

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 23RD NOVEMBER, 2023

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 23RD NOVEMBER, 2023

The Parliament met at 9.29 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 22nd November, 2023, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting. I also welcome all who are joining us, those in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. I also welcome the students and teachers of Wai District School in Nadroga.

Honourable Members, please allow me to say a few words in the vernacular.

Ni bula vinaka mai kemuni na i tubutubu, qasenivuli kei kemuni ragone. E dau tarai keimami toka na nomuni dau yaco mai. Oqo na nomuni Vale ni Bose, oqo o ira na wekamuni na turaga, na marama na nomuni Mata ena Bose Lawa. E da sega ni kila, de dua na siga e dua vei kemuni ena mai dabe talega eke, ka sa tiko na vakauinui ni'o ni na gumatuataka sara na nomuni ka ni vuli. O Viti me na Viti vinaka ni mataka, ka ra vakararavi ka vakauinui vei kemuni na i tabagone o ni sa tiko qo.

Au sa nuitaka ni ko ni na ciqoma tiko na vakamamasu oqo mai na nomuni Bose Lawa ena vuku i Viti ena veisiga ni mataka. Vinaka vakalevu.

[We extend our greetings to you parents, teachers and students of Wai District School from Nadroga. We are, indeed, grateful for your presence today. This is your Parliament and sitting here in this august Chamber are your representatives. We do not know that during your endeavour, one of you will have the opportunity to be sitting here in future. We hope you will strive to do well in your education. Fiji will be more prosperous in years to come, and the onus and hope is upon you our future generation.]

POINT OF ORDERUnparliamentary Language – Hon. Professor B.C. Prasad

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I rise again on a Point of Order? I refer to Standing Order 74(1) and Standing Order 45(4)(b)(c) because you were going to make your ruling on the Point of Order that I had raised yesterday. I kindly request your high office to also make a ruling on the Point of Order that I raised on the sitting on 15th September, 2023.

If you would recall, there was an End of Week Statement by the honourable Rinesh Sharma on the increase of National Minimum Wage and I objected to the statement made by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics in his response to the End of Week Statement. This is what the honourable Deputy Prime Minister stated, Sir, and I quote from Page 1927 of the *Daily Hansard* of Friday, 15th September, 2023:

“Mr. Speaker, they looted the workers by forcing them to use their FNPF funds during the pandemic.”

Mr. Speaker, in yesterday's deliberation, the honourable Member, again, used these words against this side of Parliament. What is the reason behind it? I really do not know whether we can look at Standing Order 45(4)(b)(c) but, again, I did raise my concern if it could be registered and I requested a ruling from you, Sir. I hope that this will be provided tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have given him the opportunity to respond. Again, let me say that in his reply, he stated, and I quote: “They looted the workers by forcing them to use their FNPF funds during the pandemic”, but his response was totally different when you gave him the opportunity and this is what he said, and I quote from Page 1935 of the *Daily Hansard* of Friday, 15th September, 2023:

“All I said, Mr. Speaker, was in reference to the FNPF Pension Act, that is a fact. That was a Government that made the decision - the Bainimarama Government.”

He then continued:

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the use of the word, “looted”, again, is very offensive and I hope and plead with you that the honourable Member needs to be reminded, he needs to be warned, that it is unparliamentary.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is my Point of Order and I hope that your ruling on it can also be included in tomorrow's ruling.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think it is a bit late at this stage that this Point of Order issue is being raised. We are now on Agenda Item 4. During the Confirmation of Minutes, issues such as this or any other you feel ought to be addressed so as not be included or excluded from the Confirmation of the Minutes, that is the time when you raise it.

When I was in Opposition, we usually look at it before the Confirmation of Minutes, that is when we rise on a Point of Order and say, “look before the Minutes is confirmed, this is what transpired and we would like to flag for you, Sir, a Point of Order.” We have been doing it for quite a long time from the Opposition.

For this particular case, I cannot make it as an exception because it has gone past the Confirmation of Minutes stage and we are right into Agenda Item 4, but we will take note of what you have highlighted, honourable Leader of the Opposition in the hope for the issue of fairness, that we are able to drum up some search. The Secretariat will require time to look at this. I cannot be including this in tomorrow’s outcome of what I stated yesterday because of the outstanding Point of Orders that were both raised by honourable Sachida Nand and honourable Professor Biman Prasad and yesterday, again, by the honourable Leader of the Opposition as against the Deputy Prime Minister Professor Biman Prasad.

So, for this particular one, we will take note of it, but maybe we need to be given time, honourable Leader of the Opposition so that we can check all that is required to be checked so we can come up with a position to advise whether this is what you have asked and this is the outcome of the search that we have undertaken and this is the ruling from the Speaker’s Chair. I hope you understand our situation as well, honourable Leader of the Opposition. We will take note and we will move on.

Honourable Members, there will be three Committee Reports for tabling this morning.

PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES

Review Report - Energy Fiji Limited 2021 Annual Report

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Review Report on the Energy Fiji Limited 2021 Annual Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) faced unprecedented challenges in 2021 due to COVID-19, in particular, the second wave of the pandemic which significantly impacted EFL’s electricity demand. The Committee noted an increase in the number of domestic customers benefitting from subsidies provided by EFL, especially after 2020, and acknowledges EFL for this initiative given that a number of customers were affected by the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in light of Government’s commitment to climate change, the Committee noted the importance of EFL embarking on Renewable Energy Sites Projects, and strongly recommends for the inclusion of key stakeholders, such as landowners in the land acquisition process. It is also recommended that all efforts be made to ensure that the pending Power Purchase Agreements are expedited to achieve the current target of 100 percent Renewable Energy by 2036.

The Committee noted the need for Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) to strengthen its role in overseeing the technical aspects of EFL’s regulatory functions, such as the registration of licensed electricians and ensuring standard compliance are met. In this regard, the Committee recommended for FCCC to recruit the necessary expertise required to regulate the services of EFL.

While deliberating, the Committee noted a slow increase in the use of solar rooftop installations and encourages the use of solar powered products by domestic and commercial customers as an alternative to reduce the dependence on fossil fuel.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to the entities that appeared before the Committee and for being prompt in responding to the various queries and questions raised by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I hereby commend the Committee's Report to Parliament and I request all honourable Members to take note of the Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report - Energy Fiji Limited 2022 Annual Report

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is pleased to submit to Parliament the Review Report on the Energy Fiji Limited 2022 Annual Report.

While deliberating on the 2022 Report, the Committee noted that EFL managed to make a healthy profit despite the various challenges and unforeseen expenses they had to endure during the financial year and commends the team at EFL for maintaining its financial soundness.

The Committee noted that EFL's existing Risk Mitigation strategies provided substantial support to the company during the adverse impact of COVID-19. This included strategies to address the disruption in EFL's supply chain and the minimising of the effects of rising fuel costs through its Hedging Programme.

It was noted with concern the damages to EFL's infrastructure which occurred due to various reasons such as motor vehicle accidents that damaged power poles, overgrown vegetation clashing with power lines, third-party damage to EFL underground cables and vandalism of EFL assets. The Committee would like to urge members of the public to be mindful of EFL's infrastructure to ensure that they continue receiving uninterrupted electricity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, EFL lost 54 technical employees for greener pastures overseas. Given that EFL is an essential service provider, it is imperative to further develop strategies to entice technical employees from moving overseas.

The Committee was made aware that multiple Renewable Energy Projects are in the pipeline at present. However, the Committee is concerned that our National Targets to meet 100 percent Renewable Electricity by 2036 might not be achievable. While hearing submissions, the Committee was made aware that various applicants who intended to invest in Renewable Energy Programmes had their applications rejected.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend our appreciation to the entities that appeared before the Committee for being prompt in responding to the various queries and questions raised by

the Committee. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby commend the Committee's Report to Parliament, and I request all honourable Members to take note of the Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report - Fiji Corrections Service 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 Annual Reports

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights is pleased to submit to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on the Fiji Corrections Service 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Corrections Service is obligated under the Corrections Service Act to serve the public by keeping in custody those convicted by the courts, in providing effective corrective and rehabilitation services, whilst applying all relevant human rights obligations and standards.

This Report captures the review findings and recommendations of the Committee in respect of the pertinent issues noted from the contents of the Fiji Corrections Service 2018-2019 and the Fiji Corrections Service 2019-2020 Annual Reports. For the review, the Committee conducted extensive deliberation on the Annual Reports, whereby issues were identified and correspondences regarding these issues were made with the FCS and its representatives.

Some of the main areas of discussion addressed in this Report are as follows:

1. The Fiji Corrections Service is committed to reducing the high number of contraband entering correctional facilities.
2. The Fiji Corrections Service continues to work towards its responsible target by safely detaining and rehabilitating persons sentenced to imprisonment or placed on remand at its correctional centres pending trial by the courts.
3. The Fiji Corrections Service has no control over the number of persons incarcerated by the courts, therefore, does not have means to minimise overcrowding issues within the correction facility.
4. The Fiji Corrections Service has taken humanitarian steps to monitor and provide day care towards inmates of old age. This has subsequently exposed the lack of facilitation for inmates that are at risk with respect to mental and health problems.
5. The Fiji National Budget 2022-2023 provided funding for a Job Evaluation Exercise to be conducted for the FCS staff with the view to reviewing salaries. The FCS engaged a consultant company - Maxumise Pte. Limited to conduct the JEE, which was to conclude in early October 2023. The Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Finance now have the responsibility to evaluate and determine its outcome.

6. The Committee during its tour of Correction facilities was informed of the land tenure issues at its Levuka Corrections Centre. The Committee notes that the Fiji Correction Service has taken steps to protect tenure on the *Mataqali* land by signing a 99-year lease agreement with Land Owning Unit Yavusa Totogo beginning in 2017.
7. At the conclusion of this review, the Committee believes that the majority of the issues identified in the review, have been adequately addressed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to acknowledge the honourable Members of the Justice, Law and Human Rights Committee - honourable Iliesa Vanawalu (Deputy Chairperson), honourable Mosese Bulitavu, honourable Lenora Qereqeretabua and honourable Faiyaz Koya, for their deliberations and input. I also acknowledge the representatives of Fiji Corrections Service, who made themselves available to make submissions which assisted the Committee in its work.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I hereby commend the Committee's Report to Parliament, and I request all honourable Members to take note of the Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- 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. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to 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, as follows:

1. Minister for Health and Medical Services;
2. Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management;
3. Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations; and
4. Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

The Ministers may speak for up to 20 minutes and after the Minister, I will then invite the Leader of the Opposition or his designate, to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will be no other debate. I now call on the Minister for Health and Medical Services to deliver his Statement.

Colonial War Memorial Hospital Centennial Celebration

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, fellow Government Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament; I rise today to deliver my Ministerial Statement on the country's largest and one of the oldest hospitals, the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, which is celebrating its 100th birthday in nine days' time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital, as we fondly call the hospital by, celebrates its century of existence on Saturday, 2nd December, 2023. This will be a proud moment for the Hospital and the Ministry and as the Minister for Health and Medical Services and a former staff of CWM Hospital, I am indeed proud to be part of the celebration of this achievement by an iconic health facility for the nation and the region. The CWM Hospital is not the oldest health facility in Fiji however its achievements and contribution to the health of the people of Fiji over these 100 years is most certainly worthy of our acknowledgment and appreciation.

On a brief history of CWM Hospital Mr. Speaker, Sir, the original colonial Hospital was located at Levuka the Old Capital of Fiji in Ovalau built by the local business community with the support of the British Subjects' Mutual Protection Society in the 1860s.

In 1894, the Hospital was then relocated to Walu Bay in Suva, some 12 years after the Capital was officially relocated from Levuka Town to Suva Town in 1882. In 1918, the deadly Spanish influenza pandemic that caused a high number of sickness and the demise of about 5 percent of the population in Fiji put a lot of pressure on the Hospital. The Hospital was overwhelmed with cases and temporary hospitals were set up in the nearby schools and halls around Suva to cater for patients coming to the Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was reported that from this experience, the then Government considered building a new and bigger hospital. With the end of World War I in 1918, the decision was made to build the new hospital as a memorial to Fijian citizens who served in the war - hence the name, "Colonial War Memorial Hospital".

In 1923, the new CWM Hospital was constructed and completed with the aid of £319,500. It was officially opened by the then Governor of Fiji, Sir. Cecil Rodwell on 2nd December, 1923.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the time of its opening, the new Hospital boasted a total of 108 beds with a staffing of two doctors and a total of 27 staff. Out of the 27, 17 were European staff and 10 were native staff, as they were called then. The new CWM Hospital contained an out-patient department, administration offices, inpatient ward beds for 28 Europeans and 80 natives, kitchen, laundry, operating room, x-ray room, clinical laboratory, nurses' home, and lecture room.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an interesting and probably not well-known bit of the history of the Hospital is that the Hospital was said to be the brainchild of Sir Henry Marks, an Australian born businessman of Jewish descent, and Legislative Council member, who personally donated £5,000 towards its founding and gave another £5,000 through his company.

Mr. Speaker Sir, Sir Marks, who was then elected as Mayor of Suva from 1926 to 1930, also held the rank of Major in the Fiji Volunteer Force, before being made Honorary Colonel of the Fiji Defence Force in 1937.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the CWM Hospital today, as we have witnessed over the 100 years, the Hospital has evolved and expanded its services. The Hospital's infrastructure has expanded tremendously from the original ferro-concrete building which constituted the current West Wing of the Hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Hospital now has more than 500 inpatient beds and a workforce of more than 2000 workers and the scope of health provided by the hospital has expanded manyfold. Tertiary healthcare services like those available in tertiary hospitals abroad are now provided at the hospital by well trained and competent Fijian healthcare workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Hospital has continued in its teaching role, which started when the Colonial

Hospital was in Levuka and continues to this day. Preparing the regions next generation of health practitioners through hand-on training for thousands of undergraduates and post graduate trainees in medicine, nursing, dental, allied health, health management, support services, and even including training from well-developed countries around the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the century of services, many millions of Fijian citizens have been born, cared for, had consultation, treated, reviewed and discharged from the hospital. As the referral hospital for the Central and Eastern Health Divisions, the hospital has ably provided health services to people referred for admission at the hospital, as well as conduct outreach visits to many islands in the Eastern Division as well as to the communities in Rewa, Tailevu and the interior of Naitasiri.

In addition, Medical Specialities from CWM Hospital continue to carry out outreach visits to the Western and Northern Health Divisions of the country, taking specialist medical services close to the population in these divisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2021, the hospital also faced a very similar challenge in the COVID-19 pandemic, to the Spanish flu-pandemic that the original hospital faced in 1918. The CWM Hospital responded effectively and contributed immensely to the Ministry's overall successful response to the pandemic.

On infrastructure improvement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing the aging infrastructure at CWM Hospital has been a real challenge that previous governments have attempted to address. The Hospital currently has a total of 14 buildings of varying ages. Those buildings that are 20 years and older require significant infrastructural improvement works. A number of infrastructure assessments have been done over the last decade and some repair and renovation works undertaken.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to undertaking the necessary works to address the infrastructure needs for the hospital and is utilizing our allocated resources as well as liaising with our health partners for technical assistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the World Bank's assistance a Structural Assessment Project was approved in June 2023 and is in progress for the Hospital. A structural retrofitting assessment is to determine which buildings are suitable for refurbishment or extension, and to delineate the necessary structural interventions required to improve health services, safety, climate resilience, and compliance with national building codes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an initial scoping mission was completed in October this year and it has identified eight out of 14 buildings as eligible for structural integrity and retrofitting assessments and further prioritization of the building is underway by the Ministry. A full detailed assessment under the project is anticipated to commence in January 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the assessment report will assist the Ministry to prioritise the most urgent retrofits of CWM Hospital for consideration in our next annual budget proposal, while feeding into the long-term master planning for health services delivery in Fiji. In addition, the ongoing "Health Sector Review" that the World Bank is assisting the government is expected to provide additional information that would inform the master planning process that is required for the hospital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the Centennial celebration CWM Hospital board of visitors have been working hard and supporting the Medical Superintendent - Dr Luke Nasedra, the proud son of Wainibuka and the Hospital Management in the celebration programme. The Board Members are led by the Chairperson, Dr. Esther Williams are volunteers and are putting in a great effort to support the Centennial celebrations for the Hospital. The Centennial celebration was formally launched on

Remembrance Day 11th November, 2023 at the CWM Hospital and it was fitting that the Hospital hosted ex-servicemen from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces on the auspicious occasion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the celebration programme includes:

1. Planting of 100 trees around the Hospital compound.
2. A planned clean-up campaign for the Hospital scheduled for Saturday 25th November, 2023 which I hope to see you all there.
3. A sports day for the Hospital staff planned for Saturday 2nd December, 2023.
4. The Open Day for the Hospital on 13th to 15th December, 2023 to be held at Albert Park.
5. A Gala Dinner and Ball to be held on 16th December, 2023 to acknowledge the Hospital staff and the stakeholders.

I look forward to the support and participation from all honourable Members of Parliament at the various activities of the Centennial celebration, Sir.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, CWM Hospital launches into the Centennial celebration, we also acknowledge and pay our deepest respect to those dedicated Hospital workers who worked hard and gave their best in delivering health services from the Hospital in these 100 years.

We pay tribute to the former Medical Superintendents, Matrons, Consultants, Doctors, Nurses, Dental Officers, Allied Health Practitioners, Ward Assistants, Drivers and other Support Service workers, for the yesteryears, many of whom have since passed on while some are still with us today. We also know that some of their descendants have come back to serve at CWM Hospital and some are still here today.

The Ministry remains committed to supporting the role of the Colonial War Memorial Hospital to carry on the legacy of services and caring irrespective of age, gender, economic status or belief in the next 100 years.

Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to deliver my Ministerial Statement. *Vina'a valevu.*

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Good morning. Mr. Speaker. Sir, I rise to respond to the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services Ministerial Statement. I thank the honourable Minister for the Statement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I understand that the Ministry of Health and Medical Services intend to celebrate the Century of the old Colonial War Memorial Hospital. No doubt the old wing of the CWM Hospital has played a pivotal role in serving the people of Fiji throughout its 100 years of existence. It is essential to acknowledge the challenges posed through the progression of time and changes in Occupational Health and Safety Regulations among other international hospital standards to address them effectively.

The West Wing of the CWM Hospital houses various clinical facilities as alluded to by the honourable Minister including some private wards, the ANZ Ward, the Rewa Ward and the Lau Ward. It also house some of the Matrons office, the main switchboard for the Hospital, Physiotherapy Department, the JB Savou Dental Teaching Clinic for the School of Medicine, the Urology Clinic and also the CWM Dental Clinic.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, considering the significance of this historical building it is imperative to conduct a thorough evaluation to address the multiple issues concerning the infrastructure. If the

Coalition Government wants to keep this 100 years old building, then it is imperative, as alluded to by the honourable Minister, to do a thorough assessment of the building.

I asked our honourable Whip whether the CWM Hospital is part of the National Heritage Site because I was thinking we could do something like MHCC, to keep the face, but he said, “No, not at the moment”. So, in the status, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the infrastructure is no longer compliant to the Fiji Medical and Dental Council accreditation standard.

The challenges of infection control is an ongoing issue in the building, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Currently, the Physiotherapy Department operates from the end of the East Wing, which is along the Extension Street, down to the other New Wing of the Hospital.

In addition to improving the West Wing it is crucial to provide suitable office for the Nursing Unit Manager and staff, given that the inpatient wards and Dental, Physiotherapy and Urology Units also require a facelift, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, over the past century, the dental profession and the services provided in the Dental Department of CWM Hospital has evolved immensely. The service demand by patients and the different modalities of diseases that are presented to the clinic has also changed from its initial size, and the services that were provided in the Dental Unit from the starting has now changed.

Also, in the past 100 years, dentistry has evolved in a phenomenal phase globally, Mr. Speaker, Sir. With the support of the Bainimarama and the FijiFirst Government, it assisted the Fiji National University to develop a speciality training - Post-Graduate Training for Dentists, who are now qualified but still serving as normal Dental Officers in the Hospital because of the need to review staff establishment due to the increasing population and the demands of service, and also to remunerate the Post-Graduate qualification and the speciality of care that they are now providing to Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the moment, I urge the honourable Minister to look into the staff establishment for CWM Hospital. Also, at the moment, our Prosthetic Unit is operating from Nakasi Health Centre. They were relocated there because of the OHS issue with the old Children’s Hospital - the wooden building across the road from the Mortuary. We need to bring the prosthetic service back to CWM Hospital to attach to the clinical services so that patients do not have to travel that far to and from for the completion of their dental care.

Mr. Speaker, space is an issue in CWM Hospital and we hope that the honourable Minister, in their scoping and also in their plan, would consider the plight of the CWM Hospital Dental Unit. It is important because CWM Hospital Dental facility is the main referral centre for all dental cases that cannot be treated outside of Suva.

We have graduates who have done their Post-Graduate training that have also earned their licence for speciality service for dentistry but are not remunerated as such, and I had indicated this to the honourable Minister and I hope that he would look into it.

Before I sit down, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement and I hope that the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance will give the necessary funding support for the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services to be able to uplift the healthcare services, especially at CWM Hospital, so that we can look forward to a new face of CWM Hospital. By prioritising this improvement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health can retain and enhance the historical significance of CWM Hospital for future

generations.

I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement and I thank you for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management to deliver his Statement.

Development Programme for the Rural and Maritime Communities
and Support from Development Partners

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, our distinguished guests in the gallery and I acknowledge the presence of Mr. Malcolm Patterson of the Australian High Commission as well as Ms. Rebecca Brown, who are good friends of Fiji; *vinaka vakalevu*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today in this august Parliament to provide an update on development programmes for the rural and maritime communities. Supporting our Fijians through various programmes is one of the core principal activities of the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development, the other being coordinating disaster management operations, which I had already discussed earlier in the week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, the Ministry's development programmes have been expanded to include:

- Rural Housing Assistance with a budget of \$3 million;
- Seafaring Entrepreneurship Assistance Subsidy with a budget of \$0.5 million; and
- Rural and Outer Island Development Programme with a budget of \$2.5 million.

The other existing programmes are:

- Self-Help Programme with a budget of \$1 million;
- Community Access Road, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) with a budget of \$2 million; and
- High Risk Water and Sanitation with a budget of \$0.8 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, prior to the end of the 2022-2023 financial year, the Ministry solicited applications through an online portal for those requiring assistance under the three new programmes. Applications received were then shared with the Divisional Commissioners' Offices for validation of information and assessment to determine the scope of assistance required.

In a span of three months (August, September and October), the Ministry was overwhelmed with almost 6,000 applications. Breakdown of these applications were:

- | | | | |
|----|---|---|----------|
| 1. | Rural Housing Assistance | - | 5,381; |
| 2. | Seafaring Entrepreneurship Assistance Subsidy | - | 227; and |
| 3. | Rural and Outer Island Development | - | 209. |

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of Divisions, the number of applications received from the Divisions are as follows:

- Central Division - 1,916;

- Eastern Division - 310;
- Northern Division - 1,475; and
- Western Division - 2,116.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the SEA Programme, the Ministry of Finance has approved the release of the \$0.5 million to the Ministry. The Ministry has already identified 40 recipients from the applications received to be funded from this budgetary allocation, as follows:

- Central Division - 8;
- Eastern Division - 10;
- Northern Division - 9; and
- Western Division - 13.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has identified 147 recipients for the Rural Housing Assistance Programme, as follows:

- Central Division - 44;
- Eastern Division - 40;
- Northern Division - 22; and
- Western Division - 41.

The identified recipients would have been the ones that met the eligibility criteria and selection criteria set out by the Ministry. Included in this list are 12 recipients who are former workers of the Emperor Gold Mine of Vatukoula. There was an agreement by the previous Government for them to be assisted under the Vatukoula Social Assistance Programme, which we have now fully funded.

On another note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have received an additional 10 packages of housing materials, transferred from the Ministry of Housing that handled the Rural Housing Scheme previously. These housing materials were funded in the 2021-2022 Budget but procurement were deferred due to COVID-19.

The Ministry of Housing has started the procurement of outstanding materials which are now delivered to our Ministry for facilitation of cartage to recipients. We have already arranged to start the delivery of these materials from this weekend whereby three sets of materials will be delivered to the Northern Division and seven sets will be delivered to the Eastern Division. We hope to complete these deliveries by the end of next week.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also in the process of recruiting a Head for Rural Housing Unit and a Senior Technical Officer, who should be appointed before the end of December 2023. The positions were advertised after the Ministry completed a Job Evaluation Exercise and upon the endorsement of the Ministry of Civil Service. The Ministry has received three Leading Hands transferred from the old Rural Housing Unit previously based in the Ministry of Housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme, the Ministry is also working on completing submission for the \$2.5 million budget release. In the meantime, the tender process for assets and services required under the programme have already been advertised (hire of machineries, procurement of portable sawmill and procurement of value adding equipment) and remaining ones targeted for advertisement this weekend.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is in the process of recruiting a Head of the Rural

and Outer Island Programme and a Senior Technical Officer, who should be appointed before the end of December 2023. The positions were only advertised after the Ministry completed a Job Evaluation Exercise and upon the endorsement of the Ministry of Civil Service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the three new programmes, the Ministry had to use its existing officers to work on planning for implementation and drafting of Operational Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures.

The Ministry has already received approval from the Ministry of Finance to utilise 70 percent of the funds allocated for Self-Help Programmes and CARFF, an equivalent amount of \$0.7 million and \$1.4 million respectively. The Ministry is now progressing on implementing a total of 29 Self-Help Programmes and 39 CAFF projects to utilise the \$2.1 million that has been approved.

In addition to the above, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry recently received approval for the release of \$0.8 million for the implementation of 43 Hire Risk Water and Sanitation Projects across the four Divisions - 13 Ecological Purification System Water Projects and 30 Sanitation Projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UNDP Gov4Res Project has been a valuable development partner for the Ministry since the signing of Letter of Agreement (LOA) in August 2020. The Risk Informed Development Programme is a game changer, and we are excited to be the pioneer of this Programme in Fiji and in the Pacific.

The UNDP has provided almost \$2 million to the Ministry for the implementation of this initiative to support 89 projects that are now being used as a demonstration not only in Fiji but have also been shared across the Pacific region and at the global platform at the DRR Meeting that was held in Bali, Indonesia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure that honourable Members are aware of the Planned Relocation Guideline approved in 2018 and the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Planned Relocation in the Republic of Fiji document endorsed this year. The Ministry has been identified as the lead agency for the implementation of the SOP.

A Relocation Projection Unit is expected to be established and this will be managed through the normal budget and planning process. The Unit which is to be secretariat to the Fijian Taskforce for Relocation and Displacement will largely have an administrative function. At present this is currently being managed by the Climate Change Division and (GIZ), the German Agency for International Development Corporation (GIDC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has an arrangement with the Ministry of the Interior and Safety of the Republic of Korea for the implementation of the Saemaul Undong. This is a concept that has been implemented in Fiji since the signing of our Memorandum of Understanding in 2018.

Three communities namely; Silana and Naimasimasi in the Tailevu Province and Mau in the Namosi Province, had been selected for piloting the concept, and various development projects have been implemented in these Villages for the past three years. The Ministry is working on applications for funding for new projects for the next budget cycle of the SMU Korea (2025-2029 budget years).

In addition to Saemaul Undong, there is another programme called the Saemaul Geugmo, which is a community based financial model and focuses on communities' sustainable financial development through savings and self-help development through cooperative principles.

The Ministry of Interior and Safety of the Republic of Korea has supported active ODA

projects such as the on-site study, individual training, consultation on an establishment and operation of pilot Saemaul Geugmo programme in developing countries.

The Saemaul Geugmo projects have been implemented in developing countries, including Myanmar, Uganda and Laos by the Korean Federation of Community Credit Co-operatives (KFCC). The KFCC is now intending to conduct such programmes in Fiji. This augurs well with the Government's vision of encouraging MSMEs and their sustainability to support our local communities and improve living standards and economic growth.

Another regional organisation that the Ministry is working with is through its membership in the Centre for Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP), which provides technical support and promotes innovative best practices on sustainable integrated rural development amongst member countries in Asia-Pacific in order to improve the lives of the rural people. The CIRDAP also provides training for member countries in different thematic areas, including integrated rural development, governance, sustainable development, economic empowerment and socio audits, to name a few.

The Ministry has developed a template or guideline to assist communities in formulating their development plan. This is to ensure that communities are better able to plan and coordinate their development priorities so that there is a more cohesive approach towards development and resourcing.

Last but not the least, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst I appreciate the support provided by the Government towards the rural and maritime communities of our nation, I believe that it is time that we, as a Government, must work together on changing the mindsets of our people. Over the past 16 years, a culture of dependency syndrome has been developed. This, obviously, drains out resources that can be better allocated towards efforts of poverty reduction and investing in education for our future generation, for instance.

There has to be a concerted effort between the Government, development partners and the private sector, towards building the best capacity of our rural and maritime citizens to have confidence in themselves, make productive use of the resources that they own, and reinvest in their respective communities, thereby, contribute the economic growth. There must be a change in mindset, a total paradigm shift, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In planning for development at community level, this is an area that I intent to focus on in the next 12 months. Our people must be encouraged to instil a culture of wealth creation and innovation from an early age. We should not underestimate the capabilities that already exist in our communities - women and youth empowerment, and even recognising the talents of our children. Planning at the community level should embrace this.

I acknowledge the establishment of the Department of Strategic Planning in the Ministry of Finance, and I believe that this will assist in better coordination in planning for development at all levels - national, divisional, district and community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme and decentralisation of services, and to curb rural to urban drift and transforming the landscape of our communities, the Ministry plans to strengthen guidelines and frameworks for rural development in the next 12 months. This will be done through a consultative approach, not only within the Government, but with all key stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to enlighten Parliament on the progress made

with regards to the development programmes for our rural and maritime communities.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I offer the floor to the Leader of the Opposition or his designate, I would like to adjourn Parliament for tea. But before doing so, I would like to acknowledge, once more, those sitting in the gallery.

I have been informed by honourable Ditoka that there are few friends of Fiji here. I understand some are from the Australian Embassy. Could you stand up if you are from the Australian Embassy?

(Acclamation)

I have noticed our former staff at the Consul General's Office in Sydney, Orisi, with his fancy haircut sitting at the gallery as well. Welcome, Orisi. No wonder, we have missed you during our recent trip to Sydney.

From New Zealand, we have Nina Nawalowalo. *Ni sa bula vinaka, Bulou.* The last time we met was in Palau, I think.

(Acclamation)

Honourable Members, we will now adjourn for tea and, please, dear friends, you may join the honourable Members in the Big Committee Room to share some coffee and tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.31 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last evening when we concluded, he made a very passionate speech on the Fiji Sports Council 2017-2018 Annual Report and I reminded him that his National Disaster Awareness Week has brought disaster to Albert Park.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the ground condition is quickly deteriorating, and I urge the honourable Minister for Local Government to please take particular care about Albert Park. Suva is our capital, Suva is our pride and there has been a lot of investment. I walk around the park almost everyday during dinner time and I am really worried about the condition.

MR. SPEAKER.- \$10 million for Albert Park.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Yes, Sir, justified.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statement by the honourable Minister this morning, again, very well aligns and confirms what I did mention a few years back, the shift in our development paradigm. We had *TC Tomas* in 2010 - a Category 4 Cyclone; *TC Evans*, again, in 2012 - a Category 4 Cyclone, let alone all the other calamities that occurred in between and then in 2016 with *TC Winston*, the change in our development paradigm that we took with us into Bangkok and Tokyo. The way we live is changing, the way we do development must change and, therefore, the way we do partnership must also change and this is exactly what the honourable Minister had stated in his Ministerial Statement this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is good to see that he is continuing but I differ with his concluding remarks. In the Ministry we inculcated a dependency syndrome in the last six years. I beg to differ on that, Mr. Speaker, Sir because rural development is essential. We have huge potentials in rural Fiji and therefore it is important that we create the environment for rural Fijians. There are constraints, there are challenges, what we as leaders, we as planners must do is convert those constraints and challenges into opportunities because there are huge potentials and opportunities that can only be realised when government creates the environment for our rural people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, the way we live is changing, I have talked about resilience in development, I have talked about sustainability in development and that is why the governance for resilience programme was in place together with the United Nations. It is about risk informed development.

Honourable Minister for Works, I drove up to Vunidawa on the day after *TC Mal* and a suggestion to you, honourable Minister, and the honourable Minister for Rural Development in terms of governance for resilience, we are now still doing the Viria Water Project. I saw the construction of the pipes at the Naqali Crossing and, of course, on the two bridges and into Waila. We need to protect the very end of those pipes as it comes up onto the platform that was constructed to raise the pipes so that it is protected from the elements of the environment. If flooding can take away the Moto Bridge, it can take away those pipes. This is about the resilience in development and I hope when it comes to risk informed development that we can look into that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, infrastructure development; what do we need to do? Again, infrastructure development is critical. We have to look at the airfields in the rural areas, the jetties in the rural areas, the roading in the rural areas, communication in the rural areas because these are all essential.

Essential Services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the Social Services particularly health, education, water, I will not go into the finer details. Financial support is very critical. Yes, there were considerations in the last few years to have the same programme as the NDP first in the Eastern Division so that the concerns and the potentials in the Eastern Division can be realised. Of course, we learnt a lot when we went to the islands of Lau. I totally agree with what the honourable Minister is considering about the need for detailed planning. We need to now have specific development plans for every geographic region in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Vatoa is different from Ovalau; Ono-i-Lau is different from Wakaya. So, we need to look at specifically the area, potentials, challenges and what can we do as leaders and as planners to bring those potentials and opportunities into reality. That is why these programmes are so important. Again, I emphasise resilience in development, particularly on housing, we need to get our people out of the poverty cycle.

A lot of internal movements, probably I will not call it displacement, but a lot of internal movements came after *TC Winston* particularly for those who had their homes damaged. Again, this is an investment. We invest in housing. We will get our people out of the poverty cycle and they can use their savings and reinvest into other potentials they have in the rural areas. Saemaul Undong and Saemaul Geugmo (MG), we know what is happening in those programmes, again just continue with it, honourable Minister.

Lastly on Rural and Outer Island (ROI), this is important but the linkage between ROI, Ministry for Women, Ministry for Youth and Sports, Ministry for Agriculture and Ministry for Fisheries and Forestry is very critical. If we are to graduate the subsistence farmers, fishermen and women from where they are with the current level to the semi-commercial level, it is the whole of Government approach and it is the interagency connectivity that is very important for the ROI Programme and it needs to be supported.

I do agree with the concluding remarks of the honourable Minister, and I would like to say that continuity and further improvement is necessary in order to fully realise the potentials and the opportunities in rural Fiji that I have talked about.

2nd Australian Ministerial Visit to PALM Scheme Workers

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, guests in the gallery and those watching on their television or online; I rise to update this august Parliament on the recent Ministerial visit to Fijian workers in Australia, approved employers and the Fijian diaspora from the 21st October to the 4th November, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I commence with my Ministerial Statement, I just wish to provide a response to the supplementary question that was asked by the other side of Parliament yesterday on the Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our records show that there are two Volunteer Schemes that the Ministry is engaged in:

1. Graduates Pre-Service or Pre-Employment who are registered as volunteers for training under

- NEC and that is where we have 105 of them this year; and
2. Regional Volunteer Scheme whereby our retirees and unemployed are engaged in the Pacific Islands abroad. This scheme has not been operating since 2021 due to budgetary constraints and other government priorities, including COVID-19.

The New Zealand VSA Scheme, the volunteer scheme in New Zealand, this is the first time we are signing the agreement with them. It has not been in existence before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of this visit to Australia was to meet with the Fijian workers, approved employers and the Fijian diaspora in the five states across Australia, that is Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria which were not covered in our first visit in March this year. This was to enable my Ministry to hear their concerns and views regarding the schemes and to take appropriate action to resolve that. The areas visited are also those from where most complaints were received by the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our honourable Prime Minister on 18th October, 2023 signed the renewed and elevated Vuvale Partnership Agreement with his Australian counterpart in Canberra. Under the partnership engagement, Pillar 2 is related to deepening economic relationships and this is where our Labour Mobility Programmes are captured in the document. Through this partnership agreement, we will work closely with the Australian Government to enhance the protection of Fijian workers and strengthen their rights while working in Australia. This includes implementing measures to address issues of concerns pertaining to worker's welfare and their well-being.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, kindly allow me to take this opportunity to reassure our honourable Prime Minister and this august Parliament of my Ministry's commitment to working closely with the Australian counterparts to ensure that the PALM Scheme continues to benefit Fijian workers and their families while upholding their rights as well. Together, we will strive to create a fair and just working environment for all Fijian workers and strengthen the Vuvale Partnership for the mutual benefit of both countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of issues received by the Ministry on labour mobility under the PALM Scheme resulted from the pathetic attitude of the previous administration for not taking time to visit our workers during their last four years in Government. Remember, I am talking about the last four years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to set the record right, honourable Koroilavesau and honourable Usamate visited the workers during their terms like I am doing, but I cannot say the same about honourable Bala. He once visited the RSC workers in New Zealand who go there for only eight months from 7th to 11th July, 2019. No PALM worker was visited.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Look after the workers of this country.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- That is exactly what we are doing.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I do not think so.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- *Levu na vosa!*

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in achieving this the Fijian Government through representation by my Ministry and the Fiji High Commissioner to Australia held meetings with the

Australian Minister responsible for the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Honourable Tony Burke and the Assistant Secretary for Pacific Labour Policy and Engagement of the Pacific under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ms. Carli Shillito discussing labour mobility issues and the way forward including minimisation of social impacts on the families. The meeting aimed at strengthening collaboration and cooperation between the two countries in the field of labour mobility and shared economic development, also identifying gaps and finding appropriate solutions to strengthen the programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during this meeting, both my Australian counterparts and I discussed a range of key issues on the terms and conditions of employment, compliance with minimum standards, skills training and assessment and expanding opportunities for workforce collaboration, funding of the Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) and local training institutions for industry skills development.

Both countries reaffirmed their dedication to the PALM Scheme and expressed their intention to further strengthen ties with mutual interest in addition to the Ministry putting together a governance structure for the CLOs and proposed case officers and Community Connections. This organisation is working with the Australian Government to assist our workers in Australia to further reach out to workers with issues and provide support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have conducted a meeting with some approved employers who have engaged Fijian workers under the PALM Scheme. The meeting aimed at addressing any key concerns that may have arisen during the workers employment in Australia. This meeting was crucial in fostering a positive working relationship and ensuring that work rights and wellbeing of Fijian workers are protected. The Ministry is committed to working closely with the approved employers to uphold the principles of fairness, transparency and respect for workers under the scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also had a series of meetings with the Fijian diaspora to discuss the important role they play in assisting our Fijian workers under the Scheme through the provision of proper advice and community connect programmes.

I wish to thank our various Fijian communities in Australia for providing valuable support and contribution to our Fijian workers when the need arises and were faced with challenging situations in any alien environment as well as the culture shock that they were faced with. I also extend my sincere gratitude to the respective religious organisations and their pastors for the crucial role they play in providing pastoral care to our workers.

The insights and contributions from the Fijian diaspora are incredibly valuable to ensuring the wellbeing and success of Fijian workers under the Scheme and we are committed to working closely with the diaspora for the betterment of our workers. Also, I called upon the Fijian diaspora while we were there, Sir, to work collectively to ensure Fijian workers are all treated with dignity and integrity and free from harmful effects of misinformation to support initiatives that promote their wellbeing, rights and fair treatment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, meeting our Fijian workers after a lapse of three years was an eye-opener. At the same time, I felt a sense of shame and guilt over this matter about the laxity of the previous administration.

HON. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, they have to accept it, they ditched them.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of those.

You know how you looked after the workers of this country as well. Let the Bill come this afternoon.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We are looking after all of them, unlike what you did.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Listen!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of these meetings was to engage directly with the workers, understand their experiences, address any concerns they have and ensure that they are receiving the treatment and support while in Australia.

These meetings were crucial to ensuring the workers' wellbeing and success under the scheme. The country liaison officer, the first one that we have appointed, accompanied us and noted the concerns that need to be addressed through dialogue with the respective employers and to draw the attention of relevant state agencies to ensure compliance, especially in the areas of work rights and fair work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all Fijian workers visited expressed their sincere appreciation to the Coalition Government for taking time to visit and listen to their grievances. There were occasions where emotions got high, there were tears (tears of joy) as well shed by those workers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I quote what most of them said:

“We have not received any Ministerial visitation for the past three years since our deployment in 2021, and seeing the Government delegation present here today, gives us hope that the Government of the day cares for us.”

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Another jurisdiction all together.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I know it hurts, sorry about that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is a government elected by the people for the people.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- When we fully understand our responsibility to our people, wherever they are, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Hence, the need to meet with them and solve their problems. Who else can they look upon for this assistance, Mr. Speaker?

HON. P.K. BALA.- Not you!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- They were ditched, as I have said earlier, by the previous Administration.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- They felt, what they felt. Talk to them when you see them, they will tell you.

HON. K.K. LAL.- People are watching you.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes, they are all watching. They are watching from abroad as well and they know.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- They are getting more than \$5 an hour.

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- That will come as well, honourable Member.

HON. P.K. BALA.- When?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the visitation has enabled the Ministerial Team to hear and see things from a bird's eye perspective. It has also revealed ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- \$2,300.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ...both the positives and the negatives.

(Hon. K.K. Lal interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Speak when it is your turn.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What about the Caregivers in America?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, you destroyed the Trade Unions in the country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- You decimated them.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a positive note, Fijians will remain focused, committed and dedicated, thrive and achieve their set goals.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Some of these workers have assisted their families, Mr. Speaker, Sir, back home through construction of their home, farming, land cultivation, income-generating incentives, better education for their children and siblings, as well as community development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to share a few success stories of our Fijian workers.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- *Vinaka!*

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a young man from Matawalu in Lautoka has bought a truck for his father...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Thanks to FijiFirst.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... to help him cart his sugarcane from the farm to the mill. Another gentleman from the Province of Namosi has recently commenced with construction of a three-bedroom house for his children and spouse back home.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Tell them.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, an Aged Care Worker from Tau Village in Nadroga, went there and she took the initiative to upgrade her qualifications, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- She was assisted by the employer and after upgrading her qualifications and working for three years, in the fourth year, her employer applied for the variation of her VISA, and now, she is going for Permanent Residency and her children and spouse are going to join her.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- This lady also took the initiative to build a house, worth \$45,000 in her village.

MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT.- *Vinaka!*

HON. A.D. SINGH.- She also makes voluntary contributions to her FNPF from there.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- We have encouraged other workers to do the same, Mr. Speaker.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Absorb it.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a woman from Navua, who has just been six months of her engagement in the scheme, bought a four-wheel drive and secured a five-acre piece of land for her spouse to start their family farm. Another gentleman, Sir, from Bua secured a \$50,000 home in Caubati, and he still has two years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scheme is a game changer for some of our goal-oriented workers and they have achieved more compared to what they would have done ...

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- You tell them.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... in years back home here. Mr. Speaker, Sir ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Minister.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- *Na cava?*

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scheme, however, also has negative impacts on our workers and they faced several challenges during their employment in Australia. Negative impact or social issues due to family separation. Challenges which include cultural adjustment, language barrier, differences in workplace, practices. Furthermore, some workers encounter issues related to unfair treatment, overcrowded living conditions and lack of support services and breach of work rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial to address these challenges and ensure that Fijian workers are provided with the necessary support, guidance and resources to thrive in their roles and contribute positively to the Australian workforce and our own economy as well as their families back home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the health and lives of our workers is of paramount importance to us. Some Fijian workers, under the scheme, are facing psychological injuries resulting from discrimination, exploitation or mistreatment at their workplaces which can have a negative effect on their mental wellbeing.

Similarly, some workers are experiencing overcrowding living conditions, inadequate pay due to unauthorised deductions, long working hours with no overtime payment which contribute to stress and psychological effect. It is important for both the sending and receiving countries to recognise these potential risks and implement measures to support the mental wellbeing of labour mobility workers. This can include providing cultural orientation, language training, social support networks and above all ensuring fair treatment and protection of workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenges that our workers encounter require a comprehensive approach to address the issue. The issues need to be addressed urgently with our Australian counterparts to ensure the principle of fairness, equality, respect and dignity is upheld. We will be submitting a comprehensive report on our findings to my counterpart in Australia to be addressed by his department. We have advised him of this and very soon the report will reach his table.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded to earlier, there are some excellent approved employers and there are those that are not that compliant. Non-compliance by approved employers contributes to exploitation of workers through breaches of employment laws including employment contract breaches. To address these challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is reviewing recruitment and also the performance of some labour hired employment agencies as approved employers which is not working well for the Fijian workers. We are also encouraging and promoting the host employers to recruit directly under the programme and minimise third party involvement in the process. This is to minimise malpractices in recruitment and reduce exploitation as well as occasional disengagement of our workers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the team has noted that certain visa arrangements are very restrictive, there are conditions which say, “No pregnancy, no family visitation and no worker portability”. Sir, worker portability means joining another employer to work with which is a violation of worker’s rights and both human rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have had this discussion with our Australian counterpart and now it has been agreed that workers can be moved from one workplace to another in the same industry. Our workers also have been advised to ensure that with the assistance of the Country Liaison Officers put in writing all their grievances to the employers so that it can be escalated to higher authorities in the proper manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the role of the Country Liaison Officer is the key to the Fijian Government as it serves as a vital link between the Fijian workers, Australian approved employers and the Fijian Government ensuring effective communication, coordination and support for the success of the scheme for both Governments. The Country Liaison Officers will be responsible for ensuring the seamless transition of the Fijian workers providing an ongoing support and addressing concerns while promoting Fiji abroad.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week the Ministry has finalised the appointment of the second Liaison Officer to be based in Brisbane to look after the workers in Queensland and Northern Territory. The appointee will start work in two weeks' time. In the coming weeks the Ministry will advertise the position of the third Country Liaison Officer in Sydney to look after workers in New South Wales.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Minister check from the ground.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- There are no Liaison Officers, you never appointed one. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said this earlier, the Australian Government had approved the allocation of funds for a Liaison Officer in 2021. They never appointed. We have appointed the first one now and we have appointed the second one and now we are appointing the third one.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- In the new year, we will appoint the fourth one and that is when we will be relieved to having to go and visit them every time.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- They were sleeping on the job.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must thank the honourable Minister of Finance for approving the two Liaison Officer allocations and with that we are appointing and the third one. For the fourth one we have now asked the Australian Government to assist with and hopefully in the new year, we will appoint that one to be based in Western Australia. Once we have four Liaison Officers, we will be breathing a sigh of relief. The Liaison Officers will be the direct link between the workers, employer and us, and they will provide us with monthly progress reports, and of course to the High Commission. In that manner, they will resolve the problems on the spot.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the ongoing commitment to the PALM Scheme, the transition of the Scheme from the Department of Foreign Affairs to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relationships, is a strategic move and we are very happy that the whole Scheme is now under the Ministry of Employment, to say in simple terms. The Ministry of Employment and Workplace Relationship is now having the Scheme under its wings, and that makes things easier for us because we will deal directly with the Minister and his team. This way we will be more focused and there will be fewer layers of unnecessary ...

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Travel.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ... structures. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in strengthening both the Fiji and Australia collaborative efforts, they have agreed to work on data sharing initiatives, and this will

involve sharing of relevant information and resources to improve the effectiveness of the Scheme to ensure the successful implementation of all the goals.

Data sharing initiatives will help us to develop a new national labour mobility framework strategy to facilitate cooperation and coordination between the sending country and the receiving country, as well as between the government agencies. All in all, the Fijian Government is looking forward to finalising the Australia-Fiji bilateral Labour Agreement under the PALM or the MOU following the merging of both the short term and the long-term programmes in April, 2022. We hope to finalise the MOU once the draft implementation arrangements are made available by our Australian counterparts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir the revised MOU will improve governance of the Labour Migration Scheme in several ways. It highlights the principle of cooperation and responsibility sharing between the sending country and the host country by improving inter-ministerial and inter-agency coordination. This is because development negotiations, implementation and monitoring of Bilateral Labour Agreements require coordination amongst different ministries as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bilateral Labour Agreement will continue to create transparency, a major component of good governance and to be developed based on social dialogue and inclusive consultative processes for both countries. The Bilateral Labour Agreement will lead to positive changes in laws, policies and practices for better governance of the whole scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that the PALM Scheme will continue to be a valuable opportunity for the Fijians workers, and I am committed to addressing the challenges they face while working in Australia. The Vuvale Partnership Agreement provides a golden opportunity to Fiji to collaborate with the Australian Government and improve our labour mobility scheme for the benefit of all parties involved including support towards our economy which to-date stands at approximately \$50 million in remittance annually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji therefore has the opportunity to diversify our economy by strengthening and growing our Labour Mobility Programme towards economic resilience and at the same time has the obligation for the duty of care for our Fijians working abroad under these schemes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday the honourable Minister said that during my term I never visited the workers.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Yes.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Today he comes to this Parliament and say that is what I did.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- No, the PALM workers.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- PALM workers.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the manner in which the honourable Minister presented himself today, as if he is the only one who did everything in regards to PALM.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Answer the question.

HON. P.K. BALA.- And I will tell him, now I am going to tell him and you will listen to what I am going to say.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the outset I wish to thank the honourable Minister of Employment for his Ministerial Statement justifying his travels that he made but let me tell him ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He help cleaned up your mess.

HON. P.K. BALA.- ... that no amount of justification will reverse the decisions that he took to travel and I have always call his travels as “wine and dine travels”. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Employment Centre was established under the National Employment Centre Act 2009 under the Bainimarama Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is the fact!

HON. S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Did you visit or not?

HON. P.K. BALA.- No one can take away that fact, even you honourable Kamikamica.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Future Prime Minister.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Vuvale Partnership was signed in 2019 between the two former Prime Ministers of Australia and Fiji and Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what they had to say at that time and I quote, “we commit to this not only as friends and partners but as families as *vuvale*”.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the initial stage this task was very difficult. There was a huge competition by our neighbouring countries. The staff at the Ministry of Employment had to work day and night to build upon our name and brand and that is how this programme has become so successful.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hear! Hear.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, May last year, Australia’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Senator Wong, came to Fiji, and after our discussions, she announced that the Australian Government is working towards allowing the families of workers to live in Australia, and it is not a new subject.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, later last year, the Australian Prime Minister met with us and talks were held to increase the Caregivers from Fiji under the PALM Scheme. Here in Fiji, not there in Australia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all worked hard, as I have said earlier on, even during trying times, like COVID-19, to make sure that Fiji does not fail in its obligation in terms of the agreement.

During our term, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had sent around 7,000 Fijians to Australia and New Zealand for employment. I do not know what the figure is now, honourable Minister. You should have said in this Chamber the number of people you have sent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, the FijiFirst Government, have laid a very solid foundation for this growth.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- And we hope that the honourable Minister will build on that.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were criticised for these programmes by some of the honourable Members on the other side, so let us not forget that. The slogan was that the villages will be empty under these programmes, but that was not the truth, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Today this programme has become so important for this Government, that the honourable Minister has to make regular visits to Australia and New Zealand.

(Laughter)

What he has talked about, the success stories, I used to come here and inform Parliament on the success stories, that is the whole objective of that programme. The programme is designed in such a way that they would come, assist the villagers and the families, that is an ongoing thing. It is nothing new.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I briefly said on the works that we did, was all done here in Fiji, without making regular trips, like my colleague, the honourable Minister. But during our term, Sir, we had trust, this is the word, “trust”, on our staff at the Embassy to carry out this work, and also the team leaders that we sent from here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the word “trust” is important. What I can gather now is that this honourable Minister has got no trust in the staff of the Embassy.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I think he does not even trust his Prime Minister because the honourable Prime Minister went to meet the seasonal workers. Then after one week, I read in the papers that he also went.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- What is all happening? And then you come here and my God – big song, sing, dance and everything.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, now, there is even Liaison Officers. So, I hope from now onwards, since we have Liaison Officers, Embassy staff, team leaders (there are a lot of team leaders), that these wine and dine trips will stop. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Development and Way Forward for Sea Cucumber Fishery in Fiji

HON. K.V. RAVU.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests in the gallery and members of the public who are watching the livestream from the comfort of their homes; a very good morning to you all. I rise to deliver a Statement on the Sea Cucumber Fishery in Fiji and it is my hope that the information shared through this Statement will provide a holistic insight to us all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the trading of sea cucumber in the Pacific started in the early 1800s and is currently a multi-million dollar industry in the region, second only to tuna with some 21 sea cucumber species making up 90 percent of the trade.

Sea cucumbers are an important source of income for local fishers, including women, and their export is considered as one of the oldest trades in Fiji. As you are aware, Fiji has traded sea cucumbers since 1813 and because of its lucrative status, it has continued trade until today with imposition of fishing and trading bans by the Government of the day along the way.

Sea cucumbers which are largely traded in a smoked dry-form referred to as beche-de-mer or trepang, are high in protein and important amino acids, and consumed mainly by Chinese and other Southeast Asians for health and medicinal benefits.

MR. SPEAKER.- What is the biological name - sea cucumber, beche-de-mer and what?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes, I have forgotten the name.

MR. SPEAKER.- What?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- *holothuria scabra*.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- I could not get what you said, but you just continue.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- It is *holothuria scabra*.

Over 13 million people are involved in sea cucumber collection across 83 countries with over 90 percent of the world tropical coastlines participating in the trade. The main consuming countries are mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the high market demand, coupled with the associated risks on use of sustainable fishing practices and inadequate management strategies had led to the decline in sea cucumber stocks and health hazards for harvesters. In recognising this, the Ministry imposed the fishing ban in 2017 to protect this fishery and allow natural repopulation. The ban was of two parts:

1. Ban on the use of underwater breathing apparatus; and
2. ban on harvest or sale.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this ban was lifted in July 2022, with closure for harvesting in February 2023 and exports in April of the same year. The intent of lifting of the ban was to support national economic recovery after the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic and more so, individuals and communities for basic survival needs as most were made redundant from their jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the lifting of the ban to allow the harvest and export for this period had served its purpose with some \$18 million to \$20 million direct benefits paid out to harvesting communities and individuals. It was overwhelming to see the various forms of investments our fisher folk had engaged during this opening. This included infrastructure, improvements at village level, housing, procurement of machines and equipment to support income generating activities, investments and many more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was equally important that the Ministry tracked exports of bech-de-mer. Our records show that a total volume of 140,000 metric tonnes of bech-de-mer were exported during the opening in 2022-2023. The value is estimated to be \$11 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the sustainability in the stock, the following were in place in the 2022-2023 opening of the ban:

1. A defined criteria was in place for the selection of traders. A total of 11 companies were engaged by the BDM Licensing Committee and it was chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Industry and Trade and co-opted an additional three Permanent Secretaries as members. All these traders were issued with conditions to operate.
2. The 11 companies engaged agents to buy sea cucumber from harvesters.
3. A special licence specifically for sea cucumber harvest was issued to fisher folks through the normal licensing process under section 13 of the Fisheries Act (Cap 158).
4. A monitoring plan was also in placed by our Enforcement Team to ensure compliance to the licensing and trading conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry undertook a bech-de-mer stock assessments in the Western Division with the SPC experts and surveyed some of the *i qoliqoli* with the most harvest pressure. The areas show presence of species which indicates that they have not been fully wiped out as speculated and will be repopulating.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on these assessments, the Coalition Government reopened the ban for six months in July 2023 and for closure on 31st December, 2023. The intent of the opening was for three reasons - for national economic recovery, greater community empowerment and to open up spaces for iTaukei-owned businesses to trade in this lucrative commodity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from the processes that were in the first lifting of the ban, the new ones implemented by the Coalition Government through the Ministry are as follows:

1. The defined criteria was expanded to allow eligible iTaukei own companies to be part of this process.
2. An internal committee chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Fisheries and Forestry evaluated the submissions. This streamlined process allowed for swift decisions to be made.
3. Twenty-one companies were engaged to buy and sell sea cucumber, of which 25 percent was iTaukei owned and they had secured their direct markets to Hong Kong. In the first opening in July 2022, there was a zero percent involvement of iTaukei-owned companies.
4. It was mandatory for companies to liaise directly with communities and harvesters, resulting in better pricing offers for harvesters.
5. As part of their corporate social responsibility, traders were tasked to engage in hatchery and culturing activities with selected communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for both lifting periods, the lucrative profits, gains and benefits has shown positive impacts in improving the livelihoods of communities and fisher folks and have contributed to economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the current opening period, the estimated volume of exports recorded by the Ministry is 42,000 metric tonnes with a value of FJ\$4 million. More shipments are expected to

be received in next month of opening.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the Ministry's attempt to ensure sustainability in this fishery, the following is currently being implemented:

1. Together with its partners, the Ministry has undertaken various assessments to study the viability of the beche-de-mer fishery and understand the stock status. This includes the National Science Expedition which has just concluded in the last two months. This was a rapid assessment that was led by the Ministry in collaboration with Blue Prosperity Fiji and the WAITT Foundation.

The preliminary report has shown that there are beche-de-mer stocks on our reefs, while some areas have fared better than others. There are measures and monitoring in place to ensure that communities continue to adhere to specified size limits and conditions imposed.

Following these studies, the Ministry plans for a more extensive national stock assessment. This is a very costly exercise, we will, therefore, seek funding to undertake this through the normal budgetary process and through our partners.

2. The Ministry has already started scoping for communities with potential for sea cucumbers sea ranching projects. The Ministry is also liaising with donors partners, through furthering the scope of hatchery at Makogai to increase large scale production and rearing of sea cucumbers and replenishing coastal reefs around Fiji.
3. Galoa Hatchery has juvenile sandfish ready for restocking some of the reefs where the broodstock was spawned from. In addition, some of the sites have already been reseeded with juvenile sandfish.
4. The Ministry will finalise its Sea Cucumber Management Plan and regulations to ensure controlled harvesting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to inform this august Parliament and the general public at large on work that the Ministry is undertaking to balance conservation and production of these fishery.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate, honourable Minister, how many direct importers and exporters local do we have? You have mentioned a few but I could not get the actual figures of locals in that category.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the total number of exporters is 21 and we have 11 *iTaukei* exporters.

MR. SPEAKER.- Would it be simpler to Australia if you have to be an importer or a local resident in China to be an importer?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- No, Sir, it is a direct export to their clients in Hong Kong and China.

MR. SPEAKER.- I said that I am interested because of my co-ownership of the *qoliqoli* and we have been dealing with the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce, honourable Minister. So I suggest just to polish up on those figures that I have been asking because it is hard to penetrate to be an exporter or importer. You are an exporter if you are Fijian but you have to be a resident somewhere in China or Hong Kong to be an importer. Is that correct?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- Alright, that is enough.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to speak in response to the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forest Ministerial Statement on Sea Cucumber Fishery in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be addressing sea cucumber as beche-de-mer which is much easier for me to refer to or BDM. The ban on sea cucumber was introduced in 1987 as an affirmative action initiative. It was to help *iTaukei* communities along the coast and around the islands in Fiji. It was to prompt them to enter into commercial activities and this had initiated the immediate response by local communities especially on maritime islands and coastal areas in Vanua Levu and Viti Levu.

During the 30 years of harvest there was no guideline to the harvesters of BDM especially the merchants and the middlemen. The benefit basically over those 30 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the middlemen and merchants. Our local population did not get the total benefit that was initiated to benefit our local population. Let me just give you an example, BDM would be bought at about FJ\$70 here in Fiji and it was sold in Hong Kong open market at US\$200.

The merchants basically went out and distributed boats and engines as part payment for our local population to collect and sell the resource back to the merchants. It was really totally unfair. The practice basically drove the BDM population to almost extinct. In fact, two species have gone through the process of extinction in Fiji and luckily during those years when the ban was introduced, it had repopulated our reef.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other issue with beche-de-mer when it had gone out of the shallow waters that used to be harvested by our ancestors and it can only be found in deep waters, our population around the coast started using diving gears and this was a great concern. There was a huge number of fatalities amongst our *iTaukei* population in Vanua Levu, Taveuni and Yasawa basically were the scapegoats of these buying and selling. Fiji was on the verge of losing two main species, golden fish and black fish.

The Ministry of Fisheries was able to repopulate our ocean during that period. The initial ban was for five years. We had planned that within the five years, the population would come back. Fortunately, within three years, we had report on our stock assessment that the population has rejuvenated.

The whole of the Lau Group was reported to have the population that had never been seen before; the beaches were full of beche-de-mer. In that context that we were waiting for the five years, the cyclones hit Fiji. We started to put a programme to re-introduce for our local communities along the coast and the maritime islands to harvest this to benefit them. It prompted us to make a quick restock and stock assessment. That was bulldozed by the cyclones and then COVID-19. In fact, we were lucky that we had reached the five years when COVID-19 hit. So, the population of beche-de-mer around the coastal areas was in huge quantity.

Basically, the honourable Minister has explained what had resulted out of the harvest and the sale. I thank the honourable Minister for highlighting the strict guideline that was given. I also thank the initiative to involve the local communities, especially *iTaukei* to be involved in the export. This is an area, I had travelled to Hong Kong, and I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would know how difficult it is to enter the Hong Kong market of beche-de-mer, but I was able to go across, through our representative in Hong Kong and force him to allow our *iTaukei* to be also exporters of the commodity. I hope in the context of all these, the Government will still look at sustainability as a

major consideration for our future generations. We must not allow the leisure of our generations to be denied from our future generations.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this is a very interesting topic and I think if only the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications could look into and see how best we can explore it. In several of our visits to Hong Kong, in transit we were met by the Chamber of Commerce, as highlighted by honourable Koroilavesau. I was interested to touch on how best we can penetrate that big market in China. This is a very expensive food in China. They take all the sea cucumbers, they can grab hold from all the seas all over the world, and they are very good businesspeople. They will milk you dry before you realise you have run out of stock.

I was listening very closely to the statement by the honourable Minister, since he is a fisheries expert, maybe this is something that could be followed up, because I am wearing another hat here and it interests me. We levy \$10,000 for some local men to come and dive for this; \$10,000 is peanuts. They will do this all over the seas in Fiji, and there is only one big exporter sitting out there in Labasa. He gets all the juice out of all these without dipping his head in the water.

We have tried using machines and we have suffered a lot, then they banned the usage of this and honourable Koroilavesau knows that fully well because we were at the extreme mercy of the weather and we did not know how to observe all these things and we suffered these bans and we had to be rushed Suva by medivac to be able to put in those decompression chambers. It is quite costly for us but it is lucrative business, and we have them in abundance. If only we could be helped just to see how best we can also enter the market and play in the market. That would certainly be promising for the big *qoliqoli* owners all over Fiji.

Honourable Members, we will adjourn for lunch now since I have another meeting, and hopefully when we return, we will continue when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.16 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.27 p.m.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the first Oral Question from honourable Rinesh Sharma has been made redundant. Since the honourable Minister for Fisheries has given his Ministerial Statement, we hope that takes care of the question.

(Question No. 183/2023 was withdrawn)

Climate Action Transparency Phase 2 Project (Question No. 184/2023)

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU 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 Project Cooperation Agreement for the Initiative for Climate Action Transparency Phase II Project?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for the question on the Project Cooperation Agreement for the Initiative for Climate Action Transparency (ICAT). This project is fully funded by the United Nations Office of Project Services (UNOPS). There are no financial implications to the Fiji Government and the project funding for phase 2 is US\$139,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet at its meeting on 24th October, 2023 approved the signing of the Project Cooperation Agreement for phase 2 of the initiative for Climate Action Transparency which is an ongoing Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this second phase of the project is focused on:

1. National Greenhouse Gas Inventory Management System;
2. Data institutionalisation from Nationally Determined Contribution; and
3. Tracking and policy making.

The Cabinet at its meeting held on the 24th October, 2023 approved the project cooperation agreement between the government of Fiji and UNOPS as I said before.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think some honourable Members are wondering why I am wearing this tie. Today is Thanksgiving Day in the United States of America. It was first celebrated in the first harvest after the first European settlers settled there. I am not promoting America or anything.

The background, the UNFCCC as we have heard this week was ratified in 1992 by the SVT and GVP Coalition Government which I had the honour to lead from 1992 to 1999. It required State parties to regularly report on their climate change commitments and progress of National Climate Actions.

For developing countries like Fiji, reporting is done through our national communication reporting on climate change every four years and also biannual reports every two years. These reports

contains greenhouse gas inventory. The inventory is an account of greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide, methane, et cetera immediate to the atmosphere per sector on an annual basis.

We are aware of the various sectors that can contribute to these greenhouse gases including agriculture and beef and dairy farming as well as rice. Inventories are used to establish a baseline for tracking emission plans, develop climate change mitigation strategies and policies and assess national progress.

The Paris Agreement signed at COP21 sets out an enhanced transparency framework for countries to promote effective implementation of the Agreement. To support countries in this regard, the Initiative of Climate Action Transparency (ICAT) was created as a multi-stakeholder partnership in 2015 bringing together multiple countries, various sectoral experts as well as public and private stakeholders at all levels of governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initiative for climate action transparency provides countries with tailored support and practical tools and methodologies to build robust transparency frameworks needed for effective climate action in sync with national development priorities. Fiji ICAT was one project with the Climate Change Division (CCDE) together with the Ministry of Agriculture developed a Greenhouse Gas Inventory Report for rice cultivation and livestock. A guidance document for determining greenhouse gas emissions in the agriculture sector was also issued.

Phase 1 enabled the identification and assessment of two agricultural policies for greenhouse gas and sustainable development impact. The project also resulted in the development of an overarching institutional arrangement and recommendation for a National Reporting System and Design for the Fiji National Greenhouse Gas Inventory for Agriculture.

Fiji ICAT Phase 2 Project, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is the subject to this question will enable alignment of sectoral monitoring, reporting and verification systems with enhanced transparency framework of the Paris Agreement. I am sure you are all aware of the Paris Agreement, the attempt of the nations of the world to get global warming down to 1.5 or less than 1.5 degrees centigrade by 2030.

The first place of the ICAT Project identified at the national monitoring, reporting and verification system blueprint developed for the agriculture sector could be replicated for other greenhouse gas sectors.

This system blueprint will now be piloted to the fluorinated gases sub sector of the Industrial Process and Product Unit (IPPU) sector. The project timeline is expected to be 13 months and this phase of ICAT Project will enhance the ability of extension from the Ministry of Agriculture to contribute to the national reports required under United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Phase 2, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will further strengthen their ability to measure the greenhouse gas mitigation abatement impact of introducing biogas digestors in community. The project will strengthen the Department of Environment database on hydrofluorocarbons (HFC). This will inform policy around the importation of air conditioning and refrigeration into the country. Phase 2 will also address the Ministry of Local Government and Department of Environment challenges in collecting waste collection data from the various municipalities. This ICAT project will aid in understanding solid waste disposal issues as well as the opportunities for methane recovery but also address other issues such as land and marine pollution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity to update Parliament on this important

Project.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I have a supplementary question to the honourable Prime Minister but I need to acknowledge this great step into the implementation particularly climate action steps that would help us in fight against global warming.

My simple question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is all about green gas and you are well aware of the fight on methane particularly on energy, agriculture and waste. But, honourable Prime Minister, Sir, apart from greenhouse gas data and recording and the actions that we do, also very critically is our implementation of our Nationally Determined Contributions. We have a reporting process in that area as well, Sir.

The question is, how is the Climate Change Office approaching this or if we have not made so much effort into it, then probably it is something that the Government has to consider seriously because this is how our mitigation contributions are also recorded under the UNFCCC process?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- I think that is a very pertinent supplementary question. It challenges the Government to update or upskill its workers. You will have noticed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there was an article in the news two days ago about the appointment of a new Permanent Secretary for Climate Change and he had been involved in the international arena for some years and has come home to serve. He has not been appointed, they have made the announcement but he will be part of the group going up to COP.

The Australian Government have been very kind as to second to us an expert from the Climate Change Division of the Civil Service in Australia to help out with our records and data keeping to justify our request. The Small Island Developing Nations have been complaining about the tardiness of the assistance they get. It has been because of their submissions for this funds have not been properly staffed and we are going to have the officers properly staffed. We are also looking at other things like the landfill in Naboro and whether we can harvest anything from the old dump we have in Lami et cetera. Those are things that we are doing.

We had an old chap from Tailevu (senior to me at school) who manage the Manukau Dump for many years and then he came to start the one in Naboro during our time and it is time now that we look at harvesting gas from that landfill.

MR. SPEAKER.- I just want to share something regarding the statement made by the honourable Prime Minister in terms of the tardiness of these Small Island States. It is quite something to work with them and see how they have been going on their own, it is sad. Even though they are seriously affected, but their tardiness, kind of, stands out.

Those are some of our island neighbours who are now suffering from these issues which have been raised by the honourable Prime Minister. They are coming to meetings, sometimes you do not feel embarrassed but sometimes you laugh - this is the Pacific way. How they are dressed, just a pair of shorts, flip flops and they come to international meetings to register themselves. When they go back, we will be talking amongst ourselves. *Isa*, this is where we are and how we are doing it.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is something that we really should be talking about. There are nature-based solutions that the honourable Leader of the Opposition is very much aware of and there are also our own men thought-up solutions of reclamation and trying to mitigate the effects of rising sea levels. We have a Fiji company that is working with the Government of Kiribati in the reclamation of some of their islands, also shipping, landfill all the way from Fiji to Kiribati to build up their islands.

ECE Curriculum and Salary of Teachers
(Question No. 185/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the steps being undertaken by the Ministry to address the ECE sector, particularly the ECE Curriculum and salary of teachers?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for again asking another question regarding the Ministry of Education. This time around, this one is a very crucial sector in terms of the education regarding Early Childhood Education and some of the long overdue issues regarding teachers' salaries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently *Na Noda Mataniciva* is the current curriculum that has been used by the Early Childhood Education. I see the honourable Member is nodding his head in agreement to what I am saying from this end.

Since 2009, this curriculum needs to be reviewed to be on par with the changes and demands that have occurred during the period from 2009–2023. There was a forum of Fiji ECE subject analysis that was done in 2022 where there was discussion to review the Early Childhood Education curriculum in 2023 so this will be undertaken in 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regarding teachers first of all we need to review the resources that have been allocated to address the ECE. Currently, there is only one or two ECE officers that look after closed to 800 ECE schools around Fiji. So after the Fiji National Educational Summit there were plans to set up and put more emphasis on the Early Childhood Education with the positions to be filled up for the position of Director ECE, Principal Officer, Senior Curriculum Specialist.

These are some of the proposed positions that were discussed in the Fiji National Education Summit: a Senior Education Officer for ECE, Research Officer and nine district officers (advisors) that will be responsible to seeing the smooth operations of the ECEs schools in the various districts around Fiji. The proactive steps that need to be taken by the Ministry will contribute to the development of our nation's young minds and ensuring that our dedicated teachers who play a very important role receive a recognition and the remunerations that they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to draw attention to the disparity that had been experienced by the Ministry of Education ECE teachers regarding the inconsistency of the remuneration that they have been paid over the years. They were given contracts and I think the honourable Member would be very much aware with the stated salary of \$14,000 that they will be entitled to. Unfortunately, the ECE teachers are paid hourly rate of \$5. They work five hours a day and sometimes their salary amounts to only \$9,000. So, these are the discrepancies that we are trying to work on, for us to review the hours of work, if they work the full eight hours so that they can be entitled to what they are actually appointed on, on a salary of \$14,000. Thank you very much Mr, Speaker, Sir.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, a supplementary question. Before that, there might be new question but if the Minister can answer; if we are talking about ECE children, proceed from ECE.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will decide on that.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Sir.

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- If students going from ECE to primary school, ECE being the feeder of primary school and primary school being the feeder of the secondary schools, what we have seen recently is some management are coming up with their own rules whereby Year 8 students are not taken into the same school for Year 9 as a feeder. I will give you an example. MGM Primary are rejecting students from Year 8 to be enrolled in Year 9 and they telling them to go and look for their schools on median marks. If the Ministry can look into this because parents are having a lot of difficulties also.

The same applies for ECE. If the feeder is ECE for primary school, they are not enrolling these students and parents are roaming around from here and there to look for their schools and we have live examples of this, if the Minister can look into this, please.

MR. SPEAKER.- They roam around looking for schools?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, Sir.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a totally new question, but I would like to shed some light into the education situation that we have now. We have over 700 plus primary schools, and we only have 170 plus secondary schools. Definitely, there is imbalance there that we are trying to address by even building new schools, trying to address students going to find the schools that provide better quality education. At the same time, they are leaving the schools in the rural and maritime areas vacant or empty, because the people are coming into town, and we are going to address that. Thank you.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Thank you, honourable Minister. There is an estimated of 1,500 ECE teachers, and Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of the people have been affected by the VAT increase.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Of course they have been affected, we agree.

Honourable Minister for Employment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is relevant because 80 percent of his speech is about international things, nothing about local employment. To the Honourable Minister for Education, I have high hopes from you that if the salary of these ECE teachers could see an increment in time to come, and if there was any impact assessment done through a feedback question mechanism, or clarification on the impact of the Cost of Living that has increased.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the short answer to that is, we are trying to address the anomalies in the pays that are currently being paid out to ECE teachers. This was inherited. I think the honourable Member who asked the question would be fully aware, and that is what we are trying to address now, trying to give them what were actually offered in the first place with the proper working hours.

MOU - Risk Communication Capacity
(Question No. 186/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services update Parliament on

the Memorandum of Understanding to Enhance Risk Communication Capacity for the Ministry?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. Sir, on 3rd October, 2023, Cabinet endorsed the Ministry of Health to engage with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for opportunities to build risk communication capacity in the Ministry. Just as the honourable Prime Minister had mentioned in celebrating the Thanksgiving Day, we are also thankful to the US Government in terms of increasing their capacity at the USAID Department - the Ministry's to seek their assistance with regards to risk communications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, risk communication is important in the public health response tool, sure the previous Government know this too well. Its main purpose is to enable people at least to make informed decisions to take actions to mitigate the effects of health threat or hazard such as disease outbreak and proactive measures and preventative measures, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services Communication team has commenced consultation with our USAID counterparts and the details of their assistance with the Ministry. The visit by the USAID Team is planned in February next year to conduct the Needs Assessment Survey and also handover much-needed communication equipment.

The MOU between the Ministry and the USAID has been drafted and contains assistance sought from USAID through its action portfolio which is their funded global social behavioural change project. The list of activities are the needs assessment which I have alluded to earlier in 2024, capacity building for staff of the Ministry and developing communications, plan, campaigns and communication materials, virtual coaching on developing communication materials, website enhancement training and provision of communication equipment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently draft MOU is now with the USAID Team for their consideration and final endorsement, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Sir, that in itself is a brief update on the current MOU between the Ministry of Health and USAID on the understanding on enhance risk communication capacity. *Vinaka.*

Update on Review of Market Fees
(Question No. 187/2023)

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

Given that the market fees review for market vendors and farmers was announced in the 2023-2024 Budget, can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the status of the review?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the question, first, I would like to respond to a remark that was made in the morning by the honourable Leader of the Opposition regarding the upkeep of Albert Park. I wish to remind the honourable Leader of the Opposition as well as honourable Members of Parliament that there is no change to the maintenance programme that is followed by the Suva City Council, whatever has been done in the past they are continuing with that, that is going to continue, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I played touch rugby there last year and this year.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- A good example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are here for the last two

days, the ground was closed. It seems that Suva City Council was trying to maintain the surface, as well as the upkeep of Albert Park.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Deep holes are there.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, now I will respond to the question before me this afternoon. Firstly, I would like to remind the honourable Member that the 2022-2023 Budget does not mention the market reviews for market vendors and farmers, but rather reinstated the waiver of the market stall fees, I suppose as COVID-19 recovery strategy. The reinstatement is the consideration of the successful navigation of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that we are now on the path to recovery. This is also to ease the Coalition Government as we now work on the national priorities and commitments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government provided a sum of approximate \$10.5 million in the form of financial support to Municipal Councils for the waiver of the market stall fees for the last two financial years. The waiver was provided in the financial years from 2021 to 2022, as well as 2022 to 2023.

However, there was a shortfall from the grant that was provided by Government. In 2021 to 2022, there was a shortfall of close to \$55,000, which is a short fall of 11 percent and \$1.2 million in the financial year 2022 to 2023, which is a shortfall of close to 19 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although the market stall fee subsidy was allocated to 13 Municipal Councils initially, the amounts allocated was insufficient to pay all the dues on the market stalls. Not all the Councils were provided with the actual amount of funds that they would have collected from the market vendors in all the municipal markets.

As a result, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry requested for a reinstatement of market stall fees to allow Councils to collect fees to focus on strengthening their revenue stream. All Municipal Councils around the country have been challenged to manage their affairs from business perspective and not relying solely on Government on the provision of grant to assist them in their operation.

As such, the budget for the financial year 2023-2024 does not make any provision for the subsidy on the market stall fees for this fiscal year. Municipal Councils have now reinstated the market stall fees from this financial year and are collecting the same. There is no review, they are just collecting whatever the gazetted fees say for all the municipal markets around the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the significance of the market stall fees revenue and sustaining operations and development of municipality, the Councils have been prompted to take actions to ensure the collection of their revenue. Since the announcement of the reinstatement of stall fees, Municipal Councils have been advised to ensure that market stall vendors resume payment of their respective fees as at 1st August, 2023. The existing fee structure, as outlined in the previous years, remain in effect to allow the Councils to make appropriate submissions if there is a need for review of the market fees for all the Municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, Municipal Councils have been directed to establish a mechanism to efficiently collect these fees and maintain accurate record of the transactions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a sum of \$1.675 million has been collected by the 13 Councils in the last quarter from August to October this year. This is the much-needed revenue for the Local Government that will assist Municipal Councils to enhance their operations and service delivery for the benefit of the market vendors, ratepayers and the community at large.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government, through Municipal Councils, will ensure that ratepayers and various communities continue to receive the service that they deserve. Needless to say, the Municipal Councils will be motivated to build the cities and towns with the aim to generate multiple activities and innovative development of infrastructure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, UN Women has provided funding assistance to the Ministry for the review of the bylaws and the development of the new Municipal Market regulations, considering the changing demands of the markets, market vendors, Municipal Councils and the public at large.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the funding provided by UN Women is in the sum of FJ\$89,600. This will cover the market consultancy and awareness during the review exercise.

It is also worth noting, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the assistance will focus on the consultative process of the revision of market bylaws of the Municipal Councils to ensure that regulations are established. As such, the Ministry in partnership with UN Women, has appointed a consultant to carry out the review exercise and draft market regulations that will be a standard regulation to be used by the 30 Municipal Councils.

As we speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you go around Municipal Councils in Fiji, they have different market bylaws for different markets, and that is something that we are trying to address now. There are cases where some of the produce that are not supposed to be sold in some of the local markets that we have are now being sold. It is just like you are walking into a mini supermarket. There are also cases where some market vendors have been allocated more than two or more than four stalls, some even have 20 stalls, so that is something that we are trying to address right now.

The role of the consultant, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to provide guidance to the Ministry of Local Government in developing Municipal Market regulations which would replace the market bylaws.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the review and consultation with the Office of the Solicitor-General, the Ministry will facilitate the formalisation of the regulations. The consultancy fee for the review is in the sum of FJ\$40,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of funding an agreement with Ministry and UN Women is also to develop materials and awareness programmes. Awareness material will be a simplified market regulation that will be displayed in all 13 Municipal Markets.

The Ministry of Local Government in collaboration with UN Women endeavours to complete the project before the end of the financial year.

I thank you, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to respond to the question before this august Parliament this afternoon. Thank you very much.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the honourable Minister has informed Parliament, he has reinstated the fees for the market vendors and farmers. Sir, what a Government! The people's Government!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would be welcomed by the Coalition Government to come into Parliament and brag about putting money into people's pocket, but here they are bragging about their collections.

To the so-called people's Government, honourable Minister, do you have any exemptions on any reduction for any smallholder vendors because remember, cyclones came, COVID-19 came and these were really affected? Mr. Speaker, Sir, these were really affected but the VAT increase has

really impacted our people, especially these vendors. So, are there any exemptions to be considered for these vendors?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Thank you, honourable Member for the question. Mr. Speaker, Sir, through you, if you have been following the Reserve Bank of Fiji's announcement just lately, they have stated that Fiji is now back to pre-COVID-19 level and if you happen to walk around all the Municipal Markets, you will see that a lot of produce are now being sold in all the markets.

To answer his question, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just said that the Ministry is on the verge of reviewing the market bylaws and that some of that, we want to do right now, so those are some of the things that we are going to consider. There will be cases where some vendors that will be affected may be due to something that must have affected them. VAT increase is not something new. What I have just is not back to pre-COVID-19. A lot of things are happening now. A lot of people are buying from the market. A lot of market vendors are now receiving more income as they used to do before, so that is something that the Ministry is considering of doing as we review the Market Bylaws.

Establishment of the Scam Taskforce
(Question No. 188/2023)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the establishment of the Scam Taskforce on online fraudulent activities and its future plans?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I thank the honourable Tunabuna for a very relevant and topical question in the country right now. Perhaps, before I venture into my question, there were some questions made over the last 24 hours that warrant some mention. I would like start with, to me, what was a very significant event yesterday.

Sir, yesterday, on this floor, the honourable Leader of the Opposition begged the honourable Prime Minister to attend COP 28 and the honourable Prime Minister agreed, virtually immediately, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I hope Fiji watch that gesture yesterday, Sir, because it is showing a very important point, a point that all of us in this Parliament, including the whole country, will learn that one key element of leadership is the ability to listen, and when it is right, act on it.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 16 years...

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- No!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *E sega, e warai*. So, I hope that the people of Fiji will take note that we have a Leader who actually listens.

A couple of other points, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Bala mentioned something about empty vessels yesterday. So, I thought just to match his quote, I would provide a quote from this side of Parliament just in the spirit of banter and politics. It is a quote from Abraham Lincoln, the former President of the United States, where he said, and I quote: "It is best to be quiet and be thought a fool or to speak out and remove all doubt."

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, the final point I would like to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir,

is about honourable Bala and maybe this is picking on his speech.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- If you continue to speak, you'll remove all doubt.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He, in responding, was asked, "Did you travel to see the workers offshore? I think he did not answer that question, which brings me to a very important point, Sir. What was the motivation of his Government in terms of the....

HON. J. USAMATE.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker. Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, please, answer the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- You raised a Point of Order and you are telling him to answer the question?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I will leave my point on honourable Bala for another day, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity to answer the question. The Scam Taskforce was actually established this year by Government in response to quite significant and concerning online fraudulent activities that happened in this country. It is very unfortunate that Fiji has had a history of scams over the years, such as the gifting pyramid schemes, now the e-Bay shop scheme, bitcoin and cryptocurrency, impersonation to obtain financial advantage through *Viber*, et cetera.

The failed e-Bay shop scam has left many people struggling, with hundreds of people losing thousands of dollars in a scheme that provided zero returns once it collapsed. E-Bay shop was essentially a pyramid scheme disguised as a recruitment agency. They had over a hundred agents, recruiting people into the scheme across all Divisions in Fiji. In response, the Fiji Police Force also established the taskforce in each Division to ascertain the severity of the matter.

The Consumer Council of Fiji, Fijian Competition & Consumer Commission (FCCC), the Consumer Commission and other agencies pleaded to the public to come forward and report the matter to enable comprehensive investigation to proceed.

Thus far, the Taskforce has received over 1,859 complaints as of 31st October, 2023. It is understood that the people have been taken in for questioning and we hope for an outcome soon, given that the e-Bay online recruitment scam is of national interest, noting the millions of dollars that have been lost by the public actively participating in this online scheme. The total value of reported losses to date is \$3.1 million.

There is, no doubt, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the rise in technology and the use of e-commerce platforms are being misused. It is still new and not fully utilised in Fiji and the Pacific countries, hence it is not fully regulated. Such examples, such as mobile wallets - M-PAiSA and MyCash, are becoming increasingly popular tools for cashless payments and money transfer. There is a need, Sir, to review existing regulations and identify gaps to safeguard consumer protection. That is one of the current new priorities of the Ministry and the People's Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed, the Taskforce has their hands full to also assess, review, monitor online fraudulent activities both, locally and abroad, ensuring there is no money leakages offshore. It is important to note that continuous advocating against fraudulent activities through various media platforms are being made by members of the taskforce. The Taskforce may or will declare an online activity as a scam after an assessment of the Taskforce, assigning members to take necessary action where applicable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Taskforce at the moment, comprises of the following agencies, the:

1. Ministry of Trade;
2. Fiji Police Force;
3. Fiji Competition and Consumer Commission;
4. Consumer Council of Fiji;
5. Online Safety Commission;
6. Reserve Bank of Fiji; and
7. Solicitor-General.

The Chairperson of the taskforce is generally the Minister for Trade (myself) or the Permanent Secretary. The Taskforce has the ability to co-opt members, such as the Financial Intelligence Unit, commercial banks and telecom service providers, such as Vodafone or Digicel, as required. Thus far, we have had three meetings on the online scams – e-Bay Shop and *Viber* impersonations are key issues at the moment. Impersonators would defraud family, friends, business executives using MPAAiSA or MyCash platforms to deceive innocent people.

What are the future plans, Mr. Speaker, Sir? In our Taskforce meetings, we have invited the two major operators, Vodafone and Digicel to seek their support to nurture and create awareness on the ongoing scams that are involving the use of e-wallets. Most importantly to hear the activities in providing more secure platforms, programmes and initiatives to create more awareness of devious transactions and scams. It is unfortunate that whilst Fiji aims to develop our digital economy, it is being misused and it does build mistrust amongst us all; this is unacceptable.

Sadly, during our taskforce meetings, it was revealed that a new way of scamming through *Viber* accounts as I had mentioned is currently underway where accounts are being hacked, whereby the hacker will try and obtain money from one's own contacts. This type of new impersonation is happening right now, and our taskforce has received a lot of reports and complaints. Alarms are being sounded and we urge people to take this very seriously.

In addition, the FCCC, the Consumer Council, RBF are collaborating with a digital solutions provider to provide a proactive approach to awareness and educating the public on online scams. They will be publicising their awareness material very soon. We have made it a top priority, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to bring justice to those involved in the scam to be taken to task. Furthermore, we will be undertaking more awareness programmes to educate the public so that they do not fall into such scams in the future.

In the medium to long term, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the taskforce is also looking at the existing laws to give consumer protection agencies more teeth. Can I say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the government over the last 16 years had seen these scams before and did absolutely nothing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- This is a government that is full of talk, a lot of hot air, again no action.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just like you.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Through this august Parliament, I call on the beloved Fijians to take great awareness in the use of various social media sites as there have been high reports of fraudulent activities originating from social media sites promising get rich quick schemes. I therefore urge the public to practice financial awareness when coming across such schemes and prevent themselves from falling victim to these kind of ventures.

In very simple terms, Sir, if someone comes to you and says, “your money is going to grow 50 percent or 100 percent” my advice to the public, run for the hills. With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to answer the question.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his detailed explanation but not his meanderings. My question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs has had discussions on this matter. I just wanted to ask the honourable Deputy Prime Minister if there has been communications with the two mobile service providers because it seems to us as a Committee that they are also taking advantage because it is business for them on the money transfer that has been created as they collect fees out of it. I just wanted clarification on that, please.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you for that question. Let us not forget Digicel and Vodafone are actually regulated by the RBF so there is no way they would jeopardise their licences. They have responded when there has been invitations for them to come and attend the taskforce, they have been quite transparent in terms of their explanations, and they are actively assisting the Police to actually try and find out the perpetrators.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a supplementary question. I had alluded to this in one of my statements the other day. It has to do with the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime. When we ratify that Convention, we partner with these countries that are leading the fight on cybercrime. Do you know if we are going to ratify, given that Treaty has gone through the whole process? It came to the Standing Committee on the Foreign Affairs and Defence, and we brought it back to Parliament. Do you know if we are going to ratify and sign it? Those people who are doing the online scams, if you catch them, there is the Cybercrime Act in Fiji that you are going to perhaps use to convict them and that was put in place by the previous government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, obviously if they are found to be guilty, they will be prosecuted. At the moment the police is still doing their investigations. On the Budapest Convention, we are working hard to actually get something before Cabinet to actually ratify the Convention. There is only another piece of consultation that needs to happen with the stakeholders, and as soon as that happens we will be tabling it with Cabinet . I am hoping to do that in the first quarter of next year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a clarification. If the two mobile companies are regulated by RBF, then what is Telecommunication Authority of Fiji doing?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, she has been the Minister of Trade but probably is not familiar with the machinations. Telecom does not operate mobile wallets, so they are not regulated by the RBF.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- They are not regulated by the RBF?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes, so they are not accountable, they do not have a discussion point to make in the conversation about e-Bay and whatever, because that involves the mobile network. It does not involve Telecom.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Can you confirm whether RBF is regulating these two mobile companies?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Of course.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is very important to understand, because I know there are many financial institutions which are not regulated by the RBF till now, for example, Pacific Finance is not regulated by RBF. That is coming as a ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Reserve Bank of Fiji Act stipulates very clearly who gets regulated under the financial system. The mobile operators have to be regulated because they are taking deposits from the people of Fiji so they have the laws that actually regulate them. Then you have the banks that have certain regulations. In order to get the mobile wallet, they need to get RBF approval. They cannot do it without RBF. I am not sure what you learnt when you were there for 16 years.

Update on Waste Management and Disposal Practices
(Question No. 189/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the current state of waste management and disposal practices in our communities that used to be covered by Rural Local Authorities?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the honourable Member for the question raised. Waste management in Fiji, indeed, is a critical issue. The reason why this is very important is because this is brought about by exacerbated rate of urban drift, population growth, the changes in lifestyle that have led to surge in waste generation. The burden is particularly heavier on municipal councils grappling the challenges of proper solid waste management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as outlined in the Local Government Act 1972 the municipalities bear the responsibility for solid waste management. However, they face a barrage of issues including illegal dumping, damaged communal containers and resistance to service charges. In the rural areas, the disposal of solid waste is often buried or through burning. The municipal councils were given the responsibility for solid waste management, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in extended areas a duty previously overseen by Rural Local Authority since 2018. Despite the challenges, the Councils are now servicing 234 settlements and villages in these extended boundaries.

For the current fiscal year 2023-2024, an allocation of \$2.2 million has been designated to address solid waste management in the extended areas. The Ministry of Local Government has been providing consistent support offering government grants and technical assistance from JICA to manage solid waste effectively. Over the past three years, the council had collected 120.8 tonnes of waste in these areas with the government contributing \$10.6 million towards waste disposal efforts. Additional support include government subsidies, the purchase of garbage trucks in collaboration with JICA for technical assistance and the formulation of a solid waste masterplan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the pursuit of sustainable practices, councils are engaging in waste segregation at source, composting green waste and assisting villages in communal heat excavation within the delegated areas. This approach plays a pivotal role in extending the lifespan of landfills.

To further enhance solid waste management, the Ministry in collaboration with municipal councils has initiated a partnership with the Pacific Recycling Foundation to establish mini-waste recycling centres. The centres situated in various locations aim to address waste issues in informal settlements and promote recycling.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is essential to acknowledge that councils provide waste collection services

to informal settlements without monetary compensation or it is free of charge to the informal settlements. The waste collection subsidy helps offset the cost and the councils are actively working to reduce ongoing expenses by procuring fleet and equipment and adopting inhouse services to replace costly outsourcing.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative to highlight that the Ministry is actively collaborating with esteemed developed partners like KOICA and UNDP to undertake the crucial task of rehabilitating specific dumpsites across Viti Levu, particularly those encroaching on the coastal areas. This is a challenge for the Ministry right now; to rehabilitate and even move some of the existing landfills and dumping sites that we currently have.

Furthermore, the Ministry is orchestrating a collaborative effort involving key agencies such as the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change Unit, Ministry of Finance, UNDP and KOICA to spearhead the legislative reforms. These reforms are geared toward instituting mandatory ways of sorting at the source and ensuring effective management at dumpsite and landfill.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the formidable challenges faced, municipal councils are unwavering in their commitment to delivering efficient services to their delegated areas.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, a very simple question. In accordance or to be aligned with the SDGs of responsible consumption, production and sustainable citizen communities, does the Ministry have any future plans to generate renewable energy and fertilisers from the disposal practices of this waste for cleaner cities in Fiji, healthier soil and greener farms?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a very good question. If you have been to or if you have a chance to visit Lautoka Dump Site, they now have a compost site where all the green waste are dumped in a particular area. As we speak, they do collect the compost, it can be termed as very good manure and fertilisers.

In one of my last visits to Vunato Rubbish Dump, they have even been selling the green waste or the compost to the public. That is something that we are also exploring right now. As part of the reforms that we are undertaking right now, because if you go to countries like Singapore, they are converting waste to energy. So, these are some of the ways that we are reviewing right now and trying to ensure that when we try and resolve waste management system, we also look at the more effective and more climate friendly ways of disposing waste in our country.

MR. SPEAKER.- This question to be redirected to the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts.

Restoration of Levuka Heritage Site
(Question No. 190/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts inform Parliament on the steps being undertaken in partnership with World Heritage Fund to restore the heritage sites damaged during *TC Winston* in 2016 at Levuka?

HON. I. VASU.- I thank the honourable Member for the questions. I understand the town of Levuka has been wondering where will they get the assistance when they get listed, who will be helping them, whether it is the Government, World Heritage or National Trust? But when I brief you this afternoon, you will see that World Heritage does not have that much to offer when towns are

listed as World Heritage Listing and also the Government does not allocate much from 2013 to-date. So, that must be why they were wondering as to who is there to help them.

I understand in our last sitting we were discussing about the Heritage Bill and to help the people of Levuka, we need to pass the Heritage Bill. In regards to the policy for the heritage site in Levuka, they can process it. The trust be formed so that funds can be allocated to that trust and they can help with the restoration of those old properties in Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 1990 Fiji became a signatory to the 1992 World Heritage Convention and it is eligible to apply for the World Heritage Fund. The Fund is used for world heritage sites international assistance and also fund advisory bodies. The status allows Fiji to pay the World Heritage Fund an annual contribution of US\$134. The Fund is used for world heritage sites international assistance and to fund advisory bodies. The World Heritage is paid out under these categories:

- preparatory work up to US\$30,000;
- emergency assistance up to US\$75,000; and
- conservation and management assistance up to US\$10,000.

In addition to that, they can also assist with:

- technical corporations the sum of US\$10,000;
- training and research, the sum of US\$10,000; and
- promotion and education assistance the sum of US\$30,000.

I am glad to report that the World Heritage Fund assisted Fiji with about US\$44,500 from 2003 to 2008 to fund the Heritage Port Town of Levuka before it was listed in 2013 as the World Heritage Site. The breakdown of this Fund is as follows:

- 12th August, 2003 - a comparative analysis study for Levuka was approved with given US\$10,000;
- March 2004 - the World Heritage Stakeholders Consultations we were given US\$19,500; and
- 25th March, 2008 - the development of Legislative Protections for the Conservation of Heritage in Levuka of a management plan we were given US\$15,000.

In 2016 (three years after the listing of Levuka Town as the World Heritage Site) the devastating *TC Winston* hit Fiji and did not spare Levuka Town. Mr. Speaker, UNESCO assisted Fiji by sending two built heritage technical experts to organise a rapid assessment report on the effects of *TC Winston* on Levuka. Their response was included in the 2016 *TC Winston* post-disaster needs assessment report and this was completed in May 2016.

The World Heritage Rapid Assessment Report was presented to the post-disaster need assessment working group for the Culture Sector which was set up by Government. It was the first time that Government had recognised the urgency to include its PDNA (a survey of cultural heritage resource) that was damaged during *TC Winston*.

According to the *TC Winston* PDNA Report, the summary of the combined value for the damage and losses for the cultural sector in Fiji was Culture and Heritage Sector was \$5.9 million, World Heritage Site in Levuka was \$4.38 million. A total recovery and reconstruction need for the cultural sector during *TC Winston* was \$9.1 million.

Mr. Speaker, the World Heritage Funding only cater for the technical corporation training and research assistance. However, it does not include financial assistance to restore damage to the Levuka Heritage structure. The timeline for the heritage funding for any purpose is from January to March each year. As the deadline for the submissions was March 2016 the PDNA report was endorsed in May which was too late. Two months after the approval window which mean we missed out on that opportunity.

In 2017 while there was an opportunity to make the submission to the World Heritage however the Fiji Government decided to have a structural assessment done first for Levuka World Heritage structure. This was conducted between 2017 and 2018. The structural assessment was fully funded by the Government with the budget of \$0.6 million. Based on the *TC Winston* PDNA Report the Government had provisions of assisting some homeowners in the historic port of the town of Levuka with the urgent restoration work after *TC Winston*.

Mr. Speaker, to answer the honourable Member's question the World Heritage contribution for *TC Winton* came in the form of two experts who conducted the rapid assessment. The previous Government had allocated \$1.5 million for its restoration of the Levuka Community Centres Project from the 2023-2024 budgetary allocation.

Mr. Speaker, I understand we have overlooked the Town of Levuka for too long. We will try our outmost best to try and help and carry out the process to work with World Heritage and make sure we work with the Town of Levuka, our National Trust and the iTaukei Affairs so that we can move the project forward. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Members. We are probably just waiting for another Winston.

(Laughter)

Since there is no supplementary question, we will move on now to the Written Questions.

Written Questions

Accident Compensation – January to September 2023 (Question No. 191/2023)

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

Can the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice update Parliament on the total compensation that has been paid out by Accident Compensation Commission Fiji for road accidents from the period January to September 2023?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have not prepared my response. I will table it tomorrow.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka.*

Road Safety Education and Awareness Programmes (Question No. 192/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport provide Parliament with details on the total funds spent by the Land Transport Authority on Road Safety Education and Awareness Programmes and the breakdown of each activity for the period January to September 2023?

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I thank the honourable Member for the question and hereby¹ provide the answer to Written Question No. 192/2023.

(Written response handed to the Secretary-General)

Degree in Animal Health - FNU Koronivia Campus
(Question No. 193/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Education update Parliament on the following:

- (a) how many students had graduated from FNU Koronivia Campus in the course of Degree in Animal Health since the inception of the course; and
- (b) how many have been absorbed into the Ministry of Agriculture or any other Government Ministry or Department?

² HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I table my response as permitted under Standing Order 45(5).

(Written response handed to the Secretary-General)

Fiji Police Force Statistics - Acts of Brutal/Inhumane Treatment
(Question No.194/2023)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration inform Parliament on the following -

- (a) The total number of reports received by the Fiji Police Force in the period 5th December, 2006 to 22nd December, 2022 of alleged acts of brutal and inhumane treatment while in Police custody and the breakdown of the same by year and Division;
- (b) The total number of police officers who were investigated and the total number of police officers who were charged for committing alleged acts of brutalities and inhumane treatment on those in the police custody in the period from 5th December, 2006 to 22nd December, 2022 and the breakdown of the same by year and Division;
- (c) The total number of police officers who were successfully convicted and sentences for committing acts of brutalities and inhumane treatment on those in police custody in the period from 5th December, 2006 to 22nd December, 2022 and the breakdown of the same by year and Division;

¹ Editor's Note: Reply to Written Question No. 192/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport is appended as Annexure I.

² Reply to Written Question No. 193/2023 tabled by the honourable Minister for Education is appended as Annexure II.

- (d) The total number of police officers who are still under investigation either in the force or suspended for committing alleged acts of brutalities and inhumane treatment on those in the police custody in the period from 5th December, 2006 to 22nd December, 2022 and the breakdown of the same by year and Division; and
- (e) The total number of deaths and injuries in police custody in the period from 5th December, 2006 to 22nd December, 2022 and the breakdown the same by year and Division?

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

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

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU. – Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That under Standing Order 6, that so much of Standing Order 23(1) is suspended, so as to allow the Parliament to sit beyond 4:30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed on today's Order Paper. Thank you.

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

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have Schedule 2 - Motions for Debate, about five and of course, the Bills, before Parliament. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. If any, I now call on the honourable Leader of Government, in Parliament to speak in reply, if any.

HON. RO. F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I do not have any further comments to add. *Vinaka*.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for afternoon tea, before we continue. Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.54 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.31 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, there will be four Bills for this Third Reading Phase and we will deal with them progressively. I also remind honourable Members that pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November 2023, the debate on each of the four Bills will be limited to one hour only.

ITAUKEI AFFAIRS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November, 2023, I move:

That the iTaukei Affairs (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 26/2023), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I deal with the Bill with your indulgence, with heavy heart, I wish to formally announce the unfortunate passing away of the Chief Justice Kamal Kumar.

His Lordship passed away at the care of doctors at the Oceania Hospital in Suva. The Honourable Chief Justice Kumar was born on 13th December, 1963, passed away on the 21st November, 2023. He had six brothers and three sisters, he attended Andhra Primary School in Lautoka and his secondary education was at Pandit Vishnu Deo Memorial in Saweni in Lautoka. He was married to Sunita Devi and he has two sons. His eldest son Kishnel resides in Brisbane and the youngest Shivneel resides with Kamal in Suva.

The late Justice Kumar in January 1984 joined the law firm of Steward Radian Co. as a junior clerk until 1988 when the law firm of Steward Radian Co was wound up as a result of the Military *Coup* of 1987. He joined the ANZ Bank in Sigatoka in 1988 he then joined Young & Associates as a Clerk in 1992.

In 1994 he decided to study law, enrolled in Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. He completed his Bachelor of Law Degree in March 2000 and was admitted as a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Australia and Fiji and returned for the employment with the Young & Associates as a Solicitor.

In May 2012, he was appointed as a Puisne Judge of the High Court of Fiji. He was subsequently appointed as the Acting Chief Justice in 2019 and was confirmed the Chief Justice of Fiji. Throughout his adult life, he was known to be a charitable, and financially assisted several iTaukei and Indian students with their education. He had a quiet demeanour, and never sought acknowledgement for his social services to the community.

The Government of the day, the Coalition Government, the legal fraternity, and I am sure the previous Governments, appreciate his service to the people of Fiji. The Coalition Government would like to pay tribute and sympathy to his family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate of the iTaukei Affairs (Amendment) Bill 2023, which was tabled in Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November, 2023. As highlighted before the honourable Members of this august Parliament on Tuesday, the Bill essentially seeks to amend the iTaukei Affairs Act 1944 to reinstate the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), otherwise, referred to as

the Bose Levu Vakaturaga.

At its initial inception in 1875, the GCC comprised of Fijian Chiefs was established as an advisory body by the British Colonial Government, who had recognised the valuable insights that these traditional leaders could provide on indigenous affairs, and that their participation in the administration would result in a more effective governance of their respective people.

The GCC considered matters relating to Native Provincial Regulation, taxes, laws and punishments, engaging in key discussions with the Colonial Government and making resolutions along the way. The active participation of the Council culminated in the creation of laws, such as the Native Lands Ordinance in 1881, the Fijian Affairs Ordinance in 1944, the development of the traditional system of land tenure and the Mataqali Land Unit. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that also includes the establishment of schools such as, the Vulinitu, which is known as Queen Victoria School today and Adi Cakobau School.

The Fijian Affairs Ordinance of 1944, now referred to as iTaukei Affairs Act 1944, is one of the core legislations pertaining to the indigenous people of Fiji, and section 3 of this Act provided for the GCC, which was to make recommendations and proposals for the benefit of the *iTaukei* people and to consider questions relating to the good governance and wellbeing of the *iTaukei* people.

In early 2006, there were trainings conducted for village headman, *mataqali* leaders and clan leaders under a pilot project endorsed by the GCC, before the fateful day 6th December *coup d'e' tat* took place, the same year which ultimately saw the suspension of the Council in 2007.

The GCC was eventually removed altogether in 2012, some five years later, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not by phasing out due to impracticality or lack of purpose, nor by collective desire of the population to do away with it but it was abrogated under an authoritarian rule through the iTaukei Affairs (Amendment) Decree 2012, which deleted section 3 from the provisions of the iTaukei Affairs Act 1944 in the period prior to the return of democratic governance In our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji were not consulted by the regime at the time of the removal of the GCC. But regarding its re-instatement this time around under the Coalition Government, there was a Review Committee set up, wide consultations was held which have yield positive responses, as the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs had shared in his Ministerial Statement on Monday before honourable Members of this august Parliament.

The publication in the *Fiji Times* on 7th August, 2023 setting the results from the *Tebbutt Times Poll*, also found 64 percent of Fijians surveyed were in favour of reinstating the Bose Levu Vakaturaga and 76 percent overall when only the support and do not support responses were considered without the undecided responses and responses defusing to answer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, although we stand in Parliament today as the elected representatives of the people, our leadership does not exist in a vacuum within our society. May I say that again, our leadership in Fiji does not exist in a vacuum within our society. For over a century and to the present day, many men and women have stood up in their chiefly capacity to govern, represent and advocate for the traditional *vanua*, a role which was reflected in the former provisions of the Act that was removed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is only befitting with God on our side, you are seated as the Speaker to hear this very emotional momentous occasion of a critical part of the *iTaukei* the GCC, they are not only for the *iTaukei*, it is for the entire people of Fiji who call Fiji, home.

On the 14th June, 2023, His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, informed the 111th Session of the International Labour Conference in Geneva of Cabinet's decision for Fiji to adopt an official position or support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples or what is called UNDRIP. The establishment of the GCC would provide crucial insight that is currently missing towards equitable governance and inclusive development at a time when statistics show a significant percentage of those living below the poverty line are *iTaukei*.

I also echo the statement made by the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management in the media whilst visiting Rotuma earlier in March this year that with respect to Rotuma, it is more a bottom-up approach that would be taken in progressing projects on the Island. It is not a two-men rule, it is not from the top-bottom, it is a bottom-up approach. It is one of consultation and reiterating the commitment of this Government in amplifying the mediums available for community dialogue.

Earlier this year, work towards this end was progressed by the repeal of the Media Industry Development Act, which saw the return of a greater press freedom and in terms of the present Bill, it is the reinstatement of the GCC that would allow for a holistic approach towards solving the issues facing indigenous people today and related matters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Opposition Member, honourable Usamate, in his statement on Monday when referring to the GCC being the body which looks after everything in relation to iTaukei that stated and, again, I quote: "All these things are enshrined in the Constitution".

Mr. Speaker, while the Constitution recognises the iTaukei people, the ownership of iTaukei land and culture does not comprehensively deal with all these relating to the iTaukei and it is the facade and the mistake if the earlier government was hoodwinked by the former Attorney-General that everything is protected in the Constitution.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is absolute hogwash.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- If they have a good understanding of the law and the Constitution, we do not expect the nut and bolts of the law to be in the Constitution. You will find it in the Fijian Affairs Act.

The reinstatement of the GCC is not made unnecessarily by the provisions of the Constitution. May I say this again -. the reinstatement of the GCC is not made unnecessarily by the provisions of the Constitution but rather the provisions of the Constitution make it necessary that the GCC be reinstated to effect the full realisation of the rights and aspirations contained therein.

The Late Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna is famously attributed in saying that, I quote: "The title of chief is not an ornament". Much that he said about GCC is said from historical perspective. Therein lies the role of the present day torch bearers.

As shared by honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs on Monday, the GCC will emerge as a revitalised structure based on the strategic recommendations of the GCC Review Committee that are in line with international standards which include that the GCC be neutral and apolitical.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a potential for stewardship of a traditional *vanua* to facilitate reconciliation and nation building efforts, as demonstrated of the Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi, Ro Teimumu Kepa, who made headlines in 2017 by declaring the descendants of *Girmitiyas* as part of belonging to the *Vanua o Noco* in Rewa in a traditional ceremony that bestowed upon them *cavuti na luvedra na Ratu*.

The existence of the GCC does not necessitate the exclusion of other Fijians - a sentiment understood where the late Jai Ram Reddy who was a former Leader of the Opposition, briefly as an Attorney-General, President of the Court of Appeal and was the first Indo-Fijian to be invited to a meeting of the Council on 6th June, 1997 at which he addressed the assembled Chiefs saying, and I quote:

“The members of this Council are not just the chiefs of indigenous Fijians but all of Fiji”.

With that said, Mr. Speaker, I now move on the pertinent features of the Bill.

Clause 1 provides for the short title and commencement. If passed by Parliament, the Bill will come into force on a date or dates appointed by the Minister by notice in the Gazette.

Clause 2 amends section 2 of the Act by inserting the definition of “Council” to mean the Great Council of Chiefs and the definition of “Permanent Secretary” to mean the Permanent Secretary responsible for iTaukei Affairs.

Clause 3 of the Bill inserts section 3 to the Act to provide for the constitution and primary function of the Council.

Clause 4 of the Bill amends section 4(4) of the Act to require the iTaukei Affairs Board to refer to the GCC or the Bose Levu Vakaturaga any question relating to the iTaukei people that the Minister may submit to the Board.

Clause 5 of the Bill amend section 5 of the Act to empower the Minister to make regulations in relation to the Great Council of Chiefs.

Clause 6 of the Bill amend section 11 of the Act to require the Minister to refer to the Board or the Council any proposed Bill that is intended to be introduced to Parliament and which may appear to the Minister to affect in any important matter the rights and interests of iTaukei people. The Board or the Council, as the case may be, is then required to submit the proposed Bill with a memorandum which is to be used in the Parliamentary debate process.

Clause 7 of the Bill consequently amends the iTaukei Trust Fund Act 2004 to *inter alia* include reference to the Council.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the spirit of true democratic exercise, we have set out transparently the motivation and, in fact, the necessity for the reestablishment of the GCC within the codified ambit of law and anticipate healthy debate and contributions from the Opposition on the Bill that has been presented before this Parliament.

This Bill does not introduce a new entity but brings back a Council that existed and functioned practically before, and which had best suited to give recommendations and proposals for the benefit, wellbeing and good governance of indigenous iTaukei and Rotuman people in light of the cultural dynamics and structures which purvey this nation and save the reality.

Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I have before me a list of speakers and the order is as follows:

1. Honourable V. Naupoto;
2. Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
3. Honourable Ratu J.B. Niudamu; and
4. Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts.

If time is still left, then we will take:

5. Honourable M.D. Bulitavu; and
6. Honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we are just being given one hour to allocate to this debate. We started at 4.36 p.m. and we shall stop at 5.36 p.m. The Right of Reply will be given at 5.16 irrespective of whether you have delivered your speech or not, but I apologise as this is how we are going to be managing our time - the one hour that we have been tasked to observe.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the chiefly system must be preserved and protected for as long as we can. More importantly, the sanctity of it must be preserved for without it, the system dies. The sanctity is preserved when the aura and the *mana* that surrounds our chiefly system is not violated, and we do that by observing the protocols and keeping alive the traditional structure that surrounds the chiefly system.

We maintain our different roles and the boundaries in that traditional structure around our chiefly system. Words that are spoken around our chiefs, assist them with grace. Chiefs' decisions are final, they are not scrutinised or critic, before they accept it. When all these are intact, we have deep reverence for our chiefly system, and as long as that reverence exists like now, the chiefly system will be protected.

In the institutional history of the GCC, Sir, it was established in 1876 under the governorship of Sir Arthur Gordon. The decision was taken following consultations with chiefs who advised Sir Arthur Gordon on how best to govern the colony's indigenous population. In the words of Anthropologist Robert Norton, and I quote:

“It embodied the privileged relationship of trust and protection established between the Fijians and the British.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to me, the GCC is the Westernisation of a very traditional *itaukei* governance system and because of it, the chiefly system is exposed to the ravages of the whims of change and it contributes immensely to the erosion of the sanctity of this chiefly system that is so dear to our hearts. Because the decision of the GCC is not final, contrary to the traditional way where it is final, according to the Act, the decisions of the GCC is presented to His Excellency the President. If a Bill is required, it is first presented to a Board, then to the Permanent Secretary, then to Cabinet and then to Parliament. In that process, Sir, the Bill may not pass, again, their decision is not final.

A big criticism of the GCC in the past was the politicisation of it that is still relevant today. The GCC will always be politicised and it cannot shield itself from it. The GCC will face its fair share of criticism even in their last meeting, their decision to remunerate *Turaga Ni Yavusa* with \$200 per month was heavily criticized on social media and even that decision was not final because it was slashed to \$100 and approved here in this Chamber through the passing of the 2023-2024 Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the best way to protect and preserve our chiefly system is, in my view, not to expose it but to shield it from the influences of change brought about by the globalised world that we live in now. Secondly, it has to be shielded in its purest form or as close to it as possible. It is in the traditional setting that this shielding is done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these years without the GCC, the *iTaukei* continues to be served through the various arms of Government, through the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, there have been initiatives like royalty payments that was new, the Fiji Pine landowners have been paid up a total of approximately \$30 million in Lease Security Bonus Payment and more importantly, our chiefly system has been shielded in its traditional setting as I had alluded to.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, now that Government will reinstate the Great Council of Chiefs, we must be reminded of the words of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna when he warned them in 1944 and I quote:

“If we confine ourselves to pleasure seeking only, no useful purpose will be served in our maintaining our claims to chiefly status. If we are merely decorative, our position is finished forever, we will soon be tossed aside when some other races rise to the fore.”

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to this debate on this Bill. I would like to thank the honourable Attorney-General and also the honourable Naupoto for their contributions this far. I have a prepared address, but I just want to go back some correspondences over time. On 8th September, 2006, I got this letter written, it was written in *vosa vaka-Viti*:

“Au sa mai ciqoma na nomuni vola kau sa vaka vakavinavinaka sara kina vakalevu. Au a sega ni rawa ni volavola yani vei kemuni baleta ni a sega ni tiko vei au e dua na i lavelave ni nomuni vosa. Au via vakaraitaka yani vei kemuni ni sega ni tu vua e dua na kaukauwa me vakacegui kemuni ena nomuni i tutu vaka lewe ni Matabose Levu Vakaturaga.

Ena noqu i tutu vaka Minsita au via vakadeitaka tiko ga yani vei kemuni ni na qai tinia ga ko mate na nomuni lewe ni Matabose Levu Vakaturaga me vaka ga ni ko ni a sureti mo ni lewe ni Bose Levu Turaga, nai solisoli ogo e vakaturaga ka se bera vakadua ni vakayacori ki vua e dua na turaga bale ni noda vanua, ka sa nuitaki ni ko ni na dau maroroya ka karona matua nai solisoli vakaturaga ogo.

Au sa nuitaka ni na tomani tikoga na nomuni vei qaravi ka vakabibi na nomuni veitokoni ena veigauna sa tu mai ki liu.

Naiqama T. Lalabalavu

Minisita ni Veikavakaitaukei, Qele kei na Veivakatorocaketaki vaka Yasana”

Mr. Speaker, Sir,

“10th October, 2006:

Major-General S.L. Rabuka

P O Box 2437

Government Buildings

“T’saka

Ni sa bula vinaka.

Au marautaka na noqu mai ciqoma na nomuni i vola ena i ka 5th ni Seviteba, 2006. Au vakila ni muloci tu kina e vuqa sara na vakasama bibi ka yaga me da nanuma tiko. Eda na vakananuma tikoga na veika vaka ogo, ka vakadeuca malua tiko yani, baleta ni ra gacagaca ni veisau kei na veivakatorocaketaki sa yacovi keda mai.

Vinaka vakalevu na nomuni dusimaka mai na nodra vakadewa/ tautauri cala na dau vola i tukutuku ena television kei na walesi.

Au nanuma ni yaga talega me da kakua ni guileceva na veika e yaco ena veivanua me vakataki Tanzania, Aferika, vakauasivi na tatara ni nai walewale era taurivaka ena yavu kei na i tuvatuva ni nodra taukeni i yau (me sa qali vakadua kina Matanitu) na bokoci ni tutu vakaturaga kei na nodra tudei ena vakatulewa.

Au a mani vakaraitaka talega na noqu nanuma ena nona tarogi au na dau ni vola i tukutuku, au kurabui ni sa mai moici sara vakatani mai na kena i tuvatuva au a tukuna taumada vua.

Me'u tinia ena noqu vakanuinui vinaka ni na tudei ka vuavuai vinaka na nomuni cau ena veigauna no noda Bose Levu Vakaturaga ni mataka."

Ko iau

Ko

(O. Bokini)

Liuliu ni Bose levu Vakaturaga"

There is another one from the then Minister for Fijian Affairs informing me that the Council was no more and then a personal letter from a relative of yours:

"30 ni Okosita, 2007

Sitiveni Ligamamada

Suva

Ratu Tau,

Ni sa yadra vinaka. Au via vakaraitaka ga yani na noqu kauwai ena nodra lewa na gone turaga bale na Peresitedi ena veivakasalatoki nai talai kina Matanitu Tu Vakawawa, me sa bokoci na na nomuni lewena tudei (se tini mate) na Bose Levu Vakaturaga."

These were some expressions of concern and this one was signed,

"Ko

Joni kei Lusi

Wekamuni mai Naicobocobo"

I am glad that I am part of this Bill that has been brought before this august Chamber and we are going to be looked upon as bringing back a bipartisan Bill. But I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we will not vote on partisan lines today, that we will vote in the interest of the nation.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to give my brief contribution to the Bill that is before Parliament. *Bula si'a*. I have just received the Bill while the honourable Attorney-General was introducing it. After listening to the Ministerial Statement on Monday by the *Turaga nai Talai*, the Minister for iTaukei Affairs, he talked about the recommendations by the GCC Review Committee that was tabled to the 2nd GCC Meeting that was held in Suva.

In his speech he had said that the future GCC would be something that needs to be apolitical meaning the findings of the Committee probably had found out too that the GCC or the new GCC or the future GCC that he had put in his statement needs to be apolitical. It should not be mixed with politics and that was admitted by the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs.

On the other hand, the honourable Viliame Naupoto had said that while the GCC was not present, in the Act, the board was carrying the functions and roles of the GCC. If you see the current amendment that was being introduced by the honourable Attorney-General, it is just inserting the word "council" back into the Act and to play the role that the board was playing when the GCC was abolished in the decree that he is talking about.

I will not talk about the politics and the emotional arguments about the GCC, I will just go straight to the clauses, to the salient features of the Bill which I would like Parliament to see that is very important. First of all, he is suggesting an amendment to clause 3 and I quote:

"There needs to be a Great Council of Chiefs which must consist of persons appointed by the President on the advice of the Minister."

In the original 1944 Act, those words, "on the advice of the Minister" is not there. The wording is, "person(s) who were appointed by the Governor-General". In this particular clause, why it was very important to refer this Bill to the Committee would have been more consultations done and whether the powers now given to the Minister to advice the President in any appointment, how will it be vetted?

A Minister, as we all know, is a politician, a political appointment and a political decision could influence the appointment of any GCC member given that they will be advising the President in any of the appointments. If you look at the original Act, that is not there so that is a new insertion on the advice of the Minister.

The second thing that I would like to also share is on clause 4. When a particular question or recommendation is brought to the Council through the Minister, the powers that are there in the original Act that it must or should be referred to the Great Council of Chiefs. In the current form, it has somewhat weakened the Council in the words in clause 4 where we will be inserting, if you read sub-section 4 of the Principal Act, it will be amended to insert, "it may refer such questions to the Council". So, that has somewhat given powers to the Minister and somehow the original Act talks about that the Minister needs to refer that to the Council. In here, the Great Council of Chiefs is being undermined because the powers will be with the Ministers. These are some of the wordings that are there that is very, very important.

If you go to clause 5 of the Bill and you go to the Principal Act, there is a poor drafting done in terms of the words "wherever it appears" and the words that are being referred to in clause 5 are the words "of the". If you look at that particular section in the principal Bill, there are three times the words "of the" appears in that section 5, but how it was drafted here, it only refers to two occasions, that is in sub-sections (a) and (b) that refers to this. So, there is poor drafting too done there that needs to be re-done.

The other thing that needs to be looked at in clause 6 where you have the introduction of a Permanent Secretary in the procedures of a Bill concerning an *iTaukei* that comes through the Council. After the discussion by the Great Council of Chiefs, it is brought back to the board to make its papers before it goes to Cabinet.

In the original Act it talks about, after it comes from the GCC it goes to the Clerk Parliament. That has been removed in this particular amendment, an introduction of the Permanent Secretary that is in the form of the Bill that we have. The GCC had a standalone legislative procedure. After they have discussed any legislation concerning *iTaukei*, it comes from the Minister, goes right to the Clerk of Parliament or the Secretary-General of Parliament; that is being removed in clause 6 of the Bill. I hope the honourable Attorney-General will relook into this because these are very important questions.

If we had taken the Bill to Committees, we would have picked it up and also compared with the original Act, compared with the 2012 Decree and compared with the current form of the Bill that you have introduced and we will also look into the recommendations of the Review Committee of the Great Council of Chiefs so we can make a better form of the Bill that is long lasting and not come back running into Parliament for future amendments.

The last part is clause 7, the Bill states that these are just consequential amendments. There is another very important thing that this particular Bill has removed, that is, if you look at the *iTaukei* Trust Fund, the membership of the board, I will refer you to section 7(3):

“The board consists of eight members to be appointed by the Minister including:

(a) Five members nominated by the GCC.”

That veto power, nominated by the GCC has been removed by this particular Bill which now says that five members must have a suitable qualification and work experience in any of the following areas:

- (1) Investment management;
- (2) Engineering;
- (3) Information and technology;
- (4) Human capital;
- (5) Tourism and hospitality

That is a new insertion and that has taken away the veto of power of the GCC where five Members are nominated by the GCC into the *iTaukei* Trust Fund.

I urge the Government to relook at the Bill. If it was done at a rush, I would like the Government and the honourable Attorney-General to withdraw it and refer it to Committees so we can fix and repair the Bill as it is.

MR. SPEAKER.- We have only two minutes left for debate. So given that, I now offer the floor to the honourable Attorney-General for his Right of Reply because by 17.36 p.m. we should be finishing debate on this particular motion.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- My apology, Mr. Speaker.

The contribution from honourable Naupoto was relevant but here we are hearing someone who is not an expert in drafting. I do not know what his experience is for him to comment on the

semantics, it is just waste of time.

Section 82 of the Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, states that the President acts on the advice of Cabinet or a Minister or of some other body in the exercise of their executive authority. The referral of questions to the GCC because it must first be assessed as something substantive to be referred to the GCC. We have the Fijian Affairs Board refers to Cabinet then if it sees something that is relevant then it will go to the GCC. This is only an interim measure explained by the Minister for Home Affairs. The review, the future and shape of the GCC will be in a trust form and it will take two years, so we need the GCC to be sitting deliberating on the process to be discussed in the shape and form of the new GCC.

The proposed Bill processes is prior to submission to Cabinet. It does not change the essence of the intention to ensure that the GCC comments are considered at the highest level of law making during parliamentary process. The iTaukei Trust Fund of 2004 qualifications submitted by the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs since five members were repealed. There is no other substantive comment to make. I believe the essence of the Bill and why it is relevant has been considered, are there for endorsement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast

Ayes	-	28
Noes	-	22
Not Voted	-	3
Abstained	-	1

Motion agreed to.

[iTaukei Affairs (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 26/2023) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. of 2023)]

EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November, 2023, I move:

That the Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 27/2023), be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2023 which was tabled on Tuesday 21st of November, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Employment Relations Act 2007, as I had mentioned on Tuesday, had been the subject of much expressed concern in relation to the compliance of International Labour Standards and this Bill is just the beginning of the work that this Government seeks to carry out in order to upgrade Fiji's compliance level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not about following whatever the international world tells us to do as

honourable Usamate would like us to believe but about doing what should have been done a long time ago, that is precisely why this is so urgent. According to the International Labour Organisation, the employment relationship is the legal link between employers and employees. This relationship exists when a person performs work or services for his or her employer under certain conditions in return for remuneration or payment of the work or service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this legal framework the rights and obligations are created as well as the application of labour law provisions. The main purpose of amending the definition of essential services and industries in Section 185 of the Act is to revert the list of essential services back to the original definition of essential services as contained in Schedule Seven, and to bring Fiji's list of essential services in compliance with ILO Convention No. 87 being "the Freedom of Association and the Protection of the Right to Organise Convention 1948". Fiji ratified this Convention on 17th April, 2002 (that is more than 20 years ago).

In 2011 the Essential National Industries Employment Decree 2011 and the Essential National Industries and Designated Corporations Regulations 2011 made amendments with significantly impacted works freedom of association and the ability to bargain collectively. Example of such provisions in the 2011 legislative amendments were that all pre-existing collective agreements were terminated within 60 days after the commencement day of the decree.

The re-registration was required of every union, pending employment related disputes and grievances and litigations were terminated and employment disputes were referred to compulsory arbitration by the Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations with no right of appeal. Rather than unions have recourse to the Employment Relations Tribunal and the Employment Relations Courts. The ENI Regulations widen the scope of essential industries in Schedule Seven of the Act to include financial industry, telecommunication industry, civil aviation industry and the public utilities industry.

Mr. Speaker, there was widespread criticism of the ENI decree and ENI regulations by Fiji Unions including; the Fiji Trade Union Congress, the Fiji Island Council of Trade Unions and internationally by the International Trade Unions Confederation, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, the Commonwealth Trade Union Group, the ILO Committee of Experts on the application of Conventions in its observations of the Convention 87 of 2012 urge the Fiji Government to take the necessary measure to amend the ENI decree without delay in full consultations with the social partners so is to bring in conformity with Convention No. 87.

In 2013, two sets of regulations under the ENI decree were passed to extend the coverage of ENI decree which increased the number of industries and entities that were designated as essential services, to include the FNPF, Airports Fiji Limited, Pine and Mahogany Industries (that is including Tropik Wood and Fiji Hardwood), Fire Prevention Services Industry including the National Fire Authority and Local Governments including all towns and city councils in Fiji.

In 2015, the ENI Decree was appealed the new Part 19 was inserted in the Act. This new Part 19 read, and I quote, "it introduced a new interpretation provisions in Section 185 which define 'essential service and industry' to include government, statutory authority, local authority, a government commercial company as prescribed under the Public Enterprise Act of 1996."

Under the definition in Section 185 included those essential, national industries declared and designated cooperations or designated companies, designated under the ENI Decree and an extended application of the Act to such industries and workers.

These preserve the extended list of industries designated as essential services. It also introduced a new system for collective bargaining and employer union dispute resolution in those

corporations and services and establish a new Arbitration Court to decide on trade disputes in essential national industries and services.

The effect of amending the definition of essential service industry, will be, to remove the extended list of categories of essential service industries which were designated under the ENI Decree. Following the Amendment, the current list of essential services contain in Schedule 7, only will be Fiji's list of essential services and any such other services, part of those listed, provided if, and only if, designated by the Minister.

In terms of consultation, the Ministry had consulted with ERAB Sub-Committee in relation to the ERA Matrix in February and September as articulated by the Ministry of Employment this morning. The Ministry has also held consultations with the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning and National Development and Statistics, the Ministry of Civil Service, Office of the Solicitor-General and the Ministry of Local Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I just touch on a few clauses on the Bill. Clause 1 of the Employment Relations Amendment Bill 2023 makes provision for the short title and commencement. If passed by Parliament, the amending legislation will come into force on a date or date(s) appointed by the Minister by notice in the Gazette.

Clause 2 of the Bill, amends Section 185 of the Act by introducing a new definition for essential services and industry or essential services and industries, in order to revert to the original list of essential services in Schedule 7, by deleting reference to essential national industries designated under the ENI Decree.

A new definition provides that additional essential services industries maybe designated after the date of commencement of the amended legislation and may include a service which is part of a listed entities, service providers, including services provided by the Government.

Clause 3 of the Bill (Amends) Section 188 of the Act, to increase the time limit of workers in essential service to lodge or file employment grievances from 21 days to six months, the date on which a grievance first arose. A new time limit for filing of employment grievance does not have retrospective effect and only applies to actions filed after the date of commencement of the amending legislation.

Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I have a list of four speakers, provided by the Whips. A batting will be led off by honourable Maharaj, then to be followed by the honourable Minister Agni Deo Singh and if we have time we will follow on by honourable Jone Usamate before it is rounded off by honourable Minister Vosarogo.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We have here before us a Bill that has two clauses, or particularly three, I would say. Members have been harping all along about the suppression of employees' rights. Ever since 2007 ERA got into place. A lot of talks were there that, employees' rights are suppressed, this, that, blah, blah, blah.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is a fact.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We went with so many changes, 2015 an amendment was brought in, it was brought under 51, no doubt in that, but it was given to the Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. They went for a public consultation, they had some amendments to be done, they

made those amendments, it was brought back to Parliament in July 2015 where it was debated and passed. Even after that ILO did not have any issues with the particular ERA that is, that was available in the form of what it is today, yes, honourable Professor Prasad.

When people go to elections with this kind of agenda this is what actually happens. We need to change to show people something, what are we changing in this, Mr. Speaker, Sir? What kind of suppression was there that we have to change and bring these three clauses that now all these people....

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The 21 days.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- All the employers of Fiji basically only 30 percent out of more than 3,090 employees are unionised.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Only 30 percent by now the number would have decreased, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Gosh.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- But just because someone has gone out there and promised to their....

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- With most genuine reason.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- ...voters that we will actually remove it, they need to bring in something and there is no such thing to this particular Bill. There was no restriction that industries that are part of essential industries as per the Act they cannot go on strike, they can, all that was required was to give a 28 days' notice.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You give the permit? No permit.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Did anyone apply?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Did anyone apply?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- We applied.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- To go on strike?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- If you want to go on strike ...

(Chorus interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Shameema Ali is crying.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are a developing nation. Even if ILO agreed that the essential industries may defer from countries to countries. In Fiji we are a tourism-based GDP over here, Mr. Speaker. Our economy is depended on tourism, so in Fiji's context the tourism sector, airport, Fiji Airways, Aviation industry they are very essential set out, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Simple ...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- People willing to come to Fiji we cannot actually expect pilots to be going on strike without notice. The employers ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You are requesting the union...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Oh come on.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is the truth.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, as I say we are a developing nation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- We are a developing nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to have tailor-made essential industries.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Listen.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Stands for Elections.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, there seems to be a lot of running commentary going on. Just listen, continue.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with ILO there were only two issues with our ERA before amendments in 2015 and that was collecting bargaining and if the essential industries, employees, could actually associate with other unions and 2015 Amendments of the Act allow that. That is why Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was stating when we actually go and do false promises to the voters we will come back and do such kind of changes to the Act...

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Nonsense.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Which will affect the nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no suppression of what they are actually changing, will not reflect that the suppression will be removed, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these contributions I do not support the Amendment that is before us.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am quite not only surprised, but shocked at honourable Maharaj's statement. He was the former Assistant Minister and he would have read the reports from ILO.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ILO has been the Committee on application of standards has been beseeching Fiji year after year, after 2015 (2018 and 2019) to correct the essential industries list, to

restore the rights of all those workers who are not in essential services. I would invite him to go back and read those reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he should also be aware that 2019 Direct Contact Mission is still pending and is due here on the invitation of our Government now, either in December or in January, to see the progress of where we are with the amendment of the Employment Relations Act. There are so many comments that are there regarding workers' rights that have been breached through these amendments that were carried out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2007 all was fine until 2011 everything was fine, no one complained because the law was catering for everyone's rights. It was only when they started tinkering with this in 2011 as an interim regime, where no one had any right to protest or oppose, and if they did, you know what happened. That is when it started.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it goes without saying that this side of Parliament, who genuinely believe in true democracy, empowerment of our people and restoring the rights of all workers wholeheartedly support the Bill before us. The struggle of the workers and their leaders to ensure justice, fair play and equality is now finally becoming a reality after the harrowing experience of 16 years of suppression by a dictatorship that did not give a dam about the rights and freedom of the workers. This is despite the fact that Fiji had ratified the fundamental Conventions as alluded to by the honourable Attorney-General. I do not want to repeat all that, I have said it quite a number of times in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, simply, the assault on the rights and freedom of workers began just after December, a little after 2007, executed by a regime and later a government, although democratically elected, unable to shirk its dictatorial traits. This is despite the fact that Fiji had well before that ratified the fundamental Conventions that I had just pointed out. We all know that Essential National Industries Decree 2011 later largely incorporated into the Employment Relations Act 2015, with some cosmetic changes in 2016 to try and avoid the ILO Direct Contact Mission or Commission of Inquiry, which was....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, I will ask you to sit down since the bell has been sounded so I can provide another speakers to stand up and make their contribution. When the bell is sounded too, it will go to the next speaker.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you very much, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think it would be better to listen to me after listening to all that hot air.

(Laughter)

This Bill basically talks about two things. Let me school everyone, the Bill talks about two things:

1. Reverting the definition of Essential National Industries.
2. Those are subject to the processes in the Essential National Industries that

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is not!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hang on! It is my time now, you can have your time later.

The amount of time that they have for grievances to register grievances was changed from 21

days to six months. That is the issue. Now, Essential National Industries, this is how it is defined in the very Bill that the honourable Attorney-General has provided. Let me revert to these notes, probably better.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hold on! Hold your horse! Anything that may endanger life, personal safety, health of the whole or part of the population.

Now in any country in the world, the way we define this will also depend on our context. We do not just take willy-nilly the definitions provided by someone else where you have the interest of your country at heart, you take the Convention, we sign on the Convention but your most important interest is the interest of your country. So, we define that in the context of our country.

At that particular point in time it was decided to define that in the interest of making sure that the economy of this country kept on improving, while we still look after the interest of all workers in this country and that is what happened, honourable Attorney-General. We do not kowtow to all these people that have power around the world. We do not do that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- You know that there are countries in the world that condemn Fiji in Geneva but they themselves have not ratified Convention 87. They have not ratified this and they shout all these accusations at us.

We have the right as a sovereign country of our own. We ratified the Conventions and 87 in its definition allows us some leeway to define it according to our context and that is what we did and what resulted from that? We still look after all of our workers and at the same time our economy expanded. And as our economy expanded, we are able to invest in roads, welfare, education, assistance for electricity and all of those things benefited those very same workers and provided immediate direct benefits. Their children were able to go to school without having to pay fares. That is happening because we are expanding the economy. So, it was done in the context of what we have here in this country.

We did not, we allowed, people could still strike, they could go through the processes. The process was slightly changed but they feel their freedom of association was preserved, their freedom of association to join unions and to take action was still preserved. So, that is very important. We do not kowtow.

There was some time ago when the former Prime Minister used to sit here, used to fight for climate change. He would go to these countries and call them the “coalition of the selfish and if they did something about fossil fuel, even though they were very good friends, he would have the guts to tell them, “You are the coalition of the selfish” because he stood by the interest of this country first rather than kowtowing to anyone all over the world in the international arena. That is the very important thing that we have to remember.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hang on, hang on! Hold your horse.

The other part, the best interest of Fiji, I would appeal to the Minister, these things that you are talking about only affects 30 percent of the workforce of this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, 70 percent are not catered for. They are not represented. These trade unionists that are running around, who are talking about these things, they do not look after people in the security companies. Most the complaints in these ministries are about workers security companies suffering today. As we sit here, they suffer. People in the informal sector are exploited.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What did you do?

HON. J. USAMATE.- I was there doing it. That is the interest of today. That is what you need to focus on.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, you resume your seat.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Thank you very much, Sir.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker for the opportunity to address Parliament in relation to this Bill. Mr. Speaker, the amendment that we are seeking or the Bill seeks to introduce to the House is a modest adjustment but it comes with a lot of goodwill. It involves a lot of benefits also by what it would attract to our shores simply by the fact that we are going to comply with our ILO obligations.

Now, the honourable Leader of Opposition has been talking about relevance in the world stage. Honourable Usamate had been harping on this week about punching above our weights at global forums. This is an opportunity, Mr. Speaker, for Fiji to comply and become a *bona fide* compliant member of ILO. That is where we punch above our lines. That is where we become relevant at the international forums.

This amendment, Mr. Speaker, has been discussed with stakeholders. The honourable Maharaj had spoken about the amendment that they brought in 2015. What he did not inform this Chamber is prior to that one amendment, there were nine other amendments that were done, all without prior consultation. Go and read the law. Some were done by promulgation, some were done by Decrees and some were done by Standing Order 51.

What is important about this one, Mr. Speaker, is if you ask the unions, employers association, workers, Ministry, how many of those amendments, the 10 amendments that have happened to this law in the past 10 years have they been consulted with? Zero. The only one that they have said is the one in 2015. For this one, Mr. Speaker, we have consulted the unions, workers' representatives, employers and the workers in a forum, Mr. Speaker, that the FijiFirst Government had laid to rest many years ago; the tripartite. That is how we were able to obtain the views of everyone who was concerned about this amendment, their views had been obtained in leading up to the introduction of this Bill. In the tripartite, the very forum that you buried together with your attempt to suppress workers' rights. Together with that, you lost their good will, you lost their *bona fide*, you lost their trust and you lost their votes.

Mr. Speaker, the Coalition Government is doing exactly what it promised it will do. It will revive people's participation in their government and through the revival of the tripartite, both in intent and with good deeds, we are delivering that to the workers of this nation. To be fair, Mr. Speaker, to workers of the essential services, those who are in the Essential Services Decree, who only have 21 days to register their grievances and also be able to access justice. To be able to be fair with them, this Bill attempts to refine the time period which you can have access to the tribunal and

increase it to the same period that every other worker of this country has, which is six months. This amendment seeks to do exactly that.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Members on the other side, every ones in a while they would have played around with this book, the Constitution of 2013. Well, Section 20 of the Constitution also has a provision where employers rights are preserved. That, Mr. Speaker, I think they must also think about when they are making Opposition today. This book preserves the rights, the law that they are now opposing is what we are trying to promote that actuates the rights, that gives the nuts and bolts to the rights that people and workers of this country require from us.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to address this Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, please, resume your seat.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now give the Right of Reply to the honourable Attorney-General.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, if you will allow me just to read the ILO submission to the Standing Committee in 2015, and I quote:

“ILO noted in its submission to the Fiji Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights in its Report on their Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill, 2015, the office further observes that the ILO supervisory bodies have considered that restrictions or prohibition on the right to strike maybe permitted with respect to public servants exercising authority in the name of the State. This would include civil servants in Government Ministries but would not be understood to cover a broad range of civil servants such as teachers or those working in public enterprises. The definition of “essential service” or “industry” in Part 19 includes the government and statutory authority which may go beyond the above restricted notion of exercising authority in the name of the State.”

The point is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was made in 2015. We came on board, they did not do anything for eight years. Why now? Because we have to set up the mechanism first through consultation and come to Parliament.

Today is a very significant day, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have given the workers of this country the power they lost. Today, we have given back the power, giving them six months instead of 21 days.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- May I highlight a very important thing, this is actually what happens in a workplace. You are sacked, you are not given your termination letter, when you ask for it, you are not given. So, come 21 days, expire and the workers have to actually write. They have to face a lot of difficulties in trying to access these documents from their employers but then the time to appeal has gone out.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Victimisation.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- You see? We have given now six months because that is what happens today. Today is the day of freedom, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- People of this country will remember that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- This is the legacy of this Coalition Government. Thank you to the people of Fiji for choosing the Coalition Government. I endorse this Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thought all were happy but all of a sudden I hear someone is crying or something.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes - 27

Noes - 23

Not Voted - 4

Motion agreed to.

[Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 27/2023) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. ... of 2023)]

MAHOGANY INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT (AMENDMENT) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November, 2023 I move:

That the Mahogany Industry Development (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 28/2023) be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I beg to second the motion.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Mahogany Industry Development (Amendment) Bill 2023 which was tabled on Tuesday, 21st November, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Mahogany Industry Act 2010, as mentioned when the Bill was first tabled, establishes the Mahogany Industry Council with the Prime Minister as Chairperson. Apart from this under the current legislative regime, the Prime Minister is also the Minister responsible for the administration of the Act.

Under the Act, the principal function of the Council is to supervise and direct the maintenance and development of the Mahogany Industry in Fiji and in particular to supervise and direct Fiji

Hardwood Corporation Limited and Fiji Mahogany Trust in the performance of their functions under the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill seeks to amend the Act to transfer the overall responsibility of the Act and by extension the regulation of the Mahogany Industry from the Office of the Prime Minister to the Office of the Ministry of Forestry.

The Amendments proposed in the Bill will allow the Ministry of Forestry to provide the much-needed technical expertise, advice and guidance to the Council, to achieve its mandated objectives, such as:

1. The need for the Mahogany Industry to be operated on the basis that is sustainable in the long-term and in particular the need for a comprehensive programme. The desirability of the value being added within Fiji to mahogany timber and mahogany timber products. The aim of achieving a fair return to landowners for the mahogany timber on their land. It also looks after the interest of the people of Fiji as a whole including opportunities for increase employment and skills training. It also maintains high quality mahogany timber and timber produced in Fiji.
2. To establish a scheme for the certification of the fell mahogany timber.
3. The development of a recognised brand for Fiji Mahogany Timber and Timber products.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the transferring of the custodianship of the Act and Chairmanship of the Council to the Ministry of Forestry and Minister for Forestry, respectively it is not a reform that has been done in isolation. But one that complements what is already a collaborative relationship between the Ministry of Forestry and the Mahogany Industry. For instance, in September of this year, the Ministry of Forestry and the Fiji Mahogany Trust signed a grant agreement for \$250,000 to better coordinate the needs of Mahogany landowners and to further enhance the contribution towards the Mahogany industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry has been working in the forest certification space for more than 15 years and with the support from the World Life Fund provided a technical support and also the Fiji Hardwood Corporation, Forest Certification Gap Analysis and Roadmap Report. In March 2022, the Ministry of Forestry facilitated that the forest certification preparatory workshop as part of the endeavour for the forest stewardship certification to extend to Fiji's Mahogany plantations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for reference the attainment of the FSC confirms that the forest has been managed in a way that protects biological diversity and benefits the lives of local people and works while ensuring sustain economic viability. There is a need for our mahogany to be certified to enable us to compete in the international market arena. Adding its value to the place and to place us above other similar mahogany sources from Asia and Africa.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are the representative of collaborative existing efforts but when we speak of technical expertise and knowledge that the Ministry of Forestry can impart to the mahogany industry, the examples mentioned are practical illustrations that we are referring to. Under the Act, the Council has powers to fix the terms of a mahogany timber may be sold to FHCL to direct FHCL to enter into an agreement with specified persons for the sale of mahogany timber to determine how the proceeds of sale of mahogany timbers are to be distributed or used, and to give directive to FHCL and Fiji Mahogany Trust and to give directives to the iTaukei Land Trust Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these very important powers, it only stands to reason that the Council must have meetings to allow them to exercise their powers in a manner that is conducive to the exercise of their powers. However, since the commencement of the Act, on 3rd May, 2010, the

Council last had its meeting sometimes in 2018. That means, in eight years they did not have that. That is two terms of Parliament. It must be noted, that under the Act, the Council meets at such times and places as the chairperson may appoint.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is also one of the issues that the Bill seeks to rectify. By allowing the Minister for Forestry to assume the chairmanship of the Council so that the Council may meet at regular intervals. It is clear to all of us the busy schedule of the honourable Prime Minister, so if the honourable Prime Minister is the chairperson of such Council, it will really hamper its performance, as was illustrated in the last eight years when it did not meet once.

In the 2018-2019 Report on Government Commercial Companies, Commercial Statutory Authorities and other entities, the Office of the Attorney-General in this audit of the FHCL noted that the mahogany harvested in 2017 and 2018, had not been replanted to maintain the sustainability of the mahogany plantation as required by the Licencing Agreement under the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is just one of the examples which highlight the need for the Ministry of Forestry to oversee the administration of the Act, given the technical insight and resources they have which would allow them to monitor compliance with obligations under the Act. Under the Forest Act 1982, the Ministry of Forestry bears the responsibility of being the administrator of matters related to Fiji forest and forest produce.

In its response to the Standing Committee on Natural Resources, regarding questions posed on the Ministry of Forestry on the 2017-2018 Annual Report, the Ministry of Forestry had advised that mahogany plantations on private land or individually owned land were regulated by the Ministry. Therefore, the Bill also allows for the streamlining of processes as the regulating of forest products, inclusive of mahogany timber, will be regulated by one institution, that is the Ministry of Forestry. I would like to inform Parliament that the Coalition Government is committed to reforming the mahogany industry. Therefore, the Bill is one of the reforms and the Coalition Government is committed to implementing for the ultimate benefit of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has a significant mahogany industry which has the potential to make a substantial contribution to our economy. Therefore, to encourage such an industry, it is only right that with the approval of Parliament, assign the role of the chairperson of the Council and the overall administration of the Act to the Minister for Forestry and the Ministry of Forestry respectively. This will allow the implementation of the Act to be conducted more effectively and efficiently. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate. The list before me identifies three speakers, the:

1. Honourable Leader of the Opposition;
2. Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forests; and
3. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.

At the sound of the first bell, I shall be humbly asking you, honourable Members, to resume your seat so as to enable us to get the next speaker to continue.

The floor is now open for debate and the floor is yours, honourable Leader of Opposition.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me start with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications,

again, he has been harping about nothing being done in the last 16 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir in almost all his speeches in this august Parliament but the problem is, he was not in the country most of the time in these 16 years, and he is not conversant with the developments that have taken place.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister Biman Prasad in the last Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, keeps reminding us that the voters are watching, the voters are watching. We are not concerned about the voters, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because politics without principles is dangerous.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No, I said workers not voters.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I will say that again, politics without principles is dangerous.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I said, workers, not voters.

HON. S. KOROILAVESAU.- Stand up.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Whether they are workers or voters, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the workers are voters as well.

(Laughter)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- What this country needs are not politicians, but leadership.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I will say that again, because politicians are more concerned about the voters. Leadership is more concerned about the future and the future of the country and the people and the workers as well.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were some very good reasons that was considered and had the Prime Minister as Chair of the Mahogany Trust. This is one of the entities that was salvaged from its status during the FijiFirst and the Bainimarama terms in Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The same thing with the Fiji Pine, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know it. No one can deny that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Undeniable.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- This is one of the entities that was salvaged. How? Through strong leadership and solid leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Strong leadership, solid leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That is what

is needed and that is why, it remained in the Prime Minister's Office because it was in the red. The same thing with Fiji Pine, it was in the red. It cannot run its own operations, Sir.

Millions of debts, if I recall, \$23 million owed to the financiers. We owe money to FNPF, we owe money to the machine operators, we owe money to other agencies, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Apart from the \$23 million. Where is it today? Where is it today, Mr. Speaker, Sir? It took good leadership to salvage this company.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Where is it today?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It took good leadership to salvage this company.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We all know the history of Fiji Hardwood and we all know the history of Fiji Pine, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am concerned with all due respect to the honourable Minister, how solid is his leadership to take this institution given what it had gone through?

I know for a fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that even now in Fiji Pine, the Class A shares, which is mostly the landowners that we want to promote their interest, they are being bulldozed by Class B and Class C shares, which are representatives of Government in that board.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask again, the honourable Minister, how solid is his leadership? I hope he is not easily influenced, because this is an industry that is important for Fiji.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- We need, I have mentioned it, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is an over-reliance on plantations.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mahogany.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You know what has happened in most of the native forests in Fiji, it is almost gone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost gone. The issue of sustainability in the long-term and that is why it has to remain, and I urge the honourable Prime Minister, reconsider this decision because it is critical. We know how busy you are honourable Prime Minister Sir, but it is important for Fiji, and it is important for the landowners that we fight for, and it is important for the economy, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Yes.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- It is not an easy thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he talked about the certification, we know the tightening in market conditions. Sir, on environmental issues, I know what is coming up when this goes to the Minister. There are overplanted plantations as well. Sir, the danger

in overplanted plantations there are small operators who are working with some of the landowners because landowners sell out of desperation. They do not go through proper consultations and that is why we need to protect this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have strong objections to that, and we hope that the honourable Prime Minister reconsiders because it is important for the country.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry supports the motion and it will debate due to the following reason. The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 gives an overarching power to the Mahogany Industry Council which has the power to control the management of mahogany plantation through FHCL. And the engagement of landowning forest base trust under the Fiji Mahogany Trust. This basically brought other private enterprise to buy mahogany process and export timbers which negatively affected FHCL and resource owners. The practice of restrictive mahogany licensing and cooperatively high log price since 2016 has not blend well with the industry performance to date.

Under the Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 the FHCL has not been allowed to explore its full potential to expand its business into processing and export mahogany timber overseas. The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 also repealed the Fiji Mahogany Act 2003 which gives Fiji Mahogany Trust more flexibility to make its own decision on its future direction.

The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 also applies to the Forest Act 1992 in the mahogany plantation. This allow FHCL not to only operate but to regulate its own operation which should be regulated invertedly under the Forestry Act.

The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 also limits the role of FHCL to grow in of the mahogany plantation and selling the mahogany lots. This limits the profitability of FHCL and the owners who leased their land for mahogany plantations under the FHCL.

The FHCL should be allowed to process and market its own trees as well to ensure more return as value added product rather than selling only primary product in forms of log. Fiji Pine, on the other hand, assists the company - Tropik and pine product which allows more economical management and the plantations higher returns to landowners.

The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 encourages Fiji enterprises through its mahogany industry, licensing and planning their 2011 to promote the mahogany brand through its licence customers. But very little is done facilitating landowners to actively participate in forest business.

The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 states the landowners through the Forest Base Trust are given a fair share of return through lease rental and land management fees. However this share is quite small compared to what those private enterprise are receiving from export mahogany timber overseas.

The Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 also have a very little support for the provision of initiative availability and financial facilities that could enable landowners to enable meaningful participation in SMEs and Forest Enterprise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry welcome the opportunity discussed in this motion and stands ready to execute the decision in this Parliament.

I, therefore, support and commend the motion before Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the amendment to Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 putting the responsibility of the mahogany industry in the hands of the experts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have heard me talked about turbo-charging the economy in this Parliament or supercharging the economy, Sir. This industry if handle well will be a contributor to supercharging or turbo-charging the economy.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Get the right people.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- They did not do the right thing on the other side.

I am reminded of what they did in the *Bible*, the parable of the talents in the *Bible*. They just sat on it, they did not do anything to it. One meeting of that Council in 2010; what are shame! Shameful, Mr. Speaker, Sir. If you look at the trend of revenue, these industry should be a \$100 million industry right now in our country. It is not even scraping \$20 million at the moment and I think by placing it in the hands of the Ministry of Forestry, we will do the right thing and do justice to not only the industry but to the landowners, the resource owners of this industry.

Let me just share some pertinent facts of what the other side did to the Mahogany Industry just to put it in perspective. Some of it was during the chairmanship of the current honourable Leader of the Opposition. Firstly, they amended the Decree, they removed the 10 percent shares of the mahogany landowners vested through FMT. Why? They were saying that they were in for landowners' rights. Why did you do that?

Secondly, weaken the role of iTaukei Trust Board on mahogany leases by enabling the Council to have overriding powers on any matter relating to *iTaukei* land that are leased for mahogany purposes. *iTaukei* resource owner, right? Why?

Thirdly, weaken the participation of mahogany landowners to have meaningful participation in the harvesting and cartaging of operations. The honourable Minister mentioned it just now, do you see any wealth created amongst the landowners, the resource owners in the Mahogany Industry?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- None.

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

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Stop lying.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Fourthly, weaken the participation of the mahogany landowners to participate in the processing and export business. I rest my case.

Introduced an unworkable licensing system that led to poor decisions by the previous government, to increase the mahogany log prices to unrealistic levels. Oh, they have gone quiet!

(Laughter)

And mahogany log production at export volumes have been on the decline and the list can go on. I would like to just share two other things when I came back from my travels, I participated in the Mahogany Industry.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Still travelling?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was in a company that actually started talking about certification of the forest, that was in 2018. The honourable Attorney-General is still talking about no certification. They sat on the certification and the implications were, we lost out on a major market in New Zealand without a certification. They just sat on it, they had no money or no whatever.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- They had no political will to do the right thing by the landowners in the Mahogany Industry.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have said numerous times that the previous government was full of talk, but a lot of hot air. This example here, the mahogany industry is a classic example of hot air, lots of talk and no action. I support the Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir and the landowners of this country who own mahogany have a promising future ahead of them.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just a few other issues I would like to highlight. Contrary to normal standard best practise for forest sector management, the FijiFirst Party it basically takes out what is the legislative role of the Ministry of Forestry, so what we are doing here, we are reverting that back to where it rightly belongs.

The essence of the honourable Leader of the Opposition's submission is basically leadership, give it to the person who is the leader. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if am listening correctly, this is what he said. It is only the Prime Minister who has the power, that is the problem with the other side.

(Chorus of interjections)

Mr. Speaker, if I am listening correctly, this is what he said, it is the Prime Minister who has the power, that is the problem with the other side. All the Ministers and Assistant Ministers, we empower them.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What about them?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It is not a one man rule! Gone are those days!

(Laughter)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- There's a new political order we are creating here!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- The civil servants are the advisors. As Ministers we go, we listen, we empower them, we give direction, we do not dictate what they used to do, so that is what we have created today.

Fiji will benefit, the *iTaukei* will benefit, the forest industry, the mahogany plantations, the entire country will benefit from this Bill. I endorse it, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes - 27
Noes - 23
Not voted - 4

Motion agreed to.

[Mahogany Industry Development (Amendment) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 28/2023) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. ... of 2023)]

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (AMENDMENT) (NO. 2) BILL 2023

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the resolution of Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November 2023, I move:

That the Local Government (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2023 be debated, voted upon and be passed.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I beg to second the motion.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate of the Local Government (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill of 2023 which was tabled in Parliament on Tuesday, 21st November 2023. The Local Government (Amendment) Bill seeks to amend the Local Government Act of 1972, to ensure that the Local Government election procedures and processes are consistent with the policies and legislations relevant to elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to begin with the quote by Abraham Lincoln: “Democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people.”

HON. J. USAMATE.- Live with that now, live it.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- For there to be a true democracy in our country, we must give our people the opportunity to be involved in what is happening in their towns and cities. Citizen participation is a building block of democracy. As I had mentioned on Tuesday, people at the very level of society - nation, provincial, district, city, town and village must be empowered for governance to be fully responsive and represented.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, holding the municipal elections will enhance the role of the civil society and improve the quality of life at grassroot level. It will nurture our future leaders, empower citizens to speak on the issues that are unique to different towns and cities, and it will bring to light key issues which need to be addressed by the Government. We do not always need to have surveys and studies done to find out what our people need, we can give them an opportunity to tell us directly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a priority of the Coalition Government to address the wastage of resources and taxpayer’s money that has taken place in the previous years. If we provide a platform which people can use to advocate for issues that affect them, we will be able to better allocate resources and taxpayers’ money.

Furthermore, by encouraging democratic local governance, there will be positive effects on our societies. It will encourage public discussions and involvement, participation in decision making, there will be greater focus on vulnerable groups and the environment. The development of our society

deserves the same amount of attention that is given to economic development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we strongly believe in listening to our people, and bringing back municipal elections is a step in the right direction. As mentioned on Tuesday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, public consultation was held on the Bill and based on the outcome of this consultation, the Bill is now being introduced in Parliament. There were consultations with key stakeholders, the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture, Heritage and Arts, and of course, the Office of the Solicitor-General.

Clause 1 of the Bill provides for the short title and commencement. If passed by Parliament, the amending legislation will come into force on a date or date(s) appointed by the Minister by notice in the Gazette.

Clause 2 of the Bill provides for the definition of the term used throughout the Bill.

Clause 3 of the Bill amends section 9 of the Act to include that the Electoral Commission consults the Minister to determine the number of councillors in each ward.

Clause 4 of the Bill deletes section 9A of the Act as Special Administrators to remove the provision for special administrators.

Clause 5 of the Bill deletes with section 10 of the Act and substitutes a new section which provides the manner in which a candidate can stand for election to the Council, and the qualifications required. It also inserts a new section 10A which provides for the provisions relating to the disqualification of a candidate after he or she has been nominated for election.

Clause 6 of the Bill amends section 11 of the Act to provide for the qualification of voters.

Clause 7 of the Bill amends section 12 of the Act to delete the term “elector” and substitute with the term “voter”.

Clause 8 of the Bill amends section 13 of the Act to allow for the Minister responsible for elections to make regulations in relations to the conduct of elections.

Clause 9 of the Bill amends section 14 of the Act to provide that Parliament will allocate financial resources to the Fijian Elections Office for the conduct of a local government elections.

Clause 10 of the Bill inserts section 15A to provide for the vacancy of a seat of a councillor.

Clause 11 of the Bill deletes section 16A of the Act.

Clause 12 of the Bill amends section 21 to amend the method used to determine the outcome when there is a draw in votes.

Clause 13 of the Bill amends section 23 to amend the method used to determine the outcome when there is a draw in votes.

Clause 14 of the Bill amends section 25(1) of the Act to replace “town clerk” with “Chief Executive Officer”.

Clause 15 of the Bill provides the transitional provisions.

Clause 16 revokes the Local Government (Election) Regulations of 1972.

Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend this Bill to Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable members, the floor is now open for debate, and I have before me a list of four names, two from each side provided by the Whips and the batting will be led off by:

1. Honourable P.D. Kumar;
2. Honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government;
3. Honourable P.K. Bala; and
4. Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the world is moving with time, this Government is stuck in the past.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What I call a colonial hangover. They need to overcome that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, words ...

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ...were created during the Colonial days for rubbish collection. The Bill before us is taking us backwards. Why can we not use the municipality boundary for each council or town as one single electoral boundary rather than dividing into wards and little pieces.

There is merit in moving away from wards to a single electoral boundary, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A single electoral boundary can encourage elected officials or councillors to consider the interest of the entire community residing in that municipality rather than advocating the interest of their specific wards at the expense of the broader community. A single boundary can contribute to better distribution and policy development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, including comprehensive, urban planning and sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the unified approach will allow the growth of the municipality and it will reduce the complexity of managing a municipality. A unified approach is very much in line with our National Electoral System. Single electoral boundary was already practiced by the three Municipal Councils in the past. These Municipalities operated with no ward.

In 2007, we saw how Municipal Councils operated where the number of councillors did not match the number of wards. For example, Suva City Council had five wards with 20 Councillors while Lami had 12 Counsellors with two wards. How far is Lami from Suva City Council? Should Lami be amalgamated with Suva?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Nausori Town Council had 12 Councillors overseeing over 46,000 people. Labasa had 12 Councillors for its only 27,000 people and Tavua which is basically penniless, had nine Councillors to represent 2,500 citizens. The total number of elected councillors in 30 Municipal Councils were 159 - bigger than the Parliament of Fiji.

Ministries, statutory bodies provide majority of the services whether it is education, health or a transport system, et cetera. What services do Municipal Councils provide? Garbage collection and drain cleaning. Even roads are taken away. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want, and I urge the other side to think properly of how the Municipalities are evolving over time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to ask the honourable Minister whether the boundary extension exercise by the Municipal Councils is complete, which was being undertaken under the guidance of the Local Government Committee? Areas outside municipal boundaries have become satellite towns, but it is not part of the municipality. A good example is Cuvu, which is not part of Sigatoka. Have you look at all that? How will the boundary and city councils treat Rural Local Authority?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, have we incorporated Rural Local Authority boundaries and are they going to be part of the voting system or the election that the Government is talking about? We are not too far away from New Zealand, the least they can do (they often travel to New Zealand) is learn from New Zealand on how they have progressed with the election system, as well as developing its municipality.

It is extremely important to note that Auckland Council, in 2010, was established by dissolving four City Councils and three District Councils. Why was that done? It was done to reduce the administrative cost and to focus on the development of a unified city for better planning and development, and above all, pooling resources to provide those services in a more structured manner. So, look at Auckland Council at this stage.

If you look at the population of Fiji, it is just less than one million and we have 13 municipal councils. They are councils which are very small like Tavua and Rakiraki. That is why we had appointed a single CEO to look after both the municipalities, because the intention was to amalgamate them. It was not making sense. If you have these counsellors, there is an overhead cost in running the municipality, and what we wanted was more resources to go into developing the place rather than simply money being wasted in the overhead cost.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You had been in a dictatorship.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is not dictatorship, thank you, it is about modernising the municipality. That is why we are saying, they live in the past. That is what they know, that is what has been left by our colonial governance. That is what they left, and that is what they are continuing with. They are not moving with time, and that is the sad part of this Coalition Government. What they know is where they left, the clock stopped there. When they came back, now they want to go back to that time piece. That is what they are doing, they are not moving with time. We are simply urging for the interest of the ratepayers.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- No, democracy is not, that we never said there will be no election, thank you. It was all about making sure that we are able to come up with better reforms.

For the reforms, let me just remind them to go back and read the *Daily Hansard* (if you really want to know), where I delivered the Ministerial Statement, and the work had already progressed in that direction. We had completed the review of the Town Planning Act, we had completed the review of the Subdivision Act and the honourable Minister, if he is honest enough, should admit that even the terms of reference was developed for us to go in this direction.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Bill to

amend the Local Government Act. The Bill before Parliament is about restoring basic democracy to all the 13 municipal councils. As the Minister for Housing and Local Government, this Bill holds more than initiative certificates. It represents a profound commitment to our nation and our people.

The proposed amendment aims to pave the way for a fair and inclusive Local Government Election, a cornerstone of our democratic values. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for long 18 years, the ratepayers and residents of 13 municipalities had been deprived of the basic democratic right to elect their representatives in the administration of their councils. It is far, far too long.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to underscore the dedication of our Coalition Government to the principles of democracy and the empowerment of our citizens. We firmly believe that the power to elect representatives should rest in the hands of the very individuals residing in the municipalities and communities. Furthermore, our Coalition Government has fulfilled its promises to the people in reinstating the Local Government Elections.

The Bill present before the august Parliament, stands as a compelling pathway to a fair and just Local Government Election. The coming Local Government Election symbolises this commitment and we are resilient in ensuring a transparent and fair electoral process. The Bill presented before this august Parliament today, sets the wheels in motion for an election that echoes the democratic aspirations of our people.

The Local Government Election stands, not just as a democratic exercise but as a beacon of hope for our communities, potential catalysts for significant positive change. the decisions made at the local level resonates directly in the daily lives of our citizens impacting their livelihood enforcing grassroot economic development.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, the proposed amendments to the Local Government Act aims at modernising and improving the legislative framework aligning it with international best practices. These changes born out of extensive consultations with residents, stakeholders, political parties, media and civil society organisation and reflect our dedication embracing the democratic levels ideals of participation and inclusiveness.

The prolonged absence of elected councillors over the past 15 years has impacted the functions of the councils. Create independencies on national budget for project and operations. With this amendment we aim to break three from this side, Mr. Speaker, returning decision making power to the rightfully representatives chosen by the people. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Councils become complacent to collect rates.

Today we have a huge arrears problem. The last Council Elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was held in 2005. The Councillors term expiring in 2008. From 2009 all Councils have been managed under the supervision of Special Administrators by virtue of section 9 of the Local Government Act which we are revoking through this amendment. The last 18 years have created spiral events that have completely eroded the essence of democratic decision-making in Councils which will change for the better.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had the privilege of participating in extensive consultations where residents actively contributed to the manual process. Their passion and enthusiasm reaffirm the importance of giving them a voice in local governance decisions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, these amendments are not just legal adjustments, they are a commitment to restoring democratic decision-making at the Council level. The Coalition Government firmly believes that this Election will charter the course towards a bright future and that

the voice of people are not just heard but truly listened to.

I express my gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to this Bill and I fully support the Bill.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, one has to be able to put with all the heat that comes to you. So, I hope honourable Kamikamica will take note of this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last speaker said that we have waited for 16 years and now we will have the ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Get your facts right.

HON. P.K. BALA.- ...Municipal Elections I want to ask the honourable Attorney-General why you have sidelined the *mataqali* from Municipal Elections.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I want to ask the honourable Attorney-General. Why you have sidelined the *mataqali* from the operations of Municipal Council.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You need to answer this. You people are coming here shouting, dancing, everything for the iTaukei and here in this amendment, you people have taken their rights away.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Shame!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Do not laugh. It is not a laughing matter. I am asking you. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to contribute to the motion that is before us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this amendment will take away my rights as well.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Hogwash.

HON. P.K. BALA.- ... to contest the municipal election if this amendment is passed. You know nothing and that is why you are saying all sorts of things.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two sides of the coin, looks like they have only seen one side of the coin and that is to deprive our rights as the ratepayer of respective municipalities.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- *Ahre!*

HON. P.K. BALA.- What do you mean *ahre*, Members of Parliament are not allowed? I think you have not read, that could be one reason. The other reason could be, you have not discussed in the Cabinet that is why you are not aware.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed amendment to section 9(2) seems not necessary as the Local Government Election Regulation section 2 that the election commission shall consult the Minister for such purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Local Government Act (Amendment) Bill propose that section 9(3) of the Act be amended by inserting

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- The obvious correction in 2014.

HON. P.K. BALA.- I think he want something from me.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- That the councillors shall hold office

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, please keep that to yourself.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- But privately, I will share with you Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Local Government Act (Amendment) Bill proposes that section 9(3) of the Act be

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.K. BALA.- It is my humble plea that after the session call me in your office and talk to you, please. That is my plea.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Plagiarism Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- The Local Government (Amendment) Bill proposes that section 9(3) of the Act be amended by inserting: “That the councillors shall hold office for a period of three years so such terms and condition as the Minister may deem fit.” All these years, they come here and harping on that the Ministers are controlling all the municipalities.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.K. BALA.- I do not want to talk to you, you are useless. This defeats the whole

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Check the *Hansard*.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You are useless. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this defeats the whole purpose of holding elections as elected councillors shall be working on the terms of the Minister. The Local Government Act (these people must know) is the framework of operation and now under this amendment, the Minister will have legal powers to dictate to the Council, where is the autonomy that you all have been harping about?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendment to section 9(a) is not necessary as it has nothing to do with calling municipal elections. Furthermore, the replacement of section 10 through deleting and inserting needs further attention. Section 10(1) states that a candidate shall be nominated by a party to stand as an independent seems not necessary. In prior elections, through the regulations,

candidates have used political party symbols or independent symbols and, in this amendment, the ratepayers' association or the landowner and citizen association are being denied of their rights. They cannot form landowners' association or ratepayers' association. These are all his doing – being denied of their right Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In previous elections Mr. Speaker, Sir, the landowners used to have their own candidates in their respective municipalities. Let me repeat, reminded by my colleague here that in previous elections, the landowners used to have their own candidates in their respective municipalities. This message is very clear to the *mataqalis* that this Government has removed their rights.

(Honourable Members interject)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in some districts, the ratepayers do not want politics and they have the freedom to appoint or sponsor their candidates, and Councils like Tavua, Savusavu, these people, they never had this politics. They had the association, you should have consulted me, that is the problem.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You did not win the Election.

HON. P.K. BALA.- The qualifications of candidates standing requires review. The removal of the Members of Parliament is not in the interest of democracy. The Drafting team should have referred to the High Court Judgement of 17(2005), and 10.10 of 1997. Section 10(3) states “that the total of the number of candidates nominated by a Political Party, to number equally, to the ward. The number also requires a review, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Political Parties shall be allowed to fill candidates to the number that they feel fit and proper, and then there should be a provision for dummy candidates. Those were all past practice. They removed all those things, ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member..

HON. P.K. BALA.- ...and provision to withdraw...

MR. SPEAKER.- The bell has rung.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was hoping to give a speech, or give my response to inspire, but I have to respond to some of the mud that has been thrown from the other side. Let me just remind, honourable Bala. Honourable Kumar said, “go back and read the *Daily Hansard*”, we did.

Honourable Bala, in 2014, Mr. Speaker, Sir...

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Areh*, what about the ...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ...he promised...

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.-... talk about...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ...in 2014, he promised Local Government Elections. He promised Local Government Elections.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- In Parliament and to the people.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Lasu, lasu!*

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Myself, *qo sa oti*.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He is the former Minister for no elections.

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

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is his legacy, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- And let me remind him, he is standing and defending his position because he was ...

HON. P.K. BALA.- *Khalas!*

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ...appointed as an Administrator in the Lautoka City Council. He is defending his position, he was not elected, chosen by the people.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Myself not ...

(Chorus of interjection)

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- He was elected, he was appointed by an illegal regime, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are appointed by a legal regime.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Let me remind him and honourable Sharma, the People's Government is keeping its promise and coming for Local Government Elections. That is the People's Government. Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Kumar promised a review of legislation and bring it to the Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Where?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Honourable Kumar is the former Minister, but did it happen? No! So neither former Ministers ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No action.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ...delivered on their promises. But here we are bringing a Bill, reviewing the Law, and we are about to pass it, that is keeping our promises. That is keeping our promises.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- They just cannot deal with that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Under the Special Administrators, let us just go back in time, since honourable Kumar is accusing us of going back in time, let us go back in time. Under Special Administrators, Shirley Park was giving to P Meghji. JC's Park was given to North Pole Hotel.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Point of Order.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Part of Churchill Park was given to Tappoos.

HON. P.K. BALA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The honourable Minister is misleading this Parliament. She said, "that Lautoka City Council gave away Shirley Park to P Meghji. There was a process. Not aye!

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- There was a process and they were the successful bidder, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Carry on.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point is, they did not consult the voters or the ratepayers of Lautoka Council.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- You did not consult the ratepayers. That is the difference. The difference between that side and this side. We will now have the ratepayers vote for their leaders and make decisions in the Council.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is why you are being put there.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Part of Churchill Park was given to Tappoos. Again, transferred without consultation of the ratepayers, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Talking too much.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- And what happened to the swimming pool in Lautoka?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Took too long, and cost too much.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That, we have to pick up. Govind Park, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rest my case.

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the point we are making here, it is the need for ratepayers to determine. In all modern democracies, they have Local Government Elections. Talking about modernisation or coming into the 21st century, they are electing their leaders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will get now to what I really wanted to share, and that is the importance of women participating in Local Government Elections. It is not just a matter of gender equality, it is about enriching the equality of our democracy. I am very honoured to be part of Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, which comprises of...

HON. P.K. BALA.- Please, remove you from there.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Listen!

... women Members of Parliament in this Chamber who are dedicated and committed to increasing the participation of women in the Local Government Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I invite all political parties, please, ensure that you remove the barriers for women candidates to participate in the Local Government Elections. You have your voluntary quota system, constitutions, some 20 percent, some 30 percent, and some do not have it, but please, do encourage your women to step up. I call on all our fellow Fijians, please embrace the importance of women's leadership, and the need for us to stand up in support of gender equality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the Fiji Country Gender Assessment, it presents a compelling reality. Sir, 81 percent of Fijians agree that women are underrepresented in our nation. Furthermore, a remarkable 72 percent of Fijians believe it would be better for our country if there were more women in leadership roles and actively contributing to decision making processes across politics and governance.

Our Ministry is collaborating with the Ministry for Local Government, and I thank the honourable Minister for the work we are doing together and that we are engaging our relevant stakeholders, civil society organisations and we are hoping to foster an enabling environment for women's active political participation in the Local Government Elections. I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for Women, honourable Sashi Kiran who is already working in communities with the Republican Institute (RI) funded by USAID, already engaging our women on local level to participate in Local Government Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are really excited about having our women participate in Local Government Elections. It is my plea to all Fijian women, please, step up and engage in Local Government Elections. We are usually the ones that when we go around to the communities, they appeal in these meetings about road humps on roads that where speeding is happening too often, the need for streetlights and footpaths and the need for improved crossings, and also to keep their children

and family safe and the need for more bus shelters. These are issues that women usually raise in the communities, and we have got to listen to them and help them to step up and become leaders in their municipalities. I am really disappointed with the noise coming from the other side, that they are not showing respect for the appeal to women. Come on, show your respect for the appeal for women.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it behoves me that the honourable Minister of no election had the audacity...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- ...to come and ask things that are already in the Act. That is why it is so dangerous, when you try to read the law when you are not a lawyer. Let me go to section 125 of the Local Government Act, which includes villages. The villages that are located in the municipalities can participate.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It is the village....

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- You can hold the book but you may not know what is inside.

(Laughter)

If may, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the village under the iTaukei Affairs Board that can participate. So, what this Government has done, interestingly they have raised the issue of iTaukei.

HON. M.S.N KAMIKAMICA.- Now they are worried about the *iTaukei*.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Where was the issue of *iTaukei* in the last 16 years?

HON. P.K. BALA.- You have taken the right away.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- That is what we have done.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- And more importantly is bringing the freedom. We have listened, there is a massive consultation. Listen, incorporate and they have to go by standards as set by the FEO.

Honourable Kumar was referring to going back. They must go, according to the statistics. The problem is, because previously during honourable Bala's time, they formed into groups only to prepare for the Local Government. After the Local Government's done, there is nothing there. Now there are standards, they have to comply. They must come through by way of political parties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am indeed honoured, as part of the Coalition Government bringing these

four Bills in restoring the rights people. This is what we actually campaigned for. At the end of the Parliamentary session, the Coalition Government is indeed happy and satisfied that we have come through the active participation of the people. We fully endorse the Bill before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes	-	27
Noes	-	23
Not voted	-	4

Motion agreed to.

[Local Government (Amendment)(No. 2) Bill 2023 (Bill No. 29/2023) moved under Standing Order 51 was passed and enacted by Parliament of the Republic of Fiji. (Act No. ... of 2020)]

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament so that you may have your dinner before we come back to complete the five motions. These are the Reports from the Standing Committee for us to complete the night

The Parliament adjourned at 7.04 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 8.00 p.m.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW ON
LEVUKA TOWN COUNCIL 2012 AND 2013 ANNUAL REPORTS**

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on Levuka Town Council for years 2012 and 2013 which was tabled on 12th September, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka was the first municipality that was proclaimed in Fiji after the passing of the Town Ordinance in 1877. Through this, the residence of Levuka were given the right to govern the town thus appointing wardens to oversee the work being carried in Levuka. However, changes came into effect after Independence when the Local Government Act of 1972 was passed, giving all townships in Fiji municipality status and the power to elect their own town councils, councillors and mayors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the year 2012 and 2013, the Council highlighted a few events that was quite significant for them. For instance, these were courtesy visits from the Special Administrator Rakiraki for Levuka/Rakiraki Tourism Partnership. The visit from the Director of Local Government and Chief Executive Officer of Nadi, the Minister for Labour, Industrial Relations and Employment and the Parliament Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, further to the above, the Council carried out the following activities. They launched the nomination dossier and later Levuka Town was inscribed in the World Heritage Listing. They also hosted the arrival of the *Uto ni Yalo* and increased human resource capacity to enhance the services provided by the Council. The Committee acknowledged the work carried out by the town council in 2012 and 2013. It also noted the challenges and opportunities that Levuka can build on to boost its economic viability and its status as a municipal council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommends that the Council build on the Private-Public Partnership model and strengthen partnership with civil society organisations to improve the image of Levuka as a heritage site.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and I also have a list of speakers before me and four speakers have been identified. The batting will be led by:

1. Honourable Viam Pillay;
2. Honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government;
3. Honourable Premila Kumar; and
4. Honourable Assistant Minister of Finance.

Honourable Members, as soon as the first bell is sounded, we will humbly ask you to resume your seat.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to give a few remarks on the Consolidated Review of Levuka Town Council's Annual Report for the years 2012 and 2013. I know it is an old report and a lot has been said about Levuka, so I will be very brief.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka Town Council's vision to preserve the heritage of Levuka for sustainable livelihoods and its mission to promote economic growth through partnerships and efficient service delivery resonates deeply with the aspirations of our nation.

The Committee's recognition of the Council's effort in hosting notable events, receiving courtesy visits and achieving World Heritage Listing status is a testament to the significant strides taken by Levuka in preserving its cultural and historical richness. The launch of the nomination dossier leading to Levuka Town's inclusion in the World Heritage Listing is a milestone worth celebrating. It not only recognises the historical significance of Levuka but also positions it on the global stage as a custodian of cultural heritage. Such achievements underscore the importance of local governance in shaping the identity and the reputation of our municipalities.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to provide some insights and also address the august Chamber on the motion before us which is on the report provided by the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I give my comments this evening, I wish to extend my appreciation to the Chairperson and the Committee Members for the assessment and constructive recommendations. Furthermore, I also thank the Special Administrator, CEO and staff of Levuka Town Council for diligently serving the people of Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka was the first capital of Fiji and the recommendation given by the Committee is timely because it encourages more participation with the private as well the public to promote some of the developments that happened in Levuka. Based on the size of the Council, it needs the cooperation assistance of the civil society as well as private organisations to assist in the development of Levuka Town.

Recognising effective collaboration stringent on open communications subjective and mutual respect and the Ministry is committed in enhancing partnership to elevate the image of Levuka's heritage sites. It is also pertinent to highlight a note the significant aid provided by the Government of Japan to the Levuka Town Council. This include essential equipment such as garbage trucks, ride-on lawn mowers, skipper trucks and more not only supports the Council but also generates additional revenue through hiring. The Government of Japan's assistance in building seawalls post-cyclone destruction underscores their commitment to Levuka's wellbeing.

Furthermore, under the UN Women's Market for Change Project of \$400,000 has been co-funded for the construction of the new Levuka Market. The Ministry stands in support of civil society organisations committed to preserving our cultural heritage. We are so blessed that Levuka is one of the sites because of it being the first capital of Fiji.

In conclusion, I express my gratitude for the opportunity to respond to the motion before us and from the Ministry's perspective, it looks forward to continue to support the operations of Levuka Town Council.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this motion. Levuka's rich history is easily identifiable by having among the first of many things; the first trading hub, the first schools and hotels, the first banks and post office, the first police station, the first church, mosque and mandir, the first market and the first capital of Fiji. This is a huge part of Levuka's historical identity for Fiji. It was in Levuka that education, politics, trade, investment and other things began to take shape. It is worth noting that Levuka Town Council was the first municipality proclaimed in Fiji which dates back to 1877.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2013, was a momentous year for the people of Levuka, when Levuka was

listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Just after three years of being declared a UNESCO Heritage Port, *TC Winston* in 2016 and subsequent cyclones damaged majority of the historical buildings, in total, about 76 buildings were destroyed at that time, including seawalls and other monuments in Levuka.

This was a major setback for a small town. It is to be noted that Fiji faced 14 cyclones from 2016 of different strengths, example, *TC Harold*, which was Category 4 and *TC Yasa*, Category 5. Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite all the cyclones, at that time the FijiFirst Government tried to do its best to uplift, repair and restore Levuka.

The Committee's recommendation is appropriate because Levuka is a small town, the community there is close knit, and they want to promote Levuka as a tourist destination. But, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it must be noted that, Levuka Town Council is not in a financial position to look after Fiji's only heritage town on its own. They barely have about 152 ratepayers, and they are limited by other resources, so, there is a greater dependence on the National Government, NGOs and other development partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka Town Council barely collects around \$150,000 in rates, and through other fees and charges, they can come up to around \$400,000. There is absolutely no way and maintain the historical sites and provide basic services, when it collects such a small amount of money.

Levuka is our pride, Fiji's only world heritage site, so we must continue to invest in the upkeep of the infrastructure as much as we can. The FijiFirst Government had been supporting the heritage town, to restore the seawall and the road. Mr. Speaker, Sir, every year, Levuka Town Council was receiving around \$200,000 from the Government to manage their operations.

As we have heard from the Minister, the FijiFirst Government also, at that point, designed and started working on the new and modern Municipal Market, and the reason why this was being done, was for two purposes:

1. Municipal Council can start collecting fees etc. and they can slowly become self-sufficient; and
2. To allow the vendors from nearby islands to come to Levuka to sell their produce.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, with the help of the Government of Japan, we managed to secure a nine-tonne tipper truck and a 5.7 tonne excavator. With these two machineries, they are not only managing the dumpsite, but they are also hiring it out to the ratepayers at a cost. They pay money, and that is another additional revenue for the Municipal Council. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs and support staff, for reviewing and finalising the Levuka Town Council Annual Report for the 2012 and 2013.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka Town Council through the Ministry of Local Government, has received a total of \$5.3 million over the last 11 years. The substantial amount that we have seen here was in –

- 2012 - \$500,000;
- 2013 - around \$210,000;

- 2014 - same amount of \$210,000;
- 2015 - Fund for Challenge Investment Fund around \$62,000;
- 2016-2017 - Drainage and Flood Mitigation - \$50,000, Challenge Investment Fund around \$299,000 and the completion of the Levuka Market;
- 2022-2023 - around \$1.7 million; and
- 2023-2024 – we have budgeted around \$1.37 million.

So, the Government has supported Levuka Town Council for the last 11 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to make a comment on Recommendations (6), that is the Councils should build on Public-Private Partnership Model and strengthen the partnership with Civil Society Organisations to improve the image of Levuka as a heritage site. This collaborative approach envisions a concerted effort between the Private Entities and Civil Societies, to leverage resources, expertise and community development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Levuka Town Council, is impacted by the deploring state of infrastructure. Our heritage site is in a deplorable state currently. A once, booming economy is now in a battle against aging infrastructure. With businesses relocated and people migrating to other parts of the country, this has resulted in the reduced number of ratepayers leading to economic down-turn of the town. Sir, the Coalition Government recognises this problem and is looking at ways to assist Levuka Town Council, also having the Municipal Elections and having elected members will be better planned for the towns and cities including Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for 2013, the Council recorded an operating deficit of \$64,000 and also into 2014 and 2015, owing to maintenance of properties, roads, drains, streets, streetlights and the payment of salaries and wages. They need Government and other grants to support itself to make surpluses, every year. The previous Government neglected Fiji's heritage site, Levuka. I have been told that Levuka, despite being isolated from the centre business district, is one of the most serviced town with a record of 26 ships serviced per week. The economy is surviving on the operation of the Pacific Fishing Company.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, heritage tourism has been noted to be one of the desired tourism in other countries, but our first Capital fails to attract tourists. Levuka Town is also exposed to environmental degradation, which leads to depletion of Fiji's natural resources. The human factors lead to environmental degradation, Sir. I wish to speak for a few minutes on the financial accounts, which needs to be updated. Thank you, Sir.

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.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I wish to thank the honourable Members that contributed to the motion before the Parliament, noting the Reporting here. Levuka Town Council has been encouraged to work towards to the submission of their pending Annual Reports. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT - TAVUA TOWN COUNCIL 2015 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the review of Tavua Town Council 2015 Annual Report for the year ending 2015 which was tabled on the 12th of September 2022.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tavua was formally incorporated as a Town in 1992. Tavua Town covers a land area of 102 square kilometres. Apart from the agricultural sector contributing to the economy of Tavua Town, the Gold Mine and the mineral water factories continue to develop to sustainably provide for the Town and its people through employment.

In 2015, Tavua Town Council assisted stakeholders in achieving its ultimate objectives by recognising its contribution to socio-economic development, which uplifts the standard of Tavua Town. For instance, the Council assisted the Ministry of Agriculture in organising the Agriculture Show in Tavua. This was the first of its kind and it was an advantage for the people of Tavua to witness activities and programmes piloted by the Ministry of Agriculture; and the establishment of the Ex-Offenders Association and the engagement of offenders in the Council.

Tavua Town was awarded the Clean Small Town Designation in 2015 and this can be seen as a boost and recognition to Tavua as a Town; Interagency meeting on Child Abuse, Neglect and Abandonment with Government officials; and Tavua Town Council also organised its first ever New Year Street Party in 2015.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee commends the work carried out by the Council and would like to recommend that it continues to promote community engagement to achieve a healthy environment and efficient infrastructure.

The Committee compiled through its deliberation on the review of Tavua Town Council 2015 Annual Report and found that a loss of \$5,142 was incurred in 2015, and from 2010 to 2015, it resulted in the accumulative loss of \$1.1 million; funding constraints faced by the Council to carry out programmes and initiatives to improve infrastructure in Tavua and there was a shortage of technical expertise in the Council.

It also noted that Tavua Town Council has asked the well-established municipal councils that were well resourced, that they should share their qualified personnel to assist in their operations which in turn will enhance the service delivery of the Council.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have the list of speakers:

1. Honourable Viam Pillay;
2. Honourable Minister Nalumisa;
3. Honourable Premila Kumar; and
4. Honourable Assistant Minister- Esrom Immanuel.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before Parliament today to give a few remarks on the review conducted by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Tavua Town Council 2015 Annual Report. This Report serves not only as an account of the Council's activities, but as a valuable guide posed for the future development and progress of Tavua Town Council. The key findings outlined in the Report should be viewed not merely as challenges, but as opportunities for

strategic intervention and improvement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's recommendations are constructive and forward looking, emphasising the timely submission of annual reports, collaboration with various stakeholders for economic development, prioritising the development of the dumping site and encouraging the sharing of qualified personnel amongst municipals, are steps in the right direction. The call for collaboration with well-established municipal councils highlights the spirit of solidarity and mentorship that should underpin the relationship between municipalities fostering a collective effort for the greater good.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion. Thank you.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before this august Parliament to address pressing matters raised by Standing Committee on Social Affairs concerning the Review of Tavua Town Council Annual Report 2015.

First, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Chairperson and honourable Members for reviewing these reports. I also would like to thank the Special Administrators, the CEO and the staff of the Tavua Town Council for meticulously serving the people of Tavua.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation by the Committee are very critical and for me justifies the need to have a Local Government Election, once Local Government Election be able to get in, responsible Councillors would be able to assist the Council as well as the Ministry in addressing some of the very pertinent issues that are being raised here such things like submission of Annual Reports as well as the need to have more collaboration with NGOs, Civil Society because the size of Tavua Town, it does not have the financial means to sustain itself. It is particularly important that we involve some of the stakeholders and even some of the societies and donor partners to assist the Council in carrying some of its very important services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a good example raised by the Committee is the need for the Council to look for a dump site. The Council has already identified one, but issue here is that they do not have the financial means to develop the dump site. That is why there is a need to get in good people, to be the Council, be able to get in good ideas, new ideas as well as the business acumen as well as build relationships with other donor partners as well as other organizations in assisting the people of Tavua.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think these are very important issues to the Ministry and is working with the CEOs as well as the staff of Tavua Town Council to ensure especially a financial accounts, just to add on the importance of getting Annual Accounts rate but this year, the Office of the Auditor-General has diligently audited 2017-2019 Financial Statements.

The Council has submitted 2020 Financial Statements for auditing with ongoing efforts to finalise the 2021-2022 Financial Statements. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tavua is a very small town with only 287 ratepayers while the Tavua District population stands at 23,000. Often on the back of a small number of ratepayers the Town Council is expected to provide services to all citizens residing in the Tavua District. So, it becomes difficult for any Council to support a large number of people living in the District when they are able to only collect limited amount of resources from their ratepayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will speak on each recommendation made by the Committee, I agree with Recommendation No. 1 which talks about submission of Annual Reports in a timely manner. For Tavua there was no qualified Finance Officer to address these issues across the Councils, CEOs were appointed who had knowledge skills and qualifications in finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the currency of Tavua Town Council, Mr. Sailosi Sawana, who was previously employed at the Ministry of Economy, is a qualified public Accountant with over 25 years of Accounting, Corporate and audit experience. Now Tavua and Rakiraki Town Councils have a very capable CEO to lead and deliver timely Annual Reports, so this matter should be resolved. The Committee also recommended that the Council works with the Government, Non-Government Organisations, donor agencies and landowners to develop Tavua Town as it has economic potential.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Tavua Town is extremely difficult where the market is, market and bus stand. There is no State land where one can go in and quickly develop that area and build a market or bus stand. For a very long time, we were negotiating with the landowners but amongst the *mataqali*, there was a land dispute and the matter is before the court. The only option Tavua Town Council have is to completely move the market and bus stand far away from where it is if they are in search of State land but then it is not practical.

There are so many shops around it so that is a catch-22 situation which Tavua Town Council is currently facing and hopefully when the dispute is settled in court then the government can start negotiating with the rightful owner of that land and move forward from there onwards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to mention, and I think the Minister also mentioned, that Tavua is the home for Vatukoula Gold Mine and Fiji's largest water bottling plant, Fiji Water. As part of the social responsibility, the least Fiji Water can do to assist the Council is to develop ...

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ... the town for the ratepayers and visitors because they use Tavua Town. They do not pay any rates, but they use the facilities of Tavua Town and now that Fiji Water will not be paying 25 percent corporate tax for the next seven years, they do have surplus money and they should be able to invest it into a town where they are based. Simple as that. So Tavua has been approaching Fiji Water for a while, through their Special Administrators and CEO, but they have not come back with a concrete suggestion.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Because you did not treat them with respect, that is why.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is not about the respect, they need a favour from you so you have given them a favour through the national budget.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You need to treat them with respect to get respect.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So favours were made and, therefore, they need to invest in Tavua Town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Recommendation 4, the Council had identified freehold land in the interior which is a mountainous area to be the dump site. So, when they started negotiating with the landowner, yes, the cost was very high, the valuation was high and Ministry of Finance could not provide that funding because the valuation was low but the landowners was asking for more money.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tavua Town Council, through the Ministry of Local Government, has received a total of \$1.3 million since 2015 which is a favourable support from the Government. I just wish to talk on a few recommendations which I support. We visited Tavua Town and we support that Tavua Town has economic potential, thus the Council will collaborate with Government, Non-Government Organisations, donor organisations and landowners to develop the town.

Recommendation 3 where the Town Council needs to continue with its work in prioritizing development of its dumping site.

Recommendation 4 - a well-established municipal council that is well resourced should share their qualified personnel to assist municipalities in their operations which will enhance service delivery. We saw that there is probably a drawback for both Tavua and Rakiraki for being small and they do not have a well organised or well co-ordinated effort to manage those two Councils.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, lastly, I wish to talk on the financial account or the financial record of the Council, something that we rarely talk on. While we are looking at the 2015 Annual Account, the Public Accounts Committee is also looking at the 2016 account. We have noted that the auditors mentioned that all or most of the Council's accounts have been extensively delayed due to non-submission of financial accounts on time.

In a sense, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have not met the Local Government Act 1972 section 57 (1) and (3) for several years and for Tavua Town Council it is more than six years. Are we accepting this? Probably for the past government but not the current one. For Tavua, the 2017 and 2020 accounts were provided and under audit in March 2023. The 2021 and 2022 are yet to be provided. So, the Council is quite late. Internal controls were bad or ineffective.

Apart from the timing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the opinions given for 2015 were modified or qualified when misstatements eventually or in aggregate material but not pervasive to the financial statements or in simple terms, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is material misstatements or non-compliance and or lack of sufficient appropriate audit evidence to the financial statements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, that has been going on for ages, not only for Tavua but for the other Town Councils as well. There a lot anomalies but Tavua is a bit better than Levuka.

Generally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were issues prevalent in most or all Councils and I hope the Minister do take note and encourages his PS and Directors to resolve all of them before the proposed election. One unreconciled of substantiated balances, poor record keeping with extensive manual records, different system used by different Councils, quality staff shortages and lack of quality supervision from the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, I, again, thank the honourable Members who have contributed to the motion before Parliament and I concur that the Council have a lot of pending reports to submit. The Committee has encouraged the Tavua Town Council and the rest of the Councils that we will be debating this evening and remind them of the need to submit their Annual Reports on time. Thank, Mr. Speaker, I have no further comments.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – BA TOWN COUNCIL 2019 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the Review of Ba Town Council Annual Report for the 2019 which was tabled on 13th September, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, in 1905 the Ba Rural Local Authority was established under the Public Health Ordinance to administer the District of Ba on various matters. The urbanised area of Varoka was proclaimed a township under the Township Ordinance in 1939. The Local Government Act was enacted in 1972, Ba was then alleviated to town status in June 1972.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee acknowledged the commitment of Ba Town Council in the upkeep of urban sanitary and the continuity of rezoning in the district. This contributed positively in the District of Ba for the year 2019.

Mr. Speaker, the Committee also commends the work carried out by the Council and would like to recommend that it continues to promote community engagement in order to achieve a healthy and a clean environment.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate and I have a list of speakers in front of me:

1. Honourable P.K. Bala;
2. Honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government; and
3. Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament and Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be my shortest contribution. As you all know, Ba is basically a soccer crazy town, and last month we won the IDC 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have got two issues, one is the flooding, in Ba and I urge my good friend, Minister for Waterways, can you look up, please?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- He is your friend?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- What did you do for 16 years?

HON. P.K. BALA.- PM, change him!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We did many other things.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the honourable Minister for Waterways to look into it. In past years, Ba River was dredged and the people of Ba were safe from the floods. So, that is what we did, honourable Kamikamica.

The other one that I want to inform Parliament, that, a few weeks ago, there was a statement made that the grounds at Govind Park and the boundary fence was included (because that is in the Report) in the original contract, but I want to clarify that, that was in Phase 2 and it was not included in the original contract. So, with that clarification, I support the motion that is before us.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before this august Parliament this evening. First, I would like to thank honourable Bala for supporting the motion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I share some insights into the recommendations put forward by the Committee, first I would like to thank the Special Administrator, CEO and the staff of Ba Town Council for diligently serving the people of Ba Town.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there were four recommendations put forward by the Committee and these are very vital and also important for the development of Ba Town. One which is common in all Councils is the untimely preparation of annual accounts and some from the Ministry have been working with other municipal councils to address issues, and we also attach this with KPIs so that they will be able to produce annual accounts on time. That is something that the Ministry is working on right now with all municipal councils in Fiji including, Ba Town.

Next one is the issue of flooding in Ba. I know in one of my recent visit to Ba, I think I have done two visits already, something that has been raised, not only by the Council's CEO, as well as employees, and even by the residents of Ba. Something that we are working on right now is to work on the Elevuka Creek which, according to the people of Ba, is something that contributes significantly to the flooding of Ba Town, as well as the dredging of the Ba River.

It is something that we are working closely with the Ministry of Waterways, to ensure that this is done and also to assist the people of Ba Town. Another very important issue raised by the Committee is on the completion of Govind Park. It is something that needs to be completed right now because the people of Ba, even though they won the IDC, they are not enjoying watching their own team play on their home ground. That is something they are trying to do this year, so hopefully with the appointment of a lead consultants working on Phase 2 of the project, we should be able to complete and to ensure that the people of Ba enjoy watching their own players playing in Govind Park.

There are some issues too with Govind Park, something, that we are also looking into right now. Hopefully, the Ministry will address to ensure that if you have a project, you must make the project is done in a timely manner, as well as done to standard.

Two very important issues on the satellite towns. The two satellite towns were not really because one is on a road reserve and the other is on open space. What the Council is doing now is to liaise with the relevant agencies to formalise the rezoning of the two lots where the satellite towns, according to Committee has to complete or put up a satellite town in Ba.

The Ministry have given its assurance that it is going to assist Ba Town Council in completing some of the projects and one is Govind Park. Honourable Bala will also be happy, hopefully the people of Ba will be able to watch their players playing at the Govind Park in Ba. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for the opportunity and I fully support the motion before Parliament.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion on the Report on the Ba Town Council. Their key findings include as mentioned on the flooding and that has been mentioned by few honourable Members and the need for us to look into mitigation measures not only for the Ministry of Waterways but of course, Ministry of Public Works too moving forward, we do recognise that not only for Ba but also for Nadi. There were issues raised regarding the delays in obtaining development approvals. Noted the satellite markets in Varadoli and Namosau Wards which intends to ease traffic which is an ongoing issue not only for the Council but also with FRA.

We note the improvement in rate arrears collection of \$1.94 million to \$3.074 million in 2019 and we do acknowledge the Council's enhanced payment plans. These key findings present the Coalition Government with the need to build up on the recommendations moving forward as mentioned by the honourable Minister and, of course, I was very surprised that honourable Bala has taken the issue about Govind Park very lightly when there have been issues with the construction of the first phase, especially noting some of the defects which the Coalition Government has now taken on board to address and moving forward.

I note that he commissioned that in 2018 and after that there was a long delay before the commencement of phase two. That sort deprived the young people of Ba in terms of their sports facilities. So, when the young people were deprived, I was wondering where honourable Ketan Lal was? He did not say anything regarding that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Neither honourable Ritesh Sharma, even though the Ba Rugby Union is now being promoted to Skipper Cup we are still depriving them.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Go, go, go!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- So under the Coalition Government we will ensure that that ground comes into operation very soon. I would like to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance for fast-forwarding that and also personally visiting them. It is very surprising that a Member of Parliament from Labasa comes to solve the problem in Ba ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ... while the honourable Member of Parliament from Ba is sitting there.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- We will be working on that and I would like to thank the Council. I would also like to thank honourable Bala too for his contribution in terms of the development of that and moving forward. I support the motion, Sir.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would again like to thank all honourable Members that commented and contributed to the motion before Parliament, and your comments are highly noted by the Committee. I have no further comments.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT - FIJI POLICE FORCE 2017-2020 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, now that we are all awake, I move:

That Parliament debate the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Police Force 2017-2020 Annual Reports.

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

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for those that may have noticed, there is a year missing in between these two consolidated Reports. That Report has already been debated here in Parliament, because it came to the Committee in this order. There are nine recommendations in our

Report and I urge the Fiji Police Force to look at those recommendations and read the Report.

They are worth looking at and it will certainly help in the conduct of their operations. When we talk about the Police, I think we should also remember that this is the Force that works on the not so good side of the humanity, but the dark side of humanity. That is them and that is where they expose themselves to, so that we can live on the better side of humanity. They need to be resourced well and structured well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just talk a little bit on the first recommendation to look at the merits of setting up one emergency communications and dispatch Unit, like the 911 units that they have overseas. Right now, we have 911, 917, 919 and 913 for EFL. During one of our meetings with the police present, I called these numbers. We called 911, and after the 12th ring I had to turn it off because no one answered. I called 917, which is the Fiji Police, again, no one answered and after the 12th ring we had to turn it off. I think it is worth looking at setting up just one emergency communication and dispatch unit.

Upon inquiry, if you call 917, which is in Nakasi and someone robbing your home in Nakasi and you are calling 917, the Nakasi Police Station off the road, if no one answers, that call is diverted to the West. If someone answers it is from the West, and then connected back to Nakasi Police Station. I urge the honourable Minister may be worthwhile project to look at is setting up the emergency communication and dispatch unit. I will leave it at there and may be the other speakers can speak on the content of the Report.

MR. SPEAKER.- I have speakers listed here:

1. Honourable Tuinaceva;
2. Honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration;
3. Honourable Naivalurua; and
4. Honourable Assistant Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to this debate on the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Police Force. At the outset, I just want to congratulate the Committee on a great report. It is well researched, well-articulated, thorough and well presented. Again, I want to thank the Chairperson and Members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to make some remarks on Item 6 on Recommendations 3.1.7 Road Fatalities. Before I delve further, I want to take this time to acknowledge the Fiji Police Traffic Division for their hard work, dedication and commitment in trying to control carnage on our roads, despite being under resourced and lack of power to make their road enforcement work more effective. The Report summarises certain areas and the challenges faced by the Police Traffic Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year (2023) so far has not been a good year in terms of road accidents and fatalities, from road safety's standpoint. We have a road death epidemic on our hands. When we record eight deaths in two weeks and a total of 161 accidents in 16 days as reported by the Police, it tells us we are at a point of crisis. The Report mentioned that from the period 1st January to 23rd August, 2023, there have been 60 road fatalities compared to 23 in the same period last year.

The latest report released by Police last week says our road fatalities from 1st January to second week of November 2023, there have been 72 fatalities compared to 38 in the same period last year. That is an increase of almost 90 percent. On the 72 deaths, 31 were pedestrians, 21 passengers,

20 were drivers, and that is on fatalities. For accident cases only from 1st January to October 2023, there have been 3,062 accident cases on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, for the whole of 2022, there were only 44 road deaths. We can see that our roads have turned into a killing field. That is why I said we are at a point of crisis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir about 80 percent accidents on our roads are caused by overspeeding and about 70 percent of deaths are caused by overspeeding. To my view, the Fiji Police Traffic Division is trying their utmost best to make our road safe and reduce fatalities. Now, to effectively police, the stretch of public roads of about 7,000 kilometres that is used by around 140,000 vehicles is a massive task.

From 1st January to 2023 – August 2023 the Police made a total of 30,000 bookings on speed violations as they tried to cut down on road carnages and I salute those efforts. I noted from the Report that Police has revamped its traffic operations through a joint operations with LTA to conduct stop-checks, radar operations, breathalyser, operations and media awareness.

Streamlining operations to achieve optimal result is a great idea but that is not enough. The challenge is for the Police to intensify where road safety were and take it to another level. They will need to well structured, well-resourced and well trained to cope with road safety demand.

They will need a good relevant and practical Road Safety Action Plan to guide them. Perhaps certain powers currently with LTA to be passed over to Police. It will help them to be more capable and more effectual. Their advantage is they can operate around the clock seven days a week. That is what we need right now on our roads.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Traffic Police will need to be equipped better. Their devices to be up to date. It is not only about traffic offences it is also about road crimes road crimes. We have all sorts of illegal activities out there on the roads. Let us give Police more hand laser speed detected machines. It is time to equip them with more mobiles speed cameras, let us give them some traffic violation cameras, they need to be equipped with average speed camera system and more red light cameras. I call on the Honourable Minister of Finance to assist our policeman and women, give them money so they can do the job and make our road safe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude road accident is costing our economy big dollars. For the figure I have got which is not the latest is around \$50 million a year. What is that compared to the loss of life? Pain and grieves to the families and victims that will be with them through the rest of their lives. Let us spin that million dollars, give it to police and LTA for preventative road safety measures.

With that Sir, I support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- You should have said a long time ago. I thank you.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will try to be brief. First of all, let me thank the Committee for this very elaborate report and for the recommendations that the Chairman of the Committee has alluded to earlier.

Very briefly, I will try to just go through the recommendations and what we are doing to date to address these areas of concern that the Committee has highlighted.

On the matter of the emergency number, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can assure you that the matter has been brought to the National Security Council about a month ago and there is a paper that is

pending before Cabinet. Essentially, what it is to align all of the emergency numbers into one, it is just one number of us all to remember so I will leave it with that and then we can come out, we will all know.

The second recommendation; Fiji Police be assisted in terms of appropriate adequate facilities for storage and administration of exhibits. This definitely needs extra resourcing and I know we have been working with Ministry of Finance in the past to try and work at this because without proper protection for exhibits it is very hard to prosecute people successfully.

I have toured almost all of our stations in Fiji and this is a big problem. I want to thank the previous government for the new police stations that we have and they actually do have the kind of space that we need and the kind of protection and security to secure exhibits. But the current state of the exhibit rooms everywhere for a very long time has been under a lot of neglect and needs money and upgrade. That is what we pursue to do or we aim to do.

Implementation of body-worn and vehicle mounted cameras. I have spoken about this earlier during one of my earlier speeches; something that we endeavour and this is also because of two parts. Not only for the safety of the public who are being arrested but also for the sanctity of the work of the police to protect them.

Obviously, this is part of the things that we would really like to do and in the long term, work of the police this is something that we would like to achieve. Obviously, we talked about the integration of that into, for instance, the security systems that are down at Central Police Station (CPS). Ideally, we would like to leave these cameras live onto those things but this is something hopefully we can get in time through proper resourcing.

Counselling capacity, I am happy to announce the police do have a Psychology Unit and that was established in 2021 after this Report was done. Police work is hard, it takes its toll on the family. So, they really need to be helped, carry out their jobs sincerely, mutually and of course professionally. That unit is available within the Fiji Police Force headquarters right now for the benefit of our policemen.

Specialist allowance: there are many areas; hard work, uniform, detective - I wish we had enough money we could give it to them today, unfortunately this is something we need to work at progressively, but I hear the call of the Committee and it is something that we must do and we fully support that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Developing effective studies to reduce the numbers of road fatalities, I thanked Mr. Naisa Tuinaceva, ultimately, I think many people forget in Fiji the responsibility of our roads is not with the Police, it is with the Land Transport Authority. The Police exercise only the Land Transport Authority Act. The Police whilst they carry out needs resourcing, I recognise especially equipment and even roles to help them but obviously this is something we need to factor into Police resourcing into the future.

Mr. Speaker, animal cruelty something we take for granted absolutely true, we see a lot of stray dogs. People just go and kick them but this is not so much about the Police, this is just about society. These are creations of God we should look after them. There are proper places where you need to take them to if they need to be disposed of definitely, I agree with that.

Dealing with hate crimes, this is something that we can all do together. The police do not have so much capacity to be able to do this. Mr. Speaker, I thank you for that, but it is something we need to work at as a community; do not hate, no good for Fiji.

Community policing at the centre of our work and this is something that under the “Restore Blue” is something that we will bring to the centre, better to prevent than to cure. Sorry, I took up too much time, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister’s responses to the recommendations. There is really not much to say and I am very positive and very supportive.

But as a general comment when we examine these reports and if you fast track it forward for the next ten years, you will find that the Police Force will continue to face challenges at a strategic level, at the operational level and also at the technical level. This was confirmed in the recent visit by the Committee, that some of the issues can be resolved internally without much cost there. For example, Complaints Against the Police (CAP) and Complaints Against the Services (CAS) do not really need any technology, all it needs is good management, leadership and consistency at the sharp end of things. When people come and report and there is no feedback or responses, this is where the complainants come in. That can easily be resolved internally without any cost at all.

Small things like the Water Police, honourable Minister Mr. Speaker, Sir, things like the foul weather kit that we visited. These are things that are essential equipment for those that work out there and it is very important that that can be resolved internally, does not need a big budget, all it needs is it needs to be resolved by the Operation Commanders on the ground.

Fast forwarding, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Police is an organisation that cannot really be involved in the catch-up game. There is a change in security situation and similarly evolving criminal situations and they need to be on top of these. In my personal assessment really the situation is up here and the Police Force is really down here. The simple strategy is to take them up here and beyond the real time situation at this point.

Let me just simply finish by responding to a leadership comment by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister this evening. On that note, leadership is also a very important part in any organisation to the Police Force I see there is investment into that because as we all know everything rises and falls on leadership. A response to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Yes, you said that the Leader of the Opposition pleaded for the honourable Prime Minister to change.

In leadership, the leader makes a decision based on the advisors of his inner core or those that have sit around and provide those advice and he makes those calls. Yesterday history was made where our leader the honourable Prime Minister turn to an alternative advice and that advice was from this end of the House.

He provided that and he made his decision based on the alternative advice. The decision was made by the honourable Prime Minister on the national interest and in his primary core mission is to serve the best interests of the nation. So my call this afternoon there is always an alternative advice available at this end of the House to you honourable Prime Minister onto the other side.

HON. J.R.VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish to make a small contribution. As you know, I am also part of the Committee that was scrutinising this Report, and we had some very extensive consultations with all the necessary stakeholders. It was a bipartisan approach, we did away with politics, and we committed ourselves to the call of this Parliament to try and improve the condition of our people in the Fiji Police Force.

That is why we made a lot of consultations, we went around the country, we reached Taveuni, and judging by the Report and what they are facing on the ground, it is not only for us sitting here and looking at the Report. We made sure we went around and spoke to responsible officers, officers

on the field to get a feeling of what they were facing in terms of the duties that are being assigned to them to undertake for our country.

As I have said, it was a bipartisan approach, no politics in that. We had a lot of issues that we raised with the stakeholders, we did some consultations, some face to face, and from the nine recommendations we made sure that it is not only for Parliament to note, we had made a commitment that we will try and revisit these recommendations and try to talk to respective Ministries and stakeholders and ask them to include in their submission for next year's financial budget.

We even visited the Border Security in Nadi, and we found that they were congested in one of the small rooms. They are the first image that tourists see when coming to Fiji, and I hope that, perhaps, the Minister and those responsible will try and improve the working conditions of those in Border Security.

As I have said, it is not only for Parliament to note the Report, we have made a commitment through our Chair, that we will try and re-visit all the recommendations and make sure we talk to the relevant Ministries and stakeholders, so that we will be able to improve the working conditions that are faced by our people out there, especially the Fiji Police Force.

That is my small recommendation, we had nine recommendations, but I think that most of the speakers who have spoken before me have talked on all the nine recommendations. I am just talking generally on the outcome of our visitation and looking at the Report and what we intend to do after submitting this Report to Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is all that I wish to contribute, and I support the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are beginning to sound like your neighbour.

(Laughter)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- I am sorry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but thank you.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just thank the Fiji Police Force for the work that they do and their family that support them and I wish them well. I commend the Report to Parliament, Sir, for noting.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think by listening to all that we have heard from the various speakers, it seems that what we have been slowly discussing as well as from the Report that was provided to us by the Australian Federal Members of Parliament on the role of Parliament and make it more interesting. I think we are really far behind in how we do our work.

We have been just concentrating like we have been doing for the whole of this week, working on Annual Reports, Reports that have been late, so late and can we go beyond what has been identified from the Annual Reports. By going into policy issues then we will have to discuss that

with the Government of the day because that is what the Committees are doing in Australia and elsewhere, even in the UK.

Make it more interesting as offered by honourable Naivalurua and now honourable Vocea. They want to go beyond just submitting the Reports. No, they want to continue to see that more is done out of what they have come up with in the Reports that they have worked so hard to produce back into Parliament. So, we can take another few 10 steps further from just reviewing Annual Reports but that depends on the Government of the day and depends on you honourable Members.

How we can further discuss it and come to an agreement as to how best we can make the role of Members of Parliament more lively especially for us in helping the Government of the day carry out its work as well. That is something that we are working on but I am just happy to throw this across again because I have noticed that we are already doing it, we are doing it in parts now. It is slowly coming out but it just a matter of organising things and putting it together and having the Government to agree to it.

REVIEW REPORT - PERFORMANCE AUDIT ON THE MONITORING OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUGARCANE DEVELOPMENT AND FARMERS ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME

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

That Parliament debates the Review of the Performance Audit on the Monitoring of Implementation of the Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance Programme which was tabled on 14th September, 2023.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, I take this opportunity to speak on the motion to debate the Review of the Performance Audit on the Monitoring of the Implementation of the Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance which was tabled in Parliament on 14th September, 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all know the background and the objective of the grant which is, that the Government through the Ministry of Sugar should provide annual budgets to various grant programmes to support its objective of a sustainable sugar industry. Additionally, the Government has supported Fiji Sugar Corporation and farmers in an effort to raise cane productions to three million tonnes each year, supposedly from 2023 as per planned back in 2011. We commend the audit work carried out by the Office of the Attorney-General in examining whether the sugarcane development and farm assistance grant that was distributed to farmers for the financial years 2016 and 2019 was effectively and efficiently administered, and if the objectives of the grant were achieved. It was a timely audit.

The Committee noted and agreed with the findings during the implementation of the grant from the year 2016 to 2019 on:

- (1) Grant policy and management framework. What we found was, there was no formal written framework during the audit and the Ministry was in the drafting process when the audit was carried out, and under completion when we carried out a deliberation with the Ministry. I will borrow my friends, honourable Usamate's favourite word, "flabbergasted". The Committee was flabbergasted with this.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

(Laughter)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- As the Ministry of Sugar, with the honourable Minister and the Permanent Secretary and the debtors were in place for a number of years from 2011. What happened to all those grants that were paid from 2011 to 2015? How were they paid without a framework?

- (2) The administration of the grant. Again, flabbergasted. Accountability and transparency in grant management was generally weak; grant allotment lacked transparent system; grant agreements, payment vouchers were found missing in some cases; conflict of interest not being declared by FSC for the use of grants for farms; help in joint ventures; farmers did not always receive the grants on time and there were some elements of fraud, which were referred to FICAC.
- (3) The monitoring of grants, again, flabbergasted. Not performed to the requirements in the annual log plan at farm level, absence of proper system; and checks were not performed by the Ministry.
- (4) Reporting and evaluation, the programmes were yet to be evaluated and reported against the objective and the audit was carried out. So, all in all, it was a failure by the Ministry of Sugar.

MR. SPEAKER.- You are resuming your seat very reluctantly because you went down slowly, very slowly.

(Laughter)

I will now offer the floor to the:

1. Honourable Hem Chand;
2. Honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs;
3. Honourable Maharaj; and
4. Honourable Professor Prasad.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this very important Report. At the outset, I would like to thank the colleague Members of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for the Report. Mr. Speaker, Sir I have read the recommendations of the Committee and I hope the relevant stakeholders will take steps to implement it accordingly.

I have noted in the Report that sugarcane farmers need support from the Government, from FSC, Sugar Research Institute and other stakeholders to maximise harvest. The Farmers are faced with a lot of issues and challenges, and I am going to highlight three:

- (1) Crop Protection - Crop Protection plays a vital role towards growth of sugarcane plants. It is important to protect the cane plants from the very beginning to be able to maximise the harvest. These will benefit both the farmers and the Sugar Industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cane farmers in Saweni, Dreketi, Verebatia, Lawaki and other nearby areas in Lautoka are currently facing huge problems, where cattle are damaging cane, and this has become a big issue to farmers. The matter was brought to the attention of FSC by concerned farmers this year in August and to date the matter remains unresolved. The Senior staff of FSC are also aware of the issue but nothing has been done and I feel very sorry for the cane farmers.

- (2) The second issue is High Cost of Living: The increase in VAT, corporate tax, increase in fuel prices is taking its toll on cane farmers. On top of this the farmers have to pay more for manual harvesting this year, compared to last year. Transportation cost, Tractor chargers, transportation of cane cutters, food cost of cane cutters have skyrocketed. The high cost of living to the increase in VAT, corporate tax and increase in fuel price is leaving the poor farmers with absolutely nothing.

The cane farmers are struggling to make ends meet, Mr. Speaker, Sir, keeping in mind the high cost of harvesting, cane cutting, high cost of living, the Government should consider a guaranteed price that can assist farmers to mitigate all this cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been just reliably informed from some cane farmers in Ba, that cane is still left to be harvested and Rarawai Mill has already closed and Lautoka Mill is due to close soon. This will leave a lot of cane unharvested, it will be lost for farmers and also for the sugar industry.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Reopen the Mill.

HON. H. CHAND.- I have highlighted some critical issues faced by farmers and I am sure the relevant Ministry will look into this urgently. Mr. Speaker Sir, I commend the Committee's report, and I support the motion before the house. Thank you.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, in fact the sugar has become more sweeter ever since I become the Minister.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- And it became more sweeter.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- And it became more sweeter when the honourable Prime Minister announced \$5 price up for the sugarcane. So when you go to towns and cities now, you can see the smiles on the farmers faces.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen!

(Chorus of interjections)

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Is it part of the Report?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Sorry.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Where's the report,

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I will, I am coming there. This is the preamble, anyways, Mr. Speaker, what has happened is ...

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- *Dabe ga era.*

HON. C.J. SINGH.- What has happened Mr. Speaker, the Deputy Prime Minister, honourable Kamikamica would agree, that look what I am saying, sometimes I wonder why are we are going and referring to reports which three years old, four years old.

HON. K.K. LAL.- So what.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Come on, Just listen! What I am saying is, I have issues here, the Report of 2016 to 2019, we are three years behind. I actually wanted to see a Report that would be of 2021 because then I can correct what the industry has gone through. And I urge ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- You want to see our performance review.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ... I urge that in future all the pending reports should be consolidated so that we can move forward on the present.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Yes.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- In any business and Government is a business, if we are looking at a five year old report, we do not know what has happened. Here any private company for that matter we will monitor their accounts every quarterly so they can see where they are going. I am saying is one of the things that gives me a bit of confusion why these previous reports are being withheld.

Anyway, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugar Industry as I said, is here to stay and one of the businessmen lately met me during the Bred bank function (he was a Labasa businessman) and he said let us close the sugar industry and that person only because of sugar industry has thrived. Now we cannot close the sugar industry, the sugar industry is here to stay. That is why this Government has given 13 different programmes under the budget. There is \$50 million worth of incentives.

Now, what we are trying, Mr. Speaker, to see how we can diversify the sugar industry and Leader of the Opposition, look man you have not done that, let me do it, let me do it. You guys have failed, you guys have failed.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- So 16 years, we are here for the last 10 months only. You are from Labasa, what have you done?

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- When we are trying to do something help us out.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when he talks about bulldozer ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- When he talks about bulldozer he does not know what I meant. Here the farmers are putting wrong varieties of cane on the farm. So what?

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You do not know about farming. You know about it? I am are farmer, I am are farmer.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- What I am saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, here look we have to, we have to look after the farms, we have to look after the farmers, we have to look out for the owners farmers right.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- You are still not a real farmer.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Who said what?

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Oh sorry. Mr. Speaker, I know that I made a lot of laughter in Parliament, but this is my last meeting with you and I hope to see you next year and we will talk more. *Vinaka*.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Minister for Sugarcane and Multi-Ethnic Affairs: my first question would be and this is what we actually noticed during the meetings by the Committee actually met with the Ministry and when they came to do the submission, this particular Ministry has a Budget of \$51 million out of which \$2 million is for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, \$1 million under R, \$1 million for Operations, left is around \$49 million out of which \$47.5 million goes to FSC as grant left with \$1.5 million one of the smallest Ministry but yet this particular Ministry has two Permanent Secretaries ...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Oh! My God.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Did PS make any analysis and surprising, Mr. Speaker, that Permanent Secretary for special project. All the money has gone to FSC. What the PS is doing in the Ministry? Wastage of money, Mr. Speaker.

(Hon. C.J. Singh interjects)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- This honourable Minister cannot even talk on the Report. I am not sure what he is going to do to the industry.

At first, Mr. Speaker, I thought he is from Labasa, he might be the saviour for the sugarcane industry but I tell you, Sir, what he had, the type of response from a Minister on a particular report.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, he also spoke about price increase. Let me tell you some financial mismanagement.

First payment \$40.15, second payment \$13.38; then this Government came into the picture. The honourable Minister wanted to be all Hi5 gave \$24.62. Balance was left for only \$7.11. The total came to \$85.26. We surpassed before the wash down payment come through. Then he went begging to the honourable Minister of Finance, "Please, we have extra paid \$26 for Diwali, what will the people say? We need to give them something."

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You are misleading. I never beg the Prime Minister, understand?

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, after realising there is nothing left in the Balance Sheet they had to get the money from where from the taxpayers \$8.5 million of the taxpayers' money gone wasted. Had they actually done a better financial management throughout the year this would not have happened, Sir.

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Just because they wanted to be in the good books they gave \$24 which was much more higher than the forecasted value back in March. If these kinds of things continue how much money we are going to lose through this Minister, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister was supposed to be the saviour from Labasa. You will spoil our name, Honourable Speaker.

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, we know that the sugarcane industry is suffering. We need to come up with the alternate crop. We have actually informed people on the other side. We need alternate crops. We have been doing some research. There was \$1 million allocated to do the research for industrial hem.

Honourable Deputy Prime Minister has jumped the gun from industrial hem he has actually gone on to the medicinal hem, please come back to the industrial hem, we will have a lot of overseas repatriation if you go to medicinal hem.

Let us come back to industrial hem. Let us provide alternate crops. More than 60 percent of the farmers who are actually cultivating less than 150 tonnes. Sit down yar.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- A Point of Order. You sit down!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- He is behaving like this with the honourable Members of Parliament. Imagine what his attitude would be towards the farmers, Honourable Speaker. Thank you, Honourable Speaker.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The Reserve Bank of Fiji just revised the growth forecast from 8.2 percent and that is good news. It shows that the economy is forging ahead. What it does show however is that the resource sectors are going to be a drag on the economy if these sectors do not perform and they include sugar, mineral, water, gold, forestry and to some extent, fisheries sectors as well.

The tourism numbers is going to be about 4 percent higher than even 2019 let alone pre-COVID-19 and perhaps surpass 2018 as well depending on what happens between now and the end of December. What the honourable Assistant Minister and Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee pointed out very clearly and the figures showed in a very contrasting way. The performance of the Sugar Industry in the last 15 years, if you look at these two graphs just from the

report itself, area versus cane production, you will find that cane production has declined in a much more rapid rate than the area under cane production.

Similarly, if you look at the registered versus active growers where the decline also has been rapid. The audit report shows and it is the honourable Assistant Minister and the chairman of the Public Account Committee highlighted it very well and all the issues (nine or ten) basically points out that all these money that was being put into the Sugar Industry over the years at least from 2016 to 2019, if what the audit assessment says, then really Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a sad indictment of the leadership at all levels within the industry in the past.

I think what we need to do obviously, at the end of the day the Sugar Industry without the farmers is not going to get anywhere. I think our focus and the honourable Minister Singh in the last eight to nine months has been focusing on that. I was actually quite disappointed with the contributions from the other side; both honourable Alvick Maharaj and honourable Hem Chand.

They are complaining about the number of resources that the Government has put in and particularly, the top up cane price. Honourable Hem Chand was talking about the escalating costs, but he refused to even acknowledge the fact in an honest way that the Government has tried to mitigate that by topping up the price. We have provided a number of programmes within the budget to support the farmers. I think we have to be honest if the economy is to remain at a sustainable path of growth. In 2024 – 2025, we will have to focus in the resource sector.

I am glad that as a government, we have realised that in the long term, if you look at countries at Costa Rica you look at countries where tourism is also about 40 percent to 50 percent of GDP, one of the key components there apart from some of the other industries such as BPOs or services sectors, the agriculture sector in this country has a huge potential and our Government is going to focus on that.

In fact, the National Economic Summit identified a number of areas and as part of the planning within the Ministry of Finance, we want to push that and make sure that the appropriate policies, interventions, monitoring and evaluation are carried in a timely manner so that there is no wastage, yet there is an increase in production and we can increase the contribution of the resource sectors to GDP. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we left the best to the last.

Sir, we have heard all the comments from honourable Members who have contributed to this motion and the responsible Minister from the Ministry of Sugar and we plead with them and the relevant stakeholder in the Sugar Industry, should take note of all the recommendations and work together in addressing all the challenges and gaps identified and revitalise the Sugar Industry so that resources poured into this industry are not mismanaged or wasted.

As stated by the Minister and as recommended we need another updated report or audit. At this point, I can say that things have improved, and we should support continuously the Sugar Industry. With those final comments, Sir, I thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting and I thank you sincerely for bearing with the long sittings. It is not easy to cover all that we have covered in a day, given that this has been part of the week's sitting and hoping to try and improve on this in next year's calendar but in all, I thank you all for your contributions.

The Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 9.47 p.m.

ANNEXURE I

Reply to Written Question No. 192/2023 tabled on Thursday, 23rd November, 2023 by the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport(Ref. Page 2237)



Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport (Hon. Ro F.Q. Tuisawau)

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

Expense Categories	Amount (VEP)	MoF Budget VEP	Virement	LTA Revised Budget VEP	Activities
Community and School Visits	\$35,539.85	\$16,092.16	\$19,447.69	\$35,539.85	Visit villages, communities, settlements, schools, outer islands, etc.
Media Campaign	\$12,377.98	\$5,604.65	\$6,773.33	\$12,377.98	Print media (e.g. Fiji Sun, Fiji Times, Magazines), social media (e.g. Facebook, TikTok, Twitter), TV advertisements (e.g. FBC, FijiTV, MaiTV), Radio (FBC, CFL)
Public Outreach Programmes	\$7,356.02	\$3,330.75	\$4,025.27	\$7,356.02	Awareness booths at festivals, public events, University Open Day
Roadside Awareness	\$5,189.55	\$2,349.79	\$2,839.76	\$5,189.55	Awareness of drivers, pedestrians and passengers
Defensive Driving Courses	\$11,436.07	\$5,178.16	\$6,257.91	\$11,436.07	Conduct DDC courses throughout Fiji
Total	\$71,899.47	\$32,555.51	\$39,343.96	\$71,899.47	

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) has spent around **\$71,899.47** on Road Safety Education and Awareness Programmes for the period January to September 2023 and the breakdown is as follows:

- **\$35,539.85** has been spent on community and school visits. The LTA has a dedicated Road Safety Team which visits villages, settlements, communities, schools, outer islands to create road safety awareness.
- Additionally, **\$12,377.98** has been spent on media campaigns. This includes print media such as Fiji Sun, Fiji Times and popular magazines. The LTA has been posting road safety messages on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. The Authority has also been running road safety advertisements on television platforms such as FBC TV, FijiTV and MaiTV. The LTA has also been carrying out road safety awareness on major radio stations such as FBC and CFL.
- **\$7,356.02** has been spent on public outreach programmes such as festivals, major public events and University's Open Day.
- **\$5,189.55** has been spent on roadside awareness programmes whereby face-to-face interactions and road safety flyers are distributed to drivers, pedestrians and passengers

- **\$11,436.07** has been spent on conducting Defensive Driving Courses (DDC) throughout Fiji. The funds have been spent on hire of venues to host DDC in different towns to meet the demand.
- Only **\$32,555.51** has been provided as budget support for the same period. The LTA had to carry out an internal virement of **\$39,343.96** from other expense categories to carry out its Road Safety Education and Awareness function.

From January to September 2023, the LTA conducted –

- 307 School Education and Awareness, impacting 55,104 people;
- 102 Public Outreach, impacting 21,075 people;
- 250 Office Outreach, impacting 8,269 people;
- 230 Driver Roadside Awareness, impacting 14,480 people;
- 8 Stop, Revive, Survive Campaigns in partnership with Nestle, impacting 4,800 people;
- 164 Passenger Roadside Awareness, impacting 34,894 people;
- 120 Pedestrian Roadside Awareness, impacting 13,183 people; and
- 334 Community Outreach Awareness, impacting 78,486 people.

Furthermore, the LTA has also been reaching out to the corporate bodies to come on board and join LTA in advocating road safety messages and road safety campaigns.

Around \$50,000 of in-kind assistance has been received from corporate entities. This includes road safety flyers (English, iTaukei and Hindi), bumper stickers, key-tags, etc.

Apart from the above, the LTA Media Team are continuously rolling out road safety messages via the LTA Social Media Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and TikTok, as well as mainstream media.

In conclusion, the safety of our people is non-negotiable and our commitment to this cause should be reflected in the prudent allocation and effective utilisation of funds.

ANNEXURE II

Reply to Written Question No. 193/2023 tabled on Thursday, 23rd November, 2023 by the honourable Minister for Education (Ref. Page 2237)



Minister for Education (Hon. A.M. Radrodro)

Discussions below are in two parts, to address the questions posed by the honourable Assistant Minister for Education, honourable I. Vanawalu.

(a) Introduction of Programme - 2014

The Fiji National University, College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, started the Bachelor of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry (BVSc & AH) in 2014, with more than 40 students. The Programme runs for 5½ years, including 6 months of hands-on internship.

Only 10 students graduated from the first cohort in 2019. To-date, 66 students have graduated from the University since 2019 – 4 of these graduates are from other countries in the South Pacific.

Currently, there are 9 students enrolled in this Programme and they are in the fourth year of the Course and will complete and graduate in 2025. The FNU may close this Programme in 2025.

The Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and FNU

The Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for registering Veterinary doctors to practise in Fiji. The Ministry and the FNU are closely working together to assist with the registration of the Veterinary Science graduates.

The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) has also assisted in funding further training to get the first three cohorts of graduates ready for a qualifying examination that will be developed and administered by the MOA.

The training, which is conducted in three phases, started in 2022, and 44 students were part of it. The third phase, a hands-on programme of 12 weeks ended recently on 4th November, 2023 and that was completed by nine students. The remaining graduates could not attend those trainings due to employment and personal commitments. The University plans to work closely with WOAH and MoA to offer continuous professional development trainings for FNU graduates and other Vets who may need such training.

The lack of a Veterinary Council in Fiji is a major setback since a council could have managed most of the post-graduation events that FNU is currently involved in, including continuous professional development. Such a council will also bring all the stakeholders together to manage veterinary practice and report to the MoA.

We believe that the registration of FNU Vets will greatly reduce the current shortage of Vets in Fiji and the South Pacific. More Vets are needed not only to fill vacancies, but new Vets can stimulate the setup of more commercial livestock operations.

- (b) Furthermore, in response to the second part of the question, the table given below provides the data on the graduates' employment status in the workforce, despite the challenges encountered in this specific area. Below is the breakdown of the employment engagement of the 66 graduates to-date.

No.	Employer	Number of Graduates
1	Ministry of Agriculture	6
2	Rooster Chicken	8
3	SPCA	7
4	Vet Essentials	4
5	Pacific Animals Shelter and Hospital	1
6	Animals Fiji	3
7	Goodman Fielder	3
8	On further studies	3
9	Other jobs	1
10	Now overseas	4
11	Other Pacific citizens	4
12	Unconfirmed	22
	Total	66

(Source: College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF), Fiji National University (FNU), 22nd November, 2023)