers.

Once we get to that stage where we will be discussing some of the amendments proposed by the Opposition, most of these are practical scenarios that we have faced for the last two terms and this was one of them whereby once the Committee presents a report, we never used to get response on time and at times our recommendations. A lot of work was hindered in its scrutinising annual reports especially for the Public Accounts Committee where they scrutinise audit reports.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of languages, *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and Hindi languages, I believe this was a ruling made in the Business Committee. As Opposition, we took a principle stand then, and we objected to it. At that point in time, we did say that it should go through the Standing

Order Committee for a review, and we still take that principle stand from Opposition that we believe the official language in this Parliament should remain as English. It is a policy decision. Now that it has come through the Standing Order Committee as we debated back then that it should not be the Business Committee but the Standing Order Committee which should make a decision on whether other languages should be allowed in Parliament or not. Now, that is being done and it is here for us to debate.

Red card and yellow card, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is something new and we are grateful that privileges is with the Speaker to decide and not with anyone else. We have faith in the Speaker to make the right decision at the right time, not just for the Opposition, but for the Government members as well.

Voting procedures, by roll calls - I believe we had a lot of discussions and we agreed that vote by acclamation is needed especially when we go to Committee of Supply. We cannot be calling for rollcall every time there is an amendment, otherwise it will take us at least two or three months to pass the Budget. This was also appreciated by the Government Members and we came to an amicable solution that we can have vote by acclamation as and when suggested by the Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last point that I would like to raise which is a concerning one. I raised this in the Standing Order Committee as well with regards to the prayer. I still take that stand and this is my personal view as a Hindu, I have no issues with the incorporation of the word “Jesus” in the prayer. We can have a Christian prayer though we are a secular state. Again, it is policy decision that has been taken by the Government and we were voted against this particular issue.

As I am saying, I have no issues of the word “Jesus” used in the prayer. As a Hindu, as honourable Koya who is a Muslim, as honourable Charan Jeath Singh as a Sikh, what we are saying is, to be incorporated in this prayer, there is a phrase where it says and I quote: “... heal us from our differences and unite us”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the Committee stage, I was told that the Government has reservations of the word “Fijians” to be used in the prayer. I still urge that the prayer should read: “... heal us from our differences and unite us all as Fijians”.

Now, that the honourable Prime Minister is on record saying that every citizen in Fiji will be called a “Fijian”, there is no harm in incorporating other individuals who are not Christian believers to be incorporated as Fijians in this particular prayer. That is my request and I propose an amendment to this particular report, especially in the prayers that this particular phrase should read: “Heal us from our differences and unite us all as Fijians.”

That will actually see anyone else apart from a Christian believer who sits in this Chamber is incorporated in this prayer, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is a request from our side. As I said this is my personal opinion as a Hindu, that we need to be incorporated in this prayer. We are actually taking part. Whenever you come pray and if the word “Fijians” is incorporated into the prayer, we will also feel inclusive as part of the prayer. With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you very much and hope that the amendment that I have proposed would be accepted by the Government.

MR. SPEAKER.- Since there is no one else who would like to speak on the motion, I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Opposition Whip with the points have been made and I do understand that this is also part of their submission that the honourable Speaker has allowed time or after this sitting to be

considered and it will be something for the Standing Orders Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to deliberate on. However, at this point in time, since there are no objections to the current Standing Orders that are before us which are been agreed to by both sides, but for the other submissions that are to come, I seek the support of Parliament that we do pass these amendments and that we will be conveying the Standing Orders Committee after the sitting to consider those submissions.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a couple of things that I wanted to raise. Just generally speaking, I agree with what honourable Maharaj has actually mentioned, with respect to certain things in there, he is quite fervently saying those things.

One of the things that is very important, and I mentioned this at one of the meetings I had attended to because of his absence. What we needed to do was ensure that we were also compliant with the Constitution, and it is an issue that probably needs to be vetted and vented instead of adopting it now. There are couple of things. Section 23 of the Constitution and I specifically refer to Section 23(3)(b). In a Constitution there is a provision, it literally states in Section 23(3)(1), and I quote:

“Every citizen has the freedom to make particular choices, and the right to-

- (a) form or join political party;
- (b) participate in the activities of, or recruit members for a political party; and
- (c) campaign for a political party, candidate or cause.”

It also states in Section 23(3)(a) and (b), and I quote:

“Every citizen who has reached the age of 18 years has the right -

- (a) to be registered as a voter;
- (b) to vote by secret ballot in any election or referendum under this Constitution.”

So, if this is being done, and given the citizen has been given the right, there is no clear reason why we need to set it out the way it has been in the amendment. I think it is something that actually really clearly needs to be debated. There are certain things in there, the ones that are marked in red with respect to the changes that will require us vetting. Case in point, Sir, what is the reason behind the yellow card and the red card?

When the authority to remove someone from Parliament vests with you, Sir. It has always been there. It is your discretion that is there for you to exercise if and when someone in here, it has been in some occasions where it has been used but it is used very sparingly, but it is your discretion. We are actually saying that, why do we need to change that? What is the reason behind it? There is no quoted reason being offered with respect to yellow cards and red cards. It does not make sense, Sir. Why do we need to actually add those particular provisions within the Standing Orders? I can understand some provisions that, along the course of time, may need amendments. I can understand the discussion regarding some of the other ones but those two particular reasons, Sir.

One of the very important provisions, again, as I go back to the first one is, when someone votes, at the moment from what I understand, correct me if I am wrong, honourable Tabuya, is if you are going to vote in Parliament, you get called out to say, “I vote for X, Y or Z”. So that right to vote and do it by way of secret ballot is actually very important. It is not just for us; it is for both sides of Parliament. We have seen this on many occasions, not just in this Parliament, previous Parliaments before us where you actually hold that right. It is something that we should really clearly look at with respect to jurisdictions around the world and how it is done. And the reasons behind that particular right existing. It is not something that needs to be taken lightly, Sir.

I go back to what I had spoken about yesterday. We are given some rights that we take for granted and we cannot curtail those, we cannot force people in particular situations where if someone wants vote for someone else, if the Prime Minister's being elected, that is his or her choice. What is the reason? I need to hear, what is the reason behind it having to be disclosed?

Really, I have not anything, Sir. So that is an objectionable part from our perspective, Sir. As I have said, are we in line with the Constitution? If I remember correctly, I think that was something that, correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Speaker Sir, you had said, "ask to see if we could get some kind of opinion on it whether we are actually encroaching on the Constitutional rights of a particular person to vote".

So, all of those things, Sir, if I am wrong, I am wrong but at the end of the day I think it is something very, very important. There are certain things, as I say again, probably as time goes along, we need to amend or fix from a past practice, that is understandable. Again, no reason being proffered with respect to this. What is the yellow card status? What is the red card status? What purpose does it really serve when you, Sir, already have that discretion. I know you use it wisely.

MR. SPEAKER.- We take note of what was being said by honourable Koya but in view of the Right of Reply that has been given, we will take note of that and we will ensure that we will bring it up when we review the issues raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition in the whole review of Standing Orders and that will considered when we review it next. Also, nothing is set in stone, we are flexible with this.

Parliament will now vote on the motion, and I notice you are opposing the motion, honourable Leader of the Opposition when your side agreed to in the Business Committee, so again you are opposing it out here? Let us be clear on that.

We agreed to it in the Business Committee and that is the very thing that we are trying to amend here, otherwise it becomes a joke and laughingstock. You go to a meeting, you agree there and you come out here, you oppose it again for the sake of opposing. So, please, honourable Members if you oppose it, then we will put it to the vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	28
Noes	-	20
Not voted	-	5

Motion agreed to.

EXCISE (BUDGET AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 107, I move:

That the amendments to the Excise (Budget Amendment) Bill 2023, Bill No. 09/2023, which was tabled in Parliament on 30th June, 2023, be considered by Parliament during the debate along with other Consequential Bills.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very small amendment. The

Excise (Budget Amendment) Bill 2023 was tabled in Parliament on 30th June, 2023 as Bill No. 9 of 2023 to amend the Excise Act 1986 and to address budgetary policy changes in the 2023-2024 Budget. Since the tabling of the Bill, four anomalies have been identified in relation to Clause 4 of the Bill which have been updated. This has been picked up by Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) and at the outset, I apologise that, that anomaly was there. The Bill is tabled with the relevant amendments in Magenta for ease of reference, if you look at the amended Bill.

Very briefly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Clause 4 of the Bill amends Schedule 2 to the Act to reflect the increase in the rate of excise duty on alcohol, tobacco, sugar sweetened beverages and other excisable goods. Sir, after the Budget Address, the two items of excisable goods under Schedule 2 to the Act that I had referred to in my speech are item 103 in relation to cigarettes containing tobacco grown outside of Fiji and tobacco grown in Fiji, and item 203 in relation to manufactured tobacco containing tobacco grown outside of Fiji and tobacco grown in Fiji. So, that is the change that was not properly reflected and we thought that, that should be corrected so that there is no mistake in the interpretation and the application of the excise duties. It is a minor amendment.

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

There being no one willing to make a stand on the motion, I now call on the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance to speak in reply.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, this is just a minor correction, so honourable Members would have the opportunity during the debate to discuss if there is anything.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I rise on a Point of Order. Just a quick clarification from you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have all been handed a copy of the gazette which says, "This is the Amended Standing Orders and pursuant to Standing Order 15(3)(1) and as directed by the Speaker, I hereby publish the Amended Standing Orders of the Parliament of Fiji". Was this gazetted prior to us actually agreeing to it, Sir? Has this already been gazette?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a clarification. Was it gazetted before we actually met? From what I see here, the Secretary-General has it dated today and it was already gazetted before we have vented/vetted it. That is the query and question that we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- The honourable Minister of Finance, the question now as has been raised....

HON. J. USAMATE.- How come this is done before we discussed it in this House?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is just the Standing Orders, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Before we agreed?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it just would seem highly unusual that you would gazette something prior to it being approved. It is something that we need to correct. It is already gazetted prior to us having gone through that last previous motion raised by honourable Tabuya.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- We would like an explanation, Sir, if we could on whether it was gazetted prior to all of these happenings. That is what it says, that is what we have all received. Maybe the honourable Attorney-General can shed some light on it. I am not sure, Sir, but some clarification that we need, please.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, could I humbly ask, please, we need a lot of concentration in the way we meet in this august Parliament. When a question has been put and there is no response from either side, we have continued as is in the Standing Orders in how we operate in this august Parliament.

Now, when the question was asked, “Does any Member oppose the motion?”, in that span of time, no one responded by saying, “We oppose the motion”, so we moved on. You still have your right if you want to address this on the issue that you have raised, honourable Koya, but we have covered this and we have gone ahead so all I ask is that we continue and that leaves the door open for anyone all the time.

Should you dispute that, there are always avenues available to seek redress on this. But all I ask, honourable Members, when we sit and deliberate in this Parliament, when a question has been raised, please, make your response there and then. Otherwise, we will not be able to move forward. As we move forward, we take another 10 steps back because of the way that the delay is pulling us back.

For papers such as this to be provided to you, honourable Members, at the very time that you are sitting to deliberate on it, it is nothing new. This is how we have been doing it in the last so many years. Bills just come to us and amendments, as we were about to deliberate on it. Do we have the time read it? No. But when the Bill is presented, you have to do all your best. This is how best you can actively participate in the decision-making process when it is there for you to decide on. So, all I ask is that we continue because we have covered them. I hope we are not going to be going back and front on these issues every time.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, just a matter of clarification. I am not sure if you are aware, Sir, this copy was handed to us just now when the amendments that honourable Minister of Finance gave. So, we did not know or have a copy of the gazette already gazetted before the vote or during the motion that was filed.

I understand what you are saying, Sir. I do not disagree with you. It was just an issue that as a Party, we wanted to query with respect to this being gazetted prior to. I understand the honourable Leader of the Opposition will write formally to you, Sir. Thank you very much and we appreciate your time.

ESTABLISHMENT AND MEMBERSHIP OF THE EMOLUMENTS COMMITTEE

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That pursuant to Standing Order 129 that the Emoluments Committee be established to review the salaries and allowances of Members of Parliament as provided for under the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014, and the Emoluments Committee must report back to Parliament at the September Sitting. The Members of the Emoluments Committee as agreed to by both sides of the House shall comprise the following –

1. Hon. Lynda D. Tabuya;
2. Hon. Ro Filipe Q. Tuisawau;
3. Hon. Aseri M. Radrodro;
4. Hon. Alvick A. Maharaj; and
5. Hon. Mosese D. Bulitavu.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this particular motion has been brought about in agreement with the Opposition as to the need to review the salaries and allowances of Members of Parliament. There have been Cabinet decisions made already before this particular Committee was to sit which includes the reduction of allowances of Members of Cabinet.

Also, Mr. Speaker, there are discussions with Opposition regarding the entitlements of Members of Parliament. This also includes pensions, as well as other allowances such as housing that have been raised not just for Members of Government but also Opposition and also former Members of Government and Opposition. Mr. Speaker, because these discussions have been happening, there is a need to convene the Emoluments Committee because there are requirements under the Parliamentary Remunerations Act 2014 that need to be reviewed accordingly.

This motion is being brought to the House, Mr. Speaker, for the Members to support and we have some time where Members of Parliament can make submissions to the Committee, as well as the Committee itself will look to engage independent individuals or experts that can review what is currently entitled by Members of Parliament.

To that end, Mr. Speaker, I ask the Members of the House to support this and that we will be reporting back in the September sitting.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, just on the technicality of this particular motion that is moved, we do not oppose this motion but being in Emoluments Committee, before we are strictly guided by what is part of the motion itself. In this one, though we will be reviewing the pension, however, pension does not fall under the Remuneration Act. There is a Pensions Act 1989 which I believe should be incorporated in this particular motion so that the Emoluments Committee has the powers to review that particular Act as well. Otherwise, we will be facing some issues when it comes to Pensions Act 1989.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, that is an issue that has been raised. We need to include another legislation there. You only have one legislation in your motion here and that is to do with the Parliamentary Remunerations Act. The other one is to do with Pensions Act 1989 since you have mentioned pension in your statement.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, if I can just clarify this; I know the honourable Prime Minister will also speak. The history of the current salaries and allowance for Members of Parliament and Ministers was done after the General Elections in 2014. The Interim Government, in the Constitution, it was a requirement or it was allowed that until the first sitting of the Parliament after the first General Election, the Interim Government could make Decrees and pass laws.

So, after the Election, there was a Decree which sets the allowances and salaries of Members of Parliament, Ministers and Assistance Ministers. That then became an Act of Parliament under which the salaries, benefits, allowances and pensions which was a separate Act was determined

because the pension, Mr. Speaker, invariably is based on the salaries that honourable Members of Parliament and Ministers receive, so it is linked.

I know, by determination, there is a salary reduction of 20 percent at the moment. For example, honourable Opposition Members, instead of getting \$50,000, they are getting \$40,000. The Ministers and the Prime Minister and everyone on this side have also through determination on a reduced salary of 20 percent. What we have done in this Budget is because we are going to go through this Emoluments Committee which is the right thing to do, this motion really is for us as Members of Parliament, Ministers and Assistant Ministers, which will also include the determination that can be done on it in future that we are appointing this Parliamentary Emoluments Committee. But that does not mean that the Parliamentary Emoluments Committee itself will make an assessment because the principle is that, we cannot determine our own salaries and allowances ourselves. So, we need some experts.

I am hoping that the Parliamentary Emoluments Committee will appoint because they will do the Terms of Reference, appoint an independent group of experts, Sir, to come up with all the considerations that Members of Parliament, we have increased the Parliamentary budget, political parties will get more money now. We understood when we sat in the Opposition how difficult it was. I know all the honourable Members on the other side, Assistant Ministers and Ministers have their own vehicles, but Opposition Members also play a very useful role. A lot of people go to them, a lot of people ask them for donations, a lot of people ask them for lots of things and we want to make sure that every Member of Parliament including Ministers are well equipped in terms of the resources because that is fundamental to a good, functioning democracy.

That is why we have included the full salaries that everyone gets in this Budget, with the concurrence of the honourable Prime Minister and Cabinet, we will be restoring those salaries back to where it was while the Independent Emoluments Committee looks at the entire salaries, benefits, allowances and pension. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now with pension, for young people who are coming into Parliament, for example, if honourable Rinesh Sharma does not get into Parliament, he decides to leave Parliament after

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, can I just cut you there. You are correct in saying all that you have said but that the Opposition is raising is that there is only one legislation that is being reviewed here and it is to do with the Remunerations Act. Since the mention of pension by the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, that is the point that they are raising, why can it not be included? Can it be included, or will we have to take this back to Cabinet because this is Cabinet's decision? If it is not to be included, then we continue as is here. This is just to do with the Remunerations Act and nothing to do with pension because pensions come under the Pensions Act.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As I have said, Sir, I think we carry on with the Emoluments Committee because the pension as I have said invariably is dependent on the salaries. It does not stop the Committee from making their recommendations because ultimately, it is Parliament which can make the determination. On that basis, the changes to the Pensions Act can be made, so it is possible, Sir.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sorry, Sir, again, mine is a clarification and this is for purposes of ensuring that we are correct. Of course, it is an Emoluments Committee that needs to deal with something that has come to the fore for everyone and there are certain things that need to be raised. It is regarding the actual composition of the Committee.

Currently, the Emoluments Committee, in the motion it says five people. The Standing

Orders, I am also to understand that this would be a Special Committee where the Committee has the powers of a Standing Committee conferred by the Standing Orders and any other powers specified in the resolution of Parliament and establishes the Committee.

My question really is, Sir, and it is something that we need to really look at, under Standing Order 114(4), and this is something that we had sought clarification earlier on with respect to the composition of the Committees. It states and I quote, Sir:

“Each party is, as far as possible, entitled to be represented on each standing committee in a way that fairly reflects that party’s representation in Parliament.”

My reading of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that in these actual Committees, the representation in those Committees is by party, not by coalition. For us, it is just one, there are three on the other side, so the determination that needs to be made by Parliament or seek an opinion on this, Sir, is that this particular Special Committee and this particular clause has a bearing on all Committees. It is not something light, it spells it out quite clearly, Sir and I will say this for the general public to hear also. Each party is as far as possible entitled to be represented on each Standing Committee in a way that fairly reflects that party’s representation in Parliament.

We have had a discussion on this with the Secretary-General who has not come back to us yet with respect to all the Committees. In simple terms, the larger the percentage we have, the larger the representation you get on these Committees. It is not a small thing, it is not something that we can bypass, it is something that we need to correct or find out how you calculate this, Sir. It is a very important point with respect to the composition. It is not about the actual Committee itself, it is the composition. It is a very important point that I think this whole Parliament, all the lawyers and the legal minds in this Parliament need to look at carefully and maybe the Secretary-General would like to get an opinion on this.

It does not only talk about this particular Special Committee. It talks about all the other Committees that we have representation in. That particular clause would mean, the larger the party, the larger representation in the Committee. Of course, you have three, you may end up with the same amount if the size of the Committees increase. I know we have got seven or five, it may have to go to seven; how do we deal with that? That has to be determined. Even the current Committees that we sit on, we are sitting on tender books if this is not being interpreted properly, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I give the Right of Reply, as was raised earlier by the honourable Leader of the Opposition to me regarding the same issue that you have raised honourable Koya, we are still awaiting the provision of that opinion. At the same time, whilst we are waiting for that, we will continue as we are doing now and then when that opinion comes, then we will sit and talk it again.

For sure, we will need to be addressing that here in this august Parliament. The issue of party representation or the three parties coming in as one is a representation of the three parties. As I stated earlier to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I am still waiting for that opinion. Whilst we are still waiting for that, through the discussion of this motion that we ask the learned Attorney-General to please re-look at that again as we need a clear definition regarding the issues that have been raised by the Opposition, but for the time being, we continue as this and let us vote and decide on this motion. There is nothing to stop us in reviewing the composition as well, otherwise everything becomes a standstill. This will all come to a standstill.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- I apologise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was just commenting to the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament about the point raised by the honourable Koya.

I think his interpretation of Standing Order 114 is correct but again it is subject to the advice to come from the Office of the Attorney-General. In the meantime, the *status quo* could remain until that opinion comes in and that opinion can resolve the Standing Committee membership from the point in which that advice comes through to your office.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will address the issues that have been raised. Firstly, by honourable Koya as was mentioned by honourable Vosarogo, there is an opinion that is due and we are looking forward to the Office of the Solicitor-General to provide him opinion as soon as possible, so that there is clarity with this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the composition of the Committee is really by Convention. There are five Members in each Standing Committee, so we have followed that number. Furthermore, Section 114(4) just states that “each Party is entitled to be represented.” We have consulted with our Members within the Coalition Government and party representation, and these had been the Members that had been agreed to.

From the parties that are not represented, I can confirm that, Mr. Speaker. It is always done by agreement within the Coalition Government. As you know the numbers that we have at any time, this is something that we have to work with due to the busyness and availability of our Members. This is the numbers that we have come with and the names. We are thankful for the continued co-operation and good working relationship within the Coalition Government, Sir.

The point raised by honourable Maharaj about the Pensions Act, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, it does have some bearing to the sitting of the Emoluments Committee. However, Sir, as mentioned by honourable Professor Prasad and I needed him to be on his feet because if we are bringing in the Pensions Act and any changes to it, there also financial implications.

I needed the honourable Professor Prasad to contribute to the motion and to really confirm that the involvement of the Pensions Act in this regards is really as a natural consequence of what we discussed under the Parliamentary Remunerations Act. It is just in lieu of that. So, there are no proposals at the moment for changes to the Pensions Act. Therefore, Sir, we would like to leave the motion as it is, and we will proceed from there.

If there is something that the Emoluments Committee may wish to raise and bring to Parliament about changes to the Pensions Act, we are open to that too. But at this point, Sir, it is just to do with the Parliamentary Remunerations Act of 2014 and the motion is as is. I seek the support of Parliament to support this motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote on the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2023-2024 APPROPRIATION BILL 2023

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members in the gallery, to the FijiFirst family, thousands of Fijians listening or tuned into the Parliament session and every Fijian abroad who has Fiji at heart, *bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we live in the best nation in the world, and I call that “Fiji Islands” – my

home. I believe that a National Budget should be the welfare and for the betterment of the people of the country. Here, we have a Coalition Government that has conjured a deficit budget in which it is inhumane to the thousands of the Fijian people in time to come.

This Budget is not for the people of this country, this Budget is rather to support the incompetence, demands and the desires of the Coalition agreement. This Budget does not address the challenges faced by Fijian families and households. It does not inspire confidence in our people to invest in the country. This is evident, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ever since the Coalition Government came into power, we saw a massive migration, people left the country, zero confidence in this Government. The numbers speak and you have been travelling a lot as well.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What are the numbers?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You are at the airport a lot as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 31st March, 2023 the honourable Minister of Finance under the Coalition Government said, “we need to find the money.” I did not know he was targeting the pockets and the savings of our hardworking Fijians, else why would the Coalition Government increase VAT on our people and this is collective taxes that our people will be paying. There is a removal of concession from various items as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Coalition Government we have a Minister of Finance that says, “we need to find wealth.” I would like to tell the honourable Minister of Finance as a national leader, you are not supposed to find wealth, you are supposed to create it. This is why this Budgetary allocation has zero new capital investment projects.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I think they made the budget overnight.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- No wonder Fiji holds a very dark future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to talk about debt.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- What about it?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Listen you might learn.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Coalition Government has painted a grey picture about debt. I would like to share with the people of this country, for example, if a young couple decides to progress in life, they take loans from the bank, they buy a house, they have invested in an asset, if they smart with their finances and I hope the other side is listening, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this young couple can take their loan, build a house, create a flat, have a return on investment and they pay off their debt before the timeframe. What happens is they own a asset, in a couple of years they are able to refinance,

invest in business or build more. That is called progress and prosperity.

In the same way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, any government would borrow to build infrastructure and that is considered as good debt. If you take debt to build roads, build buildings, you create accessibility, you create affordability. This establishes startups, entrepreneurship, new businesses, current business can scale up Mr. Speaker, Sir, and create jobs. When you create jobs, there is economic activity, money is generated, the economy flows. It is very simple; I do not need to have a PhD or be a professor to understand this.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You need it.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Who is talking?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is very artistic in painting a picture that debt is bad, the people need to pay for it and then the government needs money. That is the picture they have painted.

On 30th July, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance under the Coalition Government comes up with a \$639 million deficit Budget which will take Fiji's debt from \$9.9 billion to \$10.5 billion. The very leaders who campaigned and complained about Fiji's debt crisis, "*oh bahut karza, karza bharo desh chalo*" that was the mentality, Mr. Speaker, Sir and that is happening but at the expense of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 29th March, 2023 in one of the articles it says and I quote, "Honourable Biman Prasad attacks FijiFirst for their reckless spending." Mr. Speaker, Sir, reckless spending, the first quarter of this year the Coalition Government has borrowed \$223.2 million with over 65 international trips. Is this not wastage, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Is this not reckless?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- They should be looking into the mirror before they speak.

The cost of living will sky rocket and may seem out of control because the Coalition Government makes bad and poor economic decisions and it is evident. This Budget is the evidence of the poor economic decisions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget creates a gross-borrowing requirement of an estimated \$1.2 billion and this is higher because maturing debt is refinanced and not repaid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that brings my attention to the honourable Minister for Sugar. On 21st March, 2023 the honourable Minister for Sugar in Auckland held a mini-press conference. The article says on 21st March, 2023 that the Minister promised that the Rakiraki Mill will be established. When will it happen, Minister?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Answer to the farmers. When will ethanol be produced, 3,500 sugarcane tonnes, 350 days operational. When will it happen Minister?

The honourable Minister for Sugar also promised that the Labasa Mill will be turned into refinery mill. When will it happen? The farmers want to know. When will it happen?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- But then Mr. Speaker, Sir, we find out that majority of the funds for sugar is under the honourable Minister of Finance. I urge and plead on behalf of the farmers to the honourable Minister for Sugar to knock harder on the door of the honourable Minister of Finance and get the job done for the farmers.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the pursuit to build the Rakiraki Mill, the Minister for Sugar has taken to *Facebook* that he has guaranteed \$400 per tonne.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You should follow him on *Facebook*.

Sir, \$400 per tonne for cassava.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- That fix the sugar problems, then will plant cassava.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I guess the various international trips has really helped our honourable Minister for Sugar and is coming to good use.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You are jealous!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Jealous of you, in your dreams.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this brings me to corporate tax. I am an entrepreneur Mr. Speaker, Sir, I started from nothing. I could say that it is immensely difficult to start a business, it is not easy, so many suffered during that pandemic and so many have been resilient, relevant and they have survived. I congratulate all businesses people for doing what they do and what they love to do and contribute to the country.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Did you get some Government grant?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I deserved it.

(Laughter)

Because I worked for it and I deserved it and that is what FijiFirst Government is about, cultivating the next generation of leaders. Where are the youths? Where are the youths on your side? None of the youths, nothing for the young people.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, talking about businesses, businesses create jobs.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, businesses creates jobs, innovation and contribute to the regional development but this Coalition Government, some of the businesses still face the ramifications of the global pandemic yet the Coalition Government decides to increase corporate tax. They do not know when businesses are not able to survive, they will pass down their corporate tax to the selling price of the product with their added profit and their added fiscal duty and the added VAT increase. Collective tax will destroy this country from businesses to the consumers. This is what the Coalition Government has been harping about with this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if businesses do not survive, they will reduce the hours of the staff, people will have less pay. There would not be jobs, people will be jobless, how will people survive, this will increase the crime rate which is very evident in Fiji right now. Crime rate has increased in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there seems to be a new policy on the streets - you scratch my back, I scratch your back. You give me \$1,000 today, I will help you on a rainy day. Some of the policies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the streets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming to tourism. Tourism is Fiji's backbone and it collapsed during the global pandemic, but we showed our resilience and we are one of the fattest growing economies in the world. More opportunities, a sustainable, resilient and inclusive Fiji. I would like to thank all those Fijians working in our tourism sector for their immense contribution in making tourism the backbone of our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I like to congratulate the very hard working and dynamic staff of Fiji Airways and to FijiFirst Government for their achievement as the best airline in Australia and the Pacific.

I would like to thank the staff of Fiji Airways and the FijiFirst Government for their achievement as to be ranked 15th globally. I would like to thank the staff of Fiji Airways and the FijiFirst Government for Fiji Airways being ranked 12th globally for the Cabin Crew category. Thank you FijiFirst for keeping our airline alive with their strategic measures and visionary plans and this achievement would not have been possible without the hardworking and dedicated staff of Fiji Airways. Thank you for making us proud.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with geopolitical tensions on the rise internal and external wars....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, no running commentaries please. Allow honourable Sharma to make his contribution.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

With geopolitical tension on the rise and ongoing wars internally and externally with various countries that are suppliers of raw materials, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is forecasted that fuel prices would increase. Yet, this Coalition Government thinks to increase departure tax. On top of that, there is 5 percent increase on excise duty for alcohol, tobacco and 5 cents per litre for carbonated drinks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is very unfortunate, the Coalition Government thinks that the tourism sector is their day-to-day bank or pot of gold, whenever they want, they can get all the money out from it and run their operational expenses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will make Fiji a very expensive destination. We already have throat-slitting competition in the region with Tonga, Vanuatu, Samoa and Cook Islands and then also global competitions such Bali and Maldives. Why? When tourists want to travel, they do their thorough research.

Two things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that jeopardises our tourism sector. One is the increase taxes by the Coalition Government and the other is the high crime rate that is happening in Fiji. Why would anyone want to come to a nation and be robbed? That is the question people will be asking. So, by imposing high taxes on the tourism sector, this actually jeopardizes the jobs of thousands of Fijians who have seen the worst of the pandemic and this is nothing or something very close to that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of VAT. The additional cost will be passed down to the consumers, the ordinary Fijians, higher prices mean it reduces the buying power of every Fijian. This will contribute to a decrease in economic activity. Through their multiple consultations, I think they did it with their friends and supporters. The failed Fiscal Review Committee and the lavish economic summit, this was just a preview when the movie was all about tax increases. So, why would they? Oh well they know what they are doing.

(Chorus of interjections)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increase in taxes is inhumane to the people of this country and the honourable Minister of Women went on *TikTok* and said 12.5 percent is inhumane, then what is 15 percent, I ask her?

(Honourable L.D. Tabuya interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- That is your budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- If five things were bought for \$20, now for ordinary Fijians will be able to buy two or three things for \$20. That is the state we will be all living in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I bring my attention to the honourable Assistant Minister for Women. She has spoken about addressing the needs of the poor, vulnerable and how deprived they are of nutrition and the Welfare Support Scheme, but the amount of collective tax that the Coalition Government is charging them, they will take all the welfare in the blink of an eye.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- When you go and visit them, honourable Member

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- *Ka boliyo ulon ke?*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when she goes and makes her visitations, I hope she has the honesty to say to her vulnerable and marginalised people and communities that the Government she is part of has increased collective tax on the very same people they think, “oh, we have given you welfare by an increase of \$15 to \$25.” You must be joking!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, she spoke about termites. Yesterday a business owner messaged me and said that their raw materials just arrived, 3 percent duty has increased, 15 percent duty on that and the price of finished good is high. Construction will be extremely high. So, when someone wants to rebuild their homes after the termite infestation, what will honourable Assistant Minister Sashi Kiran go and tell her people.

(Honourable S. Kiran interjects)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *ka jayek boliyo aap ulon se?*

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Copy and paste Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the honourable Minister for Women, “is she going to build more Golden Age Care Homes because ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- ...with their high collective tax, that is where she will be putting these people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government states that the Budget is about tightening your belts as things will get difficult from here. So, thousands of Fijians are told to tighten their belts only so these Ministers in the Coalition Government can tighten and loosen their belts flying in aircrafts from one country to the other. That is evident from all the international travels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 29 Ministers, 65 plus international trips - \$223.2 million in borrowing in four months is extreme wastage in Fiji’s history. A very historic Government we have over here.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Point of Order. He is misleading Parliament because he stated twice

MR. SPEAKER.- Could you provide me the Standing Order?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Standing Order 62 imputing misleading facts here. He has expressed that Government borrowed \$223 million for overseas travel. Can he prove that?

MR. SPEAKER.- Continue, honourable Sharma.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to respond to this very quickly. I think he is not listening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I said 65 international trips alone and \$223.2 million borrowings alone according to the financial report from the Ministry of Finance. You can have a read, it is from the quarterly report.

On 27th January, 2023 the honourable Minister of Finance said, “As a Minister of Finance, I have been inherited a mess.”

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.-Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask the people of this country. When you love what you do, you do not complain. You should have the vision to find the solution in a problem. Full of complains.

The debt could have been paid off with new and innovative investments and projects; where are the creative ideas, Coalition Government? No creative ideas at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it took the honourable Prime Minister so long to convene the COC meeting which led to the appointment of the members to the Electoral Commission. It just shows that we could be in fully capacity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they talk about New Fiji, they talk about democratic values and they talk about the Constitution. I know the honourable Minister for Sugar is there.

(Laughter)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Interference!

MR. SPEAKER.- Do not let them distract you, honourable Member.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Honourable Prime Minister says to work with them, we are here to work with you as well for the betterment of every Fijian, but Mr. Speaker, Sir, our goal is the same. The goal is the welfare and well-being of our Fijian people, but our parts are different. I can understand it must be hard for three parties to work together in the first place, I mean it is kind of evident on their faces.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to correct this confused Government. This is very important. They call themselves the People’s Government. Let us put it to the test, Sir. This Budget, does it give to the people, or does it take away from the people?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, which government calls itself the People’s Government but takes away from the people their savings, deposits, income and salaries? The reality is three parties formed a Coalition Government to defeat FijiFirst Government that was for the people, that gave equality, that gave into the people. Even during the pandemic, we never once complained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident and now we know that the Coalition Government cannot manage money and when they want more, they will come after your savings. Again, I repeat this, for the point of order that was raised. Mr. Speaker, Sir \$223.2 million in borrowings in the first quarter was done by this Government.

Just one question, I ask the students who were on TELS and think their loans have been forgiven, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when you are forgiven, are you let go of or are you held on to? This is what I want to ask the students. They are educated, knowledgeable with great knowledge comes great responsibility and I hope you make your parents and your country proud. but, again, I would like to ask, did the Coalition Government honour their promises? Have they left gone of you or have they held on to you by a bond - in the name of bond? That is for them to answer because they are the ones who hold the real power of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government likes to swim in an empty swimming pool.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- They have to listen to this.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on misleading statements on the Lautoka Swimming Pool, the initial estimate by the project consultant was \$2 million. This estimate was based on a different location - smaller pools to be constructed.

Then Lautoka City Council resolved to construct another pool on another location...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NATH.- Listen, listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- This is important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initial estimate of the project consultant was \$2 million and the estimate was based on a different location, smaller pools to be constructed. Then Lautoka City Council resolved to construct another pool at another location at a higher ground with international standard facilities with other facilities as well.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Lautoka City Council requested the project consultant to provide an estimate cost on the new location and new scope of work because it was scaled up to international standards, which came to around \$7.8 million.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Then Lautoka City Council invited public tenders for the construction of the pool based on the new scope of work which was now at \$12.6 million and that is the difference, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They are unable to understand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the confusion here is that, the estimated cost by the consultant was \$7.8 million and the best tender price received by Lautoka City Council was \$12.6 million. The whole idea of the FijiFirst Government at that time was to support the project to give it an opportunity to the younger generation for training, competition and the use of international standard pool.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vision was also the same with what we have done with Churchill Park. We are hosting international...

HON. C.J. SINGH.- What happened to Shirley Park?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I will come to that, do not worry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope I have cleared this misinformation which has been coming time and time again. For the information of Parliament, only \$6 million was paid out to relevant contractors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look forward to concluding my speech. This brings me to the speech of honourable Qereqeretabua. Her speech was very fancy and very polished. She spoke about the law and order in Fiji, but we have a law and order situation in Fiji - increased robberies, home invasion, and that is evident. This is why even the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications is very ambitious with his revenue projections and collections and about investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, crime rate, and the evidence that the honourable Minister for Women always ask, where is the evidence? Here is the evidence. The US Embassy in Suva issued security alert regarding crime. On 10th July, 2023, an international embassy is stating crime rate is high in Fiji.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he does not understand it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do round off, honourable Member.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We have a Coalition Government that has an approach to rebuild Fiji with a blind eye, with a textbook Budget, a Budget that is disconnected from reality and this would bring pain, suffering and disappointment among thousands of Fijians. We must not forget we were voted in by the people, we have a national responsibility to serve the people of this beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the real power and the final decision lies with every Fijian citizen. The Government's job is to be fair, but how are we fair to the thousands of ordinary Fijians when they have to pay so many taxes and those rich people earning above \$270,000 gets a 5 percent tax reduction? This is the new Fiji, the new democracy that they are harping about.

In times of calamity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a real leader is at the forefront of the calamity but here, we have a Coalition Government, that has put the public at the frontline to bear the burden of the debt. This is not leadership.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Your debt!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- We have a Fiji here, the new democratic Fiji that they talk about where the poor, the vulnerable, grassroots, marginalised, the middle class income earners pay more and the rich pay less.

To help you and your families to plan and get ahead, FijiFirst always believe in a core

principle, and we believe that every hardworking Fijian should keep more of what they earn. Our people should be rewarded and the best reward for them was lower taxes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this high deficit Budget deprives and will disappoint thousands of Fijians to just 22 zero-rated items and that is something our people do not deserve. To my fellow Fijians, I ask you all, do we deserve this kind of leadership?

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support this Budget. We are national leaders and we should be capable and competent enough to tackle challenges, but not at the expense of our people.

MR. SPEAKER.- I tend to adjourn Parliament now so that we can take a morning tea break.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.27 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 12.07 pm.

SPEAKER'S RULING

Gazetting of Amended Standing Orders

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we continue with the Batting Order, I will address Parliament on the issue raised by honourable Koya with respect to the Gazetting of the Standing Orders.

Honourable Members, I can confirm that the amended Standing Orders was only gazetted by Star Printery after the official adoption and approval of Parliament. I can further confirm that the request for official gazettal was sent to Star Printery at 11.04 a.m. today.

The copies that were immediately circulated after the approval of the draft gazetted copies have not been officially gazetted, that is, the copies that you have been receiving. The primary purpose of circulating those draft copies was to assist honourable Members immediately, whilst the official gazetted notice was still being undertaken.

For the information of honourable Members, the Secretariat will continue to ensure that you are served in the most effective and efficient manner. Thank you, honourable Members.

RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE 2023-2024 APPROPRIATION BILL 2023

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, my fellow Fijians present here today and those watching this Parliamentary session live; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide my response and support the 2023-2024 Budget. I also wish to join previous speakers in congratulating and thanking the honourable Prime Minister for his vision and leadership. I also wish to thank the honourable Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for the very well consulted and prepared Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to extend my deepest sympathy for the loss of Filomoni Tikoi, originally from Nasau in Wainibuka. The fellow officer who have been serving at the Vunisea Agriculture Station and also Joseva Turagasau Rawace, originally from Nakawakawa in Wainunu, Bua, who had served at Naduruloulou Agriculture Station. To Mrs. Tikoi and Mrs. Turagasau and your families, we send our deepest condolences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the Budget for the New Fiji, the Budget for Rebuilding our Future Together, a Budget that will provide relieve to many, a Budget that will meet the needs of the rural population, a Budget that will provide opportunities to our younger generation and a Budget that will impact the lives of our fellow Fijians. This Budget will, once again, promote our reliance on agriculture, not only for income generation, but more as a source of livelihood, contributing to our national economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had received a lot of very positive comments on the Budget that is before us, comments from farmers, market vendors, exporters, agro-input suppliers, comments from the general public, especially the rural communities. They are very confident with the budget, and they are committed to the Ministry in reviving the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to record at this point in time that in the last six months of this year,

I had spent bulk of my time in consultation with stakeholders and concerned groups on how the agriculture sector can be taken back on track.

Most rural farmers believe that they had been deprived from required support from Government to maximise their benefits from agriculture. This had been the reason for the low growth in the agriculture sector.

I also wish to make known that in previous years, most of the funding for the Ministry of Agriculture may have been targeted at areas that has not really made impact to the growth of the agriculture sector. This includes, but not limited to initiatives that are sustainable and can meet domestic demands - hotels, agro-processing and the export markets. The impact of climate change to agricultural production had not been evaluated well in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very happy to assure you that the Ministry of Agriculture will be rolling out programmes that will counter the effect of climate change.

The Ministry of Agriculture's direction in Fiji was guided by the 2022 Strategic Development Plan. Because of the inability to align well to the SDP, performance of the agricultural sector has been very badly affected. Let me draw our attention to areas which we will be assisting in our next budget.

On Dairy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji still imports around \$99 million worth of dairy products. The annual demand for liquid milk is 24 million litres and we are producing only 29 percent of the milk in the formal sector. Moreover, this is worsened by poor genetics, old infrastructure and poor hygiene and nutrition in our dairy farms. This is a disaster, and the dairy industry is on the verge of collapsing.

However, we have started reviewing the entire dairy industry and the Ministry has put aside \$5.5 million to the Dairy Programme, which is the highest budget ever allocated for the dairy industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a budget of \$800,000 on milk price incentive, a top up of 18 cents for every litre produced by all registered dairy farmers in Fiji. This is a relief, but far from solving the rise in the production cost.

The farm gate price of milk was not formulated by the consultant when the review and restructure of the dairy industry was done more than 12 years back and it has not been completed.

The Budget has an allocation of \$2 million for the importation of genetic material for the dairy sector, which will have a significant impact on the dairy industry. This is a very crucial intervention for the industry that had suffered badly from the losses of good breeds of cattle due to Bovine Tuberculosis and Brucellosis re-emergence in 2014.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the ongoing works, the Government will be assisting farmers with the supply of supplementary feed on a one-third and two-third basis.

Under the Dairy Extension Programme, activities such as Improvement to Dairy Access Farm Roads and Milking Sheds Improvements and Smallholder Farms Development will motivate the farmers to increase their milk production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current budget will assist the Ministry in its commitment to support the provisions of services that will control zoonotic diseases in Fiji.

Tuberculosis and Brucellosis has significantly contributed to the loss of production of the beef and dairy sector. A \$1.6 million support programme has been provided to the ongoing Tuberculosis and Brucellosis Eradication Campaign (BTEC). The Ministry will also maintain active disease surveillance on other zoonotic diseases. This allocation has been revised based on last year's utilisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to make matters worse, last year, 16 positions in the BTEC Project were not filled and are still vacant, despite the provision of funds. This has caused major delays in testing coverage. To-date, the Ministry is already working on procedures of recruiting project staff. Disease surveillance will continue very shortly in the livestock sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on our studies with the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the tourism industry consumes a large amount of imported beef.

We will be investing \$1 million to develop and maintain good cattle breeds. These are the high producing climate resistant breed. The programme includes the construction of facilities that will enable us to adopt modern breeding technologies.

The initiative of sheep and goat for commercial agriculture has less impact on the industry due to the criteria used for beneficiaries by the former Government.

The breeding programme will develop the nucleus herd which will be used in the Sheep and Goat Breeding Programme. Offspring with good genetic traits will be supplied to farmers and the Ministry will vigorously carry out necessary studies to improve herd performance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is noted that in the last few years, there is a huge shortage of veterinarians in Fiji to address animal health issues. Currently, there is only one registered Veterinarian out of the five available positions in the Ministry of Agriculture. Further to the above, the source of veterinarian practitioners who can be registered to practice in Fiji are limited to recognised universities around the world.

The provision of \$50,000 in the next financial year will allow the Ministry to engage a consultant, who will set up a qualifier's exam for veterinarians from other Universities so that they can be registered to practice in Fiji. It is anticipated that the shortage of veterinarians will be addressed through this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a total of \$100,000 has been allocated to the product development of ginger paste, fruit juice concentrate and other local indigenous fruits. The programme will continue to provide training on value added products from local agricultural commodities to various women and youth groups. This will support what the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways had mentioned regarding agro-processing to address seasonality of commodities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lack of coordination of the Ministry of Agriculture with other organisations such as Fiji National University (FNU), the School of Agriculture in Koronivia had been noted with grave concerns. There had been courses that are offered at the Koronivia Campus with very minimum consultation as to the relevance of the courses in the agriculture sector.

The Ministry has already initiated proper consultation processes and there will be close consultations with academic institutions like the University of the South Pacific (USP), FNU, University of Fiji and other institutions around the region, to address needs from different agriculture sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is highly a technical and scientific field of work. It requires personnel with specialised training both, in academic and in their capacity to be competent in their work. Unfortunately, bad and wrong decisions in the last years had been one of the main reasons that most staff and personnel of scarce skills resources had been drained.

Today, the Ministry is left with no Veterinary Pathologist, no Entomologist, no Animal Nutritionist, no surveyors, but only one Veterinarian Officer and one Engineer. The Ministry will be addressing brain drain through revision of policies and proper remuneration of staff.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to build strong momentum by strengthening and expanding agriculture production through the –

- development of product standards;
- access to planting material and seeds;
- increase in private sector engagement by strengthening industry approach and dialogue; and
- organise farmers' groups through cooperative registrations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to thank honourable Tuinaceva for commenting on the Ministry of Health and Medical Services' concerns regarding the allocated funds to address NCDs in Fiji. I wish to assure you, Sir, that the Ministry of Agriculture is committed to producing healthy and nutritious food for the citizens of our nation. The Ministry is going to roll out programmes that will address over-reliance on cheap imported food and be dependent on local foods to reduce NCDs to our population.

The Ministry notes with concern urbanisation at this age and time, as raised by honourable Naivalurua. The Budget for New Fiji will support youth and women movement in agriculture, and it will initiate programmes that promote high value crops for export markets. I am confident that our Ministry has been allocated with funding that will reverse urbanisation, especially for communities in Vanu Levu and Taveuni.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Waterways Division had been neglected and ignored in the past years. They have lost all their Surveyors and Engineers. Programmes had been given less priorities and they work in very difficult working conditions.

The local farmers and communities need them. Their work is important to all of us. I thank them for the hard work they have been doing and I thank the honourable Minister of Finance for the support given to them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Waterways Division is mandated to safeguard our food security system, housing and rural economy and ecosystem through a resilient and effective National Waterways Programme. The demand for our service is no longer focussed only on the two main Islands, but it is also mandated to expand to the rural and maritime island communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than \$22 million is being allocated for the Waterways Division to deliver its service. Approximately 73 percent of the allocated amount will be spent on a number of capital projects.

Our major concern today is delivering our mandate in this climate change era. The change in climate has increased the frequency and intensity disasters, affecting our ability to maintain steady growth in the agriculture sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these impacts contribute to Fiji's flash flooding, heavy silted waterways and coastal and riverbank erosion. In this budget, the Ministry has been allocated with \$200,000 to undertake surveying and mapping of four major rivers in Viti Levu, which will be the initial works required to develop a 20-year National Waterways Programme that addresses silt deposit into our major rivers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is understood that dredging is important, however, the Ministry is committed to address siltation through upstream sustainable land management practices.

To address watershed problems in Ba Town and low-lying areas, the Watershed Management Programme has been allocated money \$1 million for the construction of Qalinibulu Retention Dam in the upper catchment of Ba River. This is designed and intended to control peak flow and reduce flooding at the surrounding catchments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the dredging of major rivers and creeks is a programme designed for flood mitigation purposes. Sir, \$3 million has been allocated for works in the major rivers and creeks that are prone to flooding. Dredging of rivers and creeks is an essential programme that will help mitigate and reduce flooding and reduces impacts on agricultural production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the removal of the Drainage Board in 2018 saw the severe backlog in the maintenance of existing drainage schemes affecting sugar and non-sugar crops. The allocation of \$200,000 will assist in the planning and preparatory works required for the reinstatement of the Drainage Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, flooding, worsened by poorly managed drains contribute to high economic losses during floods. The Ministry has allocated more than \$5 million to address the growing threats of flooding through the maintenance of the drainage systems for the non-municipal areas, drainage for farmlands and drainage for rural residential areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unregulated and unsustainable land-use practices continue to increase siltation and sediments of our waterways. A substantial amount of \$3.8 million has been allocated for Drainage and Flood Protection Programme. This work can never be overstressed for it has been a problem area in the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterway in his Budget response, we have the potential to improve local rice production. An allocation of \$800,000 will enable the Ministry to provide necessary support services for rice production through the maintenance of existing irrigation schemes in Bua and Macuata in the Northern Division and Navua in the Central Division, ensuring that irrigation infrastructures are operational and water is available to farmers all year round. At this moment, the potential of these Schemes is yet to be realised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sea-level rise has long been a threat to coastal communities. Sea-level rise has further rippled effects of coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion and inundation, affecting the community's land and freshwater aquifer.

To address these issues, \$1.5 million has been allocated to construct seawalls, such as nature-based solution seawalls that will reduce community exposure to coastal erosion and high wave action during storm surges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, a total of \$50,000 has been allocated for the preparatory works for Coastal Protection Works for Nasilai Village in Tailevu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, drought is a slow onset disaster not seriously considered and addressed in the past. Irrigation Support for Farm Development is a programme that is designed to increase the resilience of farmers from drought through the provision of micro irrigation systems to allow them to better manage water. Selected farmers will be supplied with the basic irrigation kits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above programmes are designed to support the Government in the implementation of the National Adaptation Plans and the Green Growth Framework for Fiji through recognising the need to have resilient infrastructure to improve livelihoods and also reducing the vulnerability and risks of climate change impacts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, within the Ministry, information gathering is an exercise that is regularly undertaken through surveys by our Extension Officers and Statistics Unit Team. A total of \$200,000 has been allocated for the collection of agriculture data. This will help in policy formulation in the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways.

The Ministry of Agriculture will maintain a forward focus in leading the agriculture transformation agenda beyond incremental growth. We recognise and support the efforts and contribution to the sector by the women and youth.

I wish to thank the staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways for the hard work they have all been doing and braving situations in the past few years.

I send my best wishes to the many who lost their jobs due to the nature of policies of the last Government, and I encourage you to continue your support for the growth and development of the Agriculture Sector.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide my response, and I fully support the 2023-2024 Budget.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity to respond to the Budget as delivered in this Chamber on Friday, 30th June, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for your understanding my missing in the last two days in Parliament due the bad flu that is going around and may I add that your staff here in Parliament are so efficient. They sent me your signed letter to say that you had approved just a few hours before I send my sick leave.

Mr. Speaker, in the lead up to the Budget announcement and as I prepared in my own way, I was not really one hundred percent sure as to what I was supposed to do. This is a milestone event for me to deliver my Budget response in my very short political career. But there was this lingering thought in my mind that was telling me, "Give them the benefit of the doubt, this will be the first Budget and it is the first Budget of a new Government."

I am not sure whether you should say those things when you are in Opposition but those were my very honest thoughts. I was looking forward to the new plans, the new programmes, new initiatives, new incentives and to be fair, new ideas and new programmes need to be given time to run before they can be critiqued fairly.

During the Budget delivery, those thoughts began fading. I was dejected with the lies, the misinformation, the blaming, the excuses and name calling that featured in about one-third of the Budget Address.

Mr. Speaker, when the honourable Minister of Finance finally came around to talk about this new Budget that I was waiting to hear, there was nothing new. For the most part, they just took the FijiFirst programmes and ran with it - a little bit of renaming here and there to create an illusion of newness. However, in some way, it made sense because when came into power, instead of laying a foundation for this Budget through a mini-budget, they just ran with the Budget that was prepared by the FijiFirst Government. Again, this made sense because it was that budget prepared by the FijiFirst Government that has allowed the projected growth of 8 percent that they are now boasting about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, their actions and what they say do not match. This Budget has now threatened the achievement of that projected growth. I hope that the projected growth will be achieved and even increased, and I sincerely do, for the benefit of the people that sent us here and to whom we owe service to the best that we can offer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not one that will just sit on this side and rub my hands together, hoping and wishing that the Coalition will crumble. That, to me, is a waste of my time because that day will come and is coming. That, I guarantee 100 percent, but before that day arrives, whenever it arrives, we, on this side of the Parliament, have the honourable job of compelling those on the other side of Parliament to do right for the people of our beloved country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Qereqeretabua, when she spoke, said that we, on this side, should not lecture this Government, whilst at the same time they are lecturing us on what they think we should have done four years ago, eight years ago, some even going further back. But in this Chamber, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know, we do the lecturing.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I have heard you lecture before, Sir, in your own way when you were on this side because when we see injustice, discrimination, abuse of power, corruption, unconstitutional action, favouritism, nepotism and violation of institutional integrity, I would remind the Government that, yes, you will be told off and, yes, you will get lectured because that is one of the tools we have as Opposition, to compel you to do right for our people. You will ignore them at your own peril.

So, right now, when you think about it, the role is reversed. They are doing the lecturing and we, the FijiFirst, the alternative government in Opposition, is indirectly running the Government and running the country because they are using our budget. They are using all the good policies and programmes that we had put in place, and they are running with it right now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have the more pleasant duty and obligations, I must add, to acknowledge and thank the Government when they do right for our people. We do that on people's behalf, we must give credit where credit is due. Unfortunately, this is something that is so hard for those on the other side today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank and acknowledge the Government for not abandoning our children, our future generation, and continue with the Free Education Initiative that was started by the Bainimarama-led Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was fortunate to be there on that day when we started it off and said, "yes". Myself, honourable Usamate and Mr. Filipe Bole, who is a long time education practitioner, were so emotional. He said that he never thought he was going to see free education in this country while he was still alive. We both and we all understand that an educated society is the bedrock of economic growth and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the Government for continuing the various social welfare and pension schemes – thank you for looking after those who need to be looked after here in Fiji. Also, those were programmes initiated by the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is carnage on our roads right now. There is increase recklessness on our roads. The death toll on our roads in June was 44, compared to 14 for the same time last year. Even in those first few days of July, we are hearing the same bad and sad news of road fatalities almost everyday. The pain of losing loved ones away from home is so unbearable. To all the families of those 44 and those who had passed recently, I send my sincere condolences for your loss.

I hope that if you are listening, you know about the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF), which provides compensation for victims without the burden of proving fault. You can go there to claim your compensation, if you so wish. I think, take the option of going to court, if you so wish also. If you do not know, please, ask Government officials around your place or those who know, to help you access that facility if you so wish. If you want, my number is 9908703 - you can call me, and I can see if I can also help guide you to that facility that is available.

This is an initiative of the Fiji Government and I thank the current Government for continuing with it. I know it faces a lot of criticisms and objections in its initial implementation, but I think we are so glad that it is still continuing. To all the road users who are listening today, please, be safe on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the amount is substantial, let me tell you a quick story. I was driving back from Nadi with my wife and this black car with flashing lights and a white Kia behind just zoomed passed us. I have a dashboard camera that is installed in my car. I looked up and made sure it was recording and it did. But, instead of just passing us, it went ahead and passed all the other cars that were in front of us. I was talking with my wife and say, “Those two cars are really driving fast.”

When we arrived at Wainadoi, that black government car and Kia (I think it was GS361) was parked there where they sell *bu*. The lights were off, the red lights were no longer flashing and I do not know who was in there. So, we drove passed them and kept driving. All of a sudden, it was zooming passed us again, really fast. I looked up into my dashboard camera to make sure it was recording because I was worried that it was going to get into an accident because there were a lot of cars in front of me.

I tell that story and plead, and I think of the carnage on our roads, if the fight against it starts here in Parliament. I told that story to the members of my Committee and they can attest to it. I know you get driven around but, please, take charge and tell your drivers to slow down.

Get rid of those flashing lights, it is a distraction. Even when I drive and when I see flashlight at the back, I concentrate more looking back instead of what is in front. You need to follow the road rules.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the biggest offenders on our road are government vehicles. I see a lot more abuse on the use of government vehicles - picking children from school, park and people going shopping, I see a lot more of them parking in private homes right now after working hours. In the past during the FijiFirst Government, the practise was, if you are taking the car home, you park it in the nearest police post or police station, just to cut off that opportunity of abuse if it is parked at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a grant of \$130,000 that is tucked away in this book that I would like to thank the Government for continuing. It is a grant to the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to

Animals (SPCA) and we all know that SPCA is an animal shelter here at Walu in Suva, but may I remind the Government that there are other animal shelters and sanctuaries around - one is in Ba which is a 'no kill shelter. You can take stray animals there and they will not put them down unless it is really necessary. Can you imagine when strays are brought there because they have a 'No Kill Policy', dogs and cats they live, say 10 years all that time, they get fed and they get looked after. They are around, and I hope Government can look into supporting them also.

The high number of stray dogs and cats in our urban and peri-urban areas is the reflection of the inhumane treatment and cruelty that we do to our animals. It is not a good reflection of the character of our society. One day I went up to SPCA delivering old newspapers and an injured owl that came home. I think it was our cats that probably caught it but it was still alive, but it couldn't fly. I took it down to SPCA and whilst I was there, I think this lady who was on her way to work was holding a small kitten. I asked her, "Where did you get it from?" She said, "Oh, someone threw it on the road, I stopped, picked it up and took it to SPCA". Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be the voice of our furry friends, and I am sure a few of us too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me turn to the honourable Minister of Finance's Budget Address. In his Address, he talked about how they started but even that Party got robbed. So, let me remind him how they actually started.

Mr. Speaker, they started by creating history when they made themselves all Ministers and Assistant Ministers and perhaps, the only country in the world, small as we are, having three Deputy Prime Ministers and with it came the perks - cars, drivers, backup cars and more drivers, office space, support staff, stationery, pays and allowances for Ministers and Assistant Ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers, business class travel, first class travel, so they started off in the red.

How do we know that it started off in the red? Because they did not do a mini-budget, but they worked with the current Budget and the current Budget only caters for a much, much less number of Ministers and Assistant Ministers, no Deputy Prime Minister and for less overseas trips too. From the word go, they had already busted their budget. That is not a good start.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why they structured themselves this way was not service driven. That was not the way they saw was the best way to serve, no. It was not service-driven but it was driven only need to survive as a Coalition. And this is very much reflected in the way the Budget is done.

The Ministers, Sir, started sacking the Heads of our very institutions.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I will continue, Mr. Speaker. I will just go back a little bit, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after that, they had power, then they started sacking the Heads of our very institution that uphold our young democracy. And in that process, create doubt and mistrust in their ability to function justly and fairly in their service to our people - the Commissioner of Police, Commissioner of Prisons, Supervisor of Elections, Chief Justice, Director of Public Prosecutions and Permanent Secretaries. Then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they went after Boards and CEOs of State-Owned companies and statutory bodies, like FBC, iTLTB, FRCS, FRA, LTA, FNPF, and the list goes on, and this is still continuing, Sir, the latest victim being the CEO of Post Fiji. Now, they are being replaced by their own people, mostly, candidates that did not make it through or their strong by their

own people, mostly, candidates that did not make it through or their strong supporters and their donors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this must stop. Some of these acts of removal and appointments to these positions were unconstitutional.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, even the Tribunals to adjudicate on the drummed-up allegations against some of these hardworking but now unfortunate people, have not even been stood up, almost seven months later.

Very lately, I read in the news that the honourable Attorney-General has said that FICAC was weaponised. Weaponised is a very common word in America right now with Trump and what he is going through, I think that is where he took it from.

I suspect, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that FICAC could be the next. Honourable Attorney-General, you really need to stop. You need to stop, the damage that you are doing to this country is irreparable.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, damage was already done, even before this Budget. There is a lack of public trust and faith in these important institutions, and that has a bearing on investor confidence and consequently, on our economy, as the honourable Minister of Finance himself said in his Budget Address that Everything is Connected to Everything Else, which is commonly known as the First Law of Ecology. And there is a practical version of the First Law of Ecology and that is attributed to Bruce Mau and he said, "When everything is connected to everything else, for better or for worse, everything matters". So, all that I have said matters when we deal with the National Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst listening to the Budget Address by the honourable Minister of Finance and listening to the contributions from the other side, I think that they are looking at us and treating us as their enemy when we are not.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a democracy like ours, that side of Parliament leads and governs and, we on this side of Parliament, keep them in check on behalf of the people. But, Sir, we both fight the same enemy and the enemies are poverty, unemployment, crime, corruption, lawlessness, drugs, extreme climatic events due to climate change, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why most of those issues I had raised were not adequately addressed by the honourable Minister of Finance is because he is looking at the wrong direction, he is concentrating on us. Look the other side, that is where the problem is.

Let me talk briefly, Mr. Speaker, if you allow me, I know the bell has rung, about two issues, and the first issue is climate change. The world right now is talking about the coming *El Nino*. It is the warming of the sea in the Pacific Ocean. It starts from the East, along the Coast of South America, coming towards us in the West. And when this event happens, there is extreme drought in some parts of the world, extreme rain and flooding in other parts, and extreme hurricanes too.

We have just come out of a cycle of three years of *La Nina* which the cooling of the ocean. The last *El Nino* was in 2015 and 2016, and yes, that is when the second strongest cyclone in the world ever recorded, struck Fiji - *TC Winston*. In this Budget, Sir, there is no fiscal space to deal with such extreme events.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the problem of drugs in Fiji is increasing at an alarming rate, but that is to be expected because globally, there is an increase in drug use. I was listening to a BBC News item talking about this issue. But we, most of the time, we tend to think and talk about drugs from the perspective of health and how it messes up people's health.

But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bigger problem when it comes to drug is that it creates a secretive segment of our society and it operates just below the normal level where we operate, just out of radar range, so that they are not detected. But, if we pull it up and expose what is happening there, it is what we, at the normal level, call corruption. There is bribery, "You do this for me, I will do this for you" or "Do this for me, I will get that person to do something for you". It is corruption in the normal sense.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the level above is corrupt, or simply perceived to be corrupted, the two levels pull at each other, they combine and then corruption thrives in our society. It is one of the reasons why I harp about institutional integrity.

The budget for the Police Force this year is for business as usual. The drug problem in Fiji cannot be and should not be dealt with as business as usual. The drug problem is a flickering red warning light right now, it needs to be dealt with urgently and with energy and with the right resources.

Lawlessness rampant the freedom that this Government so triumphantly proclaim when they formed Government is translating to freedom to do whatever you want, reflected in the level of lawlessness in this country. Two of my golfing friends who are senior citizens got marked recently. The gentleman got injured in his arm and around his neck and the lady luckily held on to her purse a little bit hard and long enough for the guy to get scared and ran away in broad daylight. Now, in our email grouping, we now talk to each other and say, "Do not go here, do not do this", just to be safe. These are all senior citizens, Sir. The honourable Prime Minister is also a member.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the US issued recently a security alert. Let me read it to you again. I apologise if you have heard this before but let me read it again. It says that as of 10th July, 2023, the US Embassy in the capital, Suva, has issued a security alert regarding crime concerns in the city. The alert notes that crime is a prevalent issue, particularly in tourist areas, such as downtown Suva, the waterfront and seawall area and on Victoria Parade Street.

The alert further notes that violent crime and assault is also a concern, particularly, within the Colo-i-Suva Forest Park. Individuals should take basic precautions such as exercising heightened vigilance in crowded areas, keeping valuables secured and avoiding public display of affluence and should monitor official sources for updates. That is what is happening in our society and guess who reads it too, tourists.

In the Budget, we are not only pricing our tourists, but we are also pushing them away because of lawlessness in our country. We have big problem in our hands, Mr. Speaker, and I ask Government, what are you doing about it? So, I urge the Government to focus on the real enemy, the real problems that our society is facing, and not on us. We will focus on you to make sure that you deal with the problems diligently and efficiently.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those two gentlemen from Tailevu sitting in between the handsome gentlemen from Naitasiri, need to sort themselves out because in their response to the Budget, the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management questioned why they are employing engineers in rural development, that they should go back to their combat engineering role, while the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration said that they are given money to increase engineers because of the role they play in rural development. Which is it, Mr. Speaker? You need to sort it out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister of Finance, in his Budget Address, said that the Coalition Government is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. Those are the words of President Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address in November 1863. But, Sir, if they are a government of the people, by the people and for the people, why is the seat empty?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order! Are we rounding off?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I think this is important. This seat is for a representative of the people, and you are deliberately muzzling the voice of the people when you do not allow their representative to come and sit. As you have said and reminded us, one of the most important events in a Parliament is Budget.

Mr. Speaker, the words that he said – govern by the people, of the people and for the people, I do not like it when people misuse it, because those words were meant and said in relation to soldiers who had fought and died. He was speaking at the dedication of the soldiers National Cemetery in Gettysburg. They were dedicating the cemetery in Gettysburg and the Battle of Gettysburg was the deadliest battle during the civil war in America. The full context of those words is, “That these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that the government of the people by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth.” When you say that you are for the people, by the people and of the people, and keep this seat empty, you say it and do something else, you make those hallowed words hollow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget is inward-looking, same as when they formed their Government; they make it sound good by weaving it into a false narrative of debt situation; and it does not tackle the problem that this nation is facing down.

In conclusion, let me put it in a simple way to the ordinary people who are listening. From 1st August, if this Budget is passed, your electricity bill will go up, your water bill will go up, your food bill will go up, the cost of your children’s uniform will go up, the cost of your children’s school stationery will go up and what will go down for you, is nothing. But if you earn \$270,000 and more, you pay less tax. If you are a rich bottled water company, you do not pay tax, with all the other bottled water companies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget does not do right for the people, and I cannot and will not support it.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Members of Parliament; good afternoon to you all. I take this opportunity to welcome all Fiji citizens joining us this afternoon whether through television, radio, livestreaming or Parliament Website or through social media platforms.

Before I begin, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I offer my congratulations to Salote Elenoa Biukoto, I would say the first *iTaukei* lady CEO of Fiji Vodafone. She rises from the village of Lawaki in Nairai from Yavusa Qalisau, Mataqali Ione, a daughter of a school teacher.

Before I begin with my Budget may I address this House, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on some of the issues raised by honourable Naupoto. Matthew Chapter 75: Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye. *Leuta mada mai na malamala mai na matamu.*

Honourable Naupoto, would agree that he lost the Election in 2014. I mean, how many votes 400 or 300? Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time for someone who has finished from the RFMF, stood for elections and then went back as Commander, that is outside the norm. Never find it in Australia, New Zealand or anywhere else, but we know the reason.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- What is the reason?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Because someone in the Government must have some connection with the Military.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker. I take offence of what he said and that is a personal attack.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Did you cite the Standing Orders you are quoting from?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It hurts, Mr. Speaker, it hurts. They are calling us as putting our own people on the Board.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 74. I take offence, that is a personal attack.

MR. SPEAKER.- Could we just continue, honourable Member?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Another response, Mr. Speaker, and is related to honourable Bulitavu. I would like to briefly respond to honourable Bulitavu's comments on Monday which he reiterated yesterday. He referred to the removal of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice.

Honourable Bulitavu stated that the honourable Prime Minister should remove me as the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice because I am a threat to his leadership. He used to be in this Party but then he moved to FijiFirst. I think the answer lies with him.

Mr. Speaker, his speech clearly violates Standing Order 61.

MR. SPEAKER.- As you know, he is an old guard of Parliament and he has been there all this time.

(Laughter)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I hope he stays there and does not come back here. He has to make a decision - stay in the line.

Standing Order 61 states, and I quote: When speaking, a member must confine to the observation to the Budget under consideration. Standing Order 62(1), states, and I quote: “When speaking a member must not impute improper motives to any other member.”

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order, Attorney-General.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- I stand under Standing Order 74, Sir. I just want to correct the honourable Attorney-General and the correction is that Standing Order 61 refers to judicial proceedings.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- My correction, it is an oversight. Well, it is basic, we all know that Standing Order, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

If I may, this speech serves to malign, smear and cast that person or the Attorney-General. Furthermore, it does not relate to the subject matter - the Budget which is under consideration and motions table for consideration of additional Bills.

It is unwarranted, uncalled for and highly inappropriate. The comment is otherwise irrelevant and amounts to a breach of the Standing Orders. I urge, honourable Bulitavu, to be respectful and observe the decorum of this august Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I shall now provide my contribution the Budget before this Parliament. There is, no doubt, that we are living in perilous times - times of uncertainty and times of unprecedented volatility due to the current geopolitical environment. I would, therefore, like to commend the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for a realistic and sensible Budget before this august Parliament. There is no doubt, a Budget that makes tough and responsible decisions, given the high debt level this Government has inherited from its predecessor - the FijiFirst Government, which irresponsibly borrowed to finance Government expenditure.

According to the World Bank’s Fiji Public Expenditure Review reported in the *Fiji Times* on 19th April, 2023, it is troubling that Fiji recorded the fourth worst GDP decline in the world and that its GDP was four times worst to the average for Pacific Island Countries in 2020 and 2021.

In fact, the low economic growth trends were emerging prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which, together with the severe tropical cyclones and Russian/Ukraine war, merely aggravated the economic crisis on unprecedented scale.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Its already going down.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bible reminds us in Luke 12:48: “Everyone who has given much, much will be demanded and for the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” The prevailing economic conditions requires Government to make suitable structural adjustments under the Budget to ensure the sustainability and long-term survival of our nation. Under this Budget, Government has developed safeguard measures and will implement relevant and practical policies to address the challenges facing our economy today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now refer to some of the events pertaining to the Ministries and institutions under my responsibility, which demonstrates the irresponsible measures inherited from the previous Government and how this Coalition Government will rectify them.

The Office of the Attorney-General is the Chief Legal Advisor to the Government. Despite its constitutional advisory role, the previous Government failed to ensure that the Office is running in full capacity, when it failed to fill and, in fact, defunct 50 percent of the established staff positions within the Office of the Attorney-General.

Since the inception of this Government, the Office of the Attorney-General advertised all the defunct vacant positions and filled those positions, except for the Deputy Solicitor-General and the Executive Support Manager positions which are still being processed.

The Office of the Attorney-General is also working towards the setting up of the Fiji Law Reform Commission which is established under the Fiji Law Reform Act 1979. It saddens me to say that despite the significant statutory role of the Commission which keeps law applicable to Fiji under review, it has been defunct under the previous Government. We will ensure that the Fiji Law Reform Commission becomes operational to perform its statutory functions. This will generally ensure simplification, improvement, modernisation of the law and also ensure that our laws are also aligned to international best practices.

Recognising the significant role of the Commission, an additional budget of \$400,000 has been allocated to the Office of the Attorney-General's to enable the set-up of the Commission. I am also pleased to inform this august Parliament that the Director of the Law Reform Commission, Ms. Raijeli Tuivaga, has just been appointed in the Ministry of Justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to refer to some of the mismanagement of the public funds by the previous Government relating to the Ministry of Justice which is responsible for the administration of the law and justice in Fiji. The Ministry delivers service through legally mandated registries to maintain official records of legal documents. This includes the Registrar of Companies, business, credit unions, money lenders, Justice of Peace, land titles, deeds, births, deaths and marriages.

One of the blunders of the previous Government relates to the procurement of services by a Singapore Enterprise between 2017 and 2019. This company was engaged to undertake business, process and review at US\$602,640. I am told it is about 25 to 50 pages of study.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is worrisome that the previous Government paid over FJ\$1 million without anything to show for it. This will ultimately affect ease of doing business in Fiji which affects promotion of investments. The previous Government also allocated \$7 million in 2021–2022 Budget and \$2.6 million in the 2022–2023 Budget for implementing of Fijian Vaccine Pass System to cater for Fiji citizens and permit holders who wishes to travel abroad. This project has been abandoned but the Government had wasted public funds, including the procurement of relevant equipment such as scanners, computers, camera, the leasing of office space and recruitment of staff.

Under this Government, the Ministry of Justice is working to digitalise the Office of the Registrar of Titles and increase staffing to improve service delivery. The digitalisation project will improve and ensure safe record-keeping and the ability to utilise records efficiently.

The Ministry of Justice in consultation with the Ministry of Trade and Communications is also working to digitalise the registries for ease of doing business and potentially, include issuance of hotel permits and construction permits in order to expedite registration of permits.

On the Judicial Department, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to briefly address some blunders relating to the Judiciary by the former Government. As we know, the judicial power and the authority of the State is vested in the Judiciary. The Judicial Department is the administrative arm of the Judiciary. It is comprised of non-judicial officers employed in the Judiciary.

If I may just address one of the matters raised by honourable Naupoto, as we came in, I told the Government that we are going to follow the process. That means if someone is suspended instead of summarily terminated, they will go through the process. We will appoint the Tribunal, they hear their complaints and pay is orderly. That is the process we have taken now, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Well, I think history speaks for itself if you look at the previous Government, is it not?

Parliament is constitutionally required to ensure that the Judiciary has adequate financial resources to perform its functions and exercise its power properly. Yet, the previous Government failed to ensure this when it unilaterally removed the judicial rooms and office from its premises at Government Building in order to establish the Parliament complex here, despite the existing Parliament complex at Veiuto.

For the information of this august Parliament, this Parliament complex used to accommodate the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal rooms, registries and members of the Magistrates Court and other administrative offices, particularly the IT and Assets Department. As a result of the restructure, the Judicial Department spent over \$4 million to-date to lease another building, namely Kelton House, to house some of the administrative services of the Judiciary.

An additional \$13 million has been used to renovate and refurbish the Veiuto Parliamentary Complex to accommodate the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court rooms and their respective registries and Chambers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this Government, we will ensure that the Judicial Department which is the administrative arm of the Judiciary is adequately resourced to ensure the proper and efficient operational running of the Judiciary.

Accordingly, the Budget provides an additional budget of \$3 million, compared to the last financial year, to the Judiciary, which should cater for the necessary appointments of improved service delivery. Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done.

The Fiji Corrections Service (FCS) plays a crucial role in the administration of the criminal justice system. Corrections, formerly called the Fiji Prisons Service, continues in existence under the Corrections Service Act 2006. The FCS is mandated to treat prisoners humanely, aid in their rehabilitation and prepare them for the productive law-abiding lives once they are free.

Regrettably, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government failed to ensure that FCS filled all its established positions to effectively fulfil its mandate. In fact, under the 2020–2021 National Budget funding, 84 positions for FCS were defunct. Unfortunately, this wrong was not corrected after COVID-19.

As a result, the FCS has been requesting for virement of funds to cater for the salaries of some 84 positions which needed to be filled to function properly. This may also affect planned capital projects namely, the construction of the Supervisor Northern Division Office which was earmarked

under the previous budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is taking a progressive approach to ensure budget availability for FCS so that it may fund its 84 positions. Government has accordingly agreed to fund 30 out of the 84 positions from this Budget. To-date, the FCS has been able to fill 946 out of the 963 established positions.

Also, it is regrettable that the FCS has been requesting for funding of their database under the previous Government. The database is intended to store important information regarding inmates such as their personal details, their history, particularly of their conviction and sentence, whether they have attended any rehabilitation programmes. The database will also store information of recidivists or reoffenders. These are important information that allows FCS to make relevant determination pertaining to inmates, such as their eligibility for parole. This Budget provides a funding of \$180,000 for the establishment of the database.

The previous Government has also failed to provide adequate funding for construction of the retaining wall required for the Levuka Corrections Centre of about \$900,000 which poses a risk of soil erosion to the inmates housed at the Levuka Corrections Centre. The previous Government had only agreed to fund part of the retaining wall of only \$200,000, making it impossible for FCS to construct the retaining wall.

Because of that, the FCS has not utilised the monies allocated by the previous Government. However, I am relieved to say that this Budget will allocate \$700,000 to Corrections so that it may construct the retaining wall for the Levuka Corrections Centre.

With respect to Legal Aid, there are 248 established positions. During the last financial year, the Commission was able to fill 175 positions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Office provides a very critical role in terms of providing legal service to members of the public who cannot afford a lawyer.

Under this Government, the Commission has been able to fill an additional 36 positions, bringing staff capacity to 85 percent. This is expected to address the staffing capacity to enable the Commission to effectively provide legal assistance to the impoverished.

I will go on to the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF) which was referred to by honourable Naupoto. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ACCF also falls under my responsibility. The ACCF was established under the Accident Compensation Act 2017. It pays compensation to all persons who suffer from personal injury or death, suffered by any person arise out of the accident in Fiji on a non-fault basis.

Under the Act, accidents refer to those caused by motor vehicle, those are riding of/and in the cause of employment or occurred in a school premises or during a school event or activity. To-date, ACCF had approved a total of \$51,989,000 in compensation since its inception in 2018. This is based on the 2,585 approved applications received, that is, 2,291 applications for injury and 294 applications for death.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance indicated the Government's intention to review the NPTC levy. In fact, the previous Government had redirected 40 percent of the NPTC levy to be paid to the Accident Compensation Fund established under the Act. This is another intended review by Government to ensure that the NPTC levy is being used for its original intent, that is, to fund the training of workers in Fiji. However, this will also mean that Government will need to look at an alternative source of funding if the NPTC levy is reversed to its original intent.

On iTaukei Land Development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government provided \$10 million to assist *iTaukei* landowners to develop their land for residential and commercial purposes. As of yesterday, all files relating to this programme have been transferred to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. The Government's view is that the proper authority that should be doing this is the iTaukei Affairs rather than the Attorney-General's Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under this grant, 10 subdivisional projects have been approved, out of which three projects have been completed with leases handed over to their respective landowners in 2022. The remaining seven projects are still in progress, which shows the delay in processing of the applications and issuance of titles.

One thing strikes me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it appears that there were selective clients of this project and it overlooked the people of Suvavou, the people who gave their land, the people of Tamavua, the people of Kalabu, and that is the reason why this project has been shifted to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs so that they can deal with it in a more fair manner.

The total cost of the development of land and the projects is about \$23.6 million, out of which \$7.9 million had been paid. This means that the Government will need to pay another \$15.6 million for completion of the entire project. According to our records, the grant was also used to assist the loan repayment on behalf of the Mataqali of Natogadravu in Tailevu.

The Coalition Government has agreed to continue with the project through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs as the relevant Ministry dealing with matters affecting *iTaukei* people. This also ensures that the proper awareness of the project is carried out so that *iTaukei* people can take advantage of the opportunity to develop and obtain proper lease titles for their land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight some of the law reviews that have been endorsed by Government which we will consult the public on. This Government has recently conducted consultations on the Child Justice Bill and the Child Care Protection Bill. In fact, the previous Government had approved the review of the Juvenile Act 1973 and the Child Welfare Act 2010 review over 10 years ago. That eventuated in the draft Bills of the Child Justice and Child Care and Protection for Mutual Dominant under the previous Government. As such our people have been denied the potential benefits of those Bills for over 10 years.

To ratify that, the Government has conducted several consultations on the two draft Child related Bills. I am informed that there are future plans to conduct another round of consultations with stakeholders and the wider community before the draft Bills are finalised and submitted to Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also undertaking consultation in the review of the following Bills, the:

1. Legal Practitioners Act 2009;
2. High Court Act 1875;
3. Magistrates Court Act 1944 and the Anti-Corruption Court; and
4. Local Government Act 1972.

There are also plans to review and replace the Surfing Areas Act 2010.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Cabinet also endorsed the review of the:

1. Statistics Act 1961;

2. Audit Act 1969;
3. Forest Act 1992;
4. Fisheries Act 1941 and its policies;
5. Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010;
6. Drainage Act 1961;
7. High Salaries Act 2011,;
8. Civil Service Regulation 1999; and
9. All *iTaukei* related laws.

We are, in fact, ensuring that genuine and regular public participation is enabled in the development of the review of the law. This will ensure that the rights and interests of the people are considered in any formulation of law that will, no doubt, impact their daily lives. This underscores Fiji's democratic society which should be based on human dignity, equality and freedom. This is a fundamental neglect of the FijiFirst Government that this Government is trying to ratify.

In relation to TELS debt write-off, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tertiary Scholarship and Loan Service (Budget Amendment) Act 2003 will give effect to this. By forgiving TELS loans, recipients now can have more disposable income, allowing them to spend more on goods and services which, in turn, stimulates economic growth. This can also improve their overall financial well-being, allowing them to invest in other areas such as buying a home, starting a business or saving for retirement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also removed the "No Jab No Job Policy" which was legalised by way of amendment to the Health and Safety at Work General Workplace Regulations 2003. That amendment was unilaterally made by the previous Government, which failed to adequately consider the impact of the amendment on the affected workers' rights and their livelihood. Under this Government affected workers can now re-apply for their positions.

Government will also look into reviewing the Civil Service remuneration which will address numerous requests made on this to the previous Government. Moreover, and noting the constitutional right to adjust the minimum wage, it is also appropriate that Government will work towards reviewing the current Minimum Wage rate in the next financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, going back to the review of the NPTC levy, it is a fact that 1 percent levy of the employers payable under the Fiji National Training Levy Order 1998 was intended for training of Fijian employees to promote employment productivity. Unfortunately, in its 2018-2019 Budget, the previous Government restructured the allocation of the levy by distributing 40 percent of the funds to ACCF and 50 percent towards the provision of medical services by Private Medical Practitioners. On top of that the previous Government extended the use of the levy to be used for FNU capital projects. To ratify that, the Government will work towards reviewing the NPTC levy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not wish to dwell on this, but I wish to address my concerns. I guess the 50-page anonymous document circulating in the social media which makes accusation that directly attacks the Government, and the values and principles of democracy that it seeks to uphold.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Those accusations are both, unfounded and without legal merit, and originated from anonymous sources, aiming to malign Government rather than engage in meaningful discussion.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I have just been told it was circulated by a former FijiFirst candidate. Perhaps, you can make connections. In fact, the author's decision to remain anonymous reflects to a lack courage in taking responsibility for its claim.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the first month of taking office, I visited His Excellency the President and, in our discussion, what came out from the 50 pages was basically some of issues that were put forward and we can know where it is coming from.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are your referring to me?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- The Members of Parliament can know where is it coming from. The document has been referred to appropriate authorities for their necessary action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, given the high debt level inherited from the previous Government and taking into account Government's projected long-term goals which includes reducing debt to GDP ratio by 2030, the Budget appropriately seeks to implement structural adjustments to raise revenue while also safeguarding the needs of the most vulnerable through appropriate social measures. The Budget also ensures that we, the elected Members of this beloved nation, are leading by example and making the necessary sacrifices to ensure the recovery and sustainable growth of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the 2023-2024 Budget before this august Parliament.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 1.35 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.47 p.m.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament and all those watching from the comfort of their homes, a very good afternoon, *ram ram* and *bula* to you all. I would like to thank the honourable Minister of Finance and his team for the hard work and dedication in preparing and presenting this National Budget. *Vinaka*, Permanent Secretary and the team at the Ministry of Finance. A very prominent, thriving and inspirational Budget. This is what I would have said, but unfortunately, I cannot.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You just said it.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- At first glance, we had critics praising the Budget, commentators were all over giving running commentaries and made it obvious that without a VAT increase the economy cannot survive just like the narrative that has brain-washed people that debt is a wrong thing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the commentators, the only way to bail out Fiji is through increasing the revenue of Government by increasing the VAT, duty and corporate tax. My colleagues have said a lot about the unfulfilled promises made by the Coalition Government that were to be achieved in the first 100 days, then later it changed to six months and now in this financial year. So, I will not dwell on it, but what I would like to focus on is this Budget, and if the Budget itself has the depth to achieve the desired outcomes. One thing that is obvious that this Budget will achieve is increased inflation, which totally contradicts what honourable Ditoka was saying that this Budget is to help *iTaukei* communities because according to him *iTaukei* communities live in poverty. So how can the increase in inflation help not just the *iTaukei* communities, but anyone?

One of the points highlighted by the honourable Minister of Finance is that Government revenue needs to increase. Let us see how the Government can increase its revenue and its effect on the general public. In very simple terms, there are two ways. The first one is by making policies that should be sustainable and would yield the desired effect over several years without putting additional burden on its citizens. This would include Government investment in public enterprise that would give direct return in terms of dividend and investment in infrastructure which will give a pathway to increase economic activity that contribute towards the growth of the economy. The second way would be to burden the citizen by increasing the tax, thus increasing the revenue. This is what a lazy government does and that is exactly what has been done by this Coalition Government in this Budget.

We need to create stimulus in the economy by increasing the buying powers of individuals and decreasing tax by ensuring that people have more money in their pockets. The more money people have in their pockets, the more they are going to spend, that would mean more income for the Government. The policy should ensure that people are always in the spending mode, but over here, the Coalition Government is doing totally the opposite. It is better to collect \$5 from 20 individuals than to collect \$20 from five individuals. Collection in both scenarios will give you \$100, but the first scenario puts less burden on the people.

Comparing the living standards of people in 2006 and now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost every second house along the Suva-Nausori corridor must have a vehicle such as 4x4 or SUV. Was this possible in 2006? No, it was not. No matter what one says, no one can deny that there were so many developments taking place, such as roads, electricity, water supply, civil service delivery, school education, rural roads, airports, jetties, bridges, police stations, digital technology, *Walesi*, et cetera. After the election when the Government changes, they should not change the basics, which was set by the previous government with regards to development of the nation.

The continuity should be there in terms of development. One can argue that this Coalition Government will also do the development, but it is not reflected in the Budget especially when the FijiFirst used to present a budget that used to have at least 40 percent capital investment and 60 percent operational. This Budget is offering 80 percent operational expense and 20 percent capital expense. Yet, FijiFirst was blamed for excessive expenditure. So, if capital expenditure has been reduced by 50 percent, one can only imagine how many capital projects will take place.

The number of any new major capital project in this Budget is zero. Even during COVID-19, the FijiFirst Government ensured that all capital projects continued as it benefitted Fijians, and post-pandemic when our economy is within the five fastest growing economies in the world, we slow our development by reducing the capital budget. No way this makes sense, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Yes, I agree to what the honourable Minister of Finance said that it will take time for Fiji to recover. One for sure that I know, it will take time to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. What other recoveries is he talking about, that I am not too sure. The biggest global crisis COVID-19 pandemic has gone, the economy is back on track and growing very rapidly with major contributing factors being tourism.

It is interesting to see the Government Members flying high in the clouds visiting overseas on the same Fiji Airways that most of them wanted to be either sold or eaten as dinner at the height of pandemic. Where would Fiji have been if it had sold Fiji Airways aircrafts? Honourable Kamikamica, please go and read the *Daily Hansard*, it is on record that former Opposition Members requested planes to be sold especially the one sitting right next to you. That reminds me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I request the honourable Minister of Finance to go and get the toilet fixed in Fiji Airways' A330 Airbus as it does not look good, our national carrier ranked 15th globally, flying tourists to and fro Fiji when the toilet is not in operation. We were blamed for the toilet doors at CWM Hospital, now please go and fix the toilet in the aircraft.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- You need to do it because under FijiFirst it was ranked 15th globally and if you do not attend to these kinds of things, the ranking will definitely go down.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same note the products in the duty free has hiked up to almost 200 percent. Duty free products are almost the same price even without duty compared to the local market price. This will also have a negative effect on the tourism industry. First, go and get these basics right. Would we be on the path to recovery had we sold Fiji Airways aircrafts? I do not think so, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We need to admit that harsh decisions were taken during COVID-19 pandemic and positive results of those decisions can be seen now. On one side, it was the health of the people, and on the other side it was the livelihood of Fijians and on top of that, keeping the economy floating. These three aspects were kept in balance which is why we see a boom in the economy today. Now, that we are over the pandemic period, let us look back on some of the statistics.

First and foremost, the debt level which the Government members do not get tired of criticizing, every government borrows money not just in Fiji but throughout the world. Even the Coalition Government will borrow with this current Budget where they have a deficit of \$639 million. Debt to GDP was only 48.6 percent pre-pandemic. It was during the pandemic that the government had to borrow that showed that there was an increase in debt to GDP ratio and it crossed 80 percent. Had it not been for COVID-19, we would have been sitting well below 50 percent.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why did we not borrow and why did it have to increase to 80 percent? It had to increase to 80 percent -

1. Overnight we lost tourism income accumulating to about \$2 billion.
2. Could inject money into the economy and at the same time ensuring our foreign reserve is healthy as Fiji is dependent on imports. Borrowing overseas brought foreign currency thus increasing foreign exchange.
3. To support more than 115,000 people of Fijians who lost their jobs overnight.
4. To ensure that Fijian families do not die because of hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. Our health system does not collapse.
6. To ensure that the education of our children are not affected.
7. To help businesses with much needed cash flow to keep their business going.

Sir, FijiFirst faced criticism that we borrowed and took the country into a debt level from which we cannot rescue ourselves as a nation. We were tagged that because of our borrowing, the economy was about to collapse. What a joke, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We became the fifth fastest growing economy in the world. Borrowing is not bad but what is that money used for is more important.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Exactly, now you find out.

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And that money was used for capital investment.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This reminds me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of a famous advertisement that comes on *Navtarang* where a guy tries to borrow money to buy bread and that is exactly what the Government is going to do. I believe that you do not borrow money to buy bread, you borrow money to establish a bakery which in return will give you more business and you will have a return on investment. That is exactly what FijiFirst was doing to borrow money for capital projects and not for day-to-day-operations.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What was happening that you overspent in the past, that is why.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Let us compare the figures to what FijiFirst used to offer and what is there in this Budget. I can see that this Budget also has a deficit, and that the Government will have to take loan to manage the deficit. So, how is this loan taken by the Coalition Government any different to the loan taken by the FijiFirst Government?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-Very different.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, because ours was for capital and yours is going to be operational and a loan is a loan. How can you stand in Parliament and criticise the loan taken by the FijiFirst Government and when you are sitting on the other side, you take loan. How is that possible?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Half a million.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Do not use the loan.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The honourable Minister of Finance tried to play smart and he talked about the percentage deficit being the lowest and not mentioning anywhere that he is going to borrow. Maybe he thought people are not smart that they would not understand and guess what? Some NFP supporters posted on *Facebook*, “Finally a Budget without any loan.”

The deficit percentage seems to be less, but one needs to see how it is. There is an estimated \$3.7 billion revenue projection. Remember, this is just an estimate, it is not that \$3.7 billion will be actual revenue. Now, this is what I am saying, the cooking up of numbers and not what you claimed we were doing to show nine years of consecutive economic growth.

The honourable Minister of Finance must remember, there are 28 members on the other side waiting to spend this \$4.2 billion budget and he is the only one who is responsible for collection. Remember this is not a \$3.7 billion cheque waiting to be cashed. It is just an estimate, and he has to collect this amount worth \$3.7 billion. By forecasting revenue, one can show the lower percentage deficit. Interestingly to see after one year if this revenue is going to be collected.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We will keep a close watch, do not worry but all the Fijians need to realise is where is this \$3.7 billion coming from. Out of \$3.7 billion, \$800 million is from direct tax and \$2.2 billion from indirect tax. So, a total of \$3 billion is directly going to be paid out of our pockets. Yes, from our pockets through increase in VAT that will have a huge impact on the savings and spending powers of Fijians. Secondly, the increase in corporate tax and thirdly increasing the duty on certain items. Who gets affected by this? Who is at the end of the supply chain ends up paying for all these? Ordinary Fijians from their own pockets.

No company will fork out money from its pocket to pay additional corporate tax of 5 percent. It will be passed on to the customers. The amount of indirect tax that Fijians consumers would be paying will be massive, in excess of \$3 billion and it will have a huge impact on those who are living under poverty and as claimed, there are almost 10 percent Fijians living under poverty. If we calculate this amount per capita, it accumulates to a huge amount. Unfortunately, these are the things people wanted and here they have it.

Some Members from the other side suggested that Social Welfare would take care of the increase impact of VAT. Let us be realistic about it. Sir, \$100 to \$150 is spent on a single trip to town these days, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Is that enough? I do not think so. FijiFirst was being blamed to burden the future generation with debt, but this Budget is not putting burden on the next generation but putting burden on this generation by increasing VAT, corporate tax and duty.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Shame.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This is what Government Members of Parliament were selling during the election campaign and, unfortunately, people bought these lies. Hard reality but have to deal with it now. What is new in this Budget that was not there when FijiFirst used to offer a National Budget? I recognised three things apart from increases in tax:

1. Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs;
2. Beautification of villages and settlements; and
3. Zero VAT on medications.

Are we joking with people on the issue of the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs? Is it just to fulfil someone's ambition that Coalition Government has created this Ministry?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Sugar and Multi-Ethnic's total budget is \$51.6 million, out of which \$2 million is for Multi-Ethnic Affairs with \$1 million done under "R"; one of the smallest ministries in the history of Fiji. Is this blatant abuse of power and unnecessary spending? Close to 40 percent of Fiji's population fall under Multi-Ethnic Affairs and a budget of \$2 million and \$1 million under "R"?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who is the Minister?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- What are we doing? Whose idea was this? Government can do much better than this.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- So this is what the Minister was doing for past six months making a budget worth \$2 million and because he was not too sure what was to be done in his Ministry, out of that \$2 million he puts \$1 million under "R". If I am able to come up with an idea, I will ask for the money, Minister of Finance, if I am not....

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Speak when he is here.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Unfortunately he is not here to listen.

The honourable Minister's company must be having a turnover of more than \$2 million. He could have done a much better job with his Ministry and \$1 million is just for the operational cost of that Ministry which is abuse of money. The two programmes under that Ministry are sitting under "R". That means \$1 million is total waste of money, just paying for the civil servants by creating this new Ministry.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- As the Minister for Sugar, he could have utilised that \$1 million or \$2 million to increase the price of sugar cane.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 62(4)(a) on offensive words used against another Member.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- No he did not.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- He is bringing up a personal issue, his company and mixing it with the National Budget. Do not mix the two, keep to the Budget and keep him away from you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Continue, honourable Member.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was the honourable Minister himself who said that being a businessman, being a farmer makes him the best candidate for that particular Ministry."

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- *Sa yawa!*

HON. K.K. LAL.- And promoting cassava.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And promoting cassava, that is the second issue. Never mind, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will continue.

On the second point, why is money only allocated to *iTaukei* villages and settlements? Why has the Budget started to divide people into ethnicity and race? I am not against the fact that money is allocated for villages and settlements through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, but there are other settlements with other ethnic groups as well. Why can funds not be available to those communities as well to beautify the surroundings because at the end of the day, every beautification programme will beautify our Fiji. So why the double standard? Why have we started dividing people by ethnic-base policies? This needs to be rectified. Just yesterday, the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament talked about genuine reconciliation and such policies do not help in mixed communities and settlements we even have *iTaukei* as well, so why are they deprived to access these funds?

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Point of Order.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Standing Order 62 (4)(d), this has been a common theme throughout by the Opposition. Honourable Ketan Lal read it out so that they can understand. It states and I quote:

“Words that are likely to promote or provoke feelings of ill-will or hostility between communities or ethnic groups within Fiji.”

He is imputing that the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs’ budget is creating ill-feeling. How can you say that?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That budget is particularly for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, so how can you say that it creates ill-feeling because the other ministries also have budgets which cater for rural communities such the one you are saying.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Which one?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Rural Development.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Wait, hold on, I will come to it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Continue, honourable Member.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am done with that beautification programme, no worries about that.

The Culture, Heritage and Arts for the *iTaukei* community is very important. No issues with it being moved to the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. These are important, these non-tangible values need to be preserved. The culture, dialect, custom, traditional dance, traditional foods and recipes needs to be preserved. We need to train someone with philosophy degree who can preserve this for us. We need to and we should invest in offering PhD in iTaukei Culture, Heritage and Arts in our

local universities. Even if we can train at least few scholars who can preserve this for us would be great.

But at the same time, which Ministry is looking after the Culture, Heritage and Arts of other ethnic groups? Other groups have been totally neglected as I said earlier. With the Minister, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs is merely a joke with a given budget of \$500,000 which is under “R”, why this disparity?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very true.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Honourable Prime Minister, you have been advocating about equality and that every citizen of Fiji will be called Fijian and they will have to share equal rights, so why is the budget announcement is not reflecting this?

Thirdly, we do understand that there is a shortage of skilled workers in Fiji at the moment but not just that, there is a massive shortage of nurses as well and one of the organisations which has been training nurses in Fiji gets \$600,000 only. Is Fiji’s Sangam Nursing Institute being victimised just because their National President is an Opposition member?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are serious about the health sector, we need to increase the support. Close to 300 students are enrolled at Sangam Nursing Institute. These nurses will fill the gaps left by nurses who are leaving Fiji for greener pastures. While still on the education sector, the write-off of \$600 million on TELS loan, yes, I agree, you have done it, but at what cost? On one side, you do not have operating surplus and on the other side waiving out such a huge amount and then paying close to \$150 million every year. The effect this is going to have on the economy will be very bad. If a student took money for their studies, they should honour and pay it back.

I have a few questions with regards to the new scholarship:

- The cut-off mark has not been clarified, is it 200 or more?
- What will happen if I want to study something that is in demand and universities are not able to offer me a place, but I qualify for the scholarship?
- What will happen to the freedom of choice if I want to become a lawyer, but the scholarship is not offered? Where will I get the money to study law since there is no option of loan and banks would not offer the loan?
- Have we not removed the burden from the current students and placed it on the parents whose students are still at high school? While talking about high school, managements now are allowed to impose levies on students.
- Where is free education for primary and secondary school? We all know it will come in the form of building fees, ground fees, logistics fees, management fees, name it. While ministries will pay for tuition, parents will have to pay for all these.
- Why has the student ambition I had throughout high school to be in a particular profession, I will be forced to choose a different career path just because Government is not offering a scholarship and not providing me with a loan so that I can still choose my career path and pay the loan later?
- It is said that the students in high school will face the full brunt of such poor planned policies when they choose their career paths as early as next year.
- On the zero-rated VAT on medication. Let us see the reality on the ground. We know that the pharmacies are giving prescribed medication both with and without prescription, it is either we turn a blind eye towards it or let us face reality. So, medication given out on prescription, what will they be classified as? Or if they are given without prescription, what are they going to be classified as? Either stop it totally or make prescription medication VAT

exempted instead of zero-rated - no pay, no claim. And what about all those over-the-counter medications that will come on prescription because that will be referred to as prescribed medication. Will these items be VAT-free as well or not?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe these are very important concerns with regards to the Budget otherwise our people will suffer. In *Hindi*, there is a saying, *leep pot ke barabar karo*. This Budget is a truly reflection of this particular programme. With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not support the Budget.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to render my support to the 2023-2024 National Budget that was announced in this august Chamber on 30th June, 2023. Firstly, allow me to congratulate and thank the honourable Minister of Finance and his hardworking staff at the Ministry for Finance for crafting a very considerate and fair budget which is a budget for our new Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset I wish to point out that this Budget has been a fair and tough one, but none the less, one that we as citizens of this country deserve. Given the financial status of our economy, one which we the Coalition Government have inherited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have long been living on freebies and unnecessary spending and now we as citizens of our country sadly must make the tough decisions including the increasing of VAT at 15 percent. Let me remind Parliament that the 15 percent VAT is not new to Fiji as it has already been applied by the former government without exemption, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and here they are jumping up and down about the 15 percent VAT.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Were they thinking about the people when they made the 15 percent VAT? I doubt that.

Nevertheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Home Affairs for 2023-2024 Budget has been allocated \$12.4 million so as to manage the nation's security by outlining policies in matters of national security and defence. Sir, \$324,222 has been allocated for the upcoming National Security Review which is a much needed one to align our security and defence strategies as was alluded to by the honourable Minister of Home Affairs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2023-2024 Budget, the Immigration Department received an allocation of \$8.6 million in the upcoming 2023-2024 Budget cycle. The Department anticipates roughly a 19 percent salary increase from \$2.5 million to \$2.9 million. The additional \$239,686 in this year's Budget makes provision for the employment of 10 additional Immigration Officer positions. This, Mr. Speaker Sir, is part of our initiative to strengthen the delivery of critical immigration services. A sum of \$1.5 million has been allocated for the modernising of immigration through the procurement of e-passports to ensure security and forgery and a further \$0.3 million for the installation of new passport kits in our missions globally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a further \$250,000 has been provided for the renovation of the Immigration Department Safe Houses in Suva and Nadi. Both these houses, Sir, are not fit to be occupied given

the deteriorating condition and inhumane facilities in them. This, in turn will boost the work carried out by our Immigration Department in the apprehension of individuals who have breached the law and the deportation of individuals who do not follow our immigration laws

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Immigration Department continues to focus on resolving the many migration issues. The continued objective to strengthen border management and security and facilitation of the increasing rate of mobility at our borders. Mr. Speaker, Sir, allocation of the Immigration Department's resources to its key programmes in this Budget allows us to contribute immensely to improving efficiencies in the facilitation of the people's movement, economic development on migration of skilled workers and investors and socio-economic well-being of our Fiji citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department is committed to creating new avenues to improve the Ease of Doing Business and ensuring that all facets of the Departments functions in accordance with the global best practices. With that being said the Department is pursuing few projects to enhance and raise the standards of immigration service delivery.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Budget will bolster various immigration systems and processes. As alluded to yesterday by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, it will also strengthen and further enhance border security priorities in combating internal and external threats. Given that Fiji is still a developing economy, the budgetary allocation for Immigration will further, reinforce and revamp travel and trade and ensure that Fiji adheres to international standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 2023-2024 Budget is a progressive and a considered one for the Immigration Department. The Budget prioritises resourcing the Department on more staff and technology to ensure efficient and effective delivery of immigration services. I thank the Government for its understanding of the ongoing challenge of resource constraints with the Immigration Department. The Department has already taken some action to reduce the load on issuing temporary work permits. They will also consider broader immigration law changes that will better position Fiji in the global economy and take advantage of people's increased mobility and utilise this financial budget wisely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the damaging effects of unnecessary spending debt left by the previous government have rattled and tarnished the Fijian economy. Such a statement is evident in various failed projects that the previous government traversed on and to name are few, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the famous Lautoka Swimming Pool, Govind Park and as honourable Ketan Lal would agree with me, our very own Savusavu Market that we have always been waiting for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some of the reasons why the Opposition has been asking why are there no capital expenditures? I understand, Sir, there is a lot of things that we need to do first before we start of something new.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Running out of ideas, do not worry.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- However, I feel empowered to stand here and say that the 2023-2024 budgetary allocation includes every citizen of this beloved country, and that ensures that we all move forward stronger despite the challenges that had ravaged the nation for the past decade and a half. Such sentiments are evident in the 2023-2024 Budgetary allocation as it involves all Fijians, regardless of differences especially vulnerable marginalise groups, the elderly who have sweated to build this nation, the current working population and the young rising generation who are the future of Fiji.

For instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increased allowances for the Social Pension Scheme from \$147.7 million to \$200.2 million to support our elderly citizens, shows the compassionate and moral responsibility of this Government. This is also reflected in the budgetary allocation for the education sector, receiving a warping yet deserving a \$845 million chunk of the Budget. In all its totality, this adds up to the national security of Fiji, prioritising the lives of every Fijian – young, youth and old and ensuring that no one gets left behind, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yet may I say, this is what defines the Coalition Government.

I also would like to take this time to acknowledge the allocation and increased budgetary allowance for the *Turaga ni Koro* and *Turaga ni Yavusa*. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a timely allocation for the *Turaga ni Koro* and *Turaga ni Yavusa* as they are the guardians of our various villages across Fiji, such finances will enable them to carry out their work effectively.

Furthermore, Sir, I would also like to commend and acknowledge the forgiveness of the Tertiary and Loans debt. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 55,000 students and families are debt free, thanks to the Coalition Government Budget. In fact, many students were not paying the debt. It was eventually a failed scholarship scheme which should have not been brought to life in the first place.

Maybe we should ask the students, what scholarship system do they want, fortunately, they have answered and that is why we are sitting on this side of Parliament and they are sitting on that side Parliament. This would not have been possible, Mr. Speaker, Sir, without the support from the Government of the day, the honourable Minister of Finance and his incredible team and, of course, the leadership of our honourable Prime Minister.

The cancellation of the Tertiary Loans Scheme would not only empower students bonded by debt but will give them more space to breath in terms of budgeting for family and personal expenses. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight that more money is not the only solution for every issue. We are approaching this from an entirely new perspective, the efficient and effective utilization of every single dollar will now be the main focus.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, questions have been raised by the Opposition on the services of the Immigration Department on overseas labourer's coming into our country. Let me remind this august Parliament and Fiji as a whole that as gatekeepers, the Immigration Department wholeheartedly welcomes all to our country. However, as gatekeepers, the Immigration Department will be vigilant and remain steadfast on their decisions on all who aspire to enter our country that they follow our laws and when entering our country that they meet the entry requirements.

In addition to this Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems honourable Nath while speaking yesterday has come up with some sort of conspiracy theory and that the honourable Member has some evidence of a screenshot that someone has been told to go back to India. I say to the honourable Member, "Please, lodge your complaint with the relevant authorities or even legal system which is why it is in place."

This is just the beginning Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Coalition's administration, assistance and support. We will continue to work hand in hand with the ordinary people and ensure that no one is forgotten. On that note Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the 2023-2024 Budget.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, Prime Minister of Fiji, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and people of Fiji who are listening in and watching today. As I have said, thank you for the opportunity to be able to contribute to this debate, the debate of the 2023-2024 Budget. First of all, I would like to

congratulate the honourable Professor Biman Prasad, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for the delivering the Coalition Government's first ever Budget proposal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want everyone to know that I really, really, really want the 2023-2024 Budget to be a great Budget. I want it to be an appropriate Budget that will deliver a better quality of life for our people. I want it to be a great Budget, because I care for the people of Fiji like all of us. We all really care for the people of this country so this needed to be, it needs to be a great Budget. The people of this country deserve the very best, they deserve a Budget that will move their lives forward, that will uplift their lives and the lives of their children and the people around them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want the Coalition Government to do well so that it can do the right thing for Fiji. They have the mandate to decide what happens in this country, they have the power to make things happen. They can make a difference and I am also quite confident in wishing the Coalition Government doing well because I know that the alternative government that I am a member of will always be able to do a much much, much better job.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- We have shown them over the last eight years and we will show it again in the future. I am going to show you how we have done that, and I am going to show you in my address today how this Budget is going to lead to harsher lives for the people of this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is what I wanted this Budget to do, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Unfortunately, it falls far short of my expectations. After sitting on that side of Parliament and my good friend the honourable Professor Biman Prasad sitting here for so many years, every time that we had a FijiFirst Budget, I would listen to him as he badmouthed every budget, as he said, "you have no ideas, everything that you say is out of date" and he said that over and over again. All these verbiages, this verbal diarrhea that used to come across from this side of Parliament, questioning every single FijiFirst Budget, I sat there and listened to his accusations. But what he has put together here, Sir is totally unimaginative, totally dull.

A Budget based on false premises, highly likely and I think it will lead this country in the wrong direction. It will lead us astray, it will lead this country astray. There is nothing, nothing here that will build a better Fiji because that is what we on this side of Parliament stand for - Building a Better Fiji. During the course of the debate, the Coalition Government has tried to present a very false picture of the situation that they had when they took over. They referred to it as a grim state of things. The terminology has come in grim like some big catastrophe has fallen, they have not really painted it in the way that it needs to, nothing could be further from the truth.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Look at the health centres.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Let me tell the people of this country what our legacy has been – the legacy of the FijiFirst Government. In this country there has never ever been a time when you had nine years - growth, growth, growth, growth. Never ever happened.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Bainimarama boom.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, the Bainimarama boom gave birth to all the things that you will

now try to imitate.

(Laughter)

As the honourable Leader of the Opposition said, “your Budget is microwave.” Everything that we do, you just reheat. You put it in the microwave oven, you just reheat. There is nothing new in what you do. There is no innovativeness, there is no new thinking. It is devoid of anything new. Absolutely nothing new.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it took governments around 34 years from 1970 to double GDPs, to make it increase rapidly like that. It took us far less time to be able to do that during the time that the Bainimarama Government and the FijiFirst has been in power. The GDP per capita, the amount of wealth we create in the country, apportion to all the people in this country increased from \$6 billion to \$12 billion in a very short period of time. That is a creation of wealth. When you create wealth, then you can provide service to people. If you do not create wealth, you cannot provide to people the things that they need. That is what we did. When you start crossing your arms, I know this thing is hitting you right there.

(Laughter)

We delivered a Constitution that gave equality to everyone in this country. No matter where you stay, no matter what your religion is, no matter what kind of food you eat or language you speak, our Constitution gave you equality. It gave stability to the people of this country. That will be a legacy of this government forever. We made sure that during the darkest times of our history, when people were hit by COVID, we got this country together ready to fly into the clouds and into the stars. We revived the country and got it ready. The learned Attorney-General has tried to say that the economy was already declining before COVID-19 hit.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Do you think any country in the world has continuous growth all the time for 20 years or 30 years?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Tell me which country, honourable Attorney-General?

Let me tell you the basics of economics. There are always cycles of economic growth. In this country for the first time ever, under our leadership, we had one cycle, the only time we had the cycle of nine years of continuous growth. When you have nine years, you go up the hill, sometimes there will be a slight dip, then you go up again, because it does not go up and up all the time. You will see that that is what has happened here - growth was happening, growth was increasing.

During COVID, taxes declined by 50 percent and government revenue declined by 50 percent, but we had to maintain the expenditure. We decided that we will look after the people of this country. We decided it, so what did we have to do? We had to borrow. What would you do in the same case? Would you leave them to die? Would you leave them to flounder? Would you leave them to have nothing to be able to look after their children? What would you do? You have no answer.

During that time, if you look at the deficit ratios, they were going down from 2017 to 2018, below 50 percent, going from 47 percent and going down. Only in COVID did it take off. What would you have done? Would you just let them die and suffer? Is that what you would have done? Every sane government in the world did the same thing. Every sane government, for two years we had to have that deficit because it was necessary. You are trying to compare what you are doing in this Budget to COVID time. It was an abnormal time. You are not comparing apples to apples, you are comparing apples to rocks. You do not do that. Totally insane!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, debt to GDP ratio was 48.8 percent in 2018-2019. It only went up to 88.8 percent at the end of 2020-2021. It was necessary. Why? Because we in government cared for the people of this country. You need to make sure that you show that you care for the people of this country. This Budget does not show that you care. What you are doing in this Budget is showing that you do not care.

We brought Fiji successfully through COVID-19 through strong and decisive leadership. We made sure that our tourism sector was ready to take off. We did not chew on model aeroplanes, no. We did not sell of those new planes, we got it ready. We worked with the industry. So, when the borders opened up, before other countries could take off in tourism, we were there. We hit that road running. No one got to the tape before us. That was strong decisive leadership. That is part of the legacy we give to you, do not forget it.

We were also named as the world's third fastest growing economy in the world.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- By who?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Investment projections in the pipeline. This pipeline that you are talking about, that is the one developed during our time. You are talking about this pipeline, developed during our time. Honourable Deputy Minister, that pipeline, watch out the pipeline might disappear. Some of those projects might disappear.

Tourism arrivals are now at the same level or above pre-COVID, it is above 2019. Why? Because we got it ready.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- No.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is the legacy we give to you, do not forget it. We have a high standing, a highly educated workforce, high standing regionally, internationally and a Fiji competing well above its weight class. So that is what we have given you. We have given you a revived Fiji, a Fiji ready to shoot to the stars. Do not take it to the gutter. Shoot to the stars, that is what we have done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the problems that we had with the Government when they were in the Opposition is this word that I have defined before in this Parliament. The word is "hypocrisy". The word hypocrisy is when you say, "I will do this, I should not do this", then I do the exact thing.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Who was that?

HON. J. USAMATE.- You. That is what you have been doing.

Initially I talked about how you used to talk about Standing Order 51 all the time. Immediately when you got in, you went into Standing Order 51. This week you have done it again - Standing Order 51. You said, you said, you said, you do the exact opposite. Secondly, over the past

few years, you have been yelling about the nominal value of debt. Yelling and shouting and we always tell you, “Look at debt to GDP ratio”. Do not just look at this bottle that it is just black from this side, it is also white from this side. Look at the thing in totality, but as soon as you cross from this side to that side, you forget about nominal GDP, you start talking about debt to GDP ratio. What happened in this walk just across this aisle? Did the shades come off your eyes? Did you finally see what we have been telling you all of those years?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You did not pay attention during the lectures.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister has changed his tune. Now after all that, complain about debt, his very first Budget, he increases debt.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Is that hypocrisy or is that hypocrisy? When you have been yelling, shouting and frothing at the mouth about debts and then you do the same thing, you increase it, I do not what else to say.

My good friend the honourable Tabuya says, “okay, we also increased the budget for the social welfare.” Yes, you did, you increased the budget. You took that increase of \$400 million or so from the VAT, you put a \$100 million. But my contention is this, what people lost is far greater than what they gained, your overall impact. So yes, you are partially true, but not completely true.

My fellow Fijians in the villages and settlements of Fiji and in the urban centres around Fiji, I want you to know what this VAT is going to do to you. Every fortnight if you spend around \$50 on VAT free items, you will pay the same amount for those VAT free items. But every fortnight if you are paying a \$100 on other things that are not VAT free, the amount of money you spend is going to go up by 6 percent, even up to 11 percent because company tax is also increasing.

Some of that company tax can be passed on. Those goods, the price will go up by 11 percent. So, you are spending a \$100, it will become a \$111, multiply that by the month of the year. If you are buying ice-cream, and you have to buy an oven, if you want to take your children to McDonald’s, the price is going up and up and up – ice-cream, sweetened biscuits. That is what is happening from this Budget. That is what this Government is doing to you the people of Fiji. This is the reality. Bus fares, water, all of that is going to go up. It is not a pro-poor Budget, it is the exact opposite. This Government is saying the debt is so much that you have to go through the hardship of increased VAT so we can pay off the debt, but the debt stock is increasing. If you are paying off debt, the debt stock should be decreasing.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are contradicting yourself.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is what is happening here. He is saying I have to do this for that and he does the complete opposite. This Budget is a pro-rich one. What do you think this Budget will do for those earning the highest levels of income in this country? Will it reduce their income taxes? Will this Budget reduce the income taxes of the people earning the highest income in this country? It will do the exact opposite. So, for the poorer, raise the prices of the things that you have to pay. For the people with the most wealth, give them more take-home money. That is what is happening in this Budget.

On top of that, what is that going to do for the small struggling companies in Fiji? All the strong struggling companies in Fiji, he is telling them, “We are going to increase your tax from 20 percent to 25 percent.” Some companies like multi-nationals that used to have tax holidays in this

country, telling them, “We are not going to pay tax on your profits.” That is what happening. You are talking about, we need to raise income and then you have these other sources of income, just cut it short. There is total non-alignment, non-coherence in everything that is happening in this Budget. Total non-coherence, non-congruent, it is going all over the place.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Hogwash.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, as I was saying. Do you know that under this Budget, companies like Fiji Water, very profitable organisation, very good organisation will pay no taxes on their profits. Nothing. I want to tell you about some companies, the Budget gives all the company tax wherever they go. To make it worse, this Budget will increase company tax on all other areas.

I have mentioned, we have some struggling industries in Fiji. I have been a member replacing the honourable Leader of the Opposition on the Natural Resources Committee. We have been looking at the Ministry of Fisheries. We have some struggling sectors in Fiji. These companies that sail on the high seas and catch fish.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What were you doing for 16 years?

HON. J. USAMATE.- The offshore fisheries, under this Budget, they will have to pay an increase in 3 percent on all the money that they spend on packing goods and raw materials. These companies already have to pay four times the freight cost of their competitors that live in South-East Asia. These companies are operating, and process charges are twice those of their competitors in Asia.

On top of this, this operation cost will increase. They asked for some relief, they were not given it. These companies that employ locals, some of these companies, if you go to Walu Bay, their ships are berthed there, they cannot move into the ocean because they are struggling. They asked for some relief, they were not given, but that relief was given to a multi-national company that is making millions and millions of dollars.

Other companies that we have in Fiji like garments, they bring in raw materials, they process it then they send it out. Now everything that they are bringing in, the duty goes up. They are competing with others in Australia, New Zealand and around South-East Asia. Those garment factories employ lots of women, those companies are not being given a break but the multi-nationals that are earning millions are given the break. This is a pro-rich Budget. It is not looking after the interest of the people of this country.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You are contradicting yourself.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other thing that I want to say, as I have said before.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have never seen you this confused.

HON. J. USAMATE.- As I said before, this Budget here is a real microwave one. There is no new thinking, all the thinking, the hard work that was done this side, you just put it in a canister, put it in a microwave and turned it on. That is all you have done, microwave oven. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister for Trade was talking about everything that they were going to do in the Ministry of Trade and I was looking at all these programmes that they had under MSME Coordinating Agency, Young Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES) - \$100,000. The Budget has been doubled but that was an initiative of this side of Parliament.

The Northern Development Programme, budget going up to \$1 million, that was also initiated from this side. The National Export Strategy doubling it up to \$200,000, Integrated Human Resources Development (a programme from this side of Parliament), Trade Enhancement Programme (\$300,000), it is just microwaving of the things that we already put in place.

Honourable Deputy Prime Minister when you talked about the ease of doing business and making the construction companies making that process work much faster, that was started under us under Singapore Cooperation Agency; all started from this side.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Started, not finished.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Started and because we did it, do you know what happened?

Fiji is in a strong state, we give you the permission to stand on our shoulders from what we have done for you so we can give you that knee hop to make sure you do the best for the people of this country. I listened very carefully, I think my time is going.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are going overtime now.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I think you need to hear it. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the time.

I am hoping that you do not put a halt to this revival. I think honourable Premila Kumar had talked about the importance of the middle class; people earning from \$30, 000 to \$60,000. These are the people who spend in this country. There are not too many benefits that you are putting in to make sure that, that group can continue to spend. They are missing out from the means tested assistance \$30,000 - \$60,000. They are missing out on all of those things, at the same time, they are being hit by the VAT increase. You do not kill that group of people, do not kill their spending power.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Already killed.

HON. J. USAMATE.- The other one that you have to watch out for is tourism. A lot of the things that you are doing might dampen the tourism numbers. Sir, VAT increase, company tax and all of those other things, all these projections that we heard about 8 percent growth, they were made in the context of the conditions that were in place when we were in government. You have changed those things. So, a lot of those calculations on the revenue might not be true. If that happens, two things might happen; your revenue will drop, either you will maintain the same expenditure level and go into deeper deficit or you will reduce your expenditure levels. The most saddest thing that I find as you increase this revenue, capital is not going up. What is happening is this bloated operational expenditure that is just increasing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Honourable Naupoto talked about the number of Ministers that you have. You are just bloating the operational expenditure. It is not leading to any wealth in this country; just bloating it up. It is not good for the future of our country. This is my message to you, the state that we have given this country to you, do not take it down the tube. You have got to take it to the next level and to do the right things.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister talked at length about the Film Tax Rebate. I will just read some articles, here is a *Fiji Times* article of 27th June, 2023 that noted that in 2016....

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you wish to round off, honourable Member?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Sir, these are the last few ones.

That year we noticed that out of the \$20 million of tax rebate that was given, the economic activity level was around \$120 million. Rebate of \$20 million to get \$120,000. Is that a good deal or is that a bad deal? That is what we did.

When we were in government, we started new industries. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister goes to international conferences and talks about the growth of the communication sector. The growth in the communication sector happened because of what we did. We took away the monopolies, we reduced the call charges, we built the Southern Cross Cable, Interconnectivity, the BPO Sector and all of those new industries happened during our watch.

You need to find new industries to grow. We need new jobs in this country. Do not raise the revenue and spend it on your operational expenditure. You need to get rid of your cronyism that has become rife. You walk through all these ministries, when I became a minister, I did not bring any FijiFirst people into my Ministry. I did not bring one FijiFirst person into my Ministry. Now you go to all of these ministries, and you see them from your parties working in those ministries. That is cronyism. It is happening right across, we are seeing it. You got to be able to look out to manage that particular issue to make sure that it does not become our practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in finishing off, you know who inherited the real mess when it started, that was the Bainimarama government. They inherited the real mess.

(Chorus of interjection)

HON. J. USAMATE.- You are talking about the NBF billions, the Agriculture scam but here is a difference. We did not sit down and cry. We did not whinge and whine and groan and moan. We got on with the job and we did what we had to do. So, stop whinging and moaning and groaning; grow up.

(Chorus of interjection)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my last point. In the annals of history, the FijiFirst Government will be remembered for the transformative changes made in this country.

Free education, I was sitting in Cabinet on the day that honourable Viliame Naupoto said that Cabinet decided to make education free and he is true.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It was not new.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I saw the late Mr. Filipe Bole, a very distinguish leader in our country, a person who dedicated a significant portion of his life to education. The day that was announced he was very emotional about it. I did not fully understand, now I can see. When education is free, you will see now the number of graduates that are coming out of universities, more of them are women (females). The barriers that used to stop girls from going to school is completely cut off. That is a major transformative shift, one change in government policy affects a generation of people.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- It removed the barriers to growth, other things that we did, we cared

for the least well off, we cared for them. You have never seen, all these social welfare programmes that you are talking about started during our time. Thank you for keeping them, they are the things that you are talking about started during our time.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- You have to think about the hallmark of your time in office.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You have had 16 years to do that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So in closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Confucius say, “Think of tomorrow, the past can't be mended”. I say, tighten your belts, hit up your breeches and get the job done.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost I wish to take this moment to express my gratitude to the Almighty God for the blessings and guidance I have received over the past six months in my capacity as the Assistant Minister for Education. The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet colleagues and fellow Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen who are seated in the public gallery and those joining in via live stream from the comfort of their homes, workplaces here Fiji and abroad; a very happy Wednesday afternoon to all. It is with great pleasure and humility that I stand before you today to deliver the response in support of the National Budget for the Fiscal Year 2023-2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the theme for this budget is “Rebuilding our Future Together”. This resonates deeply with the Ministry of Education as it envisages to provide equal opportunities to all children and a conducive learning and teaching environment whereby are they exposed to opportunities to express themselves confidently.

Before I proceed, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere gratitude to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and his esteemed team for their tireless efforts in compiling this comprehensive budget. Their dedication and meticulous planning have ensured that the needs of our education sector are adequately addressed in the Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I concur with the honourable Minister of Education in extending the gratitude of the \$845 million set aside in the 2023-2024 Budget for the education sector, thus reaffirming the People’s Coalition Government’s commitment to prioritise education and invest in our future generation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, within this allocation, \$505.4 million has been designated for the Ministry of Education. One of the key areas of focus for this Budget is ensuring that we have a strong and resilient teaching workforce. To achieve this, a significant portion of \$322.6 million has been allocated towards salaries and wages to fund the employment of our existing 14,000 teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our continuous efforts to embrace digital transformation learning, there is an allocation of \$50,000 for e-transaction costs. The Ministry is taking the initiative to venture into digital money online transactions, and this fiscal year, we have created provisions to receive revenue through M-PAiSA. The Ministry for Education is also strengthening financial literacy through curriculum review not as a component of the commercial subject but a subject of itself. This will empower all the children to be financially literate, encourage entrepreneurship, value transparency and its relevance to everyday life and future investment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education is also committed in reviewing the curriculum as literacy & numeracy rate in Fiji is a grave concern. Thus, Ministry of Education is supporting the ICT capacity with library software licence and strengthening the reading programme for the curriculum review with an allocation of \$90,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education supports the provision for special education grant to students with disabilities who are enrolled in both special and mainstream schools. We continue to promote inclusive education and \$141.9 is allocated to cater for these learning resources of the 1,067 students in special schools as well as 336 students in the 122 mainstream inclusive schools.

The Coalition Government firmly believes that every child deserves to be given equal opportunities and disability is not to be used as an excuse to deny them their rights to equal educational opportunities. For this reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, necessary funds to provide grants to our special schools is also included in the Ministry's 2023-2024 Budget. By prioritising special and inclusive education, we are not only fulfilling our moral obligation but also building a stronger and more equitable future for all.

Mr. Speaker. Sir, the media has highlighted an increase in social ills in our communities such as crimes and graffiti, bullying in schools and brawls after organised school sporting competitions. Therefore, the need for chaplains in school is immense as they will provide pastoral care service, along with teachers and parents. They provide spiritual and emotional support and help students deal with a range of issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education is committed that chaplains or the religious teachers are given provisions of counselling training organised by the Training Unit of the Ministry in partnership with Substance Abuse and Advisory Council (SAAC). The Ministry of Education has already started working in organising consultation with faith-based schools and management for the cost sharing provisions of the school chaplains under one of the six provisions in the Free Education Grant (FEG).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to recognise the significance of providing holistic support to our students and chaplains play a crucial role in supporting our young minds, providing guidance, counselling to nurture their emotional and spiritual well-being. It is imperative that we continue to emphasize the value of developing a well-rounded individual, and chaplaincy contributes to this goal for the future of Fiji.

Let me turn your attention to the reinstatement of the Board of Governors in government schools. During the Opposition's tenure, the decision to abolish these boards might have been taken with the intention to centralize decision-making processes. However, after a careful evaluation of the impact and feedback from various stakeholders, it has become evident that inclusive governance structures contribute to the overall success and efficiency of our education system.

The reintroduction of Board of Governors in government schools ensures that decisions are made collaboratively, taking into consideration the diverse perspectives of the parents, educators and community members in Fiji. This approach guarantees a more transparent, accountable and inclusive system where all stakeholders have a voice in shaping the future of all our schools in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the Opposition may have doubts about the implementation and costs associated with these initiatives, considering their long-standing experience in government. However, it is important to keep in mind that change is essential in any dynamic society. We have carefully assessed the potential benefits and the challenges associated with these decisions and have developed comprehensive plans to ensure smooth implementation and cost-effectiveness.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education recognises the need for increased counselling support for our students. The allocation of \$581,931 for counselling support in the Substance Abuse Advisory Council will ensure that young vulnerable students who indulge in substance and volatile abuse because they cannot cope with the socio-economic or family problems receive the necessary guidance and support to reclaim their lives.

Another significant development is the allocation of \$50,000 for the development of a National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) policy. Sir, TVET is an essential component of our education system, and it is crucial that we have a comprehensive policy in place to guide and enhance the quality of vocational training offered in our country. This budgetary allocation will enable us to develop a policy that is responsive to the needs of the industry and prepare our students for the workforce of tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our commitment to the future of vocational education, is evident in the allocation of a total funding of \$690,520 for 32 vocational centres. This will cater for 1,032 students on an acquittal basis of \$610 per student per year. Mr. Speaker, Sir, by investing in vocational education, we are equipping our youth with necessary skills for meaningful employment and contributing to the overall economic development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a founding member country of the University of the South Pacific (USP), the government of Fiji not only agreed to be a member of the USP family, but we also agreed to help fund it. That funding commitment is determined by the University Grant Committee (UGC), of which Fiji has significant input. The UGC determines member countries contributions following a process of consultation of all member countries. The last government signed up to this commitment but did not honour this on rather dubious grounds or even worse, that one would weaponize that commitment and mask personal as though one is trying to attain a critical strategic goal to the detriment of thousands of USP students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government through the Ministry of Education is committed to fulfilling this commitment and the fiscal year of 2023-2024 budgetary allocation for the education sector indeed includes a provision for the outstanding grant of \$20 million to USP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our nation is among the most vulnerable in terms of climate change, and as a responsible government, we believe in taking proactive measures to mitigate its impact. Hence, a significant allocation in the education sector budget is the \$2 million set aside for the establishment of the Pacific Action for Climate Transition Center in collaboration with Monash University and the Fiji National University (FNU). This Center will serve as a knowledge hub, facilitating research, education and the development of effective strategies to combat climate change in partnership with esteemed institutions. The People's Coalition Government recognises the urgency of this matter and remains steadfast in our commitment to future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the \$300,000 is allocated to the Fiji National University whereby the Coalition Government remains committed to providing livelihood training to our people who live in the rural maritime areas. With this provision, I congratulate the 211 individuals who graduated in this two-week programme last week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, many Fijians eagerly wait for the new financial year's Budget announcement, hoping for some positive news that could bring a sense of relief and stability and I am certain that it did exactly that for the 53,725 students whose TELS debt got written off. This decision reflects our Government's commitment to providing equal opportunities for all and easing the financial burden on our future professionals.

Going forward, the reinstatement of the bond system whereby students will serve a designated period upon completion of their studies will ensure that our students contribute to the growth and development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to this provision of scholarships with an allocation of \$148.2 million under the Fijian Scholarship Scheme to both new and existing students, ensuring that they can pursue their educational dreams without financial barriers. One of the initiatives of the People's Coalition Government is the provision of three PhDs and five Masters by research awards for study in New Zealand universities. In line with our commitment to rebuilding our future, these prestigious awards will allow our students to further their studies and bring back valuable knowledge and skills to contribute to the development of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Scouts Association plays a vital role in providing scouting activities and training to our individuals aged 8 years to 26 years old. With a current registration of 10,000 scouts and over 1,000 trained leaders including retirees who are teachers themselves, the Fiji Scouts Association is undoubtedly one of the largest youth organisations in our country today.

The allocation of \$98,000 towards the School Scouts Programme is a commendable move that will greatly enhance the capabilities and resources available to this organisation. These funds will enable the Fiji Scouts Association to further their mission of fostering character development, leaderships skills and community service amongst our students and youth of Fiji today.

Similarly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Girl Guides Association has proven to be an invaluable partner in promoting leadership, character development and community service among our young girls. The Budgetary allocation of \$50,000 for the Fiji Girl Guide Association in the new financial year 2023-2024 affirm our commitment to their noble cause and recognise their contribution to our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these provisions and initiatives signify the People's Coalition Government's unwavering dedication to creating a conducive environment for quality education and lifelong learning. We are committed to working alongside all stakeholders including the Opposition to address any concern and build a stronger and more inclusive education system. It is only through collaboration and open dialogue that we can truly aspire to create brighter future for our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I take my seat, it is worth noting that as we embark on this new fiscal year, we must do so with optimism and determination. Let us remember that rebuilding our future together requires a collective effort from all sectors of life. I implore all honourable Members in this august Parliament as well as all relevant stakeholders and education partners to not only support the National Budget, but also actively participate in its implementation. Together we can create an equitable, inclusive and prosperous educational ecosystem that will shape the destiny of our beloved nation.

On that note, I fully agree with the 2023-2024 National Budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- I would like to inform you honourable Members that honourable Vasu has given his notice to deliver his speech in the vernacular or the *Vosa Vaka-Viti*. For us to access that, we go to Channel 1 of your devices in front of you.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable parliamentarians and those who are available here in the gallery and those who are watching from home in Fiji and abroad, *ni sa bula vinaka*. Sir, please allow me to present my response to the Budget in the *iTaukei* language.

¹ Au gadreva me 'u vosa ena noqu tokona na i Tuvatuva Vakailavo esa vakadavora vei keda na i Vukevuke ni Paraiminisita ka Minisita ni Lavo ena i ka 30 ni Jiune ena yabaki ogo. Taumada, au gadreva me 'u vakavinavinakataka na Minisita kei na nona i vakailsilesi, ka vakakina na lewe ni Fiscal Review Committee, ena kena biu vata na i matai ni Tuvatuva Vakailavo ni Matanitu Cokovata. E dodonu meda vakavinavinakataka na kena tuvanaki vakamatau, ka ni kovuta taucoko na veitiki ni bula ni noda vanua.

Misita Sipika, ena sega vakadua ni dua na i tuvatuva vakailavo ni dua na matanitu me na sotava taucoko na veigagadre kece era gadreva na lewenivanua. E dodonu meda duavata, vosota, ka tokona na cakacaka ni kena tovolei me tarai cake tale e dua na yavu vou ni noda Matanitu kei na noda bula vakailavo. Na kena vaqacacotaki e levu na i tuvatuva e daidai, eda na qai tauca na kena vinaka ena veisiga ni mataka. Ogo na i tuvatuva vakailavo ni dua na Viti vou ka meda veitauriligataka vata na kena tarai cake na bula vakailavo ni noda vanua.

Misita Sipika, ni bera niu na tosoya yani na noqu vosa me baleta na Tabacakacaka ni iTaukei, au gadreva meu vakavinavinakataka na wasewase vakailavo ena vica na tabacakacaka vaka-Matanitu.

Ena Tabacakacaka ni Vuli, na \$148.2 na milioni esa mai soli ena vuku ni sikolasivi ni vuli vei ira na lewenivanua e Viti, na kena sa mai bokoci na nodra dinau ena TELS na lewe 53,700 na lewenivanua kei na nodra vuvale. Na kena sa tekivu tale na vakavulici ni vosa kei na i tovo vakavanua ena veikoronivuli.

Me baleta na Tabacakacaka ni Bula. Au vakavinavinakataka vakalevu ni sa mai tosoi cake nai votavota ni Tabacakacaka ni Bula ena kena veituvatuva ni veiqaravi raraba ni lewenivanua. Na kena vakavinakataka ni veivanua ni veiqaravi taucoko sara e Viti kei na kena sa mai tosoi cake na kedrai sau na liga ni veiqaravi.

Ena Tabacakacaka ni Teitei. Au vakavinavinakataka na kena sa tosoicake nai votavota vakailavo me votai kina Tabacakacaka ni Teitei ka me na rawa ni laveti cake na kena teivaki vakalevu na qele kei na kena rawati mai na veimakete, na kena sotavi na gagadre ni nodra vakani na lewenivanua ka vakabibi na kena tokoni na bula vakailavo ni noda Matanitu.

Na nodra qaravi na Marama, na Gone Lalai kei na Social Protection. Au vakavinavinakataka vakalevu nai votavota e votai vei ira era sa qase sara, era malumalumu ka ra lewena na peniseni. Au vakavinavinaka talega ena nodra nanumi na marama, na goneyalewa kei na gone enai wasewase vakailavo sa tiko ogo e matada.

Ena veivakavaletaki kei na Local Government. E da vakavinavinaka vakalevu ena kena sa na qaravi na veidigidigi ni veitauni kei na koro lelevu, e dua na vanua kara nanamaki tu kina vakalevu na lewenivanua mera digitaka na nodra mata me cicivaka na nodra tauni kei na veikoro lelevu.

Au taura talega na gauna vinaka ogo meu vakavinavinakataka na kena vakadaberi vakavinaka o ira na noda era tiko ena veitikotiko ka sega ni vakamatanitutaki, ka wili tiko e levu sara vei keda na gole mai na veiyanuyan kei na lomanivanua.

Misita Sipika, au gadreva meu vakaraitaka na vakavinavinaka levu ena vuku ni tuvatuva vakailavo ka cicivaki keda tiko mai ena loma ni ono na vula sa oti. Sa mai qaravi rawa kina e levu sara nai tavi ni veiqaravi ena Tabacakacaka iTaukei.

¹ Editor's Note: Translation of the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts' iTaukei speech in reply to the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 is appended as Schedule I.

Misita Sipika, au cavuta na vakavinavinaka ena i tuvatuva vakailavo ni 2023-2024. Sa mai tosoi cake na i votavota ni Tabacakacaka i Taukei mai na \$15.4 milioni ki na \$38.6 milioni. E tubu ena \$23.2 milioni, ni vakatautauvatataki kei na i tuvatuva vakailavo ni yabaki sa oti. Sa i vakaraitaki ni kena sa tauri vakabibi na kena laveti cake na bula ni kawa i Taukei.

Turaga na Sipika, e dua na i tuvatuva levu sa vakanamata kina na kena dikevi tale vakavinaka e tolu na matabose bibi e qaravi keda na kawa i Taukei, oya na Matabose ni Tabacakacaka ni Qele Maroroi, na Valenivolavola ni Veitarogi Vanua kei na i Qoliqoli kei na Tabacakacaka i Taukei raraba. Ogo e wili kina na kena dikevi na lawa eso e vauca na nodratou vei qaravi na tabana e tolu ogo, sa dodonu me veisautaki ka me salavata kei na veibolebole sa sotavi tiko ena gauna ogo.

Misita Sipika, e \$300,000 esa vagolei ena qaravi na i Tabacakacaka i Taukei kei na Valenivolavola ni Veitarogi Vanua kei na i Qoliqoli. Ena sauma ga vakataki koya na Tabacakacaka ni Qele Maroroi na kena dikevi vakavinaka na vei tuvatuva ni nona vei qaravi.

Misita Sipika, e gadrevi mera bau vakaitavi talega na noda kawa tamata ena vakayagataki ni noda i yau bula, ka me tosoi cake kina na nodra bula vakailavo. Ena yavu ogo, e a qaravi kina na i matai ni nodra bose cokovata na i taukei ni yaubula e Viti ka vakatokai i Taukei Resource Forum ena vula o Maji ni yabaki ogo.

Au vakavinavinaka vakalevu ni sa mai wili talega ena sasaga levu ogo ena matabose levu ni bula vakailavo ni noda vanua se na National Economic Summit ka sa vakavotukanataki ena loma ni tuvatuva vakailavo vou ni yabaki ogo. Ena matai ni gauna ena i tuvatuva vakailavo ni Tabacakacaka, esa biu vakatikitiki kina e \$100,000 me na qaravi na kena cakacakataki kina na i Taukei Resource Forum.

Misita Sipika, au vakavinavinaka ni sa mai vakadonui talega me sa soli mai e \$4 milioni kina Tabacakacaka i Taukei ka dau tiko ena Valenivolavola nei Vunilawa. Ogo me mai qaravi kina na veivakatoroicaketaki ni qele ni kawa i Taukei me na vanua ni veivakavaletaki se subdivision.

Turaga Sipika, me vaka na nodra kauwai na Turaga Lewe ni To ni Veisaqa, o honourable Bulitavu, au via vakadeitaka vei ira ni levu sara na taba ni vei qaravi me vaka na soveya kei na so tale e tiko kecega ena loma ni Tabacakacaka i Taukei kei na kena veimatabose. E sa na vakarawarawataki kina na vei qaravi eso ka dau sau levu tu vei ira na noda taukei ni qele ena kena sagai me vakatoroicaketaki na nodra qele.

Sa tiko talega ena Tabacakacaka e dua na kena dau ni cicivaki ka qarava na ka ni bisinisi me vaka na i Taukei Trust Fund, me na vukei ira na i Taukei ni Yaubula ena kena vakayagataki vakamatau na i lavo ni veivakatoroicaketaki. Era sa tu vakarau talega na i vakaillesilesi, vakabibi ena kena yadravi vakavinaka na vakayagataki ni lavo ni veivuke ogo.

Misita Sipika, e dua na bolebole levu e sotava tiko na Tabacakacaka vaka i Taukei sa i koya na nodra gadreva tu na veitikotiko vakaturaga e Viti na kena vakamatatataki na kedra i yalayala ni qele, vaka talega kina na kena butuki na veiqele vakaturaga e Viti ka se bera tu ni butuki kei na kena biu vakamonalivaliva na mape ni nodra veiyalayala ni koro. E vakadredretaka sara vakalevu na cakacaka ogo na nodratou se vakayagataka tu ga na i yaya makawa ni soveya na neitou Tabana ni Butu i Yalayala ni Qele ni Veitarogi Vanua. Au vakavinavinaka ni sa vakarautaki tu e \$250,000 me na voli kina na i yaya vovou ni nodratou vei qaravi.

Misita Sipika, e sega ni na taura vakamamada na Matanitu Cokovata na kena laveti na bula ni noda veikorokoro. Sa oti ogo e 15 na yabaki ka sa qai lesu tale mai na Village Improvement Scheme, se na i lavo ni kena vakavinakataki na noda veikorokoro. Sa vakarautaki ena i tuvatuva

vakailavo ogo e \$2 milioni me na qarava na cakacaka ogo. Sa na cau mai o ira na lewenivanua ena dua na i katolu, ka na i tavi ni Matanitu e rua na i katolu me qaravi kina na veivakatoroicaketaki ogo.

Me'u na vagolea na i sau ni taro a taroga mai o honourable Maharaj, keitou na vei qaravi vata tiko kei iratou na Rural and Maritime Development, ka na veisemati tiko na veivukei e rua ogo ka ra na vukei talega kina o ira na noda era tiko ena settlements.

Misita Sipika, esa mai vakadonuya na Bose Yaco na kena vakacokotaki e dua na i tuvatuva me baleta na kena vakatoroicaketaki na Kawa i Taukei. E dabe ena vakanananu ogo ena kena tatadrataki me na yaco na gauna esa na lailai sara na vakararavi ni Kawa i Taukei ki na Matanitu. Keitou vakabauta ni na rawa. E tiki ni tuvatuva ogo sa i koya na kena tauyavu e dua na noda bage. Ogo me na vukea na kena tauyavutaki se vakatoroicaketaki na noda bula ena tabana ni bisinisi. Sa vakarautaki kina e \$100,000 me na qaravi kina na kena dikevi se feasibility study na vakanananu ogo.

Misita Sipika, na veituvatuva kece ogo mai cake ena sega ni yaga kevaka e luluqa na bula ni veiliutaki vakavanua. Sa lutu sobu tikoga na veivakatagedegede ni noda veiliutaki vakavanua ka me yacova mai na gauna ogo, e sivia ni 53 na pasede ni tutu vakavanua era se lala tu ga. Sa kena i balebale ni sivia na veimama ni veikorokoro e Viti kei na noda kawa tamata e se lala tu ga na veiliutaki vakavanua.

Ogo na yavutu ni noda bula vaka-Viti. Sa bibi kina na nodra vukei ko ira na sa tawana tiko na nodra i tutu ka qarava tiko na kena i tavi. Ena i tuvatuva ni yabaki vakailavo ogo, era na taura kina e ya \$100 e na veivula na vei Liuliu ni Yavusa ka ra sa vakadeitaki oti me vukea na nodra vei qaravi.

Misita Sipika, sa mai tosoi cake na kedra i sau na Turaga ni Koro kei na Mata ni Tikina. Sa dua na cakacaka levu sara era qarava ena kena sasagataki na bula ni dua na koro se na tikina. E sega ni tauri vakamamada na bibi ni nodra vei qaravi, ka sa biu tiko kina e \$2.1 milioni me baleta na kedra i sau.

Turaga Sipika, e gadreva na Matanitu Cokovata me vakalailaitaki sobu na nodra i colacola na lewenivanua vakaturaga ena vuku ni sasaga ni Yasana. Esa biuta vakatikitiki kina na Matanitu Cokovata e \$10.8 milioni me sa sosomitaka na Soli ni Yasana. E tubu ena \$6.5 milioni mai na i tuvatuva vakailavo sa oti. E vica na ka ena rawati mai na i wasewase vovou ogo. Sa na rawa ni vagolei na nodra dau soli vaka-Yasana mera soli vaka-Vanua me vaka e virikotori tu ena loma ni lawa ni Tabacakacaka i Taukei. Ogo me vagolei ki na cakacaka ni veivakatoroicaketaki ni vanua, ka vaka kina ena yalava ni bisinisi.

Misita Sipika, na veituvatuva tale eso ka okati ena i tuvatuva vakailavo ogo e wili kina:

- *Na kena dikevi tale na i Dusidusi ni Bula Vakoro se Village Guideline.*
- *Na cakacakataki ni tuvatuva me baleta na kena muduki laivi vakadua na i vakarau i tovo kaukauwa vei ira na marama kei na gone.*
- *Na tauyavutaki ni porokaramu ka vakatokai na Community-Based Integrated Natural Resources Management Project.*
- *Na vakalevutaki ni Tabana ni Veitarogi Vanua kei na Qoliqoli.*

Misita Sipika, me vaka au sa vakaraitaka taumada mai cake, ena sega ni rawa me na sotavi kece na gagadre ni lewenivanua ena i tuvatuva vakailavo ogo, ia e kena i tekitekivu ogo me sa tavoci

yani kina na waqa ni veiqaravi ni Matanitu Cokovata. Sa ka bibi kina meda veitauriligataka na cakacaka levu sa tu e matada ka vakabibi na noda veirogorogoci ena dela ni vanua lomani ena noda lomana na noda vanua.

Au via vakadeitaka talega vua na i Liuliu ni To ni Veisaqa kei na nodra i lawalawa ni na yadravi ka qarauni sara vakavinaka na kena vakayagataki na veivotavota vakailavo ni cakacaka ni Tabacakacaka i Taukei. Au veisureti talega yani ki na i To ni Veisaqa ni na dola tu na katuba ni Tabacakacaka i Taukei me na rogoci talega na domomudou me baleti ira na noda kawa tamata. Me'u vakacavara, na i lakolako ogo meda na vakacegu ni da sa kila eda sa solia vei ira na noda kawabula mai muri e dua na Viti vinaka.

Au sa tokona na i Tuvatuva Vakailavo ni 2023-2024. Vinaka saka vakalevu, Misita Sipika.

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn Parliament now for afternoon tea and when we resume, we will go straight to the next speaker, the honourable Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management, who will then take the floor. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.40 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 5.20 p.m.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *dou sa bula sia*.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I rise to add my contributions and lend my full support to the 2023-2024 National Budget. But before doing so, Sir, let me reflect on some of the pertinent issues revolving around the Budget Debate during the week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the honourable Prime Minister was asked on Monday morning during our Caucus meeting before we came into this Chamber for the debate as to what he expects of us to say during the debate, as usual, he was cool and calm, and his response to us was; “Be yourself, do not try to be like others. Do not emulate others, speak the truth and speak with conviction.”

My interpretation on his piece of advice, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that, if you are reading something written by others or someone else’s idea, be careful to fully understand it before you say it, otherwise you will get into trouble.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what saddens me is the continuous referral from some honourable Members of the Opposition that their leader is someone else and not the honourable Seruiratu. We all know that honourable Seruiratu was sworn in as the Leader of the Opposition in this Chamber. Not to recognise him is an insult and that is why some honourable Members from the other side of Parliament are being misguided since they are taking instructions from someone else and not the right leader that they should be taking instructions from.

Mr. Speaker Sir, let me begin my response to the Budget Address. I wish to offer my commendations to the honourable Minister of Finance and his Team for a bold, comprehensive and visionary Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even while still recovering from the unprecedented economic blows of the COVID-19 to our nation’s economy, the Coalition Government has shown through the 2023-2024 National Budget our ability to provide steadfast direction and sound consultative leadership.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as stated by the honourable Minister of Finance in his National Budget Address, the Coalition Government, “although six-month-old with a mandate to deliver change has walked into a deeply grim state of affairs”, it recognises the need for a carefully thought-out budget to address the present and setting a platform and pathway for shaping a better future.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Coalition Government has carefully crafted the 2023-2024 National Budget by prioritising productive sectors that would drive our economic recovery and adopting policies and revenue measures that would bring about the change that the Fijian people had been longing for in the last 16 years. It empowers Fijians to fight back in the spirit of “Rebuilding our Future Together”. Of course, we will feel the pinch of pain in the short term but a sacrifice for our future gains.

At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me provide a response to the honourable Leader of the Opposition and those on the other side of Parliament, by claiming that the 2023-2024 Budget is a Microwave Budget. Literature has confirmed that one of the properties of microwaves is that it travels in a straight line. This basically means that policy waves surrounding the formulation of this Budget is built on good governance - a straight line where participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus-oriented, accountability and inclusiveness are the building blocks leading to the formation of this Budget; and very straight where interests of the “same kind” is not a priority

but the needs of the majority are central to the formulation of this Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Bulitavu claimed that this Budget is a painful Budget. The honourable Member simply refuses to understand that the decision to increase VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent is because of the mess left by the previous Government.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Yes.

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- More than \$500 million worth of revenue was lost through selfish and arrogant policies, like the Film Tax Rebate, *Walesi*, no strategic plan for FRA over the years and losses on Capital Gains Tax. If the previous Government had formulated good policies, we would have the fiscal space to operate on the same VAT rate but, unfortunately, that is not the case.

Honourable Hem Chand, in his Budget speech, claimed that this was a hopeless Budget. Hopeless to him because he has lots of investments to rely on but for those who are merely struggling and are social welfare recipients or pensioners, this is a hopeful Budget for them. They are receiving an increase in allowance in the new budget. Ordinary Fijians will also be able to afford beef, prawns, duck and lamb/sheep products due to reduction in fiscal duty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about the core functions of my Ministry, and that is rural development. The Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management is grateful for its budgetary allocation of \$29.1 million. The increase in our annual allocation of \$14.1million portrays the Coalition Government's priority in capitalising the development of our rural and maritime communities and effective of the National Disaster Management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government remains committed to improving lives and raising the living standards of our people in the rural Fiji. The Ministry intends to utilise the \$2 million funding received under its Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) Programme to deliver more rural infrastructure projects to increase transportation access to markets and improve accessibility to markets and basic services of Government for our rural Fijians. In the last three years, the Government has invested about \$5.6 million for over 230 community access projects throughout the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the \$1 million allocation to the Ministry's Self-Help Programme (SHP), communities will be encouraged to initiate their socio-economic sustainable development projects on a cost-sharing basis. While this will instill a sense of ownership over these initiatives, this arrangement has also eased burdens, especially on those living in our rural and maritime communities, who come forward to access Government assistance offered under this Programme. In the last three years, the Government has invested about \$3.4 million for over 280 multi-sectoral projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, about 10.4 percent of the rural population rely on high risk water source. This is equivalent to 8,611 households. Additionally, about 30.5 percent of rural households use high risk sanitation in Fiji. This is equivalent to 25,387 households or 102,996 people in a household of four people.

The Ministry is pleased that with an allocation of another \$0.8 million in the next financial year for its High Risk Water Sanitation Programme, we will be able to assist these at-risk vulnerable communities and rural dwellers with the provision of proper sanitation facilities and procurement of purification water systems to treat high risk water sources for quality water.

On reviving our rural economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, invigorating the standard of living of our

rural populace remains a key commitment of the Coalition Government. Intensifying the economic opportunities and creating an enabling environment for these resource-rich communities is the pathway to a vibrant rural economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for far too long, our rural economy has been neglected. There is a lot of growth potentials in rural Fiji, especially on Vanua Levu – our second largest island. Your People's Coalition Government is devoted to harness these potentials through creating the right environment and secure financing. I am glad that we have left no stones unturned for the past six months to progress work in this area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism industry development in Vanua Levu is long overdue. We need to develop the infrastructure first, like airports, roads and other key infrastructure to boost our tourism market in the North. There is also a great need to develop the infrastructure of villages that are located close to the main towns of Savusavu and Labasa. I am glad that the Coalition Government is progressing work in this area with a provision of \$5 million funding provided by the World Bank to support the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programme which aims to support resilient and sustainable tourism development in Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry is still a key development sector for Vanua Levu. The intention to thoroughly review and assess the industry is long overdue. We know that this is an industry that was a backbone of this country many decades ago. A number of urban areas – Lautoka, Ba and Labasa, still rely on this industry. I am confident that with the allocation of \$49.7 million to the Sugar Unit in the 2023-2024 financial year, it will enable us to re-strategise and revive this vital industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need collective efforts at all levels to revive our rural economy. In the upcoming financial year, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management will be working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry in complementing each other's programmes, to ensure our rural people receive the much-needed support they rightfully deserve to enable them to contribute positively to the revival and boosting of our rural economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme is aimed at complementing activities of other agencies in the agriculture, fisheries and forests, and communication sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the commitment to address long overdue drainage issues across the country under the budgetary allocation of \$22.1 million in the Department of Waterways is appreciated. Furthermore, the budgetary allocation of \$16.1 million for coastal erosion protection, river dredging, watershed management and rice irrigation scheme is also commended. These will definitely address disaster risk reduction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend the recognition of this Government of the contribution by the Dairy Industry through their budgetary allocation of \$5 million for the new financial year. It is time that the local dairy industry receives the attention it deserves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plan to construct a new market for Savusavu with a budgetary allocation of \$3.9 million and preparatory works for Dreketi mini market is commendable. One of the objectives of the rural and outer island development is to facilitate easy access to markets. The establishment of such facilities will create an enabling environment to enhance economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, without question, our Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are

classed as strengths in building local economies and bringing innovation that impacts communities. The allocation of \$2.5 million for the Northern Development Programme (NDP) aims to re-ignite grassroots entrepreneurship and strengthen resilience through skills training, business management and economic guidance - all the while contributing to national economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, inclusive governance remains an epitome of the Coalition Government, as we endeavour to effectively serve and empower our people. Rebuilding the economy will need the collective effort of all stakeholders, including our communities. It is through effective collaboration and dialogue that we can give voice to the ordinary people and incorporate their needs into funding interventions and policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this, the increase in allowances for our community leaders is commendable. The allocation of \$767,040 for our 302 District Advisory Councillors (DAC) will support and strengthen the link between Government and people at the grassroots level, as DAC members play a pivotal role in being the coordinating arm of Government in the various communities they serve in.

In strengthening the iTaukei governance structure in our villages and districts, the allocation of a sum of \$2.1 million for the increase in monthly allowance for our Turaga-ni-Koro and an additional \$585,800 for increase in allowances for the Mata-ni-Tikina is very much welcomed.

In terms of iTaukei empowerment and development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, already alluded to by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, I must commend the concerted effort from our Government to chart a pathway in empowering our *i Taukei* communities. The historical reinstatement of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga (Great Council of Chiefs) this year has been restoring, rejuvenating the spirits of the indigenous people in the hopes of improving their socio-economic status. The \$2 million allocation for the Village Improvement Scheme and \$4 million for the iTaukei Land Development Scheme are just a few of the timely interventions that will enable our resource owners to capitalise on empowering their economic capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to conclude by saying that the 2023-2024 Budget is reflective of a strong commitment by the Coalition Government to focus on macroeconomic stabilisation and implement fiscal policies that achieve a sustained economic growth, stimulate investment and keeping Government debt at sustainable levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the best Budget ever. This is the Budget for now and the foundation for the future, a Budget for a new Fiji and this is the blueprint for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I concur and fully support the motion that the 2023-2024 Budget be endorsed by this august Parliament.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet colleagues, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Members of the Legislature, and the people of Fiji who are watching on live stream as well as those who are here with us in the public gallery; I rise to present my contribution to the Appropriation Bill before this august Parliament.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics for delivering a coordinated, well-planned and inclusive 2023-2024 Budget to support economic recovery in contributing to “Rebuilding Our Future Together”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to acknowledge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister's Team at the Ministry for Finance for a careful, transparent, very consultative and effective approach in managing the public purse since the Coalition Government took over on 24th December, 2022. The Budget now before Parliament is more realistic, prudent and deserving of all of our support in re-building our island home Fiji together on the foundation of bipartisanship and mutual collaboration.

On the outset of this Budget Debate, I wish to acknowledge the support as well as the guidance of all those who have made it possible for me to continue and discharge my responsibilities as the Minister responsible for Lands and Mineral Resources for the past six months - the Permanent Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Directors, Managers and all staff who have put together our request to the Ministry of Finance and my Parliament Team who, I am sure, are glued on to the screen. Thank you for a job well done!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be the first of many budgets that will be presented to Parliament by the Coalition Government and I say of many Budgets in future. There will be many to follow in years to come. In other words, the People's Coalition Government is here to stay for a long time. We are here to stay for a number of reasons:

1. We are here to correct historical woeful economic policies that we have inherited from the FijiFirst Government for the past eight years, and eight years before that, in its military interim government form.
2. We are here to correct short-sighted and ineffective fiscal and monetary policies that has led the country to a humongous national debt level that now needs to be paid. We are paying off \$1 billion of FijiFirst Government debt, even in our first year in office. The Opposition appears to have very short memories, alleging that we would be responsible for raising that debt level beyond \$10 billion. What they do not appear to accept is that they were responsible for the increase of the national debt from around \$2.8 billion in 2006 to approximately more than \$9 billion in 2022.
3. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the height of blankness, to all of a sudden allege the Coalition Government of high deficit in its first ever Budget of over \$600 million, when they have lived on high borrowing and high deficits in all these years between 2007 and 2022. Someone said on social media.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Who is that someone?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.-

...when the honourable Leader of the Opposition labelled us on Monday as spending like drunkards in a nightclub, you recited him. He said that.

If that was true of us now, they were spending like druggies, and might I add, in open daylight.

4. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 15 percent is not new to Fiji. Certainly, it is not new to FijiFirst Party, they introduced it. It was their legacy. Between 2011 to 2015, 15 percent VAT. Why? It was necessary to do so at that time to lift our country's revenue earning. That was your reasoning. Everything is linked to everything else. Ring a bell? Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2016 was when they reduced 15 percent to 9 percent VAT. Of course, we all knew the reduction of VAT was driven by politics, it was not driven by economics.

In 2022, the FijiFirst Government placed a three tier VAT, zero-rated on 21 items, 9 percent and 15 percent on other items. We now will have only two-tier programme, which will only have an overall effect of 3 percent more as opposed to the increased social protection programme and funding that actually puts more money in the pockets of ordinary Fijians than anything else, whose buying wish list is only within the 22 items that are zero-rated. In addition, the Government is reducing duty on consumable goods that will provide relief on affordability for all Fijians.

5. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the populist FijiFirst Government policies of the past have affected the revenue potential of the Government to get more in order to deliver or improve service delivery to the people all these years, instead of relying in heavy borrowing that we have now inherited and now will have to pay, on their behalf and on the weight of those irresponsible policies, now on the shoulders of ordinary Fijians.
6. For this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the old adage that warns people who point a finger like the Opposition have been doing for this week. When you point one finger, remember, four are pointing back at you. Take responsibility for the mess that you had created.
 - (i) Sir, \$506 million hole that was identified by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications in his speech; rebate to movie companies; rebate to oil companies; and monies that could have been better utilised in the upkeep of national infrastructure such as roads, water and electricity grid, health and education.
 - (ii) Excessive borrowing - that is not to suggest that borrowing is not right. It is what you do with it and how you spend it that is more important. We all know from the FijiFirst Government record, they score a big failure in their scorecard.
 - (iii) They harp about institutional interference and constitutional violations. Take a long hard look in the mirror, honourable Members, you have the worst record of interference since 2006. Nepotism? Take a long look in the mirror, honourable Members. When you point one finger at us, four are pointing back at you. How do you explain linen in Suva taken to Nadi for washing and to be returned to Suva for use at the largest hospital of this country? *Sa cava? Sa sega na vale ni savasava e Suva? Sa oti na Boom Detergent e Suva me kau i Nadi me lai sava kina?*
7. Against all that the honourable Opposition Members have said, this is the Budget, Mr. Speaker, that will set straight the path for economic recovery, bring back prudence in our financial affairs and make Fiji a nation for all to find their feet and also to improve their lives.
 - (i) There is now an increased support for vulnerable and disadvantaged in the new Social Protection Programme.
 - (ii) Increase in pension funding.
 - (iii) We are empowering our community leaders, not just the *iTaukei* community leaders, all communities by increasing their allowances for them to do their work.
 - (iv) We are returning FNPF to pre-COVID rates by 1st January, 2024.
 - (v) We are creating Fijian Scholarship Scheme that will free up 53,000 students – your

relatives, honorable Members, your sons, daughters, granddaughters, grandsons, nephews and nieces are going to be beneficiaries to this Coalition Budget. Honourable Rinesh Sharma go and ask those who had loaned and now have their loans forgiven as to how they feel about this aspect of the Government's Budget? Come back to Parliament in September and report what your findings are. You are included, honourable Ketan Lal.

- (vi) We are paying, Mr. Speaker, what is due to the USP for the sake of our children. Our commitment to pay USP our dues is not tagged to any demand we have on how USP conducts its business. That is for the Council which we dominate, anyway. Of course, there must be good governance, Mr. Speaker, but such concerns could have been raised and achieved by consultation and not by bulldozing tactics, such as the withdrawal of funding that the FijiFirst Government did. It is a shameful thing to do! To the students of Fiji at the USP, we are going to ensure that what the Government owes that needs to be paid to USP will be paid for your sake.
- (vii) To the people of Vanua Levu, the \$200 million 10 year plan to support an integrated, resilient and sustainable tourism development. It would look, in the beginning, feasibility on infrastructure to support the development programme, sustainability assessment on roads, power grid and connectivity to complement the programme in the latter part of the stages of development.
- (viii) To the colleagues of mine from Vanua Levu on both sides of Parliament, this is the answer to our 'look north cry' for all these years. Regrettably, Mr. Speaker, I note the honourable Bulitavu; my Savusavu colleague, the honourable Ketan Lal; honourable Tuinaceva, an adopted son of Savusavu; and of course the Leader of Opposition, have rejected this Budget. I have saved honourable Naivalurua because he has chosen Naitasiri for his home for now. But I ask the honourable Members, we still have your vote to count and so, please, remember your voters from Vanua Levu. Vote for this Budget and vote for your voters' interest.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has been allocated a total budget of \$30.1million. This is an increase of \$6.9 million from the last financial year. So, in moving forward, the Ministry will be pragmatic in its approach in delivering, finding new solutions to the existing challenges faced by the Ministry.

With the allocated budget, the Ministry will continue to ensure that we strike the right balance between the fulfilment of our role and function, support and encourage economic activities while ensuring that our environment and resources are sustainably protected and managed.

Mr. Speaker, on the area of ease of doing business, to sustainably support the development and growth of the agricultural sector and agro- processing, the Ministry will continue to speed up the process of 'land accessibility'.

We have reviewed our processes with much focus on land accessibility, Mr. Speaker. This, of course, you would note is evident in the launch of the State Land Online Application portal, which is transparent, efficient and accessible to all.

Lessees can now apply for State land leases without leaving the comfort of their homes, their businesses or farms and is readily available through the Ministry's website.

The Ministry will also revamp another online portal in the coming months, which is the

Online Consent Application. State lessees will be able to apply for consent through the MyLeaseInfo portal. This will enable lessees to track status of their applications online, and at the same time reduce turnaround time in processing applications for consent in all of their land dealings.

The door of creativity and innovativeness is what the Ministry has been revamping on to improve and pursue to 'go-digital' in its processes which I must commend. This new Ministry online systems are not outsourced, Mr. Speaker, which would be a costly exercise. This Ministry online portals/systems are developed by our very own innovative 'in-house' developers.

Mr. Speaker, therefore, with the budget provision, the Ministry will pursue its commitment towards:

- the digitization of lease records.
- efficient streamlining process of survey plan examination and approvals. The Ministry will also enable chartered approved survey plans to be viewed online via the VanuaView platform, and scanned plans will be freely available on the Ministry of Land's website.
- continuous free access to the Vanua View online and Fiji's Land Information System through the provision of \$150,000 in this Budget.
- digitization and upgrading of Fiji's geological Information with a provision of \$120,000 which is aimed at updating the geological maps currently with the Mineral Resources Department.

In the area of mining, Mr. Speaker, in order to sustainably develop Fiji's mineral potential, a provision of \$1.02 million has been allocated, which is an increase of \$128,000 from last year's budget.

Mr. Speaker, this provision is to fund mining-related policies, provide validated information for our mining investors, monitoring of mining activities and sustainably facilitating the exploration and development of the mineral and petroleum resources of the country.

The Mining Division, Mr. Speaker, currently monitors seven Mining Leases, 35 Exploration Licences and 38 Quarries.

Mr. Speaker, in order to ensure sustainable extraction of sand and gravel and other stones from rivers, an allocation of \$62,000 has now been given for the baseline survey of Potential River Aggregate Sites. This item was asked many times during the FijiFirst Government in the past but was turned down. With this budget, we will be able to get this baseline survey organised so we can track usage and stock against the baseline environmental concerns for river back retention across the country.

With Government's commitment, Mr. Speaker, to providing access to clean water as a fundamental right of every Fijian, a total of \$3.5 million has been allocated for Groundwater Assessment and Development for Large and Smaller Islands. This represents of almost an addition of \$1 million from the previous budget, and this will enable the Ministry to do more for the red zone areas of our island home.

It is to be noted, Mr. Speaker, that there are some communities who still depend on rainwater harvesting system and hand-dug wells which gets worse during the drought.

With the Mineral Exploration and Geological Mapping, Mr. Speaker, in this year's Budget, there is provision for the purchase of a vessel for mineral exploration and geological mapping within Fiji waters, including coastal assessment and surveys for vulnerable communities.

Mr. Speaker, when it comes to revenue collection, I am happy to report that the Ministry up to this month has collected a revenue of \$21.2 million, which is an increase of \$2.3 million for the same period last year with the provision of all the services provided by the Ministry, we will continue in our effort in the collection of revenue and arrears through processes that are mandated by law. Effective from 1st August, 2023, VAT will increase from 9 percent to 15 percent, so we take this opportunity in this national address to encourage those who still owe leases to pay before or on 31st July, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, to assist in the diversification of the economy and income generation for rural Fijians and commercial agricultural investments, we will continue to focus on maintaining as much good agricultural land as possible. There is also an allocation in that respect of \$123,799 for the Land Use Master Plan.

Disaster Management and Resilience, Mr. Speaker, we have an allocation of \$12,000 that would allow us, the Government of Fiji, to co-share with satellite lease provider, INTELSAT (IS18), based in Washington to monitor seismic activities and its operations so that we can update our NDMO Operations here in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the allocation of \$80,000 will also fund this initiative as the expert of knowledge and skillset which has significantly assisted or is of assistance to areas such as Nabavatu Village in Macuata landslip which resulted in cracks on the ground and houses and affects livelihood of those in that area.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will also continue its work in monitoring the sustainable use of our natural resources through:

- foreshore development activities;
- tracking down of illegal land subdivisions;
- monitoring sand and gravel extraction;
- groundwater extraction rates and use;
- illegal land dealings and form of land use; and
- exploration, quarrying and mining operations.

Mr Speaker, before I resume my seat, let us look at some 'real cooked up numbers' of the past. Honourable Maharaj had talked about that in his speech today. I mean, Mr. Speaker, the real cooked up numbers from 2015-2023.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, from 2015-2022-2023 Budget. The revised Budget was \$34,662,841,621.41, over \$34 billion. That was budgeted, revised by the FijiFirst Government from 2015-2022-2023. How much did they spend which was the actual? \$29,823,378,206.67. What was the variance?

Mr. Speaker, \$4,839,463,414.74. So, to the people of Fiji, from 2015-2022-2023 Budget, hear it in this Parliament today, you got short-changed by the FijiFirst Government by a whopping \$4,839,463,414.74 by your own Estimates. The honourable Usamate wanted a budget for the people of Fiji, a real budget from this Budget.

Well, they fell short. They fell short, Mr. Speaker, big time, from 2015-2022-2023 by a whopping close to \$5 billion of what they budgeted for. They enticed the people of Fiji that they will spend and yet they did not come up to the mark because their revenue collection was up in the sky and speculative. They had pulled wool over our eyes for all these years about what they wanted to do, Mr. Speaker, and at the same breath, short-changed the people of Fiji by close to \$5 billion in

their Budget from 2015 to 2022.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.W. VOSAROGO.- They are trying to ask us how we are going to come up with \$680 million. People of Fiji are supposed to be asking you, how you budgeted for your budget over these years and failed to deliver on \$5 million of what you budgeted for?

To conclude, Mr Speaker, Sir, I support the Budget that was presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister after a very long time, Mr. Speaker, in a timely manner in this Parliament on 30th June, 2023. Thank you, very much, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, to give his Right of Reply. Just before he takes the floor, I would like to remind you, honourable Members, that he will not be limited in his time of Right of Reply as this was approved in the Business Committee.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to especially and once again thank you for your steady hand in guiding us all on the acceptable standards of parliamentary decorum and dignity. Yours, Mr. Speaker, is not an easy task as you preside over hours of deliberations and provide wise counsel in the process to keep us on the straight and narrow. But, Mr. Speaker, we can all agree, however, we agree or disagree with each other, your calm hands in on the gavel and we appreciate that and we are grateful for that.

Mr. Speaker, let me start by saying there are two Hindi sayings that I will use to describe the Budget contribution from the Opposition but before that, I want to thank the honourable Prime Minister. I know honourable Naivalurua yesterday asked the question, is the honourable Prime Minister happy with the Budget?

Let me tell him, the honourable Prime Minister did not appoint me to, please, him or to make him happy. The honourable Prime Minister appointed me and his Government to provide economic prosperity, give freedom and stability to this country.

In the last six months, Mr. Speaker, he has shown the country and the people of this country that he is not only a compassionate but a gracious Leader and one who is determined to provide that steady leadership.

Mr. Speaker, the more I listen to the debate, and I want to thank all honourable Members for their contribution. I especially want to thank my colleagues on this side, the honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, because what they have done, Mr. Speaker, they have not only made my task easy, but they have also in their own wisdom, understanding, wrote their speeches, studied the Budget, and in the process, have made excellent contribution and debunked most of what came from the Opposition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know there are a number of things that the Opposition was expecting from the Budget because it came out very clearly as I had predicted, because it comes out of what they were saying before the Election and what they said after they lost the Election, and what they have been saying for the last six months. So, they were saying during the Election campaign, "Oh! If Sitiveni Rabuka and Biman Prasad and SODELPA if they come into Government, they will take away your social welfare. They will take away Free School, they will bring a scholarship that will discriminate you. They will ruin the economy." In fact, when the negotiations were going on, Mr.

Speaker, Sir, to form the government, some of them were calling people and saying, “Sitiveni Rabuka will ruin the economy.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last six months, they went around the country, we know and, we have seen this. So, their expectation of this Budget was that suddenly, Biman Prasad as Minister of Finance is going to come to Parliament and announce that we are cutting social welfare, that we are taking away tuition fees for students, that there will be a very hard budget.

But when the Budget was delivered, when I was delivering my Budget, Mr. Speaker, I actually looked at my colleagues on the other side. When I began, they were pretty straight, so by the time I finished they were disappointed. There is a good Hindi saying, it says, “*khisyan billi khamba noche*”. When metaphorically translated, it means, embarrassed or a shamed person to bend his or her feeling by quarrelling, and that is what they have done.

All they have done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last two days is to quarrel about what they did and what they did in the last 10 years to 15 years.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The other Hindi saying that is very apt to describe what they have been saying in their Budget contribution goes like this, Mr. Speaker, “*ulta chor kotwal ke daante*”, Figuratively, it is like the thieves telling the guards, “Oh! Do not do this.”

This is a Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which inherited the mess, the looters, and we are still finding everyday Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica said, I just found out last week, another \$16 million...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... - Tuna Stabilization Fund. There is a claim from MWH and he, in his contribution, as Minister for Infrastructure did not say a word about FRA. He presided over the worst management of infrastructure after spending \$3.1 billion. Look at the state of the roads and bridges today! He did not talk about that deliberately, he was dancing all over the place.

(Laughter)

But he did not talk about FRA.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Like Michael Jackson...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to put my colleagues at ease because if I did the microwave that they are talking about, I will talk for about three hours in my right of reply. But I do not intend to do that.

Mr. Speaker, I want to say this, and I know they do not like it because they still have not got into those chairs and relax themselves that they are now actually in the Opposition. So, what we heard over the last two or three days is, “FijiFirst did this, FijiFirst did that, this is what you inherited”, that is all they could say, Mr. Speaker, because they were totally taken aback at the way in which we

have come out and crafted this Budget. They are also worried that this Budget had overwhelming support so far, Mr. Speaker.

(Laughter)

Honourable Premila Kumar said, “Why is Consumer Council supporting the Budget?” It is an organisation. The Fiji Council of Social Services supported the Budget, the business community, the Employers Federation, the international donors and partners, they all supported the Budget because they honestly know that this is a Budget which is not only fiscally prudent, and my colleague, the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources, just now debunked all that they were saying about debt. One of the things that they kept saying was, “Oh, debt went because of COVID-19” or “Oh, we looked after our people, that is why we had to borrow”.

But Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the 2018 Election, they actually produced a fake Budget. It was a fake Budget and I remember being in Parliament at that time on the Opposition side, where they presented a budget where they cooked the numbers, and honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources is absolutely right. They tried to show to the people before the Election that this was the expenditure, but there was a whopping \$1 billion hole. They produced a budget, they forecasted the revenue, but the money was never there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after having done all that, the result was so close that when we challenged the result, they hid in Level 9 for two days and we were looking for them. that, Mr. Speaker, created so much uncertainty and instability and created a situation where people, the investors, were really worried.

What happened in 2019 before COVID-19 hit us, Mr. Speaker? Our economy actually contracted by negative 1.9 percent.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- COVID-19 saved us!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In fact, COVID-19 saved them a little bit...

(Laughter)

...but could not save them fully, that is, why they are sitting on the other side.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by 2019, the economy was grinding to a halt, there was negative growth, and when COVID-19 hit us, we went deeper into the hole.

They only talked about borrowing. Yes, we had concessional financing -World Bank, ADB, they looked at many other countries, but what defining for Fiji was this. We had the fourth highest contraction in our economy in the world, and the reason was, what happened in 2018 and 2019.

When we got into 2022, of course, we were recovering from a 17 percent contraction, and they talked about the economic growth. Not one of them acknowledged the fact that when COVID-19 hit us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, all our international partners and donors knew that the Government had nothing in its coffers. So, we had Australia, New Zealand, the World Bank, ADB, we had all kinds of support not only in terms of direct budget support, but also medical consumables, vaccines, those were all provided to Fiji in a way that was unprecedented. So, none of them acknowledged that. They were all in Government, but not one of them acknowledged the fact that Australia and New

Zealand came to our rescue.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They were taking credit. They went into the Election in 2022, taking credit that they looked after the people. But our people, Mr. Speaker, to a large extent, were looked after by international partners, donors and lenders who had provided concessional loans.

I sat in the Opposition with you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for eight years, and I have never had this kind of convoluted, confused and contradictory contribution from the Opposition. So, let me just explain the contradictions.

On one hand they all seem to have said, “Oh, this is the biggest expenditure budget, you have to borrow more. You are spending more.” Then, on the other side, they are saying, “No, no, you are not giving enough, our people are going to suffer. This is not the budget for the poor, this is the budget for the rich.” Then they are saying, “Oh, why are you increasing Company Tax to 25 percent?”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know what they want.

(Laughter)

What sort of economic logic? I mean, you have to be logical. If you say, you are raising Company Tax, and then you are saying you are not giving enough, I do not know what they are talking about. It is very hard to be able to, sort of, respond, and that is why I am going to keep it short because a lot of things they said is not worth responding, because the people of this country understand and that is why they are so worried.

They seem to be carrying on. I know some of the speeches are coming from the man whose reasons no one has explained, who managed to kick himself out of Parliament in January soon after having been elected, but when we offered...

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is your point of Order?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Why do you want to attack someone who is not here? If you want to talk about someone, talk about us here.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You have another leader outside, that's why!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What's your Point of Order?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Our leader is here, our Party leader is outside. You want to talk about someone, talk about someone here.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is bit of a hogwash, because they do not understand. In fact, I thank honourable Usamate because he has given me some points to

raise.

In fact, it is quite embarrassing, Mr. Speaker, and I was very disappointed. There was one opportunity for the honourable Members on the other side to break loose from the dictatorship that they were clogged in for many years. Yet, they come into this Parliament, and they do not recognise their leader. They praised the leaders....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- They kept referring to them who are outside.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, they are referring to both of them outside.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- How many leaders there?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker! Standing Order 81 - Response to misrepresentation. I would like to clarify this, he has been talking about the leader. We had made reference in our speech, and you may like to look at the *Daily Hansard*, I have made reference to Frank Bainimarama as the former leader, who did not eat the plane or ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am clarifying, the statement I made, and that statement was made in relation to the leader who was here then, not in relation to this leader.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is confusing!.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- You should never be confused, Mr. Speaker, Sir, SODELPA also had two leaders - one was the Party leader and the other one is the leader who is sitting here. So, you should know better. That is the clarification I want to give and it is up to us, as a Party, we want to call whoever a leader, we will do it. But I just want to clarify that my statement was in relation to the former leader, and I want to clarify that for your record.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In this Parliament, honourable Kumar should know that the honourable Leader of the Opposition is a leader.

Mr. Speaker, the other point that I want to respond to which has been made by honourable Naupoto today, right from the first session of Parliament, obviously, they talked about how the Coalition Government is not following the Constitution, how the constitutional process is being bypassed and, in fact, Mr. Speaker, when we were in Opposition, we were constantly reminded about the Constitution. Their General Secretary is a lawyer, he was the drafter of the Constitution, and he knows the Constitution. Honourable Koya know this. If, at any time, anyone, including the Opposition, feels that the Constitution is not being followed, take it to the court. That is what they should do.

Mr. Speaker, they have not filed any case, any breach of Constitution by this Government, but they keep talking about it. They talk about stability, they talk about creating confidence, yet, these are the very people who created this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is absolutely important for us as a government to be able to understand what the Opposition has been saying and this is an opportunity for us to respond.

The other syndrome that I think the Opposition reply, kind of, signified, Mr. Speaker, is what I call the 'Stockholm Syndrome'. It is a psychological syndrome when people remain captured. It is an old syndrome where you are looking at prisoner and the captor. What I heard from the Opposition over the last two or three days when they talked about the microwave budget, when they talked about what their former leaders were doing, they do not seem to be getting out of there. There is so much captivity there, they were so afraid. I think a lot of them are still afraid, even the new ones who have joined are afraid, and she was trying to explain the Party's structure.

The FijiFirst Party is like a company. It has only two shareholders and both of them are out. There are all kind of employees. Mr. Speaker, they are all employees of a company in which there are only shareholders because their constitution allows only two people to become the leader. That is why they probably referring him as a leader.

Mr. Speaker, in fact I do not know how their constitution was accepted and how they were registered as a political party.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Fiji is watching you.

Mr. Speaker, the other point that they have been making is that this is a big spending budget. It certainly bigger than what I would have preferred personally, but the spending that we are engaging is now all the catch-up spending that has been necessary for years. If you have listened to our honourable Ministers on the Government side, the constant theme that has come through is the maintenance of facilities and we know and every Minister on this side knows the pathetic state of our facilities. So, that is what I mean by the substance, Mr. Speaker.

As we have just pointed out - I pointed out and the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources pointed out, they were putting out budgets in which there was not enough revenue. So, they were telling the people that they were going to do this, fixed this and that, but nothing was being done. Therefore, I want to remind the Opposition also, Mr. Speaker, about the findings of the Fiscal Review Committee that instead of spending \$5 on maintenance for every dollar of capital expenditure, the previous Government spent only 20 cents on every dollar of capital expenditure.

The previous Government built shiny new things for Ministers to open and give speeches, then after the cameras were gone, it will forget about them whether you talked about Labasa Campus, how Navua was done, whether you talk about the moving of equipment from Ba to Navosa just for the opening, was all for show, Mr. Speaker.

The Government's Asset Maintenance Model has been described as build, deteriorate and rebuild. That is the sort of mismanagement that has to be turned around and that is why we told them that \$200 million is allocated towards maintenance and that is expenditure. A lot of it will be capital work. A lot of jobs will be created. Small contractors would be able to take advantage of that.

Mr. Speaker, what we are also doing through this Budget is to fix the system. We have had to step in and fix with millions, simply to ensure that they receive some additional reward for the work that they do. Teachers were similarly ignored for many years with no annual appraisals carried out.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, they were just pretending. It was a government that was pretending, and we have been left with the mess. So, they talked about a big spending budget, but they have not

talked about what we need to do now as a Government.

There are things that went into that microwave that they talk about that will never be back there again. So, they talked about a microwave budget, but it was an analogy that describes themselves because in the microwave, they tried to put instant noodles. It smelled like noodles but when the people actually went and tried to get out the substance, there was nothing there. That is the microwave budget that they talk about. So, this is a Budget, that spending the money we need to bring the Government back to do real things and not just pretending.

Mr. Speaker, the people know the situation with the VAT. I think, the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources covered that very well. The 15 percent VAT is not a new thing. They had 15 percent VAT from 2011 to 2015, and there were only six items that were zero-rated. So, the argument that I had from them today and yesterday as well, that this is going to burden the people. But when they were presiding on 15 percent VAT, they did not worry about it.

So, this obsession now of more debt and more spending, Mr. Speaker, is all hogwash. They know that it was the obsession of the FijiFirst Government and their false belief that we can continue to borrow more and live beyond our means that led to our debt problem that we have inherited.

I am surprised, Mr. Speaker, that the Opposition Members are so brainwashed. They still tend to believe that there was nothing wrong with them increasing the debt from \$2.7 billion to a staggering \$10 billion, similar to the Stockholm Syndrome. So, independent reports, Mr. Speaker, had a very clear message on the fiscal direction and I want to repeat some of those because it is important.

When we came into Government, we had three independent reports, the:

1. World Bank's Public Expenditure Report;
2. International Monetary Fund's Report; and
3. Independent Fiscal Review Committee Report.

All these Reports clearly pointed out three key facts.

1. Fiji was headed towards a fiscal disaster, if we did not embark on an immediate path of fiscal consolidation which we have begun with this Budget.
2. A credible and meaningful fiscal consolidation was not possible without addressing the revenue side of the Budget because the ill-thought tax cuts and large tax giveaways by the delusional FijiFirst Government had deprived the nation billions of dollars.
3. This deep routed fiscal problem did not start, as I have said, during COVID-19. In fact, it started in 2014 when the then Minister of Economy what I call started with this experimental economics to increase spending without raising sufficient taxes.

So, I just want to remind the Opposition that their hypocrisy, Mr. Speaker, as I have already said can be aptly described by that *Hindi* saying, "*Uta chor kotwal ke daante*". This is the hypocrisy that is coming from the other side. Again, I do not want to go into that.

FijiFirst were on higher expenditure than ours. They actually lied, Mr. Speaker, on the other side. If you look at FijiFirst Government's 2017-2018 Budget, they had a planned expenditure of \$4.4 billion and their 2018-2019 Budget had allocated \$4.7 billion. That is much higher than this Budget, Mr. Speaker, and that is not during COVID-19. Sir, 2017-2018 Budget had a planned expenditure of \$4.4 billion and 2018-2019 (well before COVID-19) Budget had allocated \$4.7 billion. So, they were all lying. They said this is the highest expenditure.

The major problems with those two Budgets was that it was based on an extremely unrealistic and fake revenue target with a revenue gap, the figures do not lie. So, the Budget hold was \$1 billion in expenditure promises because there was no money.

Mr. Speaker, what we did when we came into Government, as I have said earlier, we started fixing the leak and that is another analogy here which I want to talk about. When you take over a sinking boat, the best way to save that boat from sinking is to first fix the leak, and we are still finding those leaks, we are still trying to fix those and there would be millions of dollars that would be needed to not only stop the leakage but also compensate what has been leaked out and what this Government will have to pay.

Mr. Speaker, they were, again, confused, honourable Usamate was completely confused. On one hand he talked about the nominal debt, then he talked about debt to GDP ratio, but he knows that this Budget has actually arrested the key indicator of fiscal prudence and, that is, debt to GDP ratio and it is now on a manageable target, it is on manageable track.

Let us look at the \$4.3 billion expenditure, Mr. Speaker, let us dissect it a little bit. The budgeted expenditure of \$4.3 billion has to be carefully dissected and we talked about it, so I just wanted to repeat because they do not seem to understand this, or they are deliberately misleading the people.

If we look at the \$4.3 billion expenditure, that includes \$346 million in VAT expenditure, Sir, that Government has to pay when we produce goods and services, we also have to pay VAT on all our expenditures. So that is an additional expenditure as a result of our tax policy, pension, salaries, interest payments. So, we had to increase the VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent, and Government's VAT expenditure, Sir, have also increased from \$188 million to \$346 million, an increase of \$160 million. That, in a way, explains some of the additional expenditure. Then we have some of the additional expenditures in terms of paying the debt or the dues, for example, USP Grant.

Let me debunk another myth that there is nothing new in this Budget - that was the theme that was coming from the other side. If they think that forgiving \$650 million TELS debt is not new, then I do not know what it is. If they think that lifting the burden on 53,000 students, their families, their guardians is not new, I do not know what it is.

Is an increase in Social Welfare Budget to over \$200 million not new? Is the increase of 15 percent in monthly social welfare allowance and 25 percent increase for those who are above 70 years not new? Is our concentration on the budget for the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the empowerment of the *iTaukei* community not new? So, there are a number of features there, Mr. Speaker, that they cannot see and, obviously, they seem to underestimate what is in the Budget.

Let me move on to some of the tax measures because that is where they have been totally confused. On one hand, they are saying, "Why are you increasing the VAT", and on the other hand they are saying, "Why are you are increasing the company tax?" Then they are saying, "Oh, this is a pro-rich budget." They talk about company tax and in the same breath, they say this is a pro-rich Budget.

Mr. Speaker, the Opposition seems to also claim that increasing taxes will harm economic recovery and growth. I do not know where they are coming from? As an Economist, Mr. Speaker, I cannot see what they are saying - that these budgetary measures is going to harm the economy.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, if we do not take these measures now, the impact on the economy would be worse and would have been avoidable under the previous trajectory, irresponsibly, orchestrated by the previous Government.

By maintaining macroeconomic and macro-fiscal sustainability, Mr. Speaker, in this Budget, we are sending a very strong signal to the economic investors. In fact, the investors are very, very pleased, Mr. Speaker, because when you look at the private sector....

(Hon. K.K. Lal interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not know, maybe he is suffering from something, Mr. Speaker. In my ears, I get distracted. He appears to be a complete nuisance.

Mr. Speaker, the fiscal prudence in the Budget has given more confidence to the private sector so I do not know where they are coming from with respect to saying that there is no confidence.

They should also note, Mr. Speaker, as I have said in my Budget Address, we want to bring certainty and consistency, and we want no surprises, and the business community wants that. So, for departure tax increases, it is gradual. It used to be \$200 two years ago and we have now only increased it to \$225 from 1st August and \$240 from 1st January, 2024, so still below what it used to be.

The same for corporate taxes which used to be at 20 percent but now we are just increasing it to 25 percent. VAT used to be 15 percent with only six zero items, now we have 22 VAT-free items. It is important to note that we are not bringing taxes like ECAL, STT, so this argument that it will hurt the tourism industry, we have had good discussion with the tourism industry, and the tourism industry...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think his statement needs to be corrected immediately, he is misleading Parliament because he is saying that only six items were under zero VAT. In fact, 21 items were zero VAT, check speech. Your speech says 21, and then you are saying you are adding one more. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think honourable Kumar is overly excited by the arguments. What I had very clearly said, Mr. Speaker, VAT used to 15 percent with only 6 zero-rated items. That was from 2011 and 2016. She did not hear it properly. Now, we have 22 VAT free items, it is important to note that we are not bringing ECAL and STT.

Mr. Speaker, there has been a lot of talk about water tax issue and the SRT deduction. In fact, I sent my Permanent Secretary and Officials to have a briefing for parliamentary Members. Of course, they invited others, but all these things were explained to them, but they still ignored that, so let me just correct that.

Mr. Speaker, I want to touch on the criticism both, inside Parliament and outside Parliament. How has the Government restructured the taxation of bottled water companies? The Opposition has tried, in this Parliament, to say that there is something sinister. Sir, they come up with this conspiracy theory in all these. I know the ever present ghost of someone that they rely on has made similar noises. Their General Secretary, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, made similar noises outside of Parliament, as well as the Fiji Labour Party Leader. They are all suggesting that because the Government exempted water bottling companies from income tax, the Government is giving away millions of dollars in lost revenue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us remember that this is from the same Government that they were in that passed a special law to free certain special people from their obligation to pay Capital Gains Tax.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Even though, Mr. Speaker, we have now reversed the special law that they made for special people caused the taxpayers of Fiji \$70 million.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And others rushed through the loophole. That is an example of a corrupt law.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me go back to the water tax and let me say this clearly for everyone's benefit, inside and outside of Parliament. The restructuring of taxes on bottled water companies will cause the Fiji Government nothing.

HON. RO F. TUISAWAU.- Listen and learn!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Listen, listen, listen, very important

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Listen and learn something

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Instead it is projected to produce more tax revenue in the coming financial year not less. Mr. Speaker, Sir, why is this? People may ask how we end up working with the bottled water industry to take more taxes from them than before? Important question. The answer is very simple, and they should listen to this.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Listen, honourable Ketan.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We were approached by the bottled water industry, not Fiji Water, but the industry as a whole, they asked that the Coalition Government restructure the taxation of the industry so that foreign owners could claim a tax credit in their home country Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the tax they paid in Fiji.

Let us remember Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the water resource tax that Fiji charges is also the highest in the world. In this financial year, we expect to collect more than \$80 million from water resource tax alone. Most of this water resource tax is of course collected from one industry player, Fiji Water which is foreign owned. The industry proposal was to make the income of the bottled water businesses tax free. The corporate tax that the Government receives from the water bottlers is almost twenty-times less than the water tax.

HON. K.K. LAL.- So!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Listen!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- But even then, we do not want to lose that tax, even though it is twenty-times less and that is why the bottled water industry proposed that we increase the water resource tax to make up for the loss corporate tax. That is why Mr. Speaker, Sir, the higher rate of

water resource tax has been increased from 18 cents to 19.5 cents a litre to recover any income tax that has been lost. As a result of this proposal, Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone wins. The Government collects more revenue, not less.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C PRASAD.- The industry participants receive the foreign tax credits where they are available and the industry continues to grow, meaning significantly more water resource tax in the coming years. We expect this to rise to more than \$100 million in the 2024-2025 financial year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You are dealing with a billion dollar industry.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, it is completely therefore false, malicious for people like Mr. Mahendra Pal Chaudhry to claim as he did last week that Fiji will lose hundreds of millions of dollars in tax. The Government will lose nothing, the Government will in fact collect more tax. Let us not forget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it was while Mr. Chaudhary was Finance Minister in the Military government back in 2008 that the government tried to block exports of Fiji Water to force Fiji Water to pay more tax. That move was a clumsy, shortsighted...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Sit down!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... piece of attempted blackmail.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What is your Standing Order?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, relevance. Last time I spoke about the Vice-Chancellor...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What Standing Order? Say it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. K.K. LAL.- Standing Order 74, Mr. Speaker. Sir. The last time I spoke about the USP Vice-Chancellor, the honourable Member raised a Point of Order and he said those who were not present here, they should not be speaking about them.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What is he saying?

HON. K. LAL.- He is referring to the former Prime Minister and former Minister of Finance, Mahendra Pal Chaudhary who is not here to defend himself. So, let us not bring other people who are not present here. Also speaking about our General-Secretary who is not present, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Please show some respect to our leaders. Thank you.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You in the Labour Party?

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you very much for your Point of Order, honourable Ketan.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He is getting more confused, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is in relation to water tax I am talking about because I have to respond to that. In fact, that decision damaged Fiji's reputation for foreign investments in a big way and I think they know that.

The other one, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they talked about quite forcefully is the social responsibility tax which they kind of spin as a pro-rich policy and how we have restructured it. What we have done here is to simplify and streamline the overly complicated personal income tax regime and made it slightly fair. What we done is ...

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they cannot just listen.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is just so annoying, so we have now basically merged the PAYE...

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and Social Responsibility Tax (SRT) together in a single tax tabled with a 5 percent reduction in (SRT) across the board as it was unfairly high and targeted a small group of lawyers and accountants by the previous government. Again, it was made to punish some people. There is a history and let me explain. When the previous government introduced...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Shut up!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is a good one.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... SRT, they got it fundamentally wrong. The SRT was applied on full income rather than marginal income because any good taxation system, for it to be progressive, you should look at the marginal tax rate. So, they applied on full income rather than the marginal income on additional income which should be the case to make the tax system progressive.

By that foolish change, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had hundreds of taxpayers earning gross income of over \$270,000, having a lower net take-home pay compared to those earning below them. You do not have that anywhere in the world. So, if you are earning \$270,000 and above, after the SRT, your take home pay would actually be lower than someone who is earning \$200,000 or whatever the number is there. That is how absurd the rate was. After the complaints, the Government recognised this stupidity and we have reversed the policy to apply the SRT not on full income but only Mr.

Speaker, Sir, on marginal income which is the incremental income or additional income above \$270,000.

This means that the anomaly highlighted earlier was eliminated, however while these anomalies were sorted there was another major problem because the corporate tax rate was set at 20 percent and what happened when this SRT came in, the PAYE and salary combined was much higher, in fact, maximum of 49 percent then with hundreds of people scaping SRT. So those who were directors were receiving salaries, they escaped SRT by forming companies or paying the reduced tax rate of 20 percent and taking tax free dividends.

Because there was no progressivity, we were losing income. The only group left paying SRT in that case were the lawyers and the accountants who by the virtue of law could not form companies. That was why it was done because it was targeted, it was very unfair. So, what we have done is to make it more fairer, make it more progressive, nothing. We suggest that we are favoring the rich.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the kind of uninformed debate that we have heard from the Opposition in the last two days. A couple of other things that I wanted to quickly point out, honourable Naupoto talked about the drug problem, and he was talking about police in this Budget. As the honourable Minister explained, we provided additional funding for police patrol, police beat, we know drug is a problem. Let me just remind some of them and especially honourable Usamate because he seems to completely ignore that. Honourable Pio Tikoduadua, while in the Opposition two years or three years ago, moved a motion in this very Parliament to have a national inquiry on the drug problem. What happened? He was assaulted by the then Prime Minister and checked out of Parliament and all of them were sitting there gulping the injustice that was done to this man because he raised an important issue.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- *Isa*, sad.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We know there is a serious drug problem in this country and already the honourable Minister had laid down what he needs to do.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the level of debate that we had from the Opposition. I wanted to finish it in an hour but I have gone past, if I followed the microwave I would have gone for three hours. As has been said by my honourable colleagues on this side, this Budget has fundamentally put the country back on track. Since we have come into Government, there is a sense of freedom, optimism and exuberance within the country.

You can look at all the indicators, you look at the indicators with respect to tourism numbers, you look at the spending you look at the expectations of the investors, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica talked about the pipeline, the banks are telling us that the uptake on loans and borrowings by the private sector is very buoyant, and so all the indicators that are there, shows that our economy was on the right trajectory. What this Budget has done is to create a fine balance to looking after our people, making sure that our spending on health, education, infrastructure and social welfare is adequate. That, Mr. Speaker, Sir, brings the Budget into focus.

One last point that I wanted to discuss because a lot of misinformation has also come from the other side. When they talked about TELS forgiveness, they deliberately forgot or they deliberately manipulated the narrative or tried to manipulate the narrative, but I am pretty sure, that is not going to work because the young people are celebrating; university students are celebrating and high school students are celebrating. They know what this Government has done, they understand what it means. So, they are equating, they are saying, "Oh, you have replaced loan repayment with bond." So, there is no chain. Mr. Speaker, Sir, how naïve can they be. Bond is

about students serving our country. We did that. I studied on a scholarship, and I signed the bond for four years for which the scholarship duration was, to serve the country, and if I did not, I had to pay.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Exactly.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That is not forgiven.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You do not equate a bond with a loan that you have to pay. It is not cash. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are talking about all these misinformation that Government has lost its revenue. They do not understand a simple thing. When the Government gives loan, it is an expenditure, it is supposed to be a revolving fund, it is supposed to be paid, but as we had pointed out, in many ways, that loan was already forgiven. Sir, TELS told us 21,000 students paid, they spent close to about \$150 million to \$190 million....

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Point of Order! He is misleading Parliament, Sir. The point is that that money was never forgiven. Students had to pay the loan but for the last three years because of COVID and all, they were given a break. As soon as the economy improves, they were supposed to pay back. So that was the formula. Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has been misleading Parliament simply by saying there is so much of excitement, et cetera, but he fails to understand as the Minister of Finance and also looking after the growth of the economy, he should understand better that this is not a sustainable model, which means that we all have to pay that amount of money every year.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Just listen to the lecturer.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Kumar and I published the article together. I think honourable Kumar is more confused.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You seem to be the only one that is not confused.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What I was simply saying is that, 21,000 students who took loans, TELS does not even have the record of those people. So that money that was spent on 21,000 students is dead money already. The rate at which the collection was coming, I am not talking about forgiveness during COVID-19, she is misinterpreting what I am saying. I am just saying that what we have crafted as part of the new scholarship is a real well thought out strategy to ensure that we produce a labour market requirement that is commensurate with what the economy needs, what are the human resource needs, there will be proper planning, students would be put into different skill area, different subject areas, different professional programmes and there will be both equity and access to scholarships.

Government was not collecting the money anyway. So, what we have done, is we are forgiving all that was there. Some students who have a small percentage would have paid everything, that is fine, we cannot go back. However, for those who still owe, all their loan agreements will be converted into bond agreement. If they had served like four years and they are left with one and a half years, the bond agreement will be for only 1.5 years. It is a very good scheme and that will be good for the country and good for the students.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I had said in my Budget Address, this may seem a tough Budget, but it is a very compassionate one. It is a well thought out Budget, it brings into picture in a particular way fiscal prudence, and it will provide the confidence that is needed not just to the private

sector, but our international partners, donors, lending agencies and to our people. This is our first Budget and this Budget, we understand is not going to solve every problem, given the magnitude of the problem that we have. So we do ask the Opposition and our people understand this already, but we have to make sure that the Opposition understands this that we need patience, we have to make sure that what we have provided for in this Budget, our honourable Ministers understand this very well. We are strengthening our Planning Office within the Ministry of Finance, our monitoring and evaluation will be much stronger and much more focused so that we are able to deliver the expenditure that had been provided for in the Budget.

With those words, I want to once again thank the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on the Budget, including my two colleagues, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica and honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka, all the honourable Ministers, Permanent Secretaries who made very good presentations to the Ministry of Finance in the formulation of the Budget.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank my Permanent Secretary who made very good presentations to the Ministry of Finance in the formulation of the Budget. I also want to take this opportunity to thank by Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shiri Gounder. A very competent Permanent Secretary and all his staff who have found the process that we used to formulate the Budget seamless, much more congenial, easy yet it gave time to everyone to think through this Budget carefully. So I want to extend my gratitude and thanks to all those who worked very hard in the office to get this Budget out.

Also, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the people who participated in the Economic Summit. All the thousands who made written submission as well as the Chairman of the Fiscal Review Committee, Mr. Richard Naidu and all the members because they worked very hard in compiling the statistics, going through the details and putting out a report independently which informed the country as to the state of our finances, our economic situation and that helped not only us but the people at large to understand how and why we have got this Budget. I want to thank all of them.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, I commend this Budget and I invite the Opposition to do something different, get out of that microwave and support this Budget, *vinaka vakalevu*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I was listening to the Right of Reply and the fiery exchanges. I heard correctly that questions were coming from this side of the House asking that the honourable Minister of Finance just explain a bit on the so much talked about exemption of bottled water taxation. That has been done. Despite that, there were still Point of Orders being raised to try and point score on how the Budget has progressed.

Honourable Members, pursuant to Standing Order 99(3), the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 (Bill No. 3 of 2023) has been read a second time and without questions being put, the Bill and the Estimates now stand referred to the Committee of Supply.

Before we go to the Committee of Supply, I would like to take this time to adjourn Parliament for dinner before we get back and go straight into the Committee of Supply. I will explain later when go onto the Committee of Supply on what is the objective for this evening and what we should achieve and complete. The Parliament is adjourned, and dinner is being served in the Big Committee Room.

The Parliament adjourned at 7.13 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 8.25 p.m.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, for the benefit of those who are experiencing the Budget process for the first time, Parliament will now resolve into Committee of Supply to consider each Head in the Budget Estimates. It is envisaged that this process will be completed on Thursday evening after which the Committee of Supply will then vote on the Schedules and Clauses of the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023.

For the information of honourable Members, we will attempt to complete debate and votes on the Heads of 1 to 22 before we adjourn tonight. I know it is getting late into the night honourable Members, but this is how we were taught by the previous government on how to sit late into the night and address Budget processes.

For the information of all honourable Members, please take note that for the Committee stage, I will be sitting down there with the Secretary-General and Members will refer to me as “Mr. Chairman”. The mace will be placed (pointing to the mace) on the lower brackets signifying that the Parliament is in Committee.

Honourable Members, please take further note that the Secretary-General will announce each Head separately and once the Head is announced, you know the time that we are in, there will be no repeat nor going back. May I repeat that, there will be no repeat or once we have covered the Head and then all of a sudden you want to take us back again, I think I will not allow that to happen.

Honourable Members may then speak on that Head and you may speak for more than once on each Head. Please take note that in some of the Heads, there will be several programmes and activities listed. I remind honourable Members that we will deal with these progressively and we will not regress to the Programmes and Activities that have been earlier discussed.

Honourable Members may also move amendments to the Estimates under the respective Heads. If a Member moves an amendment, I will call for a seconder and then debate will ensue and at the end of the debate, the mover will have a Right of Reply and this will be followed by the vote on the amendment. All the votes on the amendment will be done through acclamation.

Please take further note that the final vote on the Head will be taken electronically. For the information of the honourable Members, amendments are limited to those permitted under Standing Orders 100(2) and these are an increase, decrease or removal of the item or subhead from the Head being debated. And there are no further amendments and debates, we will proceed to the vote on the Head and then we will continue to the next Head.

Honourable Members, please, take note that the amendment slips (I think you have already got them) and copies of Standing Orders 100 have been placed on your tables to assist you during the Committee of Supply stage. There are Heads 1 to 50, and we need to get through today and tomorrow and therefore I seek your full cooperation during this crucial process. I hope we are all in agreement on that.

In Committee:

Head 1 – Office of the President

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The floor is now open for any comments.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Just a quick query, Mr. Chairman, we have not filed a plus or minus on

Programme 1-1-8 on Construction of the Executive Office and Administration Block listed at \$1.5 million. Just a quick explanation from the honourable Minister might just satisfy instead of ...

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are just seeking clarification?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Yes, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Is this at the same place, is it somewhere else, are the plans already in place or is it in stages?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Same plan, same location and same amount and is still on “R”.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Prime Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is at the same place.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, just a follow-on question from honourable Koya. Have you got any plans, the amount has increased? Is there any scheme plan?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not know what he means Mr. Chairman, but that is an allocation which used to be there. That was not utilised so we reallocated that allocation which used to be there, that was not utilized so we have reallocated that and it is at the same place in the President’s Office. That is why it is under “R”.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, we understand it is under “R” but I just want to know in a nutshell, it shows an increase but we want to know how are you going to use it? Have you any preplans or the money will just be sitting there or how did you get to that figure?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You mean that \$1.5 million? Let me just explain.

HON. V. NATH.- Head 1-1-1-8.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, that is what I am trying to explain to you.

HON. V. NATH.- Do you have any scope of work, honourable Minister?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Just listen. The Executive Office and the Administration Block was....

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Vijay Nath, you have raised your question. I think you have added on another question and another question. I am trying to get the honourable Minister of Finance to reply to your first question. Now, you are adding scope of work, et cetera.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is pretty straight, Sir. A sum of \$500,000, this was under the 2022-2023 Budget under Head 50 to undertake the preparatory works, however no works has commenced. Site inspection has been conducted by the Ministry of Public Works and are currently working on the initial drawings. The estimated cost of the project is \$2.85 million as quoted by the Ministry of Works. This will include the demolition of the existing structure and reconstruction of the contemporary modern Executive Office for His Excellency and an Administration Block to support the responsibilities of the office. The project will be undertaken in two phases hence \$1.5

million is allocated in the next financial year, while based on the progress of the project, remaining funds will be allocated the following year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have covered the General Administration. Parliament will now vote on Head 1 – Office of the President.

Question put.

Head 1 agreed to.

Head 2 – Office of the Prime Minister

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for any comments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Are we on Programme 1-1 or the overall Head?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Programme 1-1, can we just have some clarification on SEG 6 – the Grant to Fiji Servicemen's Aftercare Fund. This was not there before. Can we just have some clarification of that huge increase?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I can answer that. This increase is due to the following:

- Transfer of Grant to Fiji Servicemen Aftercare Fund of \$14,947,350; and
- Transfer of Department for Public Enterprise, Information, Environment, National Archives under the Office of the Prime Minister.

It is just a transfer or reallocation.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Head 2-1-2(3), it says that overseas travel for the honourable Prime Minister (\$500,000). We can see that there is no change as alluded to by the honourable Minister of Finance. He said that the travel allowance will decrease for all the Ministers including the Prime Minister. Why is it not reflecting there?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are confusing with the allocation and the allowance rate. What was announced in the Budget is that the travelling allowance and per diem will be reduced.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Head 2-1-2(6), the provision there is an increase in the provision to Rotuma Council which is getting half-a-million dollars and again this is a clarification before I ask for an increase or decrease. Then you have got Rabi Island Council (\$155,000), Kioa Island Council (\$70,000); Grant to Melanesian Vasu-iTaukei (\$100,000). The only increase is to the Rotuma Island Council. Could we be profit to the reason as to why only Rotuma has an increase and the other communities remain stable at one particular amount? Can we just get an explanation on that, Sir? The question really is, is there a plan for the other communities and the reason for the increase to only Rotuma.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The reason for the increase is the submission that was made by the Rotuma Council and we appreciated the need for an increase in the grant in terms of the activities they plan. What happened was for some reason, the grant was held back for almost like two years and a lot of activities that were supposed to be undertaken was not undertaken. So, it sort of reflects the legacy and that is why we have decided to increase it.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, if I may also, is that the case with only Rotuma or the other councils also if there were some non-movement in there? Have they all been dealt with equally in terms of, were there submissions made by the other councils?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Head 2-1-2(10) – Small Grants Project (\$2,000.000). Can the honourable Prime Minister clarify what are these small grants project?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, the former Prime Minister had made a lot of promises to some of the rural areas. When we go around, they are asking the former government had promised us the seawall or that community centre. We are catching up on those, I have not used this fund for any of the new projects. They are carry overs from the last administration and we have added another \$1 million to cater for what we will be funding this year.

HON. K.K. LAL.- What are the criteria placed for these small grants project?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, at the moment everyone applies. They come through their village council, *bose vakoro* or community and we try and do that because it is outside the main budgetary allocation, so they come for the small grants and it is limited to \$50,000 and below.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- This is the one you used for the kitchen and the sinks, et cetera.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Community halls.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I believe honourable Prime Minister also wanted to explain about Programme 1-2(6) about Rotuma Island Council. What the honourable Minister of Finance has explained is they were not given funds for the past couple of years. I believe as a Committee Member, I do understand they were not given the funds because their accounts were not up to-date. If we are going to back pay them like this, are we setting the right precedence for other Councils as well where they do not provide accounts on time and then later on they get it. Just a clarification on that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In fact, it was wrong the way the grant was withheld, so all those audit requirements, et cetera will be met before this is released. What happened was, out of the annual grant of \$500,000 that is allocated, 70 percent of the funds are diverted for development projects and only 30 percent is used to meet the operational cost. We are aware of that and that will be taken care of before the funds are released. As I had said to you, nothing happened for almost three years. What we felt was once all that is cleared, this is the fund that is allocated and that will help them to catch up.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, just in relation once again to Programme 1-2(6) on the Grant to the Melanesian *Vasu-i-Taukei* (\$100,000). I think this group does not appear to have a Council. I do not see a Council here. Is there any basis of the grant on the basis of the number of people who constitute this particular group? Why I ask this, as a former Minister of Lands, I am aware of the issues that they face in the very communities they have. I think there is a substantive number of people that we are talking about here. Looking at the amount that is allocated to this grant, is it purely on the basis of a request or does it also take into account the total number of people who might be included in that group?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There is no increase in the grant, but the annual grant of

\$100,000 is provided and 100 percent of the funding is diverted towards development. A sum of \$50,458 has been utilised to undertake the supply of fibre glass boat and engine for Cobo Village and Macuata and supply of brush cutter for Nabunikadamu, Bua. Currently, the Council is undertaking the construction of fibre glass boats while awaiting availability of stock of outboard engines from the supplier. They do not have any other source of funding, so this is what we have provided and there was no additional request.

HON. J. USAMATE.- (Inaudible)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it is a development grant.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- I just wish to add to that. It is basically demand driven. When communities are organising themselves and they have to submit proposals, of course, there is quite a large number of people there, to support all of them will be quite significant. For this year, we are trying to improve the mechanism to support them through the Council. For the last couple of years there has not been any active Council, so we will be prioritising Council formation, meetings and coming up with priorities for each village. But, of course, there are other sources of funds within the Government to also look after the Melanesian communities. This is not the only fund.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, on SEG 7 former Prime Ministers' and Presidents' Benefit (\$170,000). Would that also include the benefit for the immediate past Prime Minister?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- It was approved two weeks ago and the Secretary to Cabinet is liaising with their solicitors, they had put it to the lawyers before it came to my office.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, on SEG 5 I have heard about 4R and 5R, just a clarification, what is this 7R - 7R and Litter Awareness (\$10,000)? Just want to know, that is all, not a big deal. Tell me what is that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me explain to him, Sir. It is a programme for litter awareness programmes in all Divisions and 7R refers to rethink, you probably already heard about it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I heard about 4R and 5R.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me read it for you.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, do it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Rethink, Refuse, Reduce, Repurpose, Reuse, Recycle, Recover. Happy?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Remember.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are still in the microwave.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 4-1(8), just one clarification on the Construction of Naboro Landfill - Stage 2 Cell 4 (\$2,740,000). If you can give us an update on the preparatory phase, like how far have we reached? Are we at the construction phase or we are still at the preparatory phase?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Desludging have not started. Once they first finish Stage 1 and Cell

2 for Stage 2 has also not started.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Honourable Prime Minister, through Mr. Chairman, have we done the preparatory work? This means that we done the plan and everything else is passed and we are at the construction phase? If that can be clarified?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The project, as you know is for the construction of the new Cell at the Landfill. The total amount of the design and bill for Stage 2 Cell will cost about \$6.85 million. So, duration of the project is two years and 40 percent of the work will be carried out in the first year and the remaining work will roll over in the next financial year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So the tender has been called?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Will be called soon.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Okay, thank you.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 4-1(7) - Environment Programmes - Northern and Western Divisions (\$8,000). Can you explain the Environment Programmes, please?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Can you repeat your question, honourable Member?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Honourable Prime Minister, can you explain what are these Environment Programmes under Programme 4-1(7), an allocation of \$8,000 to Northern and Western Divisions?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is written there?

HON. K.K. LAL.- I am asking what are these programmes?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Because they are new, they are appearing here for the first time.

HON. K.K. LAL.- I need an explanation on what are these programmes. I am a new Member and I am just asking.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Yes. It is showing here for the first time, there was nothing showing in the 2022-2023 Budget. It was handled by another Ministry, transferred to the Prime Minister's portfolio now. That is why they are appearing here. The notes are there with you, honourable Minister of Finance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If you look at SEG 7, the allocation is for all different things - compliance, natural resource information database, convention, et cetera. If you want all the details I can give you, I can read it to all of you.

(Honourable J. Usamate interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, it says Environment Programmes and then it lists all the components.

HON. J. USAMATE.- He is asking about the first one.

HON. K.K. LAL.- First one, \$8,000 allocation.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Northern and Western?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is the fund to cater for compliance and enforcement of all legislations in the Western and Northern Divisions.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, in the second one Compliance and Enforcement of EIA. Sir, EIA is something that is a requirement right across all different types of segments. I am just looking at that figure of \$20,000, given the importance of the environment and making sure that EIAs are undertaken, I am just wondering is this \$20,000 adequate to cover all these or the cost for enforcing EIA are totally within this office or is funded elsewhere?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Your government had only \$10,000 we have increased by another \$10,000.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is why I am asking. I did not ask what my government was paying, I was asking you whether it is adequate.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is adequate.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Ketan, you are taking us back to your earlier question?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yes, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We have already done that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I have just one more question on a different SEG though but still with that environment programme on SEG 7. Can the honourable Prime Minister, a very quickly explanation, right at the end you have got Management of Methyl Bromide, Hydrofluorocarbons and Phase Out Management. What is the actual plan? I just did some clarification on what it is actually for. The last line on SEG 7, honourable Prime Minister. I know it is a bit of a technical one but that is why I am not quite sure about what it is.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Which one?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister it is the management Methyl Bromide, Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) and the Phase Out Management Plan. All those three things, what does it entail?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- We are trying to phase out Methyl Bromide.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is to cater for the implementation of the HFC Phase Out Management Plan and Programme outlined is in Fiji's Hydrofluorocarbon Phase Out Management Plan Strategy, so that is where it comes from.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 5-1(5) - *Fiji in Focus*, the current budget being given to it is \$138,962. What I understand, Sir, there is a decrease from about \$252,438. Just a quick explanation on why the decrease?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Photographic expenses?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No, honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This covers for the fortnightly publishing of 26 issues of *Fiji in Focus* and *Noda Viti* per year in the local dailies. So, that's the cost for a year.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- My question relates to the fact that there is a decrease of \$252,438 from what I understand subject to correction by you. I just need an explanation on the decrease.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- According to the tender that we have received, the cost is much lower than what it used to be. So, we have made sure that the allocation reflects that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Programme-6-1(9) - Purchase of Specialised Equipment (\$150,000). Can the honourable Prime Minister tell us what are these equipment or what type of equipment?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is funding support for the procurement of conservation and bookbinding materials from overseas supplies and associated security cost. Items will be procured from *Archival Survival* in Australia and it includes about 12 items.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, I suggest for a decrease on the same.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Have you got any reason?

HON. V. NATH.- The explanation, Mr. Chairman, is not sufficient as he did not give the breakdown.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You just write your motion and send it, that is when we discuss the motion. You should be filing that with us before we on the Head and the SEG. That is how we will do it from now onwards. If you want it, you go through the Report and then you highlight the ones that you want an increase or decrease, so when we reach it, you are able to inform us that you have a motion.

For this one here, we will accept the one that you have just sent honourable Vijay Nath.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, just a clarification on what you just said over here as the Whip. What if we ask for a clarification and we want to move a motion after that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, ask for a clarification.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- And after clarification, if we want to move?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Wait, wait wait, he is asking me.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Just for the clarification sake because we can give it before but after clarification from the relevant Minister, if we feel that we should increase or decrease, can we still give the amendment?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Just like you always do to us every time. We reach a new stage, sometimes when we file our motion, my predecessor does not want to take note of it. He will say,

“we have taken care of that, it is finished, we are now onto the next one.” So we are moving that motion.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Chairman, I second the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You were saying that it be decreased by \$50,000?

HON. V. NATH.- Yes, Sir.

The reason being that the honourable Minister failed to explain the amount and in fact coordinating with the increase given there.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The reason?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think the Member is totally confused of what he wanted. I said to him very clearly that the funding will support the procurement of conservation and book binding materials from overseas suppliers and associated security. We have a very clear itemised thing for *Archival Survival*. Let me just read it for his information.

It is archival folders, inter-living tissue, acid free corrugated board, archival boxes, document repair type, double side police leaves, Japanese paper, face mask, disposable gloves, archival and gloss, pamphlet boxes and we have worked out the cost. The people who made this submission just wanted \$150,000 so there is no basis for asking for a decrease because it is based on the submission.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will put that to the vote.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, there is a problem. When honourable Kirpal asked for a....

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Hold on, honourable Vijay. We will put that to the vote now because that has come here by way of a motion and seconded by honourable Kirpal.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, one clarification on SEG 7 on Consultancy Fees. Can we just have some explanation on what the Consultancy Fees are in relation to SEG 7 (\$500,000)?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In the previous budget, it was \$750,000. We have reduced it to \$500,000 and this is sufficient for the activities required under this allocation. That is why we have reduced it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is just consultancy within the department?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, and sort of includes payment for Pack Order to SPX, trustee for monitoring airfield trust account, Brussels Mission, valuation cost, real estate hire to sell the buses property, et cetera.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you. Can I ask you a second question, Sir?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Can we go first to, honourable Premila Kumar?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I am alright, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- So, you can raise your second question.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Sir. Looking at SEG 10, I can understand the Capital Construction Grants that are being given to these different organisations. I am not too sure how Post Fiji Limited comes there for \$500,000. I was under the impression that they were doing their own funding. I understand the money being given to all of those organisations. Can I just have some clarity on that \$500,000 being given to Post Fiji Limited?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, this is partial funding for the construction of the new Post Fiji Shop at Lomaloma in Vanuabalavu. The total cost of constructing the new post shop at Lomaloma is expected to amount to \$760,000 of which the Government is funding two-thirds of this cost. Unfortunately, in 2016 the Lomaloma Post Office was completely damaged by *TC Winston*. For this reason, Post Fiji returned to operating from its original small shop. The construction of a new and bigger shop in Lomaloma, Vanuabalavu will greatly assist the rural communities in Vanuabalavu to better access improved facility and purchase of stationery and essential groceries and, of course, to transact money to Viti Levu.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. If there is any need for Lakeba too, please just see how it can be fixed?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Lakeba will come next year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The one in Lakeba was promised during the last government.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, I have a quick question, quick clarification again to the honourable Prime Minister on SEG10 - Biosecurity Authority of Fiji (BAF) is being given \$1.2 million and it is a jump from \$500,000 from last year's budget. The \$700,000 increase, the question is, what does that incorporate?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Chairman, in 2023-2024, the Budgetary allocation will be provided to support the following projects:

- Animal Disease Surveillance (\$90,000). The project aims to carry out Animal Disease Surveillance throughout Fiji in order to identify the presence of exotic animal pest and disease and also to control and prevent the spread of animal pest and disease. Already at present in Fiji with the emphasis on zoonotic diseases and diseases of economic relevance that may affect international trade. Zoonotic is when the disease is transferred from animals to people.
- Biosecurity Authority of Fiji will carry out farm visits, animal pest and disease surveillance on terrestrial and aquatic animals, collect samples, test train and conduct awareness with relevant stakeholders including farmers, procure animal test kits and disinfectants.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, would this not have been a negativity being undertaken by BAF in the initial budget of \$500,000 earlier on, for this is now an additional activity?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- This is an additional activity.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Sir, appreciate it.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sir, it is still related to the same question, further clarification. As you

have said that so many other things will be done, but why are we calling it capital grant?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- It is a capital grant because there are a number of capital projects that are included there, so that is why we call it capital grant.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- But the explanation you have given Minister it was more to do with the activities. So, that is why I am a bit confused, if you can clarify that?

HON. S. TUBUNA.- The second one is the termites project of \$300,000. This project is to control and contain the spread of AST which are vigorously present in some parts of Lautoka and Labasa and also involved in the continued monitoring and surveillance.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Just before I give the floor to honourable Ketan, you have a motion here?

HON. K.K. LAL.- I withdraw it.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Withdrawn it again?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yes, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Koroilavesau, this is your forte, you are very good in....

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- That is why I am being quiet, I wanted it to go through quickly

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, this is a new item – termites. We have just been told that the termite allocation is here but we were told that \$3 million was allocated for, so under which activity is that?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You looking for it?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who is looking?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You?

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, no, I am asking him because he has just mentioned in response to honourable Premila that termite allocation is there but termite allocation we were told is \$3 million. So, where is that?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- It is not from the

HON. P.K. BALA.- Exactly, so where is it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is in another Ministry.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you. So, when we will come to that, then we will address it.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Honourable Bala was looking for \$3 million or \$5 million?

HON. P.K. BALA.- \$3 million.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- For the whole thing?

The Biosecurity Authority of \$1.2 million, an increase of \$700,000; Animal Diseases Surveillance \$19,000, the termite, they came in during the time when you were Mayor there, \$300,000, Market Access \$70,000, International Corporation \$80,000, Non-commercial obligation \$466,000, National Plant Health Surveillance \$60,000 and Iguana in the North \$434,000.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Honourable Prime Minister through you, Mr. Chairman, honourable Premila asked about Programme 7-1(10) on the Biosecurity. I am not trying to have an argument or anything. I just need a clarification, the amount here is \$1.2 million but we were told that for termite allocation is \$3 million.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Can I answer that, Mr. Chairman?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Anyone, as long as we get an answer.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, \$3 million is in Head 50. That is what we said in the Budget.

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Areh*, that is what I have been asking.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is in Head 50.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, let me say something. This is not the way the Minister should response. They must at least have some respect for us. I mean we are not sitting here for nothing. I am just trying to add on what the honourable Assistant Minister has said on that particular activity and SEG; that is all. Why is there so much argument.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There is no argument on saying \$3 million is in Head 50.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, that means my question is still not answered because my question was, it says here capital grant but if you are conducting surveillance, surveillance is not capital grant. When the Minister mentioned that it is for termites then I understood that yes, probably something is being built, et cetera. So, if that can be further clarified as to why are you calling it capital grant when it is actually a surveillance work which is not a capital grant. You are not building anything.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Hold on, honourable Nath. Honourable Premila is still not content with the reply being given.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Minister of Finance?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The component allocation was always under capital grant, so sometimes it is a combination of surveillance (building something) with equipment, et cetera so put it as capital grant.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Honourable Minister, you will understand that if you conduct a surveillance, it is an activity.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Most capital grants, honourable Member have components of

operational staff. So, when you say capital grant for Fiji Roads Authority, there are always operational components. That is why it is called capital grant.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, this explanation is actually

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Like the maintenance of laboratory and other equipment is capital grant. The combinations is always there, but it is all under capital grant.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Okay. Still not happy, but I will accept it.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, just further explanation or clarification on that? Under Independent Bodies, I believe up in front, Biosecurity has been handed a separate budget altogether. So, why does this appear over here? According to what the honourable Minister of Finance explained that it can be used for operations but it is an independent body which actually gets a grant for operations. So, it is basically not making sense why it is over here, and also operational grant is given to independent bodies.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what I explained. It is capital grant but what the honourable Kumar was asking that there are components which does not look like that they are capital and that is why I said that most capital grants have operational components/activities and that is why it is listed like that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- But SEG 6 has Operating Grant in it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is different. See this is what I am saying. Capital grant is capital grant. Some activities look like they are operational, but it is under capital grant and operational grant is separate which includes emoluments, et cetera. It was like that before.

(Laughter)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The explanation given by the honourable Minister, I just want to progress with things but I am really not happy with the response.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Well I cannot make you happy, if you do not accept that.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, no because there is money involved and we are here to find out how that money will be used, whether we should increase it, give more or decide to base on the activities that will be carried out. Someone says, "look we are going to carry out a surveillance." Surveillance involves nothing, not really that kind of money to construct or to do all that. So, if I....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, I think the honourable Member is labouring this point unnecessarily. Let me just read what that surveillance is.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, please do that, thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- National plant help surveillance programme - plant, pest and disease surveillance monitoring, the purchase of laboratory consumables for pest and diseases, diagnostic activities, local and referral laboratories, repairs, upgrading and maintenance of laboratory equipment; that is all capital.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Right. Thank you for your explanation. That is precisely what I wanted rather than just surveillance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what I said, it is a combination. Capital grants always have operational components.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mention it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I mentioned it to you before and you do not want to believe it. You are just prolonging it unnecessarily.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 8-1(7). Honourable Prime Minister there are three portions - Fiji Climate Change Portal, Implementation of Fiji Climate Change Act (\$5 million), and Australia Climate Change Support - NDC Implementation (DFAT). These would two fundings that are coming in from our development partners and being given for this particular purpose and what are some of the activities that being undertaken with respect to the implementation of the Fiji Climate Change Act, and the actual NDC implementation? What used to be the Ministry of Economy, it has actually moved to the Prime Minister's Office. That is why the clarification.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Fiji Climate Change Portals?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mainly the second and third one. The first part of the question was the funding is from the EU and also from DFAT and what are some of the activities being undertaken within the implementation of the Fiji Climate Change Act and NDC Implementation?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- For the financial year, the whole programme is \$30 million for the next three years. The allocation will be used to support entry into force of the Climate Change Act, a comprehensive legal basis enacted in 2021 during your time in government to support Fiji's sustainable development objectives, long term climate ambition, net-zero nation targets and commitment to protecting our environment. You know all these because these are your words. Fiji-Australia Climate Change Support, that is the DFAT one. Fiji -Australia Climate Change Support Programme, funding allocation will help support our implementation of the concept notes outlined in Fijian DC investment plan, Fiji National Climate Finance Strategy, and support projects that the honourable Leader of the Opposition had been involved with in the last three years or four years.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Prime Minister.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, I was going to raise questions in here as well. This is an area that in my Budget address I did raise this about potential areas where we can invest target, particularly in terms of energy and transportation sector as well because in the NDC Implementation these are two key sectors that we need to target. I am also interested because that is quite a significant amount in the implementation of the Fiji Climate Change Act. I thank the honourable Prime Minister for the explanation, but is it focused more on adaptation plans or is it focused more on mitigation plans? That is the question that I have because it is quite a significant amount of money.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Seeking clarification.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Clarification on whether we are concentrating on implementation or adaptation?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Adaptation and mitigation.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- The actual allocation or just in general?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- All.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- In general, because we have our National Adaptation Plan, but of course in terms of the lowering of the emission, we need more of mitigation so that we can reduce this. I am just asking.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, as he would now, we have those ambitious in the old term when we were looking at those developments of hydro and solar affordable programmes. We have those online now, and the funding also online. The funds allocated here is for us to go and implement those and continue right through the year in the implementation and maybe start on some of the surveys. You would be aware of the ongoing programme now in Ovalau and is now being funded and stores landed last week. Those are things that are covered under this.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, just one question and along the same line. I think the honourable Prime Minister has identified some of the things that we do. We have a renewable energy target of electricity 100 percent by the year 2030. But we also have some bigger targets for zero carbon by the year 2050 where the big NDCs that we have are in the transport sector. This is the bigger challenge, I think for electricity we will get there. I am just wondering in the NDC Implementation, we have targets specifically for renewable increase in the transport sector. I am just wondering whether you are aware whether that would be included in this NDC Implementation?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- I do not know whether we will immediately implement those but the policies are in place for us to discourage the importation of those old vehicles and old ships that we are getting, and we would like to get to the next generation of environmentally friendly propulsion systems.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 2 – Office of the Prime Minister.

Question put.

Head 2 agreed to.

Head 3 – Office of the Attorney-General

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I have a motion here by honourable Maharaj and that is Head 3 be decreased by \$1 million on Programme 1-1-1 Personal Emoluments.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, before I actually move that motion, can the honourable Attorney-General explain the allocation, why that \$1 million is for established staff and who are going to be recruited because that is an additional \$1 million to the Office of the Attorney-General? There is an increase of \$1.077 million for established staff.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Here it is decreased, you are saying increased.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- My motion should read, it should be decreased by \$1 million, provided if the explanation is not satisfactory. If the explanation is satisfactory, I will withdraw the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I can explain that generally for other SEGS as well.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are like on a fishing trip, honourable Alvick, throwing one and you are pulling the line this side as well.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, if I can just explain this generally this might help them for other Heads. We are restoring FNPF contribution to 10 percent, so generally for all Heads, there will be an increase in emoluments. Some will have bigger increases, and some will have smaller. That is why there is an increase.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, for this particular Head, \$1 million seems to be quite excessive.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, you did not get what I said. I had said, generally there will be an increase for emoluments right throughout the Heads. In some cases, it will be more than what is just the FNPF because we are giving more positions, for example, for the Office of the Solicitor-General, we have given 15 additional positions. So, that is why, but what you will throughout all the Heads is an increase in emoluments which caters for the FNPF contribution.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, with that explanation given, I withdraw my motion.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, I have a question on Programme -1-1, the question is twofold, so that I do not go back and forth, Sir.

My first question is to do with Programme-1-1(5) on the Mercy Commission, just a progress on the Mercy Commission activities and also for SEG 7 with respect the Fiji Law Reform Commission which I understand, honourable Usamate, has also got a question.

Mr. Chairman, just an update on those two activities - how far, where are they and what is the plan, just for us to make an assessment whether we give it more or ask for it to be taken away.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Chairman, for Mercy Commission, there is really no set timetable in the past Administration. What have decided to do it on a quarterly basis. The fund is for members who are required to meet four times in a year. The funds are for their sitting allowance - 350 per member for four members; refreshment' travel expenses as there is a member who travels from Labasa; accommodation; taxi fare for member staying in Labasa and ancillary cost.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Are you saying that you are now going to have a quarterly sitting of the Mercy Commission?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Correct.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Confirmed quarterly sitting that is why the allocation?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- And it depends to on the application.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Alright. The second part with the Fiji Law Reform Commission?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- What is your question on the Fiji Law Reform?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The same question, just the activities being been undertaken, how far , where are they, what is the plan, et cetera?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Sir, \$388,160 to cater for the Fiji Law Reform approved positions that have not been funded. The Director, there will be a new Chairperson, two Legal Officers, Senior Secretary, Executive Officers; and \$11,000 for administration purposes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, under the same activity - SEG 5, we have something there in terms of drafting of laws - \$30,000 and then under Programme 1-1(7) on Page 29. You also have a figure of \$195,000 for revision of laws. Are these two completely separate things because they seem almost related to me - those two amounts of money?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- They are different. As you can understand, a lot of laws will be reviewed. We have a small team but the volume of work is huge so at times, we will have to recruit special expertise.

The revision will also be covered probably with Fiji Law Reform but those are for engagement of our people with specialised expertise just to expedite or add value to the work that will be provided by our drafting team.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, revision of law is for outsourcing of the service?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Usamate, all you asked was the difference between review and revision?

HON. J. USAMATE.- And the drafting, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I think the honourable Attorney-General has explained that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I apologise, I did not fully understand that. I thought they were talking about almost the same thing. I am just clarifying the revision of law - whether that is consultancy for those who will come outside and do the work.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In fact, if I can just add to that, as explained the Solicitor-General's Office was badly understaffed.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, I know, but I am just asking.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, we have allocated some of this funding, like drafting of laws, for example. The work itself requires very specialised skill and as the honourable Attorney-General explained, that is why there are different allocations for different activities to support.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Are they for the same thing or different thing?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Drafting is different.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Different things.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, just on the back of what honourable Usamate has raised, if you are saying with respect to drafting of laws it is \$30,000 extra really because it is a specialised skill and \$30,000 with respect to all the laws that are being drafted and that specialised skill being used, is that enough, honourable Attorney-General, bearing in mind if you bring him in from overseas? I do not think we have specialised skilled drafters here. That is quite a minuscule amount of money.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- That has been discussed by the team and that is the amount that has been put forward. We even received some quite interesting amounts, much lower than what some of the locals provide.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Chairman, this is just in regards to SEG 7 also, Fiji Law Reform Commission with an allocation of \$400,000. It is noted that there was a significant increase from last year's allocation. Last year the allocation was \$100,000 and this year, the Fiji Law Reform Commission is receiving \$400,000. Just on verification and the details, have you expanded your operations in terms of the Fiji Law Reform Commission?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You already explained that.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, the Fiji Law Reform was defunct. We now setting it up with totally new staff with a Director, Chairman, Principal Legal Officers and Support Staff.

HON. A. BIA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. J. USAMATE.- My last question, Sir. So, this is just the operational cost and the emolument cost are included in SEG 1 for the members of the Law Reform Commission?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- No, it covers everything.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is the total budget.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, we will now vote on Head No. 3 – Office of the Attorney-General.

Question put.

Head 3 agreed to.

Head 4 – Ministry for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme 1-1, I think honourable Koya has got a motion.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I think we have now gone past it.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme-1-2?

HON. A.A.MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(9), Financial Software Upgrade of \$14 million. I seek explanation as to the kind of software and which Departments will be covered.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is a new expenditure allocation and the cost breakdown is payroll software of about \$6.5 million; FEMIS software is \$6.5 million; and logistics is \$1 million. In fact, the request for tender for the supply and installation of the maintenance of the payroll system was called on 28th January, 2023.

What I can tell you is that, our payroll system is so old, in fact, it is a big risk and as soon as I got in and one of the things that came to me from the Ministry staff was the urgent need for this upgrade. So, we had the technical assistance by way of a consultant from ADB and that is what we want to address urgently because if someday it collapses, we will not be able to pay anyone, including Members of Parliament.

The person who was handling is almost 85 years old and if something happens to him tomorrow, the whole system could be at risk. This is a very urgent expenditure, and I cannot understand why it was not upgraded and re-done, so that is the allocation.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, just a further clarification on that, honourable Minister. I know \$14 million has been well spent on the actual upgrade. I am not an accountant, so is it a system that will take a long while to set up or is it simply just a plug and play?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, I think that is a good question. The current system is manual, so we have done the technical assistance, all the work has been done. As I have said, the tender has already been called and we hope that this will be done as soon as possible within this financial year. Right now, all our budgeting process is manual, this is also manual, so this upgrade will ensure that we digitise and have a very efficient well-secured payroll system as well as a budgeting system.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, in view of there being a lot of cyber problems and issues that occur worldwide, does that include a back-up system that you would have again when something that you would have more knowledge of disappears?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, of course. These days, any software ideally and technically is required to have a back-up system, appropriate security, but it is always a risky proposition. But for this one, definitely that will be part of the requirement.

Our FEMIS is 20 years old and we are hoping that this will be changed in the next 12 months.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- As you have mentioned about the tenders that have gone out, is that locally or locally and overseas?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Before the tender, I can also tell you that these days, a lot of back up is available on cloud, so the system will allow that as well.

The tender was issued locally, and I have not seen the final approval by the Tender Committee or anything yet. It has already been tendered.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, just another clarification on the same SEG, the honourable Minister just mentioned that FEMIS is going to be replaced with this new software or FEMIS will remain?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The whole system of FEMIS is manually driven right now. So, once we move on to the new software, it will be all electronic - digitised, that is the idea.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Will it only cover the Ministries or it will cover Municipal Councils and Provincial Councils as well because there is a lot of issues with regards to the accountability of these Councils?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let us fix this first and then we will look at Local Government and others.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, the same question to the honourable Minister, this kind of programme is often assisted by the donor partners. Were any donor partners approached as we have seen in past years?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are still on Activity 2, am I right?

HON. V. NATH.- Yes, Mr. Chairman, the question on the Financial Software Upgrade. The explanation by the honourable Minister is alright but I was seeking further information on whether

any other donor partners were approached because our donor partners have often assisted on the software upgrade.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I had already said that the technical assistance is from ADB.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Head 4-1-3(7) – Implementation of New Budget System. Given that you are coming up with a new accounting system, are you going to implement these things simultaneously - a new finance system and a new budget system, or does one follow after the other? These two big expenses, the \$14 million in the other one and the \$2 million in this one.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, they have been done simultaneously because as I have said to you, right now the whole budget process, they have to use excel software and in this day and age, we are doing a budget almost manually. In the past, you would know honourable Usamate that we have had errors in the actual estimates and partly because everything is done manually, so this will improve the system.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-10(7) Apprenticeship (\$50,000). I cannot really relate how apprenticeship funds are sitting in this Strategic Planning Office General Administration because apprenticeship is normally for the development of trade workers or technicians. Can we just have some explanation on why Apprenticeship funding is doing here, just for clarification.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is to cater to for apprenticeship programme for tertiary students. Within the Ministry for Finance, what happened over the years, we used to have individual standalone Ministries of national planning and Development.

Essentially over the years, there was no planning departments or unit, so we are re-establishing the Central Planning Office which will also have components of monitoring and evaluation. Right now, there is very little coordination between different Government Departments and one of the things that we found out is the uptake of expenditure up to end of July, the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, would have spent only about 38 percent of its total budgeted expenditure. There is no monitoring and evaluation, apart from the Ministry of Social Welfare, so this is a new initiative for us...

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is apprenticeship.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, and the Government Departments are also losing a lot of staff as well. We lost about 30 percent of our staff in 2022 and we will probably lose more, so we are trying to bring in internship/apprenticeship programme, to ensure that we build some capacity there as well.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just one supplementary question, Mr. Chairman. Traditionally, apprenticeships are for trade workers or technician workers. I think from your explanation, you are also talking about office workers.

We also used to have a fund in Government to train technical trade apprentices in Government, in Government Shipping, Government Printing and also in PWD. Those funds used to be there to develop these apprentices. So, I can see this might be just a coordination fund but probably in the future, if you are going to develop apprentices, would that be something that you will consider?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It will also include some areas, like HR and planning within

the Ministry. So, we will have apprenticeship programmes there as well so some of that will go for paying allowances, et cetera.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Internship.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, internship.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Programme 1-10(5) – Personal Protective Equipment (\$5,000), can the honourable Minister explain what are these going to be used for in the Strategic Planning Office? It would have made sense during COVID-19.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This will be protective equipment to execute monitoring and site visits for strategic planning office staff because as I have said, this is a new initiative to coordinate the activities with different Ministries and monitor expenditure and priorities, especially in the area of capital projects or capital expenditure because a lot of wastage that we are finding now has taken place because there is total lack of monitoring, evaluation, procurement is not done, et cetera.

We went to Wainikoro Hospital and I asked the x-ray person, how is the work going. She said that for three months, x-ray was not done and the only reason why the x-ray machine was not working was because the battery was not procured. The battery life is known for two years, so some of those monitoring and evaluating and making sure that systems work is very important. So, site visit inspections are important.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 1-10(SEG 7)-Policy Advisors (\$300,000) and Formulation of New National Development Plan (\$200,000). Are they interlinked for one?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They are both interlinked.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So, the Policy Advisors are there for the National Development Plan?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Why is there a separation, Sir?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You mean the \$50,000?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- No, you have specifically put out policy advisors.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, because those would be hiring of policy advisors within the Planning Office.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Coming from overseas?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Local people?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, I mean, if we have to get people from overseas, we will, but right now the idea is to

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Recruit policy advisors?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- With respect to the formulation of the New National Development Plan, is this a completely new development plan being formulated or is it an amendment to the current National Development Plans that we have?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is something that we will have to look at but, obviously, we will take into account what is there and what needs to be upgraded, updated, depending with the appropriate statistics and data. That is how it is done. So, if you are moving from one development plan, if you are revising a development plan, you obviously take that into account.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Is this somehow related also to the Singapore Corporation people that are here?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is different.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 4 - Ministry for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Question put.

Head 4 agreed to.

Head 5 – Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(10) – Village Improvement Scheme. The honourable Minister has stated that this is on a one-third two-thirds basis but as you are aware, Mr. Chairman, there are 14 provinces in Fiji. Is this on a ‘first come first serve’ basis or there is a guideline to, sort of, address the issues of fairness? Just a question to the honourable Minister through you, Mr. Chairman.

HON. I. VASU.- The iTaukei Affairs is undertaking the village profiling exercise in the village and from that data, we will form the development of the integrated village development. The amount will only go up to \$10,000 when we started because it is firstly introduced for each village. The plan was for \$50,000.

What we are doing is it is a one-third contribution from the community and two-thirds is given by the Government on the understanding that they are not giving the *solu ni yasana* (provincial levy), the amount that they collect can be provided as their one-third contribution and the Government will give the two-thirds from that \$2 million. It is a first come first serve and we will also set up the criteria. We will work with the Ministry of Rural Development because they have already run a similar programme.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme-1-1(7) - Feasibility Study-Setup of iTaukei Financial Institution (\$100,000). Honourable Minister, just a little bit of an explanation on that, is it something completely new or has it already been given a feasibility study, et cetera, or where are we with that?

HON. I. VASU.- This is a new budget item which the Ministry is directed to conduct the forum meeting annually to allow the coordination approach towards capturing the challenges, risk

opportunities and aspirations of the resource owners on the utilisation of their resources. We have done one this year....

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I think that is the wrong one. It is for the setup of the iTaukei Financial Institution.

HON. I. VASU.- This is a feasibility study for the set-up of the Rural iTaukei Bank. This is part of the economic empowerment for the *iTaukei* which Cabinet had endorsed recently. The Rural Bank is an integrated component of the Solesolevaki Framework. It will facilitate access to capital for those who want to do land development or any resource development. This has been tasked in providing the scope of this work.

The iTaukei Executive Forum will meet and discuss it further the criteria that will be followed, and how they will move forward. They are in the initial stage, but we will get a feasibility study on the plan. They have planned for this a few years back, but they have now this is the right time for them to start.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Chairman, can I ask a question first on Programme 1-1(6) – Turaga-ni-Koro Allowance and deal with the motion later? I would like to ask the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, and I will speak in the vernacular.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- *Na nodra allowance beka saka na Turaga Ni Koro, Turaga Ni Minisita, e wili saka tiko kina 'go o ira na Turaga Ni Koro ena koro vaka kei Maniyava mai Tokaimalo, Ra, na koro vaka kai Solomoni, ka ra sa qarava saka tu na cakacaka vakoro vaka-Viti, me vaka na soli ni yasana. E rawa ni okati talega eke o ira, Turaga Minisita?*

HON. I. VASU.- *Koya beka 'go esa vakamatanitutaki ka sa register-taki me koro? O koya kecega sa register-taki ...*

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- *O ira na koro vaka kei Maniyava (koro ni kai Solomoni) era sa tu kina na Turaga Ni Koro, era na wili talega?*

HON. I. VASU.- *Na ka e vakayacori tiko, keitou sa tekivu vakamatanitutaka tikoga mai na veikoro, gauna ga e vakamatanitutaki kina era sa na saumi.*

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

Mr. Chairman, I move:

That Head 5-1-1(6) - Vanua Leadership Allowance be increased by another \$777,600.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Niudamu, your motion is quite difficult to follow because here it says to be left out of Head 5, and now you want the increase.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- It should be increased, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- *Kerekere, na face value ni nomu mosoni oya keitou sa na taura ga.*

HON. RATU J. NIUDAMU.- *Vinaka saka vakalevu.*

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I hope I am clear on that. If you are asking for an increase, show it in your motion.

I apologise, honourable Niudamu, I understand this is fairly new. I think there is a couple of forms there - one for increase and one for decrease.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Whip!

HON. K.K. LAL.- No, MPs training.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Training? No, this is hands-on training. You have amended that?

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Yes, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You want an increase?

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- I would like an increase, Mr. Chairman, just to double that amount.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, I beg to second the motion.

(Laughter)

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, I will now put this motion to the vote.

Question on Amendment put.

Motion lost.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have another motion from honourable Bulitavu.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, I move:

That Head 5-1-1(10) – iTaukei Land Development (\$4,000,000) be increased by \$16 million.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I beg to second the motion.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, when this allocation was first introduced by the FijiFirst Government it was \$10 million but when COVID-19 came, it was reduced. Given the amount of interest by most *mataqali* who want to subdivide their land, I think one of the requirements of developing land - land clearance, drainage and roading, the cost is too high. The more money the more landowners can benefit and that is why I am suggesting that there should be an increase to a total of \$20 million so that many *mataqali* in the Western Division and Northern Division can benefit from this and they do not have to wait. This is for the betterment of the *iTaukei* people.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Chairman, it is a good motion but from your experience, the amount of money that you allocated in the previous Government for this was not taken up because it involves a lot of planning and a lot of negotiations, so we have learned from your lesson and we have kept it at this.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And you were worried about the deficit too.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Chairman, I withdraw my motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will move on. Programme 2-1?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, I thought that we are still on Programme 1-2.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes, honourable Usamate is correct. We are like going in a merry-go-round now. We down to 10, then to 6 and then down again.

HON. J. USAMATE.- No, Sir, we were talking about Activity 1 just now. Now, we are on Activity 2.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are right and we are still on Programme 1-2.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(10) - Survey of Un-surveyed Lands (\$300,000). Can I have a clarification if the Province of Lau has been completed, in particular the island of Lakeba? I know that Lau is one of the Provinces that are late.

HON. I. VASU.- Lau, Namosi, all the same, they have not been surveyed.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- NLC survey?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes, Survey of Un-surveyed Land, I assumed that that is for all the Provinces.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, I am just raising that with honourable Nalusima, I recollect that Namosi has not been, especially the *Tikina* of *Nuku*.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, I understand for Lau, the work is still in progress. I can report back to honourable Usamate in regards to that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Can I clarify whether Lakeba is included this year and it will be completed.

HON. I. VASU.- I can come back to you in regards to Lakeba.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Koroilavesau, you have a motion here, Sir, Head 5-1-2(10) – Demarcation of Un-surveyed Lands (\$125,000)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, my motion is basically in relation to unsurveyed land. I have travelled around Fiji for the past years, and this is one the issues that have stopped development within the Fijian villages - the demarcation of land. That is why I am suggesting, especially in Lau where a lot of islands and villages are unsurveyed. There is always disputes between the landowners. There was a school or secondary school that was supposed to be built there but the survey has not been done and the demarcation causes risk between the landowning Units.

I am just suggesting, I know the Government will defeat it but it will be taken notice of that in the next round of budget, if this could be looked at. It is SEG10 and involves all those three allocations. I am suggesting that allocation for unsurveyed land be increased to \$500,000; survey of unsurveyed land and digital mapping be increased to \$200,000. So, I am suggesting \$1.2 million increase in that SEG. I know they will defeat my motion but at least they should take note of it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We will take note of that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We are not going to put that to the vote because you have taken note.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Chairman, I suggest we just put it on vote so that there is someone here that wants to second my motion and then we can disperse of my motion.

HON. V. NATH.- Sir, I second the motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- So, you have two seconders one has withdrawn. So, will now put that to the vote that Head-5 be increased by \$1.2 million.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-1(7) Traditional Knowledge and Expression of Culture Legislation – Awareness and Implementaton Programme (\$100,000). That is something that we have talked about for a number of years now. I know that has finally been done. I would like to have some elaboration on what you mean by awareness and implementation programme of this particular legislation. I think it is something that is of particular interest to a lot of us.

HON. I.VASU.- For this one, it was just approved in Cabinet this year and the paper is with the Office of the Solicitor-General to do the final details of the work. What is written here is to finance the legislation which will provide for registration, ownership and protection of traditional knowledge and traditional culture and expression.

Once established, traditional communities will have a legal recourse to claim against a person, company or an institution they feel is misusing their traditional design – totem or traditional knowledge. That is what written here.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, I assume this is for drafting the legislation?

HON. I. VASU.- Yes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Because the way it is written here is awareness and implementation. From that, I thought the legislation was ready and about to be implemented. So I assume this is just for drafting the legislation or law, is that correct?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Consultation.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am not sure because here it says implementation, his explanation suggests drafting. So, I am a bit confused.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- We are aware that this particular legislation, the Bill has been pending for more than 10 years. So, we are trying to perfect that and thereafter, do the awareness.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, a quick question on Programme-2-2(10). I am getting too fast, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No, it is alright, you have taken us forward.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- This SEG is twofold. There is Rehabilitation of Levuka World Heritage Structure (\$1,500,000) and upgrade of Fiji Museum (\$1,062,000).

With respect to the first portion, which structure are we referring to – is this an upgrade that is ongoing or about to start? The second part of that question, with respect to that, Fiji Museum has actually got a grant on its own and the upgrade of that particular museum in last year's budget was \$718,000. How far have we gone with that and why is it that the upgrade is now going cost \$1,062,000?

HON. I. VASU.- The first it is an ongoing one. This one is closed to the old wharf in Levuka, the old MH Building. They are working on that. When I visited the last time, they were putting up the roof. They renewed the inside of the building.

In regards to the second one, they have requested for it and we have continued upgrade the current Museum here in Suva.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, perhaps this is just a comment and may be the Minister can look into this as well. While sit on Levuka, in almost every meeting of the Lomaiviti Provincial Council, comes up with the old Levuka Hospital. It is an eyesore, and it is also becoming a health hazard. I am not familiar with the law concerning heritage sites but that has been an issue that comes up frequently.

On Activity 2-2(7) - Preservation of Historical Monuments (\$150,000), there are some issues coming up also from the communities and perhaps, honourable Minister, I just want to bring to your attention is just the process, particularly when they are going to an *iTaukei* community because I came across one in Veinuqa, Tailevu. Honourable Ditoka can help you with that. They just came straight into the piece of land, demarcated the area and according to the *Liuliu ni Yavusa*, it is such a big area and they, sort of, denying them access. I just want to bring this to your attention. It is good that we have the allocation in here but perhaps, the process that needs to be followed.

HON. I. VASU.- Point taken, Mr. Chairman.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I have two questions. First one is SEG 7 - Preservation of Historical Monuments, if the honourable Minister can highlight, particularly which historical monuments will be fixed with \$150,000 and then I will ask my second question.

HON. I. VASU.- This funding increase will ensure the implementation of conditions and requirements regarding the old Levuka World Heritage Sites and stated in the 5 Years and 20 Years National Development Plan traditional historical sites, is the funding for the preservation of historical monuments in the site in Levuka World Heritage Town, Ovalau.

This will help the historical sites to be upgraded and preserved for the local and overseas visitors to the Heritage Sites. We will support the historical monument and site that can provide a base for community-based heritage tourism project, will ensure the creation of necessary infrastructure to support heritage tourism on Ovalau, will support the historical building that can support its function and its residence and user that will also be enjoyed by visitors to the site.

They will complement each other to create an overall atmosphere on the conservation of heritage, resources, from being lost and will also boost tourism, boost moral for heritage preservation in the local community. Will support identification of heritage sites with place, name and information panels, will create a better presentations and promotions for the heritage resources, to be viewed and enjoyed by all visitors on the island. It is mostly focused in Levuka.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you Minister for your very detailed explanation. My question was very specific because if you go to Levuka, there are many historical sites and the preservation work had already started on several sites, like Deed of Cession and few others. This particular amount (\$150,000) being allocated for this financial year, which sites will be fixed? When you come up with \$150,000, surely you have got something in mind, so which particular site will you fix?

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- May I assist the honourable Minister, it is the Deed of Cession site, World Heritage Commemoration Plaque, Pigeon Post Fountain, 199 steps, European War Memorial, Nasau Park Foundation, Fijian War Memorial and replanting of the public spaces.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, the reason why I asked because Heritage and Arts previously was under Ministry of Education and the list the Minister read out is impossible to fix with \$150,000. It may be for particular specific ones. Why I am asking this question is because one way of maximising is by working with Levuka Town Council where they can also put in their money and then you can get few more monuments preserved.

My next question, Mr. Chairman, is on Programme 2-2(6) Grant to Cultural Centres (\$150,072). Previously, we did not have Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, so because we did not have that Ministry, all multicultural centres were looked after by Heritage and Arts. Now, that we have Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, why is these multicultural centres still with Heritage and Arts?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, if I can answer that before the honourable Minister, I know the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs did not have enough time to go into the details. We have planned to have a group which will be looking at what the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs would do to look at all the other ethnic groups, their cultural activities, languages and all that, and there will be a team that will be set up in this financial year, so that by the time we come to the next Budget, we would have a proper structure, activities, planned for the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs. That is why the allocation when we come to it, you will see is a very small amount at the moment for some specific projects.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The question was to do with cultural centres. Honourable Premila Kumar was raising question on multicultural centres.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That will be part of that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Anyway, he is quite content with the explanation given.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 2-2(7) - Culture and Education (\$37,000), there is an increase in the budget. Could the Honourable Minister explain further?

HON. I. VASU.- These are breakdown for and the additional allocation, consultation on the final draft of the Fiji National Strategy and Monitoring Evaluation and review of cultural programme, cultural centres, training of administrators, support for art education in the four Divisions - this is a pilot school, stakeholders consultations on cultural entrepreneurship, curriculum, composing of cultural and educational tv programme with Hindi, Urdu, Rabi, Kioa and Melanesian communities; the Solomons and the Vanuatu for \$37,000.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Chairman, just a couple of follow up question in regards to the question by honourable Ketan Lal. The honourable Minister mentioned that including in that allocation was the training. But then you have another allocation still in SEG 7 which is Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Training, an allocation of \$10,000. What is the difference?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister are you clear with the question being raised?

HON. A. BIA.- A follow-up question from honourable Ketan Lal regarding SEG 7. In the answer that you gave, honourable Minister, that included in that increase is the training. But then in another allocation, you have \$10,000 for planning, monitoring, evaluation, learning and training.

HON. I. VASU.- It is a quite a long explanation here.

HON. MEMBER.- No, just brief!

(Laughter)

HON. I. VASU.- In order to effectively carryout the requirement as per the above mentioned documents, the monitoring, evaluation and learning encompass adaptable framework with process, best practices and tools that are strategically tailored for the uniqueness of the organisation and set the specific initiatives. The purpose of this framework is to provide consistent approach to the monitoring and the evaluation of the department programmes and projects.

So, the sufficient data and information is captured to reveal the progress and impact of the department's work programme. Lessons learned will also be used to inform best practice guideline which will be brought back to the department for improvement purpose. Monitoring and evaluation help improve performance and achieve results.

More precisely, the overall purpose of monitoring and evaluation is the measurement and assessment of performance in order to move the effectiveness and management, the outcome and output known as the development result.

Performance is defined as progress towards the achievement of result. As part of the emphasis on results, it improves the need to demonstrate performance in placing new demands on monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation focuses on assessing inputs and implementation process. The focus is on assessing the contribution of various factors to a given development outcome.

HON. N. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, can I ask this question in vernacular, please.

Turaga na Minisita, koya na Programme 2-2(10), upgradetaki nodatou vale ni yaya makawa na Fiji Museum. Au kila ni dua na i lavo tiko qoka, sega soti ni macala vei au e lavo levu se lailai, ke rawa ni vakacacataka mada ga se na cava soti ena vakayacori tiko koya na upgrade qoka.

HON. I. VASU.- *Ena loma ni vale ya iliu walega esa vakavouitaki rawa. Koya e muri oya se dua na vanua levu se tu sara tu ga vaka ca. Koya oya se in phase tiko na kena vakavinavinakataki.*

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just a follow up question on the education and monitoring and evaluation, who does the training, where is the training carried out and who are the participants for this training?

HON. I. VASU.- Honourable Member, can I come back to you so that I can get the details and I can inform you on that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- There is some disconnect and if there is something wrong, I think this is the best time to correct it. Honourable Premila Kumar raised a very important and valid point and, that is, in regards to grant to cultural centre. Now, you have an established Ministry for Multi-Ethnic. Why can we just not transfer that to Multi-Ethnic?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is what I explained to you that the whole structure...

MR. CHAIRMAN.- It is going to happen.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is going to happen but I told you, it will happen this year.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- I have a motion from honourable Ketan Lal.

HON. K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I move a motion:

To increase the allocation in Head 5-2-2(7) – Community outreach from \$6,000 to \$50,000.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I second the motion, Mr. Chairman, Sir.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I move a motion:

To increase the allocation in Head 5-2-2(1) and (7) – Personal Emoluments and Special Expenditure from \$200,000.

HON. S. KIRPAL.- I second the motion, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the reason for asking this increase is, once we went to Levuka for the Heritage Bill, there was no established office for the Heritage Department in Levuka. It was a concern that was raised by residents of Levuka that they need an established office because that is only heritage site that is listed with UNESCO and this is the only site in Fiji which deals with humans. So, they face a lot of difficulties in communicating directly because the Department is based in Suva. So, the increase is to have one or two established staff and a fully furnished office in Levuka.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, we can consider that in next year's budget but we have to conduct a good consultations with them, then we can look at that.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, I withdraw my motion.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Motion is withdrawn. We will now vote on Head 5 – Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

Question put.

Head 5 agreed to.

Head 6 – Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(7)Infrastructure Development Project (50,000). Can the honourable Minister clarify that, please?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, you will understand that there are projects that are currently running, like the MESK, BlackRock, which are the coordinated by the Ministry and started during your term. It looks after also other special areas. We need these funds to actually run the Committee that coordinates the conduct of these projects.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Thank you, honourable Minister. I thought that there is a new project altogether.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is the same one.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(6) - Operating Grants and Transfer, there is a decrease of \$12 million. Can the honourable Minister explain what was the \$12 million allocation for and if the job has been completed?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is quite simple. Remember, we said that earlier, it has gone to the Prime Minister's Office. That is the Aftercare.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(7) – National Security Defence Review. If I am correct, I think this exercise had been undertaken previously under Commander Teleni and former Minister, Natuva. I am just wondering is this a review of the work that was undertaken then, or is it something completely new?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, I thank the honourable Member. I think I have explained this a number of times in Parliament. Reviews are conducted at times when new leadership comes and want to relook at the focus. Obviously, one of those things that we first do is to look at what others did previously and that will become part of it. But it is a new process that looks at our needs now, because it continues to evolve. There is a need to come out more clearly in the strategic way that we want to, to get how we refit. So, it includes all of that.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(7) - Human Trafficking (\$10,000). Is it a celebration or what is it about, because it just says human trafficking - \$10,000.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, one of our functions is actually looking at the conduct of human trafficking in Fiji so that work is vested within the office. It is a whole of nation committee that looks at this.

We need this amount to coordinate events only, but much of the responsibility really lies with every other department that does the work - for the police, Immigration, and a few others.

HON. K.K. LAL.- This is more of an operational allocation?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, this is general administration. This is just to run the office, we have nothing really. There is a few people who do it – run the secretariat.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, again, I am speeding it up to Programme 2, if I can?

Programme 2-1(5) – E-Transaction Cost (\$5,000). Honourable Minister, the question is two-fold; one with respect to SEG 5 - E- Transaction Cost (\$5,000) and the second is on SEG 7 - Digitisation and Modernisation of Fiji's Immigration Systems and Processes (\$1,126,746), I think that is a grant component from DFAT.

The second part of it, the question really is, almost of us have blue electronic passports. Does this particular provision that has been given, mean that we will be able to just simply swipe our passports and walk in when we go in and out of Fiji?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, can I just get the first one first, it is about electronic transactions?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Yes, the question really is, is it part of the same thing.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, no, electronic transaction remember you go there and they have got EFTPOS and we hire those from the banks, so there is a fee to pay, and we need that money to pay the banks for the use of their services. What is the second part of your question and which SEG?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- SEG 7, digitisation, will it mean that we will be able to just go through because generally in most countries, you swipe and go through. It is all electronically done.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, it is all leading towards that so things like, get passenger information and the Australian Government is helping us in terms of the ICT infrastructure for document management system within the Department. So, this is an ongoing process and as you would understand that much of the work that we do is still partly manual. So, to be able to accommodate all these other work that needs the digitised system, IOMS is helping us to do that just to make the workflow better, particularly for online application and processing.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- So this is not actually the hard way that we will be sitting at the airport?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, not yet, not quite.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- How far off are we there because that would be part of our modernisation...

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, that is correct. Because we have now digital passports, those things actually help us to capture the information. Much of the build-up also is around it. Much of it is, at the moment, there is allocation here for Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) from Sri Lanka that we currently use. We are now transitioning to the IOM which is under MIDAS.

A lot of that work, MIDAS through the United Nations, is helping us to acquire these new capabilities including what you are describing. As the Department becomes more digitalised, it allows us to do all these, including online applications and processing and this is helping us.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Within this modernisation component, what part of it does this relate to the other jurisdictions where we, for example, in Australia where they have the machines. Are we now up to speed with respect to our modernisation and being able to walk through into Sydney Airport and just swipe your passport?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, not yet, unfortunately, not for the passports that we carry. We still need to go through the old system that they have.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Manually?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes. This is what we are talking to Ministry of Home Affairs about whether we can access to those systems. That is all part of the plan in the pipeline to be able

to benefit from that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- One of the reasons why I asked is because it is a DFAT funded thing, I thought it might include Australian component of us being able to travel to Australia, is we swipe our passports and get through.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- We are doing all the asking and much of it is in their own jurisdiction to allow us. Once our systems are more compatible and expectable perhaps, then they may be allowed us after our systems have integrated for them to read and access openly. You would understand the matters of sovereignty.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have a motion here by honourable Ketan Lal, that Head 6 be decreased by \$100,000 in Programme 2-1(8) - Renovation of Suva and Nadi Safe House (\$250,000).

Another one here, honourable Ketan you want a withdrawal too?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I am moving the motion of the deportation cost.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- The motion is Head 6 to be increased by \$20,000 in Programme 2-1(5) with the deportation cost.

HON. RATU J. NIUDAMU.- I second the motion, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- This is to do with deportation, *Turaga na Tui Nalawa*.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Chairman, we need to increase the allocation by another \$20,000 or in future be increased in criminal activities by non-citizens of Fiji that we might have to deport.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We will now vote on the amendment.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 6 – Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration.

Question put.

Head 6 agreed to.

Head 7 - Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 1-3(10) - Workmen's Compensation. These is a huge reduction. So, just a matter of interest if the honourable Minister responsible can explain.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, I think honourable Bala is aware that up to 2019, all of those Government workers who are either in jail or passed away, there is Workmen's Compensation for them. After 2019, it has been passed on to ACCF. So, that is why whatever is left is there.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, but there are still pending cases which have not been determined.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Those pending cases will be covered by that because so many cases have been reduced.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- \$400,000 is enough to cover.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Alright, that is what I wanted to know.

One general person which relates to this Ministry, I have been going through the pages but I cannot find anywhere, this is in regards to the allocation for the Review of the National Minimum Wage. I know they have said that it will be done next year but where is the allocation for the review?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- You will find it.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Is that the answer, Mr. Chairman. Just look at him! He is saying, “you will get it.”

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I will look for it and answer you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is part of the operational budget.

HON. P.K. BALA.- So, how much is there? It is not a specific amount. The review exercise will be part of the operational budget for the Ministry, as it was done in the past.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Remember, how we used to address this, it is either yes or no.

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, I used to give in detail. You remember, Sir, you were sitting here.

(Laughter)

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Programme -1-4?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Honourable Minister this is to do with Programme 1-4(7), there is \$230,000 made available to Foreign Employment Mobility Services; Attachment Allowance of \$187,600; Fijian Volunteer Scheme for \$194,000; and the Pacific Labour Scheme \$250,000. All of these fundings, in a very quick fashion, Sir, can you just explain what the actual funding does for those earnings? For example, Foreign Employment Mobility Services, what does that entail.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The cost is to meet demand under the Labour Mobility Programmes to Australia and New Zealand. The allocation includes the operational and logistical cost of mobilising workers, including cost of hiring training venues, medical cost and hiring transportation. This also includes the cost of planned Ministerial Visits to Australia and New Zealand.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I hear him saying ‘operation cost’.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We are talking about SEG 7 - Foreign Employment Services.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- All of them, what is an attachment allowance?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Attachment allowance, Mr. Chairman, the allocation is for creation of employment opportunities for local unemployed citizens to do attachment with employers as part of their capacity building towards full employment. This also includes cost of facilitating lives skills

training, employment skills training and counselling.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- The last one, honourable Minister, is the Pacific Labour Scheme that is \$250,000. In reality, under the Labour Scheme, why is it that we are spending that much money within the Ministry to facilitate?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Chairman, the location is for an appointment of a country Liaison Officer and other operation costs in Australian, considering over 4,000 workers in Australia. The country Liaison Officer will be responsible for pastoral welfare support for workers on the ground, as well as promoting Fiji to the employers in Australia.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, honourable Minister.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, since it is a new allocation and new appointment, I would like to know specifically how much you will be paying to the Liaison Officer that you are going to appoint?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The package for the Liaison Officer, it will be someone who is original Fijian now a resident of Austria. It will be between AUD80,000 and AUD100,000.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving me the opportunity. I am glad to see that the Ministry is still very heavily involved in productivity services and the membership of Asian Productivity Organisation. One of the big tasks in any country is to enhance productivity, and I am glad to see here that we have the implementation of a National Productivity Master Plan. I would assume that if you have a plan, it would be linked to an increase in productivity and that increase would be measured somehow and related back to this plan.

But given that productivity is such a big thing, it boggles my mind that you try to improve productivity through some plan that is only going up to \$40,000. Is this just meetings or is it linked to an actual improvement in GDP per capita, or something measured like that or total factor productivity or whatever it is? What can we achieve in productivity in only \$40,000? It boggles my mind. Sir, maybe the honourable Minister might explain that.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is \$40,000 cost to revitalise productivity movement in country through the implementation of the master plan, cost for implementation of the master plan stakeholder engagement, national awareness on productivity movement, house productivity talks, symposium, workshops and appointment of a productivity champion in public and private sector.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is just linkage.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- This is the initial one – revitalising.

HON. J. USAMATE.- ... it targets on productivity improvement. Do you have a plan within 10 years to improve productivity?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- That will be the next step, thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Alright, *vinaka vakalevu*, I look forward to seeing that.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, there is an increase in the expenses of ILO Convention – SEG -5. Maybe this time, 20 or 30 delegation going.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- No, no!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is your problem?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thirty was in someone else's agenda, not ours.

Mr. Chairman, ILO Convention – cost of the 112th International Conference, honourable Bala is aware that this is an annual affair. Every June, the ILC is convened and every government is required to pay for the Tripartite Delegation. That is for the employer, the worker and the government delegate and government advisor. We are taking only that specific number, whereas in the 2015 and 2016 when some other people were going, a big number were going.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, further clarification on that, it is just for that one particular conference, I mean, jokes aside, normally the employer representative, the commerce representative and the Ministry staff. What I am saying is that there is an increase from \$30,000 to \$130,000. This is what I am saying. You do not have to give me and tell me all those 'bullshit' that we were taking those people. Just give me an answer, please.

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman, this is not bullshit.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You withdraw your 'bullshit', honourable Bala.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, you need to withdraw, please, Standing Order 62. Withdraw, please.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I will, but you never withdraw when you were eating aeroplane. I withdraw, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Minister, he has withdrawn that.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 7 – Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations.

Question put.

Head 7 agreed to.

Head 8 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(6), about three-quarters of the way down, just some clarifications on a heading - Comprehensive Nuclear Test. What is that for?

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- I thank the honourable Member. The Comprehensive Nuclear Test budget, there is no change in this budgetary allocation. The budget of \$23,780 is to cater for the Fijian Government's contributions on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The Test Ban Treaty organisation works to hinder the development of nuclear weapons and in the

development of advanced new types of nuclear weapons and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Treaty Organisation's ultimate aim is for the elimination of nuclear weapons and Fiji stands for global peace and security and, therefore, it is important for Fiji that we remain in the CNTBTO.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Might I suggest, honourable Assistant Minister, that that heading be changed to reflect what you have just said because it says 'Comprehensive Nuclear Test', and that is it. It should be towards the Treaty, it is just our suggestion.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Thank you, noted, *vinaka*.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Chairman, on Programme 2-1(7), I just need a bit of clarification from the honourable Minister of Finance and also the Foreign Affairs on the announcement of the budget by the honourable Minister of on the reopening of the four Missions and he had stated that \$4 million was allocated for the reopening of the Missions in Washington, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia, including the setup of the proposed one in Israel. I just need a bit of clarification on that. We do not see a set up component of that on Israel in here.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The reason why we have not included that is because we felt that by the time all the issues are explored, we will not be able to do that in the next financial year. These are immediate -Washington, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, so that is why it is not shown in this one. But if all the work is done, then there are funding in Head 50 which could be utilised.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- So we can assume at this point in time, honourable Minister, that it has to be considered later?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, that is right, because the preparatory work will continue this year.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- I am sure our friends from SODELPA are part of the component and will not be unhappy on this, honourable Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- You had announced it on the Budget Day, we all thought that that was going to happen.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is why we announced it, that it is going to happen.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, just a quick one with respect to Programme 2-1(8) – Refurbishment of Overseas Missions and we have given it \$2.2 million. Does this mean all our missions are being refurbished or specific ones that have been refurbished?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- We will be looking at all but firstly those that are being closed for some time, for refurbishment. A property is still there in Washington that will have to be upgraded. I have just been to the New Zealand one which needs a lot of work. I have not seen the one in Australia.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, we also have one in Brussels.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Yes, it is still ours, not manned but it is probably that ones that we will be looking at also.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Honourable Prime Minister, just one question, a lot of the issues that we have been saying from our end towards the Government is that a lot of things were microwaved, but I was just trying to think that goods things that not be microwaved, has the Ministry for Foreign Affairs considered the kind of approach that is being used by countries like Israel and Singapore where their ambassadors and high commissions do not come and stay in country but they come when needed. I was wondering if that is an approach that you are also considering.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Like roving, based in Fiji. That is also being considered but these are old traditional positions and locations. Out of those we send our ambassadors out to the neighboring countries. So, based in Malaysia he would have been looking after the other areas. Now, recently while Malaysia was still there, we established Indonesia whereas before we could accredit the one in Malaysia to Singapore or went directly to Indonesia or directly from Fiji but yes, it is still an option.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I was just thinking in case when you do not have a physical mission, it might be considered.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Yes.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Prime Minister just quickly too, with respect again to those refurbishment of the missions. You say it is to do with all the properties that we own in all the different missions that we have. Is that a sufficient amount, Sir, because it is quite an expensive exercise to refurbish all the missions?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- On prioritization basis, it will be the ones that has been left vacant that will have to be upgraded quickly for the deployment of the personnel.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 8 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Question put.

Head 8 agreed to.

Head 9 – Independent Bodies

HON. K.K. LAL.- A question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Not sure what he is asking.

HON. K.K. LAL.- No, hold on. You hold, you talk too much.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You in one of those Independent Bodies.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- His confused.

HON. K.K. LAL.- I will go to Head 13, Sir.

Question put.

Head 9 agreed to.

Head 13 – Independent Commission

HON. K.K. LAL.- Question, Mr. Chairman. Programme 1-1(6) – Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission. There are a lot of criminal activities and people are neglected by the authority. There is an increase, can the honourable Minister explain further on that, please?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- That is not seeking clarification on the figures that has been allocated.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- \$927,800?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Yes.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- So what is the question?

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Seeking clarification on the figure.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Why the increase? Can you clarify the increase, please?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- If there is an increase, it is probably to meet the demands of the department in terms of investigation, enquiries and travel.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Chairman, Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption, I can see \$10.1 million has been allocated. So, that confirms that FICAC will remain.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is a constitutional body.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am just asking, it will be there because there were a lot of talks that it will go. So, I am just asking since the allocation is here.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- It is there, it is still alive, it is still breathing.

You have a similar motion on that, honourable Vijay Nath?

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask about the Legal Aid Commission. If anyone has any question prior, I will hold on.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- No.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, Legal Aid Commission, as you know that we have got around 26 to 27 offices in Fiji and more than 200 staff. If you look at the narrative written by the Ministry, it is very rosy, nice and very true that the Legal Aid Commission provides services to the vulnerable and it is all around Fiji. I can see a decrease, in fact if you look at my submission there, I request for an increase.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You are seeking clarification?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- One of the things, if I can just explain throughout the ministries, when we were formulating the Budget, we looked at positions that were vacant and what is the capacity to fill those. So, on the basis of that, the budgetary allocation is there, we have had a good discussion and we understand the Legal Aid Commission requirements, but we also want to make sure that it is not being abused by people who should not be going there. That is part of the rationalization, but the funding is enough, that is what the Legal Aid Commission, as part of our

discussion, agreed.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I still insist that the amount should be increased. Looking at the genuine reason that people who cannot afford and the vulnerable people all around Fiji, as I have mentioned earlier. I believe it is more than 26.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- You want to speak on your motion now?

HON. V. NATH.- I still stick to my motion that we should increase so that the services are provided to the people who cannot afford.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Move your motion now.

HON. V. NATH.- I have already moved my motion, Sir.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I would like to second the motion.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, just repeating, as I have mentioned earlier, if you look at the narrative under Legal Aid Commission, it provides free legal services to the members of the public by giving advice, providing legal representation in court and other related services to Fijians who cannot afford them. It continues to expand and extend the services around the country with branches in rural and remote areas. As I have mentioned, we have got more than 27 offices with more than 200 staff and I still believe that there should be an increase or keep to whatever it was in the last financial year. As you can see, it has been decreased.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not sure why honourable Nath wants to insist because as I said to him, we had a very good discussion with the Legal Aid Commission. They agreed with this budget, they have a plan, they are being audited for 2022 and 2023 which will finish by 31st October. They are very happy with the budget, so I do not know on what basis you are asking for an increase, what is your rationale, I cannot understand that. Mr. Chairman, all I can say is that Legal Aid Commission is happy with the budget, they agreed to the reduction and we understand their requirement well.

HON. V. NATH.- We put it to the vote, Sir.

Question on amendment put.

Motion lost.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Nath, your second motion is still here. Another one to do with Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption.

HON. V. NATH.- I think I will withdraw that because it has been dealt with.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, mine is relative to the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC). The FCCC's budget had been reduced by some hundred odd thousand dollars. Bearing in mind that there is an increase in VAT et cetera and their activities ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- ... will increase and they have a core function within our society. I just wanted to know why the allocation has been reduced so much.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Chairman, the honourable Member is right FCCC has an important role, especially to ensure that policies, especially tax policies are effectively implemented. Although they want to do a lot of other things like, conference, research which we support, but in this Budget, we have tried to hose that down a little bit. We are saying rationalise the funding activities and we believe that the funding is quite appropriate for this particular financial year.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is an increase.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it is n increase.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, still on FCCC, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, we met with FCCC and this is to do with the regulation services that needs to come out of EFL, like licensing of wiremen and electricians. That particular function needs to go to FCCC. We were very concerned with the amount of fire incidents that we see in the country, which is caused by bad workmanship or poor quality electrical items coming into the country. Our concern is that regulatory function has really not been taken care of by the FCCC because of the funding. They have been requesting for more money so that the regulatory arm can be established. What we see here is rather than an increase there is a decrease.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- No, there is an increase.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Increase?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, there is an increase.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Sorry.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The other thing that I just wanted to say is, some of these independent commissions and bodies in the absence of Higher Salaries Commission, and because they are independent bodies, what we have noticed is that, sometime the expenses can be quite extravagant so we are trying to rationalise some of those. The increase that we have given, I think is sufficient and will allow them to effectively do any additional work they might be required to do.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, just a last question related to the same thing. If you can tell us exactly by how much the increase have been made?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- \$346,000.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Chairman, mine is on ACCF.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sorry, it is a decrease.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It is an increase.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, a decrease.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is an increase.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Chairman, mine is on ACCF. Just a concern, maybe the honourable Minister responsible can explain this. I believe ACCF is still operating from that old

warehouse at Valelevu in the LTA compound, if I am correct. The question is, that is a very busy place and we know what kind of work they are doing right now. Is there a plan to get the team over somewhere that can be more central and easier for people to access?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- I will certainly look into it. I was concerned when I was told that they operate from a small room at Valelevu.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- *Vinaka*, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, one of the issues that we have is related to the issue that was raised by the honourable Premila. In some sectors at the moment, we have the issue of providers being regulators, for instance, in the electricity field, the provider is the regulator. Ideally, we would have an ideal situation where the Government does policy, you have a regulator and then you have providers. This is one of the issues that you find when you are trying to get companies to bring in solar energy, renewable energy, they have the problem of negotiating with the providers and also the regulator. So, there is obviously a need to strengthen that technical component of FCCC. I am just wondering under this budget, does that include the strengthening of the technical component within FCCC so you can separate this provider and regulator role that currently EFL plays?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That should have been done a long time back, but that is something that we will do.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is in the question whether that is included in this increase? That is my question.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is part of the review that will happen at FCCC.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, it is not included yet?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What do you mean not included yet?

HON. J. USAMATE.- The separation of those roles. Out of EFL, to be plugged here. Does this budget it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- First we will do a review and see.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is not yet there?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, it is not yet there.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Chairman, this is just in regards to the allocation made to the Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption. I have noted that there has been a decrease of \$400,000. Can I seek clarification from the honourable Minister the reason for the decrease?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You want to know why there is a decrease?

HON. A. BIA.- A decrease of \$400,000.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You want an increase?

HON. A. BIA.- Just seeking clarification on why the decrease. Have you narrowed down the operations in terms of human resources?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, there are lot of factors that we take into account. The net decrease is due to the reduction in operational expenditures, travel and accommodation, training and, of course, all those components. If there is a reduction, \$400,000 reduction is fine, FICAC is happy with that.

Question put.

Head 13 agreed to.

Head 14 – Fiji Corrections Service

HON. J. USAMATE.- Programme-1-1(9), under SEG 9, there is a fund there to buy boulders. Is that related to the prisons (\$250,000) for boulders. Can we just have some need clarification on that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The replacement at Nasinu, fencing of the boundary area.

Question put.

Head 14 agreed to.

Head 15 – Ministry of Justice

Question put.

Head 15 agreed to.

Head 17 – Ministry of Civil Service

HON. J. USAMATE.- I have a query, Programme 2-1(8), the Renovation and Maintenance of Government Quarters and Public Buildings. I would just like a clarification if this included the Government quarters in Vunisea, Kadavu?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Specific renovation, all allocations have been transferred to Head 50. Essentially what we are trying to do is to make sure that, all Government quarters are in such a bad state. Some of them are almost not liveable.

HON. J. USAMATE.- My question was if the cottage in Vunisea in Kadavu are included in this \$3 million allocation?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They would be, but I can check on the specific one. I do not have the details.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I will appreciate if you get that.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, I have a further question on that because hearing the honourable Minister and most of the Ministers during their Budget response, they have also been allocated through the Asset Management Units in their respective Ministries allocation on renovations. Before we used to have institutional quarters and its all now known as Government quarters and Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) has been shifted to PSC as well. How does this link up with Asset Management Unit (AMU) in the respective Ministries? What will they be responsible for and the demarcation of responsibility.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If I can add first, Honourable Usamate, Vunisea included.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, CIU is essentially disbanded now. What we found out is that as a result of how it was managed, a lot of things were not happening. There was a lot of wastage and mismanagement. Some things are still being looked into. That function will now be with the Civil Service and the Public Works Department will be involved. They are already starting to do a lot work in terms of scope, et cetera. The different ministries, their Asset Management Units will also be strengthened. Right now, everything is to go to CIU. It was set up as a temporary thing after *TC Winston*, but it took a more permanent structure and most ministries had to rely on the efficiency and the effectiveness of CIU and it was not happening. So, this transition will take a while, but it will become more efficient, in my view.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You have duplication of these services. You bloat your operational expenditure. When you centralise it, you have a smaller unit.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Not necessary, if it is manageable.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is the other side of it.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Chairman, perhaps a final question from me because one is Office and Accommodation and then you have buildings and quarters. This is the question that I want to raise because most of the quarters need a lot of repairs as well.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Essentially, the Strategic Planning Office will coordinate the AMU in different ministries and make sure that the work is done. The Ministry of Works will be part of that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Last question, Sir. On that SEG on the rent for all UN Officers of \$3.315 million. We know that there are issues with that particular building at the moment. There was an intent to build a building for the UN, I am just wondering if that is still in the pipeline of the planning of current Government?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is still in the pipeline but, Mr. Chairman, if I can add to the honourable Seruiratu's earlier question. In fact, CIU was a kind of an operation where lead consultants used to make millions of dollars and it was operated in a way that whom you knew. Increasingly, we are finding out, so that is why we have taken this decision immediately to disband CIU and move these functions to PSC which is under the honourable Prime Minister, and we feel that from there, things will fall into place. The National and Strategic Planning office working with AMU and Public Works Department would create better efficiency and value for money.

Question put.

Head 17 agreed to.

Head 18 – Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-1(8) Retention Payment – Namarai Government Station. What is the progress, Mr. Chairman?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Retention payments for the Government Stations at Namara and Wainikoro for their construction has been completed. Retentions are due to be paid in the 2023 – 2024 financial year.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman on Programme 1-1(8), I just need a clarification from the honourable Minister. The upgrade and renovation of existing Government Quarters.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Nath, we are into Programme 2-1.

HON. V. NATH.- I did switch on, you missed out, Sir.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- We have moved on. Sorry about that.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- You can ask him privately.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Just a clarification on Programme 3-1(10) - Seafaring Entrepreneur Assistance Subsidy. What in particular is this and how is it going to be spent?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- It is a new expenditure allocation. It is allocated to subsidise the purchase of fully equipped and operational fibreglass boats for Fijians living in the most isolated coastal areas of Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and maritime islands. The initiative known as Seafaring Entrepreneurs Assistance furthers our longstanding commitment to the self-starting culture in our maritime communities. Eligible applicants will have to provide contributions under the Subsidy Assistance; the one third, two-thirds component.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It used to be with Ministry of Economy before?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes, it used to be with Ministry of Economy.

HON. J. USAMATE.- And the Grant for Self-Help Projects, is that also under one-third, two-thirds basis?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- In what SEG?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Same SEG - \$1 million.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- No change. It is to promote and encourage communities initiating development over their own social-economic projects in partnership with Government. It is one-third, two-thirds.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, still on on SEG 10 - Rural High Risk Water Sanitation Project. Can the honourable Minister elaborate more on that \$800,000 and how many projects so far we have successfully completed in the red zone area in the last six months?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- It was provided with \$800,000 in this financial year 2022–2023 given that the case of water related diseases such as Typhoid, Leptospirosis and Dengue Fever (LTD) has been on the rise recently. In the 2023-2024 Financial Year, the Ministry is focusing on construction, installation of 26 Ecological Purification Systems with the duration of six months and the construction of 131 sanitation structures on identified high risk areas where sanitation is below par.

As far as what has been completed, I can come back to you on that, Sir.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, how many Ecological Purification Systems (EPS) are you looking forward to for this year?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Sir, 26 Ecological Purification Systems is what we look to complete

in this financial year.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, will it stay with you or you are intending to give it to PWD or Water Authority of Fiji?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- No, it is part of the Rural and Maritime Development works. It is part of our Ministry.

HON. V. NATH.- I believe it will stay with you because prior to this, it was transferred to Water Authority of Fiji. They were the main organisation doing this project. So you want to say from this year, it will be under you.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes, we have been doing it so far.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you Mr. Chairman, my question is on Programme 3-2(10) - Rural and Outer Island Programme. If you can kindly elaborate more on this particular programme. Is it alternative livelihood, what is it all about?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, the Ministry will work with relevant stakeholders to construct related infrastructures in the rural space. For example, construction of collection centres, storage facilities for agriculture and fisheries produce, waiting sheds for rural commuters. It will also include improving livelihoods, facilitate trade, improve transportation and expand agriculture commodities through the provision of machinery to quicken agricultural development. This will all be funded under the Rural and Outer Island Programme and I believe there was discussion also on helping with the Ministry of Fisheries with the blast freezers.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I think this is the allocation for NDMO, if I am not mistaken. We know that we have been talking about El Nino in the current system, so the importance of flood earlier warnings. We know the biggest disaster that always affects our country is not cyclones but floods. The maintenance of flood early warning systems. Is this separate from the one that is done by the Fiji Meteorological Service or is this something else over and above the Hydrological Unit at the Fiji Meteorological Service and what they do or is it just a linkage back to that particular system? I can see it is only \$10,000.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Which SEG?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Programme 4-1(5) - Maintenance of Flood Early Warning System.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- It is due to land activity anticipated to be carried out in this financial year. It is just the maintenance of early flood warning systems, related activities include also site visits, GIS, tool mapping, conducting standard checks on water level installations, undertaking evacuation drill procedures, exercise and revisiting municipality evacuation plans and preparedness plans. I think it is something that we co-operate with the Fiji Meteorological Service.

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, that will be your river gauges?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes, river gauges.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Programme 5-1(10) on Rural Housing Assistance. Any clarification and what are the criteria?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- It has been allocated to provide affordable and resilient housing for rural dwellers, again the one-third and two-thirds applicant's contribution, four schemes altogether. Scheme 1 is assistance in transportation of materials to the maritime islands. Scheme 2 is the purchase of housing materials on one-third and two-thirds basis. Scheme 3 is the procurement of partial house or housing materials. Those who have timber and in-kind materials can use that as their one-third. Scheme 4 is the assistance to support the Vatukoula Scheme which is an initiative started by the FijiFirst Government but not implemented up to-date.

(Honourable P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. S. DITOKA.- No, no just facts. The programme was previously allocated under the Ministry of Housing but it is now administered under the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management. It is a creation of a new programme and activity so we have to establish the new unit and it is going to be manned by seven staff to manage the entire implementation and monitoring of the Rural Housing Programme with the intention of construction of 50 houses under Schemes 2, 3 and 4 planned for 2023-2024. We are also discussing co-operation with Nadave, as well as the RFMF Rural Development Engineering Unit to assist us with that.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, if you may, can you elaborate further on Scheme 4 which you think was not good enough. It was not fully implemented, you can elaborate....

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- I think there are only nine people left for their homes to be constructed. So, for those ones, once we construct, then Scheme 4 will be completed.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I just wanted to highlight when we took over the Ministry of Housing, one thing they did not have was a cyclone category 5 certified housing plan and the Ministry of Housing has done that. They have done a category 5 certified housing plan. Previously, they had a housing plan and it looked really odd where you have a house with a step and a person sitting on a wheelchair with a step. It just did not look right, and it was not done by the architects and engineers. Everything was done, even the materials was worked out, like how much it will cost to build that house, whether you want two bedrooms, three bedrooms and that whole thing was available for free, no one had to pay anything. It was just a one-time cost. I thought I will just highlight that.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Chairman, I believe we have worked on that as well. We have worked with the Government engineers from PWD, we also worked with other stakeholders in designing these rural housing unit houses and I believe that they are category 5 strength at the moment. We are also making sure that there is easy access for the disabled. I think those were all lessons learnt.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is along that line as well, honourable Minister. Through you, Mr. Chairman Sir, which design are we going to take now because previously it was the 24 feet x 16 feet. The Koroipita model is the one that the Minister is referring to so which one are we going to take because we need to advise our people as well in terms of the cost so that they can provide their one-third.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Yes, the 24 feet x 16 feet is the one that is going to be made available and also the plans will be made available on our websites. We will also be offering them on all our social media platforms so that they can be easily downloaded and also all our offices are available for advice if anyone wants to seek advice. The prices and the quotations will also be made available for them there.

Question put.

Head 18 agreed to.

Head 19 – Republic of Fiji Military Forces:

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, I had a question for Activity 1(7) and I will be dealing with Head 19 on our behalf. It should be fast. Review of Military Act (\$50,000), I am just trying to clarify honourable Minister, is this review on top of the review that the New Zealand Defence Force were doing for RFMF or is this a separate one?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, that work has actually been completed. It is coming through the Government system through the Solicitor-General's Office. It is now on my desk, but we want to do it after the process of the Defence Review so its holistic. Once the changes are done, we can review it. So, that fund is allocated for it in case there are major changes like for consultations and other matters but definitely the work with the New Zealanders has already been completed.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, the next one is still on SEG 7 - Annual Asia Pacific Chiefs of Defence Conference. I take it this is the hosting team of the conference?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- That is correct. The Commander is co-hosting with US Indo-Pacific Commander and it will be held in Denarau. That is our contribution to it.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- There is no further question on Activity 1.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Chairman, 1-5(1), just a clarification for the Navy, there is a decrease. Is there a decrease in the number of people who are serving in the Navy? Why the decrease, can I get that clarification, please?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, honourable Member, through you Mr. Chairman. This \$6,647,514 is just for the established strength of the Fiji Naval Divisional at 418. It is a bit of a funny situation this one because it appears that certain establishments that were already running that have yet to be funded which just came up through Cabinet, particularly through Maritime Essential Service Centre (MESC). The agreement here that they would source from within to start the process and then we would review it. That is part of the reason why we have continued with the \$6,647,514 to cater for the current establishment of the Navy right now.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Chairman, \$9 million? Head 19-1-5(1), the total for SEG 1 is \$9,746.7 million, in 2022 it was \$10,670.7 million, there is a decrease of almost a million dollars and I am taking that because this is SEG 1, that this is a decreased in the number of people in the Fiji Navy.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I apologise, I lost you there, honourable Member. So, you are talking about the reduction of \$923.9 million?

(Honourable Professor B.C. Prasad interjects)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- It is in SEG 1. If you look at the Established Staff, the total for SEG 1 for Established Staff has dropped from \$10 million last year to \$9,746.7 million. I seek clarification as to whether that indicates that there is a decrease in the number of people that you are employing in the Navy?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Sorry, let me just get my notes in order.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Minister, if I can answer that? It was a one-off expenditure because the additional was funded through redeployment, so it was basically zero in this budget. It was used in the current budget. You get that?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Sorry, no.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It was a one-off expenditure....

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- For SEG 1?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- For SEG 1 because there was an additional requirement which was funded from redeployment so that was covered in this Budget. When it came to this Budget, we went back to the original.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Sorry, I still cannot work it out if it is Established Staff, you are talking about people?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We were told that they do not need this funding for next year, that is why we considered it as a one-off expenditure. This is from the Military itself. We were told that that additional \$10,143.11 million was not needed for this year.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- That is people's pay you are talking about. You mean, if they do not need money to pay people this year that means....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, it was an additional expenditure that was required in this Budget which was redeployed and paid, but now it is part of the regularised budget so that amount is no longer there. It is not a decrease in the number of staff.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- It is 418 and everyone is adequately paid.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It was a one-off adjustment so that is why they needed that this year. That was provided through redeployment but in this Budget, they will not need that. That is why we went back to the original.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Alright, maybe you confirm that the number of people who are employed in the Navy is still the same?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, there is no reduction in staff.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I have a general question because I have been looking for the increase for the engineers because in the Budget announcement you said there is an increase in the engineers. However, you look at all those, even in the engineers, it does not reflect an increase in the number of people. So how many are your recruiting for engineers in this budget given that it was announced?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, 60 - this is for the re-establishment of the TTS, the school.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- The 60, you mean the TTS, not engineers to go into the regular force?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, this is a new one-off. Remember TTS was gone. So now we have re-established the school to teach it again; that was the request that they made. So we have added on 60 people as part of that.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- So the 60 people that you are adding on to the engineers are going to be brought in, trained through the TTS system and the TTS system pushes them out again. They are not employed, that is the way TTS works. If they come, do the TTS training and they go back.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, these people will actually be taken on.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- So they get absorbed into

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, yes it increases the strength of the regiment by 60.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- So, 60 is the total increase?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, that is correct.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote on Head 19 – Republic of Fiji Military Forces.

Question put.

Head 19 agreed to.

Head 20 – Fiji Police Force:

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-2(6) – INTERPOL. Can I request honourable Minister to elaborate?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, INTERPOL are one of our partners. This is to facilitate the organisation registration fees to international enforcement agencies such as INTERPOL, International Proliferation Program (ICP) and Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG) to allow smoother security networking. So this is what this amount is required for.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Chairman, FFIU do present to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs and when the Director came, he had a lot of good items with him, in fact, linking with INTERPOL. As you know, over the year it is beyond our control and beyond anyone's control, having drug washed up to our shores. What I suggest that we should increase it to \$100,000 so that we can train our officers especially, proper training given by INTERPOL on tackling these issues. The inter zone officers we have can be trained properly so that they can tackle this drug issue. I suggest an increase and I have given a submission, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is only for subscription budget. Our contribution is different, it is specifically for subscription.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, Programme 1-1(9) - Installation of CCTV Camera (\$700,000). I am assuming someone did not get their England right or is it one camera?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, there many cameras. At CPS and in the other stations we have controls where we have CCTVs everywhere, essentially throughout the city, through the major centres from Nasinu to Nausori. We have not quite covered all those areas that we want to look at. This is primarily to cover those areas, so we have better visibility of what is happening. That is where the money is going.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- There is more than one camera?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, definitely.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister of Finance, I think you need to get your proof readers right.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, I have got two questions. One is still on CCTV camera. I can see the amount shown here is just around \$700,000. In my view it is not sufficient because really, we need to have lot more CCTV cameras around. Just now I got a news on my phone that Eden Restaurant got robbed as we are seated here. So, it is very worrying, and that particular street is always safe. To hear all these things happening, I would like to suggest while I appreciate SEG 7 where you have Police Beat Patrol which means if I understand properly, is it foot patrol?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So, a bit of work that I had done when I was with municipal councils it was to do with CCTV camera, why London is safe?

London is safe because they have got almost 22 million CCTV cameras on the streets which makes people feel safe and they go out at night. Police Beat Patrol, yes, it is hit and miss. You are walking in the streets, yes, of course it is needed but having a camera and probably working with municipal councils so that they invest in the cities as well, that will help the Police and people will be safe. So, that is just my suggestion.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, that is the ideal situation we would like to have eyes everywhere. To cover like the gaps, there are hundreds of cameras there already. This is really to cover the other areas where we actually cannot see.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- There is none.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Now for the Police Beat Patrol, we were just talking about it today, how to integrate the best effects on presence on the ground and actually people knowing that they are on camera. Cameras are good. It develops a consciousness in people to realise someone is watching them then it is good, but it is not going to stop them also from doing something because then we have to react to investigate after that. But Police on the ground is actually quite different because when it is there, people know it is there. We show our presence, Sir, whether we are working, on horse or on back of a vehicle. That is why we have allocated this. It is important that the people actually see it. So, you should see a bit more

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, of course at a later stage we would like to know a little bit more about how effective this particular programme is in terms of the crime rate.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, absolutely, I think we capturing it. The reason why we have done this because in these dark areas are our most vulnerable spots and where people are vulnerable.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Chairman, Sir, Programme 1-1(7). I request a clarification from the honourable Minister. I have noted there is a new item under Police Beat Patrol, the sum of about \$700,000. There are two parts to my questions -

1. what does this entail as this is the first time, I have seen it; and
2. whether that element of Community Policing, you spoke about it in your response to the Budget, where is that covered in this Budget?

I remember, it used to be the core of our engagement with the community under the Duavata Community Policing. I have not seen anything on it on this one here and I feel it is an important part of addressing some of these challenges the Police are facing right now.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, through you I thank the honourable Member for that question. Obviously the Duavata is the current framework on how the Fiji Police Force relates to the community in the work that they do. Apparently, in the brief that I have received, the context of the Duavata Policing covers in parts certain areas that may be a wider context of the community policing which could still be developed a little bit further, which is integrated really into the work that the Police do both in the rural and also in the urban areas. It is that concept that we would like to develop a little bit further, based on the current context of the Duavata partnership which is developed by Doctor Eci Nabalarua and other people from USP.

Other experts in the Police have also told us that it has its own limitations, but we need to push this out a little bit further and I agree with you that that is very important; to be pro-active, to go out to the community, to reach out, to prevent rather than to cure.

This Police Beat (\$700,000) will actually allow us to increase our presence and also with the use of Duavata use this to get out into communities and talk to them (both rural and also urban areas). It will be quite helpful in that regard. We are just talking over the concept because this is a new allocation, increasing Police presence in the community because that has been the gist of the complaints.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Can I ask another follow-up question, Mr. Chairman? In the Budget proposal that has been presented, honourable Minister, I have noted there are investments in technology and equipment. Does this include the body camera or there are plans to introduce that later?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, that is part of the plan, honourable Member. Specialised equipment that the Police will now need as part of this, perhaps the international requirement about arrest, et cetera. We are only acquiring for units as we go, part of it also with PSRU specialised.

As you know, the handling of evidence is quite a complex process so a trial within a trial in terms of how people complain that they have been mishandled by Police. As you know, during your honourable Member, now we have cameras inside interviewing rooms. Now the Police cannot really do the things they used to do before if they cannot get through to an accused person because it is fully recorded. Likewise, cameras on their vests, which is something that we are trying to do to increase transparency, accountability of the Force and, of course, the relationship with the people which is really to abide by the law and not do extra legal stuff.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Chairman, my question is in relation to SEGs 1 and 7. In SEG 1 there is CID Allowance of \$50, 200 and then SEG 7 states CID Expenses. What is the difference between the two?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Programme 1-2, you said CID?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, CID.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- And the question is CID Allowance?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And CID Expenses.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- CID Expenses is on which SEG?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- SEG 7.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, through you, the the CID Allowance which has an allocation of \$50,200. The Allowance is payable to Police Officers that are entitled to wear civilian clothing to perform special tasks required by the Head of the Department.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is the Expenses?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- No, that is the Allowance.

On the CID Expenses to facilitate the payment of criminal informants to assist in the investigation of serious crimes that have slim lead but are of national interest. CID personnel have been increasing together with their responsibilities of detection rate. This will also provide any urgent assistance on and criminal investigation and awareness and training. That is the difference.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, I went through all the Activities, perhaps it is a general question, I have two questions. I do not know where it fits into the Activities.

1. Still on Allowance because it is not there with the PSRU nor with the CID - police that handle drugs. They are exposed to a lot, it is not only narcotics even *marijuana*. I hope that they would have come up with this because given the terrain and as you understand in the military they have the height, diving and death allowance, whether we call it a Hazard Allowance?
2. The big risk also when we deal with drugs. When they store it for exhibit, the stench is just horrible. We feel sorry for those that look after these storage facilities because it will have implications. This is something that we have been raising with the Police if they can come up with it. While still on that also, honourable Minister, the problem that the Police have with exhibit storage. Whether we go into containers or given the Police Stations that we have were meant for the activities back in those days. I am just going through the Activities very quickly and I do not know whether it fits into here but I just want to raise it with you.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Chairman, I note that and those things that you are saying are actually important. In terms of the high risk, there are special allowances for the other places or things like CID and forensics have allowance for those. I do not think there is any allowance for Police Special Response Unit (PSRU) going to Kadavu, that is just normal Police operations. That is something we have actually considered but not specifically covered for. I know in PSRU there are Extra Duty Allowance, that may not be adequate but as a special category, they should do that.

Exhibits are a problem, they are definitely a problem. I can tell you for sure when I went to Tukavesi, in the Conference Room which is about a quarter of the side of this side of the gallery, there were like 50 *marijuana* plants (sorry honourable Member). They are thinking up smart ways to deal with those, I think they are coming through seeking legal advice from the Solicitor-General on how to be able to capture the evidence on site without having to bring it to Suva or to Court so that the Judicial Department with the laws would allow for that evidence to be amissible in Court on a criminal trial because otherwise they have to bring all these to Court and carried with you. It is just too heavy but definitely it is a big problem but I think as we build capacity, I must admit the new police stations do have the spaces to store those like in Nadi and Lautoka but they will get filled up

quickly. It is never enough but it is something that we need to continue to chase, so containering them is an option. The points are noted.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Chairman, Programme 1-4(5) - Crime Prevention Strategy listed as \$10,000. If I could just refer you to that. But you got Crime Prevention Strategy as \$10,000 for the Southern Division, Crime Prevention Strategy as \$5,00 for the Eastern Division but nothing for the West or for the North. Is there a particular reason why it is only two divisions being given something under strategy and what does that entail? I see the West and the North do not have that particular provision.

SEG 5 says Crime Prevention Strategy of \$10,000 for the Southern Division and if you turn the page, Sir, for the Eastern Division (I have to go forward to actually do the comparison) Programme 1-5(5) there is Crime Prevention Strategy of \$5,000 for the Eastern Division. But for Western Division, which is Activity 6 and for the Northern Division, which is Activity 7, you have zero. Is there a reason or is that people from the North and the West are good people?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is based on what they require in different divisions. There are other expenses in some divisions, so it depends on what they need. That is how this has been allocated because when we had discussions, we did ask them and they said, “we just need this for this.”

HON. F.S. KOYA.- What does the strategy entail, honourable Minister? Is it education?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think it is part of the Duavata Awareness. It is called a strategy, but it just focusses on Duavata.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Would it not be the same on each Division? That is the point, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Still unfair to the two Divisions. If you are going to do the work in two of them and not on the two others. The hard question is what does it entail and why is it that it is only two divisions that are getting it?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Usually Crime Prevention Strategy really is to plan, conduct proactive programmes by organising quick fixing and long-term alleviation of prevalent offences, relevant scenarios will dictate roadmap towards reduction in crime, engaging the community and other stakeholders including the Duavata as the honourable Minister of Finance had alluded to. So those are some of the activities. As submitted by the Force, they are doing this in Divisions that are funded. So, obviously, the other two do not have but I have to find out for you whether some reasons why it is not captured in this budget. Maybe they are more law-abiding people, they need not to do that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- West people are like that.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes.

MR. CHAIRMAN.- Parliament will now vote on Head 20 – Fiji Police Forces.

Question put.

Head 20 agreed to.

MR CHAIRMAN.- Honourable Members, we have now concluded the voting on Heads 1 to 20 and we will now adjourn the Committee of Supply until tomorrow.

Honourable Members, I will resume the Speaker's Chair in order to adjourn Parliament.

The House resumed:

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. Parliament is now adjourned until 10.00 a.m. It is already morning so we will adjourn until 10.00 a.m. to continue with the Committee of Supply, et cetera. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 a.m.

SCHEDULE I

Translation of the Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts' iTaukei speech in response to the 2023-2024 Appropriation Bill 2023 (Ref: Pages 1358-1360]

I rise to speak in support of the Budget delivered by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance on 30th June this year. First and foremost, I would like to congratulate the honourable Minister and his team, as well as the members of the Fiscal Review Committee, for putting together and delivering the first Coalition Government Budget. We should be thankful that it was crafted with a lot of ingenuity – a well thought-out and balanced Budget.

Mr. Speaker, no Budget has and will satisfy all the citizens in a country. So, we must unite, be resilient and support the work of trying to build up a new foundation and economic status of our country.

The strengthening of our current economic strategy will be good in the near future. This is a Budget for the new Fiji, so we must work together to improve the financial development and economic growth of our country.

Mr. Speaker, I sincerely acknowledge the budget allocated to few sectors of Government, in the –

- Education Sector, \$148.2 million was allocated for scholarships, the exemption of TELS debt repayment by 53,700 students and the teaching of language and culture in schools.
- Health Sector, I sincerely appreciate the increase in budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Health. It will better serve the public, improve health infrastructure around Fiji and will also increase the workers' pay. Health workers will be ready to address any health issues in Fiji.
- Agriculture Sector, I appreciate the increase in budgetary allocation to the Ministry of Agriculture from \$57 million to \$95 million. It will assist in land cultivation for farmers, address food security and assist in the economic growth of the country.
- Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, I sincerely appreciate the budgetary allocation for the elderly and pensioners, as well as consideration given to women, the young girls and children in their different allocations.
- Housing Sector and Local Government, our sincere appreciation on the reconvening of the Municipal Elections as people look forward to be elected as representatives of their towns and cities, and the need to properly address the issues on informal settlements which include *iTaukei* who came from the islands and rural areas around Fiji to settle in our towns and cities.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to offer my sincere appreciation to the effort given in monitoring and implementing the Budget in the last six months, which has enabled the Ministry of iTaukei to carry out most of its activities.

Mr. Speaker, again, I would like to acknowledge the 2023-2024 Budget. There has been an increase in the budgetary allocation of the Ministry of iTaukei from \$15.4 million to \$38.6 million,

an increase of \$23.3 million as compared to the budgetary allocation in the previous year. This is an indication of trying to uplift the living standard and wellbeing of the iTaukei community.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will conduct a strategic review on three of its important Institutions – the iTaukei Lands Trust Board, iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission and the iTaukei Administration. Important emphasis will be placed on reviewing its legislations, and it must be reviewed to be in line with the challenges and changes faced today.

Mr. Speaker, \$300,000 has been allocated to the iTLTB to fund its review and allocation from Government will fund for the review the iTaukei Administration and iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission.

Mr. Speaker, iTaukei resource owners need to participate in the economic drive of the country. This was the aim of the Resource Owners Forum in March this year.

The National Economic Summit do acknowledge the request from the resource owners and it is incorporated in the National Budget. So, for the first time in our National Budget, \$100,00 has been allocated to implement this initiative of the Resource Owners Forum.

Mr. Speaker, my sincere appreciation also to the \$4 million allocation given to Ministry, which used to be allocated to the Office of the Attorney-General.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to address the issue raised by the Opposition Member, honourable Bulitavu. I need to confirm that a Surveyor Section is currently under the Ministry of iTaukei. They have assisted requests from *iTaukei*, especially those who cannot fund the cost.

The iTaukei Trust Fund will assist in the entrepreneur initiatives, they will assist land iTaukei Resource Owners in regard to financial project management. I have stressed to staff the importance of proper management of this budgetary allocation.

Mr. Speaker, a great challenge faced by the Ministry is the request from the *iTaukei* to clearly demarcate their land boundaries. Some requests that it be surveyed and have a digital map for village boundaries. The problem is that the Surveyor Section under the iTaukei Land and Fisheries Commission are using old and archaic equipment. The allocation \$250,000 will be used to purchase new equipment to solve this problem. The Ministry and *iTaukei* landowners sincerely appreciate this allocation.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry will focus on improving the livelihoods of the *iTaukei*. After 15 years, Village Improvement Plan will be reinstated. There are funds in the 2023-234 Budget for improvement of village infrastructure. Villages will give one-third and Government will provide the two-thirds assistance.

With reference to honourable Maharaj's question, we will be working together with the Rural and Maritime Development in assisting those living in settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Cabinet has endorsed the Consolidated Development Framework for the *iTaukei*. The central idea is to empower the *iTaukei*, with less dependence on Government. A mid-term target is to set up an iTaukei Bank that will facilitate capital access for the *iTaukei* and \$100,00 is being allocated to do a feasibility study.

Mr. Speaker, *Vanua* governance will be the critical link to development. Without strong *vanua* governance, all developments above will be hindered. *Vanua* governance is on the decline.

Currently, 53 percent of all *Liuliu ni Yavusa* are vacant. This means that more than half of the *iTaukei* are leaderless.

Vanua governance is the foundation for *iTaukei* communal living. The *Liuliu ni Yavusa* will be given an allowance of \$100 per month in the next financial year, to assist in their traditional obligations.

Mr. Speaker, the Turaga ni Koro and Mata ni Tikina allowance will also increase. Sir, \$2.1 million has been allocated for their allowance, an increase of \$641,000, as compared to the previous Budget.

Mr. Speaker, the desire of the Coalition Government is to minimize *vanua* obligations for the development of Provinces. Therefore, Government has allocated \$10.8 million to replace provincial levies, which is an increase of \$6.5 million from the last Budget. The idea is to allow the collection of levies from villagers to be channeled to village and community development, as stipulated in the iTaukei Administration policy and legislation.

Mr. Speaker, these are the programmes that have allocations in the Budget, the:

1. Review of the Village Guideline;
2. National Action plan Against Gender Violence;
3. Community-Based Integrated Natural Resource Management Project;
4. Review of iTaukei Land and Fisheires Commission Organisational Structure;
5. Increase in the number of participants for Traditional Leadership Course;
6. Rehabilitation work at the Levuka Heritage Site; and
7. Refurbishment of the Fiji Museum.

Mr. Speaker, as per my above statement, no budget will accommodate the needs of everyone. The Coalition Government is now ready to serve the people of Fiji. We need to work together and unite to bring about a better Fiji.

I need to inform the honourable Leader of the Opposition and Opposition Members that the Ministry will properly manage its budgetary allocation. The Ministry opens its doors for the Opposition Members to come on board and assist in the improvement of the *iTaukei* livelihood. After our time of service, we will be at peace, knowing that we have done our part for the iTaukei community.

I support the 2023-2024 Budget. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.