

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**TUESDAY, 12TH MARCH, 2024**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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**TUESDAY, 12TH 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 F.S. Koya.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

I would like to thank each and everyone of you for the contributions you have made yesterday.

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting once more and for all those joining us in the gallery and those watching the proceedings on television and the internet, thank you for taking an interest in the proceedings of your Parliament.

This week we will continue to hear the responses to His Excellency the President's Address to Parliament, which was delivered on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024. Honourable Members, before we proceed further, just a reminder to each and everyone of you that as I had stated a while ago, you are offering your responses to His Excellency's Address.

Expunged Words from Daily Hansard

I heard from two speeches delivered yesterday, one from the Government side and the other from Opposition, saying that it was their right of reply. Honourable Members, just to be reminded once again that the right of reply will only be given or provided for the mover of a motion. In this particular instance, the mover of the motion is the honourable Prime Minister. He will be offered the right of reply at the end of your responses.

I hope that is very clear and I will make an instruction here that those who stated that it was their right of reply, those words will be expunged from the *Daily Hansard*. I hope we will agree so we keep with consistency at the same pace. If people are still worried about who made those words, one was made by honourable Esrom Immanuel in his response and also honourable Sanjay Kirpal.

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

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; thank you for allowing me to speak in response to His Excellency's most Gracious Speech at the Opening of Parliament on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.

His Excellency had articulated the various issues that the Coalition Government wants to be emphasised and embarked in this calendar year. In His Excellency's introduction, he emphasised our responsibilities as Members of Parliament, and I quote from Page 4 of the *Uncorrected Daily Hansard* on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024:

“As democratically elected representatives, I ask that you listen to the voices of our people, not only to those who elected you, but to all the citizens, young and old, men and women.

I urge you all to faithfully embrace with resolve the principles of democracy and humanity as enshrined in our Constitution. In doing so, we will continue to respect the integrity and dignity of our Parliament. We must acknowledge and recognise our differences; however, we must be united with one common goal to ensure that we live in a progressive and prosperous nation.”

To me, Mr. Speaker, the quoted statement of His Excellency's introduction summarises the very core of his speech. The remaining text of His Excellency's Address basically covers the operational plan by the Coalition Government for the year 2024. The operational plan tries to cover what Government had failed to deliver in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the Address delivered by His Excellency, I wish to review the performance after the General Elections in 2022 and the subsequent formation of the Coalition Government. This, in my humble opinion, provides better reflection of what we, as a Parliament can learn going forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to gauge the performance of the Coalition Government, I wish to quote part of His Excellency's Address during the Opening of Parliament on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2023, as it reflects the expectations of His Excellency, and I quote from Page 13 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“Your Government's mission is to build unity through social cohesion and further improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth with the ultimate objective of improving the lives of the people of Fiji.

There must be clear focus on rule of law and democratic processes including transparency, accountability, respect for human rights and freedoms, and listening to the views of the people through genuine consultation. The views of all members of our communities must be heard and I urge the People's Coalition Government to ensure all initiatives and draft legislation must go through consultation process for better outcomes, to ensure inclusiveness and foster greater ownership.

Government must ensure that draft laws are deliberated in consultation with relevant stakeholders particularly through the Standing Committee process. Petitions must be accommodated so that the voice of the people is heard in Parliament when they seek solutions to issues that are of concern to them.

The Government must continue to adhere to the constitutional doctrine of the separation of powers as a cornerstone of our democracy and the necessity for public servants to perform their duties independently. Within the Civil Service, there will be more human resource and institutional capacity building to improve the service delivery to ordinary people and for civil servants to have a clear path.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to, we can all learn from the past to give us a better understanding going forward. Please, allow me to express my view on the various difficulties that we are facing now.

I vividly remember when the honourable Prime Minister, as the Leader of the Opposition in the 2018 term of Parliament, stated that a lot of people, especially politicians and supporters, expressed that there was a need for all Parties to stick together and kick FijiFirst out. I remember clearly that the then Leader of the Opposition in his reply stated, “If we kick FijiFirst out, then what?”

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Freedom!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- To me, he was 100 percent correct in his statement as there was no immediate plan made when the Coalition formed Government in late 2022. The Coalition partners, for the whole of 2023, concentrated in keeping the partnership intact, instead of formulating a plan to take Fiji forward.

Missing a plan to govern initiated this gloom and doom situation. It is apparent that the lack of direction has drastic consequences on the state of the Fijian economy and the Fijian lives as a whole.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji and Fijians are praying and hoping that things will turn around and become better. Cost of living has become too high ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very bad.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- ... and life has become unbearable.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Brutal!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- In reviewing the first-year performance, it is vitally important to try and explore the developments during the last 14 months. The comments made by the honourable Prime Minister when he was the Leader of the Opposition in the last term of Parliament is very relevant and true.

HON. J. USAMATE.- It has happened.

HON. H. CHAND.- Shame!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker Sir, to understand how we have arrived to where we are now, let me review our political developments. Let me start with the most important platform for a true democratic governance.

To provide a backdrop, the Government has concentrated on dismantling all the changes that was incorporated by FijiFirst in its first eight years of governing and in the Bainimarama-led

Government before 2014. The Coalition Government has concentrated all its efforts to dismantle every institution and initiative built by FijiFirst and, in my humble opinion, has been a waste of time and resources.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- To establish economic prosperity of a small democratic nation like Fiji, we need a multiple layer approach to form the foundation of investment and investor confidence for investors to take the leap of faith and spend.

Fiji needs stability, peace and adherence to the rule of law, as His Excellency the President had articulated. This must be practised right across the board, from the honourable Prime Minister to the common citizens of our beloved Fiji. There must be accountability and transparency at all levels of our society.

We must be subservient to the Constitution as that provides the guidelines of how we should all behave.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to examine the introduction of His Excellency the President's Address that I had already adhered to. To me, it summarises the core of his delivery and reminds this Parliament of the core principles of a true democratic government.

Firstly, His Excellency expressed that the Government must be geared towards building unity through social cohesion and further improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth with the ultimate objective of improving the lives of our people of Fiji.

The high cost of living, massive unemployment and lack of investment is driving people to our streets. As a consequence, there are more homeless, and more people are begging on our streets with more mentally disadvantaged people abound, due to abuse of drugs all over our main cities and towns.

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is a fact.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I live and work between Nadi and Suva, and the story is the same. Poverty does not differentiate between a small town in the West and a big city, like Suva, in the Central Division.

Secondly, His Excellency expressed that there must be clear focus on the rule of law and respect for human rights. In addition, His Excellency stated that Government must ensure that draft laws are deliberated in consultation with relevant stakeholders, particularly through the Standing Committee process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are all aware that the honourable Attorney-General has been making shortcuts by using Standing Order 51 to fast-track Bills. This is in total disregard of His Excellency's plea, to allow views of all members of the communities to be heard and be assured of better outcomes, inclusiveness and foster greater ownership.

All Bills passed in the last term of Parliament did not go through the normal process, as alluded to by His Excellency the President. It is ironic that the honourable Attorney-General, when challenged, his answer is that he is following processes. Mr. Speaker, in fact, he is adjusting the process to suit his agenda.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Oh, very poor.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I urge the honourable Prime Minister to remove the honourable Attorney-General and replace him with someone who is prepared to work and carry out the required work.

Additionally, His Excellency also expressed that the Public Service Commission must be given power of the existing Constitutional Framework as a central coordinating agency on all human resource matters within the Public Service. Operational framework and guidelines across the Service will foster more collegiality and coordination for greater efficiency and productivity.

His Excellency highlighted the need to accelerate key structural reforms to encourage efficiency in public service delivery by reducing waste and executing private and public sector initiative to foster growth in the short term.

It is apparent that the level of abuse in public sector and the need to strengthen Public Finance Management and related issues needs to be strengthened and this need to be urgently attended to. The need to review transparency, accountability and fiscal discipline is urgently needed.

The Government must continue to adhere to the Constitutional doctrine on the separation of powers as a cornerstone of our democracy and the necessity for public servants to perform their duties independently. I feel for the career Civil Servants, who have been replaced by the Coalition Government supporters.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Most of the Civil Servants who have been removed are now unemployed or have migrated overseas, which is now the main contributing factor of brain-drain in Fiji.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I want to remind the honourable Attorney-General that instead of coming to Government and stop preaching in Parliament, practice what Christianity teaches and what Jesus Christ had practised in life. This is the more reason why the honourable Prime Minister should remove honourable Turaga and put someone that can abide by the Constitution.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am encouraged that His Excellency highlighted the Coalition Government's progressive agenda and the formation of a new development plan to set initiatives and programmes to sustain growth in the short to medium term. I am, however, curious on the statistical figures that were made available. I think the honourable Minister of Finance is cooking up the figures.

(Laughter)

A growth of 3.8 percent in 2024 and 3 percent for 2025 must be based on real information...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- ... and not on perceived growth. The debt of \$9.9 million is highly questionable and should be compared to the payment of debt mooted around last year. Honourable Minister, refinancing is not repayment of debt. You must agree with me on that.

I am amazed that after giving good growth in the figures above, however, in the next statement cautioned the prediction and emphasised fiscal and debt sustainability due to global risk and change.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Change the Minister of Finance.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- To me, the Government already knows a lower growth rate will eventuate due to lack of economic activities but would not admit to the fact and are giving excuses beforehand.

His Excellency the President highlighted investment in robust and resilience infrastructure and announcing social safety nets for disadvantaged and low-income households. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above investment should have been carried out in mid-2023 when the infrastructure projects initiated by FijiFirst approached completion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are few areas that I feel should be covered in more detail as it is critical and very important to the development of our people in the rural isolated communities. These are the main resource-based sectors covering agriculture, fisheries and forestry. These resource-based sectors must be a priority as it can assist the resource owners and provide businesses to our people, especially in the establishment of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Agriculture is vital for the growth of tourism and most importantly, for food security. It also has a very good opportunity for export and improve foreign earnings. The sector is also human resource intensive which can provide employment in the rural areas and value addition in urban and peri-urban.

Fisheries is also an important sector and has provided source of income for our people in the maritime islands and coastal communities. It is important to develop storage and transportation facilities to move these products to urban areas for consumption and value adding for export.

Forestry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is another resource sector that can be developed, especially in value addition. This will provide employment opportunities to our people and contributes positively to export earnings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the other two important sectors that I believe need urgent attention is health and education. These sectors need urgent attention and an increase in allocation of resource.

I wish to remind the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, Civil Aviation and Education that TELS has been replaced by scholarship and that has a bond connected to it.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji needs to boost our economy.



(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, please, give me another two minutes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji needs investment to boost our economy.

HON. K.K. LAL. – Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I understand that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, Civil Aviation and Education stated in Nadi recently that the banks are flushed with money and a lot of approved loans have not been drawn done.

There are three important requirements that I would like to highlight as prerequisites to be fulfilled first before investors will invest:

1. Government must provide the right conditions for the private sector to invest.
2. Investor confidence must be established to push the would-be investors to invest, as I have already alluded to.
3. Government must take the lead and participate in local direct investment. Invest in infrastructure and services, as these will generate employment and energise the private sector.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I plead with Government to look at the issues that confront our marginalised people in Fiji attend to their daily issues.

To conclude, I implore the Government and honourable Prime Minister to learn from the past year and reconsider the direction they are taking Fiji to. The Government must re-evaluate its performance in the last 14 months and make amends.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- I am asking the honourable Prime Minister to deliver the change that was promised to the people of Fiji. Fijians expect better than what they have experienced todate.

I repeat, I am asking the honourable Prime Minister to deliver the change that was promised to the people of Fiji. Fijians expect better than what they have experienced so far. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public present this morning and those joining through livestream; *nu bula nakwa* and a very good morning to you all, *Ramadhan Mubharak* to all our Muslim brothers and sisters and we wish them well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise before this august Parliament to express my sincere gratitude to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata, Taukei Bolatagane*, for his thoughtful and inclusive speech that has resonated well with us all.

His Excellency reminded us of the importance of our role as Members of this august Parliament and the need to promote harmony and embrace diversity in our nation.

His Excellency the President shared the importance of leaving aside our differences for the common good of the people. It is, therefore, crucial that we address the challenges faced by our island nation as we have the ability to enact policies and legislations that prioritise the protection and resilience of all our citizens. Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully applaud and support the promotion of financial literacy as a way of empowering people with financial security and self-reliance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government's progressive agenda and legislative framework highlighted by His Excellency the President are people centred, visionary and provides a good platform for our sustainable economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President's Speech not only marks the dawn of the new Parliamentary Session, but also heralds a solemn summons to greatness. It is a call that beckons us to rise above the challenges that lie ahead and embrace our role as custodians of the Fijian dream.

With humility and reverence, we, the Coalition Government, accept the mantle of leadership bestowed upon us by the people of Fiji. It is a privilege and an honour that we do not take lightly. We stand committed to representing the hopes and aspirations of every Fijian, and to forging a path towards a future filled with promise and opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to respond to some of the comments that have been uttered in this august Parliament by some honourable Members on the rule of law. I wish to remind honourable Opposition Members who were in the last Government that they should be the last ones to lecture us about the rule of law and the adherence to the Constitution.

Some examples that you have noted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the sacking of the Solicitor-General during their term, the removal of the Auditor-General and the removal of the Government Statistician. This Coalition Government has brought freedom and respect for rule of law and real democracy. The lies and misinformation will not convince the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is optimistic that the domestic economic growth will certainly return to the pre-pandemic level. The projected growth rate of 3.8 percent for 2024 and 3.0 percent for 2025 is a testament of good financial management and effective policies by the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, housing is fundamentally a human right enshrined in our 2013 Constitution and plays a crucial role in the development of our country, as it not only provides shelter, but also contribute to economic growth. Over the years, there has been a growing focus on sustainable and affordable housing to address the increasing demands for housing in urban and rural areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as outlined by His Excellency the President, the new National Development Plan (NDP) that is earmarked to be finalised in June this year, will set out our collective efforts, initiatives and programmes for a more sustainable and resilient-built environment.

In line with the formulation of the new NDP, the review of the National Housing Policy will now be aligned to Government priorities to ensure consistencies and a more streamlined coordination amongst Government, the private sector and non-government organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I would like to convey my sincere appreciation to the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade for providing policy assistance to the Ministry of Housing to assist with the review of the 2011 National Housing Policy, which is now earmarked for completion this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a large proportion of our low-income households, who struggle to afford decent homes have access to our public housing programme managed by the Public Rental Board (PRB). However, there is still a high demand that needs to be met.

The Ministry will continue to support the PRB in completing the Lagilagi Low Cost Housing project that will accommodate 36 families and further plan future development around Jittu Estate for development of affordable and low cost housing units.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure the transition to home ownership, the Ministry and PRB are collaborating to design a Rent-to-Own Scheme for existing tenants. This Scheme will provide households with an opportunity to build equity in a home while renting, making it easier for them to eventually become homeowners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry will continue to facilitate and support the implementation of the Public Private Partnership project with International Finance Cooperation for developing five sites that will provide around 3,000 housing units. These sites are Raiwaqa, Suva; Nepani, Nasinu; Wainibuku, Nasinu; Davuilevu, Nausori; and Tavakubu, Lautoka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, land development projects carried out by Housing Authority provide housing options for low and middle income earning families. In December 2023, Covata Subdivision in Labasa was completed, providing 103 residential lots. An online portal was also established, providing an efficient and transparent for the public to lodge their applications to purchase a lot and build their own dream homes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Mokosoi Subdivision project in Deuba is near completion and is expected to provide a total of 34 lots with allocation of green areas which the public can use for sports or leisure activities. These projects create sustainable and inclusive communities for people from various backgrounds and contribute to increasing home ownership.

The Ministry will continue to assist first time homeowners through the First Home Ownership Initiative for those with household income below \$50,000, as well who's earning a household income between \$50,000 to \$100,000 and may access government grant to buy or build their first home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this financial year, the Ministry approved 113 applications under the First Home Ownership Initiative, with a total payout of \$1.9 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a review of the income brackets will be conducted to ensure that most deserving low-income households will have access to financial support to meet their housing needs and help the most vulnerable in society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will be working with our stakeholders to promote and encourage green building practices that will mitigate environmental impact of housing development, while simultaneously improve its resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the implementation of infrastructure upgrades for our informal settlements and providing access to affordable housing options will continue to be undertaken by the Ministry to improve the living conditions of those living in informal settlements and help them integrate into formal urban environments.

The Ministry's Informal Settlement Upgrade Programme will continue with upgrades for informal settlements, providing settlers with access to basic utilities such as water, sanitation, electricity, drainage and road. Upon completion of the upgrades, settlers are issued with 99-year lease titles, providing long term security tenure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, three informal settlements have had their upgrades completed following vigorous challenges with a total of 451 households undergoing lot allocation process to receive the 99-year lease titles. These settlements are Ledrusasa, Nadi; Cuvu, Sigatoka; and Waidamudamu, Nausori.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, four more informal settlements are in construction phase, and these are in Sakoca, Nasinu; Tavela, Nadi; Field 40, Lautoka; and Tore, Lautoka; with a total of 378 households.

By the end of this financial year, the Ministry will have an additional four informal settlements ready for construction phase. The settlements are Vuniika, Labasa; Wakanisila, Nasinu; Valewaquyaya, Ba; and Delaisaweni, Lautoka; with a total of 350 households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also be establishing a National Housing Database which will be comprehensive and a centralised system that aims to collect, manage and maintain comprehensive and up-to-date data related to the housing sector, including information on housing units, occupancy rates, tenure types, construction materials, property condition and green building initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the long-awaited Local Government Elections stand as a testament to the Coalition Government's commitment to return democracy, transparency and accountability for all 13 Municipalities in Fiji.

Through tireless dedication and perseverance, we have paved the way for a future where every voice is heard and every vote counts. A feat that could not have been achieved without the collective support of the Fijian Elections Office, the Office of the Solicitor-General and the 13 Municipal Councils. The support of our development partners cannot go unacknowledged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to respond to the comment made by honourable Hem Chand yesterday on the appointment of Towns and Cities Special Administrators. He referred to them as political appointees.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- I wish to remind him that two of the current Special Administrators were part of the former Minister's appointees.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- The new Special Administrators were appointed based on merit, experience and their potential to bring about changes to their respective Municipalities. I invite honourable Chand to the next Special Administrators Forum, and he will be able to witness how knowledgeable and committed they are in their new roles. The main role of a Special Administrator is to prepare the Municipalities for the Local Government Elections.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the amendment to the Local Government Act 1972 was just the beginning, the hard work begins now with civic education, voter education, voter registration and finally, the Local Government Election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Strategic Master Plan for Vitilevu has been completed and will be presented to Cabinet in the coming weeks. We have received overwhelming support and commitment from all stakeholders. The Ministry took control of the project to ensure that Fiji's growth and development is undertaken in a sustainable manner and is transformative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on new town development, Fiji is becoming increasingly urbanised with approximately half of our population living in urban and peri-urban areas. A significant percentage of Fiji's GDP is produced in urban areas, and this has added pressure to land due to competing uses. Urbanisation is real and rapid in Fiji, and with it comes its share of positives and challenges.

Urban areas, Mr. Speaker, Sir, establishes the space and pace for rural economic development through provision of markets, agro-processing centres and transit points into larger centres. This has led to added pressure on urban services and utilities provision such as road network, efficient and safe water supply, electricity and solid waste collection and disposal.

In the 2023-2024 financial year, the Ministry commenced Phase 1 of three critical development projects. These included Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal, Nabouwalu Town Centre and Keiyasi new town development. The Seaqaqa town development project is being initiated with the market facility project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving forward, the Ministry will strategically develop Concept Plans for Navua, Taveuni, Dreketi and Vunidawa over the financial year, fostering sustainable growth and community wellbeing, and recognising the importance of rural-urban linkages.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, market development in their respective municipalities is conducive to growth of new economic activities. The Mini-Market in Dreketi was completed by the Coalition Government in September 2023, whilst my Ministry is working towards the main market for the Dreketi Satellite Town. Markets in Savusavu, Nakasi and Levuka will be completed in the 2023-2024 financial year, similarly for Levuka, as well as Savusavu and Nakasi Markets. Taveuni Market will be a key development focus for the 2024-2025 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, together with market development and other infrastructure projects funded by Municipal Councils, we continue to beautify our cities and towns. We wish to ensure that there is a boost in economic activities and for that, we need clean, safe and beautiful cities and towns.

The Councils have been urged to enhance their service delivery to the ratepayers, residents and the community at large. I have challenged the Councils to review and strengthen their internal policies, plans and standard operating procedures to address the needs of our people better. It is imperative that we uplift image of the Councils as well the Municipalities and change the way we do business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry, through the Department of Town and Country Planning, focussed on identifying and addressing process issues for building and development planning approvals. A pilot project was launched with three Councils that helped further improve process issues.

In a nutshell, within the first three months, that is, September to November 2023, processing turnaround timelines have significantly improved by 90 percent. Furthermore, with the digitalisation of building permits, there is an urgent need to review and modernise the Town and Country Planning Act.

We need legislation that can respond to the needs of a dynamic and ever-changing environment. Since the revised process has been implemented, approximately \$500 million worth of building developments have been approved by the Department of Town and Country Planning.

Mr. Speaker, once again, I thank His Excellency the President for his opening Speech, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to stand in Parliament and deliver my response.

May God bless Fiji. May God bless us all.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and those present in the gallery, as well as those joining us through social media and various other digital means; good morning.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank His Excellency for his Speech during the opening of Parliament for 2024. In his Speech, His Excellency has raised many issues affecting our country. One of the issues he has talked about is maintaining law and order - something for this Government to seriously consider.

In my contribution, Sir, I will briefly speak about the law and order situation in the country and how it leads people to leave our beloved nation and the impacts of migration on Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a 10 percent increase in overall crime for the month of January this year is alarming. There is a serious concern about the worrying increase in crime against women and a significant increase in the number of illicit drug cases registered.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, crimes against women recorded a 31 percent increase with 252 cases received in January 2024, compared to the number recorded for the same period last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the 252 cases, 17 percent were committed in the domestic setting, primarily by spouses or partners, and women between the ages of 18 to 38 represented the largest number of victims.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is also worrying that Assault Causing Actual Bodily Harm cases involving women increased from 139 cases recorded for the month of January 2023, to 167 cases for the same period this year, and rape cases rose from 14 to 35 cases, with some reports recording multiple counts. During the month of January, the most prevalent offences were Assault Causing Actual Bodily Harm (315 cases), Theft (280 cases), Unlawful Possession of Illicit Drugs (153 cases), Burglary and Aggravated Burglary (138 cases) and Criminal Intimidation (84 cases).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember in the last session of Parliament when I raised that there is a significant increase in the crime rate, the honourable Minister of Finance replied, and I quote; "I do not know where he is getting the figures from." These are the official figures released by the Acting Commissioner of Police. While my colleague, honourable Koroilavesau, was speaking, I was observing the honourable Minister of Finance saying, "lies, lies." Let me remind him that we all know who the liar is, in fact, he is the professional liar.

(Laughter)

I will not be wrong if I say that you are the professor of liars.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He was not talking about unemployment at all. You do not have any data on unemployment.

HON. V. LAL.- Sir, one may ask, what is the reason for the huge statistical increase? The simple answer is, it reaffirms and reflects the way the Coalition Government has performed in the last 14 months. This reflects the lack of faith the Fijian people have in the Government of the day. When the Government does not respect the law, people also feel they can do the same and with the public's dissatisfaction with the authorities, a lot of crimes are not reported.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Acting Police Commissioner agrees there is nepotism, backbiting and mistrust within the Force. According to the Acting Commissioner, these things happened when there is a lack of trust within certain groups, focusing on their own personal agendas. What personal agendas are we talking about?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is the mess you created in the Police Force.

HON. V. LAL.- Taking revenge, recruiting your families and promoting your friends within the Force. These appointments involving Party supporters, sympathizers, financiers and unsuccessful election candidates indicate the Government's attempt to exert control over governance structures. Such appointments discriminate against qualified individuals who lack political backing.

My colleagues have spoken about these Civil Service appointments, Boards, Special Administrators, and I will just give one example of the appointment of Advisory Councillors. We were told that the Advisory Councillors would be elected. I happened to be in the West last week, Sir, and I met a group of friends who told me that one Advisory Councillor went to live in that area just over a month and he was appointed as an Advisory Councillor. We understand that the Advisory Councillors need to know the people in the area. They need to know the area itself; they need to know the problems faced by the people in that area. There are many examples that I can give, Sir, but this gentleman was appointed because he is a supporter of a particular Party in Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, political appointments erode trust in the existing systems and processes, and this adversely affects service delivery, institutional strength and leads to brain-drain. The Fiji National Provident Fund has noted an increase in migration withdrawals last year. It has been revealed that the migration withdrawals reached up to \$83.8 million last year. In 2022, it was \$42.9 million. The increase in the migration withdrawals basically shows the movement of our people abroad for better prospects.

The steady erosion of the talented, highly skilled portion of the population is devastating. While Fiji has historically been a migrant recipient country, during the last four decades, the reverse has been the case. Emigrants from Fiji were estimated to exceed 222,000 in mid-2019 and almost all were in four countries - Australia, Canada, New Zealand and United States of America. Permanent migration in the 1970s through to the early 2000s to Pacific rim countries, largely Fijians of Indian descent, contributed to declining growth rates in Fiji's population and shifts in the ethnic composition of the country.

During the waves of emigration that followed many *coups* in the 1980s and 2000, skilled workers and professionals fled vital sectors, such as education, engineering and healthcare, causing skills shortages. Migration has also resulted in societal issues including; family dissolution, a decrease in the proportion of young people from rural areas, and changes to community and family structures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me talk about some of the reasons for brain-drain:

- The presence of better career possibilities abroad can cause a brain-drain. We can create those opportunities here too, but we do not promote the experience or the qualified people, we promote our friends.
- Opportunities for growth such as greater jobs, higher living standards and easier access to housing and healthcare. How can we have higher living standards when the cost of living has really gone up? Before the Elections, people were promised that the prices of goods and services will go down but as soon as the Government came in, 15 percent VAT.

- Educational advancement and innovation. What is there for those who do not qualify for universities?
- Political unrest and instability. Persecution based on sexual orientation, gender, religion and political affiliation. We can see the cases of the former Prime Minister, former Attorney-General and former Commissioner of Police, we all know what is happening.
- Insecurity and safety are threatened. I have already spoken about the increase in crime rate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me now inform the people of Fiji about the effects/causes of brain-drain:

- Brain-drain represents the biggest threat to a country's population, its negative impact on the economy, leading to poor standard of living including poverty.
- Poor health, lower quality goods and services. The departure of skilled professionals creates a shortage of expertise within crucial sectors such as healthcare, engineering, technology and education. Last week, I happened to visit a Government hospital. I went to see a lady doctor who was so kind, she did diabetes check and my blood pressure, apart from the normal check-up. She told me, "We are facing shortages". I really appreciate what the doctors, nurses and professionals are doing. They are going out of their way to look after their patients and we appreciate that. How long will they carry on this workload? Out of frustration, they will resign and go. We need to correct that.
- Weakened workforce. When highly skilled individuals leave a country, it results in the loss of intellectual capital and talent pool that could have contributed to innovation, research and economic growth. Sir, yesterday during lunch break, I went to a bank and there was a long queue and upon inquiry, I was told that those serving are trainees because qualified people have left. So, it takes a lot of time.
- This phenomenon, also known as "human capital flight", meaning that a country in brain-drain continuously depletes human capital, eventually falling into a permanent skills deficit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the Author, Tara Brian – International Organization for Migration, as of mid-2019, more than 222,000 Fiji-born people resided abroad. This is more than double the size of Fiji's emigrant population in 1990, Sir, which stood at just over 90,000. This figure mostly refers to people born in Fiji who live abroad. Migration from Fiji to Australia peaked immediately following Fiji's 1987 *coup* with 2,980 settler arrivals during 1987 to 1988.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Migration in the Republic of Fiji: A Country Profile 2020* showed that these figures slowed from the early 2000s onwards with an average of 1,340 new permanent Fijian settlers in Australia each year between 2000 and 2016. 90ust over 1,150 settled permanently in 2019.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the stock of Fiji-born migrants living in Australia increased from about 41,000 in 1996 to more than 77,100 in 2019. However, the average annual growth rate of the Fijian population in Australia increased from about 41,000 in 1996 to more than 77,100 in 2019. However, the average annual growth rate of the Fijian population in Australia slowed from 3.3 percent between 1996 and 2006, to 2.8 percent the following decade.

The most recent average annual growth rate of the Fijian population figure is 1.4 percent annually between 2017 and 2019. But these figures have significantly increased in the last 14 months since the Coalition Government has taken over the governance of this country. People are leaving due to the high cost of living, no job opportunities, increase in crime and drug related offences, police



inaction, lack of investment opportunities, high rate of corruption, lack of accountability, appointing and promoting people not on merit but whom you know basis, frustration, and many other reasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people should know some of the migration impacts on education, medical and other professional sectors in Fiji. The author Tara Brian reports that the large emigration of Fijians of Indian descent from 1987 to early 2000 caused significant skill losses, particularly in the education and health sectors. Between 1987 and 2004, around 10,700 professionals migrated from Fiji, including architects, engineers, teachers, accountants and medical workers, representing over half of the country's middle to high-level workforce. Teachers are thought to be the most prevalent group among Fijian professionals that departed the nation between 1987 and 2001. Only the best qualified teachers tended to emigrate to work overseas because of the strict qualification criteria in popular emigration destinations, like Australia and New Zealand, which made the shortages in Fiji worse.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is concerned about the departure of qualified healthcare personnel, in addition to teachers. Fiji was listed as one of the top 10 nations with the greatest physician emigration rates by the World Bank in 2011. Australia and New Zealand employed almost as many Fijian physicians as there were in Fiji in 2006, as well as a higher proportion of Fijian nurses and midwives than in their home countries.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- In 2011, FijiFirst was there.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Azmat Gani, a former Academic in Economics at the University of the South Pacific and a Senior Economist with the Reserve Bank of Fiji, in his research, reports as per the Fiji Bureau of Statistics 1998 Official Statistics between 1987 and 1997, 52,000 Fijians migrated to high income countries. Between 1986 and 1994, Fiji Indians made up the majority of immigrants, making approximately 84 percent to 90 percent of all emigrants; emigrants of ethnic Fijian descent made about 4.5 percent to 7 percent of all emigrants during that time. Small numbers of minor ethnic groups have also moved. Fiji Indians, who were the majority ethnic group prior to 1987, are now the second largest ethnic group in the country due to migration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, May 2000 civilian *coup* destroyed what little trust was there between the two major races in Fiji, and it is clear that longstanding rivalries and fears still have a big influence on the political structure in Fiji. It is unlikely that migration would significantly decline in the near to medium term; on the contrary, a rise is anticipated.

Land security has long been a major cause of concern for the people of Indian descent in Fiji. This issue will also remain the main factor influencing Fijian migration patterns until it is resolved. Apparently, as long as destination nations have skill shortages that Fijian expertise can fill, skilled individuals will continue to move from Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Dr. Miliakere Kaitani's study commissioned by the Global Development Network in 2011, found out that just when looking at the migrants themselves, 59 percent of those who are absent migrants from the households are highly skilled and educated.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Who was in government?

HON. V. LAL.- I am talking about when this research was done, not who was governing at that time. Hence, the report on the economic and social impacts of migration in Fiji supports a theory that migration has led to a brain-drain.

Lakshmin Mudaliar, a researcher at the Victoria University of Wellington, claimed in 2017

that emigration will continue to deplete the human capital of Pacific countries, like Fiji. Nevertheless, the expansion of higher education demand, the universality of basic education, and our limited comprehension of obstacles and hindrances to emigration could be contributing to brain-drain in the Pacific region, especially in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what can governments do? Brain-drain is a major issue for many countries, and Fiji is particularly vulnerable because of its reliance on the workforce for most of its economic growth. The loss of such employees might have a significant effect on the growth and prosperity of the country. To tackle this issue, governments must devise strategies for retaining their qualified workforce. Re-training and upskilling the local workforce increase job prospects and changes the way multinational firms see developing countries.

In an *FBC News* article in July 2022, according to the former Minister for Economy, Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, the government invested in education to upskill Fijian employees and counter brain-drain. The tourism sector is the latest industry to see offers from Australia for chefs and this is threatening the manpower in the tourism sector. He says that Fiji cannot compare itself with larger economies, like Australia and the United States of America, as they provide higher benefits when offering jobs. Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum stressed that education is key to maintaining experienced people in different sectors of the economy.

Regarding the budget for that year (2022), the FijiFirst Government placed strong emphasis on providing funding for short-term courses, allowing students to complete Year 12, emphasizing the importance of skills qualification and providing numerous incentives for people to pursue training in those areas. The public and private sectors were eligible for Masters and Doctorate Degrees offered by the then government. He emphasized that businesses that choose to support university students will receive a tax break, a 100 percent write-off.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our recommendation and way forward is to promote the development of skills that satisfy international qualification requirements and labour demand sectors, while also benefitting the domestic labour.

MR. SPEAKER.- Please, round off there.

HON. V. LAL.- Examine programmes aimed at encouraging and facilitating the successful reintegration of returning....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Lal, please, round off now.

HON. V. LAL.- Alright, I will round off.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of the good policies of the FijiFirst Government and the hard work of the former Minister for Economy, Fiji was one of the five fastest recovering economies in the world post-pandemic. The tourism industry was booming, economic prospects improved and there was a lot of optimism. But everything has been going in the opposite direction since the Coalition Government was sworn in because there is a lack of decisive and visionary leadership.

In the last Session of Parliament, all 55 Members of Parliament voted on a motion to protect our oceans. On the contrary, the honourable Prime Minister went ahead and allowed Japan to contaminate our oceans. Then he talks about the Ocean of Peace. Fiji sides with Israel and supports the killings of innocent and vulnerable civilians in Gaza and jeopardizes our international reputation. There are many other examples I can give of the Government's indecisive leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but I will leave that to my colleagues.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need a leadership that guarantees stability, equality, security and equal opportunities for all Fijians. As the former Prime Minister and Leader of FijiFirst, Mr. Frank Bainimarama, has always said, and I quote, “no one should be left behind”.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, believing in each other, working together and helping each other guarantees stability, certainty and equality and this is what FijiFirst gave Fiji.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Who is your leader?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- One leader.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

No running commentary, honourable Ketan Lal. You have taken us back to 1987 but, please, I would like to implore on each and every one of you and those who are still to make their responses, just concentrate on the delivery made by His Excellency, instead of going back. All you are doing is digging up old bones.

On that note, honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.34 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Cabinet, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; I rise in response to thank His Excellency for his most Gracious Speech in opening Parliament for 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I do go on to share the plans for the Ministry, I feel the need to respond to some of the noise that have come from the other side. I say this with all sincerity, I wish I did not have to, but it is important for the members of the public to receive the information and to put everything into perspective.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning, honourable Koroilavesau accused us of lacking direction in handling the economy. But, first, the lack of direction is coming from the Opposition...

HON. K.K. LAL. – Hogwash!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- ... in just the first day of responses to His Excellency the President's Speech. It is very clear. One Member says, "decrease the debt", another Member says, "increase the debt".

HON. J. USAMATE. – Hogwash!

(Laughter)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The honourable Leader of the Opposition says, "broaden the tax base", another says, "do not increase VAT". The honourable Leader of the Opposition says, "find alternatives to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" and yet, honourable Bulitavu's presentation is talking all about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why do they not have Shadow Ministers? Honourable Kumar has been saying, "we do not really need it, we do not believe in it."

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- What's the problem, it is our affairs.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- But you all get up and talk about everything and anything, so you become the jack of all trade, but a master to none.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- As the Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, I do not even know who to talk to about bipartisanship. I do not know who is their Shadow Minister. I ask the question, what is going on with the Opposition?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- What is going on? Are you really united as you say that you are? Are you really united? At least on this side of Parliament, we have one Leader and that is our Prime Minister. Our responses align to our Leader, the honourable Prime Minister, but here is the problem with the Opposition. They have one Leader of the Opposition and then there are others from out there, remote controlling what is happening.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Please, FijiFirst, please, choose one Leader and be aligned to your Leader. The honourable Seruiratu should really be the Leader of your Party, please. Get on the same page, he is more than capable and, in his speech, he is stately and is all for working together for the good of our people. But that cannot be said for the rest of them and the remote controllers from out there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Koroilavesau stated there is massive unemployment.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- *Areh!* There is a huge shortage of labour, just pick up the paper and look at the shortage of labour. So, how can there be huge unemployment?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 22,000 people left in 2022. That was under which Government? So, yes, there was exodus during your time too – mass exodus. And through the Labour Mobility Scheme, this is what is happening. So, please, do not try and blame it on the local or domestic forces or elements that are happening. In fact, they shut down the vocational colleges that are supposed to be helping our people to become employed. So, some self-reflection there, please.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we are following the reflection shared by His Excellency the President at the Opening of Parliament, we were reminded of our roles as democratically elected representatives, compelling us to listen to all voices in our nation, encompassing every citizen, young and old, men and women in all their diversity. This directive highlighted by His Excellency profoundly aligns with the mandate of our Ministry. We are immensely grateful for this call to action which underpins our dedicated efforts and objectives.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Provide employment opportunities for people begging on the streets.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- The Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection has outlined our Ministry's plans for social protection.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Then why are people there begging on the streets?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is a very interesting observation made by honourable Koroilavesau, Mr. Speaker. In fact, majority of our street people and street kids, did you know, have psychosocial problems and they need to be rehabilitated? You have never thought of that during your governance.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Before they can find meaningful employment, they need to be rehabilitated and trained, and then put to employment. You do not just pull them off the street and employ them. And, yes, the Government has plans, Mr. Speaker, to start the first ever Drug Rehabilitation Centre for street kids.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Listen, maybe you will learn something.

They need to be rehabilitated first. He does not even get it!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Then why are there people begging on the streets?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes, because they have psychosocial issues. You need to deal with that first. He does not get that, maybe, he has never spoken to any of them.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

No running commentary, honourable Ketan Lal.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- As we stand at the crucial crossroad, Mr. Speaker, for gender equality and achieving our SDG's 2030 Agenda, it is vital to grasp the context we are navigating. The Coalition Government is prioritising these in its proposed National Development Plan.

In the midst of gender-based violence, economic and climate crisis, emerging artificial intelligence and the future of work, the challenges we face are unprecedented. When we reflect on the data and observance of International Women's Day last week, and amidst the ongoing 68th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, it is paramount that our collective discussions and efforts are intertwined with the urgency of propelling gender equality forward.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to clarify that I am not attending because I am prioritising Parliament. Thank you, Sir, for making that plea, as well as the honourable Prime Minister for deciding accordingly.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- This year, the theme is, "Accelerating the Achievement of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of all Women and Girls by Addressing Poverty and Strengthening Institutions and Financing with a Gender Perspective", sets a clear and ambitious path for us to follow. Solutions to accelerating gender equality and end women's poverty are widely recognised.

We need to invest in evidence-based policies and programmes that address gender inequality and boosting women's rights and agency and leadership. This approach is integral to the Coalition Government's strategic agenda. Our vision is clear – to cultivate interconnected initiatives that are deeply rooted in evidence and data, bridging across the entirety of Government's operations and reaching every corner of our population.

I want to thank honourable Virendra Lal for sharing the statistics on the alarming rates of violence against women and children and, yes, these statistics have not changed for the last 10 years. Two out of three women still face violence, and that includes technology facilitated gender-based violence or online violence.

In such a context, I am proud to highlight the key flagship whole of Government Gender Equality Strategic Initiative which includes the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against all Women and Girls 2023–2028. With a \$1 million investment from the National Budget, along with

\$6 million commitment by the Government of Australia in the next five years, the implementation has already rolled out this year.

As the honourable Prime Minister highlighted in his statement on the occasion of International Women's Day, a review would be carried out at the end of this year to ensure we deliver for all women and girls and prevent violence before it starts.

Moreover, we have embarked on the development of the Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan 2024–2029, approved by Cabinet earlier this year. The commencement of this critical framework on 8<sup>th</sup> March signalled the start of an extensive consultation process and in-depth desk reviews with a particular focus on being anchored in data analysis from the "Fiji Country Gender Assessment" launched by the Ministry in late 2023.

Our commitment to rolling out Fiji Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEENAP), as it is called, by late 2024, at least, by International Women's Day 2025 is steadfast, aiming to lay a robust whole of Government inclusive and evidence-based groundwork for catalysing transformative change in the economic empowerment of women and girls across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, additionally, as part of the Public Financial Management Improvement Plan, the Coalition Government has significantly taken strides in institutionalising gender responsive planning and budgeting as part of our governance. This effort is amplified by the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development Initiative led by our Ministry, which works across all Government sectors to build necessary capacities for gender responsive planning and budgeting. And as we recall, Sir, in our first ever budget, we were able to achieve, for the very first time in the history of Fiji, a gender responsive budgeting across the three Ministries.

In February 2024, in partnership with the Ministry of Finance, we commenced the design of a flagship Accountability for Gender Equality project, with the initial support from the Government of New Zealand. Expected to launch in late 2024, this five-year project will serve as a cornerstone for tracking the effective implementation of critical gender policies and initiatives, establishing a foundation for gender transformative planning and budget allocations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment necessitates a departure from the traditional approach of addressing women rights issues in isolation. By adopting the above holistic approach, we underscore the critical need to acknowledge the interwoven challenges faced by all women and girls in Fiji, from the alarming rates of gender-based violence to the barriers in political participation, societal pressures, limited access to reproductive health services, poverty, scarce employment opportunities and the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis. These issues are not isolated but part of a complex ecosystem affecting Fijian women's lives in profound ways. Simplifying these complex problems into detached over-simplified actions will not foster the meaningful change we seek.

The Coalition Government is dedicated in driving forward initiatives that not only tackle these challenges head on, but also lay the groundwork for sustainable progress. We are committed to transforming Fiji into a nation where gender equality is not just an aspiration, but a realised principle embedded in every aspect of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will now speak about our Children's Department. Fiji is a party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This year, we will see us honouring our commitment to the protection of all children under the CRC. This is especially the case for those deprived of parental care, and those who cannot remain with their families because of abuse or neglect.

We can achieve this by legislating our responsibility under CRC to provide protection and assistance to children temporarily or permanently deprived of their family environment. We are not seeking to do this just because of our commitments under a Convention, we are doing this because we, as a Coalition Government, want to elevate and bring to life children's rights, their development and their wellbeing. We want to give all Fiji's children the best future they can possibly imagine. We know very clearly what we need to do to make this happen.

In June 2021, the previous Government received a list of issues prior to submission of the combined fourth and fifth Periodic Report under CRC's implementation. The Committee on the CRC was concerned about the situation of children deprived of parental care in Fiji.

The Committee pointed out that the number of residential homes and of children coming into residential care, has increased over the years. Most children find themselves in residential care due to neglect and poverty, children spend very long periods of time in residential care, and there were no alternatives to residential care such as, foster care.

In Fiji, the system we have is based on an outdated philosophy of rescue and removal that was developed under the Juveniles Act 1974. But since the CRC, we know that this approach has become more and more outdated because of its inability to promote children's holistic development within their own family and community. This approach hinders the full implementation of our obligations under the CRC.

These are issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that I take very seriously. The CRC Committee has asked the Fiji Government to report back on what it is doing to support and prioritise family base care for children who cannot live with their parents. I am proud to tell you today that we have worked very hard to address this, but we will go further.

This year, we have put before Parliament a plan and legislation that responds to the calls from the CRC. It also frames the Coalition Government's actions so that Fiji's children are not just safe, but they are loved and are participating in decisions made about them. The key plan to advance this is the legislation I would put to Parliament this year.

I do acknowledge the good work of my predecessors, as mentioned by honourable Bulitavu. The two Bills that will come before Parliament was initiated by the previous Government - the Childcare and Protection Bill and the Child Justice Bill. These Bills have been widely consulted.

The Draft Bills prioritise family preservation and family-based forms of care. In line with the guidance under the CRC, they promote prevention of family separation and the need for alternative care, as well as alternatives for child's replacement, in order that the best option can be chosen according to the specific situation of the child.

The new Bills explicitly acknowledge and reinforce the key role of parents, families and communities in raising children and protecting them from harm. They also clearly present the distinction between children in need of care and protection and children in conflict with the law. Where duties were confined to responding to the child after being abused, the new Bills define the Director Children's duties broadly to encompass prevention, early intervention and response services.

Inter-agency collaboration is also recognised with the roles of CSOs and traditional leaders. Options for voluntary care plans can be negotiated with the child's parents where Court Orders are used as a last resort when agreements cannot be reached. The child, the parents, extended families and traditional community leaders can be actively involved with care planning. Priority is given to kinship and family base care.



These two Bills are a key plan in the broader legal and policy framework that we have already introduced to protect children, including the Adoption Act 2020 and the revised Interagency Guideline on Child Abuse and Neglect. But they will also advance the broader child rights aspirations of Fiji.

On this note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the goal of the Ministry to bring to this Parliament a National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children. Ultimately, I know you can have the best legislation and policy in the world, but you need the people in our Civil Service, our civil society and the broader Fijian community to support these aspirations.

Our legislation and policy are the critical *yavu* (foundations), or the *duru balavu* (posts), of the *vale vakaviti* (house), but our newly established Department for Children will be the *delavuvu ni vale* (roof rafters).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I look forward to a fruitful year as we venture into new achievements. Allow me to conclude with a Bible verse.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- It always baffles me when there is a Christian verse to be quoted and that is the response from the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I conclude with the quote from Joshua 1:9:

“Remember that I have commanded you to be determined and confident! Do not be afraid or discouraged, for I, the Lord your God, am with you wherever you go.”

God bless our women, God bless our children, God bless our elderly, God bless our vulnerable, and God bless Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me this opportunity to speak on His Excellency the President's Speech. I join my colleagues who have spoken earlier in acknowledging His Excellency's Address to the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it seems that the Government side is not taking the President's Speech seriously. Just like their Election promises, they failed to deliver what His Excellency the President announced last year.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Again, this year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency stated key priorities, which I am sure will not be delivered by this confused, clueless and inexperienced Government.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, almost 15 months has passed, and the Government is still grappling with uncertainties in steering the country forward. His Excellency announced that the major priority of the Government is the formulation of the new National Development Plan - an exercise that should have been completed in the first six months after taking office. They spent eight years in Opposition criticising Government but prepared no plan to take the country forward. After 15 months, a plan is being developed but when will it be implemented?

During public consultations, people have asked the Government to reduce the cost of food,

and they are asking the cost of food needs to go down now and not how they will do it after the plan is developed.

Members of the public are frustrated and angry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with poor public service delivery and the high cost of living which the honourable leader of National Federation Party promised to reduce, as his first priority, once he is in the Government. It is on record, Sir. However, he made matters worse by increasing taxes, duties and levies, and, of course, school fees which was increased or reintroduced by the honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people have noticed that this Government is too busy forming committees and developing plans and frameworks, or busy with workshops and conferences, rather than addressing bread and butter issues and law and order situation in the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the economy does well, the country does well and ultimately, people do well with more money in their pockets, boosting consumer investor and business confidence. Merely saying that people should have confidence will not lead to confidence, like some Ministers preach.

It was not logical for the Government to increase VAT and duties when global inflation is high. A terrible recommendation from the Fiscal Review Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which was blindly followed by the Government. Unfortunately, the honourable Prime Minister actually said that 15 percent VAT was too high. I hope he would have stuck to that and would not have allowed the honourable Minister of Finance to go ahead with his plan, and I will tell you why!

Given the existing global inflationary pressures, the price of imported goods is already high. Why is it high? It is caused by increase in freight and insurance expenses. Adding more duties and taxes makes the products and services out of reach for many low-income families.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor. Absolutely brutal!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiscal Review Committee's recommendation caused more harm than good to our economic recovery where the poor were punished and selected few were rewarded. For example, those earning more than \$270,000 had a reduction in personal tax and removal of their social responsibility tax...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Shame, absolute shame!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- ...causing a revenue loss of \$2.2 million. Who benefitted? The answer is, the rich. The lawyers, the accountants, the CEOs and the company directors were actually the beneficiaries, including the Chairman of the Fiscal Review Committee.

Mr. Speaker Sir, figures do not lie. There are preliminary indicators of our economy hitting the brakes. Despite increasing taxes, duties and levies, our revenue collection is down. There is a noticeable slowdown in consumption and new investment lending, and the slow uplifting of approved bank loans.

An observation, but not alarming, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2022, our foreign reserves stood at \$3.4 billion, sufficient for 6.9 months of imports. By February 2024, just after 15 months, data shows our reserves dropped to \$3.2 billion, covering only 5.1 months of exports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned that our debt level is around \$9.9 billion or 75.6 percent of GDP. In dollar terms, the debt increased while percentage to GDP decreased. We had no

cyclones, no pandemic, no new projects, but that went up without showing any tangible benefits that help in bringing the food to the table.

We all know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that refinancing loans is not loan repayment. Taking money from Paul to pay Peter does not resolve the loan issue, it merely transfers the debt from one source to another.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Government had to borrow to protect households and businesses from economic hardships and health-related challenges during COVID-19 and earlier cyclones. The borrowed funds were used for fiscal stimulus measures to kick-start the economy and to continue with the development projects, which the Fiscal Review Committee and, of course, the honourable Minister of Finance decided to remove all these incentives.

Some of the projects that are on hand are building -

- new markets, as you can see in Savusavu and Levuka.
- Roads.
- new schools and renovated schools.
- Hospitals.
- the Viria Water Project.
- upgrading of informal settlements which you have heard from the honourable Minister for Housing, who was just microwaving. Whatever he said was done under FijiFirst.
- informal settlements, including Cuvu, Ledrusasa and Waidamudamu, the 12 projects which are in the pipeline.
- bridges such as Toga Bridge in Rewa, Wainawi in Kasavu, Tavualevu in Tavua, Vuniyasi in Nadi, Nayarabale in Cakaudrove, are all bridges designed and executed by FijiFirst.

Public Private Partnership Housing Project which the honourable Minister for Housing mentioned which was initiated by FijiFirst with the completion of land preparation and engagement of International Finance Corporation (IFC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the past 15 months, the Coalition Government has been busy unveiling projects and engaging in ribbon-cutting ceremonies. Now, they should stop lying to the public and in this Parliament that the FijiFirst Government did nothing. And each time you cut a ribbon, just say, "Thank you, FijiFirst".

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- At least, I am seen to be doing something. Well, let the public judge what FijiFirst did for this nation and we challenge you to do better than us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President also highlighted the importance of financial literacy to empower our people with financial security and self-reliance. Financial literacy was started by the previous Government around 2008 after the global financial crisis.

A National Taskforce on Financial Inclusion was formed. An independent baseline study was conducted in November 2011 to assess the financial competencies of low-income households in Fiji. This study was used to develop the National Strategy, with the aim to lift the levels of financial competency of all Fijians. There are many institutions now offering financial literacy programmes, considering the need in our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, I recommend financial literacy session for the honourable Members sitting across. Yesterday, honourable Gavoka, with pride, stated that Fiji is the only country in the Pacific that has made tertiary education free by wiping out TELS loan of \$650 million.

It is true, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Australia and New Zealand could not forgive loans, despite being a developed nation, and they also support our annual national budget from where we fund our free tertiary education. The question is, why Australia did not forgive students loan when their GDP is running in trillion dollars?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, because they understand that it is not a sustainable and responsible financing.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- They recognise the inherent challenges of setting aside money every year for free tertiary education from their national budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TELS provided a revolving fund that allowed students to borrow for tertiary education and pay once they are employed to keep the fund revolving. Government will never have the finances to turn every future TELS loan into a scholarship from here onwards. Many of our youth will miss out on acquiring any tertiary education because the loan option is no longer available. So, I ask, Mr. Speaker, can we reconsider the interest of the people of Fiji ahead of personal and political ambitions of SODELPA by re-establishing the loan scheme?

Still on finance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's operational cost can be reduced if Ministers' and Assistant Ministers' junket trips overseas are cut back.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolutely!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- We have heard how the honourable Minister for Sports flew to the USA and then to Australia to get a visa for Canada to watch Rugby Sevens. We have also heard from the honourable Minister for Employment's many excursion trips to Australia to address workers' issues out there, neglecting the workers here.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the operational cost can also be reduced if we trim the number of Ministers and Assistant Ministers, plus three Deputy Prime Minister positions in a country with less than a million people. So, honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, you should stop talking about leadership on this side, and try and reduce the number on the other side.

The operational costs could have been reduced with the timely appointment of a tribunal to look at the dismissal of the Police Commissioner and the DPP who are on full pay. If FijiFirst would have done this, the media would have gone to town with it. Imagine three Deputy Prime Ministers. But now, with the so-called free media, they have gone quiet, even the weekly articles from Richard Naidu has stopped. Now, he is mute under free media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency said that we must be united with one common goal, to ensure that we live in a progressive and prosperous nation. For a progressive and prosperous nation, the Government must create stability, safety and security, follow the rule of law, uphold the Constitution; anything less undermines the nation's progress and prosperity.

Sadly, Fiji is not stable under the Coalition Government. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, Civil Aviation and Education himself has admitted that every

time there is any kind of commotion within the Coalition, it is immediately felt in the country. The worry is that this Government is full of commotions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency urged all of us to faithfully embrace with resolve the principles of democracy and humanity as enshrined in our Constitution.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is evident that political favouritism and nepotism is running rampant. Individuals affiliated with PAP, NFP and SODELPA, who were unsuccessful candidates or part of the campaign team during the 2022 Elections have been appointed across the Civil Service, Boards, Committees, Diplomatic Missions, Advisory Councils and Special Administrators to Municipal Councils. To accommodate more of their cronies, now they have created advisors in the ministries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Mr. Mikaele Leawere and Ms. Salabula, both failed politicians, found shelter as advisors on the Ministry of Education's payroll. It is quite amusing to see Mr. Leawere as an Advisor, officiating at a prize-giving ceremony. Why should the taxpayers pay them as Advisors for trivial tasks? I urge the media to uncover these dubious appointments. One has to just pick up the phone, go to the FEO App, look at the candidates who stood for the elections and see where they are now. That is all they have to do, and I urge the nation to do this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition partners were not put in power just to handpick their political buddies over career civil servants and meritocracy. I have heard, but I stand to be corrected, that the honourable Minister for Local Government intends to release all CEOs of Municipal Councils after their contracts end. He intends to appoint the Chairman of Special Administrators as Executive Chairman, which is a new trend for this Government to reward their cronies. If this happens, it will completely erode trust in this Government. Taking the job away from the career civil servants and deserving citizens with no political connection in favour of their political buddies is a disservice to the nation. Is this fair to our voters who put you there? Whose interest are you looking after?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, accountability and transparency are two words heavily misused by this Government. Why is the honourable Prime Minister not disclosing the names of two Cabinet Ministers who are under investigation by FICAC? While the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism's name is out for his alleged involvement in Fiji Airways "travel first pay later" scandal, such glaring inconsistencies erode the principles of good governance and cast doubt on the honourable Prime Minister's credibility, integrity and his leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in any democracy, the taxpayers can demand accountability and transparency from the Government and the elected Members. In a recent Fiji Airways exclusive deal "travel first pay later" offered to a selected 200 travellers, the honourable Minister for Tourism and Fiji Airways displayed total disrespect to the taxpayers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is disappointing to see that honourable Gavoka did not attempt to investigate the matter or to seek a response from the Chairman of Fiji Airways Board. Instead, we were told by the honourable Minister to leave the airline alone and not much can be done because Fiji Airways is not a Government company or statutory body. Is this the type of leadership we want in Fiji?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, they have forgotten that it was the taxpayers who bailed Fiji Airways out during COVID-19. We do not want another NBF saga. The question on everyone's minds is, why such a small deposit was taken and what due diligence was carried out before approval was granted

to travel without full payment?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to achieve the priorities as outlined by His Excellency needs a strong leader with clear vision. Unfortunately, the honourable Prime Minister tends to flip flop on critical matters of national importance, causing confusion and uncertainty. It started with a mini-budget issue. The honourable Prime Minister wanted a mini-budget but honourable Prasad objected to a mini-budget, so the honourable Prime Minister gave up. Again, the honourable Prime Minister said 15 percent VAT was too high, but honourable Prasad still went ahead; again, the honourable Prime Minister gave up.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, even after admitting the underperformance of certain honourable Ministers, the honourable Prime Minister moved away from a much-needed Cabinet reshuffle twice, prioritising political survival over national interest.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It does not end here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Parliament agreed not to support the release of Fukushima wastewater into the Pacific Ocean, but the honourable Prime Minister, without Cabinet approval, decided to support Japan which made SODELPA denounce the decision of the honourable Prime Minister.

Again, without Cabinet approval, the honourable Prime Minister decided not to support the UN resolution calling for a ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza which led to the NFP expressing its disagreement and disappointment with the Government. Being part of the Government, they were expressing their disappointment to the Government. This is the state of affairs. All these needs to be discussed in Cabinet, not outside Cabinet as they are doing.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, these actions cast a shadow over the honourable Prime Minister's ability to guide the country towards progress and prosperity. It shows that the Government is in disarray, solving their internal issues rather than putting national issues over their political survival.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister reminded parents to take leadership in their family but today I ask the honourable Prime Minister to take leadership of his Government and listen to the voices of the poor who are suffering.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament; *ni sa bula vinaka saka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to add my voice in response to the Address of His Excellency the President at the opening of the 2024 Parliamentary session. In a speech delivered with statesmanship, yet lined with pragmatism, His Excellency underscored the complementary principles of harmony and embracing diversity. In grounding those principles, His Excellency recalibrated the landscape of this august Parliament for a united front with one common goal: to steer Fiji towards enduring peace and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is our responsibility as parliamentarians to not only acknowledge our strengths and successes but also to take up the yoke where we can and work together to progress a united Fiji for the people that we represent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, racism has no place in our nation.

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

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Unfortunately, I have clearly detected this during the contribution by some honourable Opposition Members. It was, as His Excellency said, and I quote: "...some unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust amongst our communities for their own political ends" spreading mistrust and suspicion by making sweeping generalisations attacking individual members without fact. If you have facts, honourable Members, please, table them.

Criticising the write-off of TELS loans worth over \$650 million and describing it as not free education because recipients will be bonded, for example, some honourable Members on the other side continue to confuse loans with bonds. Under this Government right now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, more than 50,000 families can breathe a sigh of relief as they do not have loans to pay off but can have a salary earner without having a loan repayment connected to their studies, hanging over their heads because of a bond.

I wish to respond now, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to some of honourable Premila Kumar's comments. We have received criticism from the Opposition that we are only continuing the projects of the previous Government. Sir, what I want to say to that is this, these are projects for the people of Fiji that the previous Government was stalling.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- They made announcements, they had allocated budgets, but no effort or commitment was ever made to even start the projects and I will just name two examples. The first is the Nabouwalu Town Centre Project which was announced in 2016, but six years after that, what was done? Nothing. The second example is the Keiyasi Township Development, which was announced in 2015 for seven years, what was done? Nothing.

I turn my attention now to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Ministry is pursuing Fiji's interest under the three pillars of sovereignty, security and prosperity, amidst a complex and dynamic international environment. The emerging geopolitical posturing, socio-economic challenges and a rapidly shifting global order has become the norm now.

On the sovereignty pillar, the Ministry will advocate for territorial integrity and the core elements of sovereign statehood as enshrined in the UN Charter. We underscore what defines us as a nation, our identity, our values and aspirations.

The Ministry recognises the richness of our cultural diversity. Yet, we exist in an international system where rules require that whatever our views are on issues that matter to us and to our friends abroad, must be consistent with international laws and its practices as a minimum.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on security, the Ministry will be guided by the traditional and non-traditional aspects of this pillar. The Ministry recognises the expanded definition of security as encapsulated in the Pacific Islands Forum's *Boe Declaration*. Bilateral and multilateral relations need to be re-energised.

A new framework of order of cooperation within our regional 'Ocean of Peace', currently under construction, will provide the umbrella concept that brings into harmony the 2050 Strategy, the *Boe Declaration*, Nuclear Non-Proliferation, and related regional initiatives. This will be underscored by the Pacific Way of dialogue, affinity, solidarity and collective action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry places particular importance on the honourable Prime Minister's concept of the Ocean of Peace. The concept is premised on Pacific identity and values, the same values that underpin our aspirations for national and regional coexistence, brought about by tolerance, respect, freedom and peace. These, in turn, ensure a safe and secure region where our people can live peaceful and worthwhile lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg, which is the illicit drug trade in Fiji. While we fight this on many fronts, most of these drugs originate from abroad. At the handover ceremony of the Guardian Class Patrol Boat in Perth, Western Australia, last week, the honourable Prime Minister highlighted the growing scope and intensity of transnational organised crime. He then emphasized the need for cooperation and inter-operability of our Pacific family members. No one country can tackle this menace alone.

Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the non-traditional security challenges will converge with regional and international programmes and frameworks and the Ministry will cooperate with partners to champion Pacific led and Pacific specific development solutions in the economic, food, health, climate change, environment, humanitarian and community domains.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, socio-economic issues are fundamental to the prosperity pillar and Fiji's economy will be promoted and facilitated to improve market access, connectivity, mitigate external challenges, encourage foreign investment, build domestic capacity and develop the skills that Fiji needs.

Central to our approach on prosperity in international relations is our focus on development and poverty alleviation. These two - development and poverty alleviation, reach into the very heart of our people. Guided by the principle of inclusivity and the distinctive brand of Fijian diplomacy, the end goal is to enable Fiji to capitalise on strategic and comparative economic and social advantages that increase Foreign Direct Investment inflows and investment.

Mr. Speaker, in line with the Government's aim to advancing economic growth, the Ministry will seek development support for the advancement of key enablers or infrastructure construction, for example, roads, ports, slipways, shipbuilding and telecommunication. Furthermore, these are aimed at enhancing connectivity and trade, improving competitiveness and raising investor confidence.

The Ministry, Mr. Speaker, has been accorded the added responsibility of our diaspora communities worldwide. Their contribution to the national economy is well recorded and publicised and hugely appreciated. Our diaspora community is an extension of our economic space. Their status, connections and wellbeing remain our concern.

The Ministry, with partners and our diaspora-communities, are developing a Diaspora Policy that recognises their right of choice, movement, potential and also upholds their status and integrity. The Policy will, amongst other things, examine return and investment options within a migration model that recognises their capacity and sense of affinity with Fiji.

Sir, the Foreign Policy of the previous Government expired at the end of 2022. During this current year, the Ministry has been guided by a Transition Plan that will run to the end of the current financial year. With determined diplomacy, invigorated multilateral and bilateral approaches, the Ministry has re-established relations within a fractured region, regained the confidence of our friends and enhanced co-operation with like-minded partners.



In view of this advancement, the Foreign Policy White Paper will be the guiding document that spells out the Government's statement on foreign policy in concert with the National Development Plan, economic, investment, trade and security policies.

The White Paper, Sir, is an opportunity to project Fiji to the world; to explain Fiji's identity, our values and how it sees the region and the world and our ambitions in foreign policy. The White Paper is also a platform to explain to a domestic audience where foreign policy fits into national objectives. The White Paper will serve as the conceptual basis for making decisions on foreign policy, thereby lending a discipline to policy making.

Mr. Speaker, bilateral and multilateral relations globally and with our Pasifika neighbours are the cornerstones of Fiji's International Development and a key consideration in the Ministry's focus. The Ministry prioritises this to enhance cooperation in the areas of trade, agriculture, tourism, fisheries, forestry, health, education, youth, women, socio-economic development, capacity building, connectivity, leadership and especially people to people relations.

The Ministry will continue to expand its presence and diplomatic footprints globally. This will include the reopening or relocation of Diplomatic Missions, Consulate Generals, the engagement of Honorary Consuls at strategic locations to improve effectiveness, efficiency and return on investments. The Ministry recognises the significance of partnerships in responding to multiple crisis and concerns with events that have significant global impacts.

Mr. Speaker, as the global community adjusts to counter various geopolitical, geo-strategic and development challenges against the backdrop of a worsening climate and biodiversity crisis, international cooperation and collaboration has never been more relevant and more in demand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with only six years remaining to the target date of 2030 in the full implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda, the Ministry will work together with partners on the various development blueprints, to ensure better deliveries and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you well know, the Vuvale and Duavata partnerships with our Pacific neighbours - Australia and New Zealand, have advanced our aspirations while mitigating the challenges we face. With the support of our development partners, the wheels of Fiji's development agenda and economic recovery continue to turn.

Fiji actively engaged in the negotiations of the recently adopted High Seas Treaty or BBNJ, for the protection of the oceans for the benefit of all. We were among the first countries to sign the Treaty on the opening day of signing in New York in September 2023. Works are underway to ratify this Treaty before the 2nd UN Oceans Forum in France in 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Maritime Affairs Coordinating Committee, Fiji continues to progress work on negotiations of maritime boundaries with neighbouring countries. Fiji has completed its full submission on the Extended Continental Shelf. This will be tabled to the Commission on Limits of the Continental Shelf this year.

Fiji is actively engaged with other Pacific nations in the negotiations for a legally binding Global Plastics Treaty.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is strategically positioned to capitalise on geo-political developments within the Indo-Pacific region. Our engagement is important in promoting Fiji's economic and social development. Fiji was among the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific (OACP) countries that signed the EU-OACP (Samoa) Partnership Agreement in November 2023. The ambitious

Framework, which outlines a Pacific Regional Protocol, emphasises the increasing importance of aligning such Frameworks to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. We intend to ratify this Agreement in partnership with the Pacific ACP group of countries as soon as possible.

The Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will continue to channel efforts to secure leadership and membership roles in international and regional bodies and lobby to secure the engagement of nationals into key intergovernmental and international organisations. This will be complemented by the efforts to secure Global Agreements and the affiliation in trade blocs, thereby, securing advances in trade infrastructure and access.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being the hub and gateway to the region comes with responsibility. The Ministry will support the public, private and business sector initiatives that are designed to increase trade, market access and support regional associations that create efficient and effective economic infrastructures in the region. Consideration will also be accorded to social and primary sector support and other drivers of economic growth and poverty reduction.

The Ministry will pursue a renewed Pasifika focus to reinforce regional relations through the historical, cultural and people to people links within Fiji's hub and gateway status. These are critical stepping stones towards a shared "*Common Wealth*". Sir, we recognise that the Ministry is called to a role that is much larger than ourselves.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will consider how to put in place a whole of Government machinery where foreign and domestic policies work in tandem and where all arms of Government work together in an integrated strategy of delivery. As a necessary step, clarity in our direction and our goals enables us to deliver more with less. Our faith, values and principles remain the cornerstone of our Republic.

The Ministry will not be complacent or reactionary but will be audacious in our pursuit of excellence, and agile in the ever-changing international environment.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I acknowledge and welcome my fellow citizens seated in the gallery and those tuning in via livestream on the Walesi platform or Parliament of Fiji *Facebook* live. My humble greetings to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to comment on some of the key features of His Excellency the President of Fiji's Address at the Opening of the Second Session of Parliament on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are fortunate to live in a country blessed with fresh air, clean water, sunshine, sand, sea, and above all, a God-loving nation. This nation was built upon the sheer hard work and commitment of all its people, irrespective of race, religion, colour, creed and education. Everyone has paved the path to success by working in unison, and it will only continue if we can provide a conducive and passive environment. We are so blessed that the 2013 Constitution respects and recognises each and every one who call Fiji their home.

I stand before you today to share my views on utter incompetence and deceit that has become the trademark of this Coalition Government. For too long, we have been subjected to a never-ending parade of broken promises, lies and sheer negligence at the highest levels of power.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope the Government lives up to its promises, as shared by His Excellency. Most of what His Excellency shared in 2023, the Coalition Government failed to deliver. They made

numerous promises during Election and failed to deliver, despite being 14 months in Government. They continued to do so in failing to deliver what His Excellency had shared in this Parliament. Let me be clear, this Government's track record is a disgrace.

They promised unity, economic prosperity and a better future for all Fijians. Yet, what they have delivered is division, economic hardship and a mass migration because people simply lacked faith in this Government.

His Excellency addressed us on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2023 where he said, and I quote from Page 13 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“Your Government's mission is to build unity through social cohesion and further improve and strengthen our economy through sustainable growth with the ultimate objective of improving the lives of all the people of Fiji.”

The Coalition Government is guilty of failing to improve and strengthen our economy. The high cost of living is witnessed, and we face the lack of innovation from the Government to mitigate these high costs.

The racial attacks that plague our society are a direct result of this Government's failure to promote unity and tolerance. While ordinary Fijians struggle to make ends meet, our esteemed Ministers jet-set around the world on lavish trips, completely disconnected from the harsh realities faced by those whom they are meant to represent.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. S. KUMAR.- Congratulations, indeed, to this Government for their unparalleled mastery of deception and incompetence. They excel in betraying the trust of the Fijian people, implementing VAT hikes and presiding over a circus of incompetence and self-interest while the country languishes.

Congratulations on lying to the people of Fiji, especially your supporters, who now witness daylight betrayal. Congratulations on providing hardship to ordinary Fijians with a VAT increase of 15 percent. Congratulations on entertaining us with your Cabinet dramas, while ordinary Fiji suffer in silence.

Congratulations and thank you for continuing the FijiFirst policy, while you try to rebrand some and name it your own. Congratulations on having new Police Stations for Nadi, Lautoka and Nakasi, and not having an official opening because Fijians will see that those Police Stations were negotiated, planned and built by FijiFirst.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. KUMAR.- Congratulations on all official opening of the infrastructural projects that FijiFirst has been kind enough to leave you with. The infrastructure projects they boast of were laid down by the hard work of the previous Government, yet they shamelessly take credit for that. Their inability to deliver on their promises is a slap in the face of every Fijian, who believed in their empty rhetoric.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while on infrastructure, I would also like to ask the

honourable Minister responsible for the Viria Water Project's opening, when will you fulfil the landowners' demand you promised them? Please, deliver accordingly because there are more than 300,000 people in the Central Division, waiting for regular water supply.

While we hear you, Sir, of your desire to build this nation sustainably, it is rather unfortunate that our colleagues on the other side of Parliament seem to be distracted from the virtues of good governance and coherence, as it seems that quite often than not, they seem to be engulfed in protecting and promoting the interests of the Coalition partners and, no doubt, if those selected have the necessary skillset and understanding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight a few issues relating to infrastructure. The FijiFirst Government had achieved sustainable levels of infrastructural development and growth. Yes, it required major capital outlay, but it was intended to take us into the future and allow for sustainable development and growth, being conscious of the changes in climatic conditions and the adverse impacts of natural disasters. The current Government actions have created nothing, but a significant manufactured catastrophe.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency mentioned about formulating the new National Development Plan (NDP). May I ask, what is the wrong with the current one? Fijians formulated a 20-Year NDP with the FijiFirst Government and over the years, it has proven successful. For the bridges alone, FijiFirst was able to construct 52 new bridges and repaired 200 old bridges. I urge the Coalition Government not to try and fix something that is not broken. The consultation in the formulation of this new NDP should not be an excuse for the delay in development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is interesting to note that the anticipated economic growth levels of 3.8 percent and 3.0 percent for the years 2024 and 2025, we hope that this can be achieved and that too is sustainable. However, with the Coalition Government's action or knee-jerk reactions to change things and undo the FijiFirst Government's progress, we fear adverse implications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, migration has been taking place since the 1980s. There was a departure in 1987, 2000 and now. To achieve projected economic growth for this year, one of the factors to encounter is by continuing to invest in our human capital.

The Coalition Government is guilty of failing to improve people's lives. This is evident from the high number of people migrating abroad. The brain-drain caused by their incompetence will haunt us for generations to come, as our best and brightest seek greener pastures elsewhere.

We have a population under the age of 40 years old migrating. During FijiFirst time, we were proud to have 70 percent of our population under 40 years as they are the economic drivers.

It is heartbreaking to witness our Fijians losing confidence in this Coalition Government and leaving our shores in numbers. The people who have worked tirelessly to grow and develop our resilient infrastructure, have left our shores, leaving a significant vacuum that Fiji will struggle to fill in the decades.

Could the Coalition Government foresee and analyse this? The country's population is declining, our childbearing population has moved out and continues to move out, and our market size is shrinking. Has the Government of the day even risen to realise this fact?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight some concerning issues from my area in the Province of Naitasiri. I urge the honourable Minister for Home Affairs to strengthen the Police Force, since now, our farmers have become the targets. Their agricultural produce and livestock are no longer safe.

This Government's legacy will be one of false promises, incompetence and betrayal. It is time for them to face the music and answer for their failures. The people of Fiji deserve leaders who act in their best interest, not in the interest of a selected few. Enough is enough. It is time for a change, and it starts with holding this Government accountable for their actions.

In Benjamin Franklin's wise words, "You may delay, but time will not." Coalition Government, please, do not delay. Do not delay development and focus on the country. Do not delay economic improvement and wellbeing, as His Excellency alluded to in his Speech. Do not delay agriculture development and financial literacy training. Do not delay.

As an Opposition Member of Parliament, my role is crucial in holding the Government accountable and advocating for the interests of the people. Thus, I am asking the Government for -

- regular updates and reports on Government spending, policies and decision-making processes, to ensure transparency and accountability.
- fair and just governance practices, including combating corruption, promoting the rule of law, and ensuring that Government officials are held accountable for their actions.
- policies that promote sustainable economic growth, support small businesses, create jobs and reduce income inequality.
- measures to address social issues such as poverty, inequality, healthcare access, education and housing affordability.
- policies that protect the environment, combat climate change and promote sustainable development practices.
- protection and promotion of human rights for all citizens, including the marginalised and vulnerable population.
- improvements in public service delivery, including healthcare, education infrastructure and social welfare programmes.
- meaningful engagement and collaboration with Opposition Members in the decision-making process, to ensure diverse perspectives are considered.

Fiji needs a Government that is responsive, accountable and serves the needs of the people.

In His Excellency's closing remarks, he stated, and I quote from Page 11 of His Excellency's Address on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2023:

"To all our citizens, wherever you are viewing this Address from, I challenge to stay informed about the policies and decisions made by your elected representatives, and to hold them accountable for their actions.

I urge all our citizens to continue to engage in constructive, respectful dialogue, and to seek understanding and common ground in our diverse society. This is a democratic way that we all must value and cherish".

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I share the same sentiment and encourage all Fijians, locally and globally, to stay informed. Update and familiarize yourself with the policies and decisions made at this Parliament. Get involved, participate, do not stay silent, and join your Opposition in ensuring that the Coalition Government delivers what it promised.

Today, I feel for most Fijians who are suffering silently because they wanted a change. I feel for those who struggle to put, at least, one meal on the table. I pray that the Coalition Government focuses on the welfare of all Fijians.

Before I take my seat, it is only proper to wish my Christian brothers and sisters many blessings in their Lent season. I wish all brothers and sisters of the Islam faith a happy fasting on the holy month of Ramadhan and finally, to my Hindu folks, a Happy Holi.

With those words, I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me this time. I thank each and every one, *dhanyavard, vinaka vakalevu*. May God Bless Fiji.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow honourable Members of Parliament; firstly, may I congratulate your good-self on the successful Opening of the new Parliamentary term 2024-2025. Indeed, time and tide wait for no man.

We are now into the second year of the Coalition Government's term and your sterling leadership of the last year in presiding over this Parliament must be commended, especially on your approach towards the encouragement of bipartisan agreements towards matters of mutual interest for both sides of Parliament where our people have looked to us to put their interest before political party preferences.

Indeed, Sir, this is where your experience comes in handy and given our political journey together in 2014, I am well aware of your intentions towards the development of our people. *Vinaka saka vakalevu na nomuni veiliutaki kei na veituberi*.

Mr. Speaker, changing a Government is the political will of the people. We must accept that whilst the three political Parties forming the Coalition Government may have received lesser votes than the FijiFirst Party, collectively, there are more people who made it clear that they want a new direction for Fiji and a new leadership. And it is very important that, as the new Government, we respond to the aspirations of our people, and we respond to why they wanted a new Government and why they wanted the change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am humbled to make my contribution this morning to His Excellency the President's most Gracious Speech. Sir, today's response will be very special and different from all others I have shared in this august Parliament since 2014.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the various issues His Excellency had raised, I wish to take this time to send a special appreciation of the people of Naitasiri Province, the acknowledgement of each man, woman and child, in the Presidential pardon, allowing the release of the paramount Chief of Naitasiri, the *Gone Turaga na Qaranivalu*, Ratu Inoke Takiveikata.

The actions of His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere, and with the assistance and guidance of the honorable Attorney-General and his Office, freeing the *Gone Turaga na Qaranivalu* back into society and enabling him to be back home with his people and his family, is the ultimate response of the cries of the *Vanua* of Naitasiri over the many years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has been in prison. His release is an indication of the willingness and ability of the ruling Coalition Government to give our people the chance to reconcile as a people and is a sign of decisive leadership.

As people of faith, irrespective of the various religious beliefs we practice, love and forgiveness is a common value we all aspire to. Therefore, again, we are most grateful for this act of forgiveness bestowed upon the *Turaga na Qaranivalu* and others who were, likewise, given a Presidential pardon. *Vinaka saka vakalevu*, Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency the President led with the powerful reminder of our obligations under the Fijian Constitution to which he spoke of the need to encourage respect for all ethnicities and for the need to foster peace and community unity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, peace is the catalyst for stability and national growth. When peace is at the centre of our leadership, our people will be inspired to contribute and to have faith in our nation.

Rightfully said, His Excellency spoke about unscrupulous politicians who continue to instigate mistrust amongst our communities. Out of all the aspects of His Excellency's Address, personally for me, that was the defining moment and the most crucial aspect of the path we must now change as laid out by His Excellency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unity in diversity is a responsibility and also an opportunity. Embracing our cultural, ethnic and religious differences must be the responsibility of all our people and for all its leaders - a divine calling that is bestowed on each shoulder of those called to national leadership whether in Government, in the *Vanua* or in Church.

Leaders are present everywhere, Mr. Speaker, Sir. They exist in the public and private sector and they exist even in our civil society. Unless and until we accept that we have a responsibility to provide leadership that promotes national security for all our people through the promotion of a fair and non-biased system of governance; and the addressing of our major social challenges like the increase in sophisticated crime; increase in unemployment; increase in school dropouts; increase in emigration of our people; and distrust in the institutions of Government, like the Judiciary and the Fiji Police, we will be up against strong opposition and a sure recipe for disaster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the most contentious issues confronting us today remains the expiration of land leases. This is evident in the sugar industry and, likewise, the dairy industry. Last year, we read about the disturbing news of some landowners refusing the renewal of leases in Tailevu North. I am certain, Sir, that the landowners may have genuine issues that they wish to be addressed and I am hopeful for wisdom and foresight to guide negotiations around this subject.

Too often, Mr. Speaker, Sir, advisors provide criticisms but do not provide a solution to landowners and landowning units. The issue of the Tailevu Futon College dispute is a classic example to learn from. That once beautiful school now lies silent as the Management of this proud College made the decision to relocate to its new location in Sabeto, Nadi.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last couple of days, I was also notified that lease holders facing the renewal of their sugarcane leases have been asked to pay a premium in order for their leases to be extended. Most of those sugarcane farmers were caught off guard with respect to this alleged demand by iTLTB.

Mr. Speaker, the details of these grievances may very well have an explanation by iTLTB, but my request today is for us to be practical with our demands. Sugarcane farmers are already struggling to continue farming in this struggling industry and to take further loans to be able to meet their premium demands as a prerequisite to their lease extensions or renewals must be very daunting and demoralising.

Mr. Speaker, the plight of the indigenous landowners is not lost on me. The usual mantra of 'asset rich and cash poor' is a philosophy that must be defeated. Many indigenous landowning units are today devising ways to turn their vacant land into productive *yaqona* farms, *dalo* farms, ginger farms, et cetera.

Some of the most common arguments prevailing over land leases is on the absence of compensation for the use of natural resources, like land and sea, and the disparity in lease payment against the wealth and benefits derived by those leasing the land.

I urge the Coalition Government to immediately set up a Lease Review Committee to look into the plight of both, landowners and tenants, so that we address these issues once and for all. The iTLTB may not have the ability nor the political will to address these challenges that we need to resolve.

The people of Naitasiri, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have asked for compensation for land used by the State over the years without any proper compensation like that which the Fiji National University Nursing School and the Fiji School of Medicine sits on, likewise, the land on which the Republic of Fiji Military Forces at Delainabua sits on. This is not to mention the water catchment areas around Fiji where no lease arrangements exist.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, until Government does the right thing and accepts responsibility where previous Governments have failed to properly compensate landowning units, there will continue to be growing mistrust between our landowners and the tenants, as well as against iTLTB and the State.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency spoke on the need for our people to understand and practice financial literacy. I could not agree more. There are certain habits that we, Fijians, must quickly unlearn, and one of them is to live from pay day to pay day.

Mr. Speaker, the importance of financial literacy has long been recognised by previous Governments. Notably, the establishment of institutions such as the Fijian Holdings Limited; EIMCOL; the building of Provincial Council-owned buildings, like the Ratu Cakobau House, Ro Lalabalavu House, Namosi House, Macuata House, Takayawa Building and others; were established to promote prudent financial investments for the indigenous people.

Our friends, the Indo-Fijians and Chinese, are some of the best in the financial management and it would augur well for us to learn from them on how to save for the rainy day; how to establish a side hustle at home, apart from your 8.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. job; and most importantly, to save part of your income for your future. For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, so many civil servants retire without building or owning homes and by the time they retire, they use their retirement funds to build their homes. As a result, they deplete their funds meant to look after them in their old age, thus rendering them vulnerable to poverty, sickness and other illnesses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I look forward to the day the Fijian Holdings and other similar institutions, will encourage our people to practice financial literacy and teach their children to do the same by having voluntary FPNF accounts from as soon as they can, having life insurance policies or investments stashed away.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am happy to report that financial literacy was identified as a crucial part of our national learning to be included in the school curriculum, and this forms part of the recommendations from the National Education Summit held in Denarau last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, civil servants are the life of any government system and I now wish to thank our Civil Servants for their patience and endurance over the past years as governments have come and gone, and they continue to produce as expected of them. On their behalf, I ask the Coalition Government to seriously consider in the new financial year probably salary increments for our Civil Servants to counter inflation that we all know continues to challenge the best of us yearly.



The Civil Service, Mr. Speaker, Sir, always boasts some of the best brains and talents in any country, and Fiji is no exception. We must work to recognise their contributions and worth, and reward them accordingly. Everyday, we read of resignations of civil servants as they leave in pursuit of greener pastures either to the private sector or abroad, leaving behind lack of institutional knowledge and skills gap.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a review of the salary bands for the many Civil Servants is long overdue. Teachers, for example, have some of the lowest salaries in the Civil Service. After some 15 years to 18 years as a teacher, one can still be receiving \$26,000 per annum whereas other professions start at around \$34,000 per annum for new graduates entering the Civil Service in their respective professional cadre of employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last Saturday, the *Fiji Times* carried an advertisement for teacher vacancies in Australia and the salaries being offered range from AU\$77,634 to AU\$129,713, plus super, based on experience and qualifications level.

Whilst being the Minister for Education, I started discussions with two major teacher unions in Fiji to conduct a salary review with the assistance of the Public Service Commission and the Ministry of Finance, pretty much the same as the Fiji Nurses Association were able to achieve for their nurses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, unless we address these anomalies and put in place proper salary bands for teachers, we will continue to have an exodus of teachers migrating and leaving our shores, resulting in a massive brain-drain and likely deteriorating standard of education of our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the works that were in progress at my time at the Ministry of Education was the review of Assistant Principal's salary, who were still receiving the same salary as Heads of Departments. Given the extra responsibilities held by Assistant Principals, was made worse if they were serving in boarding schools against Heads of Departments, there is no incentive to ascend to such a post. This has been the result of the previous Government's review of the Ministry of Education.

Also, for those schools that are tagged as small schools, the Ministry of Education was in the process of appointing Executive Teachers to these schools, with proper approval process, to assist in the teaching and administration loads and would be given allowances for performing the role as Executive Teachers. Most of these schools are located in the rural and maritime areas, and some are also providing boarding facilities starting from ECE to Class 8 students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst the return of the Civil Service Day is welcomed, a much-deserved salary adjustment or increase will be much more appreciated.

The return of the Higher Salaries Commission is welcomed. It hopefully means the impartial review and determination of remunerations for top executive positions in the public sector. I request that under the current financial challenges, a review of the Permanent Secretary remuneration is warranted against the vast disparity in salary levels to other levels of leadership within the Civil Service, for example, those in the Deputy Secretary and Director positions, and other crucial portfolios in Government Companies and Statutory Authorities and Commissions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a simple comment on the White Paper on Foreign Policy, which is to retain the philosophy of 'friends to all and enemies to none'. May I urge the Government to review its position with respect to the Israel-Hamas war currently occurring.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- It is crucial that Fiji prioritises the lives of our men and women serving as peacekeepers in predominantly the Middle East, and retain our global recognition as peacekeepers, promoting global peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency alluded to the National Education Summit that was held last year. Indeed, the Summit after many years, was able to bring together professionals involved in our education sector, who collectively identified the needs and vulnerabilities in our education system.

On this note, I acknowledge the experience and guidance of two professionals, namely, the former Minister in the SDL Government and long-time Educationist, Mrs. Losena Salabula, as well as former Member of Parliament, Mr. Mikaele Leawere, who were assigned to the Ministry of Education after the 2022 Elections. These two individuals personally identified and made recommendations to the Office of the Minister for Education to hold the National Education Summit to resolve the challenges of the education sector collectively and holistically. It is this kind of professional expertise and experience that our Government needs, to appreciate and learn from, for they hold the institutional knowledge of the education sector that can make a lot of difference.

The honourable Prime Minister has rightfully stated recently that the education sector in Fiji is a failure, which must be urgently addressed, and I agree with him that the curriculum of learning in schools will be a good place to start with the necessary changes. Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry of Education has re-engaged the services of a former Permanent Secretary, Mr. Tiko, to look into this very Department, given his experience and knowledge of curriculum development.

The collapsing of the Ministry of Education Curriculum Advisory Services saw the direct failure of the Ministry to create the necessary curriculum content and address the main perspectives that ought to support education for sustainable development in our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when the Curriculum Advisory Services Unit collapsed, the specific curriculum specialists were told to go back to school, and the honourable Hem Chand would be well aware of this, taking all the instructions to do the necessary. I wonder who he was taking those instructions from when the National Curriculum Advisory Services collapsed. In fact, in collapsing the Curriculum Unit, the previous Government also crippled the very Unit that offers professional support to Fiji's teaching workforce that plays a vital role of curriculum implementors in our classrooms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with limited time, in my response to the Budget Address last year, I had identified two areas of focus needing urgent intervention; being a review of the education curriculum currently taught in schools, as well as the transformation of Fiji's traditional learning style to embrace online learning as part of the post-COVID lessons which will primarily place Fiji's education capabilities alongside the fast-evolving developing world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, online platform managers have been in negotiations with the Ministry of Education and these deliberations have been ongoing for some time. However, we need to finalise the implementation of the proposed online learning systems that can assist our teachers and students make learning a whole lot more interesting and engaging.

Our children of this millennium are notably visual learners. You will be surprised at how our young people of today are teaching some parents and older generation on the use of technology, especially mobile phones and computers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, fundamentally, the Ministry of Education will need to implement the outcomes of the Education Summit, and crucial lessons learnt from recent years' experiences demands that engagement and dialogue with the Teacher Unions in Fiji be the cornerstone of addressing both, the teacher and student concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to briefly share that there has been a lot said over the Fiji National University (FNU) saga that embroiled my leadership. Very little has been shared about the challenges faced by the Office of the Minister for Education during that period, to handle the imminent threat of a strike or protest by teachers and students at the University, which had been brought to my attention over various challenges that were at the heart of the FNU Council and its leadership at the time.

If there was one thing I was certain of, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was that my job was to protect the stability of the Coalition Government and the stability of our economic environment where adverse publicity and instability means the ruling Government will be held responsible for its inability to show leadership and resolve potentially destructive incidents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current University of the South Pacific (USP) ongoing impasse with threats of a strike looming must be handled with precision and delicate management. As I have alluded to, the fallout and backlash from such displays of instability threatens public confidence with potentially negative economic ramifications, and given the University is a regional institution, Fiji could face criticism that it has failed to safeguard the interests of the students of the University and that of the member countries who form ownership of the USP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to respond very briefly to honourable Hem Chand's comments about the two highly paid consultants that he mentioned. I had mentioned part of it before. The honourable Member was referring to Mr. Mikaele Leawere and Mrs. Losena Salabula. For the information of the honourable Member, from the time their contracts had expired in January this year, an offer was made to them with a reduced rate (over 50 percent) but to-date, they are still coming to work, even though they have yet to get paid. So, that is the commitment that we need from people like that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, leadership is not easy. It demands the ability to be decisive in our management responsibilities. I am aware that changes have been made at the Ministry of Education, following my exit.

You will recall, Sir, that there is a very experienced Human Resource personnel who had worked hard under your leadership and I had requested for this Officer be transferred to the Ministry of Education to assist bring discipline and timeliness in teacher transfers and management. The Officer is a highly trained individual and a very experienced Civil Servant in corporate productivity and business excellence. Sadly, this individual is now on suspension with full pay on unclear allegations, and I do hope that she will get due justice instead of rewarding those who systematically abuse the Government system over time and practice, causing untold misery and grief to our teachers and subsequently, students and stakeholders.

Time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will always capture the brave, and those who have the strength of character to go against popular tide, because they have kept their focus on the end goal, which is, to achieve the desired results that improve service delivery and reduce risks and unmitigated financial exposure. I encourage those in leadership at the Ministry of Education to, please, focus on the right goals and work together to uplift the standards of education in our nation equitably.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me additional time.

Our people are asking for the reduction in the cost of living. As elected Members of our Fijian Parliament, it is our job to help make our livelihoods manageable, otherwise, we will continue to have an increase in migration, crime and other social ills associated with a depressed economy.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we promised our people to relieve them of the many challenges we have faced as a nation, and we promised to offer everyone a fairer and more equitable piece of the national pie in leadership and in resources.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You can take my 10 minutes.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Thank you, honourable Member. It must get the approval of the honourable Speaker.

It is incumbent upon us to find innovative ways to deliver those promises for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Government to find incentives that will draw investors into Fiji and encourage domestic entrepreneurs. These are the crucial players that we must grow to be able to address issues of employment opportunities and economic stability.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to thank the hard work being done by the Ministry of Agriculture, to expand Fiji's opportunities for local consumer consumption, as well as exports of agricultural products, goods and services. I am encouraged with the various programmes being implemented by this Ministry from –

- its ginger farming workshops;
- the encouragement of women farmers;
- provision of much needed rotavator machines for rural farmers;
- provision of assistance, like soil analysts, for farmers to help them determine the kind of products they can grow on a particular land; and
- the many other programmes that include the promotion of value added products made available for our local markets, hotels and resorts, with home-grown vegetables and fruits that ease reliance on imports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, given the right motives and the right people, any industry can become a winner for Fiji, resolving the trade deficit and reversing the import and export status will be fundamental to our ability to sustain Fiji, not only for national food security, but also for the stability and growth of our foreign exchange. I am optimistic that the honourable Minister for Agriculture and his Ministry will be provided with the necessary resources and people who will elevate and contribute to our economic stability and long-term growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to end by thanking the Government and the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, that despite a lot of challenges faced in the last year under his leadership, we have resolved to persist with our facilitation of change that is responsive to the needs of our people and that assures lasting peace and development. It is easy to make commentaries from the sidelines, but to put your hand up to participate and use your resources to fight an election and become elected, takes a lot of guts, perseverance and commitment. Today, I remember those who had started the journey to regain Government leadership via democratic process since 2014, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I pay tribute to them.

Today, we have a new Chairman of the Great Council of Chiefs, and I congratulate Ratu Viliame Seruvakula and wish him well in his tenure of leadership. Whilst he may have come as a surprise appointment to many of us, we will trust the process and respect that the will of God and His calling in

our seasons of life are always done with a higher planning “because our thoughts are not God’s thoughts, and His ways are higher than ours.”

I join His Excellency the President in asking for unity, reconciliation and for a renewed spirit and commitment to serve our people. We learn lessons each day as human beings and what matters is the recognition that our time is limited, hence we must not give up from trying to be better people, better leaders and be committed to the goal of advancing together as a people with a shared vision of not leaving anyone behind.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Radrodro, for that great response.

Honourable Members, you may have noticed that I had given more time for him in making his first speech as a Backbencher, but it is good to hear from him. So much has been said about him, but it is quite overwhelming and relieving to hear the wisdom that he has attained as well.

I intend to adjourn Parliament now for lunch and when we resume, the honourable Deputy Speaker will be presiding right up until tomorrow when, for the first time, she will be leading the morning session as well. This is done not only to promote her and the women’s wing and the women’s empowerment and all that, but rather to provide opportunities to the Deputy Speaker as well. This has not been done but we have to do it somehow to prepare herself, should a time come for her to take over the leadership of Parliament.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.46 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 1.58 p.m.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; first of all, I join all my parliamentary colleagues in congratulating His Excellency the President for the sentiments that underpinned his Opening Address, which is traditionally given at the beginning of each Session of Parliament, and recounts Government's policies and legislative programmes for the ensuing parliamentary year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President in his Address, rightfully highlighted the need for a united and an inclusive nation. It stands to reasons that unity and inclusivity is the platform for peace and progress. Countless countries all over the world had benefitted from the realisation that this platform is the cornerstone of their progress. Countless other countries have failed and continue to fail to progress because of racial discrimination and the politics of exclusion of people on the basis, not only of race, but also on the basis of socio-economic status or of political exclusion of parties and their followers who are not in power.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while I welcome the sentiments and its well-meaning applications in the Speech of these sentiments of inclusion, tolerance and harmony by His Excellency the President, I am concerned that the ground reality do not match the sentiments. I intend to give some specific examples later on as to why this is so.

Going on sentiments alone, it is tempting to parrot lines of harmony in order to make us all feel good. However, we will be creating an illusion that all is good; that all our problems are going to go away because we believe in sentiments rather than actions. We want to see the smokescreen of inclusion and harmony rather than face the discord and disharmony created by some of the honourable Members of the Coalition Government.

His Excellency the President, towards the end of his Speech, made an appeal to all the honourable Members of this august Parliament to consider sentiments expressed by fellow citizens and bring your concerns to this august Parliament. His Excellency further went on to ask honourable Members of Parliament to listen to the voices of the people, not only those who elected you, but to all our citizens, young and old, men and women, and of all backgrounds and beliefs.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am not sure how many Members of the Coalition Government would heed these words and follow the true path of democratic representation of our people. Their actions and policies in the past year of their governance have not been exemplary, to say the least, when it comes to democratic representation of all our people.

As a representative of our people, I feel dutybound to bring to light matters that shows that this Coalition Government is not being responsible and accountable when it comes to governance. This Government, like any other, has to place a premium on being responsible and accountable. It cannot be any other way.

Madam Deputy Speaker, some of the honourable Members of the Coalition Government have shown themselves to be arrogant, irresponsible and entitled in the last 14 months, be it in policy matters and following the rights and wrongs of applications in following the rule of law as laid out in the 2013 Constitution, or in the personal conduct of its Ministers and Members of Parliament when they have acted in ways that make a mockery of the people whose money they are throwing around. As I have said earlier, I am dutybound that when representatives of this Coalition Government are acting in an irresponsible manner and ways that destroy rather than build this nation, then it is our duty to expose those failures of Government and governance without fear or favour.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government, given its very shaky (and I see some of it still shaking) past months, will do well to listen and act on constructive criticism that can correct their failures and provide pathways towards progress and nation building.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in recent sugar industry consultation in the Western Division, the honourable Minister for Sugar and his Team did not receive a good reception.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker ...

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Carry on, honourable Bala.

HON. P.K. BALA.- ... this was evident from the numerous times during the meeting, the honourable Minister for Sugar had to ask the public to respect him.

(Laughter)

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is typical of the entitled and arrogant attitude of the representatives of the Coalition Government on the ground. But the question that we must ask is, what went wrong for the honourable Minister to make this repeated demand for respect?

The truth is that the people were not disrespectful, for we all know that respect is a two-way street. You have to give respect to gain respect.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, that is an example of the direct opposite that goes against both, the sentiments and the reality of the message when His Excellency, in his Address, said that we need to listen to the voices of our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, instead of realising what is happening on the ground and the issues that is facing the sugar industry, we hear time and again of building a new sugar mill in Rakiraki.

Madam Deputy Speaker, building a new mill will mean that the declining number of sugarcane farmers and sugarcane farms in Rakiraki will have to be, by magic, increase their production for its current tonnage in order to make the mill viable. The problem is that, instead of fixing problems for the farmers, you want to burden them even further, just so that you can build a mill to keep your Election promises.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this lack of planning and proper studies on a project is worse than those politicians like him, who promise to build bridges where there are no rivers.

(Laughter)

Madam Deputy Speaker, just to add on sugar matters, when we were in Government, we were criticised for appointing the former ANZ CEO as the Chairman of FSC, because he was residing overseas. We ask, what is the situation now? Whether the Chairman resides here or overseas, where does the honourable Minister normally have his cocktail parties?

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President also mentioned an increase in the cane production to 1.8 million tonnes in the 2024 season, compared to 1.6 million tonnes in 2022. I ask, where are the figures for 2023? Was His Excellency the President basically misled, then why not 2023?

Madam Deputy Speaker, after talking to farmers, there has to be a miracle to produce 1.8 million tonnes this season. It is easy to say 1.8 million.

(Hon. C.J. Singh interjects)

HON. P.K. BALA.- No, I will stop there. I know you are getting under pressure, so I will respect you because of your health.

(Laughter)

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order!

Honourable Member, may I, please, remind you to address the Chair.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I note the rollout of the consultation towards the National Development Plan (NDP) and would like to remind this august Parliament that Fiji already has a short term and a long term NDP that goes into the early 2030s that would serve us equally well. It has provision for reviews and restating of goals, and it would have saved us both, time and money, to use it as a platform rather than embark on a completely new plan.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister. I am sure the people of Fiji would like some transparency on the cost of this new NDP and exactly how and why it is required and why there is a need to replace the existing Plans.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I make this comment on the NDP process because the Coalition Government is full of this thinking and planning exercise, rather than real action on the ground. We face many challenges from the spread of drugs and its impact across our societies and in particular, on our youth. This is an immediate challenge requiring an immediate response, but all we get is more planning and thinking exercises.

We have an imbalance on our youth, Madam Deputy Speaker, in the schools, tertiary and training institutions, and lack of workers on the ground and these days, it is not only qualified workers but workers in general.

For a small nation like ours, Madam Deputy Speaker, we are now relying on migrant labour, and this does not mean well in terms of how we are taking actions to provide local solutions. From my talks with the employers and investors, the issue is not just in terms of numbers, but more importantly, in terms of reliable and productive labour pools, and the Coalition Government needs to act quickly and address this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the longer we have no action on the ground and we do not move projects and have policy initiatives to address the ongoing cost of living burdens on so many Fijians, the greater the associated problems of net-migration and loss of human capital will become for Fiji. Our fear is that the current inaction of the Coalition Government and their general inept policies will lead to an irreversible lapse situation in our social and economic development for our future generations.



Madam Deputy Speaker, next, I turn to Local Government. Let us turn to the heart of the matter and, that is, the appointment of Special Administrators within our Municipalities. It has come to my attention that these appointments are nothing more than political favours allocated based on party affiliation rather than on merit.

Consider this situation, Madam Deputy Speaker, if there are three Special Administrators appointed to a Municipality - one is from the People's Alliance Party (PAP), one from National Federation Party (NFP) and one from Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA). That is the reality, no matter how they are going to say, "no" or "yes", et cetera, those are rubbish. And in some Municipalities, there are more than three Special Administrators, and it falls into the hands of PAP. This type of appointment undermines the very fabric of our democracy and erodes the trust of our ratepayers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while I personally may not harbor any grievances against the individuals appointed, I stand here today as the voice of ratepayers who have expressed profound concerns over the transparency and fairness of these appointments. These issues do not lie in the appointments themselves, but extends to the wrong process through which candidates were selected.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not know whether the honourable Minister is aware of this, but it is a very serious matter.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- About what?

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, I am going to tell you. You are very good at saying, "what" and "what", but it will be a good lesson for you.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it has come to light that a fundamental requirement has been disregarded, rendering the entire process suspicious in the eyes of the public.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the advertisement stated that the applicant must be a resident of the municipality (that is what I am talking about) on which they seek to serve. In some Municipalities, some of the Special Administrators do not reside in the Municipality.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Give an example.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is not my job, you go and do it. Why should I give examples.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Because you brought it up.

HON. P.K. BALA.- He doesn't know the meaning of 'municipalities', honestly!

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I ask the honourable line Minister to correct this incorrect appointment. And if you really want examples of these appointments, I can give you the list, but what I am saying in this Parliament is that the appointments are illegal. You have to accept that as line Minister, but if you have been pressured from someone, that is another matter, in terms of appointment.

I am telling this august Parliament, it is an illegal appointment of Special Administrators in some of the Municipalities because they do not reside within the Municipalities, and that is what the advertisement says. I am not saying, it is their advertisement, not mine, and this is what people are asking.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Furthermore, Madam Deputy Speaker, let us not overlook the imbalance in the gender representation within these appointments. Despite big talks on gender equality, the reality remains that women are systematically sidelined from positions of influence and decision-making within our Local Government.

Here, we have one Assistant Minister, who goes around the country with donor agencies' funds to conduct workshops in the name of empowerment of women. I want to ask how many Special Administrators are women?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Your time is up?

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is my time, what the hell are you doing there?

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I move towards my closing words, I must thank His Excellency the President for outlining the vision for Government to continue to formalise land tenure agreements to ensure security of tenure. During our term in office under the FijiFirst Government, after negotiations with landowners, we secured a development lease at Varavu, Ba, to develop that area. Sadly, some tenants are now issued with a notice to vacate and are caught in a state of limbo. There were big talks in the morning about informal settlements.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am also told that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance had a meeting with some residents some weeks back and he assured them that they do not have to vacate. So, I hope the honourable Minister will liaise with the line Minister to resolve this issue because there is a real issue in that area right now. You may laugh, you may joke, but this is a serious matter that needs some attention.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the sentiments of His Excellency the President is an opportunity for this Government to engage with honesty and commitment so that it can lead his vision for one nation and one people for Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let us reflect on the profound word of His Excellency the President, as conveyed in his opening Address to this august Parliament. His call to uphold the rule of law and democracy resonates deeply within our hearts and underscores the duty we bear as custodians of our nation in future. Let us not merely pay lip service to those noble ideals but let us embody them in every aspect of our governance to enact tangible change.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency's recollection of his youth in Macuata, engaged within the reach of Indo-Fijian farming families serves as a moving reminder of the harmony and unity that can be achieved when diversity is embraced rather than ignored. It is upon us, as leaders, entrusted with the welfare of our nation, to heed these calls for unity and inclusivity to bridge the divides that threaten to fracture the fabric of our society.

It is imperative, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we confront these issues head on, relegating them to annals of history and paving the way for a future where every Fijian, regardless of race or political affiliation, is afforded equal opportunities and dignity. Let us commit ourselves to policies

and programmes that foster inclusivity, that celebrate the rich mixtures of cultures that define our nation, and that empowers every citizen to realise their full potential.

In closing, Madam Deputy Speaker, let us heed the call of His Excellency the President, again, and rise above the politics of division and discord. Let us forge a path forward, guided by the principles of unity, justice and respect for all. Together, let us build a Fiji where every citizen can hold their head high with pride, knowing that they are a part of a truly great nation - one country, one nation, united in purpose and destiny. Long live Fiji and her people, live in peace and harmony.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you very much, honourable Bala, for your response. I just want you to remember that you have spoken four minutes over time. Now, if any honourable Member who is yet to speak would like to yield some time to the next speaker from your side of Parliament, please, do let Madam Secretary-General know so that she can let me know.

May I also remind all honourable Members to, please, address the Chair. Have your little conversations at tea time, but I am mindful of everyone's time here. So, I appreciate your understanding, thank you.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Madam Deputy Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; *ni bula vinaka* and a very good day to you all.

Before I respond to His Excellency's most gracious Speech, I wish to address Parliament on few issues that were brought up by an honourable Member from the Opposition.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I was a farmer and a Board member of our co-operative before I became a politician. I have resigned from the Board before becoming a Minister but remained as a member of the co-operative to support aquaculture and agriculture farmers who are struggling to make ends meet. Co-operatives in Fiji operate in different sectors across many outer islands and are closely linked with economic and social development. Is it wrong by law for me to be a member of a co-operative linked with economic and social development in my Ministry?

Madam Deputy Speaker, Section 32(1) of the Bill of Rights and Constitution states, and I quote:

“Every person has the right to full and free participation in the economic life of the State, which includes the right to choose their own work, trade, occupation, profession or other means of livelihood.”

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- You are a Minister now!

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Was there any question on conflict of interest and abuse of office to Mr. Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum in his capacity as the Minister of Economy when providing millions of dollars of Government funds to his brother at the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation by the current Opposition Member? No! Was there any question on conflict of interest and abuse of office to Mr. Bainimarama when employing his family members in various arms of Government? No! Now, we have got that out of the way.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to respond to His Excellency's most Gracious Speech delivered in this august Parliament to mark the Opening of the 2024 new Parliament year. I must

acknowledge the words of inspiration and foresight from His Excellency's timely statement that has set the course, as we navigate the people of Fiji through the year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I note that His Excellency mentioned the importance of natural resource-based sectors. The Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry echo the sentiments made and I firmly believe that this is the silver lining to our strive towards prosperity for our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are here for only three reasons and, that is, the people, the people, and the people of this land we call home. We have been humbly reminded of the immense responsibility that comes with representing the diverse voices and aspirations of our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will begin with ridges of our Forestry Sector and elaborate on the reefs and beyond for our Fisheries Sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the State Opening of Parliament, His Excellency, in his statement, rightfully stated that despite our negligible contribution to global emissions, we are greatly impacted by the effects of climate change. Our coastal communities are being forced to relocate and our lives and livelihoods impacted in various ways due to the effects of climate change.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in addressing climate resilience, the Ministry will continue its 30 Million Trees in 15 Years Programme, focusing more on survival and encouraging community participation through incentive planting and seedling sales. This support will extend to coastal communities in the restoration of mangroves for coastal protection and restoration of the coastal ecosystems.

To support our tree growing efforts, a new Plantation Policy and a Reforestation and Afforestation Guideline is being developed by the Ministry through the support from its development partners.

Additionally, Madam Deputy Speaker, we will continue to address emissions through our Forest Emissions Reduction Programme. We have completed our first monitoring report which has progressed through the third party audit and should result in the first carbon payments which we have aspired to since the REDD Plus project was implemented.

This programme is intended to be inclusive, with communities being consulted on the requirements to be met in order to participate and receive the full benefits of compliance and the standards required under the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we will continue to support our low emission development strategy through reduced deforestation and increased plantation productivity. Our support of bioenergy to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and reduce forest waste is progressing through engagement with the Nabou Green Energy and other stakeholders, contributing to the forest energy sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are currently undertaking extensive afforestation and restoration of forests, to ensure sustainable supply from our forests, while they continue to provide the essential environmental services, including protection of our biodiversity, provision of clean water and overall health of our forests and oceans through a ridge to reef concept.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency highlighted the need to foster strong partnerships and the Ministry is working in collaboration with its stakeholders, development partners and other Government agencies, to access climate funds to accelerate our response to climate change collectively. Through the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization, we have submitted a

concept note to the Green Climate Fund which has been accepted, and we are progressing in the development of a full proposal, working together with other agencies with pipeline Green Climate Fund projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker, not only has the Ministry sought external collaboration, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Heritage and Arts. Noting the access the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has with our local communities, it will assist in the delivery of our initiatives and the establishment of governance within those intended communities to ensure the sustainability and diversification of projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to secure climate finance, it is important to review our policies and legislations to allow for new developments and partnerships. We are currently reviewing our Forest Act 1992, to align to the Climate Change Act 2021. This is to ensure consistency of definition, processes, institutional arrangements and responsibility, and to provide a legal framework that will underpin forest climate change initiatives, including forest carbon trading.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with the changing global environment in terms of standards, compliance, environmental, economic, social and political development, it is imperative that the Mahogany Industry Development Act 2010 be reviewed. The Ministry will be undertaking this much needed review, in consultation with all stakeholders with the intention to address good governance, sustainability, compliance to trade requirements, inclusiveness of communities and overall economic growth.

The REDD Plus Policy of 2010 has been reviewed and is in the final stages of endorsement. This will set the much needed direction required for the forest emissions reduction programme and projects.

A Code of Practice for wood processing has been developed to ensure sustainable wood processing and improving the efficiency of sawmills in terms of recovery, health and safety and protection of the environment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to support trade and diversify products from forests, the Ministry is developing partnerships to explore the potential of bamboo and other non-wood forest products, as well as assisting resource owners to effectively participate in our efforts towards value addition. We are working closely with resource owners through cottage industries, small enterprises and co-operatives by providing training and infrastructure to manufacture their products and markets access. Currently, we are supporting three cottage industries - Gaunavou Co-operative from Vugalei, Kalabu Youth and Sawakasa Youth. In addition, we are supporting wood carvers from Fulaga and Kabara through training on product development and marketing their products, and eventually resourcing them with equipment through subsidies.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government, through the Ministry, continues to support the maritime pine commercial programme for Kadavu and Lakeba, and this work is currently in progress. The Ministry is working with all key stakeholders, including village communities in these two islands, to ensure that all key compliance regulations are met prior to the commencement of operations.

The Ministry seeks to develop new technologies and tools to assist in economic development, improve wellbeing while protecting the natural resource-base and the environment. We have developed online licensing systems for user ease and using GIS and remote sensing, coupled with the drone technology, to improve our resource assessment and enforcement.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on the topic of innovation, I wish to inform Parliament that this year, the International Day of Forests, which is annually celebrated on 21st March, has the theme *"Forests and Innovation – New Solution for a Better World."* We continue to harness new technology to develop new sustainable material from trees, newer ways to better manage our forests and the products and services they provide.

For the Ministry of Fisheries, we have prioritised the implementation of adaptation strategies to build resilience in the face of extreme weather events and changing environmental conditions by promoting and investing in aquaculture and the culture of coastal commodities. One of the core focus areas for the Ministry is dedicated to sustainable capture fisheries and aquaculture practices that ensure the long-term health of its marine resources and support the livelihoods of our coastal communities. We are working to promote responsible fishing practices for our coastal communities and sustainable aquaculture development to meet the growing demand of the seafood, while preserving our oceans for future generations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry recognises the transformative power of technology and digitalisation in revolutionising our fisheries sector. As a nation heavily reliant on agriculture and fisheries for food security and economic development, we understand the importance of harnessing innovation to enhance productivity, sustainability and resilience in our food systems.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has installed Vessel Monitoring Systems and electronic monitoring systems on fishing vessels which contribute to sustainable fishing practices and prevent Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing that could occur within our Exclusive Economic Zone. Together with placement of Fisheries Observers on longline vessels, it will ensure compliance and entering of correct data and timely submission of data from any particular area in the sea to the office for documentation.

Further to this, the Ministry is working with the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (PIFFA) to develop e-permitting and e-catch documentation systems, to ensure the mass balancing of tuna and tuna like products that pass through Fiji both, as export and re-export commodities, a system that complements the e-payment system provided by the Ministry of Finance, all aimed at ensuring the ease of doing business here in Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are committed through strategic partnerships, capacity building initiatives and investment in research and development. We aim to empower our people with the tools and knowledge needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have facilitated consultations for the Aquaculture Development Plan, with involvement of the private sector. The consultation has completed two phases now with the involvement of Fisheries Technical Officers and the private sector. The Plan will provide a platform for the private sector, Fisheries Department and other Government agencies to work together and allow the export of highly valued fisheries commodities, which will contribute to economic growth within the aquaculture sector. Furthermore, the promotion of aquaculture development is aligned to Strategic Goal 14, which is contributing to the protection of the coastal fisheries resources which has been over-exploited.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Aquaculture Bill is a legislation that protects the interests of the resource owners and investors and needs to be thoroughly reviewed before being tabled to Cabinet. The forthcoming review of Offshore Fisheries Management Act 2012 and Regulations and the Fisheries Act [Cap158], highlights our dedication to ensure robust legal frameworks, emphasizing extensive consultation processes across Fiji and inter-agency coordination.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our recent initiatives and ongoing endeavors reflect our dedication to sustainable fisheries management, economic development and international cooperation on initiatives, such as the Fiji National Offshore Fishing Crew Policy and the Fiji National Fish Warden Policy. This aims to promote safety, labour conditions and compliance within the fishing industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the recent lifting of the ban on sea cucumber harvesting, accompanied by strict regulations and approved entities, demonstrates our commitment to balancing economic interests of the people and the sector with marine conservation efforts. The Ministry continues to make a concerted effort, as in these cases, to ensure that the economic well-being is trickled down to the community level where the people will most benefit.

The Ministry has engaged efforts with certain private entities to enhance projects, like the Seaweed Development Project. This is a new direction the Ministry intends to expand the seaweed mass culture in the Northern Division namely; Bua, Macuata and Cakaudrove. This will support the farms currently established in the Central and Western Divisions. This highlights our commitment to the Public-Private Partnership and sustainable aquaculture practices, and further reinforces that concept, that our communities are not only to engage in such efforts constructively but will be able to stand alone eventually and reap the benefits of such projects.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing Fiji's Fisheries and Forestry Sectors. Through strategic partnerships, legislative initiatives and proactive measures, we are dedicated to fostering sustainable development, promoting economic prosperity and safeguarding the wellbeing of our communities.

To conclude, I would like to echo the sentiments of His Excellency, who states and I quote: "...we are accountable of our actions." The journey will not be easy, but I would like to remind us all of the purpose we are here for. Purpose crosses discipline. Purpose is an essential element for all of us and it is the reason why we are here at this particular time in history - our very existence is wrapped around what we are here to fulfil.

I wish to encourage positive, constructive and respectful dialogue for this new Parliament year, 2024. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I stand corrected on the statement I made about yielding time. I have been advised by the Secretary-General that the Business Committee had unanimously agreed that there will be no yielding. So, honourable Bala, you have just gotten away with an extra four minutes and honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry may be one and a half minute. This has been agreed unanimously by the Business Committee so you will be speaking for 20 minutes under the understanding that you use it or lose it.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I join my colleagues in expressing my sincere thanks and gratitude to His Excellency the President, *Na Gone Turaga na Tui Macuata*, for his most gracious and assuring Address.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency's Address is assuring because it contains positive statements of great significance to this nation. The notion of peace, stability, prosperity, inclusivity and security echoes throughout his Address. His vision for Fiji is a Fiji we all long to see and it is a vision not out of our reach, a vision we can make a reality provided that Government delivers.

The truth is, many of the intentions raised in His Excellency's 2023 Parliament Address have not been fulfilled by the Government. On the fourth paragraph of Page 12 of His Excellency's Address on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2023, he stated, and I quote:

“...I urge this august Parliament to embody the collective spirit of resilience and resolve of our people. This will bring hope of a promising future for the citizens of our beloved nation which we call home.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, people are migrating at an alarming rate. They are looking for new homes elsewhere. A total of 3,207 left our shores in 2023 looking for new homes across the world.

Madam Deputy Speaker, 15,794 left for employment; 10,718 left for education purposes and we know for sure most will not return. Yes, our people do have the right to seek opportunities to go elsewhere but the huge migration data is telling us that our people are fleeing our shores, fleeing a country that is their birth right, that is their home. It begs the question, what is Government doing to make Fiji, this place we call home, a better home for everyone? Could it be that Government has failed to nurture the collective spirit of resilience mentioned by His Excellency? Instead, what we see today is Government's silence on increase in racism and nationalism, both ethno and religious.

Madam Deputy Speaker, during a Government consultation on the Local Government Electoral Process held in Suva on 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2023, an *iTaukei* gentleman, who was not happy with the statement uttered by an Indo-Fijian man, stood and said, “if you are not happy, just go back to where you came from.” Let me remind Parliament, that that is not freedom of expression, that is racism.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Was that man cautioned and arrested for that deplorable attack? No! Did Government condemn that action? No!

Madam Deputy Speaker, silence in the face of injustice is complicity.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- To make Fiji a home for everyone irrespective of race, colour or creed requires the Government to speak out against racism and promote....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Point of Order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

HON. J. USAMATE.- What number?

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER. – Please, take your seat, Sir. Your Point of Order?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.– His speech uttering, inciting ...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and creating hostility and ill-will. The fact that the honourable Member gives an example about social media, what people say, there are equally the same number or if not more Indo-Fijians making comments on social media.

(Chorus of interjections)



HON. R.R. SHARMA.- What comments?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Racial comments.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Once you are finished, sit down!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- There are, of course, *iTaukei* people also, but for him to come into Parliament and use that example, implying that because of Government, this is what they are trying to do, Madam Deputy Speaker, it must stop. They are insulting His Excellency the President's call for a decent debate, tolerance and understanding. I want to register that as a Point of Order.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Honourable Tuinaceva, will you, please, take note of that. Perhaps, if you would like to couch your statement, the allegation that you have made to say that is what was uttered by someone because the other side is saying that it was not the Government's spokesperson. However, that is up to you, but this is going to be on the *Daily Hansard*.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER. - Yes, honourable Koroilavesau.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Standing Order 60 - Relevance. The discussions that have been made by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy is null and void. Honourable Tuinaceva was basically stating something that had been discussed in the public arena. If the honourable Minister does not want it, that is his problem.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau, I take your point. I think I would like to go back to words that are likely to promote or provoke feelings of ill-will and hostility between communities or ethnic groups in Fiji. Honourable Tuinaceva, perhaps, just couching and giving context to the person to whom you referred.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

To make Fiji a home for everyone, irrespective of race, colour or creed requires the Government to speak out loud on racism. Fiji does not belong to only one race, it belongs to everyone who has worked hard to make this country a great nation and we want to make this place we call home great again - a place where we all feel we belong, where every person feels the courage to speak, feels safe to live and the joy of belonging.

Madam Deputy Speaker, political stability is crucial for our multi-ethnic and multicultural society to grow. Political stability is enabled with honouring the Constitution. The Government has, on many occasions, undermined the value of justice, equality and transparency that is alive in our Constitution.

Just consider the appointments of certain Permanent Secretaries, Board of Directors, as already being mentioned by my colleagues, Diplomats, Special Administrators and earlier on today, we heard a lot about our Advisory Councillors, et cetera. Most are failed election candidates or party supporters and do not even meet minimum qualification requirements. It is called cronyism. It is wrong, it is abuse of powers. It breeds political instability, it undermines public trust and confidence in Government.

The previous Government has been accused of dirty, unethical and irresponsible behaviour by those sitting on the other side of Parliament, and it is sad to note that this Government is manifesting the accusation it makes. The case of the pot calling the kettle black.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in 2023, we have seen breaches of the separation of powers guarded by the Constitution. We have witnessed the removal and appointments of holders of key Constitutional offices in a manner that did not follow due diligence and process.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Shame!

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- I urge the Government to honour the Constitution and respect the rule of law to prevent grave confusion and our slide into anarchy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, permit me to comment further on issues raised by His Excellency in his Address at the Opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024. Firstly, the principles of democracy and humanity are enshrined in our Constitution. They are, indeed, fundamental pillars of our society. Therefore, it is imperative that we ensure that we are not merely paying lip service to them.

Democracy and humanity must be actively upheld in our governance and policy decisions. Let us uphold respect, integrity and the dignity of this august Parliament by manifesting with action our belief in these Constitutional principles. It requires a commitment to open dialogue, genuine consultation and meaningful engagement.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I must commend some Ministers and Assistant Ministers for their openness to dialogue and offer assistance on issues that affect people, especially in the rural areas which we presented to their offices. *Vinaka vakalevu turaga* Ministers.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the notion of inclusive development mentioned by His Excellency to improve the wellbeing of citizens is commendable. However, we must remember that inclusive development places the most vulnerable at the centre of development. Inclusive development ensures that everyone has equitable access to opportunities. This should be the standard by which we measure inclusivity.

Targeted interventions must be prioritized for marginalized and vulnerable communities, who for too long, have remained in the peripheries of development. Many of these communities exist in the rural areas.

Inclusive development reverses the marginalization of these communities. In this way, we prosper together. I heard that His Excellency declares Government's commitment to rural development, and I can only hope Government has the resolve to see this through.

Madam Deputy Speaker, for more than a year, at 5.00 a.m. school children from Cora and Nautoloulou Settlements in Wainunu District in Bua, walk more than three kilometres to the main road to catch a bus to get to school because the roads are so bad, no vehicle is willing to travel it. I visited the district last month and saw fathers and mothers carrying babies in the hot sun back from the health centre.

Two Hundred people live in that area. As long as we continue to hear and witness these types of stories, we cannot say we have inclusive development. What is being done about to fix their roads,

to give them the same equitable access to resources and opportunities like the many of us have so that when we speak about inclusive development, we stand with integrity and honour in this Parliament and know that we are truly meaning it?

Madam Deputy Speaker, the portion of the road from Bativurewai to Daria is in a bad state and urgently needs maintenance and some upgrade work.

The Adi Eleni Primary School is regularly flooded even during small downpours. The culvert in front of the school is blocked more than a year now.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I acknowledge the intervention of the honourable Minister for Health in the appointment of Medical Officers for the Wainunu and Lekutu Health Centres. For almost six months, people travelled the long distance to Nabouwalu Hospital to access medical services. *Vinaka vakalevu, Turaga Minister!*

Madam Deputy Speaker, when it is high tide or during flooding events, villages of Viani in Navatu District wait for hours by the roadside before they can get home. The people have been crying for the construction of their crossing. Inclusive and equitable development, again, I beg the question.

Madam Deputy Speaker, not far from here in Naitasiri, ginger and *dalo* farming communities, like Uluisavudua in Sawani, struggle without electricity, water and good roads. Although they contribute to economic development, they do not enjoy the same basic infrastructure as their neighbours in Suva - just a few kilometres away. Government has been promising the community electricity since September last year, but it has not happened.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is digital age and yet, students from some rural communities like Navonu in Cakaudrove hunt for internet hotspots miles from their homes to get necessary school assignments and projects done. Internet network needs major improvement in the *Tikina* of Tunuloa, *Tikina* of Natewa, *Tikina* of Navatu, *Tikina* of Korocau, certain parts of Wailevu West in Cakaudrove, Kubulau in Bua and Matuku in Lau. For these communities, good internet access means equitable access to opportunities in education, government services, commercial ventures and communication – just as we enjoy here in the Capital.

Madam Deputy Speaker, villagers of Natua, Vunidamoli and Natuvu in Wailevu West and Nasinu, Korolevu, Navakaka and others along the Natewa West Road are also still waiting for the electricity grid to be extended to their villages.

At Laucala and Naiqaqi Villages, Vunibuabua and Dogoru Settlements in the Tikina Wailevu, they are still waiting for their solar units Government promised to install in 2023. Similarly, for Nakorovou Village in the Tikina Kubulau and Vatuvonu Settlement in the Tikina Korocau.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to convey the appreciation from the people of Keka and Nakobo Villages who got their units done last year. *Vinaka vakalevu, Turaga Minister.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, I was expecting His Excellency to address carnage on our roads, considering it is a crisis. In 2023, we logged the worst in 11 years with road fatalities. We hit crisis point - 64 percent increase in road fatalities from 2022; 26,000 speeding infringement notices given in only the first six months of a year; 4,000 road accidents from January to December last year, eight deaths happened with a span of two weeks; and 161 accidents recorded within 14 days.

Risky, reckless, aggressive driving behaviours match statistics. In 2023, 53 public service vehicle drivers were booked for drugs issues. It is safe to assume that hundred more drivers drive under the influence of illicit substances.

Simply, our roads are killing fields and here, we have the Government spin doctors minimising the crisis to the point of normalizing the carnage. It is unacceptable that we should devalue human life, unacceptable that the right to life of all road users is minimised with the inaction of Government regarding this crisis.

The only action that matches the severity of this crisis is good enough. The highest action and level of urgency for the protection of the greatest of rights which is the right to live is warranted.

We cannot stand here and say we uphold democracy when we cannot even protect people's right to life on our roads. Since October 2018, the Accident Compensation Commission paid \$44 million in compensation. But compensations alone are not a panacea for this road safety problem. The solution is in minimising road accidents by implementing proper safety measures.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there is an evil that has been long lurking but now openly rearing its ugly head. Drug abuse and trafficking is slowly but surely choking our communities. It is overtaking and victimising our children, harming families and violating the foundation, the peace, comfort and security of our people.

Drug case for the month of January 2024 recorded a significant 94 percent increase as 169 illicit drug cases were registered, compared to 87 the same period last year. That is according to Police. Where is Government's commitment in tackling this scourge before it overtakes us? We witness a huge human costs other countries are enduring because of this illicit drug trade. We must act before it is too late.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the number of street dwellers keep growing which is indicative of poverty. The worst and the sad part is the sudden increase in the number of children below the age of 16 years who are roaming and living on the streets, especially in Suva.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the rising report of domestic violence reflects the suffering of our women and children. According to Police report, crimes against women recorded a 31 percent increase with 252 cases received in January 2024, compared to the same period in 2023. In the words of the Fiji Women 's Crisis Centre, someone's life is everyone's business. Can we see this reflected in the Government agenda for 2024 in a more serious way?

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency echoed a set of words at the very part of His Address. It is a reminder to everyone in this august Parliament on our responsibilities in representing the voice of our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our people are groaning under the high costs of living. It is almost everyone we meet on the streets who are asking the question, "why is everything so costly nowadays?" That is, from food items, clothing, hardware, fuel, transport, rent and everything are expensive.

People are not only complaining but they are also angry. They are suffering. Now, it is all over the media and FCCC is saying that consumers can expect to see an increase in bus fare soon. My question to Government, are you really going to allow this to happen? With all the level of distress and hardship that people are going through due to high cost of living, are you still going to do that?

Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for your patience in listening. Before I take my seat, allow me to utter the voice of my people from Matuku Island.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister for accepting a submission from the people regarding the airport and the road on the island. Matuku islanders face a crucial situation. They have one of the largest pine plantations that can easily sustain their building needs, but the cost of milling is just too high - triple the cost of building a similar house elsewhere. Pine logs are sent to Suva for milling, treatment and then back to Lau for use.

A humble request to the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry to support our people with the installation of a mobile timber treatment plant on the island which can be shared amongst the neighbouring islands.

Also, a big *kerekere* to the honourable Minister for Regional Development. *Ni yalovinaka saka*, our people need a shed at the jetty in Yaroi.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Matuku Health Centre and its adjoining staff quarters need urgent repair.

Finally, Matuku does not have a secondary school. Parents send their children across to Suva for high school and that comes with huge socio-economic costs. This too is something they plead with Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I pray our ears willingly hear the cries of our people; I pray our eyes clearly see their plight; I pray our hearts deeply feel their pain and suffering; and our hands and feet hasten to bring them light, joy and hope; and most of all, I pray we remember to truly serve and not wallow in self-indulgence.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on the wings of that prayer, I want to thank you for your indulgence.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to thank His Excellency the President of Fiji for His most gracious Speech during the opening of this new session of Parliament on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.

Before I go on, Madam Deputy Speaker, I, first of all, would like to respond to some of the comments made by honourable Members from the other side of Parliament, including a question that was put to me personally yesterday by honourable Ketan Lal. It seems that there is only one side of Parliament that has members who are obsessed with this political instability. No wonder His Excellency the President mentioned about unscrupulous politicians promoting instability amongst our community.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this fanaticism with political instability did not start in this Parliament. It started way back when we were campaigning for Elections up to the point where the Commander of the Fiji Military Forces was asked to assist Police in maintaining law and order. Let us be honest with each other and let us stop this rumour mongering because it takes us nowhere.

In response to honourable Ketan Lal, he had asked a question like if I can recall correctly. Is it right for the Minister for Agriculture to take his father's ashes in a Government vessel? My response to that is that it was an official trip by the Minister for Agriculture on his visit to the Lau Group of Islands and I had sought the honourable Prime Minister's permission, not only for that visit,

but also to take my father's ashes on the same trip.

What I want to say to you, honourable Ketan Lal, through you Madam Deputy Speaker, is try to get the full picture before you come and mislead Parliament because I have observed you overtime in Parliament. Talk is cheap. Anyone can say whatever they want, but you need to put your facts right.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Go and read the *Daily Hansard* first, then come and talk to me.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am asking honourable Ketan Lal, "Look around you because within your ranks you have people who can teach you about decorum in this Parliament, teach you about respect and teach you about manners.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to extend my gratitude and acknowledge the hard work and dedication of the 98,220 farmers - men, women, young and old, and those with special needs in Fiji. They have made great sacrifices to ensure that there is sufficient nutritious food available for all Fijians.

I also pay tribute to the men and women staff of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, who have toiled day and night on trying conditions to see that the Agriculture Sector remains well and alive to feed the citizens of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways has recently organised several agricultural events and initiatives to promote traditional farming methods and support local farmers. These include:

- Field demonstration in Mulomulo, Nawaka, to showcase yam planting techniques.
- The National Ginger Summit.
- Training for kava farmers in Bukuya, Ba.
- The National Turmeric Taskforce Meeting.
- Distribution of cassava flour machines to women clusters in Ba.
- Construction of new farm access roads that has started in Cicia with Vanuabalavu, Moala and Lakeba to follow. The same has been done in the Lomaiviti Province on the island of Ovalau which will be followed by Koro and Kadavu.

Last week ended on a high note, as we celebrated International Women's Day by hosting an inaugural Women in Agriculture Awards Night to recognise the contribution of women to the agriculture sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I fully agree with His Excellency that agriculture will continue to be the backbone of our economy for food and nutrition security and exports. To achieve this, the Ministry is mandated to see that all Fijians are food and nutrition secure, despite the challenges posed by climate change, pandemics and conflicts that disrupt food supply.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has already launched its Five-Year Strategic Development Plan for 2024 to 2028, with a vision of a resilient, inclusive, competitive, innovative and food secure Agriculture and Waterways Sector. This Strategic Plan focuses on innovation, collaboration and strategic investments that link with the National Development Plan and are also aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The Strategic Development Plan comprises five strategic priorities and these are:

- improving food and nutrition security;
- improving livelihoods for farming households;
- increasing adoption of sustainable resource management and climate smart agriculture;
- increasing commercial agriculture; and
- improving the quality of public sector performance and service delivery.

I am pleased that the Ministry, in close collaboration with other relevant stakeholders, now has a strategic direction to uplift the Agriculture Sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, I would like to outline the Ministry's priorities for the year 2024 and beyond, supporting the strategic direction and focusing on benefitting our farming and vulnerable communities. I had emphasised the significance of utilising modern and large scale technologies to enhance agricultural productivity in the crop and livestock sectors since I took office. By improving mechanisation, we can address the problem of aging farmers, make better use of idle agricultural land, increase efficiency, tackle labour shortages, scale up our economic output and equip our farmers with the necessary tools and knowledge.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to develop financial literacy capacity, the Ministry will continue to capacitate farmers by promoting farming as a business. In collaboration with other stakeholders, the Ministry conducts trainings and workshops, tailored to farmers' needs, covering topics such as budgeting, savings, borrowing and investment, as well as specific agricultural finance concepts like crop budgeting and accessing agricultural loans.

In empowering our farmers with financial security and self-reliance, the Ministry is also exploring a farmers' savings scheme model that will best suit categories of farmers to encourage a culture of financial responsibility that can have a positive impact on national prosperity and a secure future. In addition, the Ministry has also started developing a strategy to use farming as a tool to alleviate poverty by assisting families from marginalised groups and communities in Fiji in collaboration with other Ministries within Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry is among other Government Ministries implementing the Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting Tool under the lead role of the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, supported by the Ministry of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. A total of five capital programmes are currently piloted by the Ministry under this initiative. The Ministry has established a Gender Mainstreaming Action Group through the Gender Transformative Institutional Capacity Development initiative, to ensure that all policies, planning, projects and budgeting in the Ministry are gender responsive.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as part of the new 5-Year Strategic Development Plan, the Ministry's Strategic Priority 2 aims to enhance the agriculture sector's value adding capabilities to increase profits and enable entry into new, profitable markets for our farmers. This will expand production seasons, empower our women and youth economically, improve socio-economic livelihood and address post-harvest losses in agriculture.

To achieve this, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways will continue to provide agriculture value-adding machinery, including equipment and machines for processing cassava flour, virgin coconut oil and other agricultural products.

The Ministry will continue the capacity building programmes in value addition products for farmers and women's groups in our rural and maritime communities. By fostering partnerships with both, domestic and international markets, we will create a more robust network for trade, with fair pricing mechanisms and support systems in place.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as a vulnerable island nation, Fiji recognises the urgent need to address the impacts of climate change on the agriculture sector. The Ministry's Strategic Priority 3 focuses on the adoption of sustainable resource management and climate smart agriculture. This includes the need to fortify our agricultural practices against the challenges posed by climate change through innovative approaches, in which we envision building resilience within our farming systems.

With the recent endorsement of the Drainage (Amendment) Act 2023 by Parliament, the Government is undertaking a strategic initiative to re-establish the Drainage Board. This crucial entity will oversee the management of 103 Drainage Schemes spanning the Central, Western and Northern Divisions. This endeavour is poised to enhance support for our invaluable sugarcane farmers and cash crop cultivators operating within these schemes, fostering growth and prosperity within our vital agriculture sector.

The upcoming development of a comprehensive National Waterways Management Programme is a crucial initiative to address the challenges posed by climate change. The Programme focuses on maintaining and improving waterways infrastructure to protect critical assets from flood damage and implementing erosion control measures. Additionally, it promotes sustainable land use and development through zoning regulations, flood risk management and restoration of natural water systems.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is fully committed to fostering a resilient and inclusive agriculture sector that not only ensures food and nutrition security for all Fijians, but also drives economic growth and sustainable development, improves socio-economic livelihoods and alleviates poverty. Through strategic investments, innovation and collaboration, we will pave the way for a brighter and more prosperous future for all, including women and youth in Fiji's agriculture sector.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament; *bula, ramram, salam* and good afternoon to you all. Change is the rule of nature. Everyone or everything must change with time whether it be society or the rules that governs the society, eventually it changes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while the world realises the change that can be brought by climatic events due to global warming, people of Fiji in just the past one year have literally understood that the devastating changes that have been brought to the people of Fiji by this Coalition Government is far greater, compared to the change that global warming did globally.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Where are your facts?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Climate change gradually brought about this devastation, but the Coalition Government was in top gear when it came to changes, even if it meant changing the promises they made during the Elections or the promises they made that was to be brought about in their first 100 days in Government, or in the first six months, or even in the first year.

What we are hearing now is that they cannot do everything in just one year. I can say this with confidence that they will continue to say that, even after one whole term that they cannot do everything in just one term.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, they will be consistent in only one thing,



which is blaming the FijiFirst Government.

Although Government Ministers are out attending opening ceremonies, wearing *salusalu* and having *magiti* for the very projects that we initiated during the previous FijiFirst Government, they fail to give credit to the previous Government. I wonder if any of the honourable Ministers, during the commissioning ceremony, had stated that the project was initiated by the Coalition Government. The simple answer would be, 'no', because I do not recall that they had initiated any new projects in the last financial year. How can they work on new projects when they cannot even maintain or complete the projects initiated by FijiFirst?

I have been in Parliament for the past nine years now and this will be the tenth year, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have seen a lot in the past nine years. Already, we have had Presidents come to open the new session of Parliament seven times and three times when Presidents have opened the new term.

To my surprise, His Excellency the President pleaded for the same thing that was pleaded by previous Presidents during the opening of Parliament. What used to surprise us, and it is not me saying it, it is recorded in the *Daily Hansard*, that Opposition Members back then used to rubbish the Presidential Speech. But do not worry, we, as Opposition Members of Parliament, have ethics and although we may have reservations with the person, we still respect the position and its integrity, and we would not condemn the speech as it has been done in this Parliament previously.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Your leader rubbished the President.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Just listen!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hold on!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- For the past many years, the same plea was given to Members of Parliament that we need to be vigilant in what we say or claim in Parliament. Prior to 2023, the Government used to do good, but we were blamed for not doing enough and now the Government is doing nothing and we are requested to speak in favor of the Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Facts, facts, where is your facts?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, during our time, we used to say, "Do not do hate speech, do not talk about racism", but now, we are being asked not to talk about nepotism and corruption that is becoming the foundation of this Coalition Government.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Shame!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, we were labeled as racists this morning. Everyone knows who has given us the blue book known as the Constitution, which is based on equality and equal citizenry. No one here on our side in any shape or form promotes division. We know very well who was doing this during Elections and now as Government, they have started once again. One of the examples is attempts made to change the Constitution to change the common name, "Fijian".

HON. J. USAMATE.- There you go!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The moment we speak about nepotism, corruption, law and security, increase of illegal activities, unemployment, increase in inflation, hardship faced by the

poor, what are we told? That the Opposition is not being cooperative and that we need to work hand in hand to resolve these issues. We had been asking for the same cooperation from the Opposition for the past eight years, but did Opposition ever cooperate? No.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Where is the transparency?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the only agenda they had for the past eight years was to remove FijiFirst from government and form the new government.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- That was the biggest achievement.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Well, it seems like, it is a sin in Fiji now to talk about corruption, rule of law, lack of investor confidence, high rate of inflation, nepotism, breach of the Constitution, et cetera. I am sorry to say this but in democracy, the Opposition has the mandate to keep Government in check and to keep the Government accountable for any decision Cabinet makes. Working with the Government for the betterment of Fiji is one thing but as an effective Opposition, we need to speak against Government and ensure transparency and accountability is in place.

It was all about change, change and change - changing Chief Executive Officers, Permanent Secretaries, High Commissioners, Board members, company directors, Special Administrators and Advisory Counsellors. All of them were victims because of this so-called change. We warned people that such changes are not good for the nation because when corruption creeps in, knowledge moves out. That is exactly what is happening in Fiji. So many educated Fijians are leaving the country because they know their future is where their knowledge and merit is appreciated.

Madam Deputy Speaker, instead of pleading with us, please, improve the Civil Service which has changed for the worse in the past year. This Government promised permanent establishment for civil servants, but it is one year now, and civil servants are still waiting. Why are only new appointees getting permanent establishment to retire at 60?

Civil servants under this Government have the freedom to work the way they want, without tension. What is happening now is that Ministers and Assistant Ministers are having difficulties in getting the job done because what has been embedded into the Civil Service system is sluggishness and botherless attitude. Do not rubbish these claims, please, go and improve the system because individuals are suffering. Go and ask those patients who are waiting for hours in lines to be seen by the doctor, patients who are waiting for months to be operated on because most of the operating theatres at CWM Hospital are not operational. FijiFirst had made 10 operating theatres, only four or five are operational at the moment.

Ask those people who are waiting for normal water supply to their pipes? The Viria Water Project is on hold just because the rumor is, one Minister, all of a sudden, has manipulated the minds of landowning units that they should claim that the freehold land where the treatment plant is, is not on freehold but theirs.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Misleading, water is going.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- One such childish approach from someone within the Coalition Government and more than 250,000 people in the Suva-Nausori corridor are suffering.

HON. H. CHAND.- Very poor!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- There have been a lot of scenarios in the last one year when

Government Ministers do not spare a moment criticising the past Government but, at the same time, they do not see under their own administration what is happening. The action of one Member of the Coalition Government is affecting how other Members perform their ministerial responsibilities.

Even some honourable Ministers agree that they in trying to remove the civil servants appointed by FijiFirst, that has led to brain-drain within the system, and they do not have qualified people to do the job. Some honourable Ministers were smart enough to retain some of them, but others are now struggling with their own Ministries. The institutional knowledge is gone, it will not come back as these educated people took the next available flight out of Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as I have said before, if you breed corruption and nepotism, knowledge will take the next available flight to where it is appreciated. Worst case scenario is that these honourable Ministers cannot even blame anyone because it was the Government's decision to dismiss the contracts of those qualified people and appoint people based on nepotism.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I expected His Excellency's Speech to address four sections of our society - youth, the poor, female and farmers. I thought he would emphasize more about health, education, agriculture, housing and social protection.

Madam Deputy Speaker, FijiFirst planted a seed. We watered it daily, the plant grew into a healthy tree, it was bearing fruits and then the Coalition Government came in.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You just want to create your facts.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- They came in with vengeance and without realizing, they first trimmed the branches, and with those branches went the fruits, and then they uprooted the tree later on. All the Coalition Government had to do was to keep the tree and reap the benefit.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the fruit of the tree was of benefit to the Fijians. The branches were the projects and positive changes brought about by the FijiFirst Government, and the root of the tree was the National Development Plan. This Government destroyed the tree and now they want to plant a new seed. Very poor strategic planning.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Very poor!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- The new National Development Plan distorted the Civil Service - no new capital project, what is in store for the public is no longer a guess but everyone knows that there will not be any fruit because there is no tree.

Madam Deputy Speaker, all this Government had to do was to continue where FijiFirst left, and they would have reaped the benefit as the foundation of a modern Fiji was laid 16 years ago.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Through the *coup*.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- On one side, Government has removed the student loan saying they have removed the burden of repayment but to balance it off on the other hand, VAT has increased, the First Home Buyers Grant has been reduced so net effect is zero.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Very poor!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, taxation reforms were well strategized. All that was needed from the Authority was to improve compliance in terms of collecting tax from

the agents. The Vat Monitoring System (VMS) should have been implemented in other industries as well, especially in small and medium-sized industries because most of the cash dealing takes place in small and medium-sized enterprises.

During the Budget debate, I mentioned it to the honourable Minister of Finance that \$3.7 billion revenue is a very ambitious target. The current report from the Reserve Bank of Fiji suggests that collection is well below target set by the Coalition Government. The Government should have maintained the 9 percent VAT and should have ensured that those businesses that are not paying tax to do so. It is always better to make 10 people pay \$10 rather than getting one person to pay \$100. The net effect is the same, revenue would be \$100, but the burden is shared if all 10 people pay their share.

Businesses are paying rent of \$4,000 to \$6,000 on a monthly basis, yet they are using cash registers. Implement the use of Point of Sales (POS) with VMS for those businesses as one can only imagine if businesses are paying that amount of rent, what would be their total annual turnover. Madam Deputy Speaker, the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) needs to crack down on such business practices.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- What is happening to the National Switch? When are we going to implement wireless payments so that we can crack down on black economy? There are millions of dollars that are collected as VAT but not paid to FRCS. If we work on this, we can bring VAT and duty down on most of the items that will help the poor and the needy.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hear, hear!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, we can stand here and try to paint a picture that everything is perfect outside the walls of this Parliament, but it is not. Our people are suffering. No matter how much paint we put on the walls. One needs to go to the market and talk to the market vendors or talk to the farmers. I urge the honourable Minister for Sugar to go to the sugarcane farmers with security guards, please. Security is an issue...

(Laughter)

... or to the squatter settlements, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the people are waiting for a piece of land to build their house or talk to the employees who are just earning the minimum wage.

His Excellency the President said to listen to the people, but Government Ministers are not even sharing their mobile phone contacts. How will they listen when people cannot even call them?

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

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I do not blame them, Madam Deputy Speaker, as selective hearing is a common phenomenon for the Coalition Government.

The Advisory Councillors are supposed to be the eyes and ears of the Government. I agree, people were handpicked, but why is the Advisory Councillor of Vunivau, Labasa, is someone residing in Labasa Town? Why is the Advisory Councillor of Covata area residing in Lajonia? Why is the Naduna Advisory Councillor residing in Vunimoli?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Madam Deputy Speaker, to put this into geography, it is Area A, Area B and Area C. Someone sitting in Area A is the advisory councillor of Area C. How is that possible, Madam Deputy Speaker?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- They need to be qualified.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Who did this?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Some of those appointees, Madam Deputy Speaker, cannot even fill any forms or write a letter. Advisory Councillors are the eyes and ears of the Government but in here, when they do not even reside in the area they are serving, how will they hear the plea of the people they are supposed to serve and what will they tell the Government?

If they were to listen to the public, they will realise that the air fares with Fiji Airways is getting very expensive. During the time of FijiFirst, one way air fare to Labasa used to start at \$65 with a 15-kilogramme luggage. Now, it is \$105 with just a carry-on and if you buy with luggage, it is close to \$130 one way. This is from Suva.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Oh my god! What is the Minister doing?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- If we consider Nadi, it starts from \$153 ranging up to \$295 with a 15-kilogramme luggage one way. That is just local fares. Very soon, locals who are trying to visit overseas might not be able to afford the air fares and if the Government cannot bring the fares down, please, open our skies to other carriers as well.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Flying to the USA, Madam Deputy Speaker, has gone up from \$2,000 to \$3,500 return. Let the competition dictate the aviation industry. As stated by honourable Kirpal yesterday, we had Qantas ambassadors in this Parliament but now, they seem to be silent when Fiji Airways is increasing air fares. That reminds me, where is the Fiji Airways Annual Report and why has it not been tabled in Parliament till to-date? It was the same people sitting in Government who have been asking for this report for the past eight years and we are into the fifteenth month in Government, none of these reports have been tabled in Parliament.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Are we doing enough to decrease the burden of ordinary Fijians? I do not think so, Madam Deputy Speaker.

When FijiFirst used to help people through Social Protection Programmes, we were told that we were handing out freebees, but I do not understand why, all of sudden, we do not hear this word in this Parliament anymore.

There has been an increase in the budget for the Ministry but when we were doing it, it was freebees but when this Government is doing it, it is saying it is empowerment. Why the double standard?

Madam Deputy Speaker, a lot of things had been said in this august Parliament, even last year, but we do not hear it anymore. As Opposition in the last eight years, they had been asking the

Government to do this and do that, but now when they are in Government, they are doing exactly the opposite.

Let me remind the Government of what we are all waiting for:

- The answers from the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry whether he is a Director.
- When is the Chairperson of Fiji Sports Council going to be investigated?
- The report on Walesi investigation from the Deputy Prime Minister.
- The announcement of one new project that the Coalition Government has funded or is going to fund.
- What the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs is doing.
- Waiting on the Rarawai Mill and now on the ethanol production.
- Singaporeans who are coming to Fiji and the Minister for Sugar was supposed to announce the good news very soon. We are still waiting for the good news, honourable Minister!
- Hear the total tonnes of sugarcane produced from the honourable Minister for Sugar based on what he claimed for year 2023. It was surprising that His Excellency the President compared production of 2024 season to 2022 season. What happened to the statistics of 2023?
- When the Ministers are going to step down, especially those who are being investigated by Police and FICAC. Please, take the cue from our former FijiFirst Minister, Dr. Mahendra Reddy, when he was charged and he did the honorable thing, he stepped down from his ministerial portfolio and once his name was cleared by Court, he got re-appointed as a Minister. But look at these Ministers, they should be ashamed.
- Still waiting for the Municipal Elections.
- Still waiting for Advisory Councillors' Election.

Now, let us see some things that Fijians are waiting for:

- Sugarcane farmers are waiting for the \$5 they were promised if the produce more sugar cane compared to 2022.
- People are still waiting for the roads to fixed all around Fiji.
- Villagers are waiting for sealing of their roads. Schools are waiting for the roads in front of the school to be sealed.
- Maritime areas are waiting for boat fares to go down.
- People are waiting for the normal water supply.
- People are still waiting to be connected to EFL grid.
- Patients are waiting for surgeries.
- Parents are waiting when the levy imposed on them by school would be removed.
- Social Welfare recipients are waiting for their application to be processed.
- Bus fare recipients are waiting for their top up.
- Poor are waiting for the price of basic food item and goods to go down.
- People are still waiting for the land development to build their house.  
Those areas that had been developed by FijiFirst, people are waiting for their lease and title.
- Teachers are waiting when the regularisation is going to stop, and proper process will be followed.
- Nurses are waiting for their working conditions to be improved along with their pay.
- Businesses are waiting for their VAT refund,
- Agriculture farmers are waiting for the assistance they were promised.
- Overseas investors are waiting for approvals.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Maharaj, please, wind up.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Fiji Airways is waiting for the payment that was supposed to be paid to them for the Israel trip.

All we can expect from this Coalition Government is to sit and wait. Unfortunately, this is the change people voted for, Madam Deputy Speaker. Now, having realised the change people have voted for, the whole of Fiji is waiting for the 2026 General Election.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and let us continue to wait.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, viewers who are watching the live broadcast through television from the comfort of their homes; *cola vina* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Before I proceed, Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to offer my condolences to the family and the *Vanua o Yasawa* for the passing of the *Turaga Na Tui Yasawa, i Taukei Vatanitawake*, the late Ratu Jone Cakautavatava. *Vina du riki valevu na kea lai tutaki tu na vanua 'qa na Yasana o Ba. Lai ciri riki na vesi tabu ni vanua.*

Madam Deputy Speaker, I take this opportunity as well to congratulate the Office of the Speaker and staff for the refurbishment of this august Parliament. I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Fiji Drua Team for their home game win against the Crusaders last Saturday.

I am delighted to address Parliament today in support of the Speech delivered by our President, His Excellency, Ratu Willieme Maivalili Katonivere. His Excellency the President left us with lasting motivation and promoted clearly the patriotism to which we all aspire as Fijians. It provided our citizens with the assurance that Government has done, is doing and will continue to do its best for our citizens, creating solid foundations for the best future for our youth and our future generations.

It reminded us of our progress and achievements, as well as what we will still have to do. It boosts our morale while acknowledging we can always do better. It affirms our capability to reach into a bright future, despite our divided pasts.

His Excellency's Speech provided every Fijian with the belief that we can match bigger nations and economies through development and prosperity. For that, we thank His Excellency the President, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, for his excellent and timely reminder.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I stand before you today as the Minister for Youth and Sports to address this esteemed Parliamentary Session in 2024. It is an honour to have the opportunity to discuss the important role that youth and sports play in our society, and the initiatives that we are undertaking to support and empower our young people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while we are proud to report on some of the recent achievements of the Ministry, including the empowerment of young street dwellers through targeted programmes and initiatives, we feel that we still have a lot more to do collectively as a nation to address this issue.

In his own words, His excellency shared, and I quote:

“I spent several happy years of my youth in Macuata with Indo-Fijian farming families during sugarcane harvesting season. Our integrated community in Macuata taught me many important lessons in life, which include hard work, respect for our elders, family unity and respect for other ethnic communities. The two major ethnic communities in Fiji have always lived in harmony together.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, that was a true story of the life of a normal young person living in an integrated rural community.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the recent visitation of street kids related to drugs and other illegal activities revealed the stories of young people mostly from broken families and the neglected. The Ministry is trying its utmost to address the needs of the vulnerable youth in our society.

While your Coalition Government would continue to provide immediate support and opportunities for these marginalised youth, we are calling on every parent to value their families. It is the cornerstone of human society.

The Ministry is seriously considering the establishment of Rehabilitation Centres around the country to address the current and future impacts of the high usage of drugs in our communities. I take this opportunity to thank all those who have been involved at the very grassroot, to address issues of street kids, drugs, HIV/AIDS, violence against women and children, et cetera.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry organised the first-ever Youth Career Fair across all the four Divisions which received an overwhelming response from young individuals eager to explore various career and entrepreneurial opportunities. The Youth Career Fair provided a platform of interaction with professionals, workshops on essential skills and networking opportunities, leading to direct recruitment and job offers for many attendees. I wish to remind my friend, honourable Koroilavesau, that there is, indeed, a lot of demand for employment here in Fiji.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has discovered a critical strategy for the re-establishment of the National Youth Services Scheme founded in 1993 to help address the unemployment rate.

Accordingly, recent studies show that lack of economic opportunities has led to extreme poverty within communities, leading young people to loiter around urban centres, live on the streets and engage in illegal activities. Therefore, the re-establishment of the National Youth Service Scheme will not only help the current youth challenges for the Government but will also hold significant implications in aligning with our commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have five Youth Training Centres around Fiji that offers transformative opportunities for young individuals seeking a second chance at education and personal development. By focusing on basic agriculture, carpentry, organic agriculture and music, these Centres aim to provide free training on a diverse range of vocational skills tailored to the interests and needs of the youth.

Apart from our community programmes, last year, 190 trainees graduated from our training centres. About 60 percent of these graduates have managed to find employment while others entered tertiary institutions for further education or utilised knowledge gained to engage in farming in their respective communities. This year, 281 trainees have enrolled at our Youth Training Centres and we



are optimistic that these young people will complete their courses this year.

Late last year, the Ministry received a generous donation of musical instruments from the Embassy of China to Fiji, benefitting the Youth Training Centre in Valelevu, Nasinu. This donation will provide students with the necessary tools to excel in their musical journey and foster personal growth and development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the reinstatement of the National Youth Council of Fiji after a lapse of eight years and the launch of the Fiji National Youth Policy and Online Registration Dashboard, marked significant milestones for Fijian youth. These initiatives provide guidance and support for youth development, empowerment and engagement in various sectors.

The reinstated National Youth Council of Fiji serves as a vital platform for amplifying youth voices and channelling their concerns to the Ministry. Its purpose is to represent the diverse perspectives and interests of our young Fijians, facilitating dialogue, advocacy and policy formulation that directly address their needs.

By providing a structured avenue for youth engagement, the Council fosters inclusivity, empowerment and active citizenship among the younger generation. Its impact lies in fostering a more responsive and youth-centric approach to governance, leading to policies and initiatives that better reflect the aspirations and priorities of Fiji's youth population.

Indeed, the reinstated National Youth Council of Fiji effectively complements the Ministry's efforts in youth and sports development. Through partnership and synergy, both entities work towards holistic youth empowerment, fostering a generation of active, engaged citizens contributing positively to society.

On Youth Entrepreneurship, Madam Deputy Speaker, a country has no greater asset for its future than its youth. The Ministry of Youth and Sports has put a priority on encouraging formation of cooperatives and strengthened entrepreneurship through the youth grant, which is truly an investment in our young people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this initiative reflects a broader strategy to harness the energy and creativity of the youth demographic, channelling it into productive and sustainable ventures. By providing financial support and resources, the Ministry not only encourages entrepreneurship but also cultivates a culture of innovation and resilience among young people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on climate change, the Ministry is committed to enhancing our disaster management capabilities to better respond to the challenges posed by climate change. This includes investing in infrastructure, resources and training to ensure that we are well-prepared for any eventualities. For that, Certificate 1 in Resilience on Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction is also part of the programmes offered at one of our Youth Training Centres, with the intention of rolling this out to the other four Training Centres and even to communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on sports development, in addition to supporting our youth, we must also recognise the importance of sports in promoting health, unity and excellence. Sports have the power to bring people together, regardless of their background or differences, and teach valuable lessons in teamwork, discipline and perseverance.

Sports make up 72 percent of the Ministry's current budget which include the Government Grants that the Fiji National Sports Commission administer and so far, we have utilised more than 70 percent of the \$14.1 million allocated for sports.

Here are some of the highlights of our sports achievements that were supported by Government:

- Fiji Water Flying Fijians set Rugby World Cup 2023 alight on 18<sup>th</sup> September as they blew Pool C wide open with a 22-15 win over Australia - their first ever win over the Wallabies since 1954. Unfortunately, the Team lost the third Quarterfinal to Great Britain with 24-30.
- Fiji attained sixth place in the 2023 Pacific Games in Honiara, having amassed 21 gold, 30 silver and 40 bronze medals.
- The Fiji Women's Deaf Rugby 7s team created history early this year in winning a gold medal for the first time in the Australian Deaf Games.

For the first time, Madam Deputy Speaker, our Ministry, through the Fiji National Sports Commission, successfully organised the Community Sports Competition last year that was funded by the Fijian Government. Minor sports like weightlifting continue to make their mark in the international arena. Both amateur and professional boxing are showing greater improvements with new sports administrators. Fiji will be sending a small delegation to the Paris Olympics 2024 Games from 26<sup>th</sup> July to 11<sup>th</sup> August, 2024. The Men's Rugby 7s team is the current gold medal winner, while the Women's team hold bronze.

In other highlights, Madam Deputy Speaker at the reopening of the Aquatic Centre and the National Hockey Turf in Suva on 12<sup>th</sup> January this year, the honourable Prime Minister said, and I quote:

“This facility serves as beacon of global sporting excellence, attracting international events and championships, thereby positioning Fiji as a prominent global sporting destination. Consequently, these endeavours significantly contribute to our economic growth, invigorating our tourism, hospitality, and employment sectors.”

Both refurbishments were funded by the Chinese Government.

The Ministry, through the Fiji Sports Council, successfully installed the newly refurbished track at the HFC Stadium which is a testament to the Government's commitment to investing in sports in the country and a healthy lifestyle for all our citizens. These tracks will provide our athletes with world-class facilities to train and compete, and will, undoubtedly, attract top talents from all around the country. Meanwhile, the entire refurbishing process of the tracks at the Stadium cost around \$1.9 million that was initially allocated in the current National Budget.

Fresh off their pe-season trial in Lautoka a fortnight ago, the Melbourne Storms are set to begin talks with prospective rivals about making Fiji the fourth nation to host a competition match after Australia, New Zealand and USA. Fiji would become the next country to host a competitive NRL game, with Melbourne Storms keen to play a regular season match in Suva from as early as next year.

Furthermore, an achievement for the Ministry is the passing of Fiji's National Anti-Doping Policy and the National Sports, Recreation and Physical Activity Policy to promote sports development, physical activity, and healthy lifestyle among all citizens. These policies aim to make Fiji a sporting hub of the Pacific and promote sports tourism opportunities.

A major undertaking is the establishment of an anti-doping organisation in Fiji to the entire sports systems to have clean sports advocating, promoting, and coordinating the fight against doping

in sports in all its forms to ensure doping-free sport is valued. Your Coalition Government had allocated \$386,700 in our current National Budget towards the establishment of our own National Anti-Doping Organization (NADO) secretariat.

Sports and the thousands of workers heading overseas, Madam Deputy Speaker, to work are pushing remittance to be another strong sector of our economy. Inward remittances increased to \$1.3 billion last year which was a new high and doubled the inflow of 2019.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as the Minister for Youth and Sports, I am committed to promoting youth development and fostering a culture of sports excellence in our country. We are working to expand access to sports facilities, enhance sports training programmes and support talented young athletes as they strive for success on the national and international stage. I call upon stakeholders, Government, private sector, civil society and individuals to join hands in supporting our youth and promoting a culture of sports participation and excellence. Together, we can build a brighter future for our nation and empower our young people to reach their full potential.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry of Youth and Sports remains committed to creating a nurturing environment for our youth, where their talents are recognised and their aspirations are supported by investing in their potential. We are building a stronger, more prosperous nation for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker, allow me to respond to honourable Ketan Lal's allegation yesterday, but I will not stoop low to his level of debate. My simple message is that please, you are in this Parliament, grow up and get your facts right.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you again for this opportunity to outline the Ministry's commitment to delivering to the youths and sports communities in our beloved country.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this brings to a close today's proceedings and I thank you very much for all your contributions. Thank you for making it lively, yes, we have gone over time. I may be enforcing stronger tomorrow morning when I start presiding, but I thank you for your contributions. You will be happy to know that afternoon tea is being served. However, do not expect dinner, enjoy your dinner at your own homes.

I now adjourn Parliament until tomorrow morning at 9.30.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.12 p.m.