

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 11TH MARCH, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 11th MARCH, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.26 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable P.K. Bala.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the Sittings of Parliament held on Friday, 24th November, 2023 and Monday, 4th March, 2024, 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, all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet. Thank you for taking an interest in your Parliament.

Commonwealth Day 2024

Honourable Members, we, the member countries of the Commonwealth of Nations generally known as the "Commonwealth", once again, come together to commemorate Commonwealth Day. Every year on the second Monday of March, 56 independent countries from around the world hold celebrations to commemorate this special day.

Commonwealth Day is a celebration of unity, diversity and the links we share in the Commonwealth. This year's theme, "*One Resilient Common Future: Transforming our Common Wealth*", resonates deeply with the Parliament of Fiji, embodying the spirit of collaboration that defines the Commonwealth. It emphasises our shared responsibility to build a resilient and interconnected world. On that note, I extend a happy and blessed Commonwealth Day to all honourable Members and to all Fijians.

Amended Sitting Times

Honourable Members, for the purposes of ensuring that all 55 Members have the opportunity to respond to His Excellency's Address, and also that Parliament can successfully deliberate on the items listed on the Order Papers for this week, the Business Committee had unanimously agreed to

the following:

- That Parliament may sit beyond 4.30 p.m. from Monday to Thursday and beyond 12.30 p.m. on Friday; and
- Lunch breaks to be limited to one hour only.

International Women's Day 2024

Finally, whilst the world celebrated International Women's Day last Friday, I wish to take this opportunity today to wish all women honourable Members of Parliament a belated International Women's Day. In commemoration of the International Women's Day, we will have the Deputy Speaker, honourable Qereqeretabua, to preside over the Parliament's proceedings at different times from Monday through to Wednesday.

DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move:

That this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech.

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

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to also acknowledge those Fijians all over the country who are watching us on livestream television or hearing us on radio, and also visitors to Fiji - our tourists. We welcome them most sincerely and thank them for their support of our country. I hope that those who are listening in or viewing us are having good reception wherever they are. We also acknowledge their keen interest in the affairs of our nation and the proceedings of your Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my distinct honour and privilege as Prime Minister to move the motion now being debated in Parliament and, that is, to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address while opening the 2024 Session of Parliament on Monday, 4th March, 2024.

May I also congratulate Ratu Meli Derenalagi and our Drua Rugby Team on their victory over the Canterbury Crusaders at Churchill Park in Lautoka on Saturday. I am fortunate to have watched all their three victories at home here in Fiji, the first two by the very slimmest of margins and also in the last minute and the last match was quite a comfortable ten-point margin. I also congratulate the coaching staff and management and all who contributed to the performance of the team and to the big crowd that came to see them play. I also thank the Administrators of Lautoka City and the Fiji Sports Council for looking after the venue for such a great morale-boosting event.

Yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of us celebrated Father's Day in our churches and at Wesley, we also celebrated Harvest Sunday. I congratulate all the farmers in Parliament and all fathers in Fiji, and to all those who were able to present their fruits of their first harvest this year. Congratulations - *ke se vo na i tei, qai kau mai vale*.

At our Father's Day worship yesterday, we also remembered the fathers who departed this life during the year since our last Father's Day. One of the speakers in church reminded the fathers

that many of the social ills of today, such as drug and alcohol abuse, violence against women and girls, ill-discipline in schools, et cetera, have all stemmed from the failure of fathers to exercise loving but firm leadership in families and communities.

In his Address, His Excellency encouraged us, as democratically elected representatives, to listen to the voices of our people, not only to those who have elected us, but all our citizens - young and old, men and women. He urged us all to faithfully embrace with resolve the principles of democracy and humanity as enshrined in our Constitution. By doing so, we respect the integrity and dignity of our Parliament and honour all Fijians. His Excellency further urged us that while we acknowledge and recognise our differences, we must be united with one common resolve to ensure that we live in a peaceful, progressive and prosperous nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency reminisced on his days as a boy growing up in his village and its environs and the people. I am sure we can all relate to his story. He spent several happy years of his youth in Macuata with the farming families during sugarcane harvesting season. Their multiethnic and multicultural integrated community in Macuata taught him many important lessons in life which included hard work, respect for elders, family unity and respect for other ethnic communities. The two major ethnic communities in Fiji have mostly lived in harmony together.

His Excellency, however, rued the unfortunate fact that some unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust among our communities, for their own political ends. This has led to the perception of communal differences within our society, and His Excellency has pleaded with us, honourable Members of Parliament, to continue to promote harmony and embrace diversity in our nation.

When I was a young boy attending Drekeniwai District School in my village of Drekeniwai, Navatu, Cakaudrove, where my father taught, our house was the Government workers' billet when they passed through the village or came to work in it. There were two mail carriers who worked for the post and communications department at that time. They traversed the coastal villages between Matakunea and Natewa on the Eastern Coast of Natewa Bay riding on their faithful horses. One was Mamaj and the other was Lachmaiya. They brought their own pots and pans and some cutlery and utensils because, as my mother told me, they would not be able to eat food prepared in pottery, et cetera, that have been used to cook or serve food that were forbidden in their religions, but my sisters and I could eat any of the food that they prepared for themselves and sometimes, my mother would allow them to cook for the whole family. They were very kindhearted, honest and cheerful for us the young children in the village, many of us even called them *Kuku Mamaj* or *Kuku Lachmaiya* and they loved that. We were family.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not blame any honourable Member who might have looked my way when His Excellency mentioned those words and I quote: "...some unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust among our communities for their own political ends."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I cannot change my past, I can contribute to our joint efforts to change the future of this country, and I will. His Excellency reminded us of the importance of respectful debates as it has an impact on inter-ethnic relations of our different communities in Fiji, implored us to leave aside our differences and strive for the common good of our people and to focus on our shared destiny, our commonality rather than our small differences. He believes that we can all aspire to these fundamental truths that demonstrate what true leadership is all about.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also mentioned his belief that financial literacy will empower our people with financial security and self-reliance, encouraging a culture of financial responsibility that can have a positive impact on national prosperity and ensure for all, a secure future.

Before the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister Finance went on his recent official visit to India, I asked him to study the development introduced by Prime Minister Modi to ensure that every person in India (1.408 billion of them) has a bank account. Every market and street side vendor had a portable credit card terminal or Electronic Funds Transfer at Point of Sale (EFTPOS) as part of their Financial Literacy and National Savings Encouragement Programmes. He came back and he told me that he had very fruitful discussions with them and ready to introduce some ideas to the Parliament.

I was inspired to ask the honourable Professor Prasad to do that in India when I noticed a young caddy pulling a golf player's bag on a *qiqi* or trolley and I said to my caddy, "how much of the \$40 fee paid today will get to your family?" He replied, "Probably none, Sir." I told him that \$40 would have made a positive impact on a family's weekly income in Wailea or Nanuku Informal Settlements. We can emulate what Prime Minister Modi has done in India by providing access to comprehensive financial literacy, supported with the enabling environment and necessary financial resources.

We all can make informed decisions about savings, investing and managing our finances effectively. While His Excellency would like to see Jone who is a dalo farmer and Ram who sells sweets at his cart learn how to manage and have access to finance, I would like the young caddies in golf clubs around Fiji and all market and street-side vendors to be able to do the same, and at the same time, encourage a culture of savings which will allow the development of a sustainable investment plan for their families' long term security. I, like His Excellency, would like to see members of our communities learning and sharing from each other's expertise and experiences so we can all prosper together.

There is a young man, originally from Taveuni, now living in the Wailea Informal Settlement. He has a weak right hand. People in the area pay him to pound their *yaqona*, and he does it one-handed, using only his left hand. When I saw him in church a few weeks ago, he has a very well-developed left arm, strong biceps and triceps and a healthy bank account which a good Samaritan had helped him with. His name is Iowane (not Naivalurua), and I met him many years ago while we were both picking up plastic bottles from along the Suva-Laucala seawall.

At this stage, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank all civil servants, Government workers and Provincial and Municipal workers and leaders, captains of industries and the business communities who have come forward to support the Government's efforts to formulate a new National Development Plan. The views of all members of our communities are now being heard through meaningful consultations and these meaningful consultations dialogue will lead to better outcomes, foster ownership, inclusiveness and social cohesion.

He also mentioned the Ocean of Peace, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the vision for a united and cohesive Fiji is dovetailed very well with the vision for the Ocean of Peace for the Pacific. I, on many occasions at home and internationally continue to champion the concept of Ocean of Peace. I sincerely hope that the Pacific leaders will discuss and embrace the concept in its next meeting this year to be held in the Kingdom of Tonga in August.

My vision is that we must all come together to promote and elevate peace for our vast maritime area which is the Blue Pacific. The aim is to promote peace as the highest virtue in the Pacific. We must continue to embrace the Pacific Way of patient dialogue and consensus building as our common heritage and core to our *Vuvale* - the Pacific family. The Government will work with other nations, through the Pacific Islands Forum to ensure that the concept of an Ocean of Peace will enhance and not reduce each State's full sovereignty rights.

Our Foreign Policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is guided by three key pillars which focusses on our sovereignty, security and our prosperity. We are currently in the process of developing a framework for our Foreign Policy through a White Paper. The White Paper will clearly define our identity and values, while setting a new direction in expressing our goals, our priorities and our ambitions. The intent is to better position Fiji in its role in the region and globally with clarity in our responsibility as a member of the Blue Pacific Continent.

We have reviewed our *Vuvale Partnership* that was signed by the Australian Prime Minister and I in October of last year, and last week through that *Vuvale Partnership*, I received on behalf of the Government of Fiji, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and the Republic of Fiji Navy a Guardian Class Patrol Boat, the *RFNS Puamau* in Perth, Australia. This new addition will enhance our surveillance capability at a period of growing concerns of transnational crime, smuggling and illegal fishing in our EEZ. In addition, it will support our effort for rescue, emergency response and rehabilitation during and after disasters.

The Government and the people of Fiji would like to convey our deepest gratitude to the government and the people of Australia for this timely assistance in building our capacity. This is in addition to the budget support and other assistance they have provided.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is now in consultation with the New Zealand Government to review the *Duavata Partnership* following the election of a new government late last year. Beyond Oceania, we are building stronger ties and cooperation with our development partners including the United States of America, United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, Japan, Korea, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, UAE, Saudi Arabia and the European Union.

On Clime Change and Environment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must all recognise that climate change is a cross-cutting issue and is an existential threat to our very survival and identity. This is the very reason I strongly support a bipartisan approach in addressing all issues relating to climate change because it requires all hands-on deck.

On Good Governance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of my immediate priorities or our immediate priorities on assuming office as the Government and as Prime Minister in my case, is to ensure collaborative, transparent and accountable decision-making processes in Government.

In 2023, the Coalition Government put into place a strategic, robust and clear decision-making machinery to support better coordination, formulation and implementation of policies and programmes.

As part of our commitment to good governance and empowerment of local communities, we will work towards the review of the Banaban Settlement Act. We also plan to hold elections for the Rabi Island Council, complete the naturalisation processes for Rabi and Kioa islanders and at the same time, we will urgently address the socio-economic needs of the Melanesian *Vasu-i-Taukei* community.

The Small Grants Scheme under my portfolio will continue to support local communities to improve sustainable livelihoods. I have made the assurance that all commitments made by my predecessor to the communities will be honoured by the Coalition Government.

Development Assistance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will also be focusing on the development and implementation of the Vanua Levu Upgrading and Sealing of Roads Project. I cannot hear any “about time” from the Vanua Levu Members of Parliament.

(Laughter)

This is a flagship project of the Belt and Road cooperation between China and Fiji, to improve access to markets and promote economic activities on Vanua Levu. It is estimated that the upgrading and resealing of 80 kilometers of roads will cost FJ\$300 million.

On Civil Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Civil Service plays an integral part in delivering cost effective Government initiatives to our people. The removal of the contract arrangements and increasing of the retirement age to 60 has brought more confidence to our civil servants. We have confirmed a lot of acting appointments that have been acting for over six months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amendments have also been implemented to relevant civil service guidelines that will allow ministries to increase the salaries of its deserving officers based on their performance.

On public enterprises, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the State-Owned Entities and public enterprises will continue to be supported to improve financial performance, and return, on investment.

The re-establishment of the Higher Salaries Commission which came into effect in October last year will promote transparency and consistency in the salaries of CEOs of all State-Owned Enterprises.

There will also be a review of the Fiji Mahogany Industry which will be a key initiative undertaken in 2024. The review will identify the necessary structural reforms to enable an efficient business environment for all stakeholders, in particular, to encourage resource owners to participate in value addition in the processing of mahogany products. In addition, the Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 and Mahogany Industry (Licensing and Branding Act) 2011 will be reviewed to ensure transparency, accountability and provide optimum return on the industry.

On Information, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also hold the portfolio of Information and National Archives of Fiji. The availability of timely and accurate information is critical in modern society. The public must be informed of all the activities undertaken by their government. The Department of Information will continue to provide timely and effective dissemination of Government's development agenda and activities as and when it happens. The Department of Information will continue to nurture improved working relationships with the mainstream media, and this is in respect of the Government's commitment for free and independent media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President's Address at the Opening of Parliament reminded us to focus on our common purpose and not on our differences. It is my hope and prayer that we work together to build a stronger nation with social cohesion and unity of purpose. I urge you to deliberate with intention towards unity, thoughtfulness and inclusivity. To have a meaningful debate, we must commit ourselves to respect one another in considering Government's legislative agenda, policies and programmes as outlined in the His Excellency the President's Address. May the people of this land that we all love be the ultimate beneficiaries of our collective effort. Together we are stronger. God bless Fiji, God bless us all.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, take note that we will follow the Batting Order accordingly and be reminded to keep to the timing. The first bell will be rung at 18 minutes and the final bell at 20 minutes.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable

Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *ni bula vinaka saka* and a very good morning to you all.

I also wish to take this opportunity to convey our congratulations to the Drua Team for the win over the Crusaders during the weekend. We convey our best wishes as well for a belated happy Women's Day to our women and a happy Commonwealth Day as well. I also wish to remind Parliament that as we celebrated Women's Day, our Hindu brothers and sisters celebrated *Maha Shivratri* last weekend and I am also advised that tomorrow, the month of *Ramadan* starts with our Muslim communities. May I, on behalf of this august Parliament, convey our best wishes to our brothers and sisters of the Muslim faith.

It is an honour for me today to stand again in this august Parliament to deliver my response to His Excellency's the President's most gracious Address delivered on Monday, 4th March, 2024 on the occasion of the opening of the second Session of the third Term of Parliament of our beloved Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while doing so, I am mindful of the fact that this response is being delivered in my capacity as the Leader of the Opposition for the first time, and I endeavor to approach it from the lens of national leadership, putting at the forefront the best interests of the nation, and those who call Fiji their home.

But first, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it would have been beneficial to this Parliament if some references were made to areas of His Excellency's Address at last years' Opening of Parliament that has been achieved, which ones have fallen by the wayside, and those that have spilled over into this years' Address. Government owes this to His Excellency and to this House - the people's House.

My view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to take my role as Leader of the Opposition in a very positive light. Consistent with the vision of my predecessor, I aim to provide leadership from this side of Parliament that guarantees stability, equality, security and opportunity for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the more I delve on the issue, the more I have come to realise the important role that Oppositions play in a Constitutional and Parliamentary democracy as a check and balance for Government. It is an instrument that provides an opportunity for citizens to be heard, and to be enlightened on Parliamentary systems and processes. On the issue of check and balances, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is time that our parliamentary system takes serious consideration in reviewing and with the aim to strengthen its accountability framework.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, accountability involves the ways in which public officials, including Members of Parliament, Ministers, and all public sector bodies can be called to account to answer for their actions. In the absence of accountability mechanisms, the people are unable to ensure that government act wisely, lawfully and fairly in serving their interests. This accountability framework, Mr. Speaker, Sir, includes parliamentary scrutiny and parliamentary oversight which are essential for effective democratic governance. I wish to acknowledge your high office, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for taking the lead in this very important area.

With that being said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I feel it is important that we, the Members of this august Parliament, are fully aware of our roles as representatives of the people of this nation. We are not here for ourselves. Previously, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a tendency by Members of Parliament to focus on issues of adversarial politics rather than examining matters that are in the public interest and affect us as a nation. This is unfortunate and must change.

As the honourable Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my team and I will be working hard. We will ask ourselves tough questions before critiquing Government. We will aspire to work

with the Government to advance the interests of all Fijians. We will give credit where its due, and strongly criticize where necessary and Members of the other side of Parliament should expect that to commence in our deliberations over the next few days.

We will ask Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we work together on the things that unite us as a nation rather than those that divide. But how much we can do and how much our political conversation evolves for the better will be dependent on two key issues, which are:

- the quantity and quality of information that is shared by the Government both in Parliament and in public spaces; and
- by their willingness to listen to and implement the alternative ideas that we may suggest.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the essence of His Excellency's plea for members of this august Parliament to "...work across the aisle, find common ground on critical issues facing our nation and put the people first...".

Allow me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to speak on a number of key issues that were raised by His Excellency in his Address. We will agree that as a nation viewed from our historical past, we have had many wasted decades. Members of this august Parliament as current leaders of this nation, it is our duty together with our community leaders and our economic and intellectual elites to look several decades ahead and map out what we would like our future to be, what our national needs are, the challenges and opportunities that will provide us the strategic perspective to guide our nation moving forward. This should be the impetus for our new National Development Plan (NDP).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to only limit our thinking to our four-year term in office is detrimental to our progress as a nation. In any case, I must thank the Government for having taken the initiative to develop a new National Development Plan, whether this was totally necessary considering that one had been in existence is beyond me. Regardless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my hope that the new National Development Plan espouses the high values advocated by His Excellency in his Address and which I fully endorse. This includes the need for Parliament to continue to listen to the voices of the people and that we all aspire to achieve a common goal of a peaceful, progressive and prosperous nation and adhere to the basic values of hard work, respect for our elders, family units and for other ethnic communities. Those values, Mr. Speaker, Sir, are the requisites for a peaceful, progressive, prosperous and inclusive Fiji. It is thus our responsibility to ask ourselves regularly if we should adhere to these values both in and outside of this august Parliament.

On the same token, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful for the Government's commitment to accountability, transparency and the tenets of good governance. These are noble commitments but they must be practiced and demonstrated to mean anything to the people of this nation. The actions must match the rhetoric.

I would, therefore, urge the Government to continue to respect the guidelines and procedures for the appointment to key positions in Government including leadership in governments statutory organisations and the appointment to our foreign missions. By flouting these processes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are denying career civil servants and deserving candidates the opportunity to utilise their experience and expertise to the fullest of their abilities in the process of nation building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to be able to transform our civil service into an effective and efficient administrative organ, the Government will need to ensure that duly qualified individuals are recruited to key positions within the Service and the way to do that is to follow the established recruitment process. Similarly, appointments to Government Boards and Statutory Organisation must follow suit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to register my concern at this point in how political allies of the current Government are being appointed ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame.

HON. I.B.SERUIRATU.- ... to represent Fiji at our foreign missions.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- This was an observation raised as an Achilles heel with past administrations where individuals with very little experience were appointed to such important positions. It does not augur well for our development as a nation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I call on the honourable Prime Minister as Minister responsible as well for Foreign Affairs to reconsider the process of the appointment of our Heads of Overseas Missions. Having the wrong people in positions of leadership in Government agencies and in our foreign missions leads to wastage of resources, lost opportunities, a disgruntled workforce and ultimately an inefficient and chaotic work culture.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to acknowledge the Government for the Legislative and Policy Reform Agenda that they have in place, but I would suggest that they ensure that due consultations are carried out to ensure that all Government Legislative and Policy Frameworks are inclusive and have considered the views of all our communities. However, perhaps more importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the need to accelerate development, and again I call on the honourable Minister for Finance to pay particular attention in areas where they are most needed. The Government is of the view that they are unable to do this due to our current debt levels, but that to me is rather clumsy.

National progress is dependent on the ability of Government to take risks and invest in development and at the same time investigate ways to broaden its revenue and economic base to be able to mitigate those risks. That takes critical and innovative thinking.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, tourism has rebounded quickly following the opening up of international travel – thank you FijiFirst.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Projections are that tourist arrivals will surpass a million this year. This is welcome news for our economy. The rebound in tourist arrivals may be credited to hotel operators being able to ramp up capacity quickly, but accommodation capacity has its limits, and investments in new capacity is low. Consequently, tourism is slowly losing competitiveness as cheaper alternative destinations such as Bali and Phuket come online. An industry contributing about 40 percent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) must be supported.

In his Address, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has emphasized a culture of financial responsibility for individuals and households which the honourable Prime Minister has also spoken on. The same responsibility should be expanded to managing public finances by our Government. A stronger focus on reducing waste, minimising duplication and eliminating “red tapism” for the expansion of the private enterprise is critical to fostering growth in our national economy.

Speaking on promoting a culture of financial responsibility for individuals and households, I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Government puts in place mechanisms to support our people and families in the management of finances received through personal remittances from families and friends overseas which had risen to a staggering \$1 billion by 2022. Of course, how those funds are utilized is the choice of the recipient, but the Government has a responsibility to ensure that they are duly informed before they make those choices.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the local front, His Excellency the President correctly points to the rich natural resources we have at our disposal. The question is when and how we can utilize those resources to maximum effect so as to support sustainable growth.

As an agriculturalist, Mr. Speaker, Sir, now is the time for Government to explore new ways of promoting and boosting agricultural production to support both our rural and national economies, whilst ensuring food security to local consumers. I am aware that a particular Government company is sourcing raw agricultural resources from overseas to process, promote, and distribute as local products. Our hotels continue to import agricultural products to meet their demands in terms of volume and quality. These are not matters of choice. We simply do not have the ability and capacity to supply those markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government needs to critically look at innovative ways to address this issue and I call on the honourable Minister for Agriculture to take the lead in this regard. Export markets are critical to our economy. In efforts to meet export market demands for *dalo* and *tavioka*, in particular, the negative impacts are felt locally with the exponential rise in local market prices due to shortage of supplies. This is a trend that will continue to persist if no action is taken to address low agricultural production. I see the need for investments in capacity building and mechanisation so that we can acquire the necessary skills, capabilities and specialised needs to grow our agricultural industry.

Just as important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fisheries and the Forestry Sectors ought to be developed so that economic opportunities in these areas are maximised.

Sugar supported the Fijian economy from colonisation through to independence. However, the industry has relied on price support for survival more recently, but the sugar industry must be helped to transition to a financially sustainable state over the next decade.

Relative to these areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government needs a vibrant Trade Policy to provide an enabling environment and details key policy objectives and strategies that positions Fiji as a trade hub within the Pacific region and recognises trade as a key driver for growth and development. The Trade Policy should aim to enhance diversification by placing emphasis on new products and markets. We should seek to gain competitive advantages through incentives and other benefits to have the edge over the other players in an open market environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am grateful that Government saw it fit to develop a White Paper on our Foreign Policy. Our Foreign Policy must place primacy on Fiji's interests while seeking long term mutual cooperation in our bilateral and multilateral engagements.

While I am aware that Government is also conducting the National Defence Review, we are strongly proposing that in order to make sensible decisions about the defence and security capabilities, it is essential to start with a hard-headed reappraisal of our foreign policy and security objectives, and the roles we wish our country to play, as well as the risks that we face in a fast-changing world. The two must work in tandem, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fail to understand the reasoning behind the concept of Ocean of Peace being championed by our honourable Prime Minister aimed at safeguarding our waters and resources as a region. The concept would appear to overlap with existing regional commitments such as the *2018 Boe Declaration* and the Blue Pacific 2050 strategy that recognises the increasingly uncertain and volatile security landscape in the region, and which has already envisioned a Pacific Region of Peace. I call on the honourable Prime Minister to clarify the difference between the concepts of the Ocean of Peace and the Pacific Region of Peace. I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the honourable Prime Minister that he place more emphasis on the more pressing issue of Climate Change rather than coining new concepts which may mean very little to us as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we all agree that the most critical phenomena threatening peace in our region is Climate Change. The well-being of the Pacific region is threatened by the intensification of the climate crisis. As demonstrated during the review of global performance to deliver against the ambition of the Paris Agreement at COP28, efforts to reduce emissions and the consistency of political commitments with these objectives have continued to fall short of what is needed to avert major consequences for vulnerable countries. We must take action to scale up our domestic response to existing impacts while accelerating our progress to build the resilience needed to address future impacts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, peace is fundamental to human existence and welfare. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been mooted. I would beg to offer an alternative approach which can be mainstreamed into our everyday life thus creating better understanding and cohesion between our communities. I suggest, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that Government consider establishing a comprehensive, ongoing and well-resourced civic education system at different levels of the community to raise awareness on democracy and governance, multi-culturalism, peace building and law and order amongst other things. I would envisage the benefits emanating out of such a system as being more effective and more far reaching than those coming out of the touted Commission.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to end with these three remarks. Firstly, with all the commitments being made by the Government through His Excellency the President's Address, the bottom line is, there is an urgent need to return our nation's finance to a sustainable footing. That must be a priority.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our policies and programmes of Government must result in tangible positive outcomes that address the basic needs and alleviate the sufferings of the grassroots of our nation.

Thirdly, the people are calling for good governance, transparency and for inclusiveness in the governance processes to eliminate dubious and corrupt practices that result in the wastage of our already scarce resources.

Those are the challenges we have on our hand, and which falls squarely on the shoulders of the honourable Prime Minister as the Leader of the Coalition Government. I call on the honourable Prime Minister to show leadership and find the answers to these challenges. Everything rises and falls on leadership. May God bless our beloved Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, after thanking the honourable Leader of the Opposition and the honourable Prime Minister for his motion, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for morning tea. We will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.22 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.55 a.m.

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to extend my greetings to the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, members of the public sitting in the gallery and all those tuning in live on the Parliament's *Facebook* channel; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in response to the Opening Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *na Turaga na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, at the 2024 Session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would, firstly, like to thank the Almighty God for His guidance and direction for the past 14 months. To my family; my husband Aminiasi; to my children - Sanaila, Sakiusa, Alowesi, Ruth, Vasiti and Makereta; to my parents, my extended family from Cakaudrove, Bua and Kadavu; and my relatives and my friends; *vei kemuni kece na kaiciqu, lavo kai, ako kai, lovava kai; vinaka vakalevu na nomuni vei 'okoni vinaka*.

As we convene for the commencement of this new legislative session, we are not merely witnesses to a procedural formality, but stewards of our nation's destiny. The decisions we make, the policies we craft, and the debates we are engaged in will reverberate through the corridors of history, shaping the course of our future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the State Opening of Parliament for the 2024 Session has signalled the dawn of a new era, one defined by resolute commitment to unity, democracy and progress. We are reminded about the paramount importance of representing diverse voices and upholding the principles of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a nation as richly diverse as ours, the pursuit of unity amidst diversity stands as an indispensable pillar of national progress. As His Excellency has eloquently echoed, the need of fostering harmony among Fiji's ethnic communities and cultivating a spirit of respectful discourse and cooperation among our leaders, indeed, embracing our collective diversity not as a source of division but as a well-spring of strength which is paramount to our journey towards a more cohesive and prosperous society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bedrock of any vibrant democracy lies in representing diverse voices and upholding the principles of democratic governance. It is not enough to pay lipservice to the notion of democracy but rather, we must actively strive to ensure that every citizen of Fiji is not only heard but is also genuinely represented in this Chambers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I proudly stand in this Parliament today and having just commemorated International Women's Day, it is my hope that I serve and inspire more women with the same ability and the same passion to serve. The local elections being brought back by the Coalition Government can very well be the pathway to more women participating in our democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the heart of our collective aspirations lies the vision of an inclusive society where every Fijian irrespective of their background or circumstance has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to our nation's progress.

Inclusive development calls for securing social progress and resilience for all people and ensuring that it will be sustainable in the long run. I, therefore, fully support the Coalition Government's agenda efforts on the formulation of the National Development Plan which is being

consulted at the grassroots level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tourism Sector stands as linchpin of our national economic vitality, serving as a beacon of opportunity and prosperity for countless Fijians. As we reflect on the remarkable growth and resilience of this pivotal industry, it is incumbent upon us to redouble our efforts to ensure its continued success and sustainability.

The statistics speak volumes. In January 2024 alone, Fiji welcomed 70,324 international visitors, marking a 104 percent increase from the previous year. Such robust growth not only bolsters our national GDP but also creates myriad of opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship across our islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, we expect 1 million visitors for the first time. As His Excellency noted, more visitors mean more demand for products and services and also means more revenue for our economy and more Fijians with jobs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation for their hard work and dedication for the past 14 months.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, This year, the Ministry launched the National Sustainable Tourism Framework. It calls for tourism that is sustainable, resilient and inclusive. It will guide the sector in accelerating a prosperous visitor economy, ensure communities are empowered and part of that, prosperity. It calls for greater attention to our diverse cultures and safeguarding our greatest asset, which is our pristine environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know and have seen that when tourism does well, so does other sectors. Next week, we will be hosting the first of three 'Farm to Fork' workshops in partnership with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. The initiative essentially aims to familiarise hotel key decision-makers with the produce that are available locally, including fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meat and sea food, and introduce farmers to key decision-makers of the hotel and explore opportunities to enhance utilization and procurement, as well as managing expectations of chefs, food and beverages managers and procurement officers. In this way, the *dalo* farmer, as His Excellency had mentioned, they too can secure markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Trust of Fiji to promote more linkages to creative arts and heritage. Most recently, we have supported the installation of heritage panels around Suva City. We will continue to support such synergies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government made strong commitments in support of regionalism. I am pleased to share that in May, we will be hosting the South Pacific Tourism Exchange (SPTe), along the margins of the Pacific Tourism Organization Board of Directors Meeting. This is the first time the SPTe is being held in the Pacific, making Fiji the first in the Pacific to host the event. The SPTe was previously held only in Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, the financing of the Fiji Tourism Development Programme in Vanua Levu was approved by the World Bank's Board of Executive Directors. This is the first of three projects planned over 10 years to help deliver its vision for more sustainable, inclusive and resilient tourism in our second largest island.

The first phase of the programme led by the Ministry of Tourism focuses on bolstering tourism in Vanua Levu, including Taveuni, by improving access to and climate resilience of essential

services such as drainage, sewage and transport infrastructure. This includes the Labasa and Savusavu domestic Airports, as well as an upgrade to the 95-kilometre road connecting the two towns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Aviation, I am pleased to share a number of legislative reforms we aim to deliver this year, beginning with Fiji's First Civil Aviation Master Plan. We will also be reviewing our National Draft Aviation Policy to ensure it meets current needs.

Mr. Speaker, airport infrastructure development is equally important to support and sustain our economic development. Today, Fiji Airports manages approximately 6 million square kilometres of airspace with two international airports. Greening of Fiji Airports is one of the key strategies for 2024 and beyond.

Mr. Speaker, solarisation and reduction of carbon emission activities include purchase of electronic vehicles and changing all the external lights to solar lights and setting up a 3.5 megawatts Nadi Airport Solar System as well. More initiatives are being looked at by the Sustainable Team.

Digital transformation is an important strategy as we move towards contactless passenger services - the use of Artificial Intelligence and the use of Advance Aviation Technology to achieve efficiency and enhance safety security and passenger experience.

Construction works at Labasa Airport terminal will commence mid-2024 at the current location of the terminal building and more land around the airport is required for future expansion for a larger passenger terminal in future. This has been identified in the Na Vualiku Tourism Development Project.

Mr. Speaker, Fiji Airports will be embarking on the development of its 10 Year Strategic Plan of 2025 to 2034 in the next few months. The Plan will inform its three-year rolling Business Plan and Capex Plan aligned to its Master Plan. The future of Fiji Airports remains promising.

Mr. Speaker, as part of the Nadi Airport Master Plan, Fiji Airports is in the process of acquiring a piece of land to access a new cargo facility on the North-West precinct of Nadi Airport. The Sales and Purchase Agreement has been signed.

There are plans for a transit hotel, retail and commercial space, and this will be progress as part of the landslide development at the Nadi Airport. The tender is out for the Master Plan consultancy for the landslide at Nadi and Nausori.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 25 percent of our total income comes from commercial and helps fund our core airport operations and infrastructure which is quite costly.

Fiji Airports has invested around \$7 million in purchasing three new Airport Rescue Firefighting Trucks for Nadi International Airport. One has arrived in December 2023, and two are expected in July 2024. The works are underway for the replacement of the fire trucks in Nausori, Labasa, Savusavu and Matei, and three new Water Rescue Boats for Nadi by 2026.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, five new aerobridges, costing a couple of million dollars are being procured and these will become available in 2025 because of the length of time it takes to manufacture them.

Mr. Speaker, Nausori and 13 other outer island airports are owned by the Government of Fiji and managed by Fiji Airports without any funding from the Government. It costs approximately \$15 million in 2023 to operate these airports. Income derived from these airports account for only 25

percent of the annual operating cost. This is apart from the capital expenditures spent by Fiji Airports to upgrade some of them.

Mr. Speaker, as we stand on the height of a new chapter in Fiji's history, let us reaffirm our unwavering commitment to fostering growth, enhancing connectivity and championing sustainable practices in the tourism and civil aviation sectors.

Let us embrace the opportunities that lie before us with courage and conviction, mindful of the trust placed in us by the people of Fiji. Together, let us forge a path towards a brighter and more prosperous future for all.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you for your dedication, your service and your unwavering commitment to the ideals of democracy and progress. May we continue to work tirelessly in the service of our nation and its people.

May God bless us all, may God bless Fiji.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Opposition Members and my fellow Fijians; *ni sa bula re, namaste, as-salamu alaykum*, and a very good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Speech of His Excellency the President has raised some very pertinent issues. And like me, other Fijians have expressed the need for many of these issues to be highlighted and voiced out in this august Chamber.

Mr. Speaker, in a span for over 14 months, this dysfunctional and delusional Coalition Government has not only failed to fulfil the promises they had made before the Election. They are the very reason why this country is suffering an economic meltdown.

The lack of investment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and continued brain-drain of thousands of our skilled Fijians is a sign that Fijians no longer have confidence nor the trust in this Collation Government which twisted the truth just to get into power.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. K.K. LAL.- The Coalition Government was given a very stable economy and we must give thanks to the former Prime Minister, Mr. Bainimarama, and the former Minister for Economy, Mr. Khaiyum. but, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what has happened now is, we can that this Government is unable to cope with the new world challenges and the demands of the Fijian people.

It is evident that they lack the practical skills needed to run an economy and a country as a government, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Let us face it - our people are suffering. Among other things, the high cost of living has caused many young Fijians and their parents to re-evaluate their livelihoods and their futures, especially in our rural communities, like Taveuni and Cakaudrove.

The elephant in the room, so to speak, Mr. Speaker, is the mishandling and mismanagement of the economy by the honourable Minister for Finance, who is more of an academic than someone with practical experience and knowledge.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a Minister for Finance who requires committees to determine

economic policies and then give tax breaks to multinational companies, like Fiji Water, while our local companies suffer. Forget about sound economic policies when one lacks common sense.

Mr. Speaker, before the 2022 Elections, there was a slogan by the National Federation Party (NFP) and I clearly remember. The slogan was, 'time for a change'. All those NFP politicians were going on and saying, "It's time for a change. It's time for a change". Boy-oh-boy, Mr. Speaker, the change people got was brutal.

Now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many Fijians are left wondering why they supported a political party like NFP, that did nothing to reduce the prices of goods but, in fact, added more burden to the people who have children in schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they claim to provide monetary relief with the 'Back to School' assistance and mind you, the truth is that that initiative was started by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. K.K. LAL.- But then, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they take more from Fijians, like this Government's fake promise of free education when, in fact, primary and secondary schools are now charging levies, adding more burden to parents and further straining our economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can clearly see that when responding to issues raised by the FijiFirst Movement, the honourable Minister for Finance starts making personal attacks and unprofessional remarks as opposed to focusing on the issues raised. They seem to have forgotten some basic economics, Sir, but let me teach them some economics today.

Higher taxes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, result in an economic slowdown. The social security nets and the automatic stabilizers have not been rolled out efficiently and effectively to mitigate the impact of higher taxes. There are more potholes on our streets and lawlessness has increased.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Sit down!

MR. SPEAKER.- There is a Point of Order being raised.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIMKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Point of Order 60 on relevance. The motion was to discuss the most gracious Speech by His Excellency the President. He is meandering everywhere. He is trying to follow his leader when he was in Government, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, if you want to stand on a Point of Order, I would implore you, please, quote the Standing Orders, so it will help me and the Secretariat to follow the concern raised by mentioning the Point of Order. In future, if one raises a Point of Order and does not, kind of, clearly make out the Point of Order that he/she is highlighting, then I will ask you to resume your seat for the speaker to continue.

Honourable Lal, the floor is yours.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Acting Commissioner of Police cannot even manage his Police Officers who have been committing crimes. How can he be expected to efficiently manage crime prevention

in our communities? Yet, the picture being portrayed to the rest of us is that we are a safe country. No, we are not, Sir. I, myself, do not feel safe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government harps about democracy, human rights, safeguarding the vulnerable such as women and children, yet they see it proper to endorse genocide being carried out by Israel on the Palestinian people, including the mass killing of innocent lives, aid workers, hospital workers and thousands of women and children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have a Coalition Government which is selective in its application on policies on fundamental human rights. We have a coalition Government which lacks humanity. The NFP was once known for its unity, equality and fulfillment of promises on policies. Their founding members spoke out whenever a wrong was done and fought for the rights of everyone. The silence on the part of NFP on the issue of Fiji supporting genocide speaks volumes of how low this once a great Party has become under its current leadership.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is, therefore, no surprise why some of their own supporters have turned against them. The Coalition Government has become a joke to the outside world and in the international arena. We have Ministers who are tasked to protect and look after the welfare of Fijians, they are being disciplined for God knows what, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But I am sure many Fijians are reading the media articles.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have received complaints daily about the deteriorating road conditions and potholes, but it seems the honourable Minister concerned does not care and is too busy opening projects that were initiated by the FijiFirst Government in the whole of last year.

In a recent issue brought to the attention of the FijiFirst's Opposition Chambers by residents of Muaniweni, some residents complained that they had no bus service. According to the residents, the bus company said they will not operate because the road conditions are worse than ever before, thus depriving residents' access to much needed transportation. Is this the change promised by the Coalition Government?

Meanwhile, the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs has proven to be a colossal waste of taxpayers' money. Over the past year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there has been a glaring absence of any meaningful plans, actions, policies or direction from his office. Frankly speaking, Sir, his performance has been nothing short of pathetic. There was no need to establish such a Ministry to begin with, neither is the Ministry performing, nor its Minister.

Then we have the sugar industry issues. Perhaps, if the honourable Minister spent more time in Fiji with our farmers addressing their concerns rather than overseas, then he may be making some meaningful contributions in that area too. But sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister has also failed to perform his duties yet retains one of the most crucial portfolios which impact the lives of our hardworking farmers and their families.

But to also put a spotlight on NFP again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fijians demand an explanation from the NFP leader as to why his Party Manifesto is not uploaded on their Party's website. The 2022 Manifesto is a crucial document that outlines the Party's vision, goals and promises to the people. It is essential for transparency and accountability in governance. I do not know the reason behind this omission, Sir. When can we expect to see this Manifesto made available for public scrutiny and evaluation?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we have seen with this incompetent Coalition Government is the improper use of authority or perhaps, even bribery involved in the windmill project case. However, Sir, we do understand that an investigation is underway.

We note that the Permanent Secretary Fisheries has been terminated by the Public Service Commission (PSC) but the Chief Executive Officer of the Fiji Sports Council, who had also signed has not been suspended by its line Minister. Where is the accountability?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do understand that this agreement was also endorsed by two Cabinet Ministers, namely the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry and the honourable Minister for Sports. But we want to know from the honourable Prime Minister why has there not been any announcement on any investigations on those Ministers and why is it taking such a long time. If there is any investigation afoot and if persons are found culpable, then they must be terminated and must be referred to FICAC.

However, there is a big question here, is someone else behind those Ministers? Something is very fishy, and God knows what, Mr. Speaker, Sir. However, on another note, I would like to raise, again, on the basis of transparency and specifically a question to the honourable Minister for Agriculture, is it alright for a Minister to use Government vessel to transport his family and father's ashes to the Lau Group?

At the same time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as this Coalition Government gets hammered by the powerful Opposition, a question in Parliament was raised by the honourable Rinesh Sharma last year with respect to another Minister, namely the honourable Minister for Fisheries and his involvement in the issuance of licence to his own company. The question is still unanswered, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Prime Minister, is this what transparency looks like? God knows when this question will be answered. This is going to be the legacy of this Coalition Government. They have talked a big game when they were in Opposition but now it is time to walk the talk. They must continue to protect the 2013 Constitution and continue to follow this important document.

We must stand for what is right and stand for justice, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Equally concerning is the decline in youth-focused policies by the Coalition Government. It appears that the ship of our nation is sailing without a compass, lacking a clear direction for Fiji's youth.

The lack of new initiatives and projects means a dearth of employment opportunities for our young people, further giving the challenges they face in building a prosperous future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very emotional, but I am not alone in saying this, that vast majority of Fijians do not support the Coalition Government's support of Israel in the Palestinian-Israeli war. Why is this Government more concerned about supporting Israel and genocide, and not support what is right? Where is the humanity in all these coalition partners?

Regardless of our religion, I know for a fact that all of us Fijians are deeply religious people, and we remain deeply connected with each other. If we see are neighbour in trouble or in a problem, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we help out – we do not see what religion they are from or what religion they practice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, God fearing and God loving people will not support the killing of innocent people. God does not teach us to kill innocent people. If this Government supports genocide, then they lack compassion, love, and above all, they lack humanity.

In conclusion, as we stand before this august Chamber, we are reminded of the weight of the

responsibility of the people we serve. Today, we have witnessed not only the unravelling of our economy, but also the betrayal of trust bestowed upon us by our fellow Fijians.

The Government's incompetence has led us down this path of despair, where families struggle, businesses falter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and dreams are shattered. But let us be clear, we are not here to simply point fingers or assign blame. We are here to demand accountability, to uphold the values of integrity and justice, and to fight tirelessly for the welfare of our nation and our Fijians, Sir.

As representatives of the people, it is our duty to hold those in power and, especially the Coalition Government accountable, to speak the truth to authority, and to advocate fiercely for the betterment of our society. We will not falter, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will not yield, and we will not rest until justice is served and the voices of the people are heard.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Lal for that very, very vicious contribution.

(Laughter)

Honourable Members, may I remind you that the motion was delivered by the honourable Prime Minister, based on His Excellency's Speech and as such, please, confine your speech to those two issues - the Speech by His Excellency and the motion by the honourable Prime Minister.

Now, since I have allowed honourable Lal to go on his spree of vilifying everyone that has come across him, including NFP, the issue of Israel on the Gaza, et cetera, as such, I hope you will take it on because I will now allow for responses to come from the other side of Parliament based on what I have allowed to continue from the speech by honourable Lal.

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise in this august Parliament to lend my support to the motion by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech during the Opening of the 2024 Parliamentary year on Monday, 4th March, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's reminder about our responsibilities as elected representatives within a democratic framework is timely. It is a challenge to us all, the Members of this august Parliament, as well as all of us who call Fiji, home, that we all grasp the paramount importance of the duty assigned to us in terms of upholding the principles of democracy and humanity with unwavering determination and resolve. By embracing inclusivity and unity, we can truly fulfil the aspirations of our people and we can then begin to build a better future for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in December of last year, the Coalition Government marked its one year in office. I can admit that the initial 12 months presented significant challenges for the Coalition Government. However, under the steadfast and decisive leadership of the honourable Prime Minister and the able assistance of our honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, I am pleased to acknowledge the substantial progress we have achieved together as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we have slowly progressed as a nation in the past 14 months, I am deeply dismayed that some of us have sadly found it necessary to use the tactics of division and disunity, employing disinformation for political mileage. Regrettably, some elected representatives have even resorted to lies and propaganda to mislead the general public. I heard that honourable Lal, in his previous contribution, has contradicted his leader in everything that he said regarding the need to work together in building up our nation. If I were the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I would be weary of the saying, "something is rotten in the state of Denmark". There are some talk of

instigation in his ranks so it would be best, Sir, for him to start investigation in that direction.

I hope that we can all take heed of His Excellency's most gracious advice and rise above such pettiness, to reach across the political divide in bipartisan cooperation so that we can work together in the noble cause of nation building.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, coming into Government came with its challenges; there were a lot of expectations to deliver. However, on the back of a post COVID-19 economy and inheriting extremely high debt levels, it was an uphill battle for the Coalition Government. Whilst we acknowledge that meeting every expectation within the first year of office would not have been feasible for any government, I would like to reassure the general public, particularly those in our rural and maritime communities, of our unwavering commitment to their wellbeing. We remain resolute in our dedication to our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial for the general public to understand that the People's Coalition Government remains diligently committed and we are, all of us, working very hard to ensure a safe, secure and prosperous Fiji for all.

Despite the increase in VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent on specific goods and services in the last year, we are pleased to observe a decline in the inflation rate from 5.1 percent at the end of last year to 3.6 percent in January 2024. This indicates that the rate of the increase in prices has slowed, compared to December last year. We also made sure that we kept the zero rate on 21 basic food items and added prescribed medicines to that list.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate the insightful overview of our economy's trajectory and the projections shared by His Excellency the President regarding our anticipated growth rates for the upcoming years. While the road ahead may be fraught with challenges, it is incumbent upon us to adopt a nuanced approach integrates fiscal prudence with strategic investments aimed at fostering inclusive and sustainable growth. I am confident that with prudent fiscal management, strategic investments, and collective resolve, we can steer through these uncertain times and emerge stronger and more resilient as a nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the hard work and effort put in by the Ministry of Finance through the Strategic Planning Office in the formulation of Fiji's National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP will provide a visionary roadmap for an inclusive integrated effort towards nation building.

I note with appreciation the multiple consultations that are currently underway to ensure that the voices of diverse stakeholders including communities, civil society organizations, private sector entities and development partners are heard and integrated into the planning process. This inclusivity fosters a sense of ownership and collective responsibility towards national development goals, promoting social cohesion and resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative that any government agency also re-strategises and aligns its course to the new dynamics in anticipation of the NDP that will be launched soon. It is with this regard that my Ministry is also reviewing its 10 Year Strategic Plan 2021-2031.

Given our role in the rural and maritime areas, we are also mindful of the upcoming review of the *iTaukei* Administration, the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs and the various statutes that govern the *modus operandi* of the *iTaukei* communities, not forgetting other Fijian rural communities which comprise the majority of the population that my Ministry serves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, significant achievements have been reached in the last two years of implementing our Strategic Development Plan. The five Strategic Priority Areas outlined in this Plan

focussed on supporting our vision of sustainable and inclusive development for productive and resilient rural communities in Fiji. These broad strategic focussed areas reflect the major development priorities and needs of our rural and maritime communities. These development priorities are expected to remain with minimal revision but with the inclusion of the Coalition Government's vision and priorities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the framing of the four core roles of the Ministry, in itself, strategically reaffirms and empowers the Ministry's staff to live up to what the role describes them to be. The four core roles for my Ministry are:

1. Rural Development Facilitator and Coordinator;
2. Relationship Manager;
3. Knowledge Broker; and
4. Risk Reduction, Response and Recovery Coordinator.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, allow me to provide some remarks in response to climate change and disaster management. Fiji is ranked as the 12th most hazardous country in the world by World Risk Index on the basis of high exposure to natural hazards and relatively low coping capacity. In this current cyclone season, we have been fortunate not to experience the impact of a major cyclone. However, we have observed that low depressions bring substantial rainfall leading to flooding and landslides. It is crucial to acknowledge that we are not exempt from any disaster, as the potential impact on our community and economy remains significant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, echoing the sentiments expressed by His Excellency in his most gracious Address, the Government maintains its unwavering commitment to enact robust policies that effectively address the compounding challenges arising from climate change and disasters, particularly impacting our vulnerable communities.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) underscores Fiji's significant exposure, estimating a 70 percent likelihood of experiencing impactful disasters related to natural hazards annually. Research indicates that cyclones and floods could result in average annual losses equivalent to 5.8 percent of GDP. These statistics underscore the urgency of the upcoming new Disaster Bill, earmarked to be tabled in Parliament later this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill is an important milestone for all Fijians and partners, incorporating valuable lessons from past disasters to ensure a legal framework that is adaptive and responsive to the evolving nature of such crises. This august Parliament might be interested to know that the honourable Prime Minister was also the Prime Minister at that time in 1998 when the current Natural Disaster Management Act 1998 was last passed.

The proposed Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in alignment with international best practices and standards for disaster risk reduction and management. It ensures that Fiji's approach harmonizes with global strategies. A notable demonstration of this alignment occurred during the Inaugural National Simulation Exercise conducted last year as part of our National Disaster Awareness Week (NDAW) 2023. The event brought together 13 Pacific Island Countries and key partners, fostering collaboration to strategise and test capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NDAW, 2023 witnessed the NDMO testing the national and sub-national coordination mechanisms in response to varying scenarios, such as, tsunamis, earthquakes, oil spills and marine search and rescue. This inclusive and comprehensive approach, integral to the new Bill, reflects its robust, forward looking and visionary nature, positioning Fiji to effectively navigate and mitigate the effects of disasters, if and when they do happen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with over 70 percent of our population residing within five kilometres of the coastline, the vulnerability to climate and disaster risks is undeniable. According to the Pacific Risk Profile for Fiji, from 2011 to 2020, the Government has responded to nine major cyclones, impacting 854,449 people or 95 percent of the population, and causing total damages amounting to US\$771.52 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given this high level of exposure, the Government remains committed to advancing its social protection programmes. This commitment involves augmenting these programmes with coverage designed to address the impacts of climate and disaster shocks. One significant initiative in this regard is the establishment of Fiji's Anticipatory Action Framework, the first of its kind in the Pacific.

Developed in collaboration with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and other UN partners, this Framework allocates US\$2.3 million of the Central Emergency Response Fund for preparedness activities. It adopts a 'no-regret' position in releasing funds to the affected members of the population once various triggers are met, aiming to provide timely assistance to forecasted areas prior to disaster impact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the unrelenting threats of climate change are becoming increasingly evident, especially for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), such as Fiji. We know that inhabitants of SIDS are 15 times more likely to die from climate disasters. Sir, SIDS are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, including sea-level rise, extreme weather events and changing rainfall patterns. These impacts can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and pose significant challenges to sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the relocation of Nabavatu Village is a clear indication of the escalating impacts of climate change on our vulnerable population. We express appreciation for the recent approval by Cabinet to proceed with the relocation of this village, and we eagerly anticipate witnessing the transition from their current tent village in which they have been living in since 2021, to their new Category-5 certified homes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project is one of the many that the Government will have to undertake in years to come. His Excellency the President has already stated that an additional 44 communities are out there to be looked into. There is no guarantee that the number will remain at that, and the chances of it increasing is high as the rate of impact of climate change bears itself on our vulnerable Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the Fijian economy, especially on Fiji's tourism sector. We are encouraged by the news that visitor arrivals have exceeded pre-COVID-19 levels, and they continue to be strong. Given that tourism plays a pivotal role on our economy, we must collaborate with relevant stakeholders to guarantee a safe, welcoming and secure environment for our visitors to enjoy their holidays.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 44 percent of Fiji's population reside in rural areas. While these areas may be regarded as resource rich, high poverty rates and rural urban drift persist in these areas. To help address this disparity, I am pleased to inform this august Parliament that the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development is currently working on initiatives that will empower our rural communities and enhance their ability to turn their God-given resources to generate and accelerate wealth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in support of His Excellency's statement about providing access to financial literacy, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime development and Disaster Management, through our

Self-Help Programme and Rural and Outer Island Development Programme (ROI), will significantly contribute towards this effort. The Ministry provides support to income-generating projects and this year is going to engage with organisations through Public-Private Partnerships that will provide the necessary expertise for improving financial literacy in the rural and maritime areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges that changing mindsets and introducing a savings culture in rural communities cannot happen overnight. It will require good governance, commitment and passion on the part of the people, as well as effective coordination and cooperation between Government agencies, the private sector, and our religious organisations.

We are encouraging and supporting the establishment of more co-operatives so that the idea of *solesolevaki* is maintained and enhanced. This is the strength of our rural people, and we need to maximise those strengths with more income-generating activities and nurture them to become self-reliant and move away from the dependency culture that was the common practice in the last 10 years.

Whilst financial literacy is crucial, ensuring that there is market access for these small businesses is equally important. Our Ministry is doing its best through our existing programmes to ensure that the supply and value chain for any type of business supported is monitored closely to ensure market access and maximum benefits for our clients.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has already been engaging with local, regional, and international partners to provide support in this area. Apart from engaging with Government agencies, we are also exploring opportunities available with regional organisations. Our engagement with the People's Republic of Korea for piloting of Saemaul Undong and Saemaul Geumgo initiatives are examples of initiatives that the Ministry is implementing as tools for economic empowerment and growth.

The Saemaul Geumgo is a development initiative that will promote the financial cooperative concept among our rural and maritime communities. Under the programme, our rural and maritime dwellers will be trained on financial literacy, savings culture, community leadership, and income generation projects. Promoting financial literacy not only enhances individual wellbeing, but also fosters economic resilience, and contributes to sustainable development in communities and societies, especially in our rural and maritime areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Saemaul Geumgo initiative or a modified version of it, using our own *solesolevaki* principles, will be piloted in rural communities and later on, embedded into the existing ROI programme due to its successful contribution towards rural development in South Korea and in other developing countries of the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the decision of the Coalition Government to institute a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This initiative is not only timely but also essential as we endeavour to advance collectively as a nation. It is my firm belief that to move forward together, we must first address and reconcile the wounds of the past.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry was once a stronghold of the Fiji economy. The initiatives planned to revitalise this vital industry are indeed promising. The targeted increase in cane production to 1.8 million tonnes for the upcoming season demonstrates a proactive approach to enhancing productivity and securing the industry's sustainability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's ROI programme is also targeted at assisting subsistence farmers in our rural and maritime communities who have the potential to contribute to economic

growth. This is the first year of implementation and we are committed to not only support but enhance productivity through the provision of machinery and equipment, as well as facilitating discussions for market access.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's programme of Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Footbridges (CARFF) is an enabler for ease of access to transportation and markets. In addition to this, the Ministry is also administering the Seafaring Entrepreneurship Assistance Programme to provide subsidies for purchasing boats and engines that are used for transportation, as well as for fishing businesses.

The Ministry also contributes to addressing health issues through its Rural High-Risk Water and Sanitation Programme. This is a programme that enables access to clean and safe drinking water and better sanitation facilities for rural and maritime communities.

Recently, there has been assistance provided to schools through the construction of Ecological Purification Systems (EPS) for access to clean drinking water and the construction of ablution blocks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am delighted to be part of a government that is people-focused on uplifting living standards and, at the same time, working with the people to transform the way they think and empower them to be resilient and productive.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of our outreach, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management has consistently and constantly challenged our rural dwelling citizens to co-operate with members of our staff in preparing their Community Development Plans and Disaster Management Plans for their communities, whether it be villages or settlements, and organising themselves to address challenges when they arise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark on another parliamentary year, I urge my colleagues in this august Parliament to reaffirm our commitment to the fundamental purpose of our roles which is to serve, rather than to be served. We must remain firm in our dedication to listening to the concerns of our people and using our platform to address their plights effectively. With that, Sir, I commend and fully support His Excellency's most gracious Speech.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of Opposition and Members of Parliament; a big *bula vinaka* and greetings to those who are watching from the comfort of their homes and to all Fijians tuning in from anywhere around the world.

Mr. Speaker, please, allow me to greet out *iTaukei* viewers who are tuning in today.

Ni sa bula vinaka. Au vakabula saka tiko yani ena yasana e 14 ena noda vanua - na vei Marama Bale kei na vei Turaga Bale, vei keda na vei delaniyavu vakaturaga, keda na lewenivanua e Viti ena duidui tavi e da qarava ena siga nikua, eda tu beka ena vanua ni cakacaka eda sema tiko mai, esa nuitaki saka tiko ni makaresese tiko yani na biau livaliva ni veiqaravi ena loma ni noda Boselawa ena noda vanua.

Mr. Speaker, I promise to be very brief. I am honoured and grateful to be given the privilege to reply or express my thoughts and opinion on His Excellency's Address while opening the Parliament Session for this year.

Mr. Speaker, while going through His Excellency's Speech, I ensured that I look into it not as a politician or a Member of Parliament, but I challenge myself on how I can look at it like an ordinary Fijian sitting at home.

A farmer may be asking; how relevant is this to me? A fisherman may ask; how will this benefit my family? A carpenter will want to know whether the changes and initiatives will influence their weekly salary or how are we going to bring about positivity, confidence and growth to the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, at the outset, my response today is based on this statement, "When the people are well looked after, the country will prosper, and the nation will grow stronger".

Mr. Speaker, no matter how many forums, summits, meetings and consultations we do, if we continue to neglect the people and turn a blind eye to their voice and needs, there will be no progress, there will be no economic prosperity, there will be no growth and development.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- A reminder to the Government of the day, "You are there because the people entrusted their hopes and aspirations of a better family, better community and better Fiji to you".

Mr. Speaker, as policymakers, we need to ensure that the people of this country should always come first because they are the very reason we are represented here as Members of Parliament. We are not here because of certain businesses and businesspeople.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- We are not here because of some companies or Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). We are here for the very people whose votes gave us the power to become Ministers and Members of Parliament. To the Coalition Government, you need to stop the 'blame game' and habitually imputing the past practices of the previous Government as a reason to get away from the expectations of the people.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- Stay true to your purpose and never deviate from the vision of the great leaders that have gone before us. You need to be bounded by the unity and faith of the people of Fiji, irrespective of their gender, race or ethnicity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, sometimes we hear words on the streets saying, "We need to accept that some of the promises made during the election campaign will not be fulfilled because this is a Coalition Government."

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. A. BIA.- Let me be frank with the Coalition Government, stop focusing on the issues within your Coalition partners, stop fighting for survival within the Coalition Government, but fight for the survival of ordinary Fijians who are living from paycheck to paycheck and hoping for a better Fiji.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is time to call for a stop of just using people for our very own political gain. For too long, some of us politicians are only seen during election campaign, visiting people and going out hearing the voice of the people, but when we are in power, we tend to totally forget the people who voted for us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we visited their doorsteps in trying to win their votes but when they come into your various office space, they are told to make appointments and at times, they are given the biggest run around of their life. Some have found it easier to talk to God than even trying to meet the Ministers in person.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some Fijians even ran out of credit after having their phone calls being transferred about five to six times, just to converse with the Ministers.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Yes, very poor!

HON. A. BIA.- Some people thought they are emailing the guardians of the galaxies because it takes months for Ministers to even respond to their email.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they need to be at the forefront of serving the people, irrespective of their class in the society. Try and avoid using the pipeline system to process issues and concerns of the people. As Ministers, you need to go out more locally, not internationally. You need to hear the heartbeat on the ground, engage ordinary Fijians in *talanoa* session and see the reality of what the people are facing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are elected to defend the interests of the people of Fiji at all costs. If it takes us to do some sacrifice in our decision-making, do it because of the people and there should be no two ways about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I have observed in the last Parliament sitting, we have spent a lot of time in 'political talk' and less 'people talk'. We are wasting our time trying to talk about the previous administration, we are too fond of trying to find fault about each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the danger of this when we are too focused on each other, we will forget the people we serve and what is required of us to carry out our roles and responsibilities. We need to honour our promise and words spoken during the election campaign, the people of Fiji are observing and listening, watching every move we make.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji need to have the assurance that they are not given false hope but are guaranteed that their interest is well served with the current Government. It is important that we remind ourselves not to expect perfection but be committed towards progress and improvement.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A. BIA.- To this august Parliament, let us stand together, shoulder to shoulder, with every citizen of this beloved country, no matter what they are, we will need to fight corruption at every turn. We should always stand for the very best and quality delivery for all Fijians, caring for all citizens and move our country forward with dignity and honor.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude with the saying, "If not now, then when? If not us, then

who?" May God bless Fiji.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker. Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistance Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all online and television viewers - *bula vinaka* and good morning to you all. I am privileged to reflect on the insightful themes presented in the inaugural Address of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere during the Opening Session of Parliament for 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to respond to the key messages articulated by His Excellency covering education, tourism and civil aviation. I echo the sentiments expressed by His Excellency the President, indeed, education will continue to be a priority. The Coalition Government has not changed its stance since we came into power to ensure that no child is left behind in our planning and policies in place at the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we all know that TELS debt amounting to a total of \$650 million, owed by some 53,725 students was written-off in 2023. These are 53,725 families across this nation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Under the new Fijian Scholarship Scheme with a total budget of \$148.2 million has catered to 8,720 new students and continues for the 9,148 existing students. Mr. Speaker, Sir, no country in the Pacific today provides scholarship for its people like Fiji through the Coalition Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- No country, no country, only Fiji with the Coalition Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No debt to the student.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the repair job is huge. Someone talked about the buildings, school fund – the schools under FijFirst were badly dilapidated...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- ... and the Government Quarters were in a sorry state.

For the information of Parliament, under the \$200 Back to School support for 2024, a total of \$42.5 million has benefitted 212,740 students from Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Year 13. Did I hear them saying that FijFirst did that too?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- No!

(Laughter)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the successful Fiji National Education Summit, which I opened on 19th September, 2023 had established a strategic direction which will transform our education system, thus building and supporting resilient Fijians. With a new direction, the Ministry must revamp its vision and mission statements along with its guiding principles, values and

responsibilities. For the information of the august Parliament, the last Summit was the Suva Declaration in 2005 and it after 18 years then another Education Summit has been staged.

The outcome of the Fijian Education Summit is the 10 years Denarau Declaration which entails its implementation phase and is taken into consideration its alignment to SDG4 and the National Development Plan. The Denarau Declaration launched on 10th November, 2023, focussed on seven major thematic areas:

First, the Curriculum & Sustainable Development which endeavour for learners at all levels of education to access high quality relevant programmes with inclusive examinations and assessment practices and processes.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Too much talk and no action.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.-

Secondly, the Quality Assurance and Assessment Systems. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on this one, the previous government removed scaling, effectively making our children severely disadvantaged in comparison to other children globally. The Ministry of Education is effectively working to reverse the decision with the re-introduction of scaling of examinations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- You have destroyed the Ministry.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- The third area is enhancing the Teaching Profession and Leadership. Our Ministry intends to strengthen an inspired, empowered and productive teaching workforce. Our Coalition Government with the intention to motivate and retain staff in the civil service, through the Ministry of Civil Service Circular 2/2024 and Circular 5/2024 mandated all Government Ministries that the retention measures through regularisation of acting appointments, allowing step movements, filling of re-evaluated positions and utilising of alternate pool be effected.

Our Ministry's regularisation processes began and successfully concluded the exercise. We have currently confirmed that 1,420 out of the 1,958 officers that have been on acting positions both in the teaching and non-teaching administrative posts. Some of these officers have been acting for two years up to 20 years from the Vice Principal and below.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Too much to fix, that is the problem.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I will share an experience.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Last week during a seminar at Pacific Harbour, a few women leaders walked up to my Permanent Secretary and conveyed their acknowledgement to the Ministry and stated this is what they said to us: "We were about to resign and leave for overseas, but because of the regularisation process, we stayed back."

There were several other messages received by our staff on the same issue. The Ministry will re-introduce Teacher Competency Framework and discussions have begun with our stakeholders. Teacher qualifications of Secondary Teacher Training Certificate (STTC) and International Diploma in Tertiary Teaching (IDTT) are now regularised as of 7th February, 2024. The arbitrary non-

recognition of the STTC and IDTT by the previous government in 2021 severely disadvantaged our teachers in many ways.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to strengthening Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Inclusive Education to ensure that every young child sent to ECE or kindergarten has access to an equitable, safe and healthy learning environment. We have planned and are beginning to roll out a restructure that will have dedicated Senior Officers position at the Director level for Special Inclusive Education (SIE) and ECE. Additionally, in the recent Coalition Government's decision in 2024 on the roll out of regularisation and step up, this enabled our Ministry to step up the salary of 739 ECE teachers.

Fourthly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on Education, Financing and Effective Governance is another priority area which includes the review and development of policies, regulations and resource allocation while working collaboratively with all internal and external stakeholders including our education partners.

Fifthly, is the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), Non-formal and Lifelong Learning. Resurrecting the Unit is crucial as we need to meet the shortage in skills in the current labour market including Tourism. The Ministry is working closely with the Higher Education Institutes to offer relevant TVET courses while we try to resolve the legal matters pertaining to the failed technical colleges under the FijiFirst Government.

In 2023, 32 vocational centres were operational, for 2024 we have scoped and will re-open 13 more vocational centres. It is our intention that every province will have a vocational centre. The Bose Levu Vakaturaga stressed the importance of having skilled young people; skills-set that is contextualised according to their community needs. For example, in the Nadroga/Navosa Provincial School that was converted to a technical college but has been idle with state of art vocational equipment will re-open soon as we work with the Nadroga/Navosa Provincial Council on this issue. We will offer vocational subjects focused on hospitality, carpentry and joinery and even automotive engineering offering viable alternatives for employment and entrepreneurship for our people on the Coral Coast. Scoping has also begun for Lomawai Secondary School, this is an example of what is happening in one province.

In addition, under the New Scholarship and Grants Scheme, 1,800 grant awards has been allocated for micro-qualification in construction, automotive and tourism and 400 grant awards for apprenticeship incentive scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also prioritising Digital Learning and Transformation, Information Technology and cyber safety. Internet connectivity and accessibility to digital resources is important for all the children in Fiji. The Ministry will need the support of communication providers and relevant stakeholders for connectivity and digitalisation of our remote and maritime scopes. The initiative by the Coalition Government and partnership with Starlink will see the pilot of Starlink in 15 schools for 2024. Development of content for the digital platform needs the partnership of genuine education partners to ensure that all schools access e-learning.

The final seventh thematic area is strengthening of the Education Policy, Planning, Research and Data. Evidence-based research and data is needed for the Ministry to make informed decisions in consultation with the policies and legislations in place. This essential unit was also dismantled in the last 15 years, so there was a lack of planning and directions for the biggest Ministry in government. The absence of the unit impacted planning, monitoring and evaluation of educational activities. Just this past weekend, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry had our First Senior Management Staff Planning Workshop to finalise our Costed Operational Plans (COP) for the fiscal year, and Staff

we had not done since 2016.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Lying.

(Laughter)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Denarau Declaration which governed the new direction for the Education Ministry will only be fully implemented when the Education Act, relevant laws, policies and programmes are reviewed. The Minister for Education has already started working in consultation with the Office of the Attorney-General. I have asked the honourable Attorney-General to delve into this in his address later this week. Collaboration with the Office of the Attorney-General is critical. The legislation must be current, applicable and futuristic. If we are to be relevant in the evolving global education landscape incognisance of the Industrial Revolution 4.0.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reassure this august Parliament that a talented and very competent team at the Ministry of Education ably led by the Permanent Secretary with the passion for education have been working diligently to ensure the old newly developed policies adhere to the required processes and procedures. An example is the appointment of the new Education Commission and part of their task is to renew the current National Curriculum Framework (NCF).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Rome was not built in a day, so it is crucial for the Ministry to get the right bricks, to lay the foundation of the Denarau Declaration framework for the future of the education system for our beloved Fiji.

Tourism, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to share a significant impact of tourism and civil aviation on Fiji's economy. Fiji's economic growth continues on the back of a strong tourism sector, the key driver. In 2023, Fiji's pandemic economic recovery was marked by an estimated growth of 8.2 percent. This growth is expected to continue, bringing our economy above 2019 levels of GDP by the end of 2024.

Last year, we broke records and welcomed 929,740 visitors up by 46.1 percent compared to 2022 and by 4 percent compared to pre-pandemic arrivals in 2019. Markets such as Australia, New Zealand, United States of America and Canada have exceeded past years. Tourism earnings reached \$1.7 billion cumulatively in September 2023 surpassing the corresponding 2019 level by 9.5 percent. In January 2024, visitor arrivals exceeded previous records for the same month with a record of 70,324 visitors. As shared by His Excellency, for the first time in Fijian history, we expect to welcome one million visitors in 2024; that would be a first for us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our connectivity with the rest of the world is not only being restored but also enhanced through our national airline. The 2024 capacity outlook is expected to grow between 8 percent and 10 percent compared to 2023. Fiji Airways has also considerably invested in its fleet, with the addition of two new A350 aircrafts in 2023. Fiji Airways newest destination is the Nadi to Noumea route with two weekly services. Fiji Airways currently operates in 24 destinations including 10 regional and 14 international destinations with discussions underway to expand more routes. The focus now is to increase code sharing through marketing arrangements with other airlines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is undertaking initial discussions for a Civil Aviation Master Plan for Fiji, intended to be rolled out this calendar year. This could be the first Civil Aviation Master Plan established for Fiji. Additionally, Fiji has an Aviation Policy which is outdated and will now be reviewed in line with imminent changes in the aviation industry. To meet the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) resolution relating environmental protection, we are working in collaboration with Fiji Airways, Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji, Fiji Airports Limited on reviewing

Fiji's State Action Plan on Carbon Dioxide Emissions. This State Action Plan to ICAO elaborates on the activities Fiji is undertaking to address CO2 emissions from international aviation and to enable ICAO to measure Fiji's progress towards meeting the global goals.

Our advocacy for sustainable aviation practices was underscored by my chairmanship of the Third Conference on Aviation Alternative Fuels in Dubai, culminating in a landmark commitment to reduce carbon emissions in international aviation by 5 percent by 2030 towards net zero by 2050.

Fiji's efforts to reaffirm the acceptance of Fiji's bid to host the office of the ICAO for the Pacific Small Island Developing States and the subsequent signing of the host State Agreement in May 2023 will solidify our role in regional aviation governance. The office will be established in Nadi with ICAO Pacific Island Small Island Developing States officer taking up residence in Nadi in October 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of tourism investments leads, we are looking at 42 projects valued at \$3 billion. This will bring in 4,824 rooms. There are about 1,627 rooms in the construction stage and a few hundred within the next few years. There are nine tourism project developments planned for 2024, three in 2025 and four in 2026. We are working with big brands such as One & Only Resorts and seeing local investors such as Punja's Group, expand into the sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the medium-term growth outlook is expected to return to the pre-pandemic trend and average around 3 percent. The loss of labour could negatively impact productivity, while constraints in hotel capacity and high prices could weigh in the growth of tourism in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as shared by his Excellency and the honourable Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and Civil Aviation, we will soon be launching the National Sustainable Tourism Framework (NSTF) 2024-2034. The Framework lays out a clear policy direction, consisting of a high-level framework accompanied by an initial three-year Action Plan (2024-2027). One of its priorities is to create a competitive destination with diverse experiences. This includes actions such as prioritizing infrastructure and connectivity to less visited tourism regions.

We will also focus on expanding products and experience, training, mentoring support for start-ups, business development training, peer-to-peer mentoring and advisory services. Target niche and experiential growth segments such as luxury, health, wellness and medical tourism; Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE); sports, tourism, educational tourism, film productions and experiential and immersive tourism. Essentially, our focus is not only on diversifying the economy but also on diversifying the tourism sector itself to be able to sustain ourselves.

Our new brand platform, "Where Happiness Comes Naturally" and the associated global launch campaign have continued to resonate and perform strongly.

Fiji's media placements continue to drive impact with our recent billboards in New York's Times Square. I am also pleased to share that Tourism Fiji's social media following is now over one million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last year we have elevated the Fijian brand by hosting major events.

1. First Spartan Fiji - brought a total of 25 countries with over 3,370 attendees, contributing FJ\$6 million to the economy and FJ\$2.6 million in media value.
2. First National Rugby League - sanctioned rugby league match delivered a \$6.15 million boost to Fiji's economy.
3. The World Surf League Fiji Pro will return after three years.

In the spirit of inclusive dialogue, last year we hosted the Fiji Tourism Convention and envisaged this as an annual event.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the tourism and civil aviation sectors play a pivotal role in Fiji's economy. The Government is committed to fostering growth, enhancing connectivity and ensuring sustainable practices in these sectors.

The President's Address has provided us with a roadmap for building a more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for Fiji and its people. For us in Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation, we heed his call to action and work together across political divides and national boundaries to realise this vision for our nation and for the world. Mr. Speaker, Sir, may the God Almighty bless our beloved nation.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch. When we resume, the honourable Deputy Speaker will be presiding over the sitting. We adjourn for lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.17 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 1.56 p.m.

DEPUTY SPEAKER. - Honourable Members, we will continue from where we left off.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow honourable Members of Parliament, *ni sa bula sia*.

It is an honour to deliver my response to His Excellency's most gracious Speech in the Opening of this Session of Parliament. It was His Excellency's last Address to Parliament as his first term in office would come to an end in October this year.

It was, indeed, a privilege to have voted His Excellency in 2021 as the FijiFirst nominee for President. His Excellency as Head of State, a figure above politics, in a very difficult position had to respect the democratic will of the people and be sworn by the Coalition Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I totally agreed with His Excellency. As democratically elected representatives, we need to listen to the voices of our people and not only those who have voted us.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency made the same call in opening the 2023 Session where he stated that the views of all members of our communities must be heard and the Coalition Government must ensure that draft laws are deliberated in consultation with relevant stakeholders, particularly through the Standing Committee process. His Excellency used the mandatory 'must' and not 'may'.

Madam Deputy Speaker, apart from the Appropriation Bill tabled in July 2023 with 14 Consequential Bills, the Coalition Government in 2023 introduced an additional 15 Bills in Parliament and only one Bill was referred to the Standing Committee for public consultation. This statistic shows that His Excellency's reminder was not followed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when Bills are not referred to the Standing Committee, it means that we are denying the people's rights to participate in the law-making process. Madam Deputy Speaker, if the honourable Prime Minister had not directed the honourable Attorney-General to withdraw the Heritage Bill 2023 which was moved under the Standing Order 51, the statistics would have shown that no Bills was ever referred to the Standing Committee in the last session of Parliament. The honourable Speaker had acknowledged the swift moved by the honourable Prime Minister, given it would facilitate bipartisanship.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency in Opening the Parliament Session last year outlined that the principled iTaukei statutes will be reviewed. This was to include the iTaukei Affairs Act, iTaukei Lands Act, iTaukei Land Trust Act, iTaukei Trust Fund Act and the iTaukei Development Fund Act. From the five mentioned Acts, only the iTaukei Land Trust Act and the iTaukei Affairs Act made it to Parliament and the rest did not.

The other 25 *iTaukei* related laws that was a core message of the Coalition Government when they were in Opposition are still nowhere to be seen. The iTaukei Affairs Bill came through Standing Order 51 in November 2023 with a new amendment that removed the GCC's veto to appoint five of the eight iTaukei Trust Fund Board members.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the last Parliamentary session, the Coalition Government did not introduce any new Bill to establish a new industry or create a new area to enable investment. For example, the FijiFirst Government in 2021-2022 introduced new Bills such as the Bill for an Act to

provide for the development of informal settlements in Fiji and other related matters; the Investment Bill; Climate Change Bill; the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants Bill; and the Industrial Hemp Bill, to name a few.

In 2021, the FijiFirst Government initiated the drafting of the Childcare and Protection Bill and the Child Justice Bill which is now undergoing executive consultations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expression Bill which is currently going through executive consultation will complement the Heritage Bill 2023 which is still before the Committee and was initiated by the FijiFirst Government in 2017. The Committee has had roundtable discussions with the consultation team led by the Permanent Secretary for iTaukei Affairs and its consultant, Mr. Tuiloma, so that both Bills can be improved specifically to identify any overlaps and gaps.

Madam Deputy Speaker, repeated calls have been made by the people that Bills be translated into the vernacular and disseminated widely through CSOs, Provincial Offices, District Advisories for them to understand and prepare a submission before the Standing Committee comes around to conduct its public consultation. Translation of the Bills should be prioritised by the Solicitor-General's Office and the line Ministries will administer the Bill in collaboration with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs before the Bill passages to Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I humbly request the honourable Attorney-General to strengthen the work relationship between the Office of the Solicitor-General's drafting department and the Standing Committee. This has been a challenging area, given the Standing Committee's communication to the Solicitor-General's Office are not actioned on time.

In addition, when a Bill is moved in Parliament, like in other jurisdiction, the Terms of Reference (TOR) and the full report of the executive consultation is referred to the Committee. This makes it easier for the Committee to do its oversight. This was the practice during FijiFirst Government, and it provided a clear guideline to assist the Committee in formulating its workplan.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when a Standing Committee scrutinises a Bill, it will need the cooperation of the drafters and consultants so that it reports back to Parliament in a comprehensive form of a Bill while it maintains its original intent per the TOR. This process is very important because it prevents any law from being subject to amendments time and again.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there is also a need for a parliamentary drafter to be based in Parliament, not only to assist Standing Committees on Bills, but also to assist in drafting private Members' Bills, as provided by the Standing Orders.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the FijiFirst Government, in a session of Parliament, passes an average of 40 to 50 Bills. The Coalition Government, as I have mentioned earlier, have not introduced a new Bill so far but only repeals and make amendments to existing laws.

In its first year in office, the Coalition Government only brought in 15 Bills, apart from the Budget Bills and all the other 15 Bills that were originally part of the FijiFirst legislative programme. In this Parliamentary session, the Coalition Government, as outlined by His Excellency's Speech, intends to review only 11 existing legislations, including the Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expression Bill and the other Bill that was alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister this morning - the Banaban Settlement Act that will also be reviewed, so there would be a total of 12 legislations to be reviewed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition stands ready to assist the Coalition Government to identify laws that need improvement, given the arising needs, and share ideas so that new Bills enabling the expansion of our economy can be enacted and through it, allowing every Fijian to fulfil their dreams and aspirations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency shared his experience as a youth in Macuata, spent with Indo-Fijian families during sugarcane harvesting season. The honourable Speaker would be very familiar with this experience having served at the then Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) in the Western and Northern Divisions. Most of the *iTaukei* in the Western and Northern Divisions speak fluent *Hindi* and even the Indo-Fijian community do speak the local dialect.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our two major ethnic communities in Fiji have always lived together in harmony. As national leaders, we must set the tone so that many of our political followers can spread the same message. Unfortunately, most of us sitting on this side of Parliament and also our supporters face direct and racial discriminatory attacks online - keyboard warriors constantly labelling FijiFirst as an Indo-Fijian Party or anti-*iTaukei*.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the reformers post-2006 *coup* reviewed the *iTaukei* institution under the process of the People's Charter so that the *iTaukei* Affairs Board, *iTaukei* Land Trust Board and the *iTaukei* Trust Fund Board play the role of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) in formulating policies that were for the good governance of the *iTaukei* people. Many saw these changes, not done with the prior and informed consent of the indigenous community as anti-*iTaukei*.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in fact, if FijiFirst was anti-*iTaukei*, then the time the Coalition Government came into power in December 2022, all the investments of the *iTaukei* Trust Fund would not be there anymore.

The FijiFirst Government expanded the *iTaukei* Trust Fund investment portfolio, and many benefitted in terms of leadership training at Nadave, indigenous studies, publication of traditional writings, et cetera. This has enabled the *iTaukei* Trust Fund to explore heritage tourism, partnering with UNDP under the Business Ready Support Scheme and most importantly, funds that were invested by FijiFirst for the *iTaukei* people has now been used to host the GCC meetings.

Madam Deputy Speaker, FijiFirst in 2015, rolled out the *iTaukei* Land Development Grant. In 2017, it established the Seed Fund for *iTaukei* landowners to provide an opportunity for them to participate in any income generating projects of their choice. Now, the Coalition Government has established a Wealth Fund from the 10 percent of iTLTB's annual earnings to allow landowning units to buy properties and start business ventures.

The FijiFirst Government introduced the equal lease distribution policy. Now, the Coalition Government has reintroduced the percentage distribution of *Turaga iTaukei*, *Turaga ni Yavusa* and *Turaga ni Mataqali*. The landowning unit members still get their same share basis and the minor's fund for children to withdraw at the age of 18 which was introduced by the FijiFirst Government is continued by the Coalition Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, every time a Bill is introduced in Parliament to amend or repeal an Act that was enacted by the FijiFirst Government, the Coalition Members, like small children celebrating a revenge, make sweeping statements such as, "this is due to the mismanagement of the previous Government or "these draconian laws by the previous Government" or "today is the day of freedom", et cetera.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these types of statements has fuelled communal differences within

our society. Labelling FijiFirst as anti- *iTaukei* and making us look like criminals does not assist in trying to establish walking across the aisle.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the incoming Chief Executive Officer of Fiji Revenue and Customs Service works in New Zealand and could be accorded an expatriate rate if he takes office. On the one hand, honourable Ministers of the Coalition Government are encouraging top jobs to be given to locals but on the very opposite, other honourable Ministers are bringing in people from overseas. There needs to be consistency.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we must give credit where the Coalition Government has implemented policies that are for the betterment of all Fijians, something that the FijiFirst Government had prioritised during its term.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the last session of Parliament, the Coalition Government focused a lot on FijiFirst's shortcomings during its term in Government and not the good developments done by FijiFirst that it can further improve and serve the people better.

Madam Deputy Speaker, no Government is perfect and for the last 14 months, the Coalition Government has made its own shares of mistakes and blunders. Ministers are under investigation, like we see in today's paper where the Attorney-General is under the spotlight. We heard about the chartered flight to Israel. Many complaints we read online where Ministers are promising Boards and even intentions to replace the honourable Prime Minister by one of the Deputy Prime Ministers. The SODELPA General Secretary makes a press conference while another Party member goes against it. Some have gone publicly to say that their Party is unfair. This kind of party politics prevents Government from serving the people better and slows progress.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the slow response in service delivery has been one of the people's growing concern. Other hot issues are the cost of living, food prices, unemployment, lack of development, road problems, water and power breakdowns, poverty, drugs and crime rates, to name a few.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government should not only talk about the achievements that they have achieved so far but also improve on what they can do better. The Coalition Government needs to develop policies that will allow our various communities to integrate, and I would also like to thank the honourable Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management for bringing in the Financial Literacy model from China and also the one that the honourable Prime Minister talked about this morning, the model from India.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is encouraging to hear that our domestic economy will surely return to the pre-pandemic level. It shows that the post-pandemic economic recovery plan initiated by FijiFirst Government in 2021 is bearing fruits. The Coalition Government needs to focus on new capital development, given the current 2023-2024 Budget had no capital expenditure but only continuing the projects under the FijiFirst Government. Many have been commissioned and opened by the Coalition Government and what we want to see is that people have access to these facilities whether it is a road, a bridge, hospital or water projects. Let us put people first.

Madam Deputy Speaker, despite our debt which is around \$9.9 billion due to the pandemic, what was more encouraging is that Fiji, in 2022, became one of the fastest growing economies in the world and this was due to the FijiFirst Government's economy recovery plan. The Opposition stands ready to assist Government on ideas to grow the economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Province of Macuata is so thankful that the relocation of the

people of Nabavatu in Dreketi to their new village site in Nadoiviri will commence this year. The FijiFirst Government had begun the initial talks of securing the new village site and now the Coalition Government will complete the full relocation process.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The relocation will be funded by \$5.9 million from the Climate Change Relocation Trust Fund. The FijiFirst Government, in 2018, had set up this Trust Fund to support the relocation in Fiji through the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund Act 2019 and the Climate Change Act 2021.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji Airways plays a key role in the increase of tourist arrival to Fiji and today, we are reaping the rewards of the FijiFirst Government's decisive leadership during the pandemic when it supported the loan guarantee for our national airlines, despite many Opposition Members objecting to it at that time. This is the type of issues where His Excellency has asked us to rise above petty politics and be patriotic.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the mechanics of it must be very clear as it will be dealing with many complex cases filled with high emotions. The Civic Education Awareness programme that was alluded to by the honourable Leader of the Opposition in his speech this morning, is very vital. The South African TRC model had a very simple set of procedures where victims would tell their stories of atrocities that they have not spoken about for years, then the perpetrators are given a chance to own up to their crime and by doing so, are eligible for amnesty. All they must do is to tell the truth and do not even need to say sorry, no apologies, no remorse, no justice and no prosecution.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to move this through the Coalition Government with the assistance of its development partners need to bring forward a Bill like the South Africa's Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 1995, to establish the TRC, its objectives, roles, functions and powers that will guide the process and at the same time, consider the interests of the victims and the perpetrators.

Madam Deputy Speaker, many of the *iTaukei* landowners who have made their land available for sugarcane leases want an increase in CBUL rates. That was an initiative of the Bainimarama Government in 2008 and the review of the land rentals which still sits at 6 percent of UCV. Landowners in Macuata, honourable Minister for Sugar, are still waiting for the CBUL payment that was due in December 2023. The last payment was made in June 2023 and the FijiFirst Government used to pay it out in every six months basis.

(Hon. C.J. Singh interjects)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- That is according to the *mataqali* members in Macuata. You better do that. If not, they will not vote for you again.

(Laughter)

Madam Deputy Speaker, it will be challenging for the GCC to be politically neutral, but it should now play a more meaningful role in making recommendations for the welfare, economic empowerment and good governance of *iTaukei* people. It must conduct wider consultations to all Vola ni Kawa Bula (VKB) members and get their free and informed consent before deciding on any questions relating to the *iTaukei*. The Coalition Government must ensure that the GCC does not threaten the State's role as protector of public interest.

Madam Deputy Speaker, people in the rural areas want speedy responses to their applications and requests in terms of Government programmes. The Coalition Government must ensure that civil servants at divisional and district level as enablers to the implementation of these programmes are very efficient and effective. Decisions on applications should be assessed in a timely manner and communicated to applicants conveniently.

Most of our people in rural areas get frustrated due to poor services provided. We need to improve these areas and the *Turaga ni Koro* and Advisory Councillors to be used to make communities aware of the various assistance available – where to get the application forms, the progress of each application in various areas, et cetera. I urge the Coalition Government to pay out the *Turaga ni Koro*, *Nasi ni Koro* and *Mata ni Tikina* allowance on time as they have been complaining recently on the delays.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we thank the Coalition Government for continuing the campaign on the 30 Million Trees in 15 Years initiative that was started in 2019 by the FijiFirst Government.

I agree that our Foreign Policy should maintain that we are friends to all and enemies to none, and it is important that we always promote peaceful solutions. This has been a subject of debate, criticism and emotions boarding on our religious beliefs in terms of Fiji's stance in the International Court of Justice.

The Israeli and Palestine situation can only be resolved through a two State solution and premised in the Oslo Accord of 1993. While both need their self-determination as a Sovereign State, a progressive withdrawal of Israel in the areas occupied by the Palestinians should be based on negotiations and mutual trust so that both States are protected and co-exist.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I totally agree with His Excellency that as Parliamentarians, we need to work across the aisle more often.

To conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency rightly reminded us by saying, and I quote from His Address on Page 10 of the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard* on Monday, 4th March, 2024:

“Let us not see challenges as mountains but common missions to ascend and resolve with open and constructive dialogue, with a view to rebuild social cohesion.”

To achieve that, we must move forward, and we cannot be stuck to the past. The Coalition Government has identified few areas that it will prioritise in this Parliamentary year, and it needs to focus on it and given that most of it are continuous programmes from the FijiFirst policies, then more sharing of ideas can happen across the floor.

On the new programmes and policies, the experience from both sides of Parliament can be harnessed to constructively put together ideas that will progress every Fijian. I will end by the words of the late Nelson Mandela who said, and I quote:

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered that the secret after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal the view that surrounds me, to look back at the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk to freedom has not ended.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, what worries me a lot is the inability of leaders to understand that

no one person has the answers to everything. We must move away from the idea that only “me” can do it because it is not true.

To the Coalition Government, it is only four years. Run your leg well as FijiFirst has passed the baton to you after successfully running the last lap. We are team Fiji, and you will pass the baton to the next team Fiji runner.

To the Coalition Government, team Fiji can only win if we play as a team. Team Fiji needs to establish a legacy for our future generations. We are the custodians of their hopes and aspirations. It is our finest hour!

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished dignitaries, ladies and gentleman; a very good afternoon to you all. I rise today with humility and gratitude to deliver my response in this august Parliament to the esteemed Address delivered by His Excellency the President in my capacity as the Assistant Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Firstly, I extend my sincere appreciation to His Excellency the President for his insightful remarks and unwavering commitment to the prosperity and wellbeing of our beloved nation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I echo the sentiments expressed regarding the importance of inclusive governance and the need to listen to the voices of all our citizens. Indeed, it is our solemn duty as elected representatives to uphold the principles of democracy and humanity enshrined in our Constitution, and to work tirelessly to ensure the integrity and dignity of our Parliament.

His Excellency the President's emphasis on promoting harmony and embracing diversity resonates deeply with me. Madam Deputy Speaker, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to foster an environment of mutual respect and understanding, transcending our differences for the collective good of our people. I wholeheartedly pledge to continue advocating for unity and inclusivity in all facets of our governance. I will try to refrain from being adversarial, but I wish to make a comment in reply to honourable Ketan Lal and honourable Aliko Bia's statements. They made wayward statements and generalisations. The Coalition Government has done so much to start fixing the mess with debts of the last 15 years. We cannot do miracle in one year. By attacking the Government, they are exposing their own hypocrisy and the failure of the FijiFirst Government. Fiji has been saved with a change of government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I commend the Government's progressive agenda outlined by His Excellency the President, particularly the ongoing formulation of the new NDP. The NDP serves as a blueprint or a roadmap for our nation's growth and development, guiding our collective efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It is imperative that we prioritise inclusive and sustainable development ensuring that no one is left behind as we strive towards a more prosperous and sustainable future. As we embark on the task of formulating a new 3-year, 5-year and 20-year NDP, I am reminded of the critical importance of this endeavour in shaping the future trajectory of our country. The Government is fully committed to ensuring the successful completion and implementation of the new NDP.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have undertaken a comprehensive review of past policies and initiatives, engaged in extensive consultations with stakeholders and segments of the society across all sectors, and aim to incorporate valuable feedback from our citizens through nationwide public consultations. I am pleased to report that significant progress has been made in the formulation of the new NDP.

At the onset of the formulation of the NDP, a total of 275 consultations have been planned by the Ministry, starting from 14th February till 21st March, 2024 teams from the Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics will be travelling around the country across the four Divisions - Central, Western, Northern and Eastern, to gather views and feedback on the development priorities, policies and strategies for the NDP. As of last week, Madam Deputy Speaker, the teams have completed a total of 250 consultation meetings. We have consulted a total of more than 11,150 people during this period, of which, around 39.1 percent are women and 32.5 percent are youths.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we can see the lengths the Ministry of Finance has gone to consult as many people as possible and receive valuable inputs for the formulation of a robust NDP. The people who our team had consulted were very grateful for the Government to hear their pleas, and these people have gambled their hopes to have their needs addressed.

The new NDP will be a dynamic and forward-looking document, tailored to address the evolving challenges and opportunities facing our nation, a plan that is the People's Plan. It will set out a clear vision and strategic objectives for the next three years, five years and 20 years, with a focus on promoting sustainable development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, based on the consultations we have had so far, key priorities identified through our consultations include the need to modernise our legislative framework, strengthen public sector service delivery and address critical issues such as infrastructure development, health care, education, police, water and drainage, roads, social and climate resilience.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it has been identified that in the next three years, we the Government need to continue to get our basic rights which will greatly resolve many of the issues that our Fiji citizens are currently facing. Basics, Madam Deputy Speaker, such as continue to fix the drainage issues, ensuring consistent supply of clean water, providing good health care facilities, improving law enforcement through resourcing the Police and enhancing access to education.

Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on promoting private sector-led growth, enhancing skills development, fostering youth empowerment to drive economic diversification and innovation. We have also taken proactive measures to ensure gender mainstreaming and inclusivity in our policy formulation process, recognising the importance of empowering women and marginalised groups in our society. Madam Deputy Speaker, the new NDP is envisioned to be completed by June this year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at the heart of the NDP lies its alignment with Fiji's international commitments, notably the UN Sustainable Development Goals. By seamlessly integrating SDGs into our national development agenda, we reaffirm our unwavering resolve to address global imperatives such as poverty, inequality, environmental sustainability while championing sustainable development and inclusive growth.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while the new NDP will align with SDGs, Fiji is linked to the international commitments, necessitating the need to achieve our SDG targets. The Second Report of the 2023 Voluntary National Review (VNR) openly presents Fiji's progress and need to address data gaps in achieving the SDGs.

Fiji views the 2030 Agenda, Madam Deputy Speaker, not merely as a global commitment, but as intrinsic to our own development goals. The SDGs have become the cornerstone of our national development planning, guiding our efforts to build a resilient and sustainable future for all. Fiji's significance stride towards achieving the SDGs is commendable, however, more needs to be done.

Madam Deputy Speaker, 128 indicators have sufficient data, however Fiji risks missing 75 percent of the 97 targets that we could measure. Urgent action is required to accelerate progress and strengthen global partnerships are essential to secure greater financial assistance, capacity building, technology transfer and system enhancement across all 17 SDGs.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with the most disciplined ambitious of fiscal policies, it was challenging for us as a developing country to meet all the SDG targets, in particular, the data and definitional gaps. I am happy to announce that the assistance of multilaterals in this regard especially the UNESCAP is valuable, and they are happy to continue to assist us about the data and the gaps.

This is by no means a criticism of the SDGs themselves, in reflecting holistically with the benefit of the 20/20 vision, we can now embrace the new lens and ambition that we have evolved to adopt, when realising that a more prosperous and sustainable developed large ocean state like ours is within reach.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let us acknowledge the resilience of the Fijian economy amidst unprecedented global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing geopolitical tensions and the escalating impacts of climate change. Despite these adversities, Fiji has grown remarkable resilience and determination to emerge stronger. Our economy is poised for a broad-based growth of around 3.8 percent and 3 percent for 2024 and 2025 respectively.

It is crucial to acknowledge that we are not immune to the economic headwinds facing the global economy. Our economy, Madam Deputy Speaker, like many others has felt the impact of the pandemic, disrupting trade, tourism and investment flows. Additionally, as a climate-vulnerable nation, Fiji faces heightened risks from extreme weather events, rising sea levels and environmental degradation, further complicating our economic outlook.

Madam Deputy Speaker, one of the central pillars of our economic strategy is fiscal sustainability. We recognise the importance of maintaining sound fiscal discipline to ensure the long-term stability and prosperity of our nation. Prudent fiscal management is essential to instil confidence among investors, maintain macroeconomic stability and safeguard the wellbeing of our citizens. However, achieving fiscal sustainability requires a delicate balancing act.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on one hand, we must address the urgent needs of our people, invest in critical infrastructure and provide essential services. On the other hand, we must exercise restraint and discipline to prevent excessive borrowing and accumulation of debt that could jeopardize our fiscal stability in the long run.

The Coalition Government is committed to ensuring that debt levels remain sustainable and manageable. We have implemented measures to improve debt management practices, enhance transparency and strengthen oversight mechanisms to prevent debt distress. Additionally, we are actively exploring opportunities for debt restructuring and other innovative financing mechanisms to ease the burden on our economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while fiscal sustainability remains paramount, we must also prioritise economic growth and climate resilience. These objectives are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. Sustainable economic growth is essential to create jobs, reduce poverty and improve the standard of living for all Fijians. At the same time, we must integrate climate resilience into our development agenda to protect our people, infrastructure and natural resources from the escalating impacts of climate change.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the path ahead of us is fraught with challenges but it is also brimming with opportunities. I am confident together we will all overcome these challenges and build a brighter, more prosperous future for all.

Early this year, Cabinet had approved the Growth Re-set Initiative Package which is a new phase of economic reforms to be undertaken by the Government. The Growth Re-Set Initiative builds on the work that has already begun through national consultations through the National Economic Summit, Fiscal Review Committee and the Budget development processes. It is focussed on a first phase of economic and regulatory reforms which are relatively easy to achieve by combining knowledgeable public and private sector skills and experience.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government must be seen to be taking the decisive step to encourage new economic growth measures and should take advantage of being new and changed, and also modernising our law and policy on essential topics including foreign property ownership, investment restrictions, short term and long- term immigration, energy generation, environment and planning laws is very essential to increase private sector participation in our economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Growth Re-set Initiative is jointly managed and implemented by the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, SMEs and Communications and I update this august Parliament that progress has been made so far in achieving the objectives under the initiative.

At this stage, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank the three sub-committees for meeting regularly and trying to look at ways to improve the current processes and areas for efficiency:

1. Sub-Committee on Immigration and Investment Law and Processes Reform;
2. Sub-Committee to Review Electricity Sector; and
3. Sub-Committee on Lands, Environment and Planning Law and Process Reforms.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as you are aware that the Coalition Government has re-established the Strategic Planning Office which is ensuring better coordination and formulation of a strategic and a robust development agenda. The Office will be further resourced in the next financial year to deliver its core outputs especially strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of capital projects and key government initiatives and ensuring value for money.

The Cabinet has endorsed the use of guidelines and user manual for the preparation, appraisal and approval of projects under the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP). This will assist in future decision making on projects to be done taking into consideration value for money and better returns.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a major change from the current practice of appraising new projects, which the guidelines introduce, is a two-stage process. One is the Early-stage Preparation (Stage One) which involves initial identification, research and discussion for the preparation by budget entities of a relatively simple screening note to be evaluated by the Ministry to determine if a detailed appraisal study (Stage Two) is warranted.

I reiterate the Coalition Government's steadfast commitment to crafting a comprehensive and inclusive National Development Plan that engenders enduring national unity, fosters a shared vision and propels socio-economic advancement across our beloved Fiji. Through the NDP, the Government will aim to address multiple facets of our citizens plea. Together, let us redouble our efforts in building a more prosperous, resilient, and sustainable future for all.

HON. H. CHAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen – a very good afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker, International Women's Day was celebrated on Friday 8th March. Women are pillars of strength in our society. We should always love and respect them. Women embody strength, courage, fearlessness and above all resilience. Happy belated International Women's Day to all women including women Members in Parliament.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to comment on some of the key features of the statement made by His Excellency the President of Fiji at the opening of the new session of Parliament on Monday, 4th March.

His Excellency the President had briefly touched on the focus and future development direction that the Government will embark on or continue to pursue in this Parliamentary session. Unfortunately, Madam Deputy Speaker, the state of affairs under this Government for approximately the last 15 months has been abysmal. The future also looks bleak. The Government has been simply plodding along with no direction. The only direction they seem to have in common is the Nadi Airport Departure Lounge.

(Laughter)

No cohesive set of policies, no cohesion amongst the Ministers.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Each pulling in different directions.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. H. CHAND.- I feel sorry for the honourable Prime Minister because it would appear that his individual Cabinet Ministers are each doing their own thing. Of course, the former Prime Minister Bainimarama did not have that problem.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President mentioned that we need to focus on development and be people centric. As was confirmed to us at the Budgetary briefing by the Ministry of Finance's staff at the Opposition office and as the budget books speak for themselves, not a single cent has been allocated in the budget delivered by the honourable Minister of Finance and supported by the honourable Prime Minister on any new projects.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. H. CHAND.- We are a developing country, we need development, we need new projects and we need new infrastructure. Please do not tell us that there are billions of dollars of private sector funds lined up for immediate investment. Most of these supposed new developments simply have attractive artistic impressions on paper only. We cannot simply rely on private sector investment. We also need public sector investment to provide more modern day infrastructure which the FijiFirst Government had started.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- My colleagues from the largest single party on this side of Parliament will talk about these in more detail.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Who wrote your speech?

HON. H. CHAND.- I wrote it.

Honourable Prasad, please do not use debt as an excuse. In fact, debt under you has increased without any single new project or a pandemic.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. H. CHAND.- You lack understanding and know-how to run a modern day economy.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, please let me give a simple example on how the non-allocation of funds or even an ongoing maintenance is impacting ordinary Fijians.

The general public including students from Viseisei Back Road, Saweni, Vuda Back Road, Dreketi, Vuda Point, Vaivai, Saru, Navula, Wairabetia and other parts of Fiji have raised serious concerns regarding bus services to their areas and pathetic road conditions. Madam Deputy Speaker, two elderly citizens aged 80 and 81 years reside at Viseisei Back Road, and they are both sickly. They have to hire a taxi at least twice a week to go to Lautoka City or to the Health Centre and they pay \$30 per trip. They spend \$60 a week on taxi fare, and this is because there has been no bus service in the area since last year. Sometimes these old men are dropped off 500 metres away from their homes because the Government road is in a pathetic condition.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not blame the taxi drivers but the *lovo* pit potholes and the Government. This was brought to the attention of the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport. Well now in the 1980s mode, renamed public works, unfortunately the public works has not benefitted from the honourable Minister for Public Works because this matter has not been addressed by him since it was brought to his attention last year.

His Excellency the President spoke about commitment to accountability, transparency and good governance practices in all public sector entities including Public Enterprises. I agree with His Excellency the President, but I do not believe the message had been received well by the Coalition Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, since day one, this Government has been assaulting section 123 of the Constitution, which sets out how transparency is created and must be adhered to in the Civil Service. It states in section 123(i), and I quote:

“Recruitment and promotion based on -

- (i) objectivity, impartiality and fair competition; and
- (ii) ability, education, experience and other characteristics of merit.”

This Section of the Constitution, like a number of others, appear to be simply on display by this Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the lack of adherence to the supreme law and, therefore, undermining the rule of law has meant lack of transparency which, in turn, has also meant that service levels to the members of the public have dropped. People are holding positions when they should not be and for this very reason, many have and are leaving the Civil Service and, indeed, many Fijians have even left our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as an example, the honourable Acting Minister for Education's recent announcement to regularise all acting positions, is not just a misguided move, but exposes his and the Permanent Secretary's complete disregard for the supreme law of the land,...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. H. CHAND.- ... the Constitution, in particular Sections 127(8)(b) and, of course, Section 123, and equality provisions under Section 126.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this regularisation has been carried out in an *ad hoc* manner by the Ministry of Education. The violation of the supreme law of the land has meant, as expected, that the Ministry of Education has created more uncertainty in an already unstable environment.

A number of deserving teachers who were acting in the leadership positions and who applied for transfer for good reasons in 2022 and in the beginning of 2023, have missed out during this regularisation because they do not meet one criterion and, that is, they must have acted in the position for the last six months.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this morning, I heard from the honourable Minister for Education that some teachers have been acting for the last 20 years. That is a lie, and I think he had miscalculated it. Despite the Ministry of Education's guidelines having no provision for regularisation, they still went ahead with the irregular regularisation process, with no transparency but all subjective, meaning, it becomes a free for all. Anyone with the right connection will get what they want, and many deserving teachers will lose out. This is what happens when the rule of law is not adhered to. Chaos, corruption and unchecked power will reign.

Madam Deputy Speaker, many deserving teachers are so disturbed and disheartened because posts have been confirmed without providing opportunities to those with the right qualification and experience on merit. As a result, teachers have lost confidence in the system, are frustrated and even more are planning to seek opportunities overseas.

They are being welcomed, in particular, in Australia and New Zealand where these Fijian teachers can work in an environment where rules and the processes are actually transparent; with the values of fairness and equality and where selection, appointment, promotion and even regularisation are not determined by your ethnicity, province, religion or whom you know.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President in his Address, mentioned that education will continue to be a priority. We, on this side of Parliament, fully endorse that education should be topmost priority.

Madam Deputy Speaker, education, and more importantly, access to education is the cornerstone of individual and societal development. It plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of individuals and societies, and it assists those individuals and societies to thrive in an ever-evolving world.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if education is a priority, why did the Ministry of Education not give priority to teacher transfer and appointment of teachers before the beginning of the 2024 school year? It is the teacher that makes the difference, not the physical classroom.

Madam Deputy Speaker, students were in classrooms without teachers for weeks and in some cases even months.

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

HON. H. CHAND.- The Ministry of Education created that chaotic situation for not only the teachers but also for the students, for the parents and guardians, and for the schools.

Madam Deputy Speaker, because of the Ministry's gross negligence, students lost many days and weeks of learning. Has the change in Ministers had an impact on the output of the Ministry? What are the highly paid advisors, mainly political mates who have no idea on how to run a modern education system and who were actually appointed without transparency doing?

Madam Deputy Speaker, what are the plans to recover the lost teaching hours?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- No plan!

HON. H. CHAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, we also sit in amazement to hear not a peep out of the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, supposedly the great father of teacher union representation. His silence is deafening.

Madam Deputy Speaker, by the way, honourable Minister for Education, the Fiji Teachers Union have clarified that there has been no agreement on the irregular regularisation process contrary to your claim that there was collaboration and partnerships with teachers' unions.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. H. CHAND.- Who is telling the truth?

Maybe, honourable Minister, you spoke with only one teacher union and thought that that was enough. The word 'consultations' has a hollow meaning under this Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, talking about transparency and accountability in Government and public enterprises. We still do not know how a private owned company - Poly Tech, is suddenly getting government grants. Suddenly, vocational courses that were offered by FNU, which is another debacle, is being offered and preferred by Government to be Poly Tech, the institutional choice.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Poly Tech is not Monfort Boys Town or Corpus Christi or Sangam or USP or University of Fiji or even FNU because these organisations that I have just mentioned are not private companies. I do not know if there is a joining of the dots here.

What was also interesting, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that for the catering at the unnecessary fanfare last year, the advertisement for expressions of interest went out on Friday, 5th May, 2023 and closed on Sunday, 7th May, 2023, just two days. Again, this, I believe, is most certainly not the transparency that His Excellency was talking about.

Madam Deputy Speaker, how fair and transparent and merit based were the recent appointments of town and city council Special Administrators? Special Administrators who have

been appointed are mostly failed candidates and supporters of National Federation Party (NFP), People's Alliance Party (PAP) and SODELPA.

Similarly, Madam Deputy Speaker, Advisory Councillors have also been appointed in this manner. Many who were very efficient and very effective, had experience and were service oriented to all, were removed to make room for the political lackeys of mainly NFP. Where is effective governance?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Very poor! Nepotism.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame on you!

HON. H. CHAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, municipal councils, state-owned enterprises, public enterprises, advisory councillor bodies and statutory bodies are not there to give jobs to politicians and supporters of those politicians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, these entities have a particular purpose, and they are there to provide a service to public or generate sustained profits. If these organisations are operated effectively, efficiently, with professionalism by those selected on merit and have no bias in dealings and process, then it will give confidence to ordinary Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it will give confidence to business houses and investors, both local and foreign. However, the opposite is happening because the end game by this Government is to treat all State apparatus as means of looking after themselves and their political supporters.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. H. CHAND.- That is the end game for them. Whether organisations do well, or they do not do well is secondary to them.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and the people of Fiji who may be listening to this broadcast through *Walesi* or livestreaming on radio today, may I begin by acknowledging *Na Turaga na Tui Suva*, the ancestral owner of the land on which the people's Parliament stands and the generations past, present and future. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na veimaroroi*. I also stand in unison with the honourable Prime Minister in congratulating the Drua Team, the Coach and Management, for its victory on last Saturday. All I can say is that the next 15s World Cup cannot come sweet enough.

It is with a deep sense of honour, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I rise today in support of the motion of the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Kiniviliame Maivalili Katonivere, *Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata, Taukei Bolatagane*, for his most gracious Speech. After one year, two months and 17 days or 444 days since committing to serve our beloved country with all its challenges and learnings, Madam Deputy Speaker, I remain very committed to serving my country to the best of my ability.

In doing so, I shall first endeavor, Madam Deputy Speaker, to provide some insights into parts of His Excellency's most Gracious Speech before providing a stock-take of what the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications has done and plans to do in 2024-2025.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will recall when I made my Maiden Speech last year, I prayed for the wisdom of King Solomon. His Excellency's Speech exudes the same wisdom. His Excellency asked us:

1. To listen to the voices of all the people of Fiji;
2. Respect the dignity and integrity of Parliament;
3. Guard against unscrupulous politicians sowing divisions and mistrust amongst us for their own political ends; and
4. Work across the aisles to find common ground on critical issues facing our nation and to put our people first.

From the People's Coalition's perspective, Madam Deputy Speaker, we could not agree more. The People's Coalition Government, from the get-go, committed to several key actions with an assurance to the people of Fiji that we would involve them and, of course, listen to their views. There has been the fiscal Review Committee, the Economic Summit and the Education Summit. This approach of listening to the people works well and will continue into the future. We cannot say the same for the other side.

We ratified on a bipartisan basis the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) Pillar 2 Supply Chain. The honourable Prime Minister invited the honourable Leader of the Opposition to COP28 and honourable Koya attended a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka in November last year.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- So!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I am also happy to note that the National Taskforce on Pornography was approved in Cabinet and will be approached on a bipartisan basis.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I am coming to that also, honourable Premila Kumar.

The signs are positive, and I am sure that we will do more of the same together, heeding the call of His Excellency.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on His Excellency's plea for us to guard against unscrupulous politicians who wish to sow divisions in our beloved nation, the honourable Prime Minister has graciously commented that we may be well forgiven for thinking that it may be him but we know it is not him.

I say this, Madam Deputy Speaker, with the best of intentions. If there is anyone of us in this Parliament that is sowing seeds of division, my humble message to you is this, you have no place in this august Parliament, nor in the new Fiji.

When we look at His Excellency's most gracious Speech in totality, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is really talking about rebuilding Fiji from infrastructure, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, speeding up the green transition, updating legislation, et cetera. The question is, why? It is very easy. It is because of the mismanagement of the last 16 years on the other side of Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We have an unsustainable debt issue. We have a massive drug problem in our country. We have a broken-down health system in our country...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-... an education system which requires work, et cetera. But I will honour the exhortation of His Excellency, Madam Deputy Speaker, and say this. We have a major task ahead of us and we can only solve it if we work together starting from this august Parliament.

In the pursuit of progress and prosperity, let us be guided by the principles of justice, equality and compassion. Let us continue to rebuild Fiji together where every individual has the opportunity to prosper and progress.

Allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, to share in this august Parliament some of the work achieved and plans by the Ministry I am honoured to lead and plan to do, as we navigate the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead.

In terms of global outlook, His Excellency correctly points out the return of the nation's economic activity to pre-pandemic levels with an anticipated growth of 3.8 percent in 2024 and 3 percent in 2025 which is positive. This is against the continued global risks, like the Ukraine War and the escalating tensions in Gaza, which will remain challenges. At present, debt to GDP stands at 75.6 percent and as we all agree, is still unsustainable.

To this end, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry which I am honoured to lead will do its utmost to try and achieve a higher GDP growth of, at least, 5 percent, hopefully, working together with all the agencies of Government, the private sector and civil society - another concept that the other side does not understand.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Our Ministry believes that this can be achieved by pushing for an investor friendly environment, drive opportunities for investment and trade growth and push for total digitisation of the Fijian economy.

Some of the areas where our focus will be to:

- continue to strive for an investment friendly environment, especially ease of doing business, collaborating with the private sector;
- continue to drive closer and stronger, broader trade and investment ties with all our partners;
- continue to drive for genuine economic diversification;
- continued focus on regional hubbing agenda; and
- continued focus on ICT or communications in Fiji.

I wish to touch on the investor friendly environment and the ease of doing business. Some of us may recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that when we got into office, a major investor in Fiji had its FJ\$30million project at Nadi Airport on hold for some inexplicable reason. This investor has spent at least \$800 million, Madam Deputy Speaker, in Fiji over the years and sends as least \$30 million in foreign exchange every year.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, to have a key investor treated in such a cavalier manner was not acceptable and was a major concern for investors around Fiji at that time. Together with the honourable Gavoka and the honourable Prime Minister, we immediately

allowed the investment to proceed which sent a very clear message to both local and foreign investors that the People's Government was keen to drive investment.

Since then, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have not stopped with the change in Investment Fiji's mandate from being a regulated to facilitator of domestic and foreign investment, we are making good progress in terms of driving investment in Fiji. The current investment pipeline stands at \$3 billion and growing. There is a mood to invest in the country from renewable energy, commercial agriculture, tourism and expansion of existing operations such as Fiji Water recently.

We have created an Investment Facilitation Committee which is an inter-agency committee which looks at investment bottlenecks and tries to fix them. If they do not move, the Minister gets involved. We have a taskforce to aid with the setup of commercial agriculture and we hope to make some positive announcements soon.

The automation of business processes relating to starting a business and the building permit approval is underway. This pilot phase aims to automate 25 processes over 16 agencies. Whilst automation of these processes are underway as alluded to by the honourable Assistant Minister, there is another exercise to look at business processes in other key agencies such as immigration, environment and land called the "growth reset" before automation. We have assistance from the private sector on this initiative, again something that the other side never did. Together with these continuous reforms, the Ministry is also getting ready for the World Bank successor to the Doing Business Report, "Be Ready" as it is called which is on the horizon with data collection expected to start at the beginning of this year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, for investment growth, we are also looking at Policy Frameworks such as one which will guide significant investment and also a policy framework for diaspora investment. This is being considered to promote and attract strategic investments into Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government does hear the frustration of the business community and I can guarantee you, we are taking action. In terms of the broader trade investment relations, to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, we do have a pretty good trade policy which we inherited from yourselves, it would be tweaked but it is quite good.

Fiji's strategic decision to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), a 14-member economic club representing 40 percent of the global GDP underlines our readiness to play a proactive role in shaping regional, trade and economic architecture. As the only Pacific country to join this initiative, Fiji has actively engaged in negotiations across all four Pillars on cooperation, trade, supply chain resilience, clean economy and fair economy. We intend, Madam Deputy Speaker, to bring two further Pillars of the Agreement through this august Parliament on a bipartisan basis namely, Pillar 3 on Clean Economy and Pillar 4 on Fair Economy.

The entry of *Google* can be seen as part of the IPEF early harvest, Madam Deputy Speaker, and there are plans Trades Pacific Investment Missions to Singapore and United States of America on the back of this economic club. We also plan to relook at Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER Plus) but I have to emphasise with full consultation with the private sector. The Interim Economic Partnership Agreement ratification subject to Cabinet approval will be brought forward this year which will provide better access for Fiji exports into the European Union.

Our trade missions have been active, Madam Deputy Speaker. In 2023, our Trade Commission based in Australia facilitated over \$70 million in exports to these markets and an increase of 15 percent over the previous year adding at least 8.5 percent to the value of Fiji's overall

exports to Australia and New Zealand. This year, the Trade Commission aims to facilitate further exports by at least 20 percent.

The Trade Commission also contributed to key events such as Spartan Fiji; an adventure tourism race (the first major post-pandemic event) which will continue in 2025. Last year, we also completed a Trade and Investment Mission to New Zealand and hosted a business forum in Australia. This, we will see reverse missions into Fiji this year which will stimulate more opportunities for investment and trade.

The Trade Mission of North America has had a remarkable year starting with the inauguration the new office in San Francisco Bay, North America. It also played a crucial role in the transformative *Google* Submarine Cable project, as well as the diverse landing station and data centre investments that will occur over the coming year. Some of our major commercial agriculture ventures are arising from USA. We are planning a Fiji-North America Business Mission this year aiming to potentially visit four states in America and Canada fostering investment and trade opportunities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there are 100,000 diaspora in Canada. The Trade Commission in North America has also been instrumental in supporting Fiji's exports and conducting market research for key exports to North America. Notably, it facilitated the purchase of over 50 metric tonnes of mature ginger by the ginger people, a much-needed market for farmers who had been over promised and their crop was not bought last year.

For China, we have secured some potential investors at least round about US\$45 million covering noni commercial farming and forestry apart from other areas of investment.

In terms of economic diversification, Madam Deputy Speaker, the development of the Medicinal Cannabis Industry as well as a broader nutraceutical economy including the potential billion-dollar kava industry is a key focus of the current Government. With advent of *Google* and second subsea cable, this should drive an expanded ICT industry. There is a massive opportunity to create very good paying jobs through the ICT industry.

In terms of the BPO industry, which is a key sector, it has undergone very good growth in 2023. We believe it can rival tourism and have been supporting this industry to-date.

Moves to reinvigorate the mahogany industry is supported by the Ministry. This as well, is a multi-billion dollar industry.

Finally, I am also looking at SMEs as a major sector in terms of economic diversification. It is already 18 percent of GDP. The Ministry is very committed to develop and harness SME growth. We just had our first MSME Conference last week that was organised by Business Assistance Fiji and it gave us policy makers another opportunity to hear directly from the MSMEs and take stock of what needs to be done. Our bid to improve access to capital for businesses, the Ministry is working with the Reserve Bank of Fiji and the Asian Development Bank on an Access to Capital Bill which will be presented later this year. This will narrow the financing gap and unlock more investments into the private sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in parallel with this, working with UNESCAP, we are developing an MSME Strategic Plan that will pave a roadmap to grow the MSMEs. We cannot talk about MSMEs without talking about the co-operative business through the *solesolevaki* concept, it is a very positive way of developing business particularly amongst the *iTaukei* community. Last year, we conducted over 200 awareness meetings, registered 77 new co-operatives and provided training to

over 800 Fijians with a notable 85 percent increase in co-operative registration compared to the same period last year. Critically as the economy diversifies, there is a need for strong standards and will continue to be a priority. Standards in the various sectors of climate change mitigation, construction, food safety and energy management not only will enhance trade opportunities but also ensure that safety, quality and reliability of goods and services.

The Department of National Trade, Measurement and Standards will play a key role. In terms of regional hubbing, Fiji's status as a regional hub continues to grow. It has developed hubbing capacity in shipping and aviation, medical support and education. From an ICT perspective, again the *Google* Cable initiatives will bring about a major shift in terms of a regional hub for Fiji from an ICT perspective.

Finally, in terms of harnessing ICT in Fiji, Madam Deputy Speaker, we believe that digitisation remains an essential driver to social economic development in our country. The Government's focus is unwavering to provide an enabling, conducive and secure ICT environment for private sector-led growth and to empower our people through financial inclusion and essential digital services. Alongside *Google*, the licensing of Starlink will provide options for our people. We are also actively collaborating with the Telecommunications Authority of Fiji to penetrate the final 5 percent to 10 percent of our isolated communities.

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, in terms of its Global Risk Reports of 2024, it is stated that cyber security is a significant risk. The People's Government is committed to putting in the necessary policy, legislative and regulatory framework to ensure a safe and secure cyberspace exist for our people. Likewise, the development of the Anti-Scam Taskforce has come forward as a result of recent scamming and cybercriminal activities.

In closing, Madam Deputy Speaker, I urge us all to rebuild Fiji together. We owe it to our children and to their children. May God bless Fiji, may God bless His Excellency the President, may God bless the honourable Prime Minister and fellow Members of Parliament and may God bless the people of Fiji.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise this afternoon to contribute in response to His Excellency the President's speech for the Opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament. Greetings and a very good afternoon to each and everyone present here today, at home and to those listening via other mediums. Before I start my speech proper, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to remind honourable Kamikamica that we have been selected by the people of this nation and we are the single largest party representing this country.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the security of a nation is the most solemn responsibility of any Government and the first priority of every Prime Minister and the same sentiment has been shared by His Excellency the President on Monday, 4th March, 2023. Madam Deputy Speaker, crime rate has risen remarkably high within the 14 months of the Coalition being in power and the behaviour of our Police security is questionable.

Why I said that the Police security is questionable is because under the leadership of the Acting Police Commissioner and with tight security, methamphetamine was stolen. If this can happen in Police stations, then what can one expect from the honourable Minister for Home Affairs? Our citizens have little or no faith in the security system of our country and I am requesting the Government to take some precautionary measures so that their livelihood is protected at all times.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President said, and I quote:

“At the same time, encourage a culture of saving which will allow the development of a sustainable investment plan for their families long term security so we can all prosper together.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, how can it be possible for the iTaukei Land Trust Board to advertise public consultation on State freehold land to be converted into *iTaukei* land? Is the honourable Minister for Lands aware of it? What will be the consequences? Madam Deputy Speaker, the Crown grant is transferred subject to provision of the Crown Grant Act upon thorough investigation of the need of a particular State land to members of the *mataqali*. It is done when there is scarcity of land to the members of the *mataqali* and not for the sake of some politicians own political gain which seems to be the main reason behind public consultations. The advertised consultation in the newspaper show the calibre of people who are involved in this exercise. Does the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs know what is happening under his nose?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I am coming to it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what will happen to the existing sugarcane farmers who have settled on this land, and I know of a few in the Western Division and Vanua Levu. I can assure the honourable Prime Minister that the conversion will have a long-term negative impact to our economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have cane cultivation in Volivoli, Rakiraki where it is almost around 5,158 acres of State land where majority of Fijians are cultivating sugarcane on this land. In Drasa, Vitogo has 2,296 acres of flat land under sugarcane and producing a good tonnage of cane. We have other cane cultivation areas such as Vatumani with 744 acres, Tovatova has 213 acres and another 6,935 acres, Koro No. 2 has 1,247 acres, Varoko has 103 acres, Vadravadra has 844 acres and for the honourable Minister for Sugar in Rara, Wailevu in Vanua Levu is 1,291 acres and Mosara has 413 acres beside other land listed for consultation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what will happen to the honourable Minister for Sugar who is harping about increase of cane production? How will he now face the farmers who are leasing on State land? The lessees will be insecure and will reduce planting of cane and production will decline which will affect our sugar industry. Similarly, the same happened with the non-renewal of native lease in the past. Madam Deputy Speaker, farmers are living peacefully in their leased land from the State but if this transfer of Crown grant takes places after consultations, it will take away the current lessees' livelihood who have been staying since the CSR Colonial days, built houses and have carried out massive developments to the land. Most of them are aging farmers and will not be able to develop the new allocated lots given to them.

Furthermore, Madam Deputy Speaker, what about compensation to improvements such as buildings, fence, roads, et cetera? Who will compensate the farmers in the scenario if the *mataqali* members want to cultivate the entire portion of land? We will be discouraging investment, and the conversion will take our country back in terms of growth. The financial institutes will be reluctant to even mortgage these leasehold land due to uncertainty of its terms and conditions. Honourable Prasad and honourable Kamikamica know that presently there is no big investment taking place in our country except the casino, if approved and if I am not wrong, honourable Kamikamica, due to uncertainty with the Coalition partners.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.-Madam Deputy Speaker, the best way to sought the shortage of land to *mataqali* unit is to have a consultation with the honourable Minister for Lands as they have land available which are in breach of lease conditions and the *mataqali* can lease from the Lands Department.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I strongly request the honourable Prime Minister to look into this and please consider my request to stop the consultation of State freehold land for the sake of the poor farmers who have been suffering all their lives and struggling for a better livelihood.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL. - I know better.

The honourable Prime Minister is not here, being a farmer's son and coming from a remote rural area of Marasa, Nadi, my parents toiled hard to feed my two siblings and I gave us a good education and how I struggled to succeed in life.

As for Schedule A and B, they can proceed with due process, there is no problem with that.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as His Excellency alluded to good governance, where is good governance when the delivery level to the public sector is pathetic? For example, Ministry of Lands has yet to provide the sales data for properties sold in Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if the honourable Speaker was here this afternoon, he will understand the difficulties registered valuers faced at the moment as they are unaware of the real estate market and where our country stands in the real property market. It seems that the Permanent Secretary, Director and the Chief Valuer have no clue of when the Ministry of Lands will give this vital information to the valuers. I cannot understand, without the available data, how is the Valuation Section on the Ministry of Lands assessing rentals and carrying out valuation? It has been more than a year since they have been finalizing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Fiji Revenue & Customs Service (FRCS) and Registrar of Titles.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I raised this question in the previous sitting and if you remember, the honourable Minister of Lands said that from January this year everything will be sorted out but nothing has been sorted out so far. Is this what we call efficient service delivery?

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency spoke about informal settlements. Can the honourable Minister of Lands highlight this as what I could gather nothing has been done so far despite being in Government for more than fourteen months.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on service delivery the Office of the Attorney-General must be proactive. Getting a certified title and lease copy takes a few days and people coming from the rural areas cannot be coming to Registrar of Titles Office twice or three times a week as some are poor and cannot afford the bus fares. The lack of service to our fellow citizens are alarming and delays their small projects mainly those who want to take loans to invest or improve their standard of living.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Minister of Finance has always complained of the debt level of previous governments. However, this Coalition Government

has significantly increased the debt level despite increasing Value Added Tax (VAT) and putting further burden on our fellow Fijians with no progressive developments to our nation. The honourable Prasad said that they are increasing VAT to 15 percent so that they can reduce the debt level but in actual fact the debt level has increased, and prediction is that by 2026 the debt level will increase significantly to US\$5.2 billion which is about FJ\$11.76 billion.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, this Coalition Government has further burdened our poor fellow citizens with high cost of living, increased cost of basic food items while the Ministers are enjoying overseas trips with hefty allowances.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, some Fijians only enjoy a single or two meals a day while the wealthy Ministers enjoy lavish meals at a cost to poor fellow Fiji citizens. Honourable Prasad, where is your so-called strategy to reduce national debt and bring the cost of living down which you have been harping about since you have been in Parliament?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- 25 percent.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Is this one of your many false promises to reduce the price of lamb chops so that you can ride in a black ministerial vehicle?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Lamb chops price?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- (Inaudible interjection)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Why, you want to give me some from your supermarket?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Stop pointing!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President said that Government is committed to greater accountability, transparency and good governance. I have been requested by the people to ask if the honourable Minister for Fisheries accepts or denies that he is one of the shareholders in the *bech-de-mer* exporting company on any of the fishing companies in Fiji? I hope to get a reply from the honourable Minister in his response which is tomorrow where the whole nation can know the truth.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Point of Order! Standing Order 62(1)- Prohibited references: "When speaking, a member must not impute improper motives to any other member."

The honourable Member is imputing improper motives in terms of what he was referring to another honourable Member, not only him, but other earlier speakers in terms of the process in hand.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, Sir. I hope you heard that, honourable Kirpal?

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Madam Deputy Speaker, what honourable Tuisawau is about accountability and transparency which I am asking. There is wrong in asking about transparency and accountability of the honourable Minister, and this has been allowed in Parliament by the honourable

Speaker, the question asked by honourable Rinesh Sharma. I would like to inform honourable Minister for Infrastructure that our fellow citizens living in Tacirua have not been receiving reticulated water since 2nd March. I request the honourable Minister to look into this as His Excellency the President mentioned this in his Address and I quote: "The Government is committed to ensure that all citizens have access to clean drinking water."

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Yes.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Just fix your thing first and then bring up some Points of Order.

It is disheartening to note that a large section of our population is being deprived of basic necessity, and cartage of water to this area is not regular. Also, if the honourable Minister can look into the roads at Nabitu, Sigatoka, Marasa, Nadi and the bridge at Buabua, Lautoka which are in pathetic conditions. Madam Deputy Speaker, we must be united with the vision that portrays a strong, secure, peaceful and prosperous Fiji, where people are educated, healthy and manage their resources in an economically, environmentally and socially sustainable way.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Our aim is to decrease poverty, promote equal opportunity and prosperity and enhance peace and stability to help Fiji achieve its long term development vision. It can only happen if the Government gives opportunities to our younger generation who are the future leaders of this nation and stop getting people who have left the nation and are returning for their own benefit and agenda. I hope the honourable Prime Minister will give some serious consideration to this.

Before I end, I would like to remind honourable Gavoka that it is not a free education, because conditions are attached to it, bond (Coalition bond). He has a habit of going around the bush blaming Fiji Airways when in Opposition, but now he is praising it. Where has Qantas gone? Madam Deputy Speaker, fellow Fijians are questioning about the charter flight ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- ...to Israel and if the arrears have been fully settled or still pending? It is taxpayer's money, honourable Gavoka. Now you are quiet!

(Laughter)

With those words, I urge the Government to get to your work as time is flying and people are watching. Serve the nation and do not be obsessed with FijiFirst, as you will not be able to match what the FijiFirst Government did for the poor Fijians.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- May God bless this nation, all of us and the Coalition partners.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members and all joining in the gallery and online; *aap sabko saadar pranaam, salaam alay kum and ni sa bula vinaka saka* to all. We began our Parliament this year in a very holy month. Our Christian brothers and sisters are praying and fasting in preparation for Easter later this month. I wish

Ramadhan Mubarak to our brother and sisters from Islamic faith, as they too embark on a month of fasting and prayers. Hindus too are marking *fagunmas*, as they prepare for *Holi* also later this month.

This week, there is a World Spiritual Leaders Forum organised in Hyderabad, India, where leaders from different faith traditions are coming together to see how each faith can contribute to peace in a world full of strife. Terrorists come together and unite in their quest for destruction, so why cannot faith leaders join hands to build peace? For that, we have to make an effort to learn about each other's traditions and customs without fear of losing our own identity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as His Excellency reminded us in his gracious Speech, we are blessed with diversity of cultures and faiths. Yet, while many of us enjoy the different festivals and have a basic understanding of each other's beliefs, narratives promoting fear and insecurity have never allowed us to fully embrace each other. Much more needs to be done to allay those fears.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency lamented that some unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust among our communities for their own political ends. So, when the honourable Prime Minister called himself a *vulagi* when he was a visitor at an event, this was drummed up because this was what he had called non-indigenous community. Even chiefs when they enter a territory beyond their own within Fiji are called *vulagi*.

This simplistic interpretation is what might be called, in other countries, a 'dog whistle'. Some politicians will capitalise on the use of the word to prey on the insecurities of non-indigenous people, to suggest that they are being left out or treated as different. Many of us with a heightened sense of insecurity are ready to believe the worst, so when we hear this narrative, our fears are made worse.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to also raise the issue on what the previous Member, honourable Kirpal said. He shared one example of where Native land lease is being converted, and then he used that example to create insecurity among all State land, what if it is converted back and what impact it will have on everyone else? Things like that causes fear, that is gaslighting what is being shared.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. KIRAN.- So, when you see one example like that, instead of finding out why it has been converted, is it being used, is it more necessary for that particular *mataqali*, we have used that to create fear amongst all the people of Fiji. That is exactly what His Excellency the President is talking about.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. S. KIRAN.- Madam Deputy Speaker, even when we have lived together for generations, we do not understand enough the extent of our fears and insecurities relating to other communities. Those of us who are not indigenous surely understand that for the *iTaukei*, their identity is the *vanua*, land, its customs, traditions and its people, and all of these adhere to them.

Migrant communities feel insecure that the land they live on to which they form a different but also real attachment, could be taken away from them. What is the work we need to do as leaders to ease the tension and fears that these issues raise? Is it to create more tensions, like we have witnessed?

There are surely ways that we can see these issues not as a contest or a competition, but as a way in which we share and co-operate, work together, contributing different things, and live in harmony with one another, acknowledging each other's insecurities and working to make sure that we understand and not create that as a fear.

We need to acknowledge our past, look at our narratives of the past and how pain, trauma and insecurities have been transferred from generation to generation. Indenture, *coups* and evictions from land have traumatised my community and our sense of belonging. It does not help when these things keep being drummed up.

Melanesians, Rabi and Kioan, Chinese, Part-Europeans, all have had a history that is not talked about. We do not learn about it in schools. Instead, we rely on stereotypes passed down between generations. Political upheavals in the last three decades have impacted every ethnic group and there are scars we carry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, one of the key focus areas for our Government will be to work on healing through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and building social cohesion so Fiji and its people can reach their full potential beyond these insecurities and fears. The honourable Leader of the Opposition had shared today that we need to integrate multi-culturalism in all spheres of our life. That is our intention, Madam Deputy Speaker. School curriculum will be reviewed to integrate our history much of which was removed by the last Government. The Coalition Government has reintroduced Ratu Sukuna Day and added Giritmit Day to celebrate our leaders and remember our history. Truth and Reconciliation Commission will provide a platform for collective healing.

The honourable Prime Minister, under his leadership, the entire Coalition Government is committed to this process. This may be a difficult walk, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is hard to look within ourselves and do the hard work. It is easier for us to ignore these things and pretend that everything is fine, but we cannot go into the future as a nation, secure and united, until we have confronted the demons of the past. There are painful conversations to be had in our *vanua* settings with non-indigenous communities, political prisoners and their communities, as we prepare for the Commission.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to pay tribute and acknowledge the efforts of Major-General Jone Kalouniwai, the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), for his own initiative of healing and reconciliation within the RFMF that he began this month. We know that the RFMF has played a role in many disruptive political events in the past. And as the Commander stated recently for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to succeed in Fiji, it was important for RFMF to work on healing and reconciliation from within.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful that we live in times with leaders such as the Commander and our honourable Prime Minister who are committed to steering the nation forward from its painful past. I want to invite all segments of our community to engage in the Truth and Reconciliation process, including the business community, civil society, the Public Service and the religious groups, to create an environment of learning about each other's cultures and faith traditions.

Enabling a Muslim worker to quietly conduct his or her midday prayers at work during Ramadan, or reflecting together in a neutral and non-religious way on the message Easter brings, would be ways in which we could bring people together, show respect and support inclusion. Only when we have learnt each other's values in each of our cultural and faith traditions, do we embrace each other's authenticity and only then do we enable each other to grow to their full potential.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is a challenge issue to one and all, to take the time to try and

learn from others around you, whose faith and ethnic and cultural identities are different from your own. As one who has spent more than 20 years on this journey, let me assure you that the greatest learning from these engagements is that about oneself. We can learn to see ourselves in a different light, to understand how, within our own faith and traditions, we can do better and serve others better. I look forward to the journey of healing for this nation, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I would like to thank His Excellency for highlighting the wide-ranging work of the Government to strengthen our core social protection programmes. Fiji has developed a national Adaptive Social Protection Strategy and Implementation Plan in 2023 funded by the World Bank. This strategy aims to strengthen the role and performance of the social protection sector in helping households, communities, civil society, local government and Fiji overall in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters and in mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Fiji has recognised the value of adaptive social protection which is defined as building the resilience of households by investing in their capacity to prepare for, cope with, and adapt to shocks, protecting their wellbeing and ensuring that they do not fall into poverty or become trapped in poverty as a result of disaster impacts.

The development of Fiji's first Anticipation Action (AA) Framework in 2023 will enable financing to be triggered by the forecast of an approaching hazard, instead of only reacting to its impact following the event.

The AA Framework was developed in partnership with National Disaster Management Office and it is funded with the support of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and World Food Programme. Our Ministry has the responsibility for cash transfer to selected beneficiaries of social protection programme and prepositioning of necessary supplies. This improves the ability to deliver prompt pay-outs so that those affected by climate shocks can action time-sensitive preparedness and response measures.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to guide the staged implementation of the Strategy, the Government has developed its 5 Year Implementation Plan, which identifies two main approaches for enhancing the delivery of the Adaptive Social Protection Strategy, to:

1. expand social protection benefits and reach in disaster hit communities; and
2. implement community-based Adaptive Social Protection actions in 14 priority districts which are at heightened disaster risks and facing the impacts of climate change.

An essential prerequisite for delivering Adaptive Social Protection is investing in a robust and high-coverage social protection system that can deliver benefits in a reliable and timely manner and can be scaled up in times of crisis.

In addition of the Adaptive Social Protection Strategy, the Government is committed to strengthening the design and delivery of its portfolio of recurrent social protection programmes through an ambitious and wide-ranging package of reforms with the support of the Australian Government. These reforms are focused on strengthening programme inclusion, efficiency and effectiveness, in alignment with the objectives of the 2021 Social Assistance Policy, across the six major social assistance benefits administered by the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our Ministry is considering several programmes and policy reforms to ensure that beneficiaries are receiving sufficient support and to enhance the coverage and accessibility of the core social protection programmes. We are currently undertaking a range of

operational reforms to ensure that the system is delivering support to people in a transparent and cost-effective way. This includes:

1. ensuring that the public have access to information and understand the social protection entitlements;
2. setting up mechanisms for effectively responding to complaints; and
3. strengthening tools to measure how well Fiji's social protection system is working.

The Ministry is digitising social protection and developing a new automated integrated beneficiary management system to make it easier and more cost effective for Government to deliver, and for beneficiaries to access social protection.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as His Excellency has laid out this year, we have a lot to do. To my honourable colleagues in the Opposition, I want you to know that we value your work among your supporters and Party members. I value the work you do to scrutinise and criticise the Government's work. I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his commitment to work with the Government on what matters to our people and the nation. I hope you will also see the value of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on which we are embarking and give to this process your full support.

We cannot be effective in this work without your help. Nothing is more important than for all of us to be able to show our people that our differences in debates in this Parliament are not about enmity or hate. They are about working together to make our country better and stronger.

I know that deep in our hearts this is what we all want, and I look forward to hearing from everyone on how we can make our process better, more inclusive and something which will lead to lasting change and that includes, being factual in the way we debate and trying out best not to do gaslighting.

We look forward to a very productive year, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to say thank you to you and to Parliament, and may God bless Fiji.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka* and good afternoon to you all.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to respond to His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere's Address for Opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament last Monday and to thank His Excellency for his most gracious Speech.

At the outset, His Excellency the President made some profound announcement with regards to Government policies and plans for the development and advancement of our nation Fiji, which we all need to take heed of and work towards as honourable Members of this august Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, among the highest priorities of the Coalition Government is the formulation of a new National Development Plan for the nation, as announced by His Excellency the President. The new National Development Plan will capture our collective vision and aspirations for the future and set key initiatives and strategies that will allow the nation to grow sustainably in the many years ahead of us.

As alluded to by His Excellency the President, the key fundamental of the Government's

development agenda is inclusive development to improve the wellbeing of all our citizens. The National Development Plan is anticipated to be finalised by June this year before the Budget announcement.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President highlighted the commitment of the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to address the significant challenges posed by the increasing burden of Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases in our population. Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) continue to be the main disease burden for our people, contributing to 80 percent of all deaths in the country and 40 percent of premature death. I am grateful to the honourable Prime Minister and Minister responsible for the Civil Service for launching earlier this year the Policy and Guideline on Healthy Catering at Government agencies and institutions which should guide how the Civil Service can promote and implement healthy eating and meal preparation.

The healthy eating habits to reduce NCDs in Fiji do not start inside our hospitals and nursing stations. They start and are nurtured in our homes, schools, villages, workplaces, offices and also in the deliberations of this august Parliament.

The NCD crisis we have will require all our collective efforts and determination to control and stop. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services is finalising its Wellness and NCS Strategy with the help of our partners, which will guide our effort in addressing NCDs in Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, at this juncture, the Ministry is highlighting an uphill battle with the increasing number of HIV and AIDS cases in Fiji. While this is still the tip of the iceberg, it is commendable for the Government of the day to recognise two significant issues that were pushed under the carpet. It::

1. recognises drugs as an issue; and
2. recognised HIV.

Our latest statistics on HIV cases are alarming and demands our attention and collective action. From January to December 2023, we have recorded 415 new HIV cases in Fiji, compared to 245 cases for the same period in 2022.

Out of these cases, 404 are adults, while 11 cases are children. Three of the children got HIV through sexual transmission, while eight children got HIV/AIDS through Mother-To-Child Transmission (MTCT).

Of the total number of patients diagnosed, 298 are reported to be male, 122 female and four transgenders. In addition, 31 of these cases were teenagers aged between 15 years to 19 years.

The increase is attributed through increase in active case finding within the Ministry of Health and Medical Services using Point of Care Testing. Unfortunately, in 2023 alone, Fiji lost 82 lives to HIV which is one to many.

According to the Global AIDS Monitoring Report, Fiji is now one of the top two countries in the Asia-Pacific region with rapidly rising new HIV infections.

The Ministry is aware of the linkage between the use of illicit drugs in the country and the rise in HIV cases. Activities such as Blue Toothing for IV drugs users and Chem-Sex amongst the younger population are fueling the rise in new HIV cases.

The Ministry is finalising the HIV Surge Strategy which will facilitate our collaboration with

health partners, across Government Ministries, and our communities to strengthen prevention, increase national HIV testing by 3 percent for key population groups, improve access to diagnosis and treatment, reduce stigma and discrimination relating HIV and AIDS, and strengthen the governance of our HIV response programme.

I take this opportunity to remind everyone in Fiji that unsafe sexual practices and the use of injectable drugs are contributing to the rise of HIV in Fiji. Avoiding these risky behaviours can prevent you from getting the HIV infection. I also want to remind everyone in Fiji, that HIV is not a death sentence. With treatment, people living with HIV can lead a normal and productive life and have children who are free of HIV infections.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to address the disease burden in Fiji. His Excellency the President had highlighted a number of important steps that the Ministry will undertake. The Ministry of Health and Medical services is focussed on reviewing and updating a number of critical health legislations such as the Public Health Act 1935, Nursing Act 2010, Radiation Health Act 2009 and the Mental Health Act 2010. Other health related legislations are also being considered for review as they impact the collaboration and coordination of effort between the Ministry, other Government agencies and the community, in the efficient delivery of health services and the protection of public health in Fiji.

Talking on health workforce, Madam Deputy Speaker, Fiji continues to lose healthcare workers from the Ministry into the private health sector in Fiji or abroad. Current global trends indicate that the movement of healthcare workers will continue for some time due to a global lack of healthcare workers.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that the world will face a shortage of 10 million healthcare workers in 2030, reducing from 15 million in 2020. These gaps are still significant and contributing to the movement and maldistribution of the healthcare workers in Small Island Development States (SIDS), such as Fiji.

Nonetheless, the Ministry has noted that in the case of our nursing workforce, the attrition rate has reduced in the months of November to December 2023, following the implementation of salary adjustments and incentives for nurses which Parliament approved in 2023-2024 National Budget. This is an encouraging sign, and the Ministry will continue to work with the stakeholders to address human resource need for the immediate and the long-term.

On infrastructure improvement, Madam Deputy Speaker, since January 2023, the Ministry has continued with its health infrastructure improvement programme with the budgetary allocation from the Government, together with the general support of our partners, local businesses, civil society organisations, Hospital Board of Visitors and community members.

Through this collaborative effort, the Ministry has implemented a number of significant infrastructural improvement projects that include, amongst others, the:

1. Refurbishment of Nagado Nursing Station, Vatulele Health Centre, Nukuilau Nursing Station and Nailaga Health Centre in the Western Division.
2. Refurbishment of Dreketi Health Centre, Naqumu Nursing Station and Savusavu Health Centre in the Northern Division.
3. Refurbishment of Galoa Nursing Station, Korovou Health Centre and the SOPD Clinic at Wainibokasi Hospital.
4. Refurbishment of wards and road works at St Giles Psychiatric Hospital.
5. Refurbishment of the Rose Hall at Tamavua Hospital.

6. Construction on the Food and Water Laboratory at Fiji CDC Centre in Namaka.
7. Refurbishment of Cicia Health Centre in Cicia Island in the Lau Group.
8. Construction of a mortuary ramp and admin walkway at Labasa Hospital.
9. Internal renovations and exterior painting of the Mataika House in Tamavua.

A number of infrastructural works are currently progressing, such as the refurbishment of the Nausori Health Centre, the interior painting for Labasa Hospital, and the construction of the Northern Medical Warehouse facility, to name a few. The Ministry will continue to address the infrastructure improvement needs for all its more than 200 health facilities across the country.

The Ministry is aware of the infrastructural issues relating to the 100-year-old CWM Hospital, which have been highlighted a number of times in the media. The Ministry is engaging with the Ministry of Public Works and Transport and our health partners, to address the immediate and long-term infrastructure needs of this Hospital. We hope to announce this week a health partner support that will go a long way in addressing the short and long-term actions to improve our hospital buildings.

On Digital Health, Madam Deputy Speaker, COVID-19 pandemic showed us the value of digital health in augmenting and enhancing the delivery of health care services in Fiji and globally.

In 2023, the Ministry launched its first ever Fiji's Digital Health Strategy which is aimed at enhancing the Ministry's communication and digital platforms and facilitating better disease surveillance, patient referral, supply chain and inventory management, resources planning and mobilization, and governance of its daily operations. Our divisional and subdivisional command centres operations will function much more effectively with access to a better digital and communication platform.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the strategy will assist in the introduction of new digital health programme such as the immunization information system and telehealth capabilities that will further enhance health services as well as the storage and security of confidential health information for patients. This 5-Year Digital Health Strategy and Implementation Plan with the associated package of digital support will address governance, systems and human resources in line with the Government's overall digital plan.

On health programmes, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has targeted the strengthening of a few health programmes that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic which now need strengthening and enhancement.

The Ministry is finalising its Primary Health Care Strategy with the support of our partners. The strategy will define the Primary Health Care package that will be delivered at all levels of health services from the nursing station right up to the main referral hospitals.

A strengthened Primary Health Care programme will ensure that our population receive the health care they need in a timely manner, fulfilling our Universal Health Coverage targets for Fiji.

While Fiji's immunisation programme has been exemplary and applauded globally, the Ministry wishes to maintain the high immunisation coverage for the population of Fiji. The last coverage survey showed a 95 percent coverage overall for all vaccines. The COVID-19 vaccination coverage for the primary doses is also 95 percent for the adult population.

With a strong child health programme under the Ministry, Fiji has maintained its neonatal mortality rate of less than 12 per 1,000 live births consecutively over the past five years, meeting the

SDG target of less than 12 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030. The Ministry will also begin to address and measure our progress towards the SDG targets of less than 25 per 1,000 live births for under five mortality rate.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry is strengthening the immunisation information management system with development partner support in the development of a digital immunisation registration system that will be completed over the next two years. This will allow defaulters to be traced efficiently, and readily available updated coverage data across the nation.

With development partners support, the Ministry has updated its Immunisation Policy, and rolled out the digital Bluetooth monitoring of our Cold Chain process, which is the heartbeat of vaccination, providing the opportunity for research into the use of vaccines in Fiji.

In 2023, the Early Childhood Development Policy and Implementation Plan was launched through the collaborative effort of our health partners and the government agencies including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection. The Policy will ensure that the National ECD Advisory Committee effectively guide the holistic development of more than 88,000 children between the age of 0 years to 8 years in Fiji through access to healthy nutrition, early education and support for the parents.

Madam Deputy Speaker, inclusive development is an approach within the Ministry of Health and Medical Services is taking in terms of meetings our strategic objectives and most importantly improving the quality of health care for Fijians. For our many health programmes, the Ministry is engaging our community partners and civil society organisations to address the health concerns of our communities and address the health needs of our vulnerable communities so that the elderly, babies and children, pregnant mothers, the disabled and those with chronic diseases are adequately addressed.

The increased allocation for medical outreach to rural communities, which is decentralized to our divisions for the first time ever will ensure that our rural, hard-to-reach communities, and maritime communities are visited by our health teams and their health needs addressed close to their own homes. In fact, as I speak, a team of Medical Specialist led by our Acting Sub-Divisional Medical Officer (SDMO) Eastern, Dr. Luke Ravula are touring the islands of the Lau Group providing medical care and health promotion activities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, through the Ministry's Donor Coordination Unit, we are gradually building up our capacity to be able to engage effectively with our various health partners and gain maximum benefit from their support and generosity.

The Ministry is grateful to the support of local businesses, NGOs, Civil Society Organisations, Board of Visitors and community groups, as well as partners in DFAT, MFAT, KOICA, JICA, USAID, China Aid, World Bank, ADB and the UN organisations – WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP and the Governments of Australia, New Zealand, USA, China, as well as families and individuals who have supported the Ministry in its efforts to improve health services provision for the people of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to conclude with His Excellency the President's Address when he said and I quote, "Let us not see challenges as mountains, but as common missions to ascend and resolve with open and constructive dialogue, with a view to build social cohesion." With that in mind, I wish to mention and extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation for the incredible work of our health care workers throughout the country. One of them was highlighted in the media recently – the Medical Officer at Cicia Health Centre in the Lau Group, Dr. Rusila Tikoitoga who

courageously and successfully delivered twins last month with limited medical resources at her disposal.

Now, this is not our ideal delivery plan for a twin pregnancy knowing the many risks associated with multiple pregnancies. However, this was the reality at the frontline on that day, and not of her choosing. Dr. Tikoitoga displayed calmness, quick thinking remembering her training as a medical intern, and her dedication and faith to see the young mother and the newborn babies through. Madam Deputy Speaker, Dr. Tikoitoga exemplified many more dedicated and hardworking health care workers in Fiji whose stories we may never hear, who gave their best day in and day out, in spite of the many challenges they face each day.

As their Minister, I salute all of them today and I also thank our friends and partners who help to make their work easier each day with their support. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services cannot do it alone, we need everyone's contribution to create a healthy population in Fiji.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this brings to an end today's proceedings and I want to thank you very much for your energy today. We will begin tomorrow morning with the next speaker.

I must admit that afternoon tea had been ready for some time, but I thought you might appreciate us just forging ahead and then giving you the opportunity to enjoy afternoon tea after today's proceedings. I thank you for your contributions, honourable Members. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.09 p.m.