

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**FRIDAY, 15TH SEPTEMBER, 2023**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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**FRIDAY, 15<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2023**

The Parliament resumed at 9.39 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, honourable P.K. Bala and honourable S.T. Koroilavesau.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 14th September, 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 the final sitting for today. I also welcome all who are joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

International Day of Democracy

Honourable Members, today we celebrate the International Day of Democracy - a momentous occasion that invites us to contemplate the bedrock principles of democracy and their enduring significance. This important day was established through a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007 and has been observed annually on 15<sup>th</sup> September since 2008.

This year's International Day of Democracy theme, "Empowering the Next Generation", focusses on the essential role of children and young people in safeguarding democracy today and in the future. As we celebrate this day, let us be resolute in our commitment to democracy. My appeal to all Fijians is to engage with Parliament and take advantage of the opportunities that are available, so as to participate meaningfully in decision-making.

Back to Office Reports

For the information of honourable Members, the Back to Office Report for the Parliamentary Whip's Workshop which was held at the Victorian Parliament will be made available in the Library for your perusal and reference.

On that note, I just wanted to add this yellow and red card. That is something that is being

practised in the State Parliament of Victoria, so you can always fall on that should there be differences in interpretation or meaning for the impact that it may have on some, if they want to ask where do we pull this from. We did not pull it from the rugby field, it is from a similar State Government of Victoria.

### **SPEAKER'S RULING**

Honourable Members, on Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2023, I informed Parliament of two things, that:

1. I had approved honourable Bala's request to present his evidence on Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2023; and
2. I had received official communication from honourable Sashi Kiran on a matter of *prima facie* breach of Parliamentary Privilege by the honourable Member, that is, honourable Parveen Bala, and that I would address the matter at a later date.

Honourable Members, I will now address Parliament on my:

1. Ruling on the evidence submitted by honourable Bala;
2. Instruction on the matter raised by honourable Sashi Kiran; and
3. Ruling on the official communication from honourable Ketan Lal with respect to the alleged breach of privilege by honourable Charan J. Singh.

#### Submission of Evidence – Hon. P.K. Bala

Honourable Members, having reviewed and assessed the evidence submitted by the honourable Bala, I am satisfied that the evidence is sufficient to support the statement he made in the Parliament. Therefore, I hereby rule that the matter will not be referred to the Privileges Committee and this is the end of this matter.

#### Matter of Privilege - Hon. S. Kiran

Honourable Members, the official communication from honourable Sashi Kiran on a matter of *prima facie* breach of Parliamentary Privilege by honourable Parveen Bala, please, kindly take note that I have instructed for legal opinion and, therefore, I will deliver my Ruling on the matter at a later date.

Honourable Members, for your information and I seek your forbearance on this, it takes a while to get an opinion because of the so many cases that are before the Solicitor-General's Office. I hope you will bear with that because it is quite a prolonged case, just to await for legal opinion to come through so as to ensure that we are always transparent in what we do.

#### Breach of Privilege - Hon. C.J. Singh

On another matter, honourable Members, I have received official notification on Tuesday, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2023 from honourable Ketan Lal, raising a matter of privilege pursuant to Standing Order 134. The matter of privilege is against the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry with respect to his comment when responding to a question on Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, where he referred to honourable Lal as a "bloody small kid".

Honourable Members, I have duly perused the Uncorrected *Daily Hansard* of Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, specifically on page 1631 and on the face of the uncorrected transcript, I am satisfied that honourable Singh uttered those words.

In that respect, I hereby rule that honourable Singh must withdraw the words, “bloody small kid”, and I further rule that the matter will not be referred to the Privileges Committee.

I now call on the honourable Singh to withdraw the words, “bloody small kid”.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I withdraw that comment.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. That statement is withdrawn, honourable Lal, and honourable Members of the Opposition. Please take note that, that is the end of the matter.

### **PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS**

The following Reports were tabled by the honourable Ministers responsible in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

#### Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2020 and 2021 Financial Statements of Government and 2020 and 2021 Agency Financial Statements – Ministry of Finance (*Parliamentary Paper No. 91/2023*)

#### Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2016-2017 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 127/2018*)
2. Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2017-2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 72/2020*)
3. Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2018-2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 47/2023*)
4. Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2019-2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 48/2023*)
5. Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2020-2021 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 49/2023*)

#### Standing Committee on Natural Resources

Ministry of Forestry 2021-2022 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 71/2023*)

### **QUESTIONS**

#### Oral Questions

Processing of Vacancies in the Ministry of Health  
(Question No. 135/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament on how the Ministry is addressing the delay in the processing of vacancies for Health Officers?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the honourable

Member for his first Oral Question.

Sir, the Ministry has in place a recruitment plan based on the approved budget and that will ensure timely filling of funded vacancies. These vacancies include newly created positions, regularised positions, selected vacant unfunded positions from previous Financial Years and vacant positions due to post-holders' promotion, retirement, death, resignation, deemed resignation and termination.

Our HR team had conducted post-Budget awareness consultation sessions with all 13 core centres under the Ministry covering the four Divisional Health Services, three major Hospitals, two Specialized Hospitals, Fiji Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Services, Public Health Programme, Health Protection; and Headquarters, to finalise positions to be filled based on the given budget.

In terms of processing of vacancies, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is strengthening its processes, including:

1. Advertisement of open vacancies which will allow for valid merit candidates.
2. Pool for 12 months to fill positions based on the Ministry's need.
3. Filling of vacant positions from the available valid merit pool
4. Full adoption of recruitment online through Government's recruitment portal except for medical positions
5. Posting of medical officers, registered nurses, pharmacists and dental officers once their completion of internship is confirmed.
6. Creation of additional HR and corporate positions in all core centres to assist in the vacancies processing activities whenever required.
7. Acting appointment is processed through expression of interest to fill specialized positions while awaiting the permanent filling of positions through the Open Merit and Recruitment Selection process.
8. Opening of citizenship criteria that is not limited to Fijian citizenship for Registered Nurse positions.

Mr. Speaker Sir, one of the challenges that the Ministry faced in speeding up the recruitment and appointment of new staff members in the last financial year was the lack of Corporate staff within the Ministry to facilitate the necessary Civil Service-endorsed recruitment processes, because of civil service policies that existed prior to the Coalition Government taking office.

We raised our concerns during the budget consultation process and very grateful for Government's budget approval in the 2023-2024 financial year for the Ministry to recruit essential corporate staff members who are critical in running the human resources management processes for the Ministry. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services continues to align its recruitment processes to all relevant legislations and guidelines during this transitions period awaiting finalization of employment policies.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for a very comprehensive answer. Is the honourable Minister aware that there are 24 vacancies in the Radiology Department?

There are graduates coming out of the Fiji National University (FNU) but they tend to enter the private sector because of the good salary offered. Would the honourable Minister consider the plight of X-Ray technicians in the Ministry of Health because of the crucial role that they play?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank the honourable Ravunawa for his supplementary question. Yes, I agree in terms of graduates coming out from the tertiary institutions.

In terms of work needs, there are always vacancies there. The challenge with the Ministry right now is the opening of some of the new private facilities and they take most of the staff within the Ministry. Another challenge within the Ministry is the planning process in terms of requesting tertiary intuitions to increase the number of intakes in terms of those cadre and also on how we can expand ourselves in terms of services for recruitment.

Extension to the Agreement of Cooperation  
(Question No. 136/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the Extension to the Agreement of Cooperation with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Member for the question raised before this august Parliament this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Agreement of Cooperation is a collaboration established in 2018 between the Ministry of Housing, Ministry of Local Government and UN Habitat. The collaboration was made after identifying the need for a programme that addresses the need tackle the frequency and intensity of extreme events, such as flooding, droughts, cyclones and long-term sea-level rise that negatively impact informal settlements around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN Habitat and Ministry of Housing had prepared a proposal, increasing the resilience of informal urban settlements in Fiji that were highly vulnerable to climate change and disaster risks - the Adaptation Fund initially provided funding of US \$299,000 for one year from 2018 to 2019.

In 2019 Mr. Speaker, Sir, additional activities were included to this Agreement of Corporation, that included the engagement of 2 consultants; supported the finalisation of community action plans and identified community capacity needs. This resulted in the extension of the Agreement of Corporation for another year from 2019 to 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2020, the Agreement was further extended until 2021 to cover delays in implementation of activities due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. With extension to the Agreement, funding was also increased to US\$365,000. In 2021, the Agreement was extended until 2022 as capital projects were included for 16 targeted settlement-based action plans. Funding was also increased to US \$3.1 million to implement the project.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of the project was affected again because of the second wave of COVID-19 in Fiji. The delay in capital works led to the extension of the Agreement until 2023 which was endorsed by Cabinet in January 2023. The delay in endorsement of the Agreement, Sir, lessened the duration to complete the capital project works, coupled with the recovery from the global pandemic, hence the Agreement has been further extended until 2024 to complete the planned capital works.

The Ministry will, firstly, be commencing capital works on three sites out of the 16 settlements that have been initially identified. These sites are located in the Central Division and situated on State land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry had conducted the tender process for consultancy works on the

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry had conducted the tender process for consultancy works on the pilot projects. However, due to high tender bid amounts received, the Ministry had to seek alternatives within Government. The Ministry has, therefore, engaged the services of Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Metrological Services, for the designing of engineering plans for the three sites.

The upgrading works have been prioritised according to the needs of the communities, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This was done through consultation between the sitting tenants and UN Habitat. These upgrading works are expected to be implemented once engineering plans are finalised. Upon completion of the project works, a total 223 households will benefit from improvements made in the settlements to increase the resilience to impacts of climate change and disaster risks.

Provision of Sales Data  
(Question No.137/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources update Parliament on the reasons for not providing the Sales Data to the Valuers and Financial Institutes since April 2023, which is essential to Valuers in determining the Fair Market Value of properties when carrying out valuation?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide the answer to honourable Kirpal's question.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Lands, through the Office of the Chief Valuer, is responsible for the collection and recording of all property data. That is the Sales Data that we are discussing here, and monthly reports which are disseminated for the purposes of the public and also for those who might want to privately gather that information at a minimum fee. The data, Sir, is used by those who are experts in interpreting the property market throughout the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, historically, Sales Data is meant for registered Valuers and is critical for them when they undertake valuation work in Fiji. The data is an integral part of the valuation process, and it is required for valuation reports for mortgages, transfers, property matters, as well as used for sales and purchase.

Mr. Speaker, prior to the repealing of the Stamp Duties Act 1920 that provided the focal point for the collection of such information, there was at the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS), Stamp Duty's Office here in Suva. The Ministry was allowed under an MOU to collect property data or instruments that were bought for stamp duty or transfer of any land to FRCS. In exchange, the Ministry of Lands would assist FRCS in determining the market value of such properties under the Stamp Duties Act 1920 and carry out valuation of such property at a minimum applicable rate under the Valuation Registration Act 1986.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the repealing of the Stamp Duties Act 1920 through the repealing legislation in 2020, as a result, the FRCS no longer collects stamp duties. So, consequently, from 2020, the Ministry had to collect data from the Capital Gains Tax Section and not from the Stamp Duty's Section.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2022, FRCS decided to withhold access to the Sales Data to the Ministry and as at from that date, the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources do not have access to the daily Sales Data that we used to have from FRCS.



Mr. Speaker, a few months later in September, the then CEO of FRCS terminated the MOU that we had with FRCS because it appears to disclose information which are confidential to the taxpayer. So, pursuant to Regulation 51(3b) of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (Information Sharing) Regulations 2019, the MOU that we had enjoyed with FRCS for many years that allowed us to have access to information so that we can upgrade our data at the Chief Valuer's Office was repealed or terminated by FRCS, so we have gone for more than two years now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, without the essential upgrade of that database.

The way forward, Mr. Speaker, is that now, the Ministry of Lands is seeking to access the same data from two agencies and that is through the Registrar of Titles Office via the Ministry of Justice, and also with the Ministry of Information through ITC Services.

The Ministry is currently working with the Solicitor General's Office in finalising the draft MOU with the Ministry of Justice. This MOU, when it is finalised and executed, will allow the daily connection, as well as recording of relevant property sales information or transfer documents that have been lodged by parties at the Registrar of Titles Office.

Considering that there will be a lapse in Sales Data from April 2023 to the day in which we ultimately intend to sign this MOU once it clears all the legal hurdles, we have tried to engage with ITC through the Ministry of Information and we have consulted with them just to be ensure that we are being provided with an alternative source of data upgrade that we can access from the Registrar of Titles Office. Now, if that happens, it will allow us to retrieve information that have been lodged with the Registrar of Titles Office as from April 2023 to ultimately the date we soon hope we are going to put signatures on the MOU with the Ministry of Justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being proactive as of 1<sup>st</sup> August this year, the Ministry, through the Office of THE Chief Valuer, has commenced with the collection and the recording of the all the property sales information of transfer documents that have been lodged with the Registrar of Titles Office. We would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Attorney General in facilitating and ensuring that we are able to commence with the collection of this important data whilst the MOU is being finalised.

We are collecting the information and it will ultimately be available to the public and to the Valuers once we sign off on the MOU. Since the information collected from the Registrar of Titles Office is confidential until the registration of the documents on the different titles, public search, the Ministry will be drafting individual agreements with registered Valuers and their respective companies to safeguard the disseminated sales data information.

I wish to conclude that we are currently working towards having the people of Fiji with a relevant and right information on the database for leverage and for their own empowerment including all registered Valuers and I hope that we are going to be putting signature, as I said, top aper in the next month or so, so that we can upgrade all of the information that is needed from 2020 and up until real time and that information will soon be available to the registered valuers as well as to the rest of the public.

HON. F. S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, if memory serves me correct, there is physically a person that actually goes across from the Ministry of Lands to the Registrar of Titles Office on a daily basis to collect the raw data. The data is actually given by the Registrar of Titles Office to the Ministry of Lands and that should be sufficient to give the actual raw Sales Data to the institutions that require it.

I am just wondering whether that is actually continuing and I think that was still being done

because there was a digitisation process that was to take place at the Registrar of Titles Office, which I think is not quite completed but until it is digitised, it would be simple to just have digital access to each department or each government has access to it. But that particular information was being lifted from the Registrar of Titles Office on a daily basis physically to be provided to the Ministry of Lands to update their data, to say that these sales took place. Is that still happening?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can assure Parliament that the uplifting of daily Sales Data just commenced. We have picked up on a draft MOU that was sent to the Office of the Attorney-General in the first part of this year. They are currently looking through the MOU to get through all the legal issues that we need to deal with.

However, at this moment, we are picking up the information on a daily basis. We are not making them available because what we wanted to do is to pull all the information that we needed to do to upgrade the database from 2020 up until this time. So, I am sure that when we sit again in the month of November, I would have a better update for Parliament on where we are. But certainly, we are working hard to ensure that all the Valuers are made available with the right information on time.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, consumers also need Sales Data to make an informed decision when they are buying a property and for that reason, the Real Estate Board has started to create a database online so that people can hook up and find out if a property is being sold in a particular area, the price of the property say one year ago or two years ago or three years ago. My question to you honourable Minister is, how is the Real Estate Board working with the Ministry of Lands to also support the general public who are being often ripped off for not knowing the price in a particular area and end up paying a lot more?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can say that I am not privy to whether the Real Estate Board and the Ministry of Lands worked together on the upgrade of the database. What I am sure about is, under statute, the Chief Valuer is supposed to be the 'go to' person when someone requires information such as valuation of properties. But I can assure the honourable Member that if there is a database with the Real Estate Board, that is something that we can have. I can advise the Ministry to try and figure out a way of working with the Real Estate Board so that we can together provide the public with the best platform of information from which they can draw their decisions from.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very thankful to the honourable Minister for the explanation. However, like in our valuation, we pay a very heavy amount of Professional Indemnity (PI) cover, so I kindly request the honourable Minister if that can be done quickly so that no liability comes to us because now we are carrying out our valuation, not only me but all the companies of Fiji. We are relying on the data that we have. We do not take the data which the Real Estate tells us, because most of the time their data is incorrect because the sale has not taken place, the data comes here, I think. So, I really appreciate the honourable Minister's explanation that the data is coming, and I will really appreciate if the data can be made available as soon as possible for all the registered Valuers of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before you reply to that honourable Minister, I would like to declare my interest here as a registered Valuer as well. He keeps mentioning this every time he speaks on the issue of valuation, but I think that data is very critical for Valuers so as to get a proper valuation, when we analyse the sales, the members of the public as referred to by honourable Premila Kumar, is protected here.

At the same time, the Valuer is answerable for his analysis of the sales of similar kind of properties that the client wishes to purchase, so to speak. The data is quite important for the basis

that they will have the Valuer deduce whatever value by whatever method he/she applies so that makes it transparent as well to members of the public.

You may have heard, as alluded to by honourable Premila Kumar, there are certain kinds of sales done by dubious means of getting a sale through and there are so many ways. When we analyse the sale, we can reduce that, it is a 'for sale'. It is unrealistic and because you may imagine, honourable Members, the sale price of properties that we have in Fiji is almost a million or well over a million dollars now, what makes that happen could be anyone's guess - a pure sale that has taken through where a willing buyer and a willing seller concept applies at the same time, it can be all inflated as well. How do we take care of that?

Data is quite important for us because we no longer pay stamp duties but we still have the Capital Gains Tax. We used to get data through the Stamp Duties Office but now when it has changed through the change of law, that is quite difficult to get as well, but data is vital for every Valuer's work in this country. I now give you the opportunity to reply to that statement if you want to, honourable Minister.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have provided the answer and more that I was going to reply to honourable Kirpals' question. Thank you very much, Sir.

Exchange of Notes on Japan's Grant Aid  
(Question No. 138/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the Exchange of Notes on Japan's Grant Aid to the Ministry under the Economic and Social Development Programme?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I thank the honourable Bainivalu for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Exchange of Notes on Japan's Grant Aid to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services under the Economic and Social Development Programme was undertaken on Monday, 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2023 at the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Headquarters. Sir, Exchange of Notes formalises mechanisms of cooperation between the Government of Japan and the Government of Fiji to promote economic and social development in Fiji through the Grand Aid Support Project with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services.

In November 2022, the Ministry had approached the Embassy of Japan in Fiji, for them to support the strengthening of primary healthcare in Fiji through an integrated model of primary healthcare delivery. The Government of Japan responded through the Embassy of Japan in Fiji, approving a grant of JPY¥150 million which is equivalent to FJ\$2.4 million to the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to purchase two medical containers and vital medical equipment and products. The medical containers are fully fitted mobile health clinics that have the appropriate type of bio-medical equipment that will allow our health staff to conduct primary healthcare services and activities wherever in Fiji the container is sited at.

The Grant Aid Project will also facilitate the proper installation of biomedical equipment inside the medical container clinics and once the fully fitted medical container clinics are in the country, the project will facilitate the training of local health staff on the use and upkeep of the medical container clinics.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the endorsement of the Exchange of Note, the parties are progressing to process and to facilitate the release of funds from the Government of Japan and the engaging of the Japan International Co-operation System (JICS) which is the Japan based agents that deal directly with the Government of Japan on Grant Aid Projects. Sir, JICS will facilitate on our behalf the purchase of the medical container and biomedical equipment.

Sir, the Grant Aid Project has a two years' timeline from the date of signing of the Agreement and the Ministry looks forward to the full implementation and completion of the project which will add further capacity to our Primary Healthcare approach to Fiji.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- A supplementary question. Honourable Minister, forgive me, there will be two parts to my question.

We receive a lot of assistance from friends and partners, rotary clubs and a lot of medical equipment are also included. But one thing that I noted, Sir, is particularly having worked in the rural areas is the lack of Biomedical Technicians/Engineers to fix equipment when they have problems with it. My question is:

1. In the Ministry of Health in terms of availability of Biomedical Engineers and Technicians, do we have them only at the Divisional Hospitals or Sub-Divisional Hospitals, or how far down do you have them?
2. I know that there is serious shortage of this skill. A cousin of mine is now with Sai Prema Foundation Fiji. He has retired for the last few years, but they are looking for this. What is the Ministry doing about having more of such skills so that they can add effectiveness to your services, honourable Minister?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his supplementary question and I fully concur and agree with his comments that our Biomedical staff are important in the delivery of quality healthcare.

At the moment, Sir, the Biomedical cadre on its own is a small group of specialists. They are available at the Divisional level for now but moreso, located in the Fiji Pharmaceutical & Biomedical Services (FPBS). We are in the process of planning for more capacity building within this cadre.

We have recognised that in the field of medicine and health, if we move forward in the future, there will be more need for biomedical services. We have discussed with the Ministry that it should be a cadre on its own within the Ministry. There is an ongoing plan on building capacity within our Biomedical Specialist people. I believe one of our Biomedical Heads right now is honourable Bulitavu's sister. They are an important part of the Ministerial of Health, and we will look after them in terms of training, especially to make it a cadre on its own because there is a need for them moving forward into the future.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am glad to hear the assistance that Japan has been providing to the Ministry of Health over the years. I think in areas like NCD Programme, 5S and this particular programme. And also, I am glad as we are getting these containers, I think they will complement the service that is provide by *MV Veivueti* which gets people around the country.

I am interested in the actual services, the kind of services that will be provided from these containers in terms of primary health and the importance also of primary health in terms of preventative health. A lot of time we talk about doing things after the cat has run away already, but the range of services that have been provided from these containers, I assume that there will be people involved with them and whether they are just to be used in Viti Levu or across to other islands; will

the containers be carried around?

HON. DR. RATU. A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Usamate for his supplementary question. Honourable Member, the containers are the mobile clinics, therefore, there are two that I have been briefed on. There will be one in Viti Levu and one in the North for now.

It is kind of a pilot project for now and for those containers to be moved around, we need proper preparatory work done so that when we move the containers, all the connections are readily available like electricity, water, et cetera. In terms of the services, the primary healthcare services like the normal GOPD work plus laboratory as well.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Bainivalu for asking this question. I know that the comprehensive economic and social development programme had begun operations since 2016. May I sound it here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that His Excellency our President is now the champion for oral health in the country.

Oral Health is the state of mouth, teeth and our facial structure which perform essential functions such as eating, breathing, speaking and also our psychological dimensions. My short question to the honourable Minister, will he consider oral health in this container that is custom-made for the purpose of primary healthcare delivery in our country?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Ravunawa for the supplementary question. Yes, I forgot oral health will also be included in it.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- *Vinaka.*

Increase in Roads Accidents and Deaths  
(Question No. 139/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the measures being undertaken by the Ministry and the Land Transport Authority to address the dramatic increase on the number of road accidents and deaths which has set a shocking record of 53 fatalities between January to June 2023 compared to 21 deaths for the same period in 2022?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. As I had mentioned earlier this week, road safety is everyone's responsibility. It is vital because many lives are at stake and it just takes a couple of seconds looking away for an accident to occur. Sir, poor driving behaviour on Fiji's roads has led to a spike in road fatalities as mentioned. To address this alarming spike, Land Transport Authority (LTA) is considering increase in traffic fines as a deterrent moving forward.

In terms of the figures as mentioned, the current death toll stands at 60 as of 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2023 compared to 21. In assessing the alarming trend, there was a spike in Group 2 driving licence holders involved in accidents or road fatalities from the statistics provided. From January 2023 to May 2023, the LTA did a driver profiling analysis and noted that 53 percent of fatal crashes involved private Class 2 vehicles.

The enforcement by LTA, Police and stakeholders continues to curb illegal activities and also preventative measures. From August 2022 to the end of July 2023, 98,918 camera Traffic

Infringement Notices (TINs) were issued by LTA and in the same period 133,664 vehicles were intercepted and 6,389 defect orders issued.

To address issues of driver behaviour, LTA and relevant stakeholders have enhanced measures, apart from the existing driver knowledge test system and practical driving test in place, there are other measures which have been looked into and currently followed. We are looking into measures to introduce two categories of Provisional Licence before they qualify for a full licence.

We are also looking at demerit points to be issued by LTA and incentives such as gold cards for complying drivers who will be entitled to privileged services and, of course, mandatory Defensive Driving Courses Training for Group 2 licence holders on a six-yearly basis.

We continue to conduct show-cause hearings and counselling sessions for drivers in the three regions. In 2022-2023, 2,508 driver licence holders were summoned for either show-cause or counselling. At regional office, 2,173 warning letters and 28 licence holders were issued with final warnings.

In addition, LTA is also reviving the Hands-on Wheels Programme and Driver assessment exercise, participants are taken through driving lessons, undergoing what they have been taught in Mandatory Defence Driving Courses before individual assessments. We are working closely with employers and agencies in conducting driver-assessments of employee drivers and through public consultations.

We are also working with the Ministry of Education for the introduction of road safety education in the curriculum from an early age right up to secondary school as there is quite an increase in the number of young drivers holding Provisional Licences. There is a need for inclusion of Road Safety Awareness through various stakeholders and we will continue to advocate for that, also working with other relevant agencies in the process of reconvening the technical working group on road safety.

To end, I believe with all road users; drivers, passengers and pedestrians to observe and adhere to road laws and also in terms of road safety which is everyone's responsibility.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Honourable Minister, thank very much indeed for that response. I really agree with you. Sir, road safety is everyone's responsibility.

Just a question to the honourable Minister, about 70 percent of deaths on our roads are caused by overspeeding. You are saying that about 15 percent are caused by road condition. Now, 10 percent of those are said to be because of poor road markings and traffic signs. I know because I travel the Sawani/Colo-i-Suva road everyday, the road has been like that for sometimes now without proper road markings. There are no centre lines, no centre meridian, not even the side marking lines as that will tell the drivers what to do. On these road sign programmes plus the traffic signage restoration, is there a programme undertaken by FRA to see into these kinds of issues and problems?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, I have already briefed Parliament on the programme of FRA regarding the Princess Road and Sawani, Serea. The roads are currently affected by the Rewa Water Project because it would be illogical to do the resealing now, but we are nearing completion of that project and the road resealing is budgeted for and we will be working on that in the current budget to upgrade that road. But on the other hand, the bad roads also slow down the speeding drivers.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all I would like to thank you and the Business

Committee for allowing this question to be asked in Parliament, an important subject on the carnage on our roads. When we talk about road safety and road fatalities, the bottom line is, it is trying to save lives on our roads. It is like when we say, “Search and Rescue at Sea”, it is really trying to save lives at sea. I see that there are two sides to it, one is prevention and the other side is for us to be able to save lives when an accident happens on our road.

Before I ask the question, just as an example, last week a big club of wives and mothers in the RFMF of 800 or almost 1,000 had their sporting event at Black Rock. They were told that all the buses wherever they are leaving from, must leave between 3 o’clock and 4 o’clock in the morning. That is to allow the Military to pre-position an ambulance along the way. So as the buses were going down, you can shift the ambulances so that if there is an accident that happens, the ambulance is quite close-by to respond. So, the response time to an accident is faster and hopefully, saves lives if there is an accident.

Hopefully we do not go there for accident. My question to the honourable Minister is, will you consider or are you considering setting up a taskforce with relevant agencies specifically to target the reduction of road fatalities? We question the police on this issue when we dealt with the two Annual Reports that we tabled yesterday. They told us that they have 18 speeding cameras only for the whole of Fiji. Speaking of speeding cameras, the speeding detection devices, a special task force set up by the relevant agencies and you give them and say, “seek the reduction of this” maybe a better way, rather than just dealing it with business as usual.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member , that was a lengthy supplementary question or is it a statement?

HON. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The short answer is, yes. As I had mentioned, the working group is currently in place and they are all working together to address those.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Forgive me, Sir, I might need a minute extra on my supplementary. It is not an explanation, it is an offering.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are giving an explanation followed by a question?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is an offering to the honourable Minister.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Offer, that is great.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- In my capacity as Patron of the Fiji Motorcycle Association, Sir, I just received a message from the Association. We have previously assisted the LTA with road safety awareness.

MR. SPEAKER.- Is that the wild group?

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- That is in the words of honourable Tikoduadua. We are a good bunch, Sir. We are offering our assistance in any way we can. We have done so previously to raise awareness for it, please, just contact me, just message me and we will absolutely and greatly help because the carnage is too much.

Just to put it into perspective, Sir, if you travelling on a motorcycle at 80 kilometres an hour and you hit a pothole, you are in for a serious ride. So, it is quite bad and I am happy to hear that the

honourable Minister has agreed with respect to what was just mentioned regarding a taskforce. Please, include us in the taskforce.

My question, honourable Minister, is there a specific reason at the moment why we do not have enough going out in the media with respect to road safety? I ask you to think about what New Zealand does., there are quite some really hard hitting messages that go out at the movies, on TV and even our billboards. It really does help, is there a specific reason why we are not seeing that at the moment or is there something in the pipeline that will happen shortly, Sir?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, I think the issue goes back in terms of what happened to the National Road Safety Council (NRSC). This was established in 1994, however, due to unplanned and cost saving measures, this was merged into LTA and also increased the functions of LTA to incorporate that of the National Road Safety Council. I believe this has diluted the work of NRSC and this is why we are relooking at that to re-establish it. There is no point in pointing at each other, but the point is to look at solutions. That is why we are relooking at that.

The main function of LTA is registration and licensing, so there is a need to re-focus road safety specifically to an institution which is empowered and also funded as mentioned to the specific function of road safety which is very important. That is another thing we are looking at in terms of NRSC to move us forward.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for about 40 minutes to 50 minutes so you may enjoy your tea. I have been given to understand that some honourable Members have come directly here without having a proper breakfast. We have been raising questions about accountability and we worry about what have we done, so the Secretariat and I are worried too.

We are adjourning Parliament for about 40 minutes to 50 minutes and will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.51 a.m.



The Parliament resumed at 11.25 a.m.

Price Control on Items by FCCC  
(Question No. 140/2023)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the steps being undertaken by the Fijian competition and Consumer Commission to ensure fair price marking for basic food items and other goods and services as a result of the change of VAT as announced in the 2023-2024 National Budget?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I would like to thank the honourable Member for raising the question on behalf of honourable Qereqeretabua.

Mr. Speaker, we, obviously, inherited a very challenging fiscal position and the complicated VAT regime where we had zero percent, nine percent and 15 percent VAT rates. Of course, we have reduced it to two rates - zero and 15 percent.

But we also, Mr. Speaker, ensured that the zero-rated VAT on the existing 21 items, including the addition of prescribed medicine, making it 22 items, despite the advice of the World Bank and Fiscal Review Committee where the suggestion was that we should have a single rate of VAT which would be more efficient and simpler. But as are Government, we decided that we will have two rates and so all those rates of goods and services at 9 percent were raised to 15 percent.

Compared to the three rates. this change, Mr. Speaker, made the VAT simpler, eliminated issues of ambiguity around VAT rate application and assisted businesses to better administer and reduce the risk of non-compliance with additional revenues to Government.

Mr. Speaker, when we introduced these changes, most of the businesses actually complied well in a very honest manner, but there were some unscrupulous ones that tried to take advantage of the situation. Some of it almost appeared that there was deliberate attempt to make the Government look bad by disproportionately increasing their markups significantly and much more than they increase in the VAT rate. When that happened, we responded very quickly with the help of the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) and the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) and immediately got things under control.

Mr. Speaker, the role of FCCC is to ensure that there is a fair price marking for basic food items and other goods and services, and the Act provides for that assessment and determination of prices for controlled goods as well. Many of the assessments and the determination of prices for controlled goods and services are actually contingent upon procurement procedures, landing cost and there are many other factors that determine this.

The FCCC will then determine and announce the retail price before the product actually reaches the market. After the prices are declared, Sir, the allowable markup for wholesale and retail trade is specified under the Price Control Order. Sir, several factors contribute to price fluctuations, including but not limited to supplier procurement cost, international freight expenses, duty rates, exchange rates and local clearance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just also point out here that during COVID-19 and even post-COVID, freight costs had gone up significantly, sometimes by three or four times, so a lot of the increases in

the cost of goods, especially imported goods, were a direct result of the increase in freight cost. So, in the context of the 2023-2024 Budget, the price review was prompted by the increase in the VAT rate which rose from 9 percent to 15 percent, and based on those changes, Sir, the FCCC reviewed and issued determinations for a total of about 5,496 products, with these changes taking effect from 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the implementation period, the FCCC corroborated with the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services (FRCS), Green Growth Association and businesses to ensure a smooth transition to the new VAT rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to facilitate the replacement of price stickers on retailers' shelves, a notice was issued on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2023 for businesses and on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2023 for Government Ministries and Departments. This notice allowed businesses until 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2023 to update their product price levels to reflect the revised VAT rates.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, importantly, this notice did not affect the implementation of the VAT amendments as of 1<sup>st</sup>, August 2023. All businesses were required to accurately apply the new VAT rate.

The FCCC, under the Act, Mr. Speaker, conducted surveys to ensure that the enforcement was properly done and that the businesses were compliant and that they were not making undue increases in prices. There were some items or services which already had a VAT rate of 15 percent. We have had complaints that restaurants suddenly increased their prices and they put out notices to say, 'we are increasing it because the VAT rate is now increased to 15 percent'. But it was already 15 percent, so they were actually increasing it on top of the 15 percent that was already there.

The survey that was conducted in the Central Division was 452, Western Division was 595 and Northern Division was 38. There were 364 inspections in the Central Division, 297 in the Western Division and 256 in the Northern Division.

Sir, during the inspections (this was a joint, sort of, operation between FRCS and FCCC), it was found that 62 traders were found in breach of these breaches. The FCCC has proceeded for prosecution against two traders and, of course, others are under investigation.

As part of phase two, Mr. Speaker, Sir, greater scrutiny will be applied to pharmacies as well, the licensing of which already falls under the FCCC's responsibility because with the addition of prescribed medication to zero VAT-rated medicine, we want to make sure that it is reflected also in the price that people get when they take the prescribed medication to the Pharmacies.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we noticed from the discussions that we were having, for example, the chicken prices, when we talked to the suppliers, they said, "No, we did not change anything". The traders who were found to just increasing it in an exorbitant manner were saying, "Oh, somehow, this was directed by the suppliers." So, there was contradiction in terms of what we were being told.

Sir, I would like to reiterate the fact that all those items, as I have said earlier, 15 percent VAT was already there. In fact, as I have said, we have three VAT rates - we had zero VAT, 9 percent and 15 percent. So, the example of restaurants is something that we also found and think some of the traders in the way they increased the prices was not only unethical, but it was also wrong and it almost amounted to deliberate cheating. These traders, Mr. Speaker, will be taken to task by the FCCC.

In addition, Sir, we have formed a price surveillance task force comprising of FCCC, FRCS and the Ministry of Finance, to monitor the prices and what we are noticing is that there are traders

who have been very honest. In fact, the FCCC has identified that the prices of almost 230 items have actually down, even after the increase of VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent because freight costs have come down significantly and some of them have quite honestly reflected that in the prices that they had put out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is an update on what the Ministry of Finance, FRCS and FCCC are doing to ensure that there is proper compliance.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Through you, Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister of Finance for that comprehensive answer. My supplementary question would be, while he has actually mentioned that traders would be taken to task, can he provide some clarity with respect to products that are not under price control and the prices are going high and how can that be actually managed? If the prices are not price-controlled, there is no jurisdiction to indicate the percentage margin that a trader can place on a particular product. So, how is the Ministry and FCCC dealing with that?

HON. PROF. B. C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a very good question. In fact, that is a question that we need to address. The FCCC is looking at its own determinations and what sort of signals they can provide to the traders.

Also, I think, Mr. Speaker, there is a need to make sure that there is an appropriate awareness and discussion with the major suppliers to ensure that the price that they put out into the market is reflective, and that they are not making undue profit. For example, in the case of the chicken suppliers - the local producers, they get duty protection of almost 42 percent. And we are saying to the suppliers, "Look, that has been the policy previously as well, so we have not changed any of those", because we realise the importance of production. If we put together all three of them, they employ about 2,400 people, but they cannot use that to hold 800,000 people to ransom by increasing the price of chicken in an unscrupulous manner when they do not have to. So, that is the signal that we are providing. In my discussion with all of them, they actually said that those prices should not have been increased by that much, and since then, Sir, it has all come down.

There are also things happening, for example, powdered milk prices have gone down from between 6 percent to 8 percent, as announced. There is 6 percent and then the maximum increase is about 8 percent, so it is 6 percent to 8 percent of different products.

Mr. Speaker, the FCCC, as I have said, said that the actual price of about 230 items went down because post COVID-19, freight costs were coming down. For example, with chicken products, even with the protection of 42 percent, some traders who were importing chicken portions, wings and other products with the payment of 42 percent duty, were able to sell it at a lower price than what was being supplied by the local producers. So that is the kind of situation that happens every now and then,

However, what we have said from the Ministry to FRCS is that the effect of the budget should be closely monitored, and I call upon all the traders and retailers. I think by and large, Sir, majority of them are honest players. They do the right thing, and we see that kind of dialogue and campaign in bringing the prices down and making sure that they do it in an ethical manner.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is in light of the fact on how you have explained it that quite a substantial amount of odd numbers in terms of people who went through this fair price exercise and were in breach of it, are actually going to get prosecuted. The question relates to the actual penalty that is going to be imposed on them. Do you intend to have a relook at the penalties imposed?

I know most businesses are compliant. Those who actually do that are even more of a deterrent with respect to this. In every budget in every year, we do something or another, and they fall foul of it. Is there an avenue for you with respect to deterrence to these operators who are actually doing that?

I say this, Mr. Speaker, because at the end of the day, when you have a serious deterrent, it is like the taxi driver in Singapore where he will not cross an orange light because he knows tomorrow morning, he will lose his taxi licence. That is true. So, if the deterrent is there, you will get traders making sure that they are compliant. This is for the benefit of the consumers.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think honourable Koya is absolutely right. We probably have to look at the FCCC Act. I think on the deterrent, there has to be some penalty, and I agree with him. At the moment, it seems to me that it is not as clear, and some of it is not there - things like prices, as honourable Maharaj had pointed out, which are not under price control, some traders feel that they can just do whatever they want to do.

What we are saying is, if we find that there are certain products where the traders are deliberately making sure that they make big margins, we will have no option but to bring it under price control. But the point that honourable Koya has raised about penalties is very important because there are some who distort the market in a big way. One big supermarket decides to do something funny, then it, sort of, distorts everything else and sometimes people complain that they go to one supermarket, as opposed to another, but there is a big difference. It is also the timing. Sometimes, traders play their games which is alright, but they should not be unscrupulous and unethical by increasing the margin in a big way.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plight of our people in the rural and outer islands. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, you have talked about freight costs coming down, but this is one of the areas that, I would say, is a big contributing factor to the predicament and the extra burden on our people in the rural and outer islands.

The two parts to my question, and forgive me for that, are freight costs and the effectiveness of monitoring. We do a good job in urban areas - the municipalities, but it is the monitoring in the rural and outer islands. How are you looking at fixing these issues, honourable Minister?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition. I think that is a very important and critical question and as you know and pointed out quite correctly, in Vanua Levu and some of the maritime islands, it has always been an issue. The freight costs is something that we can look at.

When we were discussing the budget in Vanua Levu, there were calls about certain amount of rebates on goods that are shipped from Viti Levu to Vanua Levu. There are also, on the other side, a lot of the producers from Vanua Levu who were complaining about the fact that the freight cost is so high when sending products to Viti Levu, to Suva and to the Western Division where they can fetch better prices. But freight costs sometimes can be quite prohibitive in terms of what they could do. So, I think as part of the next Budget, honourable Leader of the Opposition, we can look at some of the areas or the flashpoints that we can deal with. If there is a requirement for certain policy intervention, Sir, then we would be looking at that as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his response. In fact, our market is so small, there is always the danger of collusion within the business community. We have seen it time and again over the years and it is extremely hard to deal with that matter.

It is for this reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that countries use different strategies to deal with such situation. A good example is India with such a big market, with a lot of competition, yet they introduced four levels of GST. They introduced 5 percent, 12 percent, 18 percent and 28 percent. In Fiji's situation, we had zero percent, 9 percent and 15 percent. The 15 percent was mainly for luxury items, like alcohol, tobacco, white goods, et cetera; 9 percent was purely for food and services such as electricity, water bill, Telecom, so it was 9 percent. That is one way of providing relief to consumers, particularly when we have such challenges.

As the honourable Minister has highlighted, I mean, really every government whether you sit this side or that side or we are on either side, it does not matter because we have to make sure that consumers benefit and they are the ones who are struggling. So, honourable Minister, one way of dealing with this issue would be, like as you have mentioned about the marked prices which are displayed in the supermarkets, but if FCCC can also run more programmes or even through their social media just to alert the public what the real price is. That is all, thank you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you. I mean, I could not agree more with the explanation, except that, in a situation such as Fiji, honourable Kumar, is right, there is a lot of collusion that takes place. It is very hard to deal with it but the fact that when we did the Budget, we assessed the situation. In fact, Mr. Speaker, some of the prices for some of the items as a result of the decrease in the freight cost have come down by as much as about 40 percent. I mean, I have a list that has been provided by FCCC on the various traders. As I have said, for 230 items, some prices have actually gone down and I know people are telling me that the prices have actually come down on basic food products, things like onions, potatoes, tinned fish, and others.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are things happening in the market and we are, sort of, studying that carefully and some of the traders have done that. So, in a sense, the measures that we put into the Budget, we have made it simpler, but we made sure that we also get enough revenue and as a result of that, we have been able to provide increases in social welfare and other areas where we have been able to help those who we feel will be most vulnerable and most significantly affected as a result of the rise in VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move on and before I give the floor to the next question to be raised, I would like to welcome those in the gallery. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament and to be here. We welcome you warmly.

(Acclamation)

Illegal PSV Activities  
(Question No. 141/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament how the Ministry intends to stop or regularise those private vehicles involved in illegal PSV activities in order to make their business legal, lawful and safe to the public?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Member for the question. Sir, the answer to the question is with them...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Just answer.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ...because the question will also be responded to with this question, what were you doing in the last term?

(Laughter)

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of illegal vehicles has been there for a very long time - 16 years. I mean, we have gone through various Ministers of Transport, CEOs of LTA, one was paid more than half a million dollars, and that is why we have brought in the Higher Salaries Commission to control that.

(Laughter)

So, you know when I saw the question I am asking myself we cannot answer it because you have the answer. What were you doing?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I mean a lot of us know the story about illegal passenger vehicles and all that. They do satisfy a need. For example, some of the taxis do not run after hours and they are there. People call them from the communities, neighbourhoods ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Wait, wait! I am still explaining.

(Laughter)

Currently we are going through and you have also gone through the public consultation on that in which we are continuing and there is definitely a need to regularise but the freeze is still there so we are looking at those regulations relating to that but it needs to be look at holistically. I know it is taking a bit of time but when it is done then it is better to do it holistically rather than in a piecemeal.

So, just to answer the honourable Member, yes, we definitely need to look at because they are satisfying the certain sector of the public demand but of course we need to put in place measures such as the standards, state of the vehicles, age and of course the training of the drivers, the standards which they need to adhere to. So those are issues we are looking into so we will address one of the problems that you passed on to me.

(Laughter)

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister said the very right thing here. These pirate taxis are running because they are serving a market. There is a need there but there is a new ball game altogether now. Most of these demands are coming from those that are operating from villages, so I think in order for the Ministry or LTA to do this, probably this is going to be a new re-look into the law that covers the PSV areas but based from villages, from rural. The question now is probably about how we are going to really get the conditions in, just to stop these pirate operators that are coming into town. I think they are already flooding the market in town but there is a need, of course, in the rural or villages.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, honourable Member. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is one

of the situations that we will need to look into. Currently, when we look at the mix system which is the base and the open, we will need to work out whether the base system needs to be adjusted to cater for those who are coming to drop but not to operate near those bases. Somehow, that needs to be rationalised to have that option and not to crowd out those who are based in the municipal bases.

We might need to have two separate areas there but the urban or the town area the priority is those who have the bases there but not to deny the public the service if those who are at the base are not there especially during busy periods, Christmas, even Fridays and paydays. That is something we are looking into.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the original answer of the honourable Minister was giving to the other question, I thought if he wanted to give up on the post, he can give it up. I appreciate the answer by the honourable Minister that he is looking into regularising people who drive these private taxis provided they meet the requirements.

One of the things I have noticed Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have had on occasion that I have to tell taxi drivers off because sometimes the way they are dressed, sometimes they start playing with their phone while they are driving. It seems to me that once they get their PSVs, they become formal taxi and they get this sense of entitlement. I am just wondering, if you are going to regularise people that are privately pirate taxis, once they get the formalisation, how do you make sure that the problem does not perpetuate?

For instance, if you can go to Makoi at night and you find these taxis there. Once they get that taxi permit et cetera, they probably operate during the day, they disappear again at night. I know it is not a hard problem to solve but I am just thinking maybe there should be some sorts of things that LTA might consider on imposing on current PSV holders. I have had a case when I had my grandchildren when the bus stopped at a bus stop, he stopped in the road, not in the bus stop. I had to tell him off, you cannot do that, I have got grandchildren here. He said, no you just get off, we had a big argument.

In this sense of entitlement for people that have PSVs or commercial taxis, I hope you might have some idea of how they might try to address this issue.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Sir, thank you. I acknowledge that it is an ongoing problem and as an institution, that is where the PSV training comes, in terms of public service. That is a component which is currently being looked into in terms of the provision of licence, the responsibility which needs to go within the compliance and the standards of dress and Code of Behaviour in terms of PSV not only that but also having a framework to monitor that and also have in place measures to pull up those who are not abiding with that Code of Behaviour.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move on to the eighth Oral Question for today and I have been advised that the honourable Esrom Immanuel has withdrawn his Oral Question for today.

(Question No. 142/2023 withdrawn)

#### Written Questions

Fiji's Diplomatic Missions  
(Question No. 143/2023)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs inform Parliament on the following:

- (a) The number of diplomatic missions Fiji had overseas before 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2006;
- (b) The number of diplomatic missions established by Fiji overseas from 5<sup>th</sup> December 2006 to 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 2022;
- (c) The cost of maintaining Fiji's diplomatic missions overseas each year for the period 2007-2022; and
- (d) The number of Diplomatic Missions that Fiji currently has abroad?

<sup>1</sup> HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide the written answers to the Written Question asked by the honourable Kiran on behalf of honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua.

(Written Response handed to the Secretary-General)

Non-Residents' Work Permits  
(Question No. 144/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration provide Parliament on the following:

- (a) How many non-residents have been given work permits since January to July this year; and
- (b) Provide data on work permits granted to expatriates by sectors and country of origin?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. Sir, I will table my response at a later sitting as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

Homeless Women and Children in Towns  
(Question No. 145/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection inform Parliament on the following:

- (a) How many children and women have been homeless in towns and cities for the past 10 years; and
- (b) How many single mothers are receiving welfare assistance and what are their age group?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the question, on behalf of my male colleagues, I wish to thank you for the beautiful ties that they have received today. Sir, with the women Members of Parliament, we look forward to apparently our matching scarves that will be coming soon. Thank you, very much, it is very beautiful and honourable Naupoto is wearing it.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 143/2023 tabled by the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure I.



MR. SPEAKER.- Is that the reply to the Written Question?

(Laughter)

<sup>2</sup> HON. L.D. TABUYA.- I wish to table my Written Response.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are always very quick on your feet too.

(Written Response handed to the Secretary-General)

### END OF WEEK STATEMENTS

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

Honourable Members, I now call on honourable Rinesh Sharma to deliver his End of the Week Statement.

#### Increase of National Minimum Wage

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I start, last night when I left Parliament, my vehicle had an issue. I would like to sincerely thank those Police Officers who approached and helped me out and I safely got home. I would like to sincerely thank them, there were 10 of them who came up last night.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the End of Week Statements on the matter of increasing of minimum wage rate, this to be reviewed. The Statement would highlight the increase in cost of living and why there is a need to increase the National Minimum Wage Rate for our people as it is a very pressing issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thousands of Fijians will agree with me, I can keep my hand on my heart and confidently say, that this Coalition Government is like a sinking *Titanic* in radioactive waters. The wage rate in Fiji, Fiji's first ever National Minimum Wage Rate was introduced in 2014 for unskilled workers at \$2 an hour. Since then, the rate has been increased twice, first to \$2.32 an hour in 2015 and then again at \$2.68 an hour in 2017.

Following a national wide consultation process, the National Minimum Wage Rate will now be increased to \$4 per hour in four trenches. The subsequent or gradual increase is taking a realistic approach. Effective from 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2022, the National Minimum Wage Rate increased from \$2.68 to \$3.01 an hour and further increased to \$3.34 per hour in July 2022, and then to \$3.67 per hour. Finally, \$4 per hour by January 2023; subsequent and gradual increase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen some honourable Members on the other side, they have said previously about \$5 wages immediately as a package that will be done for the people of this country, but then 15 percent VAT was imposed on our people. We have a very historic Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to bring our attention to the honourable Minister of Finance because we have him on record saying that the cost of living is too high, and VAT is high as well. He also said that businesses are compliant and freight cost is coming down, but our goal is to provide

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 145/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure II.

for the people and that is our loyalty. But the businesses' loyalty is their profits. Businesses will still, most of them actually will still keep the prices same or even increase their profits, despite the VAT increase, and that is why cost of living is very high.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2022, again, the honourable Minister of Finance said that he estimates that 50 percent of the Fijians are struggling to put food on the table. Coming to this year, the Coalition Government speaks about the importance of public consultations. Of course, it is very important, but I ask the people of this country if the cost of living is high and an increase in VAT is what you wanted?

We have seen the outcomes of the National Economic Summit, there were various consultations and what was the outcome? The cost of living is high, because this is a collective issue. Thousands of Fijians are having difficulties to meet basic necessities, and thousands of Fijians are struggling to buy food, water, clothes, health and sanitation items. The struggle of the Fijian people is real under the Coalition Government, knowing that we have just come out of a pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the farmers are struggling. Some students who were on TELS have messaged me and shared their pressing concerns. To my surprise, some have left their studies and are working. Some are studying and working till late at night. Some said that they can afford only one or two light meals per day. I encourage academic challenges for the youth of this country, but here, the students are in a survival challenge. How do we survive and still move on in life and build life? This is the state that our young people are living in right now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people are also concerned and worried, they cannot afford food and neither can they get food from the ocean. What do they eat? Where do they go? And like I said previously, *na idhar ke, na udhar ke* - this is where the people are left to be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijian families are being pushed into a pool of poverty with a high cost of living. Poverty has many dimensions, but its cause include unemployment, social exclusion, high vulnerability of certain population or communities to disasters, diseases which is another phenomena which prevents them from being productive. We are very grateful we have not seen a natural disaster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many reasons but in short because as human beings, our wellbeing is linked to each other and growing in equality is detrimental to the economic growth and undermine social cohesion, increasingly political and social tension and in some circumstances driving instability and conflict. The high cost of living has obviously and realistically increased the crime rate.

In the pursuit to steal and feed yourself, people have ended up in a battle with the person they are trying to rob and actually an act of violence and some people have lost their lives. If I can remember, a senior citizen in Vuda was stabbed by the person trying to rob a house and yesterday I heard in Koronivia that someone has been murdered.

These are the real issues our people are facing. Sir, EFL and Water Authority have put in submissions to FCCC to review the tariff rate. This will be an added burden with the VAT increase. Parents are struggling to feed their children especially their babies. Sir, SMA milk is \$31.50, S26 (Step 1) is \$50, S26 (Step 2) is around \$52.95; extremely expensive conditions we are living in and not all babies can drink Red Cow Milk because most end up vomiting and get sick.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Fijians are forced to be living on products like tinned tuna, high number of sodium and loaves of bread. If you go for white bread, that is bleached flour; when you go for white sugar that is bleached sugar. This contributes to the NCDs which will put pressure on our

health system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this raises the question that when our health is in danger and if one cannot feed themselves with the high cost of living under this Coalition Government, in what capacity will the Fijian people be able to afford medication? A broken heart, an empty stomach and an empty wallet teaches you a lot in life. It can make one do unimaginable things but here our Coalition Government has achieved all three. People said, “change is here” - all right. Your government, but they have increased the cost of living, and this has broken people’s hearts and hopes. The high cost of living, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has caused people not being able to afford meals, here you end up with an empty stomach and the high cost of living is where Fijians have to drain and empty their wallets.

The primary purpose of reviewing the increase of minimum wage as soon as possible is to provide our hard-working Fijian workers with a level of income that allows them to meet their essential needs. It acts as a safeguard against the high cost of living and helps reduce poverty and income inequality within our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is moving forward, but they are moving forward just like a person running on a treadmill. They are running but they are at the same place. On behalf of our thousands of struggling Fijians and Fijian families, I sincere ask the Coalition Government to stop focusing on fulfilling the Coalition Agreement and focus on the people of Fiji by reviewing the National Minimum Wages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the concerns of our people matter, the voices of our people matter, the livelihoods of our people matter. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government does not move the economy, it is the Fijian people, and this will only happen if they are given the buying power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude I would like to urge the Government to review the National Minimum Wage because it is an achievement both sides of Parliament will celebrate because the people of this country will be the ones winning.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for his statement. As I have said during my Budget Response, there is a very well-fitting Hindi saying that describes the Opposition strategy or maybe should I say Opposition hypocrisy in Parliament for the last seven months especially on the issue of minimum wage and the saying, Mr. Speaker, is *ulta chor kotwal ko daante* or the thief blaming the Police.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- One of the worst examples of hypocrisy, coming from a Member of a party that was in Government, eroded workers’ rights and nullified collective agreements between the unions that represented them and the employers which the Coalition Government is and will restore, and give true meaning to collective bargaining and not minimum wage but a living wage.

Mr. Speaker, honourable Sharma needs to be reminded that it took the Bainimarama government eight years to just even introduce a National Minimum Wage and that of only \$2 just prior to the 2014 elections. Then, Mr. Speaker, it took another eight long years for the FijiFirst Government to gradually raise the minimum wage to \$4 per hour. Again, not surprisingly it was an election year...

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- 2012 we started.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and that is where we are right now.

Mr. Speaker, we have an Opposition in Parliament which in government until last December ruled with an iron fist in respect of trampling upon workers' rights and just wages. Now, Mr. Speaker, they are shedding crocodile tears trying to be the champion of workers.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- One wonders whether an Opposition Member of Parliament who engages workers who are unskilled, work on casual basis and even pays the basic minimum wage rate of \$4 an hour. In fact, we are verifying this information.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Very poor.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, these are the same people who deprived our workers off their fundamental rights, the same people who destroyed the successful tripartite arrangement that we have had in Fiji for many years, the same group who terrorised our workers representatives and leaders and the same people, Mr. Speaker, they looted the workers by forcing them to use their FNPF funds during the pandemic.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yet, they now want to come here and lecture us about just and fair minimum wages. This is hypocrisy of the highest order that I am talking about. Mr. Speaker, it is us who have in fact advocated for a just and fair living wage for our people. In fact, it was our endless pressure on them when they were in government that led to the FijiFirst finally raising the minimum wage rate in 2022 in four tranches to \$4.

During the 2018 election campaign, the NFP as well as SODEPLA at that time, we advocated for a living wage of \$5 an hour. However, Mr. Speaker, this is a truth, we were ridiculed throughout the country by then FijiFirst government with the charge led by the former Attorney-General and Minister for Economy who accused us of trying to bankrupt the economy and forced the closure of large businesses.

Meetings were organised in garment factories by the textile and footwear industries where the former Attorney-General campaigned amongst workers and threatened that if they vote for NFP, if they vote for Biman Prasad or SODELPA, and if the NFP and SODELPA came into government and implemented the living wage of \$5 an hour, everyone will lose their jobs. We were also accused of playing politics when we stated that the NFP would increase the list of zero-rated items and lower duties on the food products.

That was always our policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to increase the minimum and to zero rate VAT on a much larger list of essential items than the six items that they had in the past.

HON. K.K. LAL.- How about the 15 percent VAT, people are suffering. Shame on you!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You will see that in the NFP Manifesto in 2018, we had campaigned for that.

HON. K.K. LAL.- People are suffering honourable Biman!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Fear mongering, crusade to scare workers of job losses,

spreading fear that businesses will close and economy would be destroyed, with hyper inflation and unemployment worked for them in 2018.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Tell them, tell them!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just prior to 2022 election, when they realised that they were about to lose the elections, suddenly they announced an increase in minimum wage to \$4 and zero- rated 21 items.

HON. K.K. LAL.- You are there because of SODELPA, do not fly high.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they picked up the whole list that we had provided in our manifesto without even changing it. We definitely liked that, they copied our policy but we definitely have no time for such hypocrisy that is coming from the other side. We know that they are on the other side, but in fact, honourable Sharma should realise that he is part of a party that actually betrayed the nation, our people and workers in this country. Soon, we are systematically since we have come into Government in the last seven months...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Where is the \$5 minimum wage, when will you introduce it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...we have restored the workers' rights, there is optimism, there is freedom...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Listen, listen!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and unions and employers are working together. We have always championed workers' rights and the tripartite approach to dealing with labour issues.

In the 2023-2024 Budget, the Coalition Government clearly announced the review of the current minimum wage of \$4, we clearly announced it. We want our workers to receive a fair and just living wage through a proper consultative process. Let me repeat this, the Coalition Government is determined to ensure our workers receive a fair and just living wage that is agreed to by all stakeholders through a proper and genuine consultative process, not in an haphazard manner or imposed on the workers or just before the election.

I have frequently elaborated on our grave economic woes resulting from the recklessness of the previous government. It is because of their gross economic mismanagement that we have inherited a large public debt which had to be dealt with immediately.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- A crippled infrastructure requiring urgent attention and a divided society that has to be reunited. The Government basically had very limited choice because of the mess we inherited. We acted quickly and decisively to tackle the debt problem. We had no choice but to increase taxes. Otherwise, the consequences of running into a debt crisis would have collapsed our economy and people would have suffered more badly for a much longer time. We had to take the bitter pill to cure the disease, otherwise surgery at a later stage would have been more difficult than painful. While we try to address the debt problem, we made sure that our vulnerable are protected.

Let me point this out, we increased our social welfare payments by 25 percent for those above the age of 70 years and by 15 percent for those between 60 years and 69 years. The budget for the

Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection was increased from \$147.7 million to \$200.2 million; an increase of \$52.5 million which benefitted more than 90,000 people who are now getting increased monthly allowances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our first few weeks in Government, the honourable Prime Minister and the Government delivered a \$200 Back-to-School payment per child from households with an income of less than \$50,000 benefitting over 223,000 children at a cost of \$45 million. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have again provided \$45 million to continue with this initiative for the 2024 school year. We have written \$650 million in TELS, thanks to our Coalition partner, SODELPA, in bringing this policy. For over 53,000 students this means their families, the students will have more income, Sir, because it is not going to...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ..that is another measure in the Budget. We gave justice to FNPf workers which had their contracts terminated unilaterally and their pensions reduced. So what we have done effective from August 2023, these FNPf Pensioners are now able to access the Government Social Pension Allowance of \$125 if they are above the age of 70...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, would I ask that you pause for a while, while we try and address this housekeeping issue.

Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with Standing Order with respect to the sitting time and I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move her suspension motion.

### **SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS**

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, I do not anticipate we will be sitting much longer as we have only one more item on the Order Paper and that is the Consideration of Bills which I believe has been supported by both side of Parliament. I beg the indulgence of honourable Members to stay on a little bit longer, understand there are those that need to leave and travel back home or to other commitments but I ask Parliament to support this motion so that we can complete the last remaining item on the Order Paper.

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

Since there is none, I now call on the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply if any as well.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have nothing further. Thank you.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to round off his reply.

### **RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE END OF WEEK STATEMENTS**

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are seeing an economy that has rebounded strongly and the momentum is expected to continue....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...the labour market has recovered strongly and the tight market is naturally pushing up wages which is benefiting our workers.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very slow.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We are looking at more reforms to entice new investments and new sectors, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that will create more and better paying jobs. The Government has generally provided a renewed sense of optimism and confidence to our investor community. We can see that quiet evidently, we are in the process of reversing some of the policies, for example just this week we have reversed the policy on retirement age of local government workers from 55 years to 60 years and in the next calendar year, the people of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will know about the review process with respect to the National Living Minimum Wage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion let me say that honourable Sharma's statement was based on generalisation without any evidence, he linked crime rate to this and that...

(Chorus interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...so it was all over the place. The Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is firmly focused on looking after our most vulnerable, the policies announced in the 2023-2024 Budget and as I said earlier the Government is firmly in control of the situation. We want to assure the people of this country that no one is going to be left behind in terms of the policies that the Government has pursued as part of our Budget and what we will pursue in the future. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

### Labour Mobility

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you, for giving me the opportunity to talk on the important topic of labour mobility. A lot of us have been talking about it for some time now. I think during the end of last year and at the beginning of this year, there were lots of concerns about the issue of labour mobility.

Labour mobility, as we all know, is just about geographical movement of labour, or people working and moving from one area to another, or occupational movement, where people move from one occupation to another. We know that it is always a function of supply and demand. If a certain area in a country or a certain type of business want certain people, there is a lot of demand, then people will move towards that type of occupation. So that happens all over.

Sometimes that supply and demand, people are prepared to move to one country or one place to another because there is a demand from the other side, and sometimes, some people under the lower scale might be thinking, "I should move because last year, before I voted, I was promised \$5 per hour and all of a sudden when the Government comes in, the people who said they are going to raise the minimum wage rate to \$5, did not do it, and that does not happen." Then they will realise, that is hypocrisy. "I am promised something, as soon they get into Government, they talk about hypocrisy, but they do not deliver it after nine months in office. Maybe I should pack up my bags and go." Maybe those are some of the ways that people have been thinking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those sorts of supply and demand issues are something that compel or push labour mobility. Also, in other countries there are aging societies, where a lot more people are older and they are not producing enough people to replace their labour supply. We have all these things happening, the growth of globalisation and in some of these countries a lot of their workers have become lazy. One of the things we see now is that, a lot of our workers who are going to Australia, are going into the areas where Australians themselves do not want to go - the rural areas. That may be because, they have a lot of welfare, so to assist the people who are unemployed, which means they still earn money that makes them lazy to go and do the work, they need people to come from other countries, and this is something you will find all over the world.

People go from one country to another to do a particular kind of employment, it is a flow, and other people come in to replace them from somewhere else. So there is a constant movement of people in this whole issue of labour mobility. Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour mobility is not something new in Fiji. Over the past few decades, and past few 100 years, we might say that even within Fiji, we have seen mobility. People are moving from rural areas to urban areas, around different parts of Fiji. People changing jobs from one job to another in Suva or moving from Lautoka to Suva or Labasa to Suva.

The mass migration from Labasa to Suva is an example of labour mobility over the years, and people are beginning to change occupations. We have seen, for instance, these past few years, people who are formally qualified to become teachers or professionals have been moving out leaving one occupation to another. This morning when I came into the office, I met one of my good friends here, who was vacuum cleaning, because, as you have mentioned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot of people in this Parliament, your staff are doing three jobs at once, because people have moved out of Parliament. Those are the kinds of things that we are finding in Fiji. These are some of the trends that we have seen.

Labour mobility has been exacerbated over the past few years to a large extent by people with lower-level types of jobs, especially, with the surge in this seasonal employment programmes, particularly, in Australia and New Zealand. Over the past few years, we have seen the development of Recognise Seasonal Employment Programme, the Seasonal Workers Programme, the Pacific Labour Scheme and now we have the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme, coupled with the eHub Programme in which Australia allows people to come and study and work at the same time. The vast numbers of our people have gone onto this particular programme. So, it has been exacerbated over the past few years. So, you have this internal mobility within the country and then you have the mobility offshore.

A lot of our people have been moving for a long time, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I think honourable Ravunawa came back from Mongolia and he met about 30 teachers, people who teach English in Mongolia, interesting. I know that we have our people in Japan who are teaching English and other things, we know that all over the Pacific, our professionals are taking up a lot of jobs all over the Pacific so there is a demand for these skills from Fiji. Fiji has become what the Australians used to be in the Pacific - we have sort of taken over that role. We are providing the specialist people as



experts in different fields to various countries all over the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have been listening to the debates and what we have been talking about in Parliament this week, there was a comment I think earlier when we were talking about something on those airports in Nadi or Civil Aviation, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka and Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica highlighted the loss of our aviation experts in CAAF because of their abilities and capabilities. There have been demands for their service, so they have moved out over the years. There was earlier this week a question on the loss of nurses in the health sector. The nurses are not only moving within the country one of the reason is because we are saying our growing private sector health establishment especially around Nadi and parts of Suva. So you can see there are more opportunities for these nurses and they begin to move around. It gives opportunities for them but it also creates problems from the places that they are leaving, to their initial places of employment.

There was a question on the loss of nurses and I think if I am not mistaken honourable Deputy Prime Minister Prof. Biman Prasad mentioned earlier this week that we have lost 10 percent of our workforce on Tuesday but I am not too sure what that timeline is.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Last 18 months

HON. J. USAMATE.- Last 18 months which is a big number, so it is a big number of people that are moving from one part of Fiji to the next and I also saw the written question that was done by honourable Pio Tikoduadua about the number of people that have left from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> August this year - 3,650 left for education and training, 5,552 for employment and 1,946 for migrating. So, the numbers are quite substantive in terms of people moving around all over the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not totally a bad thing, there are a lot of good benefits that will come out of this. Remittances have really grown, remittances if my figures are correct here, I was looking at a report from the UN World Food Programme where they are telling us that in 2022 the remittances had reached about \$1.04 billion which amounts to about 9.4 percent of nominal GDP.

Almost one-tenth of the total wealth that we have in this country comes from the work of people that are offshore, one-tenth that is a significant amount. They have noticed also in that programme that in the first months of this year once again I think the amount of money that is coming from remittances if I am not mistaken for the month of March was more than it was the previous year. So, it is increasing, the trend is increasing which is a reflection maybe that there are more leaving.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- \$700 million...

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, these are the kinds of things that are happening and that I think is one of the positive effects of labour mobility. There are some countries in the world who actually target labour mobility. If you go all over the world you will find people in the Philippines they have a national setup where they get people trained specifically to go and work overseas and I think you have seen that from Kiribati we have our sailors all over the world. They have these setups. They go for each; they push for it. I think maybe one of the reason for that is the level of unemployment they might be having in their own countries. That is one way we can look at labour mobility because we can see the actual benefit from it.

I think in Fiji we have not really decided to pursue this kind of overseas labour mobility like they have done in the Philippines, and I think there is going to be a key question for government to ponder about our reaction and our approach to this because we also are aware of the negative impacts

of labour mobility. Of course, the money that comes in has an impact on the families, has an impact on the people that live here but there are also negative impacts.

I heard some of our friends talking about this side of the Parliament we are talking about the fact that now it is becoming increasingly hard to get people who are sales reps, merchandisers, customers officers who are customer service officers. So, when there is shortage of these people we are beginning to see wage inflation in some of these occupations. If you want a certain person with a certain skill you have to increase the amount of money that you pay that can have an impact on our society - wage inflation, shortage of skills so there is a need for us to be able to address the negative impacts of this labour mobility. So, on the one hand you have the benefits and on the other hand you have the negative impacts of it and of course, sometimes you have the social problems that come with it. There is something that we need to ponder in Fiji.

We must have ways (Government and us combined) that we can benefit from the positive impacts and at the same time, minimise the negative impacts - the shortage of skills, the social issues that come with it. I think the question for us in Fiji is to decide how we are going to work with this labour mobility issue. Labour mobility is like a river, and you cannot stop it. We cannot say that we pull out of it because it is peoples' right - if they want to work somewhere else for them to go but as a country, as a nation and as a Government, we need to be able to manage it so that we can benefit from its benefits and minimise the negative impacts that it has on our country. I look forward to the Government coming forward to suggest ways we can work together to try to answer these questions and address these issues.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker. I would like to thank the honourable Usamate for answering half of the contribution I was supposed to make - he has already covered half of it. We all know, there are two sides to a coin - the negatives and the positives. He has described the positive, and he also described the negative, but the thing is planning and doing things better.

When we say this in any country is very important to have a Human Resources Development Plan (HRDP). A Human Resources Development Plan is done by getting the stakeholders together. When the stakeholders come together, the employers' federation, the education providers, the training providers all come together - we look at our needs, plan our needs and then we train our people.

I must say that our problem in past years has been (and I will just look at one sector - education) through the Loan Scheme people got all sorts of qualifications which were already flooded in the job market. And then there were subject areas where there were no teachers so there was hardly any planning done, people just went, chose their course, and did it. What we are doing now through our scholarship scheme is to make sure that there are categories of people entering the tertiary institutions including the skills, trades and then going up to engineering and the rest of it. That is the way to go insofar as planning and preparing your human capital is concerned.

The second issue of course, the positive side of labour mobility as honourable Usamate has alluded to, is that it has been there for hundreds of years ever since we can remember, and it will continue to be there. Some countries have gained a lot through exporting labour, and we are in that business now. Our people are going, we are getting remittances.

It is important for us to make sure that our people who go out there and get jobs especially on work permits, are treated fairly; and are given minimum terms and conditions equal to the people of the country that they are working in - the locals), that is very important. Also, we want to see that when they come back, they come back with some added skills, and they are able to better contribute. We have seen these examples where our people have gone, work and come back - they have improved their standard of living for their families and that is a very positive move.

Those who migrate, of course, they leave those gaps I have alluded to how we must fill those gaps and the honourable Minister for Education has yesterday very aptly described how the Ministry is planning to develop the Education sector to make sure that the tertiary institutions are providing the right type of education, right from skills to professionals. The Education Summit is going to address those issues, so these are the plans we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we will continue with this conversation as we go along.

### **HERITAGE BILL 2023**

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the –

- (a) Heritage Bill 2023 be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must immediately be referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights;
- (d) Standing Committee must report on the Bill at the November Sitting of Parliament upon presentation of Report on the Bill by the Standing Committee; and
- (e) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament at the November Sitting, and that one hour be given to debate on the Bill with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

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

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr Speaker, Sir, as you would have observed, I had tabled a motion in this august Parliament on Tuesday, that the Heritage Bill 2023 be debated and voted upon without delay. We heard the views of our colleagues and views from the other side and found merit in their views. We have the existing Heritage Bill 2023 be referred to the Standing Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we listen and took heed of their views although this Bill has been a subject of many, many discussions over the years since 2016. We considered, we did not ignore and humbly made the decision to withdraw our motion to accommodate request from the other side.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just like to emphasise the point here because that is how laws in a country are made. We are not ignorant but we are here to work together for the benefit of our people. Therefore, I rise to add to what I have highlighted on Tuesday.

The National Heritage is something that is treasured to all of us, a country in the Pacific that is both diverse and strategically placed in the South Pacific. Fiji is rich with culture and diversity while at the same time maintain strong links to our traditions and heritage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage which was adopted at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference in 1972 on the 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1990. It is one such international instrument that specifically identifies or recognises the preservation of cultural structures and sites.

As a member State, Fiji is required to adopt the legislative and administrative provisions to give effect to the World Heritage Convention. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Heritage Bill 2023 provides for the domestic application of the World Heritage Convention in Fiji. No changes have been made to the Bill as tabled on Tuesday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and each honourable Members would have a copy. It is my prayer, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that given my motion this morning, this august

Parliament will agree to support my motion so there is no further delay in deliberating an important proposed law for us. I, therefore, commend the Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. At the end of the debate, we will have the Right of Reply from the mover.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, I think there is only just one speaker from this side and I will not be long. Just to assure the Honourable Attorney General that yes, we do support it, I think. We want to thank the government also for listening to what was said the other day with respect to the Heritage Bill. It is important, it is about Fiji, and we understand all the technicalities that actually go on. This is a Bill that was instigated by us in the first place and I think it is important that we do realise that it has to do with Fiji and it has to do with our commitments that we have also made with respect to UNESCO and World Heritage sites, et cetera.

Just to give a little background on the two, they were quite a few observations that came out of visits by the previous Standing Committee - Tui Levuka and this is why we intend to take a little bit long nevertheless Sir, as somebody who is also a Member of the Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. I have spoken to my Chair and we will endeavour to have this back as quickly as possible and do the necessary work that needs to be undertaken before the November Session Sir. So, you have our support with respect to getting it done as quickly as possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the unanimous decision to support the Bill, I have no right of reply but I commend the Bill.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

[Heritage Bill 2023 referred to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights]

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I am sorry, Sir. Can I just raise a Point of Order? Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I just raise a Point of Order under Standing Order 74(1) on the practices of Parliament and I hope I can qualify under 80 as well just to make a personal explanation and perhaps on prohibited reference as well on 62.

On the Statement made by the honourable Minister for Finance when making his reply to the End of Week Statement, I will be waiting for the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard*, Sir. He used the term “looted” - This is the government that looted the workers of this country by utilising their FNPf savings. I am concerned about the use of the word “looted” the workers of this country. I find that as improper Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to place it on record before we adjourn this meeting. It is entirely up to you, Sir, on your ruling, so I leave it to you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you have anything to say to that, honourable Deputy Prime Minister?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- All I said, Mr. Speaker, was in reference to the FNPf Pension Act, that is a fact. That was a Government that made the decision - the Bainimarama Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Did you use the word “looted”?

HON. PROF. B. C. PRASAD.- Yes, I used the word “looted” it was the Bainimarama government that passed the Decree and terminated the FNPF workers’ contracts and they lost pension and they had no recourse to go back to the court because there was another decree which did not even allow that.

(Chorus of interjections)

That was what I said, and I stand by that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will take note of that concern raised by the Leader of the Opposition,

Honourable Members, I am on the floor, see that leads me to what I was about to say as well after the adjournment motion and that is, if it is possible during this break to November. Honourable Members, please take heed of the difficult task of trying to allow debate to free flow in this august Parliament.

At the same time, you should be mindful of the decision that we both make here through the Business Committee, that is the “Timing Element” that presents here how we address the timing of each participant to participate effectively in the debate. I will want to put on record the intention that I have in mind, and this will be brought about in the usual manner through the Business Committee and that is, I will give 30 seconds countdown every time we do debate.

This is just like attending an international meeting. You are still on the floor, the speaker will be giving you 30 seconds countdown, when the countdown finishes at the zero time then you are required to sit down even though you still have a lot on your table to present. I think I have been lenient in allowing people to go over on both sides of the Parliament. But we should be mindful of the effects that that will have on the timing of the sitting of the Parliament.

### ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Tuesday, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our sitting for this week and I thank you all for your contributions throughout the week. I wish you, Sir, honourable Prime Minister on your trip to the United Nations General Assembly. Have a great trip and looking forward to your contribution that you will be making as well.

I now declare that Parliament adjourns until Tuesday, 14<sup>th</sup> November. 2023 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 1.00 p.m.

## ANNEXURE I

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**Reply to Written Question No. 143/2023 tabled by the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs (Ref. Page: 1922-1923)**  
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**PRIME MINISTER & MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
 CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENT, CIVIL SERVICE,  
 INFORMATION, AND PUBLIC ENTERPRISES  
 (Hon. S.L. Rabuka)**

Response to Question No. 143/2023 is as follows:

- a) There were twelve (12) Diplomatic Missions before 5th December, 2006:
- i) Fiji High Commission Canberra
  - ii) Fiji Embassy Brussels
  - iii) Fiji Embassy Beijing
  - iv) Fiji High Commission New Delhi
  - v) Fiji Embassy Tokyo
  - vi) Fiji High Commission Kuala Lumpur
  - vii) Fiji High Commission Wellington
  - viii) Fiji High Commission Port Moresby
  - ix) Fiji High Commission London
  - x) Permanent Mission of Fiji to United Nations Office (PRUN)- New York
  - xi) Fiji Embassy Washington
  - xii) Consulate General of Fiji, Sydney
- b) There were seven (7) new Diplomatic Missions established between 5th December, 2006 and 23rd December, 2022:
- i) Fiji Embassy Abu Dhabi- opened in September 2012
  - ii) Fiji Embassy Pretoria - opened July 2011, closed December 2015
  - iii) Fiji Embassy Addis Ababa - opened May 2016, closed in 2019
  - iv) Fiji Embassy Brazil - opened September 2011, closed in 2019
  - v) Fiji Embassy Seoul - opened July 2012, closed in 2020
  - vi) Fiji Embassy Jakarta - opened in April 2011
  - vii) Permanent Mission of Fiji to United Nations Office and Other International Organizations (PRUNOG) – Geneva - opened in April 2014
- c) The costs of maintaining Fiji's Diplomatic Missions overseas are as follows:

<b>Fiji Missions Costings 2007-2022</b>		
	<b>Year</b>	<b>Costings</b>
1.	2007	\$12,166,800
2.	2008	\$12,800,500

3.	2009	\$13,822,933
4.	2010	\$18,457,200
5.	2011	\$19,536,900
6.	2012	\$21,875,300
7.	2013	\$15,522,438
8.	2014	\$27,074,761
9.	2015	\$20,805,493
10.	2016	\$38,240,574
11.	2017	\$30,155,795
12.	2018	\$30,416,889
13.	2019	\$33,449,185
14.	2020	\$26,550,649
15.	2021	\$22,491,804
16.	2022	\$19,307,990

d) Fiji now operates a total of eleven (11) Diplomatic Missions:

- i) Fiji Embassy Abu Dhabi
- ii) Fiji Embassy Beijing
- iii) Fiji High Commission Canberra
- iv) Permanent Mission of Fiji to United Nations Office and Other International Organizations (PRUNOG) – Geneva
- v) Fiji Embassy Jakarta
- vi) Fiji High Commission London
- vii) Fiji High Commission New Delhi
- viii) Permanent Mission of Fiji to United Nations Office (PRUN) – New York
- ix) Fiji Embassy Tokyo
- x) Fiji High Commission Wellington
- xi) Fiji High Commission Port Moresby

## ANNEXURE II

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**Reply to Written Question No. 145/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection (Ref. Page: 1922-1923)**

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Response to Question No. 145/2023 is as follows:

- a) In Fiji, we do not have anyone that is regarded as homeless. For the iTaukei men and women on our streets, they all belong to a family, to a village, to a *mataqali*, to a *yavusa*, to a province and therefore they cannot say that they are homeless.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I cannot share the number for the last 10 years because this is the first initiative that was taken to actually profile all those that are living on our streets and identify pathways that can give them hope and a new life.

Please allow me to highlight that as of Friday, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2023 there has been 178 profiled street dwellers in Suva, Lautoka and Nadi. From the 178 profiled cases, 39 women were profiled and 55 children.

We are currently working together with other government stakeholders and NGOs to get them off the streets, identify shelters in which they can be assisted and empowered on a short term basis before they proceed to other programmes like Seed of Success, APTC short courses, joining the Youth Band or part of training schools like Nadave, Tutu and Navuso.

- b) The Ministry assists single parents including single mothers under its household targeted programmes. Of the Child Protection Allowance and the Family Assistance Scheme, at the moment, we are currently assisting a total of approximately 35,233 households.

We are currently in the first phase of Social Protection Reform through our partnership with World Bank and DFAT where all our data will be digitalised. Once our system is up and running, information such as gender, age group and other important details will be readily available as and when the need arises.