

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**FRIDAY, 24TH NOVEMBER, 2023**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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**FRIDAY, 24<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2023**

The Parliament met at 9.34 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and honourable F.S. Koya.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Thursday, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2023, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome all who are joining us in the gallery. On that note we acknowledge the presence of our sprint queen (the one in the blue top) Miss Kesaia Boletakanakadavu. We also have Mr. Tevita Korodrau, he hails from Rewa but he has been in the United States of America all this while. We are glad to see you in this Chamber. And Madam, I really do not know, you are from?

VISITOR.- Me, Mr. Speaker?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, Madam.

VISITOR.- I am from the French Embassy.

MR. SPEAKER.- Welcome once more to the Parliament of Fiji and the two young ladies sitting right at the back. We always like to acknowledge your presence in the gallery, sitting amongst us because we know you are also, as part of those watching the livestream, part of the population that is always interested in the daily sittings of Parliament. We wish you well.

Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights – Heritage Bill

For the information of all honourable Members, I received a request from the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for the Committee to report back to Parliament on the Heritage Bill at a later sitting of Parliament. The Committee requests to undertake further public consultations on the Bill and I seek the indulgence of Parliament to approve the Committee's request. Is there any opposition?

HON. MEMBERS.- No.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being no opposition, so to the Committee, you are blessed with the full backing of the honourable Members.

### **SPEAKER'S RULING**

#### Point of Order – Hon. Prof. B.C. Prasad and Hon. S. Nand

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I now wish to address the Point of Order that was raised on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 2023.

I can confirm that I have reviewed the relevant excerpts of the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard* of that sitting day. The honourable Sachida Nand was reporting to the Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. The excerpts read as follows:

“HON. S. NAND.- I would highly recommend our Minister of Finance to get off from his four wheel drive, get out of his overseas trips and go to the farm and talk to the farmers. It is no good sitting here and saying, ‘we give subsidy, we give fertiliser subsidy, seed subsidy’ - no, talk to the farmers.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND.- Go and talk to the farmers and then you will understand the plight of the farmers.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I do not do BBQ from the road like you.

HON. S. NAND.- That statement is uncalled for and I must remind the honourable Minister of Finance, I do not do that.”

Honourable Members, there were exchanges during the day and I now refer to the earlier exchange from the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard* of the same day which reads as follows:

“HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just this morning the honourable Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister stated, “go and do roadside BBQ”. I do not do roadside BBQ.”

The response from honourable Professor Biman Prasad, I quote:

“HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD. – I did not say that.

HON. S. NAND. – Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is a usual trend of the honourable Member to backtrack what he is saying. This is an insult to the hundreds of people who sell roadside BBQs to make ends meet. These are the people who do hard work to feed the people. These are not the people who go around texting other people's wives, inviting them over; these are not the people. It is important that these people should be, we are talking about poverty alleviation.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD – Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Member is imputing improper motive. He knows what happened and he knows how that matter was disposed of. I think he is totally going down to gutter level and insulting, hurling insults using this

parliamentary Chamber.”

Honourable Members, having reviewed the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard* for that particular day, I confirm that there were exchanges from both honourable Members that were unbecoming and disorderly. I am satisfied that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister used offensive words against the honourable Sachida Nand in contravention of Standing Order 62(4)(a). I am also satisfied that the honourable Sachida Nand had indeed imputed improper motives to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister in contravention of Standing Order 62(1).

In a previous Ruling, I had stated that friendly banter is always welcomed but stooping low and playing gutter level attack on each other does not augur well in maintaining the decorum, honour and dignity of our Parliament.

On that note, I hereby rule that the two honourable Members must withdraw their disorderly statements. I will ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance to withdraw his statement on, “I do not do BBQ from the road like you.”

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I withdraw that statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will ask honourable Sachida Nand to withdraw his statement on, “These are not the people who go around texting other people’s wives, inviting them over.”

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I withdraw that statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members.

#### Point of Order – Hon. Leader of the Opposition

Honourable Members, we will now move on and, that is, on the second Point of Order that was raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2023.

Honourable Members, a Point of Order was raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition whereby he called the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Professor Biman Prasad, to bring proof to Parliament about the allegations that he had made.

Again, I have duly perused the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard* of Wednesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 2023, specifically on pages 2171 and 2172, the honourable Professor Biman Prasad said and I quote:

“The use of Section 127(8) of the Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have talked about that. It is in the Constitution, there is nothing we can do about it, but this Government moved the Ministry of Public Service under the Prime Minister, under whom the Public Service Commission is also based.

The Public Service Commission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is only responsible for appointing the Permanent Secretaries, but under the Constitution, the Permanent Secretaries have absolute power but with the agreement of the Ministers. What was happening in the past, the Ministers were making appointments and it happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir in many cases.”

Honourable Members, the honourable Leader of the Opposition then raised a Point of Order pursuant to Standing Order 74 asking that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister bring

proof about appointments being made that were made by Ministers and not according to the processes.

Honourable Members, I am satisfied that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister was referring to the provisions of the Constitution and therefore I hereby rule that there was no misrepresentation of information nor breach of the Standing Orders. On that Point of Order by the honourable Leader of the Opposition yesterday on the issue of “loot”, I will deliver my ruling at a later date.

### **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

- (1) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2021–2022 Audit Report on Statutory Authorities Independent Bodies and Commissions (*Parliamentary Paper No. 114 of 2023*)
- (2) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2022 Audit Report on Infrastructure Sector (*Parliamentary Paper No. 118 of 2023*)
- (3) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2022 Audit Report on Economic Sector (*Parliamentary Paper No. 119 of 2023*)
- (4) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2022 Audit Report on Social Services Sector (*Parliamentary Paper No. 120 of 2023*)
- (5) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – 2022 Audit Report on General Administration Sector (*Parliamentary Paper No. 121 of 2023*)
- (6) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – Provincial Council Volume 5 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 128 of 2023*)
- (7) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji – Compliance Audit Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 129 of 2023*)
- (8) Provincial Council Volume 5; and
- (9) Compliance Audit Report.

#### Standing Committee on Social Affairs

Fiji National Provident Fund – Annual Report 2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 86 of 2023*)

#### Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

- (1) Reserve Bank of Fiji August – 2022–July 2023 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 22 of 2023*)
- (2) Sugar Cane Growers Council Annual Report 2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 127 of 2023*)

#### Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights

2022 General Election Joint Report by the Electoral Commission and Supervisor of Elections

We will move on, but just before I do so, my sincere apologies to the honourable Minister for Women because I have just read your note that you sent in regard to one of your children as well, the sprinter.

Honourable Members, she will be leaving tonight to attend the Pacific Games in the Solomon Islands. Thank you very much and you go with our blessings.

**QUESTIONS**Oral QuestionsForum Fisheries Committee Members – Distribution of Funds  
(Question No. 195/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry inform Parliament if the distribution of the US\$60 million among Forum Fisheries Committee members has been agreed upon?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. For better understanding of the question, please, allow me to provide some background information on the Foreign Fisheries Committee setup at the US Treaty Agreement for which the \$60 million funding is attached to.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Just answer the question.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- \$60 million? I think he is getting there.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Carry on!

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Fiji along with the 16 Pacific Island nations is a member of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA).

MR. SPEAKER.- He is in charge of fisheries. They bait the thing, and then they throw it right out and then they pull it in slowly.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, Sir. I want you to understand where it comes from and the utilisation of this \$60 million.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, I am still talking.

(Laughter)

HON. K.V. RAVU.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Alright, you may continue.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- The Forum Fisheries Committee (FFC) Ministerial is the decision-making body for the membership, and that being the governing body of the FFA. The FFC Official meeting ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order!

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Standing Order 60 on relevance. The question is ....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- When there is a Point of Order, honourable Minister, you take your seat and we will listen to the Order being raised.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Standing Order 60 on relevance, the question is very simple. All we want to know, what is the distribution of the US\$60 million. We do not want to hear the big story about these agencies, we know what it is. Just answer the question.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thought I added my statement on how the honourable Minister looks at answering his questions, because by profession he is a fisherman. They just do not go and bait the hook and throw it in the water and pull the fish out. They will have to drag it for quite some distance. But I hope, you will not be dragging it too long; that is the concern.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Forum Fisheries Committee (FFC) Ministerial is the decision-making body for the membership, and that being the governing body of the FFA. The FFC official meeting is where the senior officials discuss the technical matters which are then referred to the FFC Ministers for a decision.

What is the purpose of the US Treaty Agreement? Whilst this Treaty acknowledges the sovereignty of the coastal states under international law for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing fisheries resources in their EEZs. This Treaty pursues the maximisation of benefits to coastal states, via the provision of fishing access to the United States purse seiner vessels to waters under the Pacific Island nations jurisdiction and areas beyond their national jurisdictions, and therein provides a platform of corporation between the parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this point, I would like to make mention that Fiji was Chair to the FFC during 2021-2022. I, therefore, pay tribute to my predecessor, honourable Koroilavesau who was the FFC Chairman for the period for his stern and visionary leadership in the FFC Ministers negotiation process along with other Fisheries Ministers in the Pacific. Their collective effort saw the tripling of the USD funds from US\$21 million to US\$60 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the 20<sup>th</sup> FFC Ministerial Meeting in the Republic of the Marshall Islands early this year, the issue of distribution of the US\$60 million funding was not resolved. Two special FFC meetings were called by FFA, here in Fiji and Papua New Guinea in August and September 2023 respectively. In the spirit of regional solidarity, the Pacific Fisheries Ministers finally resolved the USD funding distribution in October after the PNG meeting.

The distribution have given recognition to all issues that were debated on - fishing access agreement versus geopolitical positioning, financial risks and burdens carried out by the Pacific nations under the Vessel Day Scheme/PNA Pool, even to the extent of Australia and Papua New Guinea giving their full shares to the five Pacific nations under the Exploratory Pool (Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Niue and Vanuatu) to close up the great disparity in the distribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are three categories for the distribution formula:

- (1) Payment for upfront days - this is determined by the members who have US vessels fishing in their waters;
- (2) Project Development Fund - this is given to each member to supplement their national budget provisions to fund fisheries related projects; and



(3) Equal Share - this is the portion of funds that is equally shared to all members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the formula above, the funds distributed this year is US\$31 million (that is the US\$21 million plus US\$10 million) funds for climate change, \$60 million will be distributed from 2024 to 2033.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the distribution formula is very technical in nature, it took the Fisheries Ministers four negotiation meetings to come to a solution. So, in the interest of time and with your concurrence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the detail can be provided at a later date, if still required.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you honourable Minister and before I offer the floor to the honourable Rinesh Sharma, honourable Members it pays to be patient, especially with the Fisheries Minister. Otherwise, we would not have heard that very positive compliment made to the former Minister, honourable Semi Koroilavesau for the great work he had undertaken. So, thank you very much honourable Minister. In future, can we ask that you just shorten your answers, please?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do agree with you, less of a reply and more of a Ministerial Statement. Question to the honourable Minister for Fisheries in terms of ownership of marine commodity. Can the honourable Minister for Fisheries inform Parliament and the people of this country, can a Minister be the owner of a company that deals with the buying and selling of beche-de-mer and is this legal?

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, I will allow that supplementary question.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a new question and I cannot answer it now.

MR. SPEAKER.- You heard me saying, I will allow that question to be raised with you.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- So you do not have any answer to that? Will you be coming back to Parliament with a reply?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, what honourable Minister? *Vakamacalataka nomui sau ni taro, o na lesu tale mai ke?*

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a new question, I will come back at a later date.

MR. SPEAKER.- No, it is not a new question, I have allowed it to proceed.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- I will come back, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka.*

(Question No. 196/2023 withdrawn)

MR. SPEAKER.- I want to make a comment, this is the second time you have done this honourable Assistant Minister, on just the approach you have taken as the Assistant Minister and

then the kind of questions you are raising here, to ensure that we are consistent in the role we play and who is the leader of your side of the Government and what he plays and where do we take our queue from. I hope it could be a learning item for you.

Trafficking and Usage of Hard Drugs in Fiji  
(Question No. 197/2023)

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

Given the major increase in the trafficking and use of hard drugs in Fiji in recent months, can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration inform Parliament what steps the Government is taking to address this issue?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Fiji is encountering a serious drug problem. This has not only evolved over the last month perhaps as the question seems to suggest, it has come like for a very long time now. I just want to share some statistics with Parliament, Mr. Speaker, to highlight for us the significance of this issue and the problem that it is causing our society.

This is not something that we must deny because this is in the midst of our community and the responsibility here is national, Mr. Speaker. The Coalition Government will do their bit under what is allowed but we must take cognizance of this as a nation and work together in all facets of society and I think that has been the sentiments echoed throughout in terms of addressing this issue.

So, over the past 12 months, Mr. Speaker, police have recorded a total of 1,564 drug-related cases, averaging 130 cases per month. Within this total, 128 cases involving methamphetamine, 1 case involving cocaine, 141 were related to *marijuana* cultivation and the majority of 1,294 cases involving the unlawful possession of *marijuana*. This is very unfortunate, Mr. Speaker, because it is a reflection of our society and what we do, and as I have said, this is something that has been ongoing and this is a familiar issue from this Parliament.

We have been talking about this forever which requires a dedicated effort and a national solution but as on the part of government, Mr. Speaker, we have ratified the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, in 1971 the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and this demonstrates our national commitment to dealing with the drug issues under national arrangement or international arrangement. As far as the government is concerned and for our perspective because this is not only police work, we only do a very small part of it in terms of prevention and also prosecution and investigation, that is part of our work.

So we deal with the community in every facet, we talk to faith-based organisations, to the *vanua*, to communities, to schools which are presently under threat and through the Fiji Police - Narcotics Bureau talking to our community about the effects of drugs and what it does to us, and the police through its operations are just trying very hard to control this. We all understand in the past about police going out, up-rooting *marijuana* plants, raiding places where drug has been trafficked.

But we are also partnering with major nations of the world to try and look after this, so we have signed an agreement with the United States Narcotics Bureau in terms of the provision of funds, perhaps similar to what the US is giving to the region. We signed this agreement about two months ago here. Fiji will benefit from this in terms of intelligence gathering, collation of intelligence, receiving of funds particularly for prevention and also in other areas where Fiji could benefit.

So, this is not something that we are doing alone. We are working with stakeholders and our

partners because this is something that affects everyone, not only Fiji but Fiji, in our position, is the centre in which people try to push drugs. This is something that we have been trying to do for a very long time, not only this Government over the last nine months, but previously everyone has been trying.

But what I am trying to say here, Mr. Speaker, and I am going to maybe suggest this again, I had raised this in 2019 in this House, this problem needs a national solution that starts with this House. I will raise it again because this is what we have been raising with Government as the Opposition for a very, very long time. Now we have the political will to do it, we want to do it and we would like to bring the House together for something that should benefit our community.

I am not denying this at all because it is a reality on the ground that needs to be done, but we need to do it together because not Government alone or the Police can do it, we all have to do it as a nation. We need to look after our children. This has been ongoing for a long, long time, Mr. Speaker. To deny it means the diminishing of our values. This is something that this House must take into cognisance together and work together and get a solution so that is perhaps the challenge that I am putting to the House today whilst we ask ourselves, we should be part of the solution too.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I wanted to ask the honourable Minister, are we at a national crisis point or bordering or nearing a national crisis point on this issue?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Again, Mr. Speaker, as far as I am concerned we reached a national crisis in 2019. I raised it here on the day and my good friend the honourable Leader of the Opposition understood this. I raised it in this House. I sought a bilateral solution. Drugs, I said is overwhelming in this country, it is well before. Only the tip of the iceberg is becoming bigger and bigger. In this very House, I understood when we did this debate and my good friend understood this. He gave a solution in terms of using manoeuvre warfare theory and I said in Parliament, the problem is no longer in the deep battle, it is not even in the close, it is in our rear, I used it here, but this House did not have the motivation, the courage to deal with this. So, in answer to the honourable Member's question, it culminated a long time ago. We are only feeling the effects now. I am not denying it has happened during my term but what I am saying, this is the overload of what we are getting.

So, I am not trying to point a finger at anyone, I am just trying to share the reality with everyone and I am warning that problem and I am asking the House, let us rise up to this. I am going to propose to Cabinet that it moves into Parliament in the next sitting a bilateral Committee of this House that deals with this and cause the resource in the Budget to deal with it because otherwise, our children, we do not know what is going to become of them. That is the point I am trying to say, Mr. Speaker, but this has been long coming, it is not culminated now. It is a crisis on our hands, and we need a solution beginning with this House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to honourable Naupoto, may I just add a few lines here regarding the problem that has been described. We have these kinds of drugs in my province. It is not the *marijuana* that we are talking about, no these are the hard drugs. We even have it in my village in Somosomo and honourable Members, the honourable Minister had raised this way back in 2019. What have we done to try and ensure that we take care to eradicate this? It would be difficult to eradicate it, maybe to try and alleviate it.

That is why I was describing it last night on the way forward for parliamentarians if it is possible because we had just discussed it this morning with the Executive of the Legislature as to how best we can continue and not wait for the trip to Australia to have a look see at what they are doing to enhance the role of Members of Parliament.

Instead of just looking at the annual reports that was attacked very strongly by their honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs yesterday, what can we do? Parliament is already looking at this. Standing Order 110 allows sub-committees of the Standing Committees to be formed, but it is the terms of reference that is given and all that, that will need to come from the support of the Government and through the Business Committee, we will try and raise that and hopefully we can sit in between now and the recess period so as to enable us to prepare ourselves on this particular role that we need to play. This would be an additional role of MPs.

These are the roles that they are undertaking in Australia and New Zealand. They have an oversight role into the policies. To look into the government policies is not easy because you are kind of unruffling feathers here, you are interfering with government work but hopefully if it is all taken in a good sense, yes, we will be answering the honourable Minister for Home Affairs' problem on what are we doing. I am concerned with that comment because so far I have also been raising this, but this morning, we have decided to go ahead, get the Standing Orders Committee and see how best we can address this whilst garnishing the support of the government of the day.

Honourable Naupoto, you have a supplementary question?

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is more operational or technical. It has to do with Vanua Levu, especially Taveuni, Sir, with regards to drug trafficking. The Committee visited Vanua Levu and Taveuni and we were briefed that the drug problem is really increasing. As we were sitting at Matei Airport (you see people going out of Matei and people coming in) there is a dog kennel, but you have two tracker dogs.

Taveuni offers that very weak link in terms of trafficking when it comes to the airport because when you come in, if you are moving from Taveuni to Suva, your luggage is not screened. There is no sniffer dog, you just come in, they take it and put it into the carousel and then it goes into the aircraft, and from Nausori that bag is from the aircraft straight to the baggage carousel outside. So if someone is wanting to traffic, you can fly in from Suva, pick up a bag in Taveuni, there are a lot of yachts that come to Taveuni, pick it over there, it would not be checked at the airport, you will arrive in Nausori and it would not be checked again because it goes straight to the carousel.

In Taveuni, you have those two tracker dogs, maybe an idea if you would consider having a sniffer dog instead of two tracker dogs that can work at the airport. In Labasa, Sir, we were told by the Police that there used to be a Canine Unit there, no longer now and perhaps for Labasa Airport the same. Maybe a comment as to whether you would consider a sniffer dog instead of the tracker dog.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. Canine capability is actually quite good, a very effective way not only to track down but also to sniff out drugs. Given this suggestion, I am going to raise this with the Commissioner of Police in terms of how they redeploy these assets. We have very limited dogs, we have got some new dogs, both sniffers and also trackers - if they could take this matter into account and then maybe send one extra sniffer dog to Taveuni or Labasa also for that matter, I will look at that too.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Supplementary question, Sir. Thank you, honourable Minister for your response and the explanation, I totally agree with you. It is big work there and a challenge for everyone in this House.

Sir, the only concern I have is the use of our children for drug trafficking right now. Going back to a report that came in some months ago, it is happening in schools, it is happening everywhere. While waiting for all these committees and whatever the next process that we are going to take to try

and curb this problem, do we have measures in place right now to look after our children from being used as drug traffickers?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. This is something that the Ministry of Education is working very hard at with the Police in particular, and also Social Welfare to deal with that. But I think at the end of the day, this really goes back to parenting and I cannot deny that anymore. I allude to the same things that I had raised earlier, the whole of our society needs to help parents look after their children. These children do come from home, at some point they pick up these things and then they take them to school.

The Ministry of Education will do their bit and also through Social Welfare, we are also looking at strengthening the laws to be able to look at that. Our schools are pretty much free for our children - a free environment for education. We do not want to do in our schools what they do in America or in other nations to try and control drugs especially in public schools but I think it calls at the end of the day all of our responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I would just like to share with Parliament some of my observations. I am sure for all of us that were, particularly the *iTaukei* and I am sure also our Indo-Fijian brothers and sisters also experience this, when we were raised in a village environment, not only were our parents responsible for our upbringing but everyone else was concerned about our upbringing - *tamada levu*, *nana levu*, uncle or our grandparents also *vata kei na lotu*; they played a big part in trying to build our character. It is very unfortunate that has now gone. Actually, it is really, really sad.

This is dwelling into other areas so when we have people who assist the parent to make the child become a better child, there is going to be less of this happening. I mean I am just throwing that in again here because that is a very good point you raised there, honourable Member, but then it goes back to the same old thing which I can only think of one solution, and it needs to start from here. If we set the policies, Parliament work with government, get out the resources, get out there and reach out to the community, come up with the right solutions as I have said, this has culminated a long time. We have to do something now.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will allow two more supplementary questions. The first one is from honourable Matasawalevu before the honourable Leader of the Opposition, and then honourable Niudamu.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his statement on drugs. It is not only the *marijuana* that is here in Fiji, we have different types of drugs now in Fiji.

My question is, does the Force know about cybercrime or cybersecurity because most of the drugs coming to our shores now is from the use of apps when dealing with drugs with people from overseas. They are using *WhatsApp* now but *Viber* before. They are now using different types of apps, like video games when talking and dealing with drugs. Has the Force learnt more about cybercrime or cybersecurity to track down drugs coming to our shores?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Absolutely. We are building capacity and cybercrime is probably one of our biggest threats. I was with the NYPD a couple of months ago and we talked about the complexities of how they get drugs from South America through Fiji because the electromagnetic spectrum is so big and wide. They use the internet and every other means of communication through satellite, well beyond our capacity to be able to even monitor.

We only have so many patrol boats, we share intelligence with DEA, Interpol and other agencies of security throughout the world, even through *ustate.com*, et cetera. We try to track drugs down and we are dealing with people who have a lot of money.

The Police, unfortunately, right now, Mr. Speaker, needs the capacity to be able to fight that. Anything on the electromagnetic spectrum is very hard to detect with the kind of resources that we have. We need partners to do this. We have partners that are helping us right now to do that as well, but it is a major challenge, I understand.

We are working with our partners trying to keep our border safe. I mean, we are an archipelagic state. Honourable Naupoto has just referred to a case from Taveuni. It comes from the Lau Group, then it comes all that way undetected to here, then it goes to New Zealand. Sometimes we catch it, sometimes we do not, but many of the times we do not, but these are capacity building - we will build over time.

Mr. Speaker, the Government is talking to the Ministry of Home Affairs of Australia and of the United States of America, people who have the capacity to give us information and to build our cybersecurity to endure the current threats that are passing through it, that comes to affect our society.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, a very important issue and no one denies the seriousness of the drug problem in Fiji. But I am a bit reluctant on the national crisis term that we are using because of the implications as well to us, not that I am denying this, but how we define the national crisis and how it is going to affect us in terms of, particularly, people coming into the country, tourism, et cetera.

But the critical point that I want to raise, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is because of the question raised by honourable Tuinaceva on children being used and how we are dealing with it. If I may alert the honourable Attorney-General and the honourable Minister as well, one of the biggest delays in this whole work is the Juveniles Act because they are being used as mules to take the drugs but the Juveniles Act is where there is a lot of complications.

I would kindly ask the honourable Attorney-General if we could seriously look into this. The question to the honourable Minister is, while we are doing a lot of work, he mentioned about the lack of capability that we have, how are we again pursuing our efforts with our partners to make use of, particularly, the technology that they have because of the porous border, particularly the maritime border that we have and how are we utilising them throughout the machinery that we have just to help us? How is it being pursued further because that will be of great assistance to us?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, from a ministerial perspective, I can share this with the honourable Leader of the Opposition. He will understand during his time that we had built the capacity in the Ministry to be able to coordinate with, particularly, our intelligence, not only through defence, but also in law enforcement. They have these people who are stationed in our Embassies and High Commissions who help to do that - coordinate this assistance.

At our own level, we talked to New Zealand, Australia and USA - the government departments that help us to coordinate, particularly, information sharing. This is one capacity that we are dealing with under this internal security review, to rebuild that centre. I know you used it particularly a lot during your term, but it has been officially incapacitated in many ways, and I want to rebuild that. You will understand what I am talking about here. This is the centre where we share information with everyone else, and we are rebuilding that, we are inviting the French Government.

I can say, we have got the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), DEA and international partners

that have capability. We have been talking to the Australians, the Minister for Home Affairs at the Ministerial level and at every level, because we understand the magnitude because they also understand that what is coming from here is going to them.

I would like to assure the honourable Minister and thank you for raising the issue of juveniles. There was this person who came to see me the other day and he told me, “You need to get the Juveniles Act reviewed”, so I am actually on it because this is one neglected part of the work that Police really has to look at also - dealing with young people.

However, if we can get our partners, we get them back into the room that we are familiar with, honourable Leader of the Opposition, I am sure there is a lot of coordination tying up we can do to seal the gaps that we have, particularly in dealing with drugs. Not only drugs, but arms and all other contrabands that come through our country.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister in relation to hard drugs, particularly, methamphetamine and pseudoephedrine, including cocaine, to name a few, in addition to *marijuana*. How safe are these drugs when kept at our Police Exhibit Rooms because we have seen in the past that it has gone missing from the Police Exhibit Rooms? What is the Police doing about this issue, particularly, in the safe keeping of these drugs before it reaches the trial?

I understand that there are provisions in the Illicit Drugs Act where we can dispose of those drugs before the trials, but what about those accused persons who dispute the drugs and they are kept at the Police Exhibit Rooms, how safe are those?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. I know I had alluded to this earlier because this is talking about the handling of exhibits.

Yes, you are right. Over the years, I think that has been the joke going around. If you leave the exhibits around for too long unsecured, it is not going to be there. I am sure the former Commissioner of Police will attest to that. It happened, it is not new.

But the responsibility is here, and I have talked about these new police stations with better and more secure drug facilities. That is where we are going, Mr. Speaker. Much of the drugs, particularly hard drugs, we have counter safes. Within these big, controlled rooms, we have big safes also for things like methamphetamine and components of which that they use to make these drugs. If you go to Nadi, I can take the honourable Member for a tour, I can show you how we have brought all these exhibits where it is kept and then we can bring them to court when they are needed.

Obviously, Police are now talking to DPP, Judiciary, Office of the Solicitor-General and the Attorney-General on how we can review our laws, on how we can destroy the drugs on site and still being able to use the evidence as if the drugs were still there and were produced in court on the day. So, this is something we are working on too. This is something that the Police are struggling with, particularly, if they go up to Saqani in Vanua Levu, particularly in Natewa, I understand. It is very hard to carry them, this bulk of drugs from the bush. So, somehow, they are trying to find the legal framework to destroy the evidence but to be able to continue to keep whatever it is. I do not know what the legal term is. We cannot say, “admissible in court”, so we are looking after that too.

Empowerment of Co-operatives and Business Sustainability  
(Question No. 198/2023)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications inform Parliament on how the Ministry is empowering co-operatives and promoting business sustainability?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Vocea for his question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I answer the question, may I be allowed to respond very politely to two issues that were raised yesterday in Parliament. The first one was to do with the regulation of mobile companies, and I did state that the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) actually regulates them. So, I asked for a confirmation from the RBF and there are only two mobile wallets in Fiji operating currently, which is M-PAiSA and MyCash. They are regulated under the National Payment System Act 2021 and the National Payment System Regulations 2022. They were passed by the FijiFirst Government in 2021 and the Regulations came into effect in 2022. That is why Telecom is not under regulation because it does not have a mobile wallet.

The second issue that I just thought I would clarify, there is much talk about Fiji Water, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I just thought to clarify once and for all in terms of Parliament. We understand how this arrangement with Fiji Water came about. Let me state categorically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and I who were heavily involved, there is zero loss of revenue to the Government of Fiji in terms of the arrangements.

So, whilst there is a tax-free arrangement, what has happened is, if you look at the actual Act, for suppliers that supply over 10 million litres per month, you have to pay a higher price at \$19.05 and that covers for the income tax. In fact, it covers for more than just, it is about \$2 million extra. I just thought, Sir, that I would clarify that to the Members of the Parliament.

We, on this side of Parliament are very careful with Government revenue. It is an arrangement that has done some better things for Fiji Water in terms of its overall global business but in terms of Fiji, there is absolutely no loss of revenue in Fiji. I just thought I would clarify that. What it does do though, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is, it creates a better working relationship with Fiji Water and, hopefully, we can collaborate in other areas of the economy going forward.

In terms of the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question is quite an important one and I guess from this side of Parliament, the reason we placed a lot of importance on co-operatives, it is now part of the Ministry officially which I look after. Currently, there is about 554 Co-operatives in Fiji, operating across 15 various sectors. I have to say here, Sir, I was just looking at some of the infographics, it covers the whole of Fiji. That augurs well for what the Government will try and do, which is to try and push economic activity into the rural areas where most of these co-operatives are based.

In terms of how we are going about trying to empower businesses, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are various forms of assistance that we have developed over the years. This include what we call as handholding services. Our Ministry, in terms of setting up a co-operative, it takes time and then there is a need for a lot of awareness and a lot of handholding with those who are interested with co-operatives. So, that is a major service and we have officers that cover Suva, Lami, Sigatoka and basically the whole of Fiji and their prime job is to try and drive for co-operatives to be formed and developed.

Basically, over the last 12 months, we have added about 76 new co-operatives, Sir, into the books. I suspect that numbers will increase more rapidly. The honourable Minister for Youth and



Sports who is not here is actually trying to encourage the youth clubs to form co-operatives, like a commercial arm, so I suspect that the number will increase which augurs well, again, for the way we are trying to drive the economy.

A lot of training the Ministry undertakes and this is financial training and governance training, bookkeeping as well to try and assist the co-operatives in starting up and moving forward. We are trying to do the best we can in terms of both access to finance, that has always been a challenge with co-operatives or small businesses in general.

I think one of the big solutions is something that the honourable Premila Kumar alluded to, which is the National ID card. That is something that we will try and introduce next year as a project because if that comes through, it hastens all the identification process, et cetera. Also, access to markets. We are also, where we can, try and connect businesses to markets.

Those are some of the things that we are currently involved in, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I have pages and pages of notes here, but I just thought that I would highlight that. We are very committed to developing very sustainable co-operatives. We have had a rich history of co-operatives in this country, going a long way back, and I think in terms of how we intend to develop the rural economy, the co-operatives would certainly be a significant vehicle that would be used to try and generate economic activity, particularly, in the rural setting.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a supplementary question. Before that, I also would like to declare my interest under section 59 of the Standing Orders. I am a farmer and president of the Riverside Farmers' Co-operative in Ba - one of the biggest sugarcane farmers co-operative.

We were also assisted with the \$90,000 grant by the FijiFirst Government to purchase harvesters, similar to all other co-operatives. That is really assisting the farmers on flat land. There is a provision whereby if we remove the two back tyres and if it is replaced by rubber tracks, then we can harvest on a slope of 30 degrees to 40 degrees.

My question is, is there any sort of assistance, because the rubber tracks comes at a cost of about \$40,000 to \$50,000. Is there any assistance from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister or in coordination with the Ministry of Finance or Ministry of Sugar? If that assistance is given, it will further assist in regard to the shortages of labour and the harvesters can harvest on a slope of 30 degrees to 45 degrees.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my suggestion would be to either channel that question directly through our Ministry and we can certainly pick that up. Generally some of the agricultural assistance is either done through us or done through the Ministry of Agriculture. We normally then have a conversation as to who picks it up. Sir, I am quite happy to look at that and any other agricultural interest that are out there.

Progress – Savusavu, Levuka and Nakasi Markets  
(Question No. 199/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the progress of the Savusavu, Levuka and Nakasi Markets that were initiated by the previous government?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question posed

before this august Parliament this morning.

First, let me thank and commend the initiatives by the previous government for the commencement of these three markets namely Savusavu, Levuka and Nakasi Markets. However, it took the previous government eight years to finally construct the three markets apart from other markets that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government continues to prioritise the development and refurbishment of municipal markets. It is worth nothing, the present Government has allocated funding in this fiscal year (2023-2024) to excel business growth in the marketplaces. With this funding, my Ministry and the respective Councils aim to complete the three most anticipated markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Coalition Government believes that for any infrastructure development in the municipalities, we will require feasibility studies and business cases to comprehend the need for any capital projects to be undertaken. This will ensure the upgrading or construction of municipal markets which will benefit the Councils and the market vendors in the long run and such feasibility studies are imperative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the projects will strengthen the revenue streams of the Councils which will ensure their financial sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a sum of \$6.3 million, to be exact \$6,305, 664 in total has been allocated for the completion of the three markets. The Savusavu Market would be the first ever market to replicate the Bluetown Mall in Fiji. This will not only benefit the farmers, but it will also benefit market vendors, tourists and the public at large. The new Savusavu Market is co-funded by the Government and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women which is UN Women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Savusavu Market has been allocated a sum of \$3.8 million in this financial year which is for the completion of the market. The market will consist of 141 vendor stalls, some handicrafts kiosks, five SME kiosks which are located on the ground. The top floor will have provisions for one conference and meeting room, one kitchen, washroom facility, if there are MSME vendors, stalls, three food outlets, open spaces for future demands with exotic balcony fronting sea-view. The total project cost is \$3.63 million, out of which, \$2.5 million has been paid to date or 35 percent of the initial project cost.

As alluded earlier, the project is co-funded by the Government and UN Women at a cost of \$6.3 million and \$340,000 respectively. The Council engaged lead consultant China Engineering and market contractor Jenn's Construction for the Savusavu Market Project.

On the progress of construction to-date, the structure is about 30 percent completed and the building is around 35 percent completed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also very interesting to note that the project was expected to complete within 52 weeks, since October 2022. However, due to the delay in the release of funds by the previous government and unfavourable weather conditions, the further has delayed by 167 days. As such, the project is expected to be completed by March 2024, subject to better weather conditions.

On the Nakasi Market, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this market has been long overdue. For hose market vendors who sell illegally on the roadside, especially in Makoi, behind Hansons Supermarket, and Nakasi to Nausori areas. The new market has been allocated a sum of \$979,930 in this new financial year. And designed to be a modern structure with proper washing facilities. It will also accommodate 70 carpark spaces, 130 general vendor stalls, 40 fish vendor stalls, a general office space, and public

convenience facilities with some provisions for the disabled.

The total project cost is \$1.9 million, out of which \$759,000 or 39 percent of the national funding has been paid to-date. This project is under the administration of my Ministry, and Jenn's Construction has been engaged as the main contractor for the Nakasi Market. The market construction was expected to be completed within 40 weeks since October 2022, however, due to the delay in the release of funds and unfavourable weather conditions, it is expected to be completed by March 2024.

To-date the market has progressed with 50 percent of the work being completed. In addition to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, these two markets, Savusavu and Nakasi also incorporates some of the greener energy concepts, where solar energy panels have been installed, and also Bluetown concept where the solar panel will also be installed to promote Green Economy as well as rainwater harvesting.

On Levuka Market, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be a two-storey building that will accommodate spaces for more than 300 stalls for the market vendors, and approximately 310 market vendors are currently selling from the roadside under temporary tents, provided by UN Women under its Market for Change Project.

The new Levuka Market will not only support the Municipal Council of Levuka, but it will accommodate those market vendors who endure the adverse weather conditions in their current, temporary market shelters. The market is funded by Government and UN Women, the total project cost is around \$2.7 million out of which \$400,000 is supported by UN Women. The project commenced in April 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to some adverse, also delays of funds, as well as adverse weather conditions, the project is expected to be, it is near completion, but we are proposing for commissioning and opening around January 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I took over the office, in the first six months, the Coalition Government that is a government of the people, by the people, for the people. There were new initiatives to assist some of our stations that really need assistance to have better and proper market facilities. The Dreketi Rural Centre which is a place where we have, in my first to Vanua Levu, I have noted the need to upgrade the existing market structure at Dreketi.

For the information of Parliament, my Ministry in collaboration with Labasa Town Council decided to construct a temporary market to provide a secure and safe market with proper public convenience, because Dreketi is like a stopover for commuters who travel from Nabouwalu to Labasa to Savusavu. They normally stopover at Dreketi for a bite moved to Savusavu and even to Labasa.

This year, the Government has allocated a sum of \$100,000 for temporary works in the market at the new site. The temporary market structure is worth \$72,000, out of which the Government funded \$52,000 and the Labasa Town Council funded \$20,000. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is interesting to know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that when we commissioned, it only took us four months to complete the project and it was commissioned on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2023. We were amazed with the smiling faces that we put on the people of Dreketi, especially, the market vendors who used to sell at Dreketi Market.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, FijiFirst being a progressive government focused on economic development, provided spaces for vendors to sell. In the last eight years, FijiFirst government made Laqere Market, extended Ba Market, made Namaka Market, Rakiraki Market and

provided accommodation for women. I would like to ask the honourable Minister, what is he doing about the Navua Market where the money was withdrawn and diverted somewhere else?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Navua Market was not well planned. There was no good feasibility study for Navua Town. That is what we are trying to do at the moment. We are looking for the best place to relocate the Navua Market; that is something that we are doing right now. That is part of our vision, part of our mission is to also make Navua to become a town. So, there are few services, few facilities and infrastructure that we want to ensure we are doing it right before we declare Navua a town.

Education (Establishment and Registration of Schools) (Amendment) Regulations 2023  
(Question No. 200/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament on the Education (Establishment and Registration of Schools) (Amendment) Regulations 2023?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Just a quick update, the subject regulation was approved by Cabinet on 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, which was to reverse the provision under the 1996 Regulation, which stipulates that the requirement for children who turn six years old by 30<sup>th</sup> June of the same year of admission will now be enrolled as Year 1 students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the Cabinet Decision, this was gazetted on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2023 and has now become law unlike the previous regulation that was yet to be gazetted and the decision to revert was based on the projected increase in enrolment in 2024 which was the basis of the earlier Cabinet Paper. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were limitations in terms of the feasibility study, in terms of readiness of the infrastructure and in terms of the readiness of additional teachers that will require this initial regulation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I would like to address the question that was also raised yesterday in terms of the enrolment. We see a lot more concerns being raised by parents and stakeholders regarding schools being levying some sort of a fee for an enrolment form. I would like to state here for the information of the honourable Members of Parliament and also the general public, the parents and guardians that the Ministry of Education does not condone such exercise and does not have a policy that requires parents that wishes to enrol their children into schools to pay a fee to access those enrolment forms.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Minister for his response. Just a clarification on that matter, it is not really a question but the point that I want to raise is that we need to move forward. The problem is, it is really unfair for those children who turn six years old in June are denied enrolment for the whole year. So, if they are born in July, August, September of that admission year, they are sitting at home.

Technologies have come in, these little children have been in Early Childhood Education (ECE) for two years but they are denied enrolment and the provision within that discussion, the provision was there that any parent who wants to enrol their children, they need to do a provisional enrolment and we want to focus more on provisional enrolments and I can see the problems that can be created when you do not know the number and how you are going to accommodate.

We allowed for provisional enrolment whereby we can analyse the needs at different schools,

and we would have provided the infrastructure. The teachers starting from Year 1 and it just moves on. Because we also did our analysis and we found the....

MR. SPEAKER.- What is your supplementary question?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Yes, my question is actually a comment. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Good comment.

MR. SPEAKER.- I know. What Deputy Prime Minister?

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

MR. SPEAKER.- No, she has made that comment. Honourable Members, in the past have also had the opportunity, when it arises you go for it and then when they are stopped to ask the question then they say, “no, this is just a comment.”

Free Education Grant and Boarding Grant  
(Question No. 201/2023)

HON. H. CHAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Prices of most items have increased due to increase in VAT and corporate tax. Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament whether the Ministry is considering increasing the Free Education Grant and Boarding Grant to meet the increase in the cost of items?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, saving the best for the last in terms of Question No. 5 by the honourable Member. Before I answer the question, I would just like to take this time to maybe remind the honourable Member that I think he knows very well the amount of assistance this government has given to 227,000 students who access the \$200 back-to-school assistance at the beginning of this year.

HON. H. CHAND.- That is different. I am asking on this.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- That culminates to your question regarding increase in VAT and also we are about to give another \$200 again for back-to-school in 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for those in the tertiary level we have written off TELS loans that they have for them not to pay back so that is about 53,000 families that again will benefit from those initiatives and also ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Answer the question.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- ... we have also reviewed the payment of “location allowance” to teachers that were not eligible during your time. We are now trying to make them be eligible to pay for those that are truly in need of the location allowance.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Just answer the question.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Most of the teachers are now back teaching when we revised the retirement age from 55 to 60. So, most of the teachers are now back in school Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

Maybe, that is something that you should have also taken into consideration, honourable Member, before you ask the question but, anyway, in terms of the question, the Ministry will, first of all, review the school policies and procedures regarding financial management of the school as it is now due for review.

In that management handbook, as you know, there are six allocations that the grant will need to be allocated to and used accordingly by the respective schools. These are government-funded schools, not private schools which is something that this government will also need to look at to accommodate those students that are eligible for this assistance to also be part of this free education grant.

In short, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total budget for free education grant this year which includes the increase in VAT, it is \$68.9 million as of 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2023, the total utilization for ECE is about 20 percent, primary schools is about 44 percent and secondary schools is about 51 percent; in terms of dollar value primary schools is \$35.1 million and secondary schools is \$30.8 million and ECE is \$2.9 million.

Sir, the review of this handbook will be done through consultations with relevant stakeholders and we also will accommodate the assessment and see whether and how other free education grants have been used by respective schools. What we see is that most of the classrooms in the rural and remote areas have limited number of students or less number of students and they are affected by the amount of the free education grant that is usually given to them as compared to those schools in the city and town areas.

For the boarding grant, in 2023-2024 the boarding per capita grant for Non-Government schools, for secondary schools has increased this year: from \$50 per year to \$150 per student. The boarding per capita is budgeted at secondary school level of \$301,800 and primary \$459,600 for the current financial year. The rate remains the same for Non-Government Primary Schools of \$50 per child with total utilisation for boarding grant for primary schools, it is 18 percent and boarding grant for secondary schools is 2 percent. The Free Education Grant and Boarding per capita grant for Non-Government Schools as per budget under SEG 6 of the Budget Book which are also VAT inclusive.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to Honourable Rinesh Ritesh Sharma who raised a supplementary question I just want to acknowledge, honourable Members, those in the gallery. These are the staff of the Department of Immigration led by one Rasieli Rabukawaqa.

They are here to familiarise themselves with the Parliamentary Process and it is indeed an honour to receive you, ladies and gentlemen. We hardly get visits from civil servants so this is quite encouraging because you have here some that have already served their time as civil servants. They are interested in Parliament, they have graduated to Parliament but the engine room is with you all. Civil Service is the engine room of any government that comes in. So, we acknowledge your presence and the honourable Members have already made known their acknowledgement and we wish you well in your journey here and also in your careers, *vinaka vakalevu*.

I now offer the floor to honourable Rinesh Sharma. They are pointing at each other as to which one to go first.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I will let him go first.

MR. SPEAKER.- After this, then we will jump straight to the next item which is the End of the Week Statements.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- I will allow him, Sir.

HON. H. CHAND.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. One of the main reason for the introduction of Free Education Grant was to ensure that schools provide good teaching resources to students and teachers and also provide good teaching/learning environment. The other reason was to stop levying students and parents. Now it is noted with great concern that students/parents are heavily levied by some schools. Parents are raising serious concerns regarding levy.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. H. CHAND.- We have received some concerns from parents that the schools are levying the students and parents. We have got evidence.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Which school?

HON. H. CHAND.- My question is, what is the Ministry doing about this?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Shame on you!

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- This goes back to the preparation of teachers from the Ministry of Education. They need to be trained.

The honourable Member was a Director - Human Resources, Head of Human Resources. The teachers were not properly trained in terms of financial management of Free Education Grant and therefore these are some of the things that this current Ministry is trying to address in terms of providing proper training to those that are responsible in terms of the management of the grant.

For the levying of the fees to parents, I have just addressed earlier that the Ministry usually gives due consideration to the respective Heads of School. We do not have a standardised policy and this is something that we are working on to ensure that there are enrolment policies for all schools, given the respective ownerships of the schools, some are government-owned, some are faith-based owned, some are community/management-owned, so these are some things that we will have to take into consideration in terms of formulating the policy for enrolment for the respective schools.

## **END OF WEEK STATEMENTS**

### Empowering Youth for a Prosperous Future in Fiji

HON. K.K. LAL.- Honourable Members, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our nation, known for its vibrant culture and warm-hearted people, has always been blessed with an abundance of youthful energy and potential. It is these very youths that represent the future of our nation; a future we all cherish and work tirelessly to build.

For this week Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have gathered here to deliberate, discuss and make decisions that will shape our beloved nation. The issues we have grappled with have been many and

the debates have been fierce, but today as we draw this parliamentary week to a close, I want to focus on a subject that I believe should be at the forefront of our political discourse - the empowerment of our youth for a prosperous future in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we discuss this critical issue, I have to draw our attention to the challenges that impede the realisation of this mission, challenges that demand our immediate attention and collective efforts.

One of the most glaring issues is the state of education in our country. The promise of free education is a big Election promise of the Coalition Government's agenda seems to have vanished into thin air. It is disheartening Mr. Speaker, Sir, to note that students are being burdened with the weight of fees required to pay before they can even sit for their exams in certain tertiary programmes. This not only contradicts the commitment made by the Coalition Government but also places an unjust barrier to their educational pursuits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, equally concerning is the decline in youth-focused policies by the Coalition Government. It appears that the ship of our nation the Government is sailing without a compass lacking a clear direction for Fiji's youths. The lack for new initiatives and projects means a less employment opportunities for our young people further adding to the challenges they face in building a prosperous future including trying to overcome the high cost of living due to the increase in VAT. Moreover, the recent Government reshuffle and decisions taken therein have left the nation in a state of confusion.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Only you are confused.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Such actions including the lack of transparency surrounding them erode the trust and faith that our young people place in the Government. We cannot afford to have a generation unsure about the government's decisions shaping their future.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Hogwash.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, another cause for concern is the regular breach of the Constitution by the Coalition Government. The very foundation that guarantees the rights of our citizens is being questioned leaving our youth wondering about transparency, democracy that was promised to them before Elections Mr. Speaker, Sir. It is crucial that the Coalition Government must uphold the principles enshrined in our 2013 Constitution to protect the rights of the younger generation and preserve the democratic values we hold dear.

I also want to put on record Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Grace Road workers especially the female workers who were harassed by the police, there are videos that were viral on social media. None of the Coalition Government Ministers, even the Home Affairs Minister did not even make a comment about how the Grace Road workers were harassed. I also note that in today's Order Paper, honourable Ratu Rakuita (my OB from Savusavu) is also making a Statement on the Adherence of Rule of Law. It is quite surprising when you talk about rule of law and something else is happening on the other side as well.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, the Koreans were youth as well? You mentioned the Koreans or something.

HON. K.K. LAL.- They are Grace Road workers, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are they youth?



HON. K.K. LAL.- Yes Sir, some of our youth workers are working in that company, they were concerned how the Grace Road workers were treated.

MR. SPEAKER.- Carry on.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we continue to breach the 2013 Constitution, it is setting a bad example to our younger Fijians. As a saying goes in *iTaukei* “*ni sa vuvu na vuna sa na vuvu kece mai na uciwai*”.

MR. SPEAKER.- Could you repeat that again.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Sorry, Sir?

MR. SPEAKER.- Could you repeat that again.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Time is up.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, “*ni sa vuvu na vuna sa na vuvu kece mai na uciwai*”.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is disheartening to note that during times of crisis such as cyclone affecting our nation, some Ministers was seemingly preoccupied with activities that are not aligned with their responsibilities, Like drinking grog while our Fijian police officers and our fellow Fijians ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.-... were grappling with the cyclone and the ...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Nonsense.

HON. K.K. LAL.- ... aftermath and during the gust winds of *TC Mal* that was affecting Fiji. Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the absence of the Prime Minister during critical moments raises questions about this Government’s priorities and commitment to the wellbeing of our nation.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The Minister is there.

HON. K.K. LAL.- While youths and SMEs hold immense promise, Mr .Speaker, Sir, it is unfortunate that some may overlook or underestimate their contributions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Monday the honourable Minister for Finance & Deputy Prime Minister stood up in this same august Parliament and responded to a honourable Member, and I quote:

“I do not do the BBQ from the roadside like you.”

Today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- ... he has withdrawn that statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- He has withdrawn that. They have withdrawn it, honourable Member. No need to bring it back.

HON. K.K. LA.- Noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. What he quoted is already resolved. He should not quote it again. He should clearly state that I have withdrawn.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- What is your Point of Order?

MR. SPEAKER.- I have already...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ... already explained. Are you deaf or what?

MR. SPEAKER.- It has been taken care of. So, they have withdrawn those remarks and please do not reignite the fire again.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that comment was withdrawn by the Minister for Finance and Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Minister for Finance that he should recognise and promote the invaluable role that these BBQ stalls played during night life in urban areas and in our economy. Some of them are young people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I normally go and buy BBQs from them as well. These are people trying to make best living, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and create better life for them and their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that we are at a crossroad, faced with challenges that demand our attention and resolute action. The promises made to our youth, especially in the realm of education, must not be hollow words but tangible commitments that uplift the aspirations of every Fijian. It is time for the Government to reflect on its course and re-evaluate its priorities for the collective wellbeing of our young generation.

To reignite the flame, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of hope for our young people, the Coalition Government must reaffirm its commitment to free education ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder the academic pursuits of students and the young people.

To the honourable Minister for Finance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a stagnant economy leads to a stagnant future, and we cannot afford to let our young minds remain idle and please Minister for Employment, Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Minister of Finance, reduce your overseas travels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the Government I say this “FijiFirst has left you with a modern Fiji” Our young people deserve a Government like FijiFirst that they can trust and believe in. One that stands firm on the principles of democracy and transparency as enshrined in our 2013 Constitution just how FijiFirst followed it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we navigate the challenges before us, the Coalition Government must remember that the true measure of a nation’s strength lies in the wellbeing and the aspirations of the young people. I demand that the Coalition Government gets back on its track to work tirelessly for the future of our young people and to craft policies and initiatives that pave the way for a prosperous and promising tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a future that irrespective if I am an Indo-Fijian or not, I am considered a Fijian under the 2013 Constitution. That is the modern Fiji that the Bainimarama Government and

the FijiFirst Government has definitely. In the same verse of honourable Tabuya - *ciqoma, tiloma qai mokota ena marau*.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now invite honourable Lynda Tabuya. She is standing in for the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports who is being displaced at this point in time.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to respond to the End of Week Statement by my colleague, honourable Ketan Lal.

As the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection in Fiji, I do stand before you today to address this critical issue that resonates deeply within the fabric of our nation's future - the empowerment of our youth for a prosperous tomorrow.

The youth of Fiji, Mr. Speaker, represent the lifeblood of our nation - holding the promise and potential to drive our economy, innovate industries and shape the social landscape of our country. However, Mr. Speaker, their journey towards success is often impeded by various challenges, hindering their ability to fully realise their potential.

The need to empower youth is a critical issue for the Coalition Government. In the last 10 months, Mr. Speaker, since we have come into Government, youth focussed policies have been implemented in various Ministries, mostly focussed on youth economic empowerment.

The Ministry of Youth, through the reopening of our Youth Training Centres in rural and maritime areas which were closed by the previous Government, is a welcome initiative, as well as the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs stepping up their training opportunities in Nadave, and education and training Initiatives by the Ministry of Education through the Fiji National University.

Mr. Speaker, as you have heard in the Parliament previously, the offer made to our young people living in informal and squatter settlements and those who are unemployed or are on the streets received training opportunities through the Fiji National University and they continue to upskill in their stages of training.

Just this morning, Mr. Speaker, Pacific Polytech commenced its free courses in their location in Nabua - courses in Carpentry, Joinery, Plumbing, Auto Penal, Mechanics, Engineering, Tourism and Hospitality.

Mr. Speaker, I visited Pacific Polytech and met with Dr. Ganesh Chand and his team, as well as the students currently enrolled there. It was an atmosphere of smiles, joy, enthusiasm and hope. As young people, they are mostly from informal and squatter settlements in the Suva-Nausori corridor. Young single mums and dads included with an eagerness to learn and eagerness to be productive and eagerness to be empowered, and the eagerness and hope for the future. Mr. Speaker, a dignity in their life, learning the value of work. This is what this Government is committed to.

Mr. Speaker, we all know the previous Government that stopped Pacific Polytech from opening, did not give them the funding to open. For a number of years, building the complexes that were never used around the country. They closed the vocational colleges, they closed the Youth Centres without our youth being empowered. That was the legacy of the previous Government, Mr. Speaker. So, honourable Ketan Lal, who has disappeared and has left the Chambers, and is talking about youth focussed policies ...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Call him, call him!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ...he is obviously new in Parliament. He is new to this Chambers, but he should just look left and right, ask his leader, ask his colleagues, what did they do to bring youth focussed policies? What did they do to empower our youth?

This is their legacy, Mr. Speaker, this is their legacy, and I will remind them of this. We have about 800 to 3,000 young people on the social welfare system who should not be on it. They have been there for years. Social welfare is supposed to be for temporary shocks, not for years. We are talking about three years, four years or five years of young people in the system. What has their government done to graduate them out of the system? What happened to the Welfare Graduate Programme that is a mandate for the Ministry of Women and Social Protection, that they should be graduated out of? Nothing done, Mr. Speaker, no programmes.

Yes, they had the Jobs for Nature, but it was a half attempt, just to buffer the big loans that they were getting from the World Bank. It was just sort of a concessional or consolation prize, they call it, just to make it look like they are engaging young people and women. Mr. Speaker, Sir, these were not sustainable projects. We need to get into sustainable projects for our young people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have the legacy of wrecking up the largest burden for youth in the history of Fiji. They were prepared to give \$650 million to our youth in terms of Tertiary Scholarship Loans. What did this Government do – the Coalition Government? We have removed and forgiven this debt. That is empowering. We have removed this debt, we are empowering our youth to move forward without a debt. So, when they start working, they can actually afford to buy a house, they can afford to sustain and support their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to address what honourable Ketan Lal said. I want to congratulate him for being a youth MP in Parliament. I want to congratulate honourable Ketan Lal and honourable Rinesh Sharma for making it into Parliament as youth Members And, of course, honourable Alikhi Bia, from our area of New Town. Congratulations as new MPs

HON. P.K. BALA.- That side no youth.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- But, Mr. Speaker, I fail to see how grogging, and he has mentioned “grogging” of honourable Members on this side has to do with this topic of youth empowerment. In fact, the kava industry is thriving because of youth, so there is no connection there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he really do his homework and ask his leaders and colleagues, what did they do? The youth were not a priority for the FijiFirst Government in the last 16 years, Mr. Speaker. They have created a welfare state for our young people. We want to graduate our youth from welfare to well-being, from poverty to productivity, and that is the commitment of this Coalition Government, we are doing it and we will continue to do it.

MR. SPEAKER.- No running commentary and no debate.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this relevant topic. Standing Order 62(4)(a) – Prohibited references: “Offensive words against a Parliament or another Member.” The newly appointed Leader of the Government in Business looked at me and referred to me and said, “Are you deaf, or what?”

I request you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow him to withdraw the statement because we follow the rules you set in this Parliament, and when we raise a Point of Order, we quote the number

and reference, then we raise the matter.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It's too late.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- It's not too late, we are still on the matter. Please, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if he can withdraw his statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament, would you like to withdraw those comments?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it was supposed to be raised immediately after that, but in respect of the youth, I withdraw that and I know that he is not deaf.

(Laughter)

### Maintaining Safety on Public Transport

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a comment to the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, whenever we were in Government....

MR. SPEAKER.- Is that part of your End of Week Statement?

HON. J. USAMATE.- My apologies, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me move on.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning as I drove into Parliament from Nakasi and as I approached the Laqere Bridge, my mind thought back to 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 1973. I was then 11 years old, attending what was then called the Kalabu Fijian School. It was a Sunday after midday, if I recall correctly, and there was a loud noise from the King's Road. Soon after this there was an intense commotion filtering through our settlement in Wakanisila and people started running down the gravel road to the then two-lane Laqere Bridge and it was the most traumatic site; a collision of two buses just before the old Laqere Bridge from the Nausori end, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Tui Davuilevu bus, this bus company is no longer with us, an old wooden bus was coming down from Nausori. It was full of women and children who had been celebrating a wedding, in a celebratory mode, they were singing, playing instruments in the bus. They were on their way to Suva Point to put flowers into the seas as part of the wedding rituals that they have just been to. It was an old wooden bus, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and it was a time of joy for everyone on that bus.

Coming in the opposite direction was a Chieftain bus that was used by the tourists. There were no passengers on board, only the driver was on board, and it was a steel structured bus. It was a huge tragedy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 15 people on that wooden Tui Davuilevu bus lost their lives there and one more passed away the next day; 16 lives were lost.

The impact of this on the families was intense, catastrophic and immense. The driver of the Chieftain bus could be later taken to task for this disaster and to my mind, as I reflect back, two major things contributed to that disaster. First of all, driver carelessness, the way that driver drove the bus; and secondly, the condition in which the other bus was.

That traffic accident is forever etched in my memory. It is a graphic reminder and when I think of safety on public transport, those are the memories that come back and for a long time in our

area there in Wakanisila and Laqere, we were always haunted. People said that that end of the bridge used to be haunted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, public transport includes buses, taxis, minibuses, carriers and rental cars and already this year we have had 73 fatalities on the roads, 12 of these were from public service vehicles. Some of the data shared by honourable Tuinaceva last night was quite shocking and I think, for us, demonstrates another crisis that we are in. He told us last night that until last week, there had been 72 deaths compared to 38 the same period last year - a 90 percent increase, almost doubled. I think that is a crisis for us, something that we really have to address.

The other data that he shared, 80 percent of accidents are caused by overspeeding, 70 percent of deaths are caused by overspeeding, and in November alone of this year, within two weeks, there have been 161 accidents and eight fatalities. For the buses, in October of this year (2023), there have been four accidents involving buses and three of these were fatal where people passed away and all of these happened just within 10 days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be speaking a lot more for the rest of my speech and using the bus industry as a proxy for the whole of the public transport sector. But there are a number of factors that are affecting this reduction in safety on public transport, and one is the condition of buses.

The conditions of buses that we have and you can use that for condition of the minibuses, condition of rental cars and taxis, et cetera. Already, we have had four cases of burning of buses where buses stopped, people have to jump out because it starts burning. Obviously, there are some defects with the buses themselves that would have been the cause of burning.

Everyday around Fiji, there must be, at least, 10 bus breakdowns, where buses have to stop, people have to get out, they have to call another bus to put people on board. Obviously, there is something wrong with those buses that led to those bus breakdowns. That is hinting at the state of some buses, not all buses. We can see a lot of good buses around Fiji.

When I was a Minister, I used to ride around in the black car that you are now enjoying, but this year, I have had the luxury and the time to be able to every now and then ride buses back to Nakasi, or from Nakasi to here. I can tell you that riding on these public buses, there is a lot of extreme discomfort. I once sat on a bus, there was place for two people, one person was sitting there and for me when I sat on the seat only one quarter of me could fit, so I had to turn this way and sit. It is extremely discomfoting riding in our buses today. Something happened, even the buses have gone smaller, or our people have gone much bigger or both, but it is extremely uncomfortable. I have been riding buses this year and I can tell you, there is a lot of overcrowding. The condition of these buses are such, the way people are crammed together, if there was an accident, there would be a lot of injuries and even possibly fatalities.

Land Transport Authority (LTA) has quality assurance processes for buses, and this is designed to ensure that the quality of buses are maintained after they have received their fitness certificate. They normally do this twice a year, so it is very important for us to make sure that the soundness of the buses, that these quality assurance mechanisms are being implemented well.

These mechanisms look into fleet management, they have daily checks. A big question for us is, how sure are we that it is being done well because all those indicators of buses breaking down and about 30 percent of buses in Fiji are more than 20 years old. When you have very old buses, you cannot get the replacement parts, what they do, they modify parts to put that in and the quality of those modified parts – we do not know. Maybe that is part of the issue too.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the reasons that we introduced e-ticketing was to get rid of the leakage that was happening in the bus industry so that the companies could increase their income and perhaps, buy new buses. I think we have seen that over the past few years, we have seen quite a number of new buses that are on the roads; much safer and better for the people who travel on them.

So, the whole idea of putting the e-ticketing is to allow the buses to save 30 percent of their income that used to be leakage and use this for re-fleeting of the buses in Fiji. The Government also is trying to help bus companies introduce fuel rebates and reduction in duty. All of these, trying to encourage bus companies to get new buses. The whole idea of buses running on our roads, need to be in good condition so we can maintain the safety of the people who travel in these buses all over Fiji.

The second major criteria that I think is an issue here is driving skills and driving standards. As I have said in the past, most of the fatalities are because of overspeeding and it seems we have put in some good measures. We have got the defensive driving training programme. You can get training, you can get certification, but it seems this is not working so well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last major accident that we had at Lomawai, I attended the funeral and some of the people working in the industry were saying that the bus was travelling at around 90 kilometres per hour when public service vehicles are supposed to be travelling at 60 kilometres per hour. So that is one issue, driver standards and how they drive and how they do their business.

Third might be the road conditions, there is a bumper sticker going around - as you see me weaving, do not think I am drunk, no I am just avoiding the potholes. The current Minister and I know that it is not easy to address potholes, but it is now his responsibility to be able to fix those potholes. They can be a major consideration.

One of the other things that we need to do well is the road safety audits. We know where the black spots are, these black spots need to be audited, to see what can be done to fix those areas so that accidents can be reduced.

I just have a number of suggestions. I will not talk about policing, that was discussed at length last night, but I think I still have a number of suggestions that we should consider.

First, is to strengthen the quality assurance of buses, especially the old ones. The new ones are much better. How can we strengthen that quality assurance with the system that we currently have? Sometimes when you have a very old bus and when they come for fitness, they take out the old tyres and all the old stuff and they put on the new stuff. It goes in for fitness, comes back and maybe they take out the new tyres and fit the old things back on. How do we control that much better? We have systems and processes in place.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are very good with your body language, honourable Member.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It is just the *meke*, Sir.

(Laughter)

And how also can we introduce this quality assurance mechanisms in other forms of public transport - carriers, taxis, rental cars so we can assure the public that when you travel in these public vessels that you are safe.

Addressing the certification and monitoring of all PSV drivers, introduction of mobile

camera, strengthen the road safety audits and consider whether a reallocation of roads might be necessary to address this crisis.

Last point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, should LTA release some power to other agencies ....

MR. SPEAKER.- You have reached your end of time, honourable Member.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you for the opportunity.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Member for the End of Week Statement which definitely is an issue. There is no doubt that maintaining the safety of all those on our roads is a critical concern, as I have already alluded to. Safety is everyone's responsibility.

Sir, to put things in perspective, Fiji has a population of over 900,000 and the vehicle population is 144,000 with more than 14,000 PSV registered vehicles, and public transport make up 99.83 percent. There are more than 320,000 registered drivers, with 9 classifications of driver licensing categories. Of these 320,000, approximately 50,000 are registered PSV drivers, including taxis, carriers, mini-buses and omni-buses.

There are only 95 enforcement officers in LTA nationwide that assist the Police. Let me repeat that, there are only 95 enforcement officers and the Coalition Government understands this, and we have been working to address this in the financial year. Land Transport Authority is working to recruit more officers. Unfortunately, in the last Government, 104 positions and 33 of which were for public transport officers, and enforcement officers were shelved by LTA. We are working on rebuilding this as a priority.

With regard to road safety and the LTA and police working together, we can only do so much and the onus is on the creation of a safety conscious environment. So if we look at the ratio, currently, it is one LTA enforcement officer to 3,400 drivers and 1,500 vehicles. Yes, there has been a spike in road deaths, and LTA is pleading with members of the public to slow down and adhere to road rules. That is just the simple message which LTA is emphasising now, and working with our stakeholders.

The honourable Member had raised speed cameras and other devices to assist us. We are working with our development partners right now, in terms of having speed cameras and better equipment for LTA and our traffic officers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst PSV represents a small fraction of the overall vehicle population, it is true that a lot of the accidents involve PSVs.

Addressing this is a critical component of what the LTA is doing now. We have commenced rigorous, for example, for rentals, some of these vehicles involved in accidents have written-off, rigorous audits, and we have audited 163 rental companies out of a total of 412. The honourable Member had mentioned the Quality Assurance Systems (QAMs) and over the last four months, 18 out of 61 bus companies underwent rigorous QAMs.

These are some of the measures, which we are currently undertaking. I would like to also raise a few points regarding the freeze on the Public Service Vehicle permits, which we feel has led to sub-standard services given the rise of monopolistic behaviour. In terms of the sale of PSV permits, that is something also, which is an issue because the sale or the transfer of those permits have not undergone the rigorous assessments which we normally do for those who are applying for new permits. So, the reduction of the minimum age of PSV drivers, this was done, I think to curb the outward movement of bus drivers. In 2017 again, a lot of those who have been involved in bus accidents have been our young bus drivers. So, we are relooking at that criteria.



The Coalition Government has started to address the above anomalies and we will continue to do so. We are working closely in conjunction with other stakeholders including the police in terms of having nationwide campaign throughout this holiday period which you will notice in terms of addressing the situation as highlighted by honourable Usamate. With those words, Sir, I note, and with these issues raised, we will be working rigorously on addressing those.

### Best Practices for Cattle Farming in Fiji

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to present to this august Parliament my End of the Week Statement which will be focusing on Best Practices for Cattle Farming here in Fiji.

Cattle is a source of high-quality protein, both from milk and meat. It is of very high demand here in Fiji, and also around the world. Even non-beef-consuming nations, like India are amongst the top producers vying for export markets, due to the increasing worldwide demand on cattle.

Cattle provides us with:

- Beef and milk;
- Hides and Leather;
- Bi-products (livestock feed and fertiliser);
- Employment and source of revenue;
- Labour for control of weeds under tree cropping system;
- Power for animal drawn implements;
- Energy from methane digestion; and
- Meeting our traditional and religious obligations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cattle farming in Fiji is widely believed to have been introduced by Christian missionaries in the early 1830s. Cattle were only owned by early missionaries and the European estate owners, which at that time, were very limited to ownership of Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cattle farming then progressed from estates, from rearing under coconut plantations to bigger private farms. Later, it expanded to other geographical locations, especially Taveuni, Vanua Levu and Viti Levu. After a few decades, cattle farming expanded to other farming communities in the sugarcane, copra and rice plantations, where sufficient grazing land were available, especially in rural settlements.

Records show that, we at one time exported processed beef and milk products to Samoa, Tonga and New Zealand. Fiji had also in the past, exported live cattle to other Pacific countries. By the 1930s, a notable American had a 100,000 acres ranch operating in Tova in the Ra Province which maintained 31,478 heads of cattle. This was considered the biggest cattle farm at that time. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, Fiji is still heavily reliant on imported dairy products and beef prime cuts to meet our local demand and the tourist market. In 2022, Fiji imported \$29.9 million worth of beef and \$16.3 million worth of milk which signifies greater local demand and opportunities to invest in the cattle industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to also address the concern raised by honourable Sachida Nand in his response to the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways' Ministerial Statement on Wednesday with regards to milk production in Fiji. I confirm that Fiji's total milk production in 2022 was around 12 million litres. Of these, 6.07 million litres of milk was produced for the Fiji Cooperative Dairy Company Limited (FCDCL), which accounts for the formal market and around 6 million litres of milk was produced by the informal sector, those that did not go through the processing facility in Nabua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, cattle production had been limited by a number factors, including:

- (1) Lack of available improved cattle breeds;
- (2) Animal health issues;
- (3) Poor plant and animal nutrition;
- (4) Changing climatic condition;
- (5) Reducing grazing land areas;
- (6) High input costs; and
- (7) Global requirement and policies, for example, a reduction in methane emission.

Efforts to increase the productivity of the Fijian cattle industry such as importing and distributing breeding stock to farmers had been in place with the Ministry for a few decades. The success of these strategies is, however, low as evidenced by the persisting low off-take and market gap.

Considering the status of cattle genetics in Fiji, the Ministry is committed to improving genetics through embryo transfer technology and artificial insemination. Therefore, Fiji envisions producing its own semen straws and embryos from Sigatoka Research Station, which will support the mass dissemination of improved genetics. This ensures the supply of quality breeding cattle for farms, for the improvement of genetics which will contribute to the improvement of quality and increase the volume of beef and dairy in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address the losses through diseases such as bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis, the Ministry is committed to its national testing and removal of infected cattle from farms. This is a government funded project that will be coordinated with other stakeholders. Poor plant and animal nutrition affects animal production by reducing productivity.

The Government, through its farmers support programmes, will pay more emphasis in improving animal nutrition. The Ministry had identified a land for the production of planting material that will provide planting material for farmers. The unavailability of land had been identified as another major livestock restriction. The competition for land amongst other infrastructural development, alongside population pressure puts the limiting cap on expanding the livestock development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, high input cost and reducing land area of production had been addressed through the Government support on funded programmes to improve infrastructure, construction of farm roads, provision of drinking water and introduction of technologies that will help assist improve animal production.

The Government is committed through its programmes, will address methane emission through appropriate technologies of methane digestion for home use and for soil improvement purposes. Research and development will continue in terms of alternative livestock feed sources that will yield with the reduced of methane emission rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry prioritises the importance of animal welfare and, therefore, always promote good husbandry management practices. The best practices includes selection of best breeds with sound breeding plans, maintain healthy stock in good stockmanship, proper fencing and drinking practices, maintaining good grazing system with stock proof fences, sustainable and management practices and proper land care, maintenance and management of farm infrastructure, maintain proper hygiene practices and good waste management system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said the above, farmers are required to be in close contact with the

livestock officers. Capacity building will be conducted regularly, and farm visit will be done by livestock officers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will continue to support the livestock industry in Fiji as it plays a significant role with developing the other agriculture sector and it is contributing to the national economy.

### Importance of Protecting our Borders

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a statement on the importance of protecting our borders and the adherence to the rule of law. At the outset, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all Fijians for their confidence in the Coalition administration and their dedication to advancing and maintaining Fiji's transformation into a more secure, tranquil country that maintain strict adherence to the law and its security measures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, protecting our boarders from the illicit movement of weapons, drugs, contraband and people while promoting lawful entry and exit and lawful trade is essential to Fiji's security, economic prosperity and national sovereignty. The problem of protecting our country's borders is without question one of the most highly debated issues we face today in the rise of trans-national boarder crimes. The complexity of protecting our boarders while not infringing on individual rights or negatively impacting global trade should not be underestimated. Of equal importance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is our ability to move quickly, to reinforce the current security measures with enhanced measures properly supported by our regulations and our policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the attacks on the twin towers in New York the emphasis of boarder security has been put on an access control and identification. Positive identification is more critical now than ever before. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Immigration Officers must stay up to date with changes in policy, legislation, internal procedures and ICT systems such as integrated boarder management system as well as the shifting migration trends in the region. Immigration plays a critical role in travel facilitation, border protection and revenue generation for the nation. Thus, training plays a crucial role in the immigration offices. As a result, the Department is working hard to strengthen the capacity building for developing policies and laws including areas that the capacity needs assessment highlighted and analysis in reporting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, securing our boarders is imperative and this must be done without disrupting the movement of people and goods. The fundamental change to the approach that the Fiji Immigration Department has taken is a model based on information, intelligence and integration which will address the issue of border security far more holistically than ever before. This has been achievable Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the help and coordination from our neighbours namely Australia through the *Vuvale* Partnership and New Zealand through the *Hakil Matai Accord* and also through the United Nations International Organisation of Migration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, improving and modernising Fiji's boarders is a top priority and in light of the lesson learned from the Coronavirus pandemic and the emerging *Variola* virus there is an immediate need for a more efficient and well-coordinated border approach management. Since health risk has virtually replaced border risk, it will be considered for any border upgrades. We recognise the significance of striking a balance between boarder security and facilitation to promote our industry such as tourism. A strategy has already been put in place to improve the border to efficiently facilitate passenger flow and guarantee smooth travel for every individual visiting our shores.

Mr. Speaker, at present Fiji Immigration Department is facing a surge in the number of applications of investor permits due to the frequent renewals by major holding corporations and the influx of new interested investors who have showed interest in investing in Fiji. This is because Fiji's

current legal work framework Mr. Speaker, the Investment Fiji Act 2022 protects investors rights and interests as they do business within the country. Nonetheless, Mr. Speaker, in light of this, some investment firms have abused these rights and privileges and have a tendency to find ways around the law that are already in place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture I wish make it clear that Fiji's doors are open to all who wish to visit or intend to invest in Fiji but make no mistake, when they come to Fiji they must follow our laws and the Fiji Immigration Department and all law enforcement agencies will stay vigilant to protect our borders but most importantly, the adherence to the rule of law of our country and a good example of this Mr. Speaker, is the Grace Road Group in Fiji and to enlighten honourable Ketan Lal, this is the adherence of the rule of law.

We will not be tolerating criminals in our country or harbouring them in our country. On that latter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to inform this august House about ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Police brutality.

HON. RATU. R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- ... Fiji's stance for digitization solution based on trends and emerging security threats, identified from the increasing influx of people into the country as in transnational border activities are now centred in Fiji which has become the hub of the region. Therefore, enhancements to improve early detection work at the borders will focus on technology innovation and digitization to allow better co-ordination between our border agencies, including the Police and the Ministry of Health and with prompt assistance from our partners, Fiji Immigration Department will undoubtedly modernize Fiji's border.

Regarding our global responsibilities Fiji has succeeded to our international treaties and this is reflected in the Immigration Act 2003, in particular the enhancement of Part 6, determination of refugee status and the Immigration Regulation 2007 which together Mr. Speaker, established a clear legal framework to assess claims of asylum. The department works hard to complete its standard operating procedure in order to support and maintain a balance between available resources, security and facilitation.

These circumstances Mr. Speaker, of the standing operating procedure determine how we handle mass migrations and displacements like those of refugees and asylum seekers. To be able to map our responses we must assess the quality of the data, create an insightful analysis and comprehend the changing migratory trends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with a budget of \$8.6 million in the 2023/2024 fiscal year, Fiji Immigration Department is mindful of the mammoth task that it bears and wishes to inform the House that our borders are very important and more so the adherence of the rule of law and needs the support of this august Parliament. In addition, Fiji Immigration Department is committed to working with businesses and investor to ensure we are striking the right balance between security and facilitation.

To conclude Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of the hardworking men and women of the Fiji Immigration Department who are here with us this afternoon and law enforcement agencies who also play a major role in the protection of our borders and wish them well as they continue to deliver in the midst of high demand for immigration and border services domestically and globally.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, you may have been wondering why I did not offer the floor to the honourable Minister for Agriculture. He did highlight in his Statement yesterday that his Assistant Minister would be delivering in the End of Week Statement issues regarding their

particular field in terms of cattle.

The two honourable Members are well known and are popular in the Pacific as they have indicated. Cattle has been traded from Fiji everywhere, sheep, goats, they even bring bulls from Australia to here. So that is why I did not give the opportunity for the honourable Minister to reply or make a response to the Statement made by his Assistant Minister. Both are highly qualified in the field of agriculture.

As for this one, let me put it this way. The End of the Week Statement is usually given to the Opposition but the past government changed all that and they were even making End of the Week Statements as well. So, this is another avenue available to the Opposition to be providing that. But to go that way again, I leave that to the government of the day to decide whether they allow to use that opportunity for the Opposition only or is it to be continued as done by the previous government. But for the reply or the response, it is up to the honourable Minister for Home Affairs whether he wants to make a response to his Assistant Minister's End of the Week Statement or not.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, you never refuse a good offer.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- (Inaudible)

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- First of all, I would like to thank the honourable Assistant Minister in my Office, Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure for the sentiments that he has echoed on the subject on which he has already spoken on the End of the Week Statement on the Rule of Law particularly protecting our borders. I also would like to acknowledge the presence of members of the Department that are here and I thank them for the work that they do.

The Department of Immigration interchange of portfolios of this Government has now come under the Ministry of Home Affairs as you know, Sir. It is the Home Affairs and Immigration, something that was either independent or under the portfolio of another Minister in the past. We cannot emphasise any more the importance and the criticalness of the work that the Department does, and that is keeping our borders safe particularly controlling the people that we allow into Fiji and also controlling the people that get out of Fiji.

Also, they provide an essential part of our development through the issuing of work permit and passports and all other services related to that but it has not been easy, Mr. Speaker. This year the Department of Immigration is moving into our new headquarters here in Suva. We also need to look at other facilities that are available particularly in the West in terms of those officers too.

An issue that came up with the National Security Council Meeting is actually the functions of immigration at the border. I know that the honourable Naupoto when he was Director and Member of Parliament later on had argued many cases about this where Customs under FRCS performed the functions of an Immigration Officer. This has its benefits as well as risks. This is something that Government is reconsidering, Mr. Speaker.

The whole intention is actually to strengthen the capability of the Department in order to keep our borders safe particularly when they man our gates when people come into Fiji and otherwise. I also take this opportunity for all the other departments that perform the functions of the Immigration Officers in the Navy and in the Police at times when it is required. From where you are sitting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you will see that majority of the people who work in the Immigration Office are actually youth.

So, we do take cognizance of the fact that the youth are important to our development but I

would just like to say perhaps (I see the honourable Ketan Lal is laughing), this is not against you but I think the youth have actually lost faith in FijiFirst, honourable Ketan Lal, because you did not support the reduction of travel allowances earlier on. Mr. Speaker, I cannot re-emphasize further the safety of border, we talked about drugs earlier on and keeping Fiji safe and keeping Fijians safe is the function of our Office particularly the Office of the Immigration to make sure that only good people come here and to keep away those who are not supposed to come here and threaten our livelihood.

### ADJOURNMENT

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that concludes the end of our sitting for this week and this session and I thank you all for all your contributions throughout the week and also this first session of Parliament. We have completed one year of sitting.

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to advise that Parliament will stand prorogued from Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> December, 2023. By convention, this is not a sitting day, prorogation signifies the formal end of a parliamentary session or year during the parliamentary term which is four years. The Speaker will inform his Excellency the President of the prorogation as well as the State Opening of Parliament and the Session on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024. The State Opening will be officiated by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji. We will ensure that we will be communicating and listening to the decision of the honourable Prime Minister and the Government.

Once Parliament is prorogued, parliamentary business including parliamentary sittings and parliamentary standing committees' proceedings on Bills, motions and reports are suspended or ceased until the opening of a new parliamentary session, with the exception of matters that will be deemed urgent and necessary such as the standing committee work on Bills, but this will be at the discretion of the Speaker.

Since this will be our last sitting for this session of Parliament, I would like to wish all honourable Members and for each and everyone sitting in the gallery and those watching the live proceedings and everyone in Fiji a very Merry Christmas and a prosperous 2024. I also would like to wish the honourable Prime Minister and his entourage, including this Office well on the journey to attend the COP28 meeting in Dubai.

Once again, thank you so much, and I now declare Parliament adjourned until Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024 at 10.00 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.20 p.m.