

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 20TH NOVEMBER, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

C O N T E N T S

	<u>Pages</u>
Minutes	1938
Communications from the Speaker	1938-1939
(1) Welcome (2) Emoluments Committee Report (3) Time Limitation-Debate on Standing Committee Reports	
Presentation of Papers & Certain Documents	1939-1940
Presentation of Reports of Committees	1940-1942
(1) Consolidated Review Report – Levuka Town Council 2014 & 2015 Annual Reports (2) Review Report – Fiji National Provident Fund 2022 Annual Report	
Ministerial Statements	1942-1952
(1) Overplanted Pine – Hon. K.V. Ravu (2) Great Council of Chiefs Progress Update – Hon. I. Vasu	
Questions	1953-1974
<u>Oral Questions</u>	
(1) Survey/Study on Skills Shortage	(Q/No. 146/2023)
(2) High Seas Treaty (BBNJ) - UNCLOS	(Q/No. 147/2023)
(3) Clarification on the Inflation Level	(Q/No. 148/2023)
(4) Poverty Alleviation Programme – Monitoring Mechanism	(Q/No. 149/2023)
(5) Early School Dropouts & Truancy	(Q/No. 150/2023)
(6) Criteria – GCC Membership	(Q/No. 151/2023)
(7) Addressing Transportation Issues-Mainland & Outer Islands	(Q/No. 152/2023)
(8) Indian Government Grant on 100-Bed Hospital	(Q/No. 153/2023)
<u>Written Questions</u>	
(1) Education Summit – List of Outcomes	(Q/No. 154/2023)
(2) Women for Agriculture Programme	(Q/No. 155/2023)
(3) Update – Senior Citizens Allowance	(Q/No. 156/2023)
(4) Complaints Received-LTA 582 Text Free Platform	(Q/No. 157/2023)
(5) Road Fatalities-January to October 2023	(Q/No. 158/2023)
(6) 2014-2022 Graduates of MBBS Programme	(Q/No. 159/2023)
Review Report – iTaukei Trust Fund Board 2020 Annual Report	1974-1980
Review Report–Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2017-2018 Annual Report	1980-1987
Suspension of Standing Orders	1987-1988
Review Report–Fiji Airports 2020 Annual Report	1989-1995
Review Report–Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations 2016-2018 Annual Report	1995-2001
Review Report – FCCC 2018-2019 Annual Report	2001-2007

MONDAY, 20TH NOVEMBER, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.49 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

Hon. Sitiveni Ligamamada Rabuka, Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs

Hon. Siromi Dokonivalu Turaga, Attorney-General and Minister for Justice

Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

Hon. Ro Filipe Qaranqio Tuisawau, Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport

Hon. Charan Jeath Singh, Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry

Hon. Filimoni Wainiqolo Rasokisoki Vosarogo, Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources

Hon. Manoa Seru Nakausabaria Kamikamica, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications

Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya, Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection

Hon. Dr. Ratu Atonio Rabici Lalabalavu, Minister for Health and Medical Services

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration

Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro, Minister for Education

Hon. Sakiasi Raisevu Ditoka, Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Ifereimi Vasu, Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts

Hon. Jese Saukuru, Minister for Youth and Sports

Hon. Maciu Katamotu Nalumisa, Minister for Housing and Local Government

Hon. Agni Deo Singh, Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations

Hon. Vatimi Tidara Tuinasakea Kaunitawake Rayalu, Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

Hon. Kalaveti Vodo Ravu, Minister for Fisheries and Forestry

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

Hon. Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Alitia Vakatai Bavou Cirikiyasawa Bainivalu, Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation

Hon. Ratu Rakuita Solesole Sauramaeva Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Home Affairs

Hon. Sakiusa Tubuna, Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister

Hon. Sashi Kiran, Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation

Hon. Esrom Yosef Immanuel, Assistant Minister for Finance

Hon. Jovesa Rokuta Vocea, Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management

Hon. Tomasi Niuvalu Tunabuna, Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu

Hon. Jone Usamate

Hon. Premila Devi Kumar

Hon. Viliame Naupoto

Hon. Ioane Naivalurua

Hon. Mosese Dreacala Bulitavu

Hon. Hem Chand

Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala

Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa
Hon. Rinesh Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau
Hon. Aliko Bia
Hon. Vijay Nath
Hon. Ratu Josaia Bulavakarua Niudamu
Hon. Ketan Kirit Lal
Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj
Hon. Naisa Tatau Tuinaceva
Hon. Viam Pillay
Hon. Shalen Kumar
Hon. Alipate Nagata Tuicolo
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Taito Rokomatu Matasawalevu
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand
Hon. Sachida Nand

Absent

Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation
Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Friday, 15th September, 2023, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting of Parliament. It has been a while since we are able once more to continue with our programmes as already included in our calendar. I also welcome those who are joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Report of the Emoluments Committee

Honourable Members, as I had informed the Business Committee, I received a letter from the Chairperson of the Emoluments Committee, informing that the Committee will not table its report during this week's sitting but at a later sitting of Parliament. For the information of all honourable Members, this is well within the parameters of the Resolution of Parliament on Monday, 11th

September, 2023.

Time Limitation – Debate on Standing Committee Reports

Honourable Members, at its sitting last Friday, the Business Committee unanimously agreed to impose time limitations during debates on the Standing Committee Reports and this is to ensure meaningful and efficient use of parliamentary time. You would have seen that there would be about five reports for debates per day from today through to Thursday. I trust that the Government and Opposition Whips will action the responsibility accordingly.

Honourable Members, as further agreed by the Business Committee, the final decision on the times and the number of speakers will rest with the Speaker.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, I rise on a Point of Order - Standing Order 23.

On behalf of the Opposition, I would like to show our disappointment whereby Parliament sitting days was reduced from nine to five and we are not happy with that. Mr. Speaker, as discussed in the Business Committee, I rise to show our disappointment as this is the fourth week that has been taken away off the Parliament sitting this year and we would like to show our disappointment. Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What Standing Order?

HON. MEMBERS.- 23.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Standing Order 23 is about sitting days itself, not about the Point of Order.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It's a wrong Standing Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Wrong Standing Order.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I can rule on that immediately since the Business Committee has approved what appears in today's Order Paper. It is your right whether you still want to continue and air your views in this Chamber, that is well within your right honourable Whip. But let me just remind honourable Members, what is decided upon and how it was decided in the Business Committee, remains with the Business Committee. It is the outcome of the resolution, and that is what you see in the Order Paper that is before us, so we will leave that as it is and we shall continue.

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 Economic Affairs

- (1) Asset Fiji PTE Limited - Annual Report 2016-2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 104 of 2022*)
- (2) Reserve Bank of Fiji Insurance - Annual Report 2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 21 of 2023*)
- (3) Tourism Fiji – Annual Report 2015 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 107 of 2023*)
- (4) Tourism Fiji – Annual Report 2016 1st January – 31st July (*Parliamentary Paper No. 108 of 2023*)
- (5) Tourism Fiji – Annual Report 2016 – July 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 109 of 2023*)

- (6) Tourism Fiji – Annual Report 2017 – July 2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 110 of 2023*)

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

- (1) Fiji Airports - 2021 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 59 of 2023*)
- (2) Consumer Council of Fiji – Annual Report 2019–2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 105 of 2022*)
- (3) Ministry of Housing and Community Development – Annual Report 2018–2019 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 77 of 2023*)
- (4) Tavua Town Council – Annual Report for the Year Ended 2016 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 51 of 2023*)

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

- (1) Ministry of Sugar Industry – 2019–2020 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 36 of 2021*)
- (2) Sugar Industry Tribunal – Annual Report 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 125 of 2023*)
- (3) Sugar Industry Tribunal – Annual Report 2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 126 of 2023*)
- (4) Fiji Sugar Corporation – Annual Report 2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 122 of 2023*)
- (5) Fiji Sugar Corporation – Annual Report 2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 123 of 2023*)
- (6) Fiji Sugar Corporation – Annual Report 2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 124 of 2023*)

Please, also take note that the Fourth Quarter Appropriation Statement - Actual Expenditure from 1st May to 31st July, 2023 is for information only and will not be referred to any Standing Committee.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Consolidated Review Report - Levuka Town Council 2014-2015 Annual Report

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, I am pleased to present the Report of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Consolidated Review of Levuka Town Council 2014-2015 Annual Report.

The review was undertaken in accordance with Standing Order 109(2)(b), which mandates the Committee to look into issues related to health, education, social services, labour, culture and media. The Committee was mandated by Parliament to review the Annual Report and report back on its findings.

The Committee noted a few highlights for the year 2014 and 2015, which allowed the continuous improvement of the Council's work on Levuka. For instance, the 2015 Back to Levuka Carnival which was revived after 15 years; the partnership between the Council and Animals Fiji VET from UK for a weeklong clinic of de-sexing domesticated and wildlife animals; and the Council hosted Levuka weightlifters who represented Fiji in the 2015 South Pacific Games.

Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from 2014, Levuka Town Council was assisted through the Ministry of Local Government with donor funding in improving the infrastructure for accessibility and better service provided to the people of Levuka by its municipality. For instance, the Japanese Embassy donated a compactor truck to manage solid waste in Levuka during the 2014 financial year, and through the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP), continuous support and improvement provided to upgrade Levuka's road and drainage system; the improvement of the depot and the town hall and the continuous work of beautifying and rehabilitating Levuka Town without damaging its

historical port town status.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Annual Report for 2014 and 2015, the Committee acknowledged the current data and information provided by the stakeholders during the site visitation. This assisted the Committee in its review. Levuka Town Council continues to sustain its operations through its revenue sources to maintain sites, infrastructure and buildings which is of World Heritage status under UNESCO.

Therefore, I would like to thank the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs: honourable Ratu Rakuira Vakalalabure, honourable Sashi Kiran, honourable Parveen Bala and honourable Viam Pillay for their valuable input and support. I also extend my deepest appreciation to honourable Iliesa Vanawalu, honourable Ketan Lal and honourable Penioni Ravunawa as Alternate Members of the Committee on a few occasions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also extend my gratitude to the Acting Chief Executive Officer of Levuka Town Council, Ms. Nunia Labati, and the Special Administrator, Ms. Joanne Rymell, for their timely assistance in this review process.

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

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

Review Report - Fiji National Provident Fund 2022 Annual Report

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to wish all the children in Fiji and around the world a happy Children's Day, as we commemorate this special event today.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present the Report of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Fiji National Provident Fund 2022 Annual Report. This review was undertaken in accordance with Standing Order 109(2)(b) which mandates the Committee to look into issues related to health, education, social services, labour, culture and media.

Mr. Speaker, the Standing Committee on Social Affairs was referred the Fiji National Provident Fund Annual Report 2022 on 17th February, 2023. As per the normal report scrutiny, the Committee was mandated by Parliament to review the Annual Report and report back on its findings.

Mr. Speaker, the Standing Committee would like to commend the work carried out by the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF) for the financial year 2022. The Committee noted the achievement of \$8.7 billion of total assets as at the 2022 financial year. Contribution to the achievement is detailed

below:

- (1) The net income of \$650.8 million as compared to \$543.5 million in the year 2021.
- (2) General Reserves stands at \$1.7 billion.
- (3) Members' fund is at \$6.7 billion.
- (4) Total contribution received from employers for the employees is at \$395.2 million.
- (5) Credited amount of \$370.3 million as interest to members' accounts.

Despite the challenging environment, FNPf continues to support its members, increase investment portfolios and upgrading its system to ensure that operations continue to serve its customers to the highest level without complications.

In addition to the above, the Standing Committee undertook a site visit to inquire further on the investment made by FNPf on the refurbishment of Sheraton Resort, the completion of the Nadi FNPf Retail Complex and the opening of Ba Aspen Hospital, which was highlighted in the FNPf Annual Report for the year 2022.

Mr. Speaker Sir, to commend the work and assisting the Committee in its end review process, it extends its gratitude to the Acting Chief Executive Officer of FNPf, who appeared at the time of the public submission, Mr. Pravinesh Singh, and his staff for their timely assistance.

I would also like to thank the Sanding Committee on Social Affairs, the honourable Ratu Rakuita Vakalalabure, honourable Sashi Kiran, honourable Parveen Bala and honourable Viam Pillay for their valuable input and support. My deepest appreciation to honourable Ketan Lal and honourable Tomasi Tunabuna for alternating on certain occasions.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, hand the Report to the Secretary-General.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the following Ministers have given notice to make Ministerial Statements under Standing Order 40, the:

- (1) Minister for Fisheries and Forestry; and

(2) Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage, and Arts.

The Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes. After the Minister, we will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the Statement for no more than 5 minutes. There will be no other debate. I now call on the Minister for Fisheries and Forestry to deliver his Statement.

Overplanted Pine

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen in the public gallery and those who are viewing the livestream from the comfort of their homes; good morning, *ni sa bula vinaka* and *namaste*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver a Statement on the Coalition Government's stance through the Ministry of Forestry on the issue of overplanted pine areas which were transferred to Fiji Pine Corporation Limited and later Fiji Pine Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the onset, I wish to simply define overplanted pine areas. These are areas that are planted by the Company outside of its lease boundary. Sir, please, allow me to provide a bit of background to enable us to fully appreciate the position of the Ministry on this important subject matter.

Fiji Pine Limited is a public company incorporated in 1990 as part of the corporatisation of the Fiji Pine Commission to take over its assets, liabilities and obligations effective from 1st January, 1991. The shareholders of the Company are:

- (1) Fiji Government which holds 99.8 percent shares; and
- (2) Fiji Pine Trust which holds the remaining shares.

The Fiji Pine Trust which owns only 0.2 percent or 100,000 shares represent the pine landowners and was established under the Fiji Pine Act 1990 as part of the corporatisation of the Fiji Pine Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Pine Limited has a total lease of 83,000 hectares of which 35,000 is currently stocked. Out of the total stocked areas of 35,000 hectares, 28,000 hectares is established in Viti Levu and 7,000 hectares in Vanua Levu. These areas are not surveyed and boundaries during the time of planting were determined based on certain characteristics of the area, for example, creeks, ridges, trees, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Pine Limited commenced pine harvesting in 1987, at a time when the Fiji Pine Commission was managing the pine plantations. One of the main issues that arose during harvesting was the ownership of overplanted pines. The Fiji Pine Commission and iTaukei Lands Trust Board (ITLTB) resolved that:

- (1) Overplanted areas be given to landowners since the area was not leased as confirmed by iTLTB; and
- (2) for the case of double leasing, revenue generated from the harvesting of pine was to be equally shared between the Fiji Pine Commission and the other party leasing the same portion of land.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2009, harvesting of the Vanua Levu resources commenced on a large scale after the construction of the Tropik Woods Products Limited. When the harvesting commenced, the company defaulted on its decision regarding overplanting which was implemented since 1987. Despite the ITLTB confirmation that the areas were overplanted, Fiji Pine Limited

continued harvesting overplanted areas, thus in the process breached its lease conditions.

Mr. Speaker, so when the Coalition Government came into power, I announced in February 2023 that overplanted areas will be harvested by landowners and Fiji Pine Limited will be given first Preference to negotiate with the pine landowners on the purchasing of overplanted pine. This decision is based on the recognition of pine landowners as the most important stakeholders in the process. Once iTLTB, who is the custodian of all Native land, confirms that the subject area is not leased and overplanted, it is only right that the area be released to the landowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is to be noted also that the landowners were unable to utilise those land for their farming and livelihoods due to the overplanted pine for which they neither received land lease or compensation of any sort.

Since that landmark decision, a total of six overplanted areas that have been released to the landowners and harvested include:

- (1) *Mataqali* Lomate - Tiliva, Bua;
- (2) *Mataqali* Naicobo - Nawailevu;
- (3) *Mataqali* Nakakoso - Bua;
- (4) *Mataqali* Raracolo - Naruwai;
- (5) *Mataqali* Cake - Bua; and
- (6) *Mataqali* Naberei in Macuata.

Total revenue generated from harvesting this overplanted area amounted to \$560,000 and has been used by landowners for purchasing vehicles, tractors, outboard motors, building new houses, community halls (evacuation centres), maintenance of current houses, investment into financial institutions and tertiary education for landowning unit members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits to the landowners who have harvested their overplanted areas included not only additional revenue streams for their livelihood, but their harvested areas were replanted with pine and other native high value trees that can fetch greater returns in future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to mention some of the specific benefits incurred and accrued:

- (1) Two vehicles were purchased and a house for *Mataqali* Cake-Colo is in progress;
- (2) *Mataqali* Nakakoso invested \$100,000 into the Unit Trust and also purchased a vehicle;
- (3) *Mataqali* Rara was able to pay \$15,000 for school fees for Fiji School of Medicine students and also received \$40,000 for the *mataqali*;
- (4) *Mataqali* Rara was able to invest in brushcutters and chainsaw to clear their land for agricultural purpose and cash for village commitments; and
- (5) *Mataqali* Cake invested in a fibreglass boat, as well as timber for building boats, to name a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is envisaged that after the harvesting of the first crop in Vanua Levu, all overplanted areas will be utilised, hence Fiji Pine Limited will not be facing similar issues again in the harvesting of subsequent crops, similar to Viti Levu, thus fostering better relations between FPL and landowners.

Mr. Speaker Sir, these overplanted areas have been a contentious issue for decades, but this Government intends to address such issues and ensure that our people are treated fairly and compensated equitably. For the past 16 years, the previous Administration was unable to resolve this

issue. It allowed this action to continue, and Fiji Pine Limited took advantage of this, depriving landowners. It was advised that the issue was even brought to Parliament, but no action was taken.

This action shall be no more, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I repeat - no more, enough is enough! The Fiji Pine Limited, together with Government as majority shareholder, needs to be seen as a company to drive Government's mandate and the Coalition Government's mandate is to ensure that a company that thrives due to landowners treats their landowners in a fair manner, with empathy and compassion to the communities, who depend on their forests for survival.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Pine Limited has undertaken several developments in the past for the landowners and I hope that in the case of overplanted areas, they have the foresight and goodwill to continue engaging with these landowners effectively and meaningfully, and not be the cause of conflict which can be detrimental to a company which boasts compliance to the FSC standards.

The Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Forestry, is addressing this issue of good governance with the Fiji Pine Board, so as to ensure that fairness and equity is addressed at all levels and with all stakeholders, especially, resource owners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry will continue to ensure that maximum benefits are received by resource owners in the course of implementing our projects and programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to deliver this Statement. May God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka vakalevu*. "No More", thank you honourable Minister. I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, maybe not "No More" but we expect more from the honourable Minister.

(Laughter)

I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement. I wish to pay tribute to the late Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific, Professor Rajesh Chandra. We are, indeed, sad to hear of his passing. May I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that he is a proud son of Fiji, who has served the nation and the region proudly as a renowned academic and administrator, and he has left behind a legacy, Sir, not only in Fiji but for the region as well. We remember him and, of course, we express our condolence as well to his family during these difficult times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me respond to the Ministerial Statement. Again, as I have stated, maybe we expect more from the current Government, given the so many initiatives and improvements that we have made in Fiji Pine Limited over the last few years. Everyone in this august Parliament knows the history of Fiji Pine Limited and what they have been going through and it took good leadership.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It took that visionary leadership, that integrity, particularly by Government, and also getting the right people to run Fiji Pine Limited, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the fit for purpose Board of Directors, following the performance of the Board very closely.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, overplanting is undeniable. I say that again, 'overplanting is undeniable', because of the technology available back then.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What did you do about it?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the methodology to address this to benefit both, the landowners and Fiji Pine Group, is very important. Pine plantations were established more than 60 years ago. The technology to clearly demarcate boundaries was not existent in Fiji at the time then and, of course, we had these issues as well with mahogany. The availability of advanced technology in surveying is now available and it is helpful in clearly demarcating boundaries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government took on a very practical and pragmatic approach when it came to addressing overplanted pine. It is not that we did not do anything, let the honourable Minister be reminded that we took the initiative as well to resolve this issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we gave the Fiji Pine Group the first right of refusal. The key reason is because the resources used to plant the pine were public or taxpayers' funds. Fiji Pine Limited then worked with the landowners to find an amicable solution which includes ensuring that the returns to the landowners are better than what the private contractors offered. And may I remind the honourable Minister that he needs to be careful on this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I know for a fact that landowners were exploited when it comes to harvesting of their resources, particularly on pine in Vanua Levu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Pine Limited offered the best returns to the landowners, at least, during our time. It used to be operating in the red, all the decades prior to the Bainimarama and FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- That changed when the Bainimarama Government came in and ensured that the Company was not only operating profitably, but importantly that it was giving greater returns to the landowners. Apart from the lease money and stumpages, the Bainimarama Government, for the first time in the Fiji Pine industry's history, gave lease security bonus payments from 2013.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- These lease security bonus payments continue to this day and has amounted to over \$30 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Many other benefits can be given to the resource owners such as employment opportunities, education assistance, socio-economic support for community and sports projects. These are the kinds of guarantees that Fiji Pine Limited could give to landowners of lands considered to be overplanted if they allowed Fiji Pine Limited to extend its lease formally to include the overplanted areas or to harvest the overplanted pines and give high returns.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us also be considerate of environmental factors. This is very, very critical, particularly, in this age of climate consciousness. Fiji Pine Limited has achieved forest certification which includes everything that will make the industry sustainable from economic, social and environmental perspectives. Private contractors may not fully understand the minimum environmental standards required during harvesting to minimise the impact on the environment.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of replanting. That is one of the key questions that I also wish to raise with the Ministry through the Minister. Fiji is over-reliant now on plantations,

particularly on mahogany and pine. So, in terms of sustainability in the long term, how are we going to address the replanting issue? Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a key question that we need to ask.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial, and I beg Government to consider the issue of overplanting pine holistically and not from a short-sighted and short-term perspective.

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn the House for tea. But before doing so, I would like the acknowledge those sitting in the gallery in today's sitting. I have noticed the former Acting Commissioner of Police sitting there, together with Mr. Niko Raikuna from Sydney, who actually hails from Rewa. He has been in Sydney for quite some time, and he is sitting here. Thank you very much for spending some time with us.

Honourable Members, I now adjourn Parliament for tea, and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.33 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call upon the Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts, to deliver his Statement.

Great Council of Chiefs Progress Update

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to deliver my Statement on the Great Council of Chiefs' progress update. Standing before you in this august Parliament today, I am reminded of our solemn duty to steer the governance of our people with wisdom, foresight, and a deep respect for our tradition.

The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) has, for generations, not only been a cornerstone of the *iTaukei* governance, but a beacon of hope, stability and custodianship over our cherished customs and way of life.

Mr. Speaker, the inception of the GCC in 1875 marked the beginning of the governance model. It uniquely blended traditional leadership with the demands of an evolving Fiji. Yet, recently, we have witnessed a sad absence in the stewardship of the GCC. This lapse has had wide-ranging implications through our nation and across all our communities.

Mr. Speaker, the absence of this guiding institution has been felt in every village meeting, every provincial gathering and every national discourse on *iTaukei* affairs.

Mr. Speaker, governance, in its truest form, is about continuity. The seamless integration of the past with the present, to forging a future that is respectful of its roots, yet adaptive to changes that improve all communities. Governance is not just about structures and laws, it is about the spirit in which they are enacted and enforced. It is about the confidence they instil in the people they serve.

It was for this reason that the Coalition Government promised to restore the GCC. After coming into Office, Cabinet endorsed the review of the GCC in March this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to this Cabinet decision, my Ministry appointed a seven-member Review Team after an open competitive process, to review the GCC. Their work begun in April and concluded in July.

The GCC Review Team embarked on an extensive journey of consultations, dialogue and discovery, reaching every Province within our island nation. They sought the wisdom of local communities, engaging in deep consultations with Fijians from all walks of life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was a profound commitment to inclusivity. The Team ensured that the voices of Fijians, from the bustling markets of towns and cities to the villages of our islands, was heard. Their mission was to weave together the diverse array of opinions into a coherent vision for the future of the GCC.

The Team listened with respect to the hopes and concerns of the *iTaukei* people. It highly recognised that each Province holds a unique place in our cultural space. Other ethnic groups also gave their opinion. This was to ensure that they too had a part to play in this important process.

Embracing all groups of Fijians ensured that the process was all-encompassing. Through this

comprehensive engagement, the Review Team demonstrated an unwavering dedication to this process. It was not only consultative, but also culturally vibrant and deeply democratic. It is through this exercise of nationwide engagement that underscored the unity and shared purpose of their mission towards a revitalised governance structure of the GCC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the comprehensive report by the Review Team is a testament to our collective resolve to fill this governance vacuum. The recommendations of the Review Team are not merely suggestions - they form a strategic framework to guide the revitalisation and modernisation of indigenous governance structures. The recommendations are also aligned with contemporary societal values and international governance standards. They also fully safeguard Fijian heritage and the empowering of *iTaukei* communities for the generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Review Team came up with eight recommendations as follows:

- (1) The GCC be independent and politically neutral.
- (2) The GCC be re-established as a Statutory Trust under an Act of Parliament.
- (3) The iTaukei Trust Fund be moved under the proposed GCC structure and grow its financial base.
- (4) The GCC be proactive in advocating, directing and oversight of *iTaukei* interests and aspirations.
- (5) The GCC maintains and strengthens its advisory function in nation building.
- (6) The GCC champions, strongly advocating and sets strategic direction on eight thematic areas, namely:
 - (i) spiritual wellbeing and service centred;
 - (ii) good governance and good leadership;
 - (iii) economic empowerment;
 - (iv) culture, tradition, heritage and resource ownership;
 - (v) education;
 - (vi) health and wellbeing;
 - (vii) environment; and
 - (viii) climate change.
- (7) That one out of the three seats per Province is allocated for women, with provisions for observer status for ordinary citizens and youth representatives. A non-voting seat to be allocated to Christian Churches.
- (8) That an implementation team be established.

Mr. Speaker, the recommendations were endorsed by members of the GCC through the Vakaturaga Conference and the iTaukei Affairs Board. Cabinet has endorsed the recommendations in principle and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs will continue to update Cabinet on the progress.

Mr. Speaker, establishing the Statutory Trust for the GCC is a process that requires careful consideration and time. Meanwhile, as an interim arrangement, the GCC will be reinstated under the existing iTaukei Affairs Act. This will be accompanied by necessary revisions to the iTaukei Trust Fund Act to facilitate this provisional measure.

Mr. Speaker, this step will allow the reinstatement of the GCC functions while laying the groundwork for the full implementation of the recommendations of the Review Report. The process, if constantly reviewed, should produce a future where governance by the GCC is closely related with excellence, transparency and inclusivity. The future GCC with its revised statutory arrangements

will become a beacon of trust and the champion of *iTaukei* issues across the eight thematic areas it is designed to develop.

Mr. Speaker, the revised GCC is not only the custodian of our culture but a proactive participant in the modern governance landscape. It will fully uphold the principle of democracy, deeply honouring the sanctity of our tradition.

Mr. Speaker, we are at a life changing juncture, where a determined decision needs to be made to reinstate the GCC. It is critical that we now move with determination to amend the iTaukei Affairs Act - to enshrine the GCC as an institution that epitomises the very essence of good governance for all races in Fiji.

The proposed interim measure will catalyse the phased implementation of the recommendations. It will set us on a path of genuine and sustainable governance reform. In implementing this reform, we are committing to a governance model that is reflective of our values, responsive to our needs, and resilient against the tests of time.

Mr. Speaker, the GCC must stand as a lighthouse - a beacon of hope, not just for the *iTaukei*, but for all Fijians, illuminating the path towards a future rich with promise and unity. It is important that this revised GCC transcends its historical roots, evolving into a symbol of national pride and collective aspiration for all Fijians.

Its rebirth must foster a deep-seated confidence among all Fijians, assuring every citizen that it will serve as the custodian of tradition while steering the nation towards equitable progress and justice. Its role in nation-building must be evident, promoting social cohesion and championing issues that fully gel with the common aspirations of the people.

Mr. Speaker, the revised GCC can secure its place not only in the annals of history but in the hearts of the people it is meant to serve. It is to be a testament to the nation's resilience and its unwavering pursuit of a harmonious and prosperous future for all.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I call upon this Parliament to support the path laid up by the review. We need to trust the process. Our collective effort is required to breathe new life into the GCC. We will erase its memory as a relic of the past. One decision will change it into a living and thriving institution that guides us into a future of promise and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, allow me to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to every Fijian who played a role in our efforts towards the review of the Great Council of Chiefs.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to reply to the Ministerial Statement. The honourable Minister has explained the rationale behind the work that is being done to revive the disestablished GCC.

Some of the issues that he has pointed out here in terms of GCC being the body which looks after everything in relation to *iTaukei*, I must say at the outset that all of these things are enshrined in the Constitution. The Preamble of the Constitution states very specifically that the Constitution which is the supreme law of this country recognises the *iTaukei*, recognises the ownership of their land, the unique culture which includes our chiefs and our respect for our chiefs, our customs and tradition and our language.

So, in terms of the protection of things that are to do with *iTaukei*, they are enshrined in the Constitution and there are other aspects of this Constitution such as, for instance, Section 28 of the

Constitution which talks about land ownership, the sanctity of the ownership of that land. It also talks about Section 30 of the Constitution which allows for the payment of royalty, and it was only under the FijiFirst Government that for the first time that royalty was ever paid.

I am trying to point out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that these things that we are talking about, the GCC and its role and we have a long history of working together, we are being brought up under the annals of the GCC we are very familiar with. However, I am just trying to point out that these things were actually promoted upfront.

Even during our time in Government, despite without the GCC, we brought about equal distribution of leases for all the people in this country. All the time that we had GCC before, there was never equal distribution. We treated every *iTaukei* equally. This Government has now overturned that. They are saying that some *iTaukei* are more equal than others. We say, all *iTaukei* are equal, they should get equal distribution of leases. That is what I am talking about here.

We came up with a concept also of the lease money that is given to children to be kept in trust for their development. I am not too sure what is happening on that particular front. But, Mr. Speaker Sir, one of the things I am a bit worried about, I am not too sure the legality of all that is taking place. We have already had a GCC convened in Bau earlier this year. On what grounds was that a legal undertaking? I have been told that there has been an amendment, there was an *iTaukei* regulation of May of this year. But I am not too sure on what grounds that regulation has any substance if the legislation that set this thing up, has been disestablished in the first place. So, if everything that has been done so far is illegal, then all the recommendations coming after this will also be illegal.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes. The honourable Attorney-General is shaking his head, he has been making a lot of decisions that are illegal. He has brought a Bill before Parliament, the Heritage Bill, we found that it was flawed.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the Government has the right to decide that it wants to do to the Great Council of Chiefs or not but let me just quote what the honourable Prime Minister has been saying this year, 26th October, a report from FBC.

“Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka states this includes the amendment to the *iTaukei* Affairs Act to provide for the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs.”

If he is now talking about it in October, that means everything that you have done before this is all illegal. He is saying that there is still a need to change the laws. What is happening, honourable Attorney General? Your advice is wrong! What is happening here? Everything that you are now doing is illegal.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- This, I am quoting from the honourable Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is saying we have to do his administration, everything you have done so far is wrong. You have got to do something, you have got to do it legally, do it the right way. Stop abusing the laws of this country, stop abusing the people of this country, stop abusing the laws. That, Mr. Speaker, is my reply to this statement. Stop abusing it.

MR. SPEAKER.- Well, you have really ignited some fire in there.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Survey/Study on Skills Shortage (Question No. 146/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations inform Parliament whether the Ministry has undertaken any survey or study to ascertain which industry sectors are affected the most and consequently, whether any policy initiative has been put in place to address the skills shortages by the private sector?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to respond to the question asked by the honourable Alvick Maharaj and I thank him for the question. Addressing skills shortages requires multi-stakeholder approach involving collaboration among government, educational institutions, workers and employers' organisations and the whole private sector to ensure that we get the most practical solution to the problems that exist within the industries.

Mr. Speaker, the issue of skills gaps and labour mobility is a global issue, and a small economy like Fiji is hit the hardest due to our skilled workers being poached by bigger nations. This is an issue that I have profoundly discussed with the relevant stakeholders to ensure we come up with better policies and programmes.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has been working with stakeholders, like the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS) through Professor Hitendra Pillay of Queensland University of Technology and in the area of priority needs on training and development of the workforce. Professor Pillay and his team has prepared a comprehensive report on the priority areas where scholarships will be given in the next three to five years based on the labour market and industry demand.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Why do you get overseas academics, do you not have academics here in Fiji?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a copy of this report is also with the Ministry of Finance and National Planning. We have already been in discussion with the Fiji Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education, International Organisation for Migration, TSLS including our overseas development partners in working together to conduct an employment survey and skills gap and also explore new opportunities to strengthen our local institutions like National Training and Productivity Centre (NTPC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was invited to launch the TSLS Employer Connect Framework earlier this year. This Framework is to connect employers with students who are sponsored by TSLS and the recent graduates seeking employment.

Sir, TSLS assured to launch an online portal to help employers connect with students, graduates seeking employment. The online portal is ready to be launched on 15th December and go live. The Employer Connect Portal developed by the Tertiary Loans and Scholarship Service is a comprehensive job board. The key features of the Employer Connect Portal are as follows:

- (1) The job board for graduate and employers, graduates can register, create online resumes while employers can post job vacancies.

- (2) All registrations are automatically verified via FRCS TIN verification and integration.
- (3) Easy application process - the portal simplifies the application process making it easier for graduates to apply for jobs.
- (4) Efficient recruitment for employers can effortlessly shortlist candidates, scheduled interviews and hire suitable applicants.
- (5) Smart job matching - a sophisticated algorithm suggests the best job opportunities based on the applicant's skills, ensuring a good match between the job requirement and the applicants' capabilities.
- (6) Insightful reporting module - the portal includes modules for analysing the job market, skills demand and scholarship trends adding in strategic decision making.
- (7) User friendly interface with smart job cards, the easy navigation of the portal is designed to enhance user experience.
- (8) Notifications - users receive timely updates and notifications relevant to their job sets recruitment needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the framework not only assists graduates in securing employment opportunities but also expedites talent search for employers. Overall, the Employer Connect Portal by TSLS represents significant steps in connecting sponsored students with potential employers, supporting them throughout their educational and early professional journey.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Ministerial Statement?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I thank the TSLS leadership and the staff as well as the Fourth Year Software Engineering Students from USP who developed this.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Ministerial Statement.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Just wait, listen!

As you know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS has allowed over 13,000 sponsored students to work 20 hours a week by seeking approval. This is helping employers to some extent mitigate labour shortages. I thank the TSLS, again, for this initiative in helping the Government and the employers.

I will soon be meeting with potential employers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to discuss the Apprenticeship Scheme, it is all about the job market. In consultation with the TSLS Board, the Apprenticeship Scheme is a way of mitigating labour shortage and Government has a plan to incentivise it.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Listen! How are we going to incentivise this?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the hourly pay of the apprentices is \$2.97. We are now offering the employers an incentive to top it up with \$2, make it \$4.97 or pay 50 percent of the school fee through TSLS. That is the incentive we are working on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I speak, the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation together with our Ministry with the assistance from the ILO is conducting its own survey of the job market including

debt of the SMEs and that is going to assist us further in determining the areas of need where we can then offer the short-term and medium term training programmes through all the institutions that are offering this programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me also put on record in this reply the draconian laws that were imposed by the FijiFirst Government were the biggest hindrance...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ...towards a collaborative approach in determining the shortage. Let me quantify Mr. Speaker, Sir. A good survey needs data and people who are in charge of doing good data for us are the Bureau of Statistics. The Chief Statistician was terminated by them for coming up with true data.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Flabbergasted.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Employment Relations and Labour has to work in compliance with ILO Conventions, an instrument that we are signatory to. They blatantly breached all the Conventions that they were signatories to including the fundamental one and they talk about labour market survey.

(Chorus of interjections)

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

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now complying with all those and we are doing everything through consultation. Now the tri-partisan is at its best, no longer distorted and we are consulting, discussing and dialoguing at every step on everything that we do.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. The Minister has gone around the world ...

(Laughter)

... and explained 50 percent of the question. One of the questions that has been asked and may I read “which industry sectors are affected the most?” He has not even elaborated on that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, you made a very thorough reply.

HON A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, all the industries are affected.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- All the professions are affected.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- There is a shortage in every area, Sir. We have chased our people away just because of the way we treated them. Now, we are trying to retain and replace them.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker Sir, through you, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament:

- (1) how much you have paid to that overseas consultant; and
- (2) when the survey will be completed and the report presented?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- It is a new question.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the survey has been completed and the report, I have just stated, is already with the Ministry of National Planning.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- No, towards the end of your statement, you said that the survey has been carried out.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- At the expense of repeating Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said that the report has been completed and handed over, the copy is already with the Office of the Ministry of National Planning and it is being implemented.

HON. P.K BALA.- Cost?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The cost is a new question, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K BALA.- Clarification, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes.

HON. P.K BALA.- A point of clarification, Sir. At the end of his Statement he mentioned that right now the Ministry of Employment, the private sector

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- You're not the Minister.

HON. P.K BALA.- Can you answer?

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K BALA.- I am not asking you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, towards the end he said, and that is what I have asked, as to when will the survey be finished and the survey report will be presented - simple, that is what I am asking. What is so difficult, is it a new question?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- What do you want?

(Laughter)

HON. P.K BALA.- (Inaudible)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Sorry, Mr. Speaker, I could not get what he wants, if he wants a copy of the Report I will bring it over for him after lunch.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is not the point, Mr. Speaker Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, it is very simple. During the end of his Statement, he said that ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What is your point of order?

HON. P.K. BALA.- ... right now, his Ministry staff, the private sector and other stakeholders are carrying out a survey. What I have

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Can you shut up, man.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.-... what I am asking, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when will that survey be finished? That is all.

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

HON. P.K. BALA.- I am not asking for the report that is lying in his office.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Thank you.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will clarify that one Sir, with your permission.

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

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I am sorry.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The language used is not only unparliamentary but it is extremely unparliamentary. He used the word “shut up” to another honourable Member.

The word “shut up” should not be used in any Parliament and now I am asking him to withdraw “shut up”.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I withdraw that, Mr. Speaker. I am kind enough to do that, but the fact remains the same.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move on, honourable Members.

High Seas Treaty (BBNJ) - UNCLOS
(Question No. 147/2023)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate

Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs update Parliament on the signing of the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ) under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I offer the floor to the honourable Prime Minister, an issue has been raised with my Office regarding this question and the amount of information that is going to be tabled if it is going to be thorough in the way he addresses the question.

Again, it brings to mind the definition of classified information if there is such a thing as classified information under the Official Secrets Act or any other Act for that matter because the honourable Prime Minister is a bit worried as to the depth of the question and where it is heading because it might force him to divulge certain issues which are regarded as classified. But I leave that to the honourable Prime Minister for him to make that statement once more and we will leave it at that, honourable Members.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to Question No. 147 of 2023. But as you had pointed out, Sir, I have a lot of information which is useful for us in Parliament now and for those who will come after us. A lot of the substance contained in the response is of great national interest to national leaders all over the world, whether I present a summary and present and table the full response to the House, I will be led by your direction, Sir.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Fiji has always played a very important role internationally and regionally advocating for our oceans and we have carried on this from the previous government and the governments before that. All the way back to 1992 when the world met in Rio for the first Earth Summit that developed into a series of Conferences of Parties (COP) from the following year up to this year.

On 8th September, Sir, Cabinet approved the signing of the BBNJ Treaty when it was opened for signing around the United Nations General Assembly in September. The Treaty was then tabled in Parliament and referred to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. The Committee is still working on that and has not come back.

However, when the Treaty was presented for signing, Fiji was one of the first to sign and have led to be ratified by this august Parliament. It was negotiated and adopted by the UN General Assembly as an Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. That is why I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that it is of interest to us, and it will be of interest to those who will grace this Chamber in the years to come. For me, it was an honour to sign the Treaty at the signing ceremony on the margins of the United Nations Development Account (UNDA).

Fiji was one of the first countries to sign the BBNJ Treaty, just as we were the first to sign the UNCLOS in Jamaica in 1982. To fast-track notifications of the Treaty to ensure entry into force as soon as possible, 60 countries must ratify the Treaty for it to come into force. As with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea our nation's diplomat participated extensively in the negotiations for the Treaty which aims to better coordinate stakeholders in the protection of the areas beyond their national maritime boundaries called the High Seas Treaty (BBNJ).

Fiji, through our former Ambassador to the United Nations, His Excellency Satya Nandan, led the complex negotiations throughout the 1970s that led to the adoption of the Law of the Sea on behalf of Pacific Island Countries at the time that the Pacific was not well represented in the United Nations and many Pacific Islands then were still colonies. Many countries strongly opposed the 200-mile economic zone throughout those long-drawn-out negotiations.

The adoption of the UNCLOS was a mammoth step for Fiji and all Small Island States of the Pacific, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Law of the Sea effectively gave Pacific Island Countries the control of our respective 200-mile EEZ, which meant that Island Countries gained control of the fish and the seabed resources across our 200-mile zone as a result of the adoption of that historic Convention. Ambassador Satya Nandan went on to become the first Secretary-General of the International Seabed Authority and retired after serving two consecutive terms.

The Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty gives all the UN member States the opportunity to effectively conserve and sustainably manage the use of maritime resources in the high seas and we talk a lot about the protection and management of our marine resources, and this is where we are drawing that authority from. In turn, it will also help to protect marine resources within our national jurisdiction, contributing to a healthy marine environment and a stronger blue economy for the livelihoods of the people of Fiji. The High Seas Treaty is key to protecting the ocean, promote equity and fairness, tackle environmental degradation, fight climate change and prevent biodiversity loss in the high seas.

The adoption of this BBNJ Treaty is a historic achievement marking the successful end of more than a decade of multilateral negotiations. Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDs) representatives, including Fiji, participated in the BBNJ Treaty negotiations with members sharing similar priorities and positions. The objective of the BBNJ Treaty is aligned with Fiji's National Ocean Policy and other laws and policies.

The general objective of BBNJ Treaty is to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond our national jurisdiction or any national jurisdiction for the present and in the long term through effective implementation of the relevant provisions of UNCLOS. The Treaty also provides a link between the climate change and the law of the sea, a link that was not included in our UNCLOS as the impact of climate change on the marine environment was not widely studied at the time of its negotiation.

The final text, Mr. Speaker, Sir, captured Fiji and PSID's priorities, including our special circumstances as PSIDs, the role of traditional knowledge and indigenous people and local communities, fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from access to and utilisation of marine genetic resources from areas beyond national jurisdiction, as well as the need for capacity building and transfer of technology. The Leaders Communique issued at the PIF Leaders' Summit in Nadi earlier this year, highlighted the need for the finalisation of the High Seas Treaty, given it will be instrumental in managing and protecting the region's marine biodiversity.

Following our signing of the Treaty and eventual ratification, after Parliamentary approval, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will conduct the necessary consultations with relevant line Ministries to ensure relevant laws and policies are amended to facilitate the implementation of the Treaty.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Prime Minister update Parliament as to the benefits of signing this BBNJ Treaty to Fiji?

MR. SPEAKER.- I thought that has been well articulated by the honourable Prime Minister just a while ago. He dwelt at length on the BBNJ Treaty, especially with the ocean boundaries and the jurisdiction. Can we leave it at that, or do you still want to raise your question?

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits that the Treaty will bring to Fiji?

MR. SPEAKER.- This is interesting, you are raising a very interesting question regarding

Government's foreign policies and the Honourable Prime Minister has given a reply to that effect, yet you are still after more. Perhaps if the ...

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- I withdraw my question, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Rinesh Sharma, a supplementary question.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Prime Minister. I understand that collective action is required in moving this country forward, especially for the younger generations who are the future and the benefits that you have actually highlighted for this Treaty but Honourable Prime Minister, there is confusion in what terms is Fiji, a few months back, supported the Japan nuclear waste dump as well as ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What is your question?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- ... the coal industry in Australia. Now with this Treaty, you have spoken about climate change, this Treaty has a marine genetic resource mechanism component. So, can you please inform the august House by when will this materialise?

MR. SPEAKER.- I think I will not allow that question given that the honourable Prime Minister has made statements already, he has even given apologies at the recent Forum Secretariat meeting in the Cook Islands. So, I suggest we leave it at that and let us continue.

Clarification on the Inflation Level
(Question No. 148/2023)

HON. J. USAMATE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics clarify the inflation level, as the official CPI has been stated to be 4.2 percent in 2022 and below 2percent in 2023?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for his question. This is an important question because I think there is a lot of misinformation, a lot of confusion with respect to how inflation is measured so I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, the official average inflation released by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics in 2022 stood at 4.3 percent while the year and inflation for 2022 stood at 3.1 percent in December 2022. So Mr. Speaker, Sir, the average inflation from January to October is around 1.7 percent while the recent year on year inflation for October 2023 stood at 4 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the official numbers that have been released by the Bureau of Statistics which is the national office responsible for collecting and reporting statistics in Fiji but let me, Mr. Speaker, honourable Usamate will understand this because this would sound like Economics 101, but it is important for the people to understand these and the definition of inflation and how it is always being measured in Fiji. So, inflation, Sir, is the general increase in price of goods and services over a period of time and usually over a year. For example, the current 4.0 inflation rate in October 2023 means that consumer prices are four percent (4 percent) higher when compared to the year October 2022. That is what it means.

A lot of people, Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, get this wrong because the percentage increase in price is compared to the same period a year before, not compared to two years ago or five

years ago compared to the 1970s because that would be completely wrong, and some people try and do that. They said, “Alright, the price was this three years ago or five years ago or ten years ago”. Furthermore, when we say, “average inflation for the year”, it means the average ‘year on year’, on inflation for 12 months. So, for policy purposes, we generally use the ‘year on year’ inflation and not the average.

The other important point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, is that, inflation is measured by what we called the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The CPI is based on a representative basket of goods and services that is purchased by the consumer with different weights. Different items have different weights assigned to individual products and services based on its importance.

Right now, with the Bureau of Statistics, for example, the CPI base that we are using now is the 2014 base and there are 349 items in that basket. They are categorised and I want to mention those.

- Food and non-alcoholic beverages - 35 percent;
- Alcohol, tobacco and narcotics - 10 percent;
- Housing and utilities -13 percent;
- Household furnishing, clothing, footwear - 7 percent;
- Health and education - 9 percent;
- Transport - 14 percent; and
- Communication and others - 8 percent.

For example, if the food price has gone up by 8.6 percent, if you look at year on year price rise, the weight is 35 percent. So, even a slight increase in the food items will show a much bigger inflation rate, Mr. Speaker.

For example, hotels, the prices have gone up by 11.6 percent but the weight in the CPI basket for hotels and restaurants is only 2.98 percent. So, while the price rise is much bigger there, the inflation rate, if it is looked at in the basket, will be much lower.

Mr. Speaker, the point that I also want to make is that a lot of people you know focussing on the budget. Yes, there are measures in the Budget. We had three rates of VAT - zero, nine and 15. We have kept the zero-rated VAT on all the 21 food items. So, there is no tax and no VAT increase on the 21 food items. Absolutely none!

In fact, for some of them, we have reduced their duties. Mr. Speaker, I just got the list of food items, in particular, from the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC). The prices have gone down on 92 food items and there are a number of factors why the prices have gone down.

One is that before COVID or during COVID, prices had gone up by quite a bit because freight costs had gone down. So, freight costs are also coming down and those 21 food items that have zero VAT and the freight cost has come down, their prices have also gone down. It is not as if all the products or all the different brands, but if you look at milk, for example, all the prices for the different brands of milk have actually gone down.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The quality as well.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, one or two in the quality but generally, Mr. Speaker, if they care to look at this public list, they will actually find that in some cases, the same quantity, the prices have gone down. I mean, I just wanted to make this point, and they do not talk about it, Sir,

that some of the prices have actually gone down.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful to hear from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister that prices of 92 items have gone down because he has mentioned the list of 200, so we look forward to reading about that 200. The price of milk has gone down, and he forgot to mention that it used to be 500 grammes of milk, now it is 450 grammes, the price has gone down, the quantity has also gone down.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ANZ just produced a report suggesting that the projected inflation for this year might be 6 percent, but they say that that is understated, that it will be around 13 percent.

Food manufacturers are saying that the production costs have gone up between 20 percent to 30 percent. So, given this, if the projection is 6 percent and it is actually 13 percent, what will the Ministry be doing? Will there be other mitigation processes that you will need to consider in order to help the people of this country, considering the fact that you cut the taxation rate on the richest people in this country but not the poorer, and you have raised VAT in a lot of different areas?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD – That is, again, a bit of a hogwash. Let me explain this, since he raised the ANZ prediction.

The recent report, Mr. Speaker, by Dr. Kishti Sen and I have known him for years and his inflation numbers. I understand that was probably the key motivation for the question. In fact, Mr. Speaker, what Dr. Kishti Sen is saying, is that inflation in 2022 stood at 18 percent to 21 percent. They do not talk about that. Inflation in 2023 is around 13 percent. Let me state this very, very categorically, for ANZ and for everyone, that Dr. Kishti Sen is absolutely, completely wrong about that projection. I will explain why.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is quite a ridiculous suggestion from an ANZ economist and because it is going to create wrong impressions amongst the people and honourable Usamate is using that. I will explain to you why it is wrong and ANZ really, should be careful in making those kind of wild projections.

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

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am answering the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, the methodology that they used and I think he got it wrong, was based on the gross value added of the retail trade sector. And, Mr. Speaker, we all know and honourable Usamate would know that as an economist - a one-time economist, that the gross value added and expenditure as a proxy for Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation is completely incorrect! Completely incorrect! And is not used anywhere in the world to measure inflation. So, the projection that it will be 13 percent is based on the wrong method.

The simple reason is that the Gross Value Added Expenditure (GVA) and the Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure, Mr. Speaker, measure different things, and many items which are produced and sold in Fiji, included in the retail gross value added, are not part of the CPI basket.

A very simple example, Mr. Speaker, if you look at hardware prices, the building materials, prices have a separate index which is known as the building material index. That rose by 13 percent in 2022, so clearly, using that as a proxy for retail trade gross value added approach will be completely biased. They need to listen to this because they can explain to the people correctly because, otherwise, they will go and lie, Mr. Speaker.

Let me also explain, the honourable Usamate talked about the mitigation measures. Mr. Speaker, obviously, they do not talk about this because when they go out, they talk to the people, they just say, “Oh, prices have gone up!”

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Even when there is a list publicly put out by FCCC that the prices have gone down for certain items, the list is there, they actually put out the detail of the brand, Mr. Speaker, that has gone down, they do not talk about it. But let me just answer this question that he raised about mitigation.

Mr. Speaker, this Government started by recognising well before the Budget that the people were still transitioning for low income, loss of jobs, so as soon as we came in, as a Government, we allocated \$50 million. We paid \$200 each to 227,000 students in the country to get back to their school. Then when we came to the Budget, we made sure that we did not raise VAT on the 22 food items. In fact, we added basic medicine.

Mr. Speaker, we made sure that we increase the social welfare allowances by 15 percent and 25 percent. We made sure that we provided additional support and subsidies to farmers in the Agriculture Sector. We made sure that the sugarcane farmers in the history of sugarcane farmers in this country got the highest price and we put \$8 million.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Usamate talked about the fact that we reduced the tax for the rich. He forgot to mention that we actually raised the Company Tax from 20 percent to 25 percent. We made, Mr. Speaker, sure that we did not touch the threshold. We did not increase the tax for almost 70 percent to 80 percent of the people in this country who earn below \$30,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are taking one little example of Fiji Water and saying, “Oh, the tax and one irrelevant politician or as the honourable Prime Minister said, spent force, is still talking about it. They also forget that we wrote off \$650 million for 53,000 families and their children. The burden of paying that debt every month, every week, every fortnight has been lifted from them. So, all the mitigation measures that we have put in to address any increase and a lot of these prices.

They talk about the fuel price. During COVID-19, when the fuel prices went down, instead of letting the people benefit from the reduction, their Government put an additional 20 percent and it was 40 percent. When we were raising it before the election, they then reduced it to 20 percent. Now, they are talking about another 20 percent.

This is the lie and hogwash that they created when they go out there, Mr. Speaker. This is a

government which is conscious and aware, and we have put in the appropriate mitigation measures and if need be, we will put more. Plus, we have put in an additional \$45 million and every student from pre-school to Form 7 with income less than \$50,000, before the school opens next year, they will get \$200 each.

Poverty Alleviation Programme – Monitoring Mechanism
(Question No. 149/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection update Parliament on the monitoring mechanism in place on the implementation of the Poverty Alleviation Programme to ensure that Government investment covers the targeted beneficiaries?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for that question but before I answer, I would like to join the honourable Whip, as the Minister for Children, to wish all our children in Fiji a Happy World Children's Day today with the theme, "For Every Child Every Right".

In response to the question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think new Members who are here maybe hearing this for the first time - the existence of the Poverty Monitoring Unit (PMU) in the Ministry. However, as you all aware, we have changed the name of the Unit to Social Protection because according to the Coalition Government, poverty alleviation is a pervasive issue that all Ministries across Government should have their own programmes to alleviate poverty.

However, I wish to explain the monitoring mechanism in place, Mr. Speaker, that it works with the Ministry of Finance through the various line Ministries that implement the Poverty Alleviation Programmes. They gather the baseline information which includes beneficiary listing, the budget of those programmes and the performance of those programmes from a programme implementor's point of view who are in the Ministries. This baseline information is really important as it sets the platform of the PMU's Impact Assessment Survey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the years, the Unit has been monitoring, identified poverty alleviation programmes to gauge the impact of Government initiatives across the four Divisions. These assessment surveys are carried out through interviewing beneficiaries, project visitation and obtaining the views of the programme implementors. The PMU has monitored over 60 programmes from the financial year of 2016 to 2022.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the key measures are the standard of living before the assistance and after the assistance, the access to services, the support systems and income level. The findings of the survey which includes project observation and challenges shared by the interviewed beneficiaries are highlighted to the programme implementors in each Ministry to further assist them to improve delivery.

To begin with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the results of the survey and the report highlighted that Government investments over the years have had positive impacts on the interviewed beneficiaries and individual, group and community-based levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to think that the entire Parliament is united in battling poverty at all levels and so there is an improvement gauged in the last five years through responses before and after assistance was provided in their standard of living, increase in the level of income,

employment creation, expanding business and project and access to services, to name a few.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that across the Ministries there were, in the last five years, non-active projects or partially active projects. And this, Mr. Speaker, is what PMU - the information they have to assist Ministries to activate non-active projects or partially active projects that would have been budgeted for the year. So, year in year out, they can be low utilisation for projects which Ministries need to improve on.

The responses gathered from the interviewed beneficiaries are due too and this is what they have responded to –

- Lack of comprehensive feasibility studies prior to the implementation of the project - the general lack of a feasibility study whether this particular money or budget should be thrown into a project.
- Lack of technical-related training,
- Lack of monitoring the status of the project,
- Lack of ownership from the beneficiaries,
- Lack of support from amongst the group members themselves,
- Climate change risks,
- Non-availability of market,
- High cost of raw materials for projects such as speed and lack of collaboration amongst Government Ministries, who can collectively work to sustain a project. It is also noted that there are issues that are process related, such as standard operating procedures or proper policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the PMU has proposed a way forward that will assist Ministries. It will assist programme implementors to ensure project sustainability in the future such as, the need for comprehensive feasibility studies by Ministries before committing to a project, the need for project recipients themselves to take ownership and encourage working together, connecting farmers to potential markets and the possibility of cost subsidy to avoid middlemen who always reap the fruit of farmers' hard labour and strengthen network in collaboration with important stakeholders to support in the effective management of these projects.

Mr. Speaker, the Coalition Government is committed, and this was very important information we got from the PMU in order for each Ministry, now that we have put poverty alleviation across the Ministries to be able to address the challenges that were highlighted by PMU in the last five years.

Mr. Speaker, at this point, we all agree that there is space to improve and we are committed to that. The PMU is working closely with the Ministry of Finance in terms of the review of the Poverty Alleviation Eradication Strategy Framework 1999. So it is almost 14 years old and this has not been reviewed in the last 14 years. This will include the development of the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework or Integrated National Poverty Eradication that goes across the Ministries.

Also, the Unit is working in our Ministry on the establishment of the first ever National Committee on Poverty Alleviation. So, Government is committed through a National Committee from Cabinet to spearhead Government's effort in monitoring and evaluating existing programmes as well as playing a critical role in providing national direction to the Government or of Government as well as sectoral budget and planning with efficient and effective economic advice in addressing the socio-economic multi-dimensional issue of poverty embedded across all levels of society.

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- A supplementary question; can the honourable Minister also outline what the Coalition Government has committed in this year's budget to help the Ministry alleviate poverty?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Thank you, honourable Assistant Minister for the question. I think the honourable Minister of Finance has very eloquently outlined some of the immediate steps that the Coalition Government took when it came into office. But let me highlight them again, Mr. Speaker, just as a reminder to the people of what the Coalition Government coming into Parliament or into Government has taken steps to address this. As you had heard from the honourable Minister of Finance, there was the assistance for back-to-school for families of \$50 million and this is now being issued again for the next school year.

Also, Mr. Speaker, we wrote-off \$650 million student debts so that it alleviates our students from the burden of debt. It was also mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister in terms of the increase in budget all around in the social services sector, almost \$200 million increase in the National Budget of the Social Services Sector as well as the Agriculture Sector, almost doubled in budget. Of course, you have heard that the sugarcane farmers are getting the highest price ever to have received, as well as no VAT increases on the 21 items, plus medicine added as number 22. These are the commitments by the Coalition Government, and it will only increase in terms of our commitment to alleviate poverty across all Ministries, and I thank programme implementors in the Ministries who are committed to ensure that we are alleviating poverty across Government.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker Sir, but let me remind the other side of Parliament, when they took away the money for school assistance, they denied the other sectors that were allocated because that money was taken out from an allocation that already existed too. While they took away the \$600 million debt to the school, they added another \$600 million as well to the debt of the country. Sir, my simple question to the honourable Minister is, you have talked about the non-active and partially active projects. Is it possible to name a few and what are you going to do about it?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I will be happy to furnish that information to the honourable Leader of the Opposition in terms of the list which is with the Poverty Monitoring Unit, but as each Minister, as you come into office and you review your budget, you will see that there are low utilization projects that needs to be utilised more in order to alleviate poverty.

One example I give from our Ministry, in terms of the low utilization for rural pregnant mothers' programme which we discovered. This just happened to be associated with the difficulty of rural pregnant mothers coming from outer islands to come to the main cities to give birth if they face complications or issues like that. There was just not a very good, streamlined process where rural pregnant mothers could be assisted to come to the main centres and we are looking at improving that, Mr. Speaker, to assist them in terms of their transportation and also their accommodation in the main cities when they come from rural areas.

Early School Dropouts and Truancy
(Question No. 150/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on how the Ministry is addressing the problem of early school dropouts and truancy amongst primary and secondary school students?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. I would like to state that this question on school dropouts is everyone's concern and there is no quick fix solution to this particular challenge. Let me just give some background.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Office of the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, by the year 2020, there were still 260 million children who did not attend primary or secondary schools despite of the aspirations of Sustainable Goal 4 which is to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. The initial report states that without urgent action in a decade, 825 million children - half of all young people in the world, will not have the most basic skills necessary for jobs in the future. There are many reasons, Mr. Speaker Sir.

So many young people are dropping out of school or been denied quality education and these reasons vary for each country and each obstacle is huge to the children trying to overcome them. The global reasons include child labour, it can be due to poverty or forced labour amongst others, lack of funding support from home, lack of empathy by teachers who are not so welcoming, not understanding school environment, hunger, difficult journey to school, gender bias, national conflicts, teenage pregnancies, natural disasters, et cetera. Most of these reasons resonates to our education system here in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker Sir, our school dropout range has been on average 0.5 percent per year over the past eight years as recorded in the FEMIS system. These figures could vary slightly, given that not all registered schools in Fiji are captured under FEMIS, especially private-run schools. The Ministry of Education is working to initiate a process whereby all the students of Fiji need to be captured in a proper Ministry of Education system. For our secondary school dropouts, an average of 3.2 percent per year over the past eight years. A breakdown of this data can also be forwarded to the honourable Member if he so requests.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children and youth in vulnerable and disadvantaged communities are particularly at risk of educational exclusion. The recent September Education Status Report indicated that the highest number of school dropouts from primary and secondary education are of *iTaukei* male students in rural communities. What the Ministry of Education is strategising for early detection of risk of dropout is to provide intervention and this is done by the heads of schools and teachers. These are counselling hubs, and this is now widely encouraged for students and teachers, not only to address students' truant behaviour, but also concerns and needs intervention through the Fiji's Psychological Society for early detection of underlying medical or psychological issues that are often left undetected and create barriers for healthy development and growth. Continuation of the free education support to address financial barriers and high education scholarships, the Drugs and Substance Abuse Unit of the Ministry of Education based in Nasinu is engaging with schools and communities on the problems of drug use and advocating against the use and peddling of such drugs by students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I attended a Natabua High School Annual Prize-giving Ceremony, and we were briefed on how a student had been noted to miss school a lot and was eventually caught peddling drugs. The school investigated the student's background and provided counselling sessions for this young man. It was discovered the student was being coerced to sell drugs. He was offered a boarding space and was happy to accept it at the Natabua School. He has since done well in school and his behaviour has taken leaps and bounds in terms of his personality and character and shows very positive signs of becoming a well-balanced young man.

This is what the Ministry of Education is encouraging schools to do, and that is to find solutions to resolve student challenges. Sending children out of school as a disciplinary measure will not only dump the problem to another school, there is highly likelihood that because other schools

refuse to take students sent home to find another school, the student actually becomes a dropout with the possibility of soon becoming involved in crime because of neglect and rejection issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues with the hope programmes, whereby, extra support is provided to students and trainings for our teaching staff to integrate creative and innovative methods of keeping children engaged in our classrooms. We also hope to provide more training to teachers and through our teacher training colleges in how to be understanding, kind, tolerant and inspiring teachers with patience and tenacity to turn a problematic student into a success story.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there being no supplementary question, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.34 p.m.

Criteria – Great Council of Chiefs Membership
(Question No. 151/2023)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts update Parliament on the specific criteria and requirements in place that needs to be adhered to by chiefs representing any Fijian province to qualify for membership within the Great Council of Chiefs?

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. In appointing members to the Great Council of Chiefs Vakaturaga Conference this year, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs was guided by the GCC Regulation 2023. The criteria for membership remains clear. A chief need to be a *turaga iTaukei* confirmed by the iTaukei Lands and Fisheries Commission (TLFC). They must not be discharged bankrupt, in-mates or extra-mural prisoners or persons of unsound mind. Additionally, their nomination must come from their *Bose Vanua*. While members of the GCC must traditionally be confirmed in their position as *Turaga i Taukei*, we acknowledge the current high vacancy rates in chiefly titles.

For those reasons, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs adopts a flexible approach in this year's appointment. Moving forward the TLFC will work diligently to fill this vacancy. To further address this, we have initiated training programmes for future members of the GCC. The *i Sausauvou* Programme, a six-week course, is designed to prepare upcoming traditional leaders for *vanua* leadership. We successfully completed this programme in seven provinces. Despite these challenges, our criteria and training programme ensure that appointed members uphold the integrity and effectiveness of the GCC.

Transportation Issues - Mainland and Outer Islands
(Question No. 152/2023)

HON. J.N. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the measures being used to address the issues of transportation between the mainland and the outer islands?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. It is sort of a general question so I will touch on a few issues regarding maritime on the transportation, basically mainland and outer islands focusing on maritime. Of course, the Ministry and our various agencies consider safety as one of the main responsibilities.

As we may understand, the provision of inter-island shipping is categorised into two types of services - economical routes and uneconomical routes. The economical routes are profitable in nature, frequently serviced by ship operators and having a higher return in investment in terms of carriage of goods and services. These routes are not subsidised by the Government. There have been various data on this, Sir, and recently we have seen a high number of movement in terms of passenger movements. For example, in terms of the Eastern Division, covering Natovi and Levuka, there were more than 500,000 passenger movements in these ports between 2021 and 2023. Also, in the Western Division, we have seen a significant increase, given the improved performance of tourism, signifying growth as the Coalition Government came in. Cargo movement has also increased from

a million tonnes in 2021 to 2.4 million in 2022, according to the data on that.

In terms of uneconomical routes, vessel operators are provided with schedules from the Ministry, particularly in terms of Natovi and Narain Jetties. Uneconomical routes have low passenger and cargo capacity. The cost of the inter-island shipping services to uneconomical routes outweighs the investment caused for shipping owners, which is why some of these routes are covered by the Franchise Scheme which is a subsidised Scheme.

The Ministry is being allocated \$3.2 million in this financial year to subsidise private vessel operators to provide inter-island shipping services to 10 uneconomical routes in terms of the franchise. The three operators that provide at this moment are:

1. Goundar Shipping Limited;
2. Interlink Shipping Line Limited; and
3. Brighton Holdings Limited.

Currently, they are vented into a 10-year agreement and this is reviewed every five years. Some of the areas serviced include Northen Lau, Yacata, Vanuabalavu, Tuvuca and Cikobia, Yasayasa Moala route which covers Naroi, Keteira, Maluku in Moala, Qalikarua in Matuku and services Tovu and Udu in Totoya. Upper Southern Lau Route include Vanuavatu, Nayau, Lakeba, Oneata, Komo, Moce and Namuka-i-Lau.

Lomaiviti Route covers Gau – Qarani, Sawaieke, Nawaikama and Nacavanadi; and for Nairai – Lawaki, Waitoga and Nakasava in Batiki.

Of course, in Kadavu, several villages are just covered by the franchise scheme. It also provides for monthly services to other areas I have not mentioned including Rotuma; Yasawa; Beqa; Yanuca; Vatulele and other islands in the lower Southern Lau.

The franchise service is not only limited to those ports, but we have encouraged service providers to service nearby Ports where the franchise company is on the route.

In terms of some figures from 2018 to 2023 the franchise successfully serviced and transported an accumulated total of 81,790 passenger movements averaging 6,800 passenger movements per year.

In terms of moving forward, we are currently reviewing the Franchise Agreement given the increased demands and also of course from the shipping operator side, the increased operational cost related to operating the ships.

In other reviews, we are looking at digitalising the whole process so that it is better managed in terms of the schedules monitoring and of course a performance review of the whole franchise.

In terms of not only the economic side but also how cost effective it is, whether we are budgeting enough or are we doing enough to service our maritime communities.

In addition, in response to that question we also have the Government Shipping Services. This comes under the Ministry with various vessels under its operation.

He asked the general question, so I am giving a general answer. So, if you had asked about Government Shipping Service (GSS) or franchise I would have just focused on that area. It is also

good for information. I know you were away for a while, so when you came back, I thought I would explain it, just to update you.

Mr. Speaker, the GSS fleet needs to be modernised and upgraded. I know under the last Government, they did one or two purchases but the rest of the fleet is aging so we are looking at not only an increased budget but also we are currently talking to various development partners in terms of the replacement for that. In addition, we need to run our transport system more effectively as we face climate change issues and move away from fossil fuels, that is another challenge which we are looking into.

The last point, there has been a lot of things I understand, and in terms of the whole shipping fleet, some of our maritime communities are complaining about the cost of freight and at the moment, Fiji Consumer Competition Commission is currently undertaking a market study for the domestic shipping industry, not only on the rates and charges but also on the industry at large, including market players, infrastructure, regulations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, I am glad to see that the honourable Minister has continued all the work that we did, because nothing that he has mentioned is obviously new, it is all news. We are invested in GSS ships, specialised ships, specialised boats. We also came up with the idea of the 10-year licence to make sure and to encourage people that run these ships to invest in new boats, so there is nothing new. I look forward to the time, Honourable Minister when you come up with your own ideas.

One question, one of the things that makes the bus industry, people that use bus services as well because they are licensed. When there are times for you to go, you have to go. If you do not go, you can be penalised. This is not in place for boats. So, I am just wondering whether there has been any discussion, because a lot of the complaints about the islands that when the boat is supposed to come and it did not come, and then sometimes the boat owners for their own reasons, they decide not to do it, they say 'I am going to stop my ships going'.

This licensing where you have to go at this particular time, if you do not, there could be a penalty. Is there any consideration? That is a question, it has got a question mark at the end of licensing.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You know, you cannot operate in Fiji like you are operating in New Zealand and Australia because we have to have some leeway for social considerations. That is what the Coalition Government is about unlike the Fiji First Government, they apply the law and punish. That is different from us. At the moment I mentioned we are already reviewing - the performance review of the franchise. Yes, definitely, recently we had a case where there were threats to the boat owner, so they did not want to turn up. There have been issues like that, but there have been reasons provided by the boat owners.

On the compliance, MSAF is currently responsible for that and they are working diligently on the compliance issues which cover that type of operations and they are there at the beginning of the trip to look at the compliance issues before the trip and during and after. So they do separate reports to GSS and to MSAF, if there is a breach then they are addressed through those two mechanisms.

MR. SPEAKER.- A supplementary question, honourable Minister, on the route licensing.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- All those issues will be accumulated and will depend on whether it is renewed or not. So that is how we will deal with it.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Sir, the honourable Minister stated that we, the FijiFirst Government, did a few purchases. Let me remind him that when we came, there was only the *Dausoko*, *Kaunitoni* and *Vatulawa*. So, the rest of the Government fleet was purchased through this Government, when we were in Government. But the question is, we are in the disaster period Sir, he talked about the Government fleet and what we would like to know is, what percentage of the Government fleet is operational that can do the job for the Minister if needed, when we have a disaster.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- In terms of the availability, I have worked closely with the Minister for Rural Development and Disaster Management that the fleet is available 100 percent in terms of the need as determined by the National Disaster Management Office and we have streamlined that process. He does not have to ask me all the time and the other issue about the percentage of availability, I do not have the figures right now, I can get back to you on that.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is on the transport on mainland. What measures are being taken to address the issue of transportation faced by students in Lautoka area, in particular the following – Viseisei, Saweni, Vaivai, Raviravi and other nearby areas. That is because students have to walk miles to reach to and from school and this is because of irregular bus service since August 2023.

HON. K.K. LAL.- What is the Minister doing?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I heard them saying very poor. Yes, it is very poor for them not to coordinate their questions or understanding of the question because if you read the question, it says “between the mainland and the outer islands”. There is nothing there which says, ‘within the mainland’, can you re-pose that as a new question.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- *Areh*, the question says, between mainland and outer islands. Do you understand what “between” means? Between means point A and B, that is that, not within. Between is different.

MR. SPEAKER.- Too many *areh* going on.

Indian Government Grant on 100-Bed Hospital
(Question No. 153/2023)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on the development of the 100-bed hospital via the Indian Government Grant?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for her question. I am glad to give an update on the development of the 100-bed hospital via the Indian Government Grant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government of India has reaffirmed its commitment to the Pacific region with major projects planned for the 14 countries of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). This was announced when India’s Prime Minister, honourable Sir Narendra Modi, delivered his keynote address at the 3rd FIPIC Summit in Papua New Guinea where he outlined prospects for regional assistance and increased collaboration between India and the region.

Sir, as part of an action plan to strengthen the Indo-Pacific Island Countries partnership, India will construct a 100-bed regional super speciality hospital for Fiji. The offer by the Government of India to build the 100-bed super speciality cardio hospital in Fiji was also discussed in February 2023 during the visit to India by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Professor B.C. Prasad, and also subsequently by the visit of the Indian Minister for External Affairs, honourable Jaishankar when he visited earlier on.

With the hospital, the Government of India is going to provide equipment and human resources for the operations of the hospital for a period of time. At the moment, Sir, the land has been identified at Nasinu and the team from India is expected to arrive soon to begin the actual work. In terms of the commencement of the project, it will start most likely mid-next year, Mr. Speaker. That in itself is a nutshell of the current development of the proposed 100-bed speciality Hospital given to the country by the Government of India.

Written Questions

Education Summit – List of Outcomes (Question No.154/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament with a full costing and a list of the outcomes of the Education Summit that was recently organized in Nadi?

¹HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby table my response as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

(Response handed to Secretary-General)

Women for Agriculture Programme (Question No. 155/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways provide Parliament details on how many women are registered under the Women for Agriculture Programme as follows, their:

- (a) age group;
- (b) farming sector they come under; and
- (c) performance status?

²HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now table the answer to the Written Question.

(Response handed to Secretary-General)

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 154/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Education under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure I.

² Reply to Written Question No. 155/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure II.

Update - Senior Citizens Allowance
(Question No.156/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection inform Parliament on the number of senior citizens currently receiving an allowance of \$125 and \$115 respectively?

³HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I table my response under Standing Order 45(3).

(Response handed to Secretary-General)

Complaints Received – LTA 582 Text Free Platform
(Question No. 157/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the following –

- (a) Details of the number of complaints received through the LTA 582 text free platform; and
- (b) The breakdown on the nature of complaints and the number of issues already addressed from the period January to September 2023?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the ⁴question and I am tabling my answer to the Written Question.

(Response handed to Secretary-General)

Road Fatalities – January to October 2023
(Question No.158/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on the number of road accident fatalities from January 2023 until 31st October, 2023?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the ⁵written question and I hereby table my response.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you offering the written response? I cannot get what you have said, honourable Minister.

³ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 156/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure III.

⁴ Reply to Written Question No. 157/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure IV.

⁵ Reply to Written Question No. 158/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport under Standing Order 45(3) is appended as Annexure V.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I have provided the written response.

(Response handed to the Secretary-General)

2014-2022 Graduates of MBBS Programme
(Question No. 159/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament as to how many intakes have graduated from the MBBS Programme that were sponsored by Toppers Scholarship from 2014 to 2022 –

- (a) how many were absorbed into the Civil Service and are currently serving in the country;
- (b) how many of them have migrated overseas; and
- (c) how many have joined the private sector or have gone into private practice?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, I will table my response at a later Sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of question time for both, oral and written questions. Also, there are no Bills to be debated.

REVIEW REPORT – ITAUKEI TRUST FUND BOARD 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the iTaukei Trust Fund Board 2020 Annual Report which was tabled on 30th March, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, the iTaukei Trust Fund Board supports and promotes the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as guided by the principles enshrined in the iTaukei Trust Fund Act. The core objective of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board is to help develop the management, leadership and entrepreneurial skills of the indigenous Fijians and Rotumans.

Mr. Speaker, in 2020, the global pandemic significantly impacted returns on the Fund's investment. For instance, the tourism sector was severely hit which affected, particularly, the Raddison Blu Resort. The Fund diversified its investment portfolio, including offshore investments which soften the gravity of COVID-19 impact on its financial performances and return on investments.

The engagement of Mercer Investment of Australia to review its investment portfolio for the key objective was to review and to ensure the diversification of the Fund's assets with managed risks and the delivery of inconsistent returns on investment.

Mr. Speaker, the Fund's car park space at the corner of Saint Fort and Stewart Street continue to deliver constant revenue annually. Tenants were given a rental concession of 25 percent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, for the year under review, the Fund's net assets decreased from \$325 million to \$265 million. The Fund plans to diversify its revenue streams and is optimistic for a

better year ahead of recoveries by building resilience based on its diversified investment portfolio and staff to bring smarter value to its stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee is yet to receive the substantive response on the Standing Committee Report, as according to Standing Order 121(6)(b), which requires the agency to provide its responses within 21 days of receiving the report.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floors is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list of speakers that have been provided by the honourable Whips:

- (1) Honourable N.T. Tuinaceva;
- (2) Hon. Minister for iTaukei Affairs
- (3) Honourable Koroilavesau
- (4) Hon. J. Usamate
- (5) Honourable M.S.N. Kamikamica

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before Parliament. The Report summarises the core objectives of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board to help develop the management, leadership and entrepreneurial skills of the indigenous Fijians and Rotumans.

Mr. Speaker Sir, under item 3.0 on the key findings, the Report highlighted some projects funded by iTTFB. I am thankful with this brilliant idea of establishing a body like iTTFB some years ago, having part of its function to what I observed as powerful programmes that focus on the iTaukei cultural norms, traditions, language, kinship, traditional relationship and customs in general.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recommendations 4.1 says that the Sauvaki ni Vanua Programme be conducted in other Provinces. The Report simply put it as training on good governance and leadership for the *i sausau vou*. From the introduction of the programme in 2017 by the FijiFirst Government, it has slowly progressed across other Provinces as we have heard from the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs.

Mr. Speaker Sir, it is only when one takes a very close look on the objectives and contents of the training to really appreciate why we need to develop our traditional leaders.

In the *Sauvaki ni Vanua* Programme there are six components:

- (1) *Rara Tabu Vakavanua* – the *vanua* decision making forum.
- (2) *Na i Tovo ni Veiliutaki Vakavanua* – the *vanua* ethos and values and leadership approach.
- (3) *Vakasavui ni Lewa Vakavanua* – the *vanua* communication strategies, using of traditional ties to disseminate information within the *vanua*.
- (4) *Na Cakacaka ni Lewa Vakavanua* – the implementation of the decision through the *solesolevaki*.
- (5) *Vakayagataki Vakavuku ni Yaubula* – the sustainable management of resources.
- (6) *Yadrayadravaki* which touches on monitoring and awareness.

Mr. Speaker, traditional leadership plays as a vital role in our community development, resilience and sustainability. The truth is, in my view, we often relegate traditional leadership to only things of the *Vanua* - cultural practices, ritual, including religion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is this fallacy that these issues and leadership about them cannot have any bearing on a country's economic and sustainable development, but I want to say that this is not

the case anymore. Worldwide, the importance of traditional knowledge and leadership is increasingly accepted in the highest forums such as the United Nations. I want to say that understanding this traditional leadership plays a vital role in our nation's wellbeing is wisdom.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, traditional leadership safeguards indigenous knowledge and identity. I want to make a point here, Sir, that I am not only referring to the iTaukei identity, but our multi-ethnic mix have their respective traditional ethnic indigenous identities. So, our multi-ethnic identities and knowledge systems are as diverse as they are strong.

Their knowledge system strengthens their communities and can potentially give strength to others. The most important message I would like to share, if communities are strong and resilient. The sum of multitude strong and resilient communities will result in having a resilient nation. So, it makes sense to empower our traditional leadership to use traditional knowledge and contextual solutions to build strong resilient communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is critical to understand that these traditional and indigenous leadership is like an anchor that keeps communities and the people rooted in resilience and strength to cope with the rapid change of time, for example, the climate change. They have done this a long time back, before there was any formal education around. They know changes and seasons and the kind of preparation that is needed, knowing who they are and using their indigenous knowledge to adapt and cope with climate change and its strength.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are things that contribute to our nation's well-being instead of just enabling conditions that keeping people depend on Government to provide for their challenges, traditional leadership can lead their communities to a place of peace and finding solutions to their challenges. Traditional leaderships can help their communities navigate social changes, for example, our digitally transformed global world, the good and the bad it brings, its overwhelming changes are transforming the way communities and even family functions communicate or interact.

The other examples are drug issues, the street dwelling problems we are currently facing, domestic violence, poverty and child trafficking or even pornographic matters. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I am trying to say is that the idea of trained traditional leaders like the *sauvaki ni vanua*, is a positive move for building resilient iTaukei communities. Sir, I want to challenge the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs to take cue and develop similar programmes for the traditional leaders of the various multi-ethnic groups under his Ministry. Six years ago, the FijiFirst Government started with the iTaukei communities and it is producing great results according to the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide a brief on the iTaukei Trust Fund Board 2020 Annual Report that was tabled before the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on 30th March this year. I take this time to thank the Committee for their time in scrutinising the Board's 2020 Annual Report and providing us with their recommendations, which I am obligated to reply upon today. The year in review was enormously remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic. It took the world by surprise. Our normalcy was disrupted and restrictions were placed. The operations of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board were no exception to these disruptions. The global pandemic affected most of the Board's planned projects. There was a dramatic decline on the return of our investment, in particular the Radisson Blu Resort in Nadi.

To comply with the national safety measures proposed, the Trust Fund was able to continue its operations using hybrid method of operations both in office and virtually, all these efforts were taken into account to minimise disruptions and to extend our services as far as reasonably possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted in the Report, three online projects were launched in the same period. These projects proved to be successful to this day. In the same period, the iTaukei Trust Fund Board signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the strategic partner Sunshine and AMP Manufacturing Limited with the aim to establish a culture, art and commercial centre. The location of this project was to be in Vuda which is also known as the place where our forefathers first settled in when arriving into Fiji.

The status of the project was that basic outline drawing and concept had been completed, a feasibility study was in progress however, COVID-19 had prevented the completion of the study. Mr. Speaker, I regret to inform this august House that for that same reason of COVID-19 and its prolonged delay which disrupted business operations, the strategic partner has pulled out from the project like many other business who are affected by COVID-19, the strategic partner have decided to take stock and consolidate its operations and focus more on their main business which is manufacturing. In the meantime, the Trust Fund will engage in search for an alternative site.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as has alluded earlier I am here to report on the recommendation put forth by the Committee. First the *i Sauvaki ni Vanua* Programme be conducted in other province. As of April this year I am pleased to inform this August House that the *i Sauvaki ni Vanua* Programme has been conducted in over seven province around the country with the province of Naitasiri held this year. Mr. Speaker, the program has proven to be a success in other seven provinces and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board is working towards facilitating the same program in the remainder of the provinces around Fiji.

Secondly, the appointment of fund manager: the appointment of fund manager was on hold due to COVID-19 in 2020, however with the uplift of restriction and opening of borders, a board delegation visited Australia in April of this year to scout for a fund manager. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to report that a fund manager has been appointed in August this year.

The third additional training program to be expanded to other provinces, the iTaukei Trust Fund Board through its entrepreneurship framework continue to offer training on areas such as entrepreneurship, business continuity, basic cooperative and social leadership training in province around the country. The board has also embarked in the developing of the resource owners entrepreneurship framework on that will better connect resource owners from productions to the market.

Strategic alliance is being encouraged under the framework to ensure Product Development meets the expectations of the market and greater return flow back to the resource owners to help improve their wellbeing. Despite the restrictions, the team was able to train 100 community members representative from Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. The team will continue to deliver this training to assist iTaukei and Rotumans.

Fourth, increasing on revenue and exploring other opportunities for investing. All investment opportunities are assessed with high level of due diligence to ensure the opportunities are in line with the investment policy of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board. Mr. Speaker, the team at the Trust Fund continue to actively seek viable investment opportunities, both locally and overseas for sustainable future for both iTaukei and Rotuma. I wish to assure Parliament that the iTaukei Trust Fund Board has continued to reach out to the most remote places in our beloved country providing awareness, initiating connecting and assisting resource owners in their bid to improve the livelihood of both the *iTaukei* and Rotumans.

At the conclusion of this Annual Report, I must thank the board, management and staff of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board for the programmes and projects carried out during the year 2020. Despite

the pandemic, the team conducted their role diligently in achieving key mandated outlay and subsequent results are noted to this day. I express my sincere gratitude to Parliament for this opportunity to provide a reply on the tabling of the iTaukei Trust Fund Board Annual Report 2020. Mr. Speaker, I support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, may I remind each and every one of us that the Business Committee in its meeting last Friday had agreed that given the amount of reports coming into this august Parliament for this sitting and it being the last sitting, to have about five reports in a day and if it is possible to allow two speakers from each side before the Right of Reply is given again to the Chairperson of the Committee who is introducing the motion.

However, it was also decided that the discretion be left with the honourable Speaker to decide on that. So far, I have noticed that the Opposition has given three speakers and the Government has got two. So, I will knuckle down on that one and allow only two from each side so we can cover all five in a day to complete all the reports that are supposed to be coming back from the Committees to Parliament. I hope each and every one of us will bear with that as time is of the essence here, it is quite important. Otherwise, we will not finish or we will go late right into the night to complete this. So, for that, the second speaker from the Opposition would be honourable Koroilavesau before I will ask the Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Kamikamica to finish off from the Government side and the Right of Reply given to the mover of the motion. I hope you will bear with us on that.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your indulgence, I would like to pass my time to honourable Usamate who is supposed to sum up from our side.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this particular Report shows the kind of work that is being done by the iTaukei Trust Fund Board in all things to do with the *iTaukei* because some of the times we sit in Parliament now and it seems that absolutely nothing was done during all those times. That seems to have been the rhetoric, but you see all the programme that are here, the *i Sauvaki ni Vanua* programme.

I am glad to see that the honourable Minister has identified that seven provinces have carried out this successfully, though I would like to know what successful means because when you evaluate the training programme, there are various levels at which it is done. I am glad to see also that the appointment of the Fund Manager, that is progressing quite well. There are a number of things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my five minutes. One of the concerns that I have, I notice that the iTaukei Trust Fund now has a new programme called “*Na Solesau*”. I am not too sure whether it was in place in 2020 but I think this is a critical programme for us.

A lot of young *iTaukei* cannot speak the language. They speak in English all the time. It is very important that the funds that are available in order to preserve our authenticity as *iTaukei*, our young need to know the language. And if this particular programme, *Na Solesau* that I have been going through. I have used some of the YouTube, it is very important that this be propagated widely because in a lot of families now, people are not using the language correctly. That is the thing I wanted to highlight, in addition to all the recommendations that are here.

The other thing, this issue of social leadership training – this is very important. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministers will now know, when you go for *talanoa* sessions, some of our *iTaukei* people have lost that ability to try and do things for themselves, I think in a lot of sense, they ask for everything.

I remember once I commissioned a water project, at the end of the project they said, “Thank you Minister but can you replace the small taps, the \$5 taps?” So, hopefully in this social leadership training, as the honourable Minister said, what he said, I think I should also tell you that. They have

lost that capacity to be able to pull people together so they can do things for their own benefit and then Government can come in and help them. I think this is very important.

So, this social leadership training, a lot of our traditional leadership seem to have lost it. They seem to have lost that capacity to build and bring people together. I think this is very important for us because at the end of the day, when you say, if there is a good organisation, there is a good village, there is a good *yasana*, it is because the leadership that is there. So, the social leadership training, Mr. Speaker is something that is very important. One good development that I have seen from the Trust Fund has been the development of the *Tabua* Shop. It is providing a big relief to people that need *tabua*, and I hope that the Ministry can continue to do that.

The last thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want the Trust Fund to do well, it is very important they always have fit for purpose directors because I notice in Government now, they seem to be allocating directorships according to provincial basis. It is very important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to put the right people in charge of all these organisations. Put fit for purpose directors who know what to do, know what to focus on and do not allocate them on the basis of provinces.

MR. SPEAKER.- It brings me to the point honourable Members, what are we addressing here - leadership or traditional leadership? That is for you to decide. Quite different.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a contribution to the Review Report for the *iTaukei* Trust Fund Board Annual Report. As part of my contribution, I just thought I would very quickly address some of the utterances by honourable Usamate. Firstly, this morning, he mentioned that GCC is not being required because the Constitution covered it. Sometimes I wonder whether the other side was actually tone-deaf. If you ask every single chief in Fiji, Sir, they will tell you, they wanted the GCC back; every single chief in Fiji that I have spoken to. I am not sure, sometimes the other side seem to be in another planet.

Secondly, he talked about some of the discussions that the current GCC being illegal. Let us all accept, the GCC has never required a piece of legislation to be legal. We are formalising it as a structure within Government eventually Mr. Speaker, they know that, but to stand here and say that the GCC is illegal, is incorrect. He should withdraw that statement, Sir.

Another one I wanted to quickly address, Mr. Speaker, was, he talked about concern for language. What hypocrisy, Mr. Speaker! He said, “we are concerned about the people losing their language - the youth.” They were the cause of it, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- In this Chamber, Sir, what language was spoken to until we got to Parliament? What language?

HON. J. USAMATE.- What language are you speaking?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Only one language! The *iTaukei* language was not spoken here, nor the Hindi language. Shame on you guys! Absolute shame! So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my small contribution in that regard is, to the people of Fiji, we have said that we were going to make changes in this country for the new Fiji and it is happening.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Absolute shame!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my small contribution in that regard is, to the people of Fiji, we have said that we were going to make changes in this country for the new Fiji and it is happening.

Sir, with confining the rest of my contribution, I would just like to very quickly talk about the iTaukei Trust Fund and particularly some of the great programmes it is undertaking, and the commitment from my Ministry particularly to continue working with them in terms of the area of promoting entrepreneurial spirit to communities and the *vanua*.

Both the Ministry for Trade and the iTaukei Trust Fund Board have been working very closely in this regard. Through the MSME Fiji Unit and the Department of Co-operative Business, we are conducting business training across Fiji and I have to say that there is a heightened level of interest in the formation of co-operatives across our great land. That is something that we are really pushing hard in terms of trying to empower everyone in our country.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Microwave.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Some of the examples as one was mentioned in the Report was the *Tikina* of Matailobau Women's Co-operative which is based in Nairukuruku, Naitasiri. The training there was aimed at entrepreneurial skills with the women *Tikina* of Matailobau in Naitasiri and with these newfound skills, they have been able to open their business hub which houses a grocery store, a hair salon, a sewing room and an area for screen printing. Services that used to be very difficult for the women of Matailobau to access, they could only access in urban areas are now accessible in Matailobau. These types of platforms are now available and will also enable artistic and innovative thinkers in Matailobau to continue to flourish.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that the iTaukei Trust Fund Board too has also been an advocate for *solesolevaki* or the idea of co-operation which we are well aware of. The co-operative model, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know sits well within that particular *solesolevaki* model and my Ministry will continue to support the iTaukei Trust Fund Board and also the Ministry for iTaukei Affairs in order to ensure that we encourage this training across the country.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to support the Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank all honourable Members who contributed to the motion before Parliament. I have no further comments, Sir.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT – PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI 2017-2018 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji 2017-2018 Annual Report which was tabled on 3rd April, 2023.

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

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, as a member moving the motion, I rise to make a short contribution on the Report of the Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee on the review of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji Annual Report 2017–2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Committee Report was tabled in April of this year, and I wish to proceed directly to reiterating some of the main areas of discussion that are captured in the Report. Sir, to begin with, there were few pertinent issues identified by the Committee which include that:

- (1) Parliament has made tremendous strides in contributing to the achievement of certain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) specifically SDG 5 and SDG10.
- (2) Parliament has been provided great support by the Department and donor partners such as the UNDP which have led to numerous noteworthy undertakings.
- (3) The working conditions for Members of Parliament and staff have been given priority which has allowed for Parliament to function well and carried out its mandate.
- (4) The welfare of Members of Parliament and staff be given ample emphasis so as to maintain a safe work environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these issues were addressed and clarified by the Department and any information on this can be retrieved from the Committee's Report. I will go straight into the recommendations, Mr. Speaker, put forth by the Committee for the consideration of Parliament and these includes:

- (1) The Committee commends the Department for its noteworthy achievement on SDG 5 and recommends that Parliament continues with its efforts in promoting gender equality and empowerment.
- (2) The Committee commends the Department for its achievement on SDG 10 in terms of physical accessibility to the Parliament complex and numerous initiatives introduced for expanding accessibility to Parliament business such as the sign language interpreters, however the Committee recommends the following to further support SDG 10, that:
 - (a) Parliament considers improving accessibility to the Complex by fast tracking the installation of aids such as direction signs and other means of accessibility which cater for persons who have mobility issues; and
 - (b) Parliament further considers introducing other initiatives such as *Hansard* being published in the different vernacular languages and also in braille.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee believes that these would promote inclusivity in our society especially those who take interest in our Parliament sessions. Furthermore, the Committee recommends that a clear demarcation of the Parliament precinct is considered by Parliament in order to facilitate easier accessibility to the Parliament precinct which also contributes to the achievement of SDG 10. The Committee further recommends the expeditious digitisation of all parliamentary *Hansard*. In terms of the parliamentary space and infrastructure, the Committee recommends that space should be provided for separate offices for the various parties represented in Parliament.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommends that the awareness and public engagement programmes for Parliament like the "Meet the Speaker" and "Parliament Bus" be revamped to include all Members of Parliament. This, Mr. Speaker, would open up more

opportunities for Members of Parliament in engaging with the public and raise awareness on matters pertaining to the standard procedures and matters of this august Parliament.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity and urge the honourable Members of this august Parliament to take note of the contents of the Committees Report and show support for the motion that is before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have also received a list of speakers from the honourable Whips. To lead off the batting, honourable Maharaj will lead off, that is to be followed by the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ketan Lal and then the Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Professor Prasad.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to give a short contribution on the Review of Parliament of the Republic of Fiji and before I give my remarks on the Report itself, I hope you are not holding a yellow card because we are discussing the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji and I hope to not be the first one to receive the card.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are three arms of the State - the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. All three arms have different roles, and it is very important that independence is actually maintained whenever we are talking about these three Arms of the State.

Mr. Speaker, I hope this is just a rumour that is floating around on social media about the Executive's interference in the Judiciary. As I said, I just hope that it is a rumour and there is no fact to it but if there is any fact that Executive Ministers are interfering in the Judicial system then it is a very sad day for Fiji. Very poor.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will be consulting the video analyst on the ...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes.

Mr. Speaker, on the same note now let me come to Parliament. The third arm which is the Legislature Department, if there is any kind of interference or is the Parliament totally independent? We need to maintain and ensure that Parliament is independent at all times.

Mr. Speaker, this report is quite old: 2017-2018 so I would like to actually speak on some of the current issues that we actually faced and the way of how we can improve. I will be basically talking on my nine years of experience in this Parliament and the first recommendation that talks about gender equality, it was good to see when this Parliament was reinstated, we had a Speaker, a Secretary-General and a Deputy Secretary-General who were females and that was a very good way to actually portray that gender equality and most of the management roles were handled by females in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, the role of the Parliament as a legislator needs to be justified and whether we are justifying by reducing the number of weeks by four weeks of Parliament Sitting this year, is again something that can be questioned because that can actually reduce the performance of the Parliament and us being the scrutinisers as Members of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, we were offered laptops which crashed within weeks and these were new laptops, who procured it, what kind of quality assurance was there. It did not just happen to one Member, it happened to a couple of Members. Most of the Members refused to use these new bulky laptops. Is it okay for us to carry the bulky stuff with us?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, for one year the House Committee is yet to convene to look after the welfare of the Members. When is that going to happen, Mr. Speaker - a big question mark.

Mr. Speaker, the Induction Programme happened after nine months. As I said we hear these rumours about Ministers interfering with the Judiciary - interference here interference there. While we had the Induction Programme for the MPs we need to understand that there are Members on the other side who are Ministers for the first time, they need to be made aware what their roles and responsibilities are as Ministers. Some of them think that they can do anything to everything if they are the Minister.

(Laughter)

Very poor Mr. Speaker. Maybe Parliament can take a lead role for the Induction of Ministers and Assistant Ministers on the other side.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, in terms of Business Cards, some of us are yet to receive our Business Cards. We are Members of Parliament and when we go around, people ask us for our Business Cards, we offer them our telephone numbers because we do not have a business card given by the Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, on the Standing Order Review Committee, we agreed in one of the Sittings a few months ago that we will be convening, and we will allow the Standing Order Review Committee to sit to actually review the submission handed in by Opposition, that is yet to happen.

Mr. Speaker, we are still waiting for the issue that we have raised with regards to the Membership of the Committees. We are still waiting for a response. It is almost a year now that we have requested for a clarification, and I do not know why the Secretary-General to Parliament's Office is not giving a legal opinion on what we had requested to your office so that you can give a written report back to us.

I believe my time is over, Mr. Speaker, I have a few more issues over here which I intend to discuss with you personally, Sir.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to commend the Committee for their Report and also to support your decision that we should try and table as many of these Reports as possible and also discipline ourselves to contributing within the time allocated to us. That, Mr. Speaker Sir, is based on a very dangerous assumption that we have all read the Report. Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to go straight to the recommendations of the Committee.

In reviewing the Report, they have made these recommendations. One that they noted the achievements that have been made on Sustainable Development Goal 5, which is the efforts in promoting gender equality and empowerment, something that all parties represented here in Parliament I believe now, note and will promote.

The Committee also commend the department for its achievements in SDG 10, in terms of physical accessibility and I commend the work that has already been done. When you come to my age you need those rails and I commend Parliament for the work that has already been taken and the

improvements. We will put in the same request for the lift on the other side of the New Wing of Parliament House which some time works and many times does not.

The Committee, Mr. Speaker Sir, concluded by saying that they are happy with what our civil servants and members of our staff have done in the preparation of the Report in the submission and this Report was made for the period before COVID and later report that reporting on the period after COVID 19 provide a different stark reality of the time we go through. We commend the Report and the review by our Committee and I also support this Report before us.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, I share the same sentiments as honourable Maharaj, that I do not get the first yellow card or red card since this is the last Parliament Sitting. I know this Report is an old one Sir, and in light of these findings I would like to support the recommendations put forth by the Standing Committee.

We should continue with our efforts to promote gender equality and empowerment in building on the Department's achievements on SDG 5, and we should expedite the measures to improve accessibility to the Parliament Complex including the installation of direction signs and other aids for persons with disability issues. We should also consider demarcating the Parliament precinct to facilitate easier accessibility thereby contributing to SDG 10. We should also privatize the digitalization of Parliament *Hansard* for improved accessibility and transparency which I understand is currently happening, but Mr Speaker Sir, we are still receiving papers for our daily Parliament debates and I think we should start digitalizing our everyday documents here as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Prime Minister also highlighted, the separate office that we also require for Parties and representatives of Parliament, should also provide enhanced efficiency of our parliamentary processes. We should revamp our awareness and public engaging programmes, such as "Meet the Speaker and Parliament Bus" to ensure inclusivity and wider public engagement.

Before I end my contribution, I would like to express my disappointment that I am only given five minutes to contribute to this motion, and also that our voices as Members of Parliament, as legislators and as representatives of the people are being suppressed, and the number of weeks have been reduced all over this year.

We understand this is a new Government and they are still learning, but it does not mean that the voices of people are suppressed. People have been raising issues to us and we were very excited to come last week and raise many issues after *Diwali* (a happy belated *Diwali* to everybody). I had raised all these issues but unfortunately, we had to reduce those issues to one week.

Just a few days ago, we were informed that our contributions will now be reduced to 5 minutes only, that is not enough, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We represent hundreds and thousands of people in Fiji and 5 minutes per report is not enough. I think it is important that we are here to serve the people and not to be served. As legislators, we need to understand that we are here as 100 percent legislators. I understand, on the other side, they are playing dual roles, as legislators and as executive Members. But, here, when we are in Parliament, we are representing people as legislators, and I think it is important that we need to ensure that every voice is heard here and more time is given to each honourable Member to express themselves.

Just adding on to what honourable Maharaj said about this laptop, this is the laptop that was given to us, it is bulky. I may be able to handle it, but some honourable Members will not be able to. It is bulky, and you cannot fit it in a laptop bag with its extra wires given. This costs somewhere around more than \$5,000 and it does not work, and it did not work for a couple of months when it

was given to us with regular breakdowns, so I am not sure if this technology worth \$5,000 is even worth it, and we are using taxpayers' money.

I did raise the issue with the Secretary-General, asking her to give us something more efficient: iPads which were already given to Members during the 2014 Parliament as well, the former honourable Opposition Members might know. I think the former Opposition Members, they were also given much easier or accessible technologies such as the touchscreen laptops to do their work more efficiently. At the same time, I think we need to respect that this is the people's Chamber and we are here to discuss about the people's issues.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank you for those straight shooting comments you have made and I only hope that you were around when we were also given those laptops.

(Laughter)

In so far as suppression of your time to speak, I think I have made myself very clear as to the decision made by the Business Committee in how we could accommodate these volumes of reports coming back to this august Parliament. We just have to cut the coat according to the cloth available and say "Okay, two speakers from each side to speak before the Right of Reply is given." I think we should be fair in doing that. I now offer the floor to the Deputy Prime Minister, the honourable Professor Prasad.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me begin by thanking you, Sir, because it is a breath of fresh air in this Parliament, and what we have seen over the last 10 months since we have been sitting in this Parliament. I was actually listening to honourable Maharaj. He was a bit more diplomatic, but then when I heard honourable Ketan Lal, it was an insult, not only to your high office, but an insult, a direct insult to his leader who is the Leader of the Opposition who was in the Business Committee where we agreed, Mr. Speaker, on how we are going to debate and discuss this Report.

HON. K.K. LAL.- I address everyone. Everyone has the right to speak. This is the People's Chamber.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- But let me, Mr. Speaker, also commend you for the independence, the confidence, the trust that you have placed in this Parliament and the way we have conducted ourselves as government, the resources that we have provided to the Opposition, they have forgotten, of course, he was not there but Honourable Maharaj, diplomatic as he was, forgot that in this very Chamber, when they were sitting this side, Mr. Speaker.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Why are you complaining?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Now, they are complaining like little kids but when they were on this side. They bullied, ...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hogwash. Talk to Mr. Speaker.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... they punched an honourable Member. Their Prime Minister punched an Opposition Member outside this Chamber, within the precincts of this Chamber and yet, Mr. Speaker, all these people yelling from the other side were sitting there and voted to suspend him for six months, that is what they did. As opposed to that the people of this country, Mr. Speaker, know the many things that have changed in the last ten years in this country. There is freedom, there is confidence.

They, on the other side, even today, Mr. Speaker, will not admit it but under your leadership, under the leadership ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- ... not under your leadership. Nobody wants to listen to you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... of the honourable Prime Minister and us in government in Parliament they actually feel free. They have entangled themselves out of the shackles and the dictatorship of two-men rule ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... in this Parliament Mr. Speaker. They could not open their mouth properly, Mr. Speaker, and that is the difference in this Parliament today.

HON. K.K. LAL.- No one wants to listen to you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What we are saying, Sir you have all the recommendations that are there, you have shown leadership, you have addressed a number of issues. The government on its part, has provided adequate resources to the Parliament to provide all those resources.

The Parliament Mr. Speaker, Sir, under section 37(a) of the Financial Management Act, ideally, we would like the Parliament to still go further and have the independence of procurement, have the independence of managing their own budget. Right now, although there is a one-line budget, the Parliament is free, independent and determine how it is going to use that budget. That is what we have provided unlike what they were doing Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Parliament and you know Sir, too. You were also a victim of their dictatorship and I think, Mr. Speaker they should thank this government, the Honourable Prime Minister, they should thank you, Sir, and not come here and insult you, Sir, because ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- He understands, do not worry.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... what you have shown in the last nine months is absolute independence and freedom of the Parliament. You have shown bipartisanship, Honourable Koya is not here with Honourable Gavoka, that is a bipartisan participation.

The honourable Leader of the Opposition is going to be part of the delegation to 2023 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference COP28. You could never ever imagine in the last eight years...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Never, ever!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...that Bainimarama and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum would ever agree to take an Opposition Member anywhere. That is the independence of Parliament, that is bipartisanship, that is the freedom, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have provided in this Parliament.

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

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker. He is referring to people who are not here. Why are you referring to people who are not here and do not have the opportunity to defend themselves? Stop making up stories. Talk about the people who are here. You focus on the issue, tell the truth and stop lying.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, honourable Usamate does not even recognise that Bainimarama was the Prime Minister. That is why he is saying that I cannot even talk about it.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You rubbishing him he is not here!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am not rubbishing him. I am just reminding you what you are doing. I am just telling you that you were part of it.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Government side, we assure Parliament, your good self, and all honourable Members on the other side that we will provide adequate resources to Parliament - to honourable Members whether they are in Opposition or Government, all the adequate resources for them to conduct their role as Members of Parliament, including the grants for Political Parties and the allowances for them to conduct their business and their activities as Members of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights to speak in reply.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Firstly, I thank those honourable Members who have spoken in regards to the Report that is before Parliament. Secondly, I thank the honourable Members of the Committee.

On that note, there are no further comments from my side.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, for housekeeping purposes and for the purposes of complying with Standing Orders with respect to sitting time, I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move his suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

Under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) be suspended to allow Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the debate has been quite lively. You just to have very thick skin to sit in and receive all the flak coming from all sides.

On that note, I would like to adjourn Parliament for afternoon tea. We will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.05 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.47 p.m.

REVIEW REPORT – FIJI AIRPORTS 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the review of the 2020 Fiji Airports Annual Report which was tabled on 3rd April, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airports is responsible for the operation of 15 public airports in the Fiji Islands. These include:

- two international airports – Nadi International Airport, Fiji’s main international gateway, and Nausori Airport, Fiji’s domestic hub; and
- 13 outer island airports.

Fiji Airports also provides Air Traffic Management in the Nadi Flight Information Region. This includes the airspace of Fiji, Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Kiribati and Vanuatu – covering an area of 6 million square kilometres.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airports is a fully owned Government Commercial Company that was established in April 1999 into a separate commercial and regulatory authority under the Public Enterprises Act 1996.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airports’ establishment was part of an overall Government policy to ensure that Government entities were more efficient, productive and accountable, and more focussed on commercial activities and profitability. The outer island airports are operated as part of Fiji Airports’ social obligation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2020, Fiji Airports recorded a net operating profit before tax of \$1.6 million. Fiji Airports declared a total of \$175 million in dividend over the last six years from 2014 to 2019. Despite this unprecedented dividend payout, the total shareholder equity stood at \$488.6 million.

The operation of Fiji Airports was severely affected by the prolonged COVID-19 global economic crisis, which negatively affected its revenue. However, it remained steadfast to emerge strong as an organisation, having necessarily gained insights, developed strategies and prudently restructured its business model for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee is yet to receive a substantive response on the Standing Committee Report, as according to Standing Orders 121(6)(b), which requires the agency to provide the response within 21 days of receiving the report.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, but doing so, just like in the previous motions, I have a list from the Whips on those who will participate in the debate, as follows:

- (1) Hon. A.A. Maharaj;
- (2) Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;

- (3) Hon. V. Lal; and
- (4) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises, and Communications.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to give my short contribution with regards to the review of the Fiji Airports 2020 Annual Report. Before I do so, I would like to congratulate the newly appointed CEO of Fiji Airports Limited, Mr. Mesake Nawari, who is taking the lead role in gearing up Fiji Airports from where it was left by the former CEO, the late Mr. Faiz Khan. We should thank the late Mr. Khan for his contribution towards the leadership of Fiji Airports.

Mr. Speaker, one thing that we have actually seen, if we look at the record, that in 2006, Airports Fiji Limited used to make an annual profit of around \$0.5 million. In 2019, Airports Fiji Limited made a record profit of close to \$80 million and they almost made a 50 percent payout in dividend.

I know what the Government side will actually oppose is increasing the rental of real estates and the tenants that we were able to actually get that much of profit. But we should thank Mr. Khan for uplifting the face of Nadi Airport itself. That is one of the only airports in Fiji that is making profit. The rest of the 13 airports, including Nausori Airport, are basically social or corporate responsibility of Fiji Airports Limited.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the one side while Fiji Airports Limited pays dividend to the Government, on the other side, they also have a social responsibility of running these 13 airports which are basically non-profitable. So, it is kind of double-dipping and I urge the Government to consider giving something back to Fiji Airports Limited so that they can run those 13 other non-profitable airports that they are managing at this point in time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason why we see Nadi International Airport making profit is because the planes are landing at Nadi Airport. They pay substantial amount of fees to land and taxi at the Airport, so that is one of the reasons.

Mr. Speaker, back in 2020, there were a lot of calls to actually sell those planes that are landing at Nadi Airport. Had we actually taken that decision to sell all these Fiji Airways planes, Mr Speaker, what would we have done with these airports now that we know that tourism is one of the biggest factor why our economy has boomed back to where it is today. Sometimes strong decisions were taken, we had to take those decision and we should thank the FirstFirst Government ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... for not listening to the Opposition back then and sending the planes that they were actually requesting. Unfortunately, honourable Gavoka is not here who was playing the lead role in telling the Government to sell the planes.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Very poor.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The state of the airport, Mr. Speaker, as I said, Nadi Airport has been commended by a lot of visitors coming to Fiji...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ... that arriving at Nadi Airport is one of the best airports that they can actually flew in to the South Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that same note I would like to request there was a banner in Labasa Terminal back in 2020 to upgrade the terminal. When we used to fly to Labasa Airport we used to see that banner ever since this Government has come into picture they have pulled down that particular banner and I do not know where the banner is. Please look into it, people of Labasa and Vanua Levu ...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Refurbishment.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, it is almost a year now, should have done it by now. Do not say you are going to do it after we have actually raised this in Parliament”. It was a very good design, Mr. Speaker, the terminal and while I am talking about the terminal that also brings me to this particular point about Northern Airways. I believe that is the only Airways that is actually owned by a local. The charges of Northern Airways is quite substantial. At the moment it is only flying once to Labasa. Initially it used to be two trips - morning and afternoon. He is giving a quite good competition to Fiji Link as well in providing a very good fare for the citizens to fly from Suva to Labasa and back to Suva as well. They should be given some kind of rebate in terms of what they are actually paying in fees to Airports Fiji Limited, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so that we can see that a local owner of a local airways company....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are trying to destroy it?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No, no, we never did.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Your former boss did.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- What have you been doing for a year now - still waiting?

(Chorus of interjection)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are some of the things that I would like to mention about Airports Fiji Limited, they are doing a wonderful job and I wish the former Management and the current Management as well for the future endeavours. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to this motion that we debate the Review Report of Fiji Airports 2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report was quite comprehensive, it gave us the responsibilities and also the ups and downs of their performance. This report is about the Year 2020.

I will go straight to the recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because noting all those ups and downs, the reasons and also giving themselves time to look at why they have been subjected to the vagaries of business and international travel, they have come up with certain resolutions on how to perform better into the future.

The Committee has made recommendations after studying the Report and the first recommendation is that the Committee recommends that Fiji Airports embark on and prioritise the commercial development of its real estate portfolio to maximise its non-aeronautical revenue stream. From the Government’s point of view, the recommendation is noted. Fiji Airports current non-aeronautical revenue is mainly from concessions and rental revenue from officers, warehouses, land leases and housing and right now they are going to diversify their revenue sources and venture into real estate and alternative revenue streams to mitigate future disruptions in the aviation industry.

In view of that, Fiji Airports will conduct a development plan assessment of potential land development opportunities associated with the land in Namaka. My last visit to them, I was shown the map and all the potential areas for development which all look very promising. The proposed development plan is expected to spend over the next 25 years and will engage consultants to assist in the development of a master plan for land development and progress plan.

The second recommendation that the Committee made as part of its social responsibility, the Government considers providing support to Fiji Airports for the implementation of its Capital Work Programme for Outer Island Airports. The Committee recommendation is noted, a major component of Fiji Airports' Capital Work Programme is the maintenance of outer island airports and in that regard, Fiji Airports has also developed an outer island infrastructure plan.

In recent years, Fiji Airports has been internally financing its capital works including outer island maintenance. In terms of major capital projects, they have secured \$40 million loan from ANZ and the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP). Government supports the Fiji Airports efforts in maintaining the outer island airport and has assisted Fiji Airports in facilitating international funding in terms of financing and grants towards the outer island airports development. As a result of discussions between Government and the World Bank in relation to the 10-year tourism projects in Vanua Levu, we have plans to upgrade airport facilities in Labasa and Savusavu.

Recommendation three is noted, which is to prepare a contingency plan to account for possible future events or circumstances and all the recommendations as contained in the Report from our Social Affairs Committee are noted by the Government and we promise to follow through with that.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak on the Review of the Fiji Airports Annual Report 2020 and I also would like to thank the Committee for the Report.

With the support of Fiji Airports, Fiji was one of the fastest growing economies after the devastating effects of COVID-19. Infact, some of the Opposition Members then were not in favour of buying more planes and some had made TikTok mocking the decision to buy airbuses.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. LAL.- Through these planes a lot of tourists came to Fiji and our economy started moving towards normalcy. It was the foresight of the FijiFirst Government that has led to the development of the Fiji Airports to where it is today.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. LAL.- Sir, prior to the pandemic, Nadi International Airport handled an average of 41 international flights per day. With no flights, the airports' revenue evaporated and with no passengers coming through arrival and departure terminals, airports' tenants were not able to meet their lease obligations.

Aviation and travel industries were the greatest corporate casualties of the pandemic. There were massive job losses, pay cuts and reduced working hours worldwide. Fiji Airports capacity to remain a viable business entity to meets its operational expenses and credit obligations, put the company under immense financial pressure. Despite the momentous challenges faced during

COVID-19, Fiji Airports was able to progress and commission new state of the art Air Traffic Management System in April 2021.

In November 2020, Fiji Airports achieved a milestone by obtaining a Certification of Airport Health Accreditation from the Airports Council International. Sir, COVID-19 pandemic caused the total international passenger movement to shrink by 81 percent, not only that but it also affected the balance sheet and resulted in the worst financial performance. During the pandemic, Fiji Airports continued to provide employment to our people through a management restructure and staff reduction. Nadi is also the only airport in the South Pacific to have received Level 3 Airport Carbon Accreditation.

In 2020, the two major projects including the Nausori Runway Upgrade and Extension Project and the Nadi Offgates Apron Project had commence before the pandemic and had continued based on its needs and the downturn in aircraft movement. In November 2021, the Nausori International Airport Runway Project had reached completion despite COVID-19's impact. The Nausori Runway Upgrade and Extension Project has enhanced the Boeing 737 aircraft movements in and out of Nausori. This has allowed airlines to carry more passengers on the Boeing 737 compared to previous load restrictions. This runway upgrade has changed international travel in and out of Nausori for the greater good of the Deuba/Nausori corridor. It allows for the further extension of the runway to cater for Airbus A350 movements.

Mr Speaker, Sir, all these developments took place when the FijiFirst Government was in place. The FijiFirst Government always worked towards improving its services and making sure these services reached the wider communities.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. LAL.- With this Coalition Government, you cannot say the same, as in the past 11 months, we have not seen any real progress but a lot of contradictions - on one hand saying something and the other hand doing the opposite. One such example, the Government is talking about protecting our oceans and marine resources, but the honourable Prime Minister goes ahead and allows Japan to dump its nuclear waste in the ocean.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. LAL.- Sir, I can give many such examples but I will leave that to my colleagues. There are many questions regarding the charter flight to Israel. Who is going to bear the cost of this charter flight? There are many unanswered questions about this issue? Sir, a lot of questions were also asked about the so called conspiracy theory about Waqavuka. I hope that is all clarified now after a statement was issued on this. With these words, Sir, I once again thank the Committee for its recommendations so that further improvements could be done to better the services of Fiji Airports.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you honourable Virendra Lal for your wonderful counter-punches.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to contribute to the debate on the Review of the Fiji Airports 2020 Annual Report and I noticed that the FijiFirst Government always gets preoccupied itself aggrandisement or self-praise. Sometimes they speak about the wrong company, Sir. We are talking about Fiji Airports, they were talking about Fiji Airways; I am not sure how that is related.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they praise themselves for what the performance of Fiji Airports, but I think you have to stack back a bit in history and the credit for that sits with the honourable Prime Minister

because he started the reform process of Fiji Airports. Before it was altogether, the regulatory arm and the commercial arm, the honourable Prime Minister had the vision to separate it and what we have today is, not from them, the origin came from this side of Parliament. So, I thought I just remind them of that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The other thing that I would like to thank them for is, they almost sold every other asset in Fiji.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That side of Parliament.

The only asset that was left is Fiji Airports; everything else they have sold. So, I have to thank them for that. Trust me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will not sell our assets as wilfully as the other side of Parliament has done. The third one was, this was just more sort of a sharing from my side. They lament that there is only one profitable part of Fiji Airports and there are 12 other airports that are non-profitable. That is a fact of life in our country. There is only one point of entry and so, there is close subsidisation that happens. It is a responsibility that we have to bear as part of delivering services to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thought I also join the chorus in congratulating the new CEO, Mr. Mesake Nawari. A lot of us know him on a personal basis. He is a man of calibre, and I know that the other side of Parliament is asking about what we are going to do. Give him time, he will impress you all. He is making plans to develop the airport in Labasa, that is why the signage may come down in Labasa. He is making plans for Nadi, as we all know, we are getting more aircrafts into Nadi. We need 5,000 rooms, therefore, we will need a bigger airport. These are the plans on this side of Parliament that Mesake will bring at the appropriate time.

In terms of the Report itself, you have to congratulate Fiji Airports and its management at that time. They were facing a very difficult time in 2020, and both sides of Parliament congratulate them for managing themselves through a very difficult time in our country. We also note with encouragement that during that time, they actually managed to get accreditation as well in terms of carbon accreditation, and I understand that they are still the only airport in the South Pacific that has such accreditation. We also would like to congratulate them for that.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two other points in the Report that I thought I would highlight. The first one was, there was the recommendation about the expansion of non-aeronautical revenue, that was developed even when I used to be in aviation. The first steps were made during the time of the honourable Prime Minister, and I can see that with the expansion that is required at the airport, there will be opportunity for more non-aeronautical revenue with the expanded airport as with the other outer islands.

This is more of an accounting matter, the other side of Parliament is always good at window dressing and for a long time they used to debate that the government grants needed to be recognised as capital rather than revenue. I am pleased to note that good sense has prevailed, and it is now recorded as revenue as it should be for proper accounting purposes. Once again, I congratulate the former and current management of Fiji Airports and wish them well in the expansion plans that they have, and I support the Report before Parliament.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Members who have contributed to the motion before Parliament. I have no further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

**REVIEW REPORT - MINISTRY OF EMPLOYMENT, PRODUCTIVITY
AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS 2016-2018 ANNUAL REPORT**

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations 2016 to 2018 Annual Report which was tabled on 4th April, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations is responsible for upholding the constitutional right of every Fijian to economic participation, adjust minimum wage, humane treatment in the workplace and proper working conditions. The Ministry promotes and advances the rights of workers and employers and administers and enforces the Employment Relations Act of 2007, Health and Safety at Work Act of 1997 and the National Employment Centre Act of 2009.

Mr. Speaker, in the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 financial years, the Ministry of Employment and Industrial Relations continue to support workplaces to become compliant, productive and inclusive in response to important legislative change, complex issues and growing community expectations.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry's internal processes were changed and upgraded for re-certification to ISO 9001 of 2015 international standards in growing an efficient and effective work culture. The Ministry significantly expanded its service offerings through the launch of its customer services centre ensuring that more workers and businesses understood their entitlements and obligations. There was also easier access of services for the general public as well as the implementation of Fiji's first ever National Employment Policy aimed at reducing unemployment.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee acknowledges the continued work of the tripartite partners and strive to find solutions to achieve decent work and employment growth in Fiji. The Committee is yet to receive the substantive response on the Standing Committee Report as according to Standing Order 121(6)(b) which requires the agency to provide a response within 21 days of receiving the report.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have a list of speakers provided by the honourable Whips that are before me. The debate will be led by honourable Bala, then followed by the honourable Minister for Labour, before honourable Rinesh Sharma takes the floor and will be rounded off by the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute briefly to the motion that is before us and at the outset, I would like to thank the Committee and in particular the Chairperson and the

support staff. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is after lunch and as promised by the honourable Minister during the debate in the morning, he will hand in the report after lunch which I still have not received. So I hope by the end of the session my good friend will hand over that report to me.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have said, I will be very brief but this is my experience and observation. Before there were less Ministerial overseas trips to go and meet the seasonal workers and there were less issues. Now there are more Ministerial visits. Basically, every month there is a Ministerial visit with more issues and I am wondering what is really happening.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Neglect the issues and do your job.

HON. P.K. BALA.- From morning, I was very quiet. I felt sorry for the honourable Minister, but she is trying to create some situations, but I will still leave that at that. I feel sorry for you anyway.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in recent weeks there was a post from the workers who are under this Programme that the Ministerial visits are not well-coordinated.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Very hogwash.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I request my good friend next time may be after two weeks he will go again, to visit the seasonal workers, to have a coordinated programme so that we do not have such problems here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us go into the Report itself on the key findings. It talks about the minimum wage rate and I would like to ask, as to when will there be a review of the national minimum wage rate as promised by the Government because there are a lot of discussions going on in regards to this, even this Report is connected to the Minimum Wage Rate and I urge Government to please look into it because the prices of goods are going up day by day but the wages and salaries are stuck at one place. I do not know for what reason the salaries for the honourable Ministers, backbenchers have been differed but if that was tabled, that would have been a suicide case for the Government, honestly.

Let me tell you, whatever we may say here, people are suffering and we need to pay some of them Sir. We can come here and say a lot of things, Mr. Speak, Sir, but what is happening actually on the ground, that is something that we need to address and I hope the honourable Minister will take note of this and may be in his response, he will give us some programmes and the timelines when this exercise will take place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these few comments I would like to thank you and the Committee as a whole, and I support the motion that is before us.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I rise to contribute to the debate on the Report. Firstly, I would like to convey my appreciation and commend the Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for the Review of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry is mandated to pursue the attainment of Distant Employment Standards through the Promotion of the Employment Opportunities, Provision of a Healthy and Safe Work Environments, Fair Employment Conditions, Good Faith Employment Relations and Productive Workplaces.

Mr. Speaker, before I actually go any further just let me briefly respond to honourable Bala's comment on the visitation. I will have a Ministerial Statement on the visitation and that is when he will get all the answers after that, Mr. Speaker, coming on Wednesday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this man never ever visited the workers, so what does he know about their plight?

HON. P.K. BALA.- A Point of order, Mr. Speaker. The honourable Minister for Employment is misleading this Honourable House. I did visit, go and check the records in your office, you will find and if your staff are not giving that to you, that is not my problem, it is your staff's problem.

Honourable Pio, I have a lot of respect for you but I have seen you jumping up and down, there must be something wrong with you again..

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, the last three years I have visited the workers and the last three years nobody has visited them since they have been there since 2021.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I have visited as a former Minister, Semi Koroilavesau visited as a former Minister. We all visited them. Standing in this House and saying that, is a complete lie, Sir. He has to withdraw that statement.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, they have a difficulty in understanding. I said the last three years, Mr. Speaker, let me continue. This report is for the period 2016-2017 and 2017-2018.

Sir, this is part of the eight-year period of talk down, dictatorial rule. The labour laws have been amended unilaterally to deny workers their fundamental rights, deny workers decent work and a decent living, livelihood. As reported earlier, Mr. Speaker, we are now in the process of reviewing and amending all those laws to ensure that we restore all those rights that were forcefully taken away.

Mr. Speaker, this week there is a Bill coming to this Parliament, to this House, to be tabled by the Honourable Attorney General tomorrow. To begin with, by correcting the Essential National Industries List to the EIA 2007 listing, in compliance with the ILO advice listing. I will be very much interested to see how the Opposition is going to react to that, Mr Speaker, whether they want to restore those rights or they still are opposed to restoring the fundamental rights of these people. We are also going to include in the Bill the six months provisions for reporting individual grievances which is now discriminatory.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry has noted the recommendations highlighted by the Committee for improvement on the anomalies and the financial statements and all audits highlighted from the basic audits being qualified. Mr. Speaker, major issues that we have corrected are already in place in the auditing, and our auditing is no longer receiving qualified reporting.

Mr. Speaker, we inherited a Ministry which had 25 percent vacant positions that needed to be filled. We have now filled, out of the 45 that were vacant, 25 and the other 20 have been advertised and they are in the process of being filled. With all these in place, we are hoping to be able to carry out our mandate better than what it used to be.

Mr. Speaker, Sir during that period there were also 53 resignations. That is 26.5 percent of the total workforce in the Ministry. That is why, and the reason of course, Mr Speaker is obvious, the unilaterally imposed ...

HON. J. USUMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- contractual appointments, Mr. Speaker ...

HON. J. USUMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... and of course the fear of turning 55 tomorrow, if you spoke up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also reorganised the Tripartite Boards according to ILO 144 and employers and workers are now being fully consulted and the Employment Relations Advisory Board (ERAB) is in place. Collective bargaining is now well and alive, workers and employers are coming together. Workers now have the right to strike ballots, several unions have taken strike ballots and we have then intervened and brought them to the table for free discussions, dialogue in good faith and we have been able to resolve all those differences that were existing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is hurting, I know it is hurting. You failed to do what you are supposed to do and it is hurting now.

HON. P.K. BALA.- (Inaudible)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Good faith was totally missing in their days. There was nothing like good faith. The State being the worst employer, and it cascaded down to those other employers who wanted to take advantage and they did take advantage by treating workers unfairly in those days and all that is now a thing of the past.

I must also thank the honourable Attorney-General for assisting us with the drafting and the Solicitor-General for drafting the Bill and also thanking the International Labour Organisation (ILO) for providing us with a legal drafter who is sitting in our Office now assisting us with the entire ERA which will be completed by January this year and tabled in the next Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the OHS, draft Plant Regulation Bill and the draft Amendment Right Code, the draft Sawmill Regulations are currently under development in consultation with the OHS Board and it has been completed and it is going to be presented soon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the four-year ban on villages that the Committee has brought to our attention where people absconded when they were sent abroad to work. Actually, it began in 2019 and now that has lapsed so there is no more a ban and I can assure you Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current approach of providing the support to the challenges that workers are faced with when they are out there in that alien environment, through our interventions, is going to see that that is going to be reduced, so we will not need that kind of a ban anymore because of the proactive action that we are taking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all in all, all the comments of the Committee have been taken on board by our Ministry and we are addressing that. With that brief intervention, I thank you for the opportunity.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the Review of the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relation Report 2016–2017, 2017–2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the findings that were conducted then: 3,724 labour inspections were done from August 1st, 2017 to July 31st, 2018 on the new minimum wage rate. Those who did not comply were penalised and we also note from the report that the Ministry conducted public consultations around Fiji on the Government's revised Seasonal Work Recruitment and Selection criteria.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to remind the honourable Minister for Employment that he, together with Felix Anthony was part of the Fiji team to avoid Fiji from being suspended by the ILO in 2015 and 2016, yet he goes on that nothing was done again and again.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can talk about economic development, sustainability, connectivity, resilience, infrastructure, climate adaptation, mitigation - big fancy words. But in order for this to be implemented for our people in our country there needs to be a sense of belonging, a sense of equality where people feel that equal opportunities are available in Fiji because it is up to every individual to work towards a better life and this is what the FijiFirst Government was about addressing the root issue which of course they are far away from.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming to 2023 we witnessed the gradual corrosion of Fiji's Constitutional integrity and economic development affecting employment and productivity in these last 11 months. They have achieved nothing, employment is very difficult since the Coalition Government has come to power, businesses are struggling since the Coalition Government has come to power. Of course, the people are struggling with the high cost of living. In simple terms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government does not know, they do not know minimum of eight years are spent by some of them in Opposition and where are the alternative solutions to take the people forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is a very good example of bad governance. We have a Government here that cannot even reshuffle their Ministers properly. How do you expect them to improve employment and productivity in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, in the last 11 months, have shown that the women who hold employment at the national office are shown the backbenchers and one of the Ministers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact covered by Fijivillage in the media, she went on record for advocating for women participation in Municipal Elections and even at national office. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact I asked honourable Sashi Kiran, did she utter a single word in support of a female colleague when she was removed as a Leader of the Government in Parliament not a single word, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is the women empowerment, Mr. Speaker Sir, where you sit in Parliament ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- ... plays a significant role, right now no one is at the first bench which is very, very obvious.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Go and ask your leader what they did to former honourable Member Mereseini Vuniwaqa.

(Chorus of interjections)

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- ... honourable Professor Biman Prasad talks about fresh air, a breath of fresh air. Are you kidding me, breathe of fresh air. You have choked the people of Fiji with a high Cost of Living and you are talking about fresh air.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, people are jobless, businesses are cashless because this Coalition Government is clueless. They fail to make one decision, stick to their decision and if it backfires, all they say is “I am sorry”. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a washing machine mentality, they go this way and then they go that way. Indian communities they have a saying “*bina pendi ke lota*” unstable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have no direction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude I support the findings of the Committee and I thank the Committee for fulfilling their mandate to review this Report.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make my contribution to the Report that was tabled here in Parliament on 4th April, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Social Affairs have made several recommendations and those who had spoken before me have alluded or highlighted a number of those recommendations which I wish to add, just a few.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the first recommendation was based on the challenge faced by the National Employment Centre (NEC) to register and track citizens who are unemployed to engage them in a range of activities as part of its selection process. In this regard, improving the NEC’s ability to register and also to track unemployed citizens can be achieved by imposing several of these measures or strategies which the Government is now going into. Modernising the registration system which includes upgrading the registration process by implementing a renewed digital system and developing an online platform or mobile applications that allows individuals to register very easily.

Database management – Creation of a comprehensive database to store citizens’ information securely but also making them accessible, authorised personnel within the NEC framework to track the progress, job searchers, job matching and engagement of those who have applied to various activities.

Regular Outreach and Communication – We also picked up on feedback mechanism, that is important to allow citizens who have enrolled with NEC and provide them with the experience and suggestions from NEC and what services are available.

Collaboration and Partnership – This is also highlighted in the Report and that makes it important for forging of partnership and education institutions, NGOs and private sectors so that the range of opportunities expands that their available to citizens of Fiji.

Training and Support for the NEC staff is also important, Mr. Speaker, and so Government will now ensure that the staff of the National Employment Centre are adequately trained in using the registration system that is there and improving the database to ensure that they also themselves are within par of what is needed to launch this programme and take it to the next level.

Regular Evaluation and Adaptation – There is a requirement for periodic review of the registration and tracking process to identify areas where there might be bottlenecks so that we can release them and allow for a free flow of the process there at the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, on the issue that have been highlighted by the honourable Minister with regard to the review of the four-year ban imposed on villagers of absconding seasonal workers. I am not sure how and why that rule was, I am very glad that it is now being thrown out of the window. It is a very poorly developed practice, very poorly developed policy where everybody else gets to pay for

the indiscretion of one.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- The villagers are not in Government. These were policies that were put in place by the previous Government which flies in the face of every workers rights that you would probably have known in your time as Minister, honourable Bala.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- It has been taken away.

So, what has been done is, in addition to ensuring that people who go overseas to work, they must also have clear expectation of what is required of them instead of punishing people who are still trying to get themselves to work overseas, we provide clear expectations to those who are about to go into these jobs. Allowing competitive compensation and also benefits is also one of the areas which the Government is now going to put more emphasis into and also providing positive work environment. There is going to be regular check-ins and feedback. The reason why the Minister has to go and check on those work programmes overseas is to ensure that if there are any places where difficulties have been encountered by those who work overseas, that they are arrested as quickly as they are found and that they be addressed as well.

Exit interviews is also something that we also want to do is to ensure that workers who have returned from tour of duties overseas provide opportunities for the NEC to learn of what were the problems or the difficulties that they encountered when they were there. What we will do is then improve on the programme, uncover systematic issues, areas of disaffection and then improve with the programme.

Bonds have also been suggested that Government needs to have a bond system like they use for scholarships which can be tailor-made to make sure that workers complete their tour of duties overseas also return home in time with their money. I support the motion that is before Parliament, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you for your indulgence.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU:- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank all honourable Members who have contributed to the motion before Parliament and I have no further comments.

MR. SPEAKER:- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT - FIJIAN COMPETITION AND CONSUMER COMMISSION 2018-2019 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Fijian Competition and Consumer

Commission 2018 -2019 Annual Report which was tabled on 4th April, 2023.

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

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee tabled its Report of the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) 2018–2019 earlier this year in April. While deliberating, the Committee agreed that FCCC plays a significant role in ensuring that consumers in Fiji are protected from unfair and unethical market practices. It works with a vision to create a dynamic and competitive market in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee was pleased to note the array of information that was available in the 2018– 019 Annual Report which helped during our deliberations. The FCCC had submitted a written submission which provided the Committee with a better understanding of the operations during the period under review.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while reading through the analysis that was provided by FCCC, the Committee noted that the number of rentals complaints increased by 58 percent and recommended that further consultations are held with all stakeholders. It further noted that the three worst industries in terms of complaints received included automotive, construction and white goods with automotive comprising of 57 percent and made recommendations of the same. The 2018-2019 period was when FCCC had launched its 5-year strategic plan which was from the 2018–2023, given the important roles played by FCCC. The Committee looks forward to future reporting against its yearly business plan.

MR. SPEAKER:- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. Before offering the floor, I would like to inform you honourable Members that we have a list of speakers identified by the Whips that are here:

- (1) Hon. P.D. Kumar;
- (2) Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications; and
- (3) Hon. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Development, National Planning & Statistics.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to speak on this motion before Parliament. We all know the importance of FCCC in the marketplace. The crucial role of FCCC is promoting a fair and efficient market by addressing the imbalance that exists between businesses and also between consumers and businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FCCC was established by folding up three institutions which were: Fair Trading Department, Prices & Incomes Board and Commerce Commission. Over several years, FCCC has become a multi sectorial regulator, and if one analyses FCCC into detail, it is a very modern institution that deals with issues which is faced by businesses and consumers, and it tries to create that fair marketplace. That is really the intent of FCCC. The Committee made several recommendations to further protect unsuspecting consumers in the marketplace, and to improve the performance of FCCC when market practices and dynamics keep changing.

During the period under review, FCCC received maximum complaints, as we have heard from the Chair of the Committee, and the complaints were on rental properties, automobiles, construction and white goods. It is disappointing to note that the hard work done by FCCC in coming up with a self-regulating Guideline for Landlord and Tenants in 2010 did not actually reduce the number of complaints.

We have just heard from the Chair again that the number of complaints increased in that particular year by 58 percent. The nature of complaints are such that sometimes it is very hard for the institutions to find solutions, for example, there is no law that governs how the bonds or deposits should be treated and how it should be refunded. Often the landlords will come up with the unjustified quotations and they will expect the tenants to pay for the wear and tear. We have also come across situations where landlords disconnect water and electricity supply, creating more problems, and on the other hand we have tenants who do not comply with the 30- day eviction notice. There are many other issues surrounding rental premises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FCCC, with its line Ministry has developed a draft Landlord and Tenants Bill, and the Committee was very well briefed on this particular Bill, which they are still trying to finalise. We do understand that from 2020 to early 2022, it was not possible to conduct public consultation because of COVID-19, and we just hope that FCCC will speed up finalising the Bill.

We all know that the honourable Minister of Finance is not in favour of Rent Freeze Order. He announced in January 2023, the changes will be made by FCCC on rent increase restriction on Residential and Ground Rent Order 2021. We look forward to his further announcements now that December is around the corner and when the current Rent Freeze Order will expire.

There are obvious reasons as to why he is not in support of using the Rent Freeze Order, however, we are waiting for the changes he will announce that will, depending upon what the content of the changes would be, it will allow landlords to change rent based on market rate. We do not know how consumers will manage an increase in rent at a time when VAT has gone up by 15 percent, and the promise to increase the minimum wage is yet to be realised. It is a catch-22 situation. What will happen to the inflation rate which is on the rise?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also commend FCCC for undertaking the investigation into Lagilagi Housing Project that assisted the Ministry of Economy at that time in refunding hundreds of Fijians who paid money to PCN with the hope of getting a flat. We also commend FCC for coming up with fixed penalty regulation which will streamline FCCC's enforcement and provide a very quick solution to the consumers or small businesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I hope the Government now realises that FCCC does its work independently without fear or favour. When they were in Opposition, they were never tired of complaining about the CEO and the work he does with his team to make the marketplace competitive, informed, fair and efficient. I hope all their conspiracy theories regarding FCCC have been put to rest, now that they are in Government, they are working closely with the CEO of FCCC and realise that, that is their job, it is not an easy one, it is a very difficult job. The CEO of FCCC has always lived up to it and he is still delivering at a time when the cost of living has risen and we often see him trying to educate the public through various press releases, through various other work that he does behind the scene to ensure that the marketplace is fair to the consumers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion that is before Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute as well to the FCCC Report for 2018-2019 and basically since coming into office, I have actually seen how tirelessly the FCCC works to monitor and regulate pricing in Fiji and protect our consumers from price gauging and unfair and dishonest practise. Let me assure Parliament that as you have probably worked out that currently we are noticing an escalation in scams around the country. I will be answering a question in that regard but let me assure Parliament that through this process, there will be a strengthening of laws regarding FCCC to ensure that such scams are not able to take foot in our country.

Before I delve into the Report, I would also like to congratulate the board of FCCC and the hardworking team for the Report. We do notice that they have tabled a strategic plan and as the Chair of the Committee has mentioned, they are looking forward to reports relative to the plan and it is encouraging to see a regulator that is strategic and forward looking in its endeavours.

As mentioned as well by honourable Kumar which I quite agree, the increase in landlord and tenancy issues is still an on-going concern. I receive monthly reports from the Consumer Council, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and they are increasing. I agree that something needs to be done about it. There was a technical working group established to look into it and there is a draft Bill already making its rounds. We will ensure that that Bill makes its way into Parliament to try and ensure that both the landlord and the interest of the tenants are protected and maintained.

Also, in terms of FCCC enforcement, like I mentioned, the 2010 FCCC Act is also under review, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the aim to explore avenues to deter non-compliance amongst traders and businesses. I have heard some suggestions that perhaps in the past some businesses were given leeway, that we will ensure that we clamp down on to ensure that the regulation is adjudicated fairly and justly.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the introduction of increased VAT, the FCCC has been very actively monitoring pricing. The Report which was produced today by the honourable Minister for Finance is part of the active monitoring that is taking place and that is why, as the honourable Minister for Finance has alluded to, this side of the House has more calmer or sort of less panicky view of the price increases based particularly on the regular surveys that are being carried out by the FCCC which suggested there is also a lot of benefits accruing to the consumers through the price reductions. The biggest one that we saw lately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the reduction in butter prices.

One of the other areas I think that FCCC is working on is to look at an alternate dispute resolution mechanism that tries to resolve consumer disputes or disputes generally. So that is another area that the FCCC will work upon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from my dealings with the FCCC they continue to uphold the Government's commitment to ensuring consumer rights are protected. Where there is abuse that necessary action is taken to discourage unethical market practices and ensure that services are delivered at a high standard and with quality.

With those comments, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion on Report for the Review of the Standing Committee on the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission Annual Report of 2018 and 2019 on 4th April, 2023.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I thank the honourable Members who have spoken before me. All I want to say in my introduction is, this is an important and an independent institution. Since 2016 a total budget of about \$32 million has been provided to the organisation this year and the budget includes \$4.8 million.

I think both the honourable Premila Kumar and Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Kamikamica have raised a number of issues answered some of the concerns.

The couple of points, Mr. Speaker, that I want to make in relation to the issues raised by honourable Premila Kumar. I think she talked about the independence of FCCC. I agree with her. We once in the Opposition we know there were things being done. People were being forced to Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC). Officials were being forced to say things

that they would not say otherwise. We are a Government that respects those independents do and what they do.

The points she raised about the rent freeze. Mr. Speaker, I think she is right that a lot of things have happened. The rent freeze was put in place in 2007. You look at the economics of rent freeze anywhere in the world. It is an emergency. It is a one-off response. It has a time limit to address a spike or something unintended that happens. We have had this rent freeze for almost 15 years.

In economics, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we understand what we call perverse incentive. The unintended consequences of a particular policy if it is not reviewed. What has happened in the market is not only the quality of rental properties has gone down, but people have used all kinds of unscrupulous waste to increase the rent.

More importantly, Mr. Speaker, what has happened is, all those new flats that have come into the market, because the rule is that, if you have a base rent, for example, if your rent was \$400 in 2007, you cannot increase your rent, so what is happening is that, a lot of landlords have done all sorts of things. But what is also happening, the new ones that have come on the market, the landlords would raise the rent above the normal market rent that would normally be there.

What happens is, the intention of the rent freeze was to help the tenants, in fact it has worked the opposite. The rents have just increased. So I think, what we were saying at the beginning of this year, Mr. Speaker is that it needs to be reviewed and FCCC of course will do its due diligence and look at the market, what is happening there and the Landlords and Tenants Agreement, that honourable Kamikamica talked about, of course that started in 2017 and that is something we need to look at.

The contribution, Mr. Speaker, from honourable Sharma – I am thoroughly disappointed and saddened by the fact that they keep saying that we are trying to stop young people from saying things, that does not mean Mr. Speaker, that when you are young, you have the licence to say and lie about the facts that are there. He started by saying, there is no job, the economy is not doing well, investment is not taking place, but the data Mr. Speaker, hard data, official data shows otherwise.

The Reserve Bank of Fiji has actually revised the initial forecast, Mr. Speaker, from 6 percent to 8 percent. All international organisations looking at our budget, appraised the budget, have looked at the growth forecast and all of them agree – the Internal Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank have all agreed that growth is on the right trajectory.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD - Other figures Mr. Speaker, ANZ also agrees with the growth figures, except they got it wrong with the inflation forecast.

Mr. Speaker, the other point that he made, this is FNPF data. Formal sector wages in 2023, between January to August increased by 14 percent relative to 2020, Mr. Speaker. It increased! The other formal sector wages increased by 14 percent, relative to the same period in 2019. What it shows, Mr. Speaker, is that there are a lot of jobs, there are a lot of vacancies – some arising out of people leaving, but also there is job growth. The President of the Suva Retailers Association called out publicly and said if you are at home and you are looking for a job, please come because we need people.

The Tourism Industry, the numbers have increased beyond 2019. The wages and salaries there have increased, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.R. SHARMA - \$5.00.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He comes here and completely lies, lies overboard, says there are no jobs. These are FNPf figures, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- No confidence.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Now he is talking about confidence, when every business sector, when we have meetings, you see the number of people who come, who say that they are now free, even the FijiFirst supporters say they are free now. They are free, they want to invest, they want to work with the Government. It is actually quite shameful that somebody who can contribute more positively, come up with some facts, do some research, comes in this august Parliament and lies just like he is talking to people on the street.

This is a Parliament, Mr. Speaker, when you come here and say there is no job growth, for God's sake, use some figures because this is the kind of lies and misinformation that they are spreading out there in the community. They are going there and lying.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You are lying.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Shameful!

I urge the honourable Member, I urge him, he has got a bright future in politics. He can have a bright future, he has got potential, I can see that, but he is just being carried away into the politics of the past of what they are saying.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Stick to the report ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I want to say to the people of this country, yes, we understand. This morning, I pointed out a list of items. The Honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica talked about the prices. Yes, some prices have gone up and I explained the inflation rate and how it is calculated, what is happening. I also explained what is happening, what is the transmission mechanism of what is happening to imports.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Time's up.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The people are suffering.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Please, come into this Parliament with some dignity and respect on facts and what you say because we are telling the people of this country and the people of this country are watching and saying - what, there is no jobs when employers are desperate to get people to come and work for them?

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

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Members for their contribution towards the debate. I am sure that a lot of these issues that they have raised will be an added value to how the Government is going to improve the performance of the Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission. I have no further comments to make.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of our sitting today and I thank you all for bearing with us. It has been a long day and for your information, I think dinner is being prepared as well in the Big Committee Room, but Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.13 p.m.

Reply to Written Question No. 154/2023 Tabled on Monday, 20th November, 2023 by the Minister for Education, honourable A.M. Radrodro (Ref. Page 1972)



**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
(HONOURABLE ASERI M. RADRODRO)**

Response to the question by honourable H. Chand is as follows:

The Fiji National Education Summit which was convened over 3 days from the 20 - 22 September in Nadi brought together 247 stakeholders who represented faith based organisations, Teacher Training institutions, Universities, Teacher Unions, Fiji National Council for Persons with Disabilities, civil societies, corporate entities, government agencies, Diplomatic Corp, Members of Parliament and education donor partners (DFAT, MFAT, GPE & UNJCEF).

The deliberations, discussions, and plenary sessions over the 3 days, created the platform and the foundation of the 10 years roadmap for the education sector from 2024 - 2033. The Outcomes of the Fiji National Education Summit is titled the **2023 Denarau Declaration** which MOE launched together with a 3-year Strategic Development Plan 2023-2026 on 10 November at the Tanoa Hotel in Suva. The **2023 Denarau Declaration** document captures the vision and intention to create a robust and adaptable educational system that nurtures resilient and capable Fijians. The framework will encompass all levels of education from early childhood to tertiary education and emphasizes inclusivity and equity.

There are 7 thematic areas that capture the multifaceted approach required to empower the Fijian learning populace and ensure they are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and resilience to thrive in the evolving education landscape.

(I) Thematic Area 1:

(a) Curriculum and Sustainable Development

- Curriculum and programs are embedded in Fiji's context that reflects our values, cultures, sustainable resource management, traditional knowledge and skills that draw on the land that we live and exist upon and the ocean that surrounds and bind us all.
- All learners regardless of their background, abilities or circumstances are actively engaged in the learning process and learning includes both cognitive and non-cognitive development.
- The curriculum is aligned with sustainable development principles and addresses key societal challenges, ensuring that learners acquire knowledge and skills that are relevant to their lives and their future.
- Curriculum and programs, with appropriate pedagogy are inclusive, rights-based, promote gender equality, future focused and flexible, responsive to innovation and

- change, develop skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, collaboration, adaptability and digital literacy.
- Quality learning environment that supports lifelong learning at all levels of education.

(b) **Quality Assurance and Assessment**

- National examination and assessment procedures and policies including standardizations to provide the means to monitor and evaluate student learning and take stock of knowledge and progress.
- National examination and assessment procedures and policies are fully aligned with the curriculum reform.
- Consistently delivering high-quality examinations and assessment, services, or processes.
- Through quality assurance, Examinations and Assessments Unit can evaluate the effectiveness of their procedures, protocols, or training programs.

(2) **Thematic Area 2: Teaching Profession & Leadership**

- Teaching and leadership roles provided for opportunities of continuous learning and professional development.
- Teachers and leaders are empowered, supported, and recognized for their contributions and are more likely to remain in the profession ensuring continuity and stability in the education system.
- Teacher Training Institutions produce highly qualified and competent teachers.
- Teacher Training Institutions establish strong partnerships with the Ministry of Education ensuring their graduates possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to excel in the classroom.
- Improving networking and collaboration between Fiji Higher Education Commission, the Fiji Teacher Registration Authority (FTRA), and the Tertiary Scholarship and Loans Service (TSLs) and the Fiji Ministry of Education can lead to more efficient education management and better outcomes for both students and the education system.
- Developing a Teacher Protection Policy for Fiji is crucial to ensure the safety, well-being, and professional development of teachers. Such a policy can help create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning.
- MOE to establish strong and effective partnership with relevant stakeholders.

(3) **Thematic Area 3: Early Childhood Education, Inclusive Education, Access, Equitable, Safe & Healthy Schools**

- Early Childhood Education provides children with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel holistically, ensuring they are prepared for future educational endeavours.
- Inclusive Education promotes environments where all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, feel included, accepted, and valued. This fosters positive social-emotional development as children learn to appreciate diversity, show empathy, and develop strong relationships.
- All children, including those with disabilities or from marginalized communities, have equal opportunities to attend school and receive a quality education.
- All children have access to appropriate resources and educational opportunities to provide equal support and assistance to all students ensuring they have an equitable

chance of success.

- All children enjoy safe and healthy learning environments that contribute to the overall well-being of children which enhance students' ability to focus, engage and learn.

(4) Thematic Area 4: Financing of Education and Effective Governance

- Improved educational outcomes through efficient allocation of resources resulting in improved learning outcomes.
- Reduction in education inequality through provision of funding to disadvantaged areas and communities ensuring that every student, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, has equal opportunities to succeed.
- Increased teacher quality through investment in teacher training and professional development programs.
- Transforming education system through partnership and collaboration with our education stakeholders.
- Promotion of inclusive and equitable education through prioritizing inclusive education policies, accommodating students with disabilities and special needs, ensuring that every student has equal access to education, fostering inclusivity and equity in the education system.
- Strengthen the development and partnership coordination for MOE.

(5) Thematic Area 5: Technical, Vocational Education & Training, Non-Formal and Life-Long Learning Strengthening Legislative Framework and TVET Policy

- Improvement in the accessibility, relevance and quality of the TVET programs.
- Graduates possess industry-relevant skills and knowledge that will enhance their employability and success in the industry.
- Improved practical skills and enhanced learning experiences achieved through early exposure.
- Development of workforce strategies.
- Greening TVET.
- Gender equity and disability inclusivity.
- Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) and Strengthen Digitalization.

(6) Thematic Area 6: Digital Learning & Transformation, Technology Integration and Cyber Safety

- Increased access to education, personalized learning experience, collaboration and interactive learning while saving costs.
- Streamlined processes through data management and analysis, improved communication, collaboration, innovation and new opportunities.
- Improved security measures through enhanced awareness and education, greater regulatory frameworks collaboration and information sharing.
- A comprehensive theory of change model for the proposed strategy.

(7) Thematic Area 7: Education Policy, Planning, Research and Data

- Improve school and system-level management by utilizing research and data to identify best practices in school leadership, administration, and governance, which can then be implemented to enhance the overall management of schools and education systems.

- Enhance student achievement through identifying and implementing effective instructional strategies, curricula, and assessments that support student success.
- Reduce achievement gaps by addressing inequities in access to quality education, providing targeted interventions, and leveraging research and data to identify effective strategies.
- Strengthen teaching and instructional practices through promoting innovative instructional approaches and encourage the use of research-based teaching methods.
- Foster innovation and adaptability by staying abreast of emerging trends, technologies, and pedagogical techniques, education systems can adapt to the changing needs of students and the workforce. Research and data analysis can inform evidence-based decision-making to foster educational innovation.
- Enhance accountability and transparency through promoting accountability at all levels, ensuring that educational resources are used effectively and efficiently.

COSTING

- It has been 18 years since the last Education Summit, the financial contribution of our Government, UNICEF as the grant agent and GPE are appreciated.
- Tabulated below is the breakdown of the associated cost of the FNES activity.

Activity	Source of Funding	Amount{}
Pre- Summit	GPE, UNICEF	343,959 . 23
Summit	MOE	188,779.91
TOTAL		532, 739. 14

Reply to Written Question No. 155/2023 Tabled on Monday, 20th November, 2023 by the Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, honourable V.T.T.K. Rayalu (Ref. Page 1972)



MINISTER FOR AGRICULTURE AND WATERWAYS

(HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU)

Response to the question by honourable N.T. Tuinaceva is as follows:

The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways in addressing Gender gaps in the Agriculture Sector and aligning with Fiji's 20-Year National Development Plan, formulated a 5-year Policy for Gender in Agriculture in Fiji (2022-2027). This ensures commitment towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.

The Policy has four major objectives:

- Equality of access by women and men to the economic resources required for productive and resilient agriculture and markets;
- Equality of access by women and men to the information, technology and training needed for secure livelihoods and healthy diets;
- Equality of representation and participation in decision-making by women and men, for informed future agriculture planning and resourcing; and
- Effective mainstreaming of gender perspectives in all programs through strengthened capacities resources and commitment in the agriculture ministries.

This policy is designed to integrate well with the Government's existing initiatives including Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting led by the Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative led by the National Machinery of Women - Ministry of Women. The Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is one of the pilot Ministries under the Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting initiative.

In operationalising the Gender in Agriculture Policy, the Ministry has implemented various programs that support women's participation in the agriculture sector and these include but are not limited to, Vanilla, Coconut, Poultry Extension, Apiculture, Cocoa, Post-Harvest Losses and Women in Agriculture.

The Women in Agriculture Programme, previously known as the Cottage Industry Development Program [CIDP], started in 2006 as one of the Demand Driven Approach [ODA] initiatives. It was implemented in 2007 before it was taken up by the then Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation until 2012 when the program came back under the Ministry of Agriculture. In the 2016-2017 financial year, the current name was adopted with its primary objective which is to increase women's participation in the agriculture sector.

The Ministry through this program since 2016-2017 financial year has supported 1,060 women under the various age groups listed below:

- 24 percent young women (20-35yrs)
- 55 percent adult women (36 -55yrs) and
- 21 percent were (56 - 77yrs).

Through the assistance provided to those women, a notable increase in production was recorded since 2016 on the following targeted commodities:

- Floriculture production had increased from 78 tonnes in 2016 to 6,406 tonnes in 2022. This growth reflects the positive impact of the Ministry's support towards the floriculture sector which enhanced women's participation.
- *Masi* production increased from 15 tonnes in 2016 to 121.7 tonnes in 2022.
- *Voivoi* production increased from 359.6 tonnes in 2016 to 1,790.7 tonnes in 2022.

These women have diversified into other activities which has significantly improved their socio-economic status. Out of the 1060 registered women farmers under this programme, some have been assisted in more than one activity and in different phases based on their progress.

- 424 women farmers assisted with agro-inputs and planting materials (*voivoi* & *masi*) have ventured into value-adding and are currently supplying to flea markets in the Central, Northern and Western Divisions;
- 636 have been registered with Fiji Arts Council and Ministry of Women, Children & Social Protection where they exhibit their work during the Divisional and National Women Expo;
- 265 have registered nurseries and are supplying to hotels, resorts and municipal markets with flowers for landscaping and beautification;
- 318 are currently supplying local florists, funeral homes and markets with cut flowers and leaves for various flower arrangements and bouquets.
- 159 are Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) operating road stall markets and rented spaces to support their families and also provide a means of employment to other family members;
- 21 are nursery operators that have import licenses where they import exotic flowers from overseas.

In this financial year 2023-2024, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways has pioneered five (5) programmes on Gender Responsive Budget initiative as mentioned above in this statement.

Moreover, a sum of \$300K has been allocated where 200 women in 40 clusters have been identified and implementation is in progress according to the following activities:

- Supply of planting materials for *voivoi*, *masi* and flowers;
- Provision of tools and farming equipment such as brush cutter, wheelbarrow, hosepipe, watering cans and sylon shade; and
- Conduct field training.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways fully supports the participation and empowerment of women who represent 14% of our farmers and recognize their contribution to the agriculture sector.

Reply to Written Question No. 156/2023 Tabled on Monday, 20th November, 2023 by the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, honourable L.D. Tabuya (Ref. Page 1972)



MINISTER FOR WOMEN, CHILDREN AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

(HON. L.D. TABUYA)

Response to the question by honourable H. Chand is as follows:

The Social Pension Scheme or in short SPS is meant for senior citizens in Fiji who have attained the age of 65 years and above, with no source of income, are not recipients of any other Government Pension, Ex- Serviceman Funds, FNPF or any other superannuation.

Some significant changes have been made to the Programme in this fiscal year, which are:

- Recipients who are above 70 years received a 25 percent increase to their allowance which equates to \$125 per month. Recipients between the ages 65-69 years received a 15 percent increase to their allowance which equates to \$115 per month.
- Inclusion of 1,500 FNPF pensioners who were deprived of their financial benefits by the former administration 2011. We have so far onboarded 314 members and they receive \$115 or \$125 per month depending on their age.

To accommodate the above changes, Government has allocated budget of \$78.2 million which is an increase of \$23.2 million from last Fiscal Year.

I would like to inform this August house that currently there 31,250 individuals receiving \$115 per month while 21,700 are receiving \$125 per month.

Reply to Written Question No. 157/2023 Tabled on Monday, 20th November, 2023 by the Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport, honourable Ro F.Q. Tuisawau (Ref. Page 1973)

Response to the question by honourable N.T. Tuinaceva is as follows:

- a) Details of the number of complaints received through LTA 582 text free platform; and

The LTA has received a total of 1,414 texts via the LTA 582 text free platform during this period. Of these, 996 were analyzed and registered by the LTA, while 418 were irrelevant messages, such as blank messages.

- b) The breakdown on the nature of complains and the number of issues already addressed from the period January to September 2023

The breakdown of complaints by nature and the 10 common complaints received were;

- Dangerous & Careless Driving
- Driver Conduct
- Over Speeding
- Illegal operation of private vehicles
- Use of Mobile Communication
- Bus Service Complaint
- Fail to obey traffic light
- Inconsiderate Driving
- Denial of Taxi service Breaching of PSV permit conditions
- Resolution of Complaints

The LTA has resolved 84 percent of the complaints received and registered. The remaining 16 percent are on hold due to lack of information from the complainant or reluctance to provide a written statement.

The LTA has counselled drivers concerned (both verbally and in writing) and issued Traffic Infringement Notices (TINs) when appropriate.

ANNEXURE V

Reply to Written Question No. 158/2023 Tabled on Monday, 20th November, 2023 by the Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport, honourable Ro F.Q. Tuisawau (Ref. Page 1973)



MINISTRY OF PUBLIC WORKS, METEOROLOGICAL SERVICES AND TRANSPORT

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Response to the question by honourable A.A.Maharaj is as follows:

There has been 68 road accident fatalities from January 2023 to October 2023.

Please find below the breakdown per month:

Month	2023
January	7
February	9
March	6
April	9
May	11
June	5
July	10
August	5
September	1
October	5
Total	68

[Source: Fiji Police]