

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

WEDNESDAY, 13TH MARCH, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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WEDNESDAY, 13TH MARCH, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.42 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Tuesday, 12th March, 2024 as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all of you sitting in the public gallery and especially those of you who are watching the proceedings on television and online. Thank you for taking an interest in the workings of your Parliament.

I want to take this time to extend a very warm welcome to the group from the Australian Institute of International Affairs. Thank you for joining us this morning and I hope that you will enjoy today's proceedings.

Back to Office Reports

For the information of all honourable Members, the Back to Office Reports for the 147th Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Assembly which was held in Luanda, Angola and the 66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference which was held in Ghana are now available in the Parliamentary library for your perusal and reference.

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

HON. I. NAIVALURUA- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, and honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians who are watching and listening this morning. *Bula vinaka* and good morning to you all.

I thank His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, President of the Republic of Fiji

I thank His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere, President of the Republic of Fiji for his Address to Parliament on the Opening of the 2024 Session of Parliament where His Excellency reminded the Members of Parliament of their, I quote: "...immense responsibility that comes with representing the diverse voices and aspirations of our people...".

His Excellency has urged Parliament to fulfil its obligations and I fully support that call. Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President has also encouraged all Members of Parliament to, I quote: "...listen to the voices of our people, not only those who elected you, but to all citizens, young and old, men and women."

Madam Deputy Speaker, in essence, His Excellency had demanded of us several things that can be summarised simply as this:

1. That we feel the heartbeat of our people on the ground, and when we do that, we try and connect our heartbeat to the heartbeat of our people.
2. Work together and listen to each other.
3. Improve the way we do business, deliver quality and timely service.
4. Get the job done.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I call on the honourable Prime Minister to listen to the heartbeat of the people, because I am not convinced that his Government, his Coalition of political partners is doing that. While I commend the Government for completing the projects initiated under the previous administration, I urge the honourable Prime Minister to move his Ministers to action, instead what we see in the delaying and deferring of what the real issues are on the ground.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the world is experiencing turbulent times, we only must look at the increase in global conflicts, supply chain disruption, global inflation and environmental and social pressures from climate change. Fiji is not immune to this. The impact is well evident here at home. The call is urgent. Does Fiji have the leadership ready to lead through trouble times? Does Fiji have the leadership mindset that will successfully lead us through? Can this Government craft a way forward that is hopeful, genuine and inspirational for all? Madam Deputy Speaker, governing with Coalition partners is a significant challenge, especially when the Coalition needs to improve its performance and start to deliver on its promises.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I call on the honourable Prime Minister to review how he is leading his Coalition and form a government that will serve the better interest of our people and take us forward. If the task is becoming too difficult, throw out a lifeline to those who can help build a better Fiji for our people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there appears to be a deep confusion in the Government about developing a clear forward strategy and implementing priorities. As I have moved around Fiji, spoken with vendors, employees, families, farmers and business owners, I have heard a consistent message of disappointment in this Coalition Government. There are deep and real concerns about our cost of living. Many families are finding they are in survival mode, working out what bills get paid and how to continue living with less in their pockets. I ask the question of this Coalition Government, is your leadership bringing a change for the better? Are your policies bringing a change for the better?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- No!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, another concern is the compromise in keeping Fiji safe and its borders secure. We have become a target for organised crimes. They have exploited gaps in the integrity of our people and our systems. The mounting evidence is that Fiji is

a transit point and destination for hard drugs. There has been a loss in the confidence of our Police Force as the guardians of our streets and communities.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Previous years you did nothing.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I ask the question of the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration, with drugs so easily accessible and drug-associated crime impacting so many in our community, is your leadership effective in making Fiji a safer place? Are your policies effective in making Fiji a safer place?

Madam Deputy Speaker, I express my concern on the mass exodus of our people to Australia and New Zealand. As the honourable Attorney-General rightly pointed out in the news on 7th March this year that this brain drain weakens our nation's potential. I applaud the honourable Attorney-General for his honesty and ask the Coalition Government – what are your plans to address this brain drain?

Madam Deputy Speaker, when people have confidence in a nation and leadership, they invest in that nation and make it their home and place of belonging. This Government is failing to build credible opportunities for its people and secure their confidence so they can say with pride – Fiji, Forever Fiji!

Madam Deputy Speaker, I turn to one of this Government's initiatives: the re-establishment of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC). This newly reassembled body needs to be accessible, reachable, available and willing to serve in the true heart and spirit of *vakaturaga*. The fact that the Colonial Administration gave the name to the assembly of chiefs reveals its history and legacy. The name is outdated in my view and the GCC needs to be rebranded. It is out of touch and connected to a troubled past, not our future. We live in the 21st century where the name of this assembly of chiefs should resonate with the principles and purpose it will serve in moving forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the re-establishment of the GCC was a significant political platform in our last election. However, the GCC's continued relevance is not connected to politics but is dependent on its ability to serve the best interest of its people. The GCC's true value will come about as it stays within its purpose of preparing and encouraging the hearts of the *iTaukei* to invest in the right areas of life and education, to challenge and lead the way in developing self-reliance and drive a shift of attitudes for advancement rather than entitlement, from characteristics of selfishness, dishonesty and indiscipline to true principles of *cakacaka vata*, *veiwekani vinaka*, *veilomani*, *vei dokai* and *duavata*.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- *Vinaka!*

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- This is the key to realising and utilising the God-given gifts that lie within each of us.

Madam Deputy Speaker, like all initiatives led by this Government, the whole community has many expectations of the GCC. I therefore, ask the honourable Prime Minister what return on investment we will see. Will this initiative lead to better lives and a better Fiji?

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Yes!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in reflecting on His Excellency's Address to Parliament, I note the absence of any reference to the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Given the uniqueness of Fiji's sporting heritage and our deep natural talent across this nation, by now sports being one of our premium assets. The success of the Rio Olympics and the repeat success at

the Tokyo Olympics were highlights we celebrated. Yet, despite that world-class success, we have not capitalised or effectively utilised it in terms of what Fiji could have reaped. Simply, we are not achieving all that we can from sports.

Those celebrations are now a distant memory than a foundation on which we built to harness greater sporting excellence. Rugby is just not an afternoon game but a pathway to become a powerhouse, a brand, a pathway for our players and coaches. Through the boots of our rugby players, the world has come to know of Fiji better. Our sporting engagement is not limited to rugby. We compete in netball, volleyball, swimming, basketball, hockey, soccer, weightlifting, yachting and athletics to name a few.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our sports are also a platform for nation building, economic inflows through remittances, developing the Fiji brand and building a friendly space for diplomatic relations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, sports has a great role to play in nation building. I propose that the Government consider the establishment of a Fiji Institute of Sports or Centre of Sports Excellence to train and develop our athletes to compete at an elite level. Our performance at regional competitions are declining illustrating that we need to take the necessary development steps and invest more in what we have. By investing in the sports industry, we create better opportunities for our hardworking sportsmen and sportswomen.

Madam Deputy Speaker, furthermore sports can be better integrated into a foreign policy so that the achievements of our sports people can strengthen our international relations. This is about maximising what we have, expecting the best economic benefits and building our nation and moving it forward. As a small island nation, we have to be creative and innovative to be able to play above our weights.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our nation's future lies in the hands of our youth. They are critical in shaping our country's growth and development, and their empowerment is vital to boost productivity. We need to work together to ensure our young people are open to change and they share our unified vision of moving the country forward. It is important that as a nation we must understand that empowering youths goes merely beyond giving them a voice, it is about equipping them to use that voice effectively and contribute positively to the society. With this, Madam Deputy Speaker, I strongly propose a review of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. This is to pave the way for a more focused and a proactive approach to develop our youth and sports separately.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank His Excellency for his emphasis on the key pillars of our foreign policy. I believe our foreign policy should ultimately be about connecting the world to Fiji to achieve our well-being and prosperity as a nation. To accomplish this, we must have our house in order. The world will connect to Fiji when we are seen as a safe and stable destination.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I. NAIVALURAU.- The world will connect their investment to Fiji when they are confident that we are good managers of our economy. The world will support and cooperate with Fiji when they know that we are consistent in our decisions and uphold international norms.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, our peacekeepers are a stable part of our foreign policy engagement, yet this Government has chosen to take sides in the very area that our peacekeepers are serving. These decisions, in my view, needs to be revised or will disrupt how we

add value and gain value as a longstanding partner of the United Nations Peacekeeping Missions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while we discuss and debate policies, the real issues that confront us now are the bread and butter issues that our people face. The figures released by the Reserve Bank of Fiji paint a grim reality. The cost of food in our nation increased by 3.4 percent in January 2024, exacerbating the burden of our already struggling population.

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

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- The harsh reality is that major businesses are thriving while families are left digging deeper into their pockets to afford a decent meal. Madam Deputy Speaker, the writing is on the wall. The people of Fiji are not facing a mere inconvenience but an uphill challenge against the rising cost of living that threatens the very fabric of our society.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- Brutality.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Update that information.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, it would be wonderful if we are able to still remember the words by His Excellency the President that we need to listen to each other. I hope the other side would do that this morning.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, as Members of this esteemed Parliament, we are reminded by His Excellency that it is not only our duty but our moral obligation to question the rationale behind policies that exacerbate the suffering of our people. The Coalition Government must answer to the people. What justification can there possibly be for imposing such hardships in the name of change? Is this the change they promised - a heavier load for the already weary shoulders of our citizens?

Madam Deputy Speaker, we cannot afford to idly watch our people suffer. Action is needed, and it is needed now. The Government has taken steps such as subsidising fuel, reducing Value Added Tax on essential goods and controlling food prices. While these measures have provided short-term relief, they must be better targeted at those in need and on tight budgets. The Coalition Government would do well to understand and accept that they need to roll up their sleeves and do the real work now.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before the last elections, some of the Coalition partners made all sorts of statements about selling Fiji Airways. I commend the Coalition Government for keeping Fiji Airways, a national asset and realising how it serves our tourism objectives and national economy.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Nobody said that!

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Who said it?

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please order! Please allow the honourable Member to continue with his speech.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I urge the honourable Prime Minister to exercise decisive leadership that develops stability in this Coalition Government and this nation. We live in turbulent times, and turbulent times demand leadership that can take us forward to a stronger future. Fiji needs stronger and able leaders who can carry the burden of taking Fiji forward - men and women whose loyalty to the country is unquestionable and who will give us hope for a better future.

Right now, an increasing number of people are losing faith and confidence in this Coalition Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. L.D. TABUYA. – Where is the fact?

HON. I. NAIVALURUA. – The writing is on the wall!

HON. K.K. LAL. – Hear, hear!

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in conclusion, I urge the Members of this august Parliament to think anew and act anew; our people are listening, watching and asking questions that need to be heard and answered. In response, let us try to feel the correct pulse of our nation and not assume or pretend that last year's pulse is accurate today. Let us stand up, step out and move the nation forward with wisdom and courage.

Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, let us work together to unite our people and give them the courage, confidence and hope to build a better future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I applaud your leadership of this august Parliament and the guidance you have provided to oversee the roles and functions of this Parliament. I convey my best wishes to the honourable Speaker and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker as you lead our Parliament through its second session. God bless Fiji, *vinaka saka vakalevu*.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians; I rise to respond to the most gracious Address by His Excellency the President on 4th March, 2024.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank His Excellency for his wise counsel and strong leadership for all Fijians. His humble plea to the leaders in this Parliament to continue the promotion of harmony and embrace diversity in our nation demonstrates the essence of his Address.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency was forthright in calling all of us to work towards lasting peace and harmony for our beloved nation. He made this plea after pointing out that some unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust amongst communities for their own political ends.

Madam Deputy Speaker, since the beginning of the sitting of this Parliament from Monday, we have noticed two sides of the coin of the Parliamentary Opposition, as far as the tone of the debate is concerned. One would have expected that all the honourable Members of Parliament across the floor would heed the example set by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, but this did not happen.

A few became vitriolic and demonised the Coalition Government with their wild and unsubstantiated claims.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Go wash with the hogs!

One honourable Member of Parliament, honourable Ketan Lal, obviously despises the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and the National Federation Party. He is a perfect example of what His Excellency pointed out. The honourable Member's communal agenda is clear from his utterances. All I will say to him and a few others is that, you can continue with your diatribe, but this Government will continue to build a foundation for lasting peace, harmony and unity in diversity.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the context of the labour market, His Excellency pointed out that social justice is the key term for achieving peace and harmony through decent work and a sustainable employment for all. And that is exactly what the Coalition Government has done and will continue to do in the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the FijiFirst Government dismantled all the structures of consultations and amended laws to create an environment of insecurity and fear. It was a one-way traffic, and now they have the audacity to point fingers at us when we are trying to fix all the wrongs they did. They made all sorts of wild allegations. What a farce!

Madam Deputy Speaker, since coming into power, this Coalition Government has:

- allowed workers dismissed unfairly or terminated under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic, being an act of God, to return to work, particularly the Air Terminal Services and Fiji Airways workers.
- revoked the COVID-19 Mandatory Vaccination at Workplace Regulations 2021, and allowed workers terminated under these regulations to re-apply and return to work without restrictions.
- extended the retirement age of the civil servants from 55 years to 60 years, including the municipal workers.
- removed fixed-term contracts for civil servants and employees of municipal councils, providing them with job security that they had been yearning for, for ages, and this is also extended to all the State-Owned Enterprises including Government Statutory Authorities.
- promoted good governance through consultative approach rather than the dictatorial approach.
- consultative approach to also lawfully dismantle the existing worker laws and policies, to allow for social advancement - all the draconian laws that they had put in place unilaterally.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency is quite firm about advancing social justice both, at home and abroad. which he first advocated during the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conference in Geneva in 2023.

To support this commitment, Government has confirmed its participation to join the Global Coalition for Social Justice focusing on the theme *Bridging Gaps and Building Alliances*. The theme this year provides an opportunity to foster dialogue on actions needed to achieve social justice, especially in an environment of uncertainty, conflict and weak institutions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government has brought back to life tripartism. The people of Fiji need leaders who listen to them, care for them and do justice to them. Institutions such as the Employment Relation Advisory Board, the National Occupational Health and Safety Board and the National Employment Centre Board and the like, are crucial for creating peaceful and harmonious industrial relations.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Listen to the voices of the people.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, due to non-compliance to ILO Convention 144 on Tripartite Consultation, Fiji was seriously cited at the ILO under the previous Administration, (this is history it will remain there and will repeat it), for failing to comply with the very Conventions that they had ratified.

Madam Deputy Speaker, through tripartism the Ministry is able to conduct a comprehensive review of the Employment Relations Act, as well as discuss policy matters relating to employment, productivity and workplace relations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the review of labour laws is aimed at reversing the unilateral amendments done by the former Government to curtail fundamental rights of workers and workers organisations, including trade union leaders.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I vividly remember the incident when my former colleague, the National Secretary of the Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) - Mr. Felix Anthony, was arrested from his home in front of his family at 10.00 p.m. at night...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ...locked up in the cell in Lautoka, driven to Suva in the wee hours of the morning and questioned there at 8.30 a.m. and kept in custody. That is what brutality is, honourable Usamate. That is brutality.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- This harassment continues.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- It will not be forgotten, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the reason was because he raised the voice of the weak and poor workers, and they are talking about brutality.

HON. A. BIA.- It is 15 months now, honourable Singh, we want to hear what you are doing.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- The review is progressing very well, Madam Deputy Speaker, with

inputs from the tripartite parties through consultative engagement via the Employment Relations Advisory Board, the sub-committees are working. Madam Deputy Speaker, when all that was happening, those who were there at that time were on this side and they were all gleefully and shamelessly supporting.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- I also wish to thank the ILO Regional office here for its tremendous support and guidance.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- *Areh*, he was arrested from your office *yaar*, and what are you talking about, honourable Bala?

(Laughter)

Madam Deputy Speaker, the ILO has provided us with assistance through a Legal Drafter and has also now extended another Legal Drafter's assistance so that we can comprehensively revise this legislation and to be presented to the floor of this Parliament in the first half of this year.

It is a massive exercise, Madam Deputy Speaker because they have undone everything and has to be redone and those...

HON. P.K. BALA.- You were sitting in one of the boards.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Dictators! They were dictators, there was not consultation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- You had no say, anyway.

(Laughter)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, address the Chair.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in this Parliament, in its November sitting last year enacted the Employment Relations (Amendment) Bill 2023, marking a significant step to improve the rights of workers. Sectors that were decreed "essential" in violation of ILO Conventions were removed from what was first shoved down the throats of workers as the Essential National Industries (Employment) Decree 2011. They suffered for 13 years. It was dismantled on the very floor of this Parliament here.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is alarming to note that due to the draconian anti-worker laws that were either promulgated or enacted by the previous Government, union density went down from 30 percent to 12 percent. Now, that says everything, what else do you want? Now, they are saying they are championing the rights of the people. They decimated the unions. But now, both the unions and workers are busy re-organising to regain their membership and strength.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as part of the holistic review, the Ministry is now reviewing the minimum wage in the 10 Sectorial Wages Councils which were also dismissed by them. The process will involve Sectorial Wages Councils already appointed by the Ministry.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, your Point of Order?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I am rising on Point of Order 60 which is Relevance. We are talking about His Excellency the President's Speech and not the Ministry of Employment.

(Laughter)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau, please, continue Minister.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I am very much responding to His Excellency's Address.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the minimum wage exercise is going to be completed and an announcement is going to be made in the 2024-2025 National Budget.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Mediation Service of the Ministry of Employment is a peace-making institution that provides social justice to both parties, the worker and the employer. In line with its objective, we have managed to amicably resolve two potential industrial actions namely, the health and the energy sector, as well as several others.

Madam Deputy Speaker, issues of labour mobility, addressing skills shortage, the initiative on the formulation of a new sector strategic plan over the next 10 years which is aligned to the needs of the labour market is noteworthy. This will also address the issue of labor mobility through the appointment of an Education Commission to undertake a holistic review of our education system so that it adequately aligns to our needs. Thank you, Ministry of Education.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in addressing the current needs of the labour market, the Coalition Government has supported the revitalization of the technical vocational training institutions around Fiji, to provide short-term and medium-term technical training to meet the industry needs. These are provided by the various established institutions and, of course, the three Universities.

One of the institutions, Madam Deputy Speaker, is the Poly Tech Pacific which was mentioned during the debate by honourable Hem Chand. I am surprised that honourable Chand, having worked in the Ministry of Education for so long does not know that there is a thing called "non-profit company". All schools are privately owned and Government funds 98 percent of the costs. Even the University of Fiji is registered as a private company and that University also receive grants.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- They are just making money. I know you better from labour days

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, just because they hate the individuals who are running this education provider, they have that contempt for them. That is the whole problem.

This institution is providing much better service than the failed Technical Colleges from which the taxpayers lost \$30 million. They have forgotten that.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- This institution deserves more funding.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let me just elaborate a little bit more on what they are doing. They are providing award courses, as well as short courses for basic skills training and development for unskilled youth which TSLS calls micro-qualifications. The award programme allows students to attain a certificate at level 2 or level 3. Level 4 and diploma level is currently being reviewed by the Fiji Higher Education Commission. Now, if you have a gripe, go and question the Fiji Higher Education Commission because this institution is accredited by Fiji Higher Education Commission.

Madam Deputy Speaker, by July 2024, a total of 1,254 students will complete their award programme category, of which 488 will complete at the end of March, and 776 will finish their programme at the end of July. The students are spread between Nausori (536), Tavua (310) and Labasa (408). The programmes are national qualifications developed by the Fiji Higher Education Commission.

Madam Deputy Speaker, for short-term Rapid Skills Development Course, a total of 797 have completed this course and an additional 323 are in class, while about 120 are awaiting commencement. This institution has 2,200 students. They also take in dropouts and provide them with the skills training that allow them to become meaningful citizens of this country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Nabua Youth have actually benefited from this and the honourable Attorney-General was there to launch the programme that they have gotten into. So, that it is what it is doing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Ministry has been working with stakeholders like TSLS, TSLS Board to address the needs of training and filling in the gaps that we see. One initiative is the Apprenticeship Scheme that has been initiated. There are 400 positions for this year that are provided for in the budget. The Government is topping up wages by \$2, which will amount to a total of \$4.90 an hour. So, 230 places have already been taken up by institutions like Energy Fiji Limited, Asco Motors, et cetera, and the balance are going to be recruited in the near future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we also have the National Employment Centre where we have increased the allowances for attaché's that can be attached to workplaces for three to six months. From \$120 a week, it has been increased to \$180 for graduates and for those with certificates and diploma, we have increased the weekly allowance from \$100 to \$150. This came into effect on 4th January, 2024, and it is shared 50/50 by the employer and the Government. So, these are initiatives we have undertaken.

Under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have been liaising, talking and collaborating with Australian Government agencies, approved employers, key stakeholders and Fijian workers, to ensure that the PALM Scheme and Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) programmes will be strengthened and sustainable. Equally important is the Coalition Government's duty of care to the Fijian workers' welfare which we term as "non-negotiable". The economic benefit from PALM remittances up to December 2023 is F\$274 million.

Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Kumar had actually questioned the value of our visit to Australia. They were very happy when my predecessors visited but when I visit, it hurts them.

(Hon. P.K. Bala interjects)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, little knowledge is dangerous but zero knowledge is very dangerous.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Times up!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- After we have discovered all the challenges, we have been able to appoint three Country Liaison Officers (CLOs), improved the terms and conditions of their work, had the minimum standards observed, we have solved the problems and now, the CLOs are handling them directly.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government is about approaching through a consultative approach. This Government is about listening to the people. This Government is putting into practice what they were always dictating and that is the difference between them and us, and we will continue to do that, and we will not be thwarted by anyone. Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I thank you too, honourable Minister.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow Fijians, I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's Address at the opening of the 2024 Second Session of Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to put it simply, the Coalition Government is struggling to be in Government. They are just over more than one year in power and indecisive decisions are destroying Fiji faster than any cancerous disease. This Government hasty and impartial decision in making our people to be caught struggling for their daily needs...

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Facts, facts!

HON. J.N. NAND.-... so they can govern without being questioned, leaving them helpless without much support.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what else? Potholes, dusty, pathetic road conditions and defective works are now a staple feature on our roads in Fiji. This brings to my attention the state of Kawakawa, Caralevu, Nabekavu, Coquru and Delaikoro Roads which of Waiqele Road just 2 kilometres away from Labasa Airport situated in Waiqele.

With a population of more than 2,000, this is the only long stretch of road approximately 18 kilometres...

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Why didn't you do it?

HON. J.N. NAND.- ...that has not been tarsealed and often neglected, and regular maintenance is neglected.

The FijiFirst Government had plans to upgrade this section of the road but COVID-19 hindered its progress. I urge the Coalition Government to tarseal this road as during rainy season, this road becomes bogged and children, especially, have to walk as far as Waiqele Sector Office to catch the transport to go to Waiqele Primary and Secondary Schools, as well as other schools in Labasa Town.

Madam Deputy Speaker, sugarcane farmers find it difficult to cart their cane to Labasa Mill and many have left cane farming and have settled elsewhere.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Very poor!

HON. J.N. NAND.- Coupled with this are *yaqona* farmers from Delaikoro and Coquru who are unable to sell their famous Coquru Kava in the Labasa Market on a regular basis. So, as a result, they are exploited by wholesalers who give them less than the market price.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as His Excellency the President has stated, Government is committed to fostering a competitive and sustainable agriculture sector. However, this cannot be achieved as people and farmers of Sigatoka are sick and tired of stray animals that roam and ramp their crops, vegetables and sugarcane farms.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Sir, my neighbor, Mr. Uday's wife, broke her arm while chasing stray horses from her sugarcane farm as she fell on the rough sugarcane terrain.

(Hon. Member interjects)

HON. J.N. NAND.- It is not a joke. She required surgery and was in constant pain.

Madam Deputy Speaker, because stray animals frequently rampage their cane plantation and destroying everything in their path, many people have lost interest in sugarcane farming and production. Also, multiple reports have gone unanswered and little, or nothing has been done to seize the wandering horses and livestock, people have lost faith in the police and agriculture department in Sigatoka. In the farming community around Nadroga/Navosa, this has grown to be a nuisance and an eyesore.

Madam Deputy Speaker, stray animals is one of the major contributing factors of road accidents in the Sigatoka area from Sovi Bay to Lomawai. In the last three months, eight accidents have occurred and three lives have been lost. The Ministry of Agriculture is hopeless and helpless, and I urge both the Ministers to please take this very seriously and give more funding to the staff to monitor and impound these stray animals.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am saying all these because I go out to the community for community service where I meet members of the public. Just lately, I came to know from farmers in Valley Road that there is no subsidy on weedicide and insecticide which means extra financial burden to farmers. To add to the woe, the Agriculture Research Station does not have any seeds at the moment to supply to the farmers when they should be the one selling seeds and have it ready all the time.

Not only this, Madam Deputy Speaker, the veterinary office never has enough medicine for cattle, pigs, goats and chickens and this hinders big time in bringing top quality meat production. Due to the lack of medicine, the livestock die rapidly and that is beyond the farmer's control. There are many cases which can be proven by the farmers. In addition, the machine that is supposed to be hired by farmers for land tillage is always under constant repair.

Madam Deputy Speaker, last year water disruptions along the Suva-Nausori corridor has continued its usual trend and very less has been done to mitigate this. Complaints from the ordinary citizens for timely water cartage in times of water disruptions has fallen on deaf ears. Often water is delivered two days late or in some cases no cartage at all.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Minister overseas.

HON. J.N. NAND.- On the same note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I urge the Water Authority of Fiji to look into the plight of Nakama, Savusavuitaqa, Dogoru, and Delaikoro village settlements that do not have access to metered water contrary to the fact that huge reservoirs have been built in these areas that provides water to whole of Labasa Town. In fact the water source that supplies water to the whole of Labasa is in Vuinakawakawa which is few kilometers from Nakama, Dogoru and Delaikoro. The honourable Minister for Sugar got more votes from these villages and areas and he has neglected them and the situation has remained the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President also spoke about the new National Development Plan that will invest in robust and resilient infrastructure thus enhancing social safety nets for the disadvantaged and low-income household.

Madam Deputy Speaker, there is one such community is in Soasoa, Ronikanace Road in Tabia, Labasa where there are seven families without electricity. Scoping was done by the FijiFirst Government and I urge the Coalition Government to take this forward, as it has been a year and no action has been taken despite the villagers frequenting the EFL Office in Labasa.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. J.N. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency the President reiterated that we must increase our collective effort in implementing climate mitigation and adaptation strategies to minimize the risks associated with climate change and sea level rise, not only here at home, but also in the region.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I also wish to reiterate that under the leadership of our former Prime Minister and former Attorney-General, Fiji has become a global and regional leader in raising awareness on climate change, its effects and what the nation states should do together to reduce emissions, to keep us within 1.5 degree Celsius of global warming and to avoid catastrophic climate change. In order to combat climate change, reduce emissions, make advanced adaptations to the effects that are already occurring, and build strength, financial resources and wise investments are needed. The long-term advantages of these actions far outweigh any initial expenses.

Madam Deputy Speaker, investment by the FijiFirst Government towards climate change is unmatched because never ever before have we had investment of such magnitude. The list is impressive and incessant.

The FijiFirst Government had delivered on climate change where we had developed a:

- robust National Climate Change Policy;
- National Adaptation Plan for Fiji to guide climate resilience;
- low emissions development strategy that will guide Fiji towards a low carbon future by 2050; and
- National Ocean Policy that is designed to accelerate Fiji's Blue Economy aspirations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what have the Coalition Government delivered apart from false promises and attempt to resolve their own internal issues? It seems they are running out of innovative ideas and stamina to take this country forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker, recently it was in the news that 30,000 tonnes of cane have not been harvested. Part of the blame must go to the Fairtrade where many farmers opted to join Lautoka

Cane Producers Association, Rarawai Cane Producers, Penang Cane Producers Association and Labasa Cane Producers Association under the umbrella of Fairtrade. The Fairtrade has been riddled with mismanagement, poor work ethics and accountability. Farmer's complaints are swept under the carpet as Fairtrade is not answerable to any Ministry and even until to-date we have not seen their annual report. Nepotism and favouritism is at its peak and many farmers are marginalised resulting in their crop not being harvested by the Fairtrade gangs.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I urge the honourable Minister for Sugar Industry to fix these issues that farmers are facing with Fairtrade which he has failed to do so for the whole of last year as farmers had brought these issues during Ministers consultations with the farmers on numerous occasions.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.N. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the people of Fiji have lost faith, credibility and respect in the Coalition Government due to its inability to deliver what they promised during their campaigns.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J.N. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the answer to all these problems they have created including disunity, poor economic growth, high incidence of poverty, deteriorating law and order, abuse of human rights, lack of transparency and accountability.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as alluded to earlier by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, this Government is on record of appointing former politicians to key Government positions instead of experts and technocrats that has resulted in poor service delivery, miscommunication and very poor decision making.

Madam Deputy Speaker, currently the Government looks pretty anguished about the state of the public service, they just could not convert their words into action. So far we have not found a shred of vision in the Coalition Government's agenda which is heavily leaned on plans to reverse, replace and repeal and disestablish the good work done by the FijiFirst Government. I think they have a plan to go backwards and not to take Fiji forward. Of course, many voted for change but this was not the change people had voted for.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government's priorities seem to be visionless, random and harmful grab-bag of policies and decisions that do not focus on the real issues on the ground. As such, I urge and plead that the honourable Prime Minister takes responsibility for the issues facing the country and accept that he has failed as a leader. There needs to be a clear change in governance that would help re-organise the Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, finally I wish to quote from Y B Yeats poem - "*The Second Coming*" echoed by Chinua Achebe in his classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre;
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere;
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst;
Are full of passionate intensity.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, God forbid we do not go down that path. Having said that, I have hope that both sides of Parliament commit to bring critical change for all Fijians. I have hope that both side of Parliament have consultation and conversation to provide a roadmap for a change for our nation's women and children's needs. Madam Deputy Speaker, I have hope that both sides of Parliament have a conversation and this is grounded in the need for transformation in the way we create possibilities for all Fijians. In the words of *Samuel Coleridge's* poem "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, and hope without an object cannot live."

Madam Deputy Speaker, the objective of my hope is that no Fijians should be left behind. Thank you, for giving me this opportunity.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, it is now 10.37 a.m., I intend to adjourn just for half an hour and we will see you back in half an hour. Enjoy your tea. *Vinaka*.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.39 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.08 a.m.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good morning, *namaste* and *sat shiri akaal*.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am honoured to respond to His Excellency Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere's Opening Address in Parliament last week. Firstly, I thank and commend His Excellency for his most gracious Speech. His advice, wisdom and wealth of experience not only underscored the need for good policies and plans for the nation's growth and development, but also reminded us all honourable Members of this august Parliament of their responsibility to include the voices and aspirations of all people in our policies. His Excellency spoke on the significance to embrace, build tolerance and trust amongst the various ethnic communities and remain united with one of the common goals to ensure that we live in a progressive, prosperous and peaceful country that is socially cohesive.

Madam Deputy Speaker, as the Minister responsible for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, I applaud His Excellency for clearly emphasising this and thank the Coalition Government for re-establishing the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs which was disbanded more than a decade ago. I agree with His Excellency and I also believe in promoting Fiji where culturally diverse societies are socially-cohesive and all citizens share and agree on a common direction of a nation. We all will do better economically and socially and will be more successful at attending to challenges as it arises. Having understood this and to support the objectives of the re-established Ministry, two consultants were engaged to draft a policy framework for the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs, which outlined the strategic framework to guide its structure, strategic objectives and programmes for all the ethnic communities in Fiji. The Government of New Zealand provided the grant assistance to support this process.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a wide range of consultations has been conducted with the Government Ministries, Non-Government Organisations, Faith-Based Organisations, leaders, academics, community leaders, lawyers, regional advocates and a range of people from the various ethnic communities and others with an interest in multi-ethnic affairs to formulate a policy report. I am proud and confident to inform Parliament that the policy report has been finalised and will be tabled in Cabinet in the next sitting to seek the consensus on the findings and recommendations. In this regard, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to the Government of New Zealand, the two consultants, namely, Dr. Rajend Prasad, Mr. Radhe Nand, the Cabinet and all the stakeholders and individuals who have provided valuable contribution and inputs towards the drafting of this policy report.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on this note, I would like to respond to a young honourable Member on the other side of Parliament who appears totally confused about the role of the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs. Perhaps, he was not listening attentively when I had outlined the plans of the Ministry in the April session of Parliament last year. I want to inform him and to do so from now, so that he can perhaps save the valuable time of this august Parliament if he listens properly. We are progressing well as per the plan of the Ministry. We believe in consultations, inclusiveness, dialogue, listening and then making sound policies. This is the foundation of the Coalition Government. We do not pick things from the air and do not rush with ill-conceived ideas, policies and Bills like the previous government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in terms of tangible projects on the ground, noting that the Ministry is currently at its initial stage of assessing the community integration projects, we have identified the need to focus on projects which maintains and modernises the traditional structure of the heritage

sites to allow continuity of the service. One of the lead projects is the construction of a gas crematorium in Tuatua, Labasa, and handing over of the gas crematorium to the trustees will come within the year. This project will complement the natural practice as the gas cremator is environment friendly. We have also planned three similar projects in the West in the coming year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to commemorate and celebrate 145 years of the arrival of our *Girmit* ancestors in Fiji, my Ministry this year, will take lead in organising an event at the Lautoka Girmit Centre to celebrate the arrival of the *Girmitiyas* in Fiji, and to acknowledge and appreciate their valuable contribution to the progress and prosperity of Fiji. Honourable Sashi Kiran is assisting me as the chairman of this organising committee, and we have plans to make this important day in our calendar a memorable one. Again, it is the Government that has given significance to the *Girmitiyas* and its children by making it a public holiday for a second time in our history.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency in his concluding remarks stated that the Coalition Government is committed to protecting and preserving our traditions, culture, language and to support this objective, the Ministry has partially supported a 10-member youth group who are participating in the International Ramayan Festival in India. Their participation at this event is a testimony that the Coalition Government is committed to support and show case various cultures and its practices in the international level. More importantly, to maintain and preserve our culture and allow continuity of this practices for generations to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker, my Ministry has a significant task ahead and as His Excellency elaborated in his speech to rebuild Fiji, we have to get everyone together, have a sense of belonging, trust and cooperation among people from diverse backgrounds. It is all about building strong united communities where we feel supported, valued and responded to.

Madam Deputy Speaker, moving onto my other portfolio of Ministry of Sugar Industry, I wish to shed some light on the sector. I was very inspired by His Excellency's Speech when he reflected on his passion about the sugar industry as I do and both of us are also farmers. His Excellency has spent much of his time growing up with the Indo-Fijian families, especially during the harvesting season. He also had a crucial role as a Director on the Board of the Fiji Sugar Corporation in providing strategic directions to the company.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the members of this august Parliament are aware of the critical financial situation of the Fiji Sugar Corporation and the overall sugar industry must go through. Currently, we are barely achieving 1.5 million tonnes of cane compared to 3.5 million tonnes of cane we harvested in the good times. Whilst the rest of the sugar producing companies have moved into diversification, FSC has not conducted any research and development activities to explore diversification opportunities to generate additional income in its better days when it benefitted from the European Union under the preferential sugar price. It has only produced raw sugar and this will not take us too far, therefore, diversification is a must for the future sustainability of the industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the problems are many and as a new Minister for Sugar Industry and a farmer too, I have a challenging role in turning this industry around. It is not impossible, sugar as a resource-based sector is important for the livelihood of around 20 percent of Fiji's population and to bring revenue for the country that supports in the reduction of national debt as it still brings more than \$200 million in terms of foreign revenue, let alone the employment it provides to the people in the Western Division and in my howe town.

Madam Deputy Speaker, to ensure that the industry is sustained, my target is to achieve 1.8 million tonnes of cane in 2024 and over 2.5 million tonnes of cane within the next five years. These targets will become part of the National Development Plan that will craft the future vision of Fiji.

My plans are to immediately address issues on the farm, harvesting, transportation and efficiency of the three mills. The Coalition Government, Madam Deputy Speaker, has fully supported the industry in the 2023-2024 Budget and it will also support towards the next budget as well.

Yesterday, Madam Deputy Speaker, a Member on the other side of Parliament mentioned about Rakiraki. Had this Government not butchered the Penang Mill and sold it as scrap, we would have certainly achieved more than 1.8 million tonnes of cane years back, let alone insurance payout of \$8.5 million for the damage to Penang Mill from *TC Winston* which was used elsewhere by the former Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Abdul Khan. Because of these decisions of the FijiFirst Government saw many farmers exit from the industry. We have plans to bring them back and the good days are coming, and we will do it with full commitments.

Madam Deputy Speaker, all citizens in the sugar industry will be given equal opportunities. We will be supporting all existing farmers and potential farmers who are willing to join the industry and farm. We are already offering grants of one-third or a maximum of \$7,500 for new farmers who want to purchase farms for cane farming as well as paying for lease renewal costs. This grant is accessible for both men and women, young and older generation and for all Fijians.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a member on the other side of Parliament earlier stated that the Coalition Government did nothing for land leases and farmers. I found that strange. Does he not know that a taskforce was formed by the Coalition Government under the leadership of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister to resolve matters concerning land leases, renewals and premium issues? Apart from these, we have grants for the upgrade of cane access roads, infield drainage, cane planting, manual harvesting, cane cartage, cage bins, farm mechanization, guaranteed cane price and incentives to reward our hardworking farmers.

Our strategy is to fully mechanize the sugar industry as a response to address shortage of labour for cane planting, cultivation as well as harvesting. So, we will bring cane planters and fertilizer applicators for farmers. We have kept searching for harvesters for hilly land but so far we have not found a suitable one. However, in the meantime, Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) is getting steel tracks to convert the current mechanical harvesters into semi-track machines that can ease some burden on the undulated land. We will continue to look for hilly-land-harvesters and I am hoping to find something soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker, on the milling side, we have plans to venture into diversification to produce value added products such as refined sugar and sugar products, increase co-generation capacity of the mills and of course ultimately to look at ethanol plant in Fiji. Such relations will help benefit our industry through exchange of technical expertise and technologies and these cannot be done overnight.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the current mills are operating below capacity and needs attention to improve their efficiency. Soon, I will be getting experts from India to assess the three mills. These experts will provide a report at no cost as professional fees, and they are coming from Delhi.

Madam Deputy Speaker, upon the completion of the assessment, we will get an idea on our short-term solutions of the three existing mills. The experts will also provide a report on Penang Mill on whether a new mill with full capacity to refine sugar or will only extract juice and transport to Ba Mill.

(Inaudible interjection)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Do not laugh! Listen!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Listen, listen!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Other plans, Madam Deputy Speaker, are to explore setup of refinery to refine raw sugar and sell at premium price. This will not only increase FSC's income but the farmers as well. In addition, FSC will need to expand co-generation capacity of the mills to supply green energy to the Electricity Fiji Limited grid. Other countries are moving into supply of renewal energy and nothing should stop us from establishing ethanol plants in Fiji to produce ethanol for local consumption and of course to export. Fiji is importing fuel worth millions of dollars where the aviation industry is the biggest consumer of fuels. So, we have potential for ethanol green energy to reduce import bills and support the reduction of carbon emissions and mitigation of climate change impacts.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in terms of capacity building, we are advocating quality research, development of technology and transfer to our field officers and farmers. Last year, many trainings including separate trainings for women were organised by the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) and Fiji Sugar Corporation in all Mills. The training involved various aspects, including farmers' field days, demonstrations of new technology and awareness of cross-cutting issues such as climate change, et cetera. The SRIF will continue to conduct high quality research and transfer knowledge of technology to stakeholders.

Climate change has become one of the major challenges of the industry. In our efforts to reduce risks of climate change, the industry is developing climate resilient varieties. Farmers are also encouraged to practice integrated nutrient management to ensure improvement and maintenance of soil health. It is a compulsory requirement for all farmers to get the soil tested to ensure proper nutrients are applied to farms for their newly planted cane.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we are building financial security for all farmers. For this, the Sugarcane Growers Council has continued to mitigate some level of risks for all growers under the bundled insurance scheme where farmers are encouraged to take voluntary parametric insurance.

We are also progressing well, Madam Deputy Speaker, in reviewing the Sugar Industry Act to incorporate our plans for conducting the Sugarcane Growers Council election, which will give the voice back to the sugarcane farmers.

In addition, Madam Deputy Speaker, we want our farmers to learn international best management practices in farming. To advocate this, we have sent 18 persons, including 14 farmers, to acquire experience and knowledge from cane farmers in India with the support of the Indian Government. These farmers will come back to share knowledge with fellow farmers in their localities.

The Sugar Cane Growers Fund is ever ready to avail finance to the growers and recently launched a new product whereby it is offering new loan for purchase of new farms with an interest rate of 1.99 percent for the first year.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we all know about the finances of FSC that is struggling to come out of the legacy of financial mess of over \$400 million in debt accumulated over the last 16 years. But we need to find a workable solution to generate income for the company.

To address FSC's financial constraints, we are looking at joint venture schemes. We will soon get into discussions with the FNPF and Fijian Holdings for possible business models whereby the investors and FSC will partner to develop properties for various purposes such as for hospitality, medical, retirement and light commercial sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the sugar industry is here to stay and we will make it bigger, better, modern and mechanised. We have demonstrated this by paying the farmers the highest ever payment in cane proceeds of \$91.38 per tonne for the last season. No other government has done that and we have not short-changed either. I will ensure that all stakeholders both, from the Multi-Ethnic and Sugar Industry are working together to achieve the set targets in the short and long-term.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before I sit down, I would like to show an example of how mismanagement was happening in the yesteryears of the industry. There is a report here which was compiled in 2016, and you know what happened. When this report was being compiled about Mr. Abdul Khan, there was so many transactions where money was paid.

(Hon. A. Bia interjects)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes, we are going to fix it. All I am saying is that these types of commissions were made.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Standing Order 60 on relevance. He is not replying to His Excellency's Speech and he has also run out of time.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau. Honourable Minister, are you winding up?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker, because they do not want to listen to the truth, so I will end here.

HON. S. NAND.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of this august Parliament, friends, families, and fellow citizens who are present in the gallery and those who are watching us live on the Walesi platform; a very good morning to you all. I rise to respond to his Excellency's of gracious Speech during the opening of the 2024 Fijian Parliament Session.

Madam Deputy Speaker, quite a lot was covered by His Excellency in his Address. A paragraph each was devoted to each Ministry, however, I would have loved to see some in-depth policy issues that will gear Fiji in the right direction.

I totally agree with the Honourable Prime Minister when he reiterated His Excellency's words, and I quote, "It is, however, unfortunate that some unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust among our communities for their own political ends". My advice to the honourable Prime Minister is to look within your group.

(Laughter)

HON. S. NAND.- The answer to your issues lies within. A classic example is the Viria Water Project. Every box was ticked before the funding was given by ADB. The project was completed and was due to be commissioned in August 2023. What happened to the commissioning? Why has it not started supplying water to the greater Suva-Nasinu corridor.

(Hon. Ro F.Q. Tuisawau interjects)

HON. S. NAND.- I am taking about its commissioning.

Madam Deputy Speaker, is it the case of some political interference, and thus demand more compensation before the project is commissioned?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU. – A Point of Order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.– Point of Order, honourable Minister.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.– Standing Order 60 - misleading information.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Basically, the information being presented is wrong. They are saying that the water is not flowing, but it is flowing. That needs to be corrected.

HON. S. NAND.–Madam Deputy Speaker, my question was, has it been commissioned officially? No, it has not, stick to the point, do not mislead the house. Why has it not been commissioned? Is it the case of some political influence, and thus demand more compensation before the project is commissioned? Do something about it, honourable Prime Minister. Otherwise, it will be a step forward and two steps backwards.

Madam Deputy Speaker, results are best achieved when everyone works as a team. It is rather unfortunate that in this Coalition Government, everyone is pulling to their own way. This Coalition Government does not think twice before throwing its own people under the bus to suit its own agenda. When will they get the confidence of the people?

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency has talked about empowering our people, and I respect that thought. However, is this Government's action leaning towards that?

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, Civil Aviation and Acting Minister for Education very proudly stated that they have forgiven 53,725 student loans. Is it totally forgiven?

The Coalition Government celebrated the Girit Day last year, but little did they advise the people of Fiji that they are introducing Girit 2.0 for our youth.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the 53,725 graduates who's TSLs loan has been forgiven, do not walk free. They have been bonded by the Coalition Government for three years to seven-and-a-half years, depending on what they have studied.

Their travels, vacation with families and attending urgent overseas engagements have all been affected. They have to find guarantors and get clearance for FRCS before they can engage in any overseas travel.

I, as a Commissioner for Oath, have seen the struggle these students go through in getting those forms filled by the guarantors and the form being endorsed. This policy is all geared towards stifling the growth of the individual. If they want to migrate or work outside of Fiji to develop their career, they have to pay the remaining bond term before they are allowed to travel.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- What's wrong with that?

HON. S. NAND.- These students were better off with FijiFirst conditions where...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND.- Listen, listen!

HON. S. NAND.- ... if they wanted to work outside, they only had to pay half of the total debt and the other half was totally forgiven and this is the real forgiveness, not converting into Girit. So, to the 53725 graduates, I would like to say, "Welcome to Girit 2.0! Courtesy of this Government".

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is heartening to note that His Excellency has acknowledged that agriculture will continue to be the backbone of our economy for food security and export. The Agriculture Sector is a sector that keeps the nation ticking through thick and thin. It is pleasing to note that the Ministry of Agriculture has come up with a 5-year strategic plan. I hope this is not only on paper but will result in actions on the ground.

HON. M. S. N. KAMIKAMICA.- We will do more than you.

HON. S. NAND.- Listen!

Madam Deputy Speaker, the cash crop farmers are struggling with the high cost of production. The seed cost has gone up, the cost of fertilizer and other inputs has gone up, transportation cost has skyrocketed. To add to the misery, by the time these products go past the craters on the road, a considerable percentage of these products are beyond sellable state.

Even in the international Trade Administration – Fiji Country Commercial Guide that was published on 23rd January, 2024, it mentions, and I quote:

"The sector also faces several challenges including natural disasters, inadequate infrastructure, and high transportation and input costs."

Everyone is acknowledging this fact but the Coalition Government is in a denial mode, I wonder why? How will the farmers survive?

The Agriculture Sector aid should be well targeted and well monitored. I have just been informed that the tractor that was given to the Deepwater community is kept by an elite few and the other farmers of Deepwater are unable to access that tractor for their farming needs. This is not an effective aid. So, someone in the Ministry is sleeping.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the livestock sector is also in a miserable state. The strategic direction is missing to steer Fiji towards robust livestock sector. In the 2023-2024 Budget, the honourable Minister of Finance blindly allocated funds to import dairy animals into the country without consulting the relevant stakeholder. This fell facedown and now we are told that they no longer will be getting the live animals to support the dairy industry.

Money allocated for farmers to improve production is not reaching the farmers and part of it is kept by intermediary organisations as administration expenses or mark-up.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in the Livestock Sector, the cost of inputs has gone up too. In such cases, farmers are bound to take shortcuts to make ends meet. When shortcuts are taken, there is a blatant disregard to husbandry practices and the livestock becomes susceptible to disease and bad management practices.

An example of Dairy Sector is the Calf Milk Replacer which is essential ingredient in the dairy industry. From \$161 in late 2022, the price has gone up to \$251. That is absurd! How will the farmers be able to support this and be able to get to this ingredient and use it in the dairy industry.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am in no way blaming the honourable Minister for Agriculture or his team of officers. They are trying to do their best with limited resources they have been allocated with. They have been asked to run with their legs tied down. The root cause of this is poor fiscal policies. If fiscal policies are set, taking into consideration these commodities, these segments will prosper. The Government needs to ensure that funds allocated to the Ministry is released on time for it to be effective.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency alluded to raising the standard of living for our communities. But is this Coalition Government working towards that? No, I do not think so.

I do not know in which world this Coalition Government is living in. They continually avoid recognizing that poverty in this country has significantly gone up. People are struggling to make ends meet, the cost of housing has gone up, parents are finding it difficult to put food on the table, the cost of food has gone up by an alarming rate, parents are now tasked to fork out extra for school levies, things have gone beyond the reach of ordinary people and only the elite few can afford it.

Despite all these, the Coalition Government, especially the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is in a denial mode. On 27th December, 2023, a newspaper article read, and I quote: "Cost of living lower, said Prasad". Is this for real?

Has he talked to the market vendors? Has he talked to the BBQ sellers? Has he talked to the construction workers? Has he talked to the housewives and domestic workers? Has he talked to the farmers? Has he visited the rural and peri-urban areas and talked to them?

Madam Deputy Speaker, my suggestion for the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is to visit these people and talk to them. Then only he will know what they are going through.

I met some taxi drivers recently and they were really worried about the high cost of inputs. Some of them have resorted to driving for 10 hours to 14 hours a day to take home a decent income to look after their families. That is dangerous - a person driving for 10 hours to 14 hours a day. But they cannot do much, they have to work that hard to make ends meet.

They are burdened with high cost of vehicle parts and consumables. These are the people who should be heard in making policies and decisions. It feels as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is clearly avoiding contact them. But these are the people whom he promised during his Election campaign that with good policies, he will bring the cost of living down, and that was the promise. But then, did he do it?

No, on the contrary, he is quoted as saying, and I quote: "Cost of Living not determined by the Government, says Minister for Finance." This showed that he lied through his teeth to fool the voters just to get into Parliament. I will let the voters decide if he is to be believed the next time he comes around. Again, this high cost of living and increased poverty is because of poor fiscal policies.

Madam Deputy Speaker, every now and then, when one raises the issue of high cost of living and the rising cost of goods, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance and

Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is quick to respond that it is a global phenomenon. Of course, it is, and a good Government will make fiscal policies as such that it will stimulate growth and reduce the cost of living. If there is a global phenomenon, a good Government will not go ahead and raise taxes and other duties. However, in Fiji this was not done, and our people were pushed with both hands towards poverty. Again, poor fiscal policies is to be blamed here.

(Hon. M.S.N. Kamikamica interjects)

HON. S. NAND.- It is 14 months now, you cannot go back and say, "FijiFirst Government". Now, it is for you to go and do it.

Madam Deputy Speaker, investment in this country is all time low. People have shelved their investment projects until such time there is confidence in the economy. Once the investors see confidence in the economy, they will invest. You will not have to beg them to invest, like someone did recently in Nadi. If the fiscal policies are right, confidence will surely show in the economy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, crime over the last 14 months is alarming. Please, people do not feel safe walking on the streets after 7.00 p.m. One never knows when he or she will be burgled or robbed. The incidence of serious crimes such as manslaughter or murder is alarming. Theft has taken a new turn now. Apart from business and residential properties, thieves are now targeting farms, farm produce and farm animals.

Farmers in Koronivia, Viria, Laken in Tailevu have all complained about loss of farm equipment, farm produce and farm animals. As alluded earlier, farm inputs are not cheap, and losing them after devoting one's time, money and effort is heartbreaking.

I come with facts. A classic example is farms in Waidalice, Tailevu. Farmers had their rootcrops ready for harvesting in December. A couple of evenings before the planned harvest, the entire field was harvested by the thieves and taken. Nothing was left for the farmer or the market, not a single mosel was left. This is what people voted for. Is this the change that people voted for?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND. – Absolutely everything!

Then to add salt to injury, when the farmers went and complained to the police that their produce was stolen, you know what the police said – "get a security guard to guard your farm."

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. L.D. TABUYA.– Which police station?

HON. S. NAND.– Waidalice Police Post.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.– Where is the report?

HON. S. NAND.– You go and talk to them, that is your job, not mine. I have given you the information, go and verify it.

Is this the change people have voted for? Is this the security people have been provided with?

Madam Deputy Speaker, unprecedented levels of hard drugs are landing on our shores. This was not happening under the FijiFirst Government.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND.— Unprecedented levels of drugs! This is due to poor policing in guarding and monitoring our waters. What is the Government doing about it?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA. – Sixteen years, you did nothing.

HON. S. NAND.- Why can the Government not allocate more resources in guarding our waters? Why can they not? The answer is *paisa nahi hai*, no money!

The Civil Service has ballooned. Overseas travel has ballooned. Probably this is where all the money is going. And do not talk about loans, you have not paid a single cent. On the contrary, you have increased it.

Does the Government think that the people who were caught and produced in the court are the ones involved in the hard drugs? These drugs do not come cheap and there is more to what the eye can see. Go ahead and investigate, please. Do not sacrifice the pawns to save the king.

Madam Deputy Speaker, most of the hardship for our citizens in the last 14 months is because of poor planning, poor management and poor fiscal policies. I am sure everyone in this Parliament knows who's turn is to go under the bus now.

His Excellency advised everyone to enhance transparency. How transparent is this Government?

Madam Deputy Speaker, the question I propose to the Government is, “What was the reason for the six people trip to Macau?” Was it sightseeing? Did it have any national reasons? Who paid for that trip? Was it the Government or was it the Chinese delegation who is selling the idea of establishing a casino in Fiji? Looks like there is more to come before us.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in our Foreign Policy, our stance against the ceasefire in the Israel-Palestinian war is incorrect. Not only me, but majority of our people feel that the Government is wrong. Remember Palestinians are not Muslims alone, they are Muslims and Christians. Our narrow focus has restricted us from seeing the whole picture.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I was really taken aback by a criticism from Government by a prominent woman activist who was defending the removal of honourable Lynda Tabuya as the Deputy Leader. Those allegations are quite serious. I hope the honourable Prime Minister takes heed of those allegations and investigate.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND.- Listen to the video, if you do not have the video, I will forward it to you.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, honourable Members!

HON. S. NAND.- In conclusion, the people of Fiji expect actions, not words from the Government. Do not go around promising but start delivering. Seeing is believing, if the people see it on the ground, they will believe it. Deliver improved security and policing, deliver pro-poor

policies, deliver reduced cost of living, deliver improved infrastructure, deliver improved agriculture sector and deliver a better Fiji.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I join the rest of the honourable Members of this august Parliament in thanking His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for his most gracious Speech when he opened the new sitting year of Parliament on 4th March, 2024. His Excellency reminded all of us not to lose sight of the fact that national interest is paramount at all times. He urged us to ensure that we must promote unity and diversity. His Excellency also expressed concern that a few unscrupulous politicians continue to instigate mistrust amongst our communities, and he emphasised the importance of respectful debate because of its impact on inter-ethnic relations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have always believed Parliament to be a temple of democracy. We all had bitter and sometimes acrimonious debates in the past, and will no doubt continue doing so in the future. We can be as hard hitting as we like, however, debates of such nature should not be based on race, religion or ethnicity. It should not be used as a fear mongering tool, it should not be without lies and it should not be about making wild and unsubstantiated claims. Therefore, my rebuttal of what came out from the Opposition will actually form the basis of my reply, as well as that of the Ministry that I am entrusted with, will do this year.

I want to begin by thanking the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Leader of the Opposition for their very dignified, respectful and meaningful contributions. For once, I was hopeful that the honourable Members on the Opposition side would take their cue from their Parliamentary Leader while delivering their responses. But my hope turned into disappointment very quickly. A few moments after, honourable Members started speaking from the other side, and all I have heard in the last two and a half days, Madam Deputy Speaker, lies, misinformation ...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No facts, zero facts.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... motherhood generalisations.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Madam Deputy Speaker, in the process of my delivery, I will give you several examples of what those lies were. It was told this morning, for example, honourable Naivalurua said that in the last elections campaign the parties promised to sell Fiji Airways. No manifestos for a political party in the Coalition ever said that we are going to sell the airline.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Absolute hogwash.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Hogwash.

Then we had honourable Koroilavesau coming out and telling a massive lie when he said, "there is massive unemployment in the country."

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- No facts.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- No figures. The claim of massive unemployment was a massive lie.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Koroleva, your Point of Order, please.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Standing Order 90. Madam Deputy Speaker, what I have indicated in Parliament is basically massive unemployment. If he is indicating that there is an increase of employment in Fiji, that does not explain why people are unemployed around Fiji. If they are unemployed, that means they are not being trained to take over the vacancies that exist now.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- I am sorry, honourable Koroilavesau, please repeat your Point of Order.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order 90.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Are you sure?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- 80.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Are you sure now?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am questioning that my Point of Order has been asked. He stands up and blabbed away without a Point of Order. I am trying to explain, what he is trying to get into.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Members, I am reading Standing Order 80 - Personal explanation and I quote: "A member may explain matters of a personal nature with the permission of the Speaker." I do not think this was a personal nature, maybe your Point of Order should have been clarification but we take your point. Thank you honourable Koroilavesau, please take your seat.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Madam Deputy Speaker, irrelevant Point of Order, makes no sense. What he claims that there was massive unemployment in the country, that is what he said.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Of course.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And let me tell him, this is the kind of motherhood generalisation without any facts that they are bringing into Parliament. Let me just tell you the situation in the formal sector, average....

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

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, please take your seat. Your Point of Order, honourable Member?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Madam Deputy Speaker, now I refer to Standing Order 81.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Which is Response to Misrepresentation?

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Yes.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Continue please.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Thank you. I understand there is a percentage on increase of employment in Fiji. That does not explain our people on the streets and in our areas who are not

being employed. So, it is the responsibility of Government to get them employed. If people have been moved out from here and have gone overseas, ...

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Koroilavesau.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- ... that is the responsibility

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Koroilavesau, I beg your pardon, Sir.

Standing Order 81(2) states and I quote; "An explanation must be succinct, strictly relevant to the reference, and not introduce any new matter." So, please be succinct in your Point of Order on the point raised by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Do not bring in are new matter please, Sir.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- The reason that I have explained, the issue that he has raised and my point of view when I raise the issue in Parliament.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- We take your point. Thank you, honourable Koroilavesau. Continue, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I know they have a plan to disrupt me. Let me ...

(Laughter)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Absolute lie.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The reference to massive unemployment in the country is a lie, is a motherhood generalisation without any figures, without any statistics. Let me just give you an example, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is FNPF data. In 2022 and 2023, in fact in 2023, the formal sector employment return stood more than pre-pandemic levels and Madam Deputy Speaker, average salaries in the formal sector as per FNPF data also increased by 12.46 percent.

They are contradicting themselves, in fact, the demand for labor, all the indicators from the Bureau of Statistics, Reserve Bank of Fiji, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the business community recognises that we have a tight labor market, there is shortage of labor, people are looking and sometimes they cannot even find a skilled labor. So, this claim that there is massive unemployment in the country is just bogus, designed to mislead.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Hogwash.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hogwash is coming from that side.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me give another example, Madam Deputy Speaker, of the generalisation of bogus claims and I know why they do that.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Because you used to do it.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Because they have got nothing else to talk about.

All of them said, "we just heard someone talk about fiscal policy, wrong fiscal policy." In fact the honourable Leader of the Opposition to his credit recognised and made some very good insights into the economic problems that we have and in fact he made some good suggestions about

broadening the tax base. Let me just read and I urge all honourable Members on the Opposition side to read the concluding statements from the International Monetary Fund which conducts an independent analysis, looks at the data and consults the business community. It put out the Report yesterday and this is what they said about fiscal policy amongst many others, and I quote:

“The fiscal stance reflected in the 2023-2024 Budget remains broadly appropriate as a moderate fiscal consolidation balances medium term goals, a narrowing output gap and accommodated monetary conditions. The Fijian authorities have made impressive progress in mobilising domestic revenue, although spending has also increased. The 2023-2024 Budget appropriately included revenue and unseen measures and VAT, corporate tax and departure tax as well as removing certain tax concessions and incentives. Total fiscal impact of the budget is estimated at 4.6 percent of GDP.”

This is what the IFS is also saying. They would have ideally liked us to remove zero VAT on basic food items; we did not. We added, Madam Deputy Speaker, one more item.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It was already there.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- And we added Prescribed Medicine to make it 22 items, they had forgotten.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Stop lying! It was already there.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They have forgotten, Madam Deputy Speaker, that under their dictatorial rule and the FijiFirst rule, they had 15 percent VAT without any exemptions. Those are the people who are sitting there. We in the Opposition then advocated for zero VAT on basic food items and the list that we provided in 2018 of 21 food items were copied from our manifesto and implemented before the last elections. That is what they did.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is what the IMF Report is saying. Let me also give other examples of lies. The honourable Lal claimed that the Back-to-School Assistance was started by FijiFirst.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- \$180.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Another lie. Back-to-School Assistance was a new initiative of the Coalition Government. In the last two years we have allocated almost \$100 million. In 2023 as soon as we came in Government, we provided \$200 each to more than 200,000 students as support for back to school.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Point Order.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Your Point of Order, honourable Lal?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Standing Order Point of order 74(1) - Misleading. The honourable Member had said that we are lying. Unfortunately, Madam Deputy Speaker, FijiFirst introduced the Back-to-School Assistance of \$180 and the Coalition Government just topped it up by \$20.

(Chorus of interjections)

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Lal. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you may continue.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He has again lied. I would ask him to provide the evidence.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That was a COVID-19 assistance; he is lying. This is back to school. Before the children went to school, a month before, this is a new initiative announced by the honourable Prime Minister.

Let me also talk about the cost of living. You are a joke, honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Brutal cost of living.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koya. A Point of Order, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise under Standing Order 74(1)(a). This is specifically with respect to practices in Parliament. The honourable Minister has been in Parliament for many years, I think he should withdraw.

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

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Are you hard of hearing Sir? I just said Standing Order 74(1)(a) - Practices of Parliament. Please Sir, can you refrain from referring to another honourable Member like you just did. I would like that withdrawn, Madam Deputy Speaker. He is a senior Member and a former Minister, it would be nice. We can go on back and forth, honourable Minister but not in the way you just did.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Withdraw!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Madam Deputy Speaker, they learn to take it as well, let me.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, if I may just say something right now. I really do not want to waste Parliament's time. I have heard some words from this side of Parliament addressed specifically to a Member on this side of Parliament and I would like that to stop, honourable Usamate. Please let us just respect each other and let us carry out the debate as asked of us by His Excellency the President. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Koya forgot what honourable Usamate said.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- What did he say?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I responded to him.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Your Point of Order, honourable Koya.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Madam Deputy Speaker, you have made a ruling, I think he ought to just keep it at that and leave it at that.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is a statement.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- It is not about me. I am under Standing Order 74(1)(a). Do not ask me for the Standing Order, I think I know it better.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koya. Let us just continue with the debate, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I have said at the beginning, I expected this. Let me just continue to talk about the cost of living. The IMF Report on the level of inflation is very clear and let me just point this out to them. The continued reference and continued misinformation about the cost of living, when honourable Premila Kumar was speaking the other day and honourable Nand was talking about the farmers and housewives, one of the farmers from Ba messaged me and this is what he said, "Tell them, prices of flour gone down from \$22 for 10 kilogrammes to \$15; rice price for 10 kilogrammes has gone down from \$25 to \$19. Seems they not doing shopping that is why they...."

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- They must be going to expensive shops.

HON. P.K. BALA.- There is a sale in that supermarket.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Not with flour and rice.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- As we have said, as the Bureau of Statistics and the Reserve Bank of Fiji have said inflation was 5 percent in 2023. In January it has gone down to 3.6 percent. The trend is very good. The impact of a VAT increase from 9 percent to 15 percent on some of the household items apart from the basic 21 food items was temporary.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition completely ignores the measures that we put in the budget to help those ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It only offsets.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...who needed them. As I said almost \$100 million in the last two years has gone to more than 60,000 families...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- *Vinaka*.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and their children to prepare them for back to school support.

The Social Welfare, Madam Deputy Speaker, was increased by \$15 and \$25. We increased budget for health services, kidney dialysis, agricultural subsidies; all these came through the revenue that we collected.

The other important point that I want to make, this is one of the most famous and most well-articulated lie in this Parliament over the last two days. This is about the Tertiary Education Loans Scheme (TELS) write-off. The \$650 million write-off has taken away the burden from 53,000 families and their children. These students who came out with a debt burden of \$20,000, \$30,000, \$40,000 and \$50,000 depending on the duration of the course, were burdened with making the repayment while they were working.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- That is right!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That income has gone back to the families and is now with them.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Girit.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- One innovation we brought and this was an idea from our Coalition partner SODELPA and very important is that the decision by the Coalition Government has removed that burden and also provided an opportunity. In fact, with the same amount of money, with less than what they were spending on TELS loans, we are giving more scholarships to students than ever before under TELS.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I was very, very surprised that they cannot differentiate between a loan, bond and a scholarship.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Microwave.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They claimed that because it is a bond, it is not free. In fact when we studied, Madam Deputy Speaker, in the 1970s, 1980s, every student who got a scholarship funded by the government was bonded to serve the country.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Full time job.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- If you did not serve the country, if you chose to leave the country, you got to pay. With the TELS loan they had the same arrangement. We heard these stories, these lies about students wanting to go overseas. They had the same process. You had to either pay; whether you had to pay 50 percent or 20 percent, you still had to pay if you wanted to go. So, if you sign a bond, you get a scholarship. You graduate, your work in Fiji, you do not pay a single cent. You serve your bond, you go. That is what we have done.

Again, let me also say a little bit about the economy, Madam Deputy Speaker, because this is another lie that they are advocating and perpetrating in this Parliament.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The recent Budget (this is to also put the record straight), we had reduced the fiscal deficit from an average of 9.0 percent to 4.8 percent of GDP. We plan to bring this down further to 3.5 percent on the upcoming Budget. The reduction in the deficit was critical to put out debt trajectory on a path of sustainability.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to update Parliament that for the first time of the fiscal year, Government has recorded a net deficit of \$114.9 million, equivalent to -0.9 percent of GDP - a surplus. This is much lower than the targeted net deficit that the Government has already collected of \$1.8 billion in revenues which is almost half of what has been forecasted for the year.

In the first six months, we have managed to achieve almost 99 percent of the budgeted tax revenue. Compared to the same period last year, the total revenue collection has increased by \$458 million or 34 percent, and tax revenue are higher by 367 percent or 31 percent.

Similarly, non-tax revenue has also increased. The reason why I am giving you this figure is because honourable Premila Kumar and some others out there...

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

...claimed that we will not be able to collect the revenue.

In terms of the expenditures, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the first six months, Government expenditure totalled \$1.9 billion, which represents about 44.1 percent and we agreed that it is lower than what we expected. But as we approach the second half which is normally the case, we expect expenditure to increase and some of the projects that are there would not be delayed.

There was this talk about the National Development Plan (NDP), Madam Deputy Speaker, and we heard from the Opposition that there was a plan already. In fact, that plan was conceived, concocted and what we found out that there were actually incorrect figures. The data that was used in the plan was incorrect.

The data on the sugar industry was all wrong. They claimed that the Tonnes of Cane per Tonne of Sugar (TCTS) would be around 5.7 TCTS. These were the kind of statistics concocted in that plan. There was no priority, so what we have done as a Government, we have recognised that we need an immediate plan, so we have a 3-Year Plan, a 5-Year Plan and a 20-Year Plan because we know as a Government, that we will not be able to achieve everything in three years or five years and that we need a 20-Year Plan.

Madam Deputy Speaker, what we will do is we will make sure that we prioritise and make it realistic. We know that there are certain things that we would not be able to do in three years or five years.

They talk about listening to the people. If you look at the process that we have adopted in the formulation of the NDP, this is the most comprehensive process - starting from His Excellency's Office, to all Government Ministers, NGOs, the public, we have got a consultant who is well experienced in development planning, so that is the process through which we will have a plan and that plan will be realistic. It will be targeted and prioritised.

One last point, Madam Deputy Speaker, with respect to the claims made by the honourable Members on the other side and this is laughable. They talk about democracy, they talk about good governance, they talk about transparency, they talk about cronyism, they talk about nepotism, they are behaving like bad losers, Madam Deputy Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- When you listen to them, I thought that after a year, and as I have said, I want to thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition because it is important to

recognise that it is we, on this side of Parliament, that has brought real democracy in this country.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We now have real democracy. The people in this country are listening to them. Listening to the garbage that is coming from the Opposition, from the generalisation that is coming from them.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- What they did, Madam Deputy Speaker, they have talked about the promises we made in the last Election. In the last Election, they went around quietly, openly, telling the people social welfare will be gone, free school will be gone, scholarships will be gone, your leg will be gone. This is what they are still telling the people...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Who said that?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and I know what they are telling.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- But when we came into Government, when they found out, "Aah, all these things that FijiFirst was telling us were lies. We still got our scholarships better. We are going to increase in social welfare allowances. We are going to increase in the health Budget. We are fixing health centres."

Honourable Maharaj was talking about waiting for a lot of things.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, may I please ask you to wind up.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I am winding up with one last point.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Koroilavesau has a Point of Order.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Point of Order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister knows very well his time is up and you had begged us this morning that we should stick to our time.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, I have just done that with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Please wind up, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think honourable Koroilavesau did very well today. He worked very hard, and I know you might have been selected to disrupt me.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are not the Deputy Speaker!

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Sit down.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I will sit down at the instruction of Madam Deputy Speaker. She has asked me to conclude. You are not going to bully me here.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, please, wind up.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Madam Deputy Speaker, one last point and I will sit down. This is in response to honourable Maharaj. What I was saying is if they had fixed all health centres, if they had fixed the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, if they had accepted our motion in 2019 to deal with the drugs, we would not be waiting. We waited and we are here now. They can wait.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- As I have not received any notification from the Secretary-General to Parliament, we will continue to listen to the response from our final speaker before we break for lunch.

HON. V. NATH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians who are joining us here today at the gallery and all of you who are connecting online - *bula vinaka, namaste, jai siya ram, as salamu alaykum* and a very good afternoon to you all. As we enter the month of March, I extend my warm wishes for the joyful and peaceful time filled with spirit of renewal. May the upcoming celebrations of *Holi, Ramadan* and Easter bring happiness and blessing to you and your loved ones.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise in this august Parliament to deliver my contributions on the Address by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Fiji. But, before I do so, I wish to remind the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to, please, go through the *Daily Hansard* of past Parliament Sittings, when they were on this side of Parliament. Now, they are on the other side.

I suggest to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics to feel the pulse of the people on the ground and just do not follow the report by IMF. The report looks merry and rosy, but on the ground, the story is different. Life is very hard now. I want to tell you that the people are watching you, not listening, but are watching you.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Watching you as well.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NATH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, at the outset, I wish to thank His Excellency for rightfully highlighting in his Opening Speech that water is a basic need and crucial for our socio-economic development. No one can deny the fact that water disruptions have become an everyday issue in all households. It is now an everyday and everywhere issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Viria Water Project is a significant infrastructure project that was initiated by the FijiFirst Government, which aimed to resolve the water supply issues and improve the lives of 360,000 Fijians in Fiji's Suva-Nausori corridor, with an addition of 40 million litres of water per day.

With an investment of over \$270 million by the Asian Development Bank, the Green Climate Fund and the Fijian Government, this project, based on initial estimates, should have been operational by now. It was anticipated to be finished in May 2023, followed by a two-month commissioning phase.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the continuous delay from the Coalition Government is sending a negative signal to our development partners. We have to be mindful that the well-planned projects with implementation timeline on track, secures more investment from our development partners.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Development partners do not invest.

HON. V. NATH.- Madam Deputy Speaker, given this delay, the relevant authority is to undertake further investigation to confirm the official launch date.

Information on the project's environmental impact or any incorporated sustainability features is currently lacking. Additionally, monitoring the project's long-term effectiveness in addressing water supply issues and its impact on the Suva-Nausori areas' development would be insightful.

By exploring the suggested resources and delving deeper into these areas, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Rewa River Water Supply Scheme for its potential long-term impact. If the honourable Minister is saying that the project is completed, then why are the people still complaining about the lack of water?

Madam Deputy Speaker, there has been a very strong emphasis on these mentioned areas in His Excellency's Speech on the plans by the Coalition Government. However, I would like to remind us today on the saying that goes, and I quote: "Action speaks louder than words".

This also applies to those promises made during campaign time leading up to the Elections. Yes, these promises are to be actioned and not only used as political mileage or vote buying and left as failed promises. I firmly believe that whatever statement is delivered within this august Chambers should be converted into action. If not, then they are just mere words.

Madam Deputy Speaker, many on the Coalition Government side like to use the blame game and it seems they are still campaigning. This diversionary tactics by the Coalition Government is an attempt to gaslight the nation to keep their campaign narratives alive. The good thing is, the people of Fiji have opened their eyes and have seen the truth.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The truth is 16 years.

HON. V. NATH.- Yes, you worry about the magic show.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have seen the cost of living climb to new heights, compounded by the increase in VAT to 15 percent which has seen spending drop simply because the ordinary Fijians cannot afford as much as they once did. The decrease in indirect tax revenue clearly shows that consumer spending habits has decreased. This is a clear indication that our economy is contracting, and this is a very worrying trend.

Madam Deputy Speaker, His Excellency also mentioned in his Speech that the national debt was \$9.9 billion. The question is, what was this money used for? Over \$800 million has been borrowed so far by the Coalition Government and we have yet to see any new development rather than a re-packaged FijiFirst development.

Madam Deputy Speaker, we have heard about the National Development Plan that is due out this year by the Coalition Government, but I ask, why does the Coalition Government need to remake something that has already been in place since 2017? We hear from the Minister in charge of this stating they will put in new policy initiatives, including those contained in the People's Alliance

Party, National Federation Party and the Social Democratic Liberal Party Manifestos will be reviewed and factored in the new plan.

Would it not been cheaper and more prudent to have an updated National Development Plan rather than making something new at great cost to the nation? It has been 15 months now since the Coalition Government took over government and the whole nation is wondering what they have been doing all this time. What have many of them been doing for the past eight years when the FijiFirst was in power? Did they not have plans and ideas? Clearly, they were not ready and from what I have heard, many of them are still not ready.

Madam Deputy Speaker, all in all, this is an indication of the Coalition Government's disconnection and lack of understanding of how the current mechanism works, and the inability to continue to build a nation is worrisome. By way of reverting to the blame game when they know they have nothing to show, no new or viable and good ideas is evident everywhere you look. You can ask almost anyone and they will tell you the same thing, life is very hard now and this is true.

Madam Deputy Speaker, "any man can sail a ship when the ocean is calm", Publilius Syrus wrote those words more than 2200 years ago. We have seen much in the way of finger pointing and verbal attack on us that says, "they did not do the job".

Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government has forgotten that under the FijiFirst Government, Fiji had to endure six cyclones with *TC Winston* hurting Fiji to the tune of around \$1.8 billion and costing 44 lives. We were also hit by COVID-19 - a global pandemic which brought our economy to its knees and costing us over 1,300 lives. To prevent stalling the economy, we had to make the tough choices and borrow to keep our economy going.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in ensuring that civil servants were paid in full, even if they were stuck at home. Any economist would know that it takes years to restart a stalled economy and the repercussions to the people of Fiji would have been extremely serious. All these, set us back by years of development and what do the people who benefited from tough decisions have to say for themselves now? They showed gratitude for all the aid and sadly, many were bought into the narrative of high debt that only came into existence by helping rebuild after the natural disasters and the pandemic.

Everything is relevant, Madam Deputy Speaker, everything Government builds or creates, there is a ripple effect that affects the whole nation. This Government is very smart to talk about the shortfalls of FijiFirst but they also failed to explain to the people why we did that. They have hoodwinked the people into thinking that we did not look after them and sadly, Madam Deputy Speaker, many of the people of Fiji are gullible enough to have fallen into their negative narrative hook, line and sinker.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Rural and Maritime Development Programme by the FijiFirst Government in the past years have transformed Fiji's rural economy and have raised the people's living standards but now, they are suffering. Crime rate has increased. Stealing of rootcrops as alluded by honourable Shalen Kumar and other honourable Members on this side.

At this juncture, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration for attending a meeting on my request and he has heard from the public that the crime rate has really increased.

Honourable Minister of Finance, if you are not sure, find it from your team and from your boy in Wailoku.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I have already visited them.

HON. V. NATH.- You go and visit them and you will find that the crimes committed are not only in Baulevu, but Viria in Naitasiri, Muaniweni and Tailevu and everywhere, the crime rate has increased. Stealing of rootcrops and vegetables are included in that.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. V. NATH.- As pointed by His Excellency that Government will prioritize a wide range of programmes to revitalise the rural economy and encourage self-reliance, including funding of Self Help Programmes, Community Access Roads, Footpaths and Bridges, High Risk Water and Sanitation projects, Rural Housing Assistance Programme and the Rural and Outer Island Development Programme.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to reiterate and remind this august Parliament that all these ongoing Programmes are from the FijiFirst Government. There is nothing new by the Coalition Government but the fact is, we have seen a major rebranding of everything from a microwave budget to a National Development Plan that I am sure will be very similar to the National Development Plan of 2017.

In His Excellency's Address in 2023, he said, and I quote:

“Democracy will be broadened and localised further with the empowerment of local community to choose their Advisory Councillor through elections.”

I will admit, I was cautionary optimistic that this Coalition Government was going to burden the Advisory Councillors.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am fully aware of how people appreciate the provision of Government assistance and services to our rural community and I am also aware of how difficult the work as an Advisory Councillor is. As people waited to elect their Advisory Councillors last year, we only saw failed National Federation Party Candidates and their supporters getting appointed to those positions and not elected.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. V. PILLAY.- Shame!

HON. V. NATH.- I hope the honourable line Minister is aware of that. District Advisory Councillors do play a critical role in connecting the people to the Government and vice versa, to ensure that people get the real assistance needed by them.

In this regard, it is very important that the right people are appointed for this position - someone that can be a game changer and has the ability to serve the community as a whole. I will ask the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management if the process was followed. I was told by a reliable source that the list advanced from the Commissioner Office was changed. I will ask the honourable Minister if Police Clearance was done for the District Advisory Councillors.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Who changed the list?

HON. V. NATH.- I eagerly await his reply.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is critical for an economy to have a robust transport system to enhance movement of goods and persons. Our maritime community faces this challenge particularly those who reside in non-economical routes. In addressing this, the FijiFirst Government introduced the Government Shipping Franchise Scheme. His Excellency had emphasised the need to better coordinate for disaster preparedness, response, recovery operations and mitigation.

Could the honourable Minister for Rural Development on behalf of the villagers of Rokovuaka and Narikoso in the Ra Province and the villagers of Matala and Maumi in Tailevu update us on the construction of evacuation centers? We have not heard anything so far? The signing was carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) more than three years ago, but nothing has been seen happening.

Madam Deputy Speaker, having \$6 million approved under the former Minister, preparedness work already done, the project was supposed to start last year.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- What happened?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- They were overseas.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NATH.- It talked about KOICA supporting the development under the Saemaul Undong Programme, but this was also Korean funded, nothing happening so far. I hope the honourable Minister has not shelved this project because they are FijiFirst projects. I remind them that our Fijian brothers and sisters will suffer if a disaster hits these areas. I had visited this area personally, they really need evacuation centers.

The honourable Minister stated twice that we need to come away from the dependency syndrome. What is the honourable Minister doing differently to ensure that we move away from the dependency syndrome as we are hearing nothing new and only hearing a similar style – microwave statement similar to the honourable Minister for Finance and rebranding FijiFirst programmes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, honourable Lynda Tabuya yesterday attempted to insult us by saying that we are jack of all trades. I would like to thank the honourable Minister for that complement. As the saying is, “jack of all trades is a master of none” but often better than “a master of one”. Sadly, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Coalition Government is neither a jack of all trades and definitely most of them are not a master of one except the honourable Minister herself who is an expert in a few fields which everyone knows of.

To conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to remind the Coalition Government to relook at the changes that they are willing to implement, not to be vote buying but to ensure that it will bring about economic stability and sustainability.

DEPUTY SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, it is now 12.43 p.m., we are going to adjourn for lunch and the bell will ring just before 2.00 p.m. Thank you, enjoy your lunch.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.44 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.13 p.m.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome – Women's Dorcas Ministry

Honourable Members, before we move on, I would like to highlight two issues that has come before me whilst listening intently to the speeches, but before I do so, I would like to acknowledge a tour group from the members of the Women's Dorcas Ministry of Suvavou Seventh-day Adventist Church and their team leader is Ms. Leba Volau. *Ni bula vinaka mai, vinaka vakalevu.*

Contempt of Parliament – Hon. K.V. Ravu

The other issue I would like to bring to your attention, honourable Members, is that I would like to address an issue that I have picked out after having reviewed the Uncorrected *Hansard Report* for yesterday, Tuesday, 12th March, 2024 and this is with respect to the reference made by the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry to section 72 of Schedule 1 of the 2018 Code of Conduct. For the information of honourable Members, the Code of Conduct Bill was moved on the First Reading under Standing Order 84(1) on 30th November, 2018.

The Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights tabled its Report on 4th April, 2019 and pursuant to Standing Order 86, their Chairperson then moved that it be sat down for consideration by the Committee of the Whole of Parliament on a future sitting date. Due to the Prorogation in 2019, the Bill had lapsed and was restored to the Order Paper on 8th December, 2020 and that status remained until the Dissolution of Parliament in 2022. In essence the Code of Conduct Bill 2018 had lapsed entirely. In that respect, since it was never enacted, it is not a current law and therefore it is out of order to quote nor apply any of the clauses that were contained in the lapsed Bill.

Honourable Members, it is pertinent to reiterate that deliberately misleading Parliament is a very serious matter and may be viewed as Contempt of Parliament. It is equally important to ensure that whilst speaking in Parliament, one needs to be factually correct and this has been highlighted by the honourable Deputy Speaker when she was presiding; here, you need to present the facts and you have to be very factual since we do not want to mislead the members of the public.

In that respect, honourable Members, I will call on honourable Minister Ravu if you could kindly withdraw your statement on the reference to the Code of Conduct Bill 2018 accordingly, and since you still have seven days to correct what is in the *Hansard Report* and the statement will be expunged from the *Hansard Report* for Tuesday, 12th March, 2024.

HON. K.V. RAVU. -Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I withdraw that statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you very much.

We will ensure that the statement is expunged, as I have stated earlier from the Minutes of the meeting held yesterday.

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

HON. P. TIKODUADUA. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of the Parliament and my fellow Fijians, I rise to lend my voice to the motion

put forward by the honourable Prime Minister thanking His Excellency the President for his insightful and forward-looking Address at the State Opening of Parliament. His Excellency's Speech, rich in vision and aspiration, not only paves the way for our collective endeavours, but also reminds us of the weight of our duties to our beloved nation, Fiji.

Speaking to the importance of the role that His Excellency plays, I want to say that in the last 15 months or so, His Excellency has truly lived up to his constitutional mandate to be the symbol of national unity for our nation. Even when things were tough, His Excellency did not waver, he showed true leadership by accepting the elections results, showing us all how much he values democracy and the choice of the Fijian people. It is not easy to stand strong when there are so many voices and pressures coming from different directions, but our President did just that.

By welcoming the election results, he did not just follow the rules and the Constitution, he showed us what it means to truly respect and trust the process and the decisions of our nation and her people. This leadership is inspiring, Mr. Speaker, it reminds us that no matter what, we need to stick to our principles like fairness, respect for each other and the peaceful transition of power. These are the things that keeps our country stable and united.

Mr. Speaker, in that regard, I also would like to wish to extend my appreciation to the Commander and the Ranks of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, the Acting Commissioner and the Officers of Fiji Police Force, the Permanent Secretary, the Director and the Department of Immigration for their dedication and service to our country. Their commitment to maintaining peace, ensuring security and upholding the law is the bedrock upon which the confident, safety and well-being of our nation and its citizens rest.

Mr. Speaker, as announced by His Excellency the President, the National Security and Defence Review is envisaged to be a holistic assessment. It encompasses not only our military capabilities, but also the broader dimensions of security that are pivotal for a peaceful and a prosperous Fiji. This includes economic security, cybersecurity, environmental security and human security with a particular emphasis on alleviating poverty as a means to enhance national stability.

This comprehensive review will enable us to identify critical gaps, align our strategies with the best practices globally and tailor our approach to the unique needs and aspirations of our Fijian society. It will serve as a blueprint for transforming our security and defence sectors into agile, forward-looking entities capable of not only deterring threats but also contributing to the holistic well-being of our nation and its people. We understand that a nation's strength is not solely measured but its military prowess but by the resilience and prosperity of its people.

Therefore, the National Security and Defence Review will also explore mechanisms to strengthen social safety nets, promote sustainable development and ensure that every Fijian has the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from our nation's growth. The task ahead is complex and demands a collaborative approach. We will engage with a broad range of stakeholders, including community leaders, international partners and experts across various fields to ensure that the review is comprehensive, inclusive, with our national values and goals.

Mr. Speaker, the National Security and Defence Review represents a pivotal step in our journey towards a secure, stable and prosperous Fiji. It is an opportunity to redefine security in a manner that resonates with the needs of our time and reflects our commitment to the well-being of all Fijians. The review team is expected to present its report to Government in August this year and subsequently to Parliament afterwards.

As we embark, Mr. Speaker, on this critical review, I seek the support and wisdom of this

esteemed Parliament, especially the Opposition. Together we can chart a course towards a future where security is synonymous with opportunity, prosperity and peace for all of our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, the challenges we face today, from transnational crime and drug trafficking to the threats posed by climate change and natural disasters, demand a police force that is not only robust but also adaptable and equipped with contemporary capabilities. The security landscape has evolved dramatically, and so must our responses to these challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hold myself accountable for the current law and order situation in Fiji today, much of which has been inherited from decisions made in the past. The honourable Maharaj yesterday talked about FijiFirst sowing seeds. Well, Mr. Speaker, Sir, indeed they sowed many seeds. If FijiFirst wants to take credit for the good and sweet fruits of seeds that they sowed, they must also accept responsibilities for the bad or rotten or sour and poisonous fruits as well that was born out of their administration.

The negative fruits of these seeds are what we are contending with today. It is what I am contending with today - drugs, police brutality, unprofessionalism and inefficient administrative processes. All of these are now my responsibility and I have to deal with it, I accept it that it is now on my lap. It will not change overnight, but I assure Parliament, Mr. Speaker, it will change, it is going to change. Now having said all that, Mr. Speaker, it is our duty as stewards of this nation to look beyond the vestiges of the past and forge a path towards a future where our security apparatus is capable, resilient and responsive to the needs of our time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to highlight a crucial initiative within our Fiji Police Force known as the "Restore Blue Concept". This innovative approach is aimed at embedding human rights at the heart of our policing efforts. It is about ensuring that every action taken by our police officers aligns with international human rights standards, ensuring that the rights and dignity of every individual and community are respected and also protected.

The essence of human rights-based policing is to forge a positive, trust-based relationship between the police and the community that they serve. It is about moving away from any practices that may have previously undermined public confidence in the police such as excessive use of force or human rights violations. These actions not only damage the professional image of our Police Force but also hinder their ability to effectively serve and protect our communities.

By adopting the Restore Blue Concept, we are committed to transforming our Police Force. This involves integrating human rights principles into all aspects of Police work, from daily operations to the very ethos that guide our officers. It means reviewing and upgrading even their equipment and facilities to ensure they must meet the high standards required for humane and effective law enforcement, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This initiative is not just about avoiding wrongdoing, it is about actively promoting and protecting the rights of all Fijians which is fundamental to maintaining peace, order and the rule of law in our nation.

In echoing the wisdom imparted by His Excellency the President, and drawing upon the lessons of comprehensive security strategies such as those I witnessed in the People's Republic of China, particularly the emphasis on public security through poverty alleviation. We recognise the intrinsic link between socio-economic stability and national security. The fight against drugs and transnational crime is not a battle that can be won in isolation. It requires a united front, a coalition of efforts across ministries, governmental departments, and, crucially, within our communities.

To this end, my Ministry is committed to fostering stronger partnerships with local and international stakeholders, enhancing information sharing and intelligence cooperation, and

building the capacity of our law enforcement agencies. This collaborative stance extends beyond the confines of traditional security apparatus to encompass education, social services, and economic agencies, recognizing that preventive measures are as critical as enforcement in this enduring battle. Moreover, we must empower our communities to be the first line of defense against these threats.

Community policing, public awareness campaigns and engaging with civil society organisations are pivotal in this regard. We aim to not only disrupt the supply chains of drugs and criminal networks but also to address the demand side by providing support, education and rehabilitation services to those affected. The battle against drugs and transnational crime also underscores the need for regional and international cooperation. In a world where threats are increasingly transnational in nature, our security strategies must also be borderless. We will continue to strengthen our ties with the neighbouring countries, international organisations and allies to combat these global challenges together.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, please allow me to speak a little bit about drugs in particular. I wish to address a pressing concern that threatens the very fabrics of our society - the pervasive issues of drug in Fiji as we have been hearing throughout, particularly from the Opposition for the few days that we have been here. The illicit drug trade is not simply a criminal enterprise. It is a multifaceted scourge that undermines our social, economic and moral structures with a particularly devastating impact on our youth and our children.

The infiltration of drugs into our communities has far-reaching consequences. It erodes the potential of our young people, drawing them away from education and productive activities into cycles of dependency and of despair. The allure of the drug trade, with its false promises of quick wealth, ensnares not just individuals but entire families and communities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and lawlessness.

Our Government is acutely aware of the gravity of this issue and the need for a comprehensive and multi-pronged strategy to combat it. Our approach is anchored in education, prevention, treatment and enforcement with a particular emphasis on safeguarding our youth and our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry and the Coalition Government is attacking the national drug problem through a four-pronged strategy:

1. **Education and Prevention:** We are committed to launching national awareness campaigns aimed at educating our citizens, especially our young people, about the dangers and consequences of drug use and involvement in the drug trade. By strengthening our educational programmes and community outreach, we aim to build resilience among our youth, empowering them with the knowledge and skills to make informed choices. We will seek to partner with other organisations that are already doing this work on the ground.
2. **Treatment and Rehabilitation:** Recognising the importance of compassion and support in addressing drug dependency, our Government will enhance access to treatment and rehabilitation services. By providing comprehensive care and support, we aim to facilitate the recovery and reintegration of affected individuals into society, offering them a path back to a productive and fulfilling life.
3. **Enforcement and Legal Framework:** To disrupt the drug trade and hold those responsible to account, we are bolstering our law enforcement capabilities and reviewing our legal framework. This includes enhancing inter-agency cooperation, both domestically and

internationally to effectively tackle drug trafficking networks. Strengthening our legal framework will ensure that penalties for drug-related offences are commensurate with the severity of the crime, serving as a deterrent to potential offenders.

On community engagement, the battle against drugs cannot be won by Government action alone. It requires the active participation of our communities. We foster partnerships with community leaders, civil society organisations and international partners, to create a united front against the drug menace. Through these collaborations, we aim to reclaim our communities from the grip of drugs and restore safety and security for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also pleased to announce in Parliament that we are working with our development partners to build a specialised Drug and Narcotics Bureau, reporting directly to the Ministry. This new Bureau will, in my intention, be singularly tasked with effective intelligence gathering, prevention and, of course, the prosecution of those who are responsible for this threat in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drug issue in Fiji is a battle that we must fight on all fronts. It demands our collective resolve and a comprehensive strategy that addresses the root causes and provides suitable solutions. Our Government is fully committed to this fight, for the sake of our nation's present and future, especially for the wellbeing and potential of our young people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on immigration and border security, as we navigate the complexities of our national security landscape, addressing the challenges of drugs and transnational crime, we must also turn our attention to the pivotal role of immigration in safeguarding our nation's borders and ensuring the orderly management of people entering and leaving Fiji. In this era of globalisation, the movement of individuals has exponentially increased, bringing forth both, opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, modernising our immigration technology and processes is not merely an administrative task. It is a critical component of our national security strategy. The advancement of technology in recent years offers unprecedented opportunities to enhance the efficiency, accuracy and integrity of our immigration systems. By embracing these innovations, we can significantly improve our ability to detect, deter and respond to the potential threats at our borders, while also facilitating legitimate travel and fostering economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to this end, my Ministry is actively pursuing the modernisation of our immigration infrastructure. This includes the adoption of advanced biometric systems, which will enable us to accurately verify the identities of individuals entering and exiting our country. By integrating these systems with international databases and watchlists, we can enhance our screening processes and prevent individuals with known criminal backgrounds from entering our shores.

Furthermore, we are committed to upgrading our data management systems to ensure that they are secure, efficient and interoperable with other national and international security databases. This will improve our ability to share and analyse information, enhancing our collaborative efforts with international partners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the modernisation of our immigration processes also extends....

MR. SPEAKER.- Please round off, honourable Minister. Are you rounding off now?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Yes, I am, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

By digitising these processes, we can offer more accessible user-friendly services to visitors and potential residents, thereby, supporting our tourism industry and attracting foreign investment. At the same time, streamlined and transparent processes will reduce opportunities for corruption and malpractice, ensuring that our immigration system operates with the highest standards of integrity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the modernisation of our immigration technology and processes is an essential step in our broader security and development strategy. It reflects our commitment to upholding the rule of law, protecting our citizens, and ensuring that Fiji remains a welcoming and secure destination for legitimate travellers and residents.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in weaving together the various strands of our discussion, from fortifying national security and modernising defence capabilities to enhancing immigration processes and tackling the scourge of drugs and transnational crime, it is evident that our collective endeavour is both, complex and critical. Equally important is our unified stance against misinformation, particularly concerning the rise in crime rates, ensuring that our narrative remains anchored in truth and transparency under the Rabuka-led Coalition.

Let us not forget that our ultimate goal transcends partisan lines - it is the security, prosperity and wellbeing of Fiji and its people. In this spirit, I extend a hand of collaboration to our colleagues across the aisle, inviting them to join us in this noble pursuit. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient Fiji, where every citizen feels safe, valued and empowered.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, *vinaka vakalevu* and thank you for this opportunity to articulate our collective vision and reaffirm our dedication to the betterment of our beloved Fiji and its people. I support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister and thank His Excellency for his most gracious Speech.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you very much, honourable Tikoduadua. I can understand where honourable Maharaj is coming from because afterall, you two were buddies at one time.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to contribute to the debate on the motion in the name of the honourable Prime Minister that is before Parliament, which is to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I just quickly remind the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration that we have no tree that has fruits that are all sweet that we can handover. If you cry about the sour one, it will remain sour. If you add a bit of salt or sugar, you may be able to eat it.

(Laughter)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Sir, instead of complaining, please, do something.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the day His Excellency spoke to us, I was reminded of a memory photo on my *Facebook* page eight years ago in a New Zealand Military helicopter as we were travelling to the devastated areas ravaged by *TC Winston* to assess the best way we could provide emergency assistance and help those in need. Fiji led by the Government then stood together, united and tackled the huge task at hand, to provide some immediate relief and build back better, and some still ongoing today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, amazingly only a few months later in August of the same year, the nation came together again as one and cheered our Fiji Sevens Team on to its first ever Olympic Goal Medal.

During COVID-19, the same happened. We united as a nation, and through some strong decisive leadership by Government then and operators at the operational and tactical level, we came through. The strategy to expose the virus, through testing, eliminate the virus through isolation and vaccinate, worked. We came through and our economy grew. We became the fifth fastest growing economy in the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I recall these events to highlight an important, if not, the most important point, at least, in my view, of His Excellency's Speech to us and, that is, I quote: "As leaders, we are required to leave aside our differences for the common good of our people." His Excellency, went further to say, and I quote: "We must focus on our shared destiny and commonality rather than our small differences."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have highlighted through my recollection of those past events, we, as a nation, have shown that we can do what His Excellency was imploring us to do. We have done so in the past.

His Excellency's Speech to this august Chamber also comes at a time when our nation is facing some major issues. There is an exodus of Fijians from Fiji to other countries overseas seeking employment, education, and there are those who are migrating. There is a general shortage of skilled workers. There is brain drain as well as it was very well articulated by my colleague, the honourable Virendra Lal yesterday.

The FijiFirst Government put in place policies to reverse that brain drain and turn it into a brain drain gain where former Fijians can come back and invest in our country. This Government, it looks like it will be brain drain gone.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a sharp rise in crime. Drugs is at a crisis level. Yesterday, my colleague, honourable Tuinaceva, highlighted the very unfortunate case of the high number of deaths on our road. The economy is slowing down to 3 percent this year according to IMF. Life is generally hard on the ground.

His Excellency's Speech also comes after a little over one year of the Coalition Government in power. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Coalition Government, it is time for you to defend your record. The only problem is that there is very little record, if any at all, to defend.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Shame!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- This must be the reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, why they are just trying to lay blame on FijiFirst to cover their doing very little or nothing at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after listening to the other side for the past two days, it seems that the other side of Parliament interprets working together or walking across the aisle as a ticket to not being criticised. Sadly, I have to remind them that it is not the case. In this, the people's Parliament, they will be criticized. You will be asked tough questions by us on this side of Parliament and the sole Government backbencher.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- And I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they heard the very wise suggestions from their Government backbencher to them yesterday.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- You worry about your 16 years.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- It is just too bad, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they wanted to make themselves all Ministers and Assistant Ministers and they missed out on the value of good governance backbenchers.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Absolutely!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you well know, the legislature has an oversight role on the Executive. You are very well aware of this, Sir, and that is why we will never shy away from our job of oversight.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the situation on law and order in the country demands some urgent attention. There is a growing lack of confidence in our Police Force both, in their capacity to do their law enforcement work and on the integrity within the Force. The recent arrests that included serving Police Officers on the allegation of tampering with the recently seized hard drugs kept as exhibits is quite worrying.

I fear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that there is a rot that is setting in the Police Force, and I sincerely hope that I am wrong. If there is a rot, it needs to be fixed quickly because, Sir, to successfully smuggle high value contraband like hard drugs into or through a country, a secret segment of the society is created - the drivers, the transporters, the lookouts, the sellers, the bankers, and when enforcement officers or officials become part of that secret segment of the society, the problem is almost impossible to crush, as he had wanted to do when the drugs were discovered.

The honourable Minister's recent comments in the media that drug networks operated with impunity under the previous Administration is quite irresponsible, given the hard work carried out by the Fiji Police Force over the years to fight drugs.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I call on the honourable Minister publicly and I call on him again here in this Chamber to provide evidence to justify his claim.

Let me remind the honourable Minister in this Parliament of some facts in 2019. The Fiji Police Force established the first ever Narcotics Bureau to ramp up the fight against drugs and specialist training was provided to Police Officers to deal with drug-related cases. Capabilities have also been enhanced over the years to assist the Police to combat this drug problem.

Anti-Drug operations across Fiji over the years have resulted in the seizure of green and hard drugs worth millions of dollars and the perpetrators have been convicted. According to media reports, in 2019, police uncovered a methamphetamine lab in a nightclub in Nadi. A small-scale methamphetamine lab was also discovered in 2013 and in 2015 in Suva.

Way back in 2004, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Police found chemicals big enough to produce 2,200 pounds of crystal methamphetamine in a factory outside Suva. So, I am not so sure where this 'doing nothing' in the past is coming from.

The fight against drug is and will continue to be an ongoing operation and it will be a big chunk of the Police Force enforcement work. Other countries have taken a step further to set up border force to tackle contraband smuggling.

The last thing the Police Force need is political interference, which is very evident right now, and I had call out the honourable Minister for Home Affairs publicly on this issue a few times. The Fiji Police Force and other enforcement agencies need to be resourced, not interfered with. Unfortunately, nothing significant was provided for them in the last Budget. I hope that there will be an improvement in the next Budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the call by honourable Radrodro yesterday to the honourable Pime Minister for Fiji to withdraw its position and its support to Israel's occupation of and actions in Gaza. This position harms Fiji's international reputation as a peacekeeping nation that is committed to lasting peace in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our international reputation as peacekeepers is built on the Republic of Fiji Military Force's professionalism and experience. Our international reputation as a peacekeeping nation is equally premised on our ability to stay neutral in regions where Fijian peacekeepers are deployed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, only by being neutral will we be seen as credible by the parties to the conflict. Some legal scholars describe our submission as overstepping international law. Perhaps, the honourable Attorney-General can enlighten us tomorrow as to who drafted Fiji's submission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's explicit support to one party to the conflict has diminished and compromised our peacekeeping reputation and high standing not only in the Middle East but worldwide, and especially in the Global South.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as highlighted by honourable Radrodro yesterday, Fiji's stand at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) puts our peacekeepers in harm's way. Yes, there is always an inherent risk to the lives of peacekeepers when they are deployed to peacekeeping missions, as is well known to the former peacekeepers who are in this Chamber. But taking the side of one party makes you an enemy to the other, and I am talking about the lives of fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Some, in this Chamber, might even have close relatives serving in the Middle-East missions right now. My youngest son is currently serving in Iraq.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me turn to something that happened yesterday, and you may have been listening. I was disheartened when after honourable Ketan Lal asked his question to the three Ministers yesterday, the answer came in a form that, sort of, said, 'how dare you ask that question'. It was followed by a lecture on how he should behave, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those questions were merely questions on transparency and they required simple answers, perhaps, just a 'yes' or 'no'. I am pretty sure that if they had asked the honourable Prime Minister whether they should answer those questions, they would have got a very short and sharp simple military style answer of just saying answer the question and clear your name. By the way, we did not cook up those questions on this side. It came from the people, obviously, those who saw and witnessed and when the people ask, they deserve an answer because transparency is a principle of democracy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what was even more sickening to me personally yesterday was when honourable Tuinaceva used as an example the words that were spoken publicly in a Government organised public consultation on Local Government on 25th September, 2023, to highlight the

problem of racial hatred rearing its ugly head again.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It has nothing to do with the Government.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Make it shown.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- The Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics accused him of inciting racial disharmony.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Madam Deputy Speaker wisely ruled against it yesterday.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Very bad!

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I and other honourable Members in this Parliament have seen the result of racial hatred when it manifests into physical violence. Racial hatred is the biggest barrier to harmonious and peaceful coexistence in our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had warned about racism last year during my Maiden Speech in this Parliament and the incident that honourable Tuinaceva was referring to happened just a few months later.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics can choose to bury his head in the sand and pretend that nothing is happening when it comes to racial hatred and racism, and that does not bother me at all.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Not just one way.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- The reason is that, he is only one, there are 26 of us on this side who will fight racism and racial discrimination. We will call it out. We will warn people about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FijiFirst stands for equal citizenry, and we will continue to fight for equality for all in this Parliament and outside of this Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order! No banging of the table, please, honourable Members.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the one question that all that voted for us, those who gave us the privilege to occupy the seats we currently occupy, the 42.55 percent of voters who gave us 26 seats, the 8.89 percent of voters who gave National Federation Party five seats...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- 58 percent said, 'no'.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- ...the 35.82 percent of voters who gave People's Alliance Party 21 seats and the 5.14 percent of voters who gave SODELPA three seats and even those who did not vote, all asked the same simple question; What are you doing to make lives better? And the answer is, given this Government's one-year record, it is very little to nothing.

I am sure that the people are fed up with the rhetoric from the other side that FijiFirst did this, FijiFirst did not do that, and it just goes on and on because there is very little...

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It is the fact.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- ... that the Coalition Government is doing to better your lives.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- We are fixing your mess.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will end by echoing to this Parliament, again, the voice of the people. They are asking, what are you doing to make lives better? Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and all those watching online and the television viewers here this afternoon; *bula vinaka* and good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President along with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Education have informed this august Parliament about the commitment of the Coalition Government to education. Today, I stand to reiterate the same message, education is the cornerstone of development in any economy and Fiji is no exception. Please allow me to expand the issues that affect the Ministry of Education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the *Denarau Declaration* emanating from the Education Summit would now form the basis of the future direction of the Fiji education sector. At the heart of that declaration, there are seven thematic areas based on the Terms of Reference of the Fiji Education Commission which has gone through public consultation on Wednesday last week. Based on this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a paper would be drafted to be discussed in Cabinet in the coming days for the roll out of the Education Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the second important challenge that awaits our action is to have a home grown education programme that not only induces a strong sense of civic pride, patriotism and productive citizenry but one that also prepares a future workforce to meet the demands of the domestic and international markets here and abroad. We will continue to assist in the process of nation building through education and improving the lives of our fellow kith and kin.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the third dimension is improving the actual classroom environment, its physical and social infrastructure pertaining to teaching and learning. This is in ensuring that we have adequate teachers, improve our pupil:teacher ratio, boost student morale, provide for the security of teachers and students and importantly, improve the welfare of those engaged in the process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot the fact that more than 90 percent of our schools are faith-based education institutions. We cannot and must not follow the footsteps of the previous Government in undermining and diluting the foundation values...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- ...of these faith-based schools. The People's Coalition Government is fully committed in upholding those values and we will support everyone to enhance the same way moving forward. The Coalition Government is on record of living by its noble commitments and in respect of the education sector, our budgetary allocations, pragmatic leadership and steps taken to ensure that we provide education for all, speaks volume about itself. I do not think one needs to belabour this point as teachers and students find themselves in a more free and just

environment for teaching and learning than the period of cynicism in the last 16 years of the last administration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the regularization as per MCS Circular 2/2024 and 5/2024, we at the Ministry are effectively correcting the irregularities, inhumane, inconsistent and haphazard appointment processes that was implemented by honourable Hem Chand during his term when he was head of Human Resources at the Ministry of Education.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Point of Order.

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

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 62.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Member, are you speaking to me or to him?

(Laughter)

HON. H. CHAND.- To you, Sir.

I think he is misleading Parliament; it is not me. He has mentioned my name. It is the Ministry of Education. He has mentioned my name, he should withdraw that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Assistant Minister, that Point of Order has been raised on your mentioning his name.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- He said he was there before.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he was at the administrative during that time.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are now correcting the wrong subject combinations for Head of Department (HOD) appointments. For example, a graduate in Commerce was appointed to HOD Social Science, how was this allowed when there were many others?

Secondly, the prolonged acting appointments of officers; officers acting here, there and everywhere. It was like Hollywood and maybe Bollywood. The officers in the last government would be transferred from pillar to post at the whims of Directors like the FijiFirst was doing for the last 16 years.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the removal of three counsellor positions was ill conceived, poorly planned and negatively impacted our children. We are in the process of reinstating the Divisional Counsellors and will introduce counsellors in each of the nine districts and appoint counsellors to the large primary and secondary schools throughout Fiji.

We are now also correcting the separation of teacher couples. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to be inundated with requests to reunite couples and families. The last administration must have had a quota of families that needed to be broken up when they were making appointments within the Ministry of Education.

There was also a complete disregard in ensuring ethnic balance in all our primary and secondary schools. Every appointment or suggestion to HR fell on deaf ears. The fact that remains that vernacular must be taught at the primary school level and evidence suggests that those whose mother tongue of the vernacular being taught should be the teachers. In the last administration, I believe the honourable Members on the other side disregarded that when they were in the Ministry controlling from the last 16 years in office.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Another massive exercise that we embarked on is the review of School Classification. I ask the honourable Members in the Opposition, how can an Assistant Principal in a small school with a population of 100 students be paid exactly the same salary as the AP in a large school with a student population of 1,100 students? How was this done? I urge the honourable Opposition Members not to mislead the people of Fiji in this regards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will also be establishing HOD positions in schools. In 2023, we established 60 HOD positions and remunerated them accordingly. This year we will establish approximately 185 HOD positions. In the last government, the acting HODs in various schools is an unestablished position where they were doing the work without any remuneration. This is modern day slavery, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry embraces the work before us. We are implementing decisions and plans based on facts and we will continue to do so in line with the policies of our Coalition Government. Another fact that I wish to draw the attention of this august Parliament to, is the Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) 2021 Report. The PILNA data shows that the score for Year 4 students in 2021 was lower than in the previous PILNA cycle, PILNA 2018. The report also showed that approximately 66 percent of Year 4 students in Fiji, two out of three performed at or above the expected level which is three to eight in the PILNA Report 2021.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Schools were closed- COVID-19.

HON. I. S. VANAWALU.- Conversely, approximately 34 percent of the students, one out of three performed below the expected proficiency level, which is level zero to two. In other words, even though most Year 4 students were meeting the minimum expected level for numeracy but this is a significant proportion (34 percent) who are yet to meet this level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, PILNA findings support intervention in Fiji education system with the goal of strengthening our numeracy, reading and writing instruction leading to improved student learning outcomes. Other data sets such as that from the World Bank and our very own Status of Education Report 2023 tell a bleak story. We are actively working on changing this narrative with a clear system, processes, transparency and accountability that is now only seen in our beloved Fiji after 16 years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government has also invested heavily in the much talked about literacy and numeracy rate in Fiji as revealed by the regional educational authority body in the PILNA results, as mentioned earlier. I would like to reassure this august Parliament that apart from strengthening our Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) programme in school and the reading unit set

up in the Curriculum Advisory Service, we as a Ministry have also extended investment in the library unit.

The Ministry of Education advocates exposure to reading materials at an early age to complement the literacy and numeracy curriculum in collaboration with the Australian Government. We have now ventured into community library. This has begun in a few communities. An example of the success of the partnership with community library is the big improvement in the Year 8 examination results of one of the primary schools in the Eastern Division that was once classified as underperforming school. We will invest in a mobile library that used to be a practice in the past. For the rural communities, we are having community library set up. For our urban students, we will partner with other government ministries and ensure that we provide adequate reading and student support spaces in the local halls and the communities Fiji wide.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the digital world that we are in now, we will need to encourage our children to develop reading habits because most of us sitting in this room will agree with me, and we know too well the benefits of reading and the positive impact it will have on our children who are the future leaders of our nation. I also want to bring to the attention of this august Parliament, the effort that the Ministry of Education is implementing on accessibility to education.

The Asset and Infrastructure Services Unit continues to ensure that all schools are either rebuilding or renovating its building adhere to the standard Category 5 disaster resilient structures. Due to climate change, the Ministry has included Disaster Risk and Resilience staff to ensure that the Ministry of Education provides, facilitates and promotes the teaching, learning, administration and management of education in Emergencies and School Based Disaster Risk Reduction Programme in the country in accordance with the Ministry's policies and guidelines.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continues to deliver boats and engines to support student's transportation to school. Let me enlighten Parliament that the Permanent Secretary visited the school whereby its students were swimming across the flooded river last two weeks ago in the interior of Viti Levu. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the bridge...

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Assistant Minister, there is a Point of Order.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Standing Order 60 - Relevance. I thought we were answering to His Excellency's Speech.

MR. SPEAKER.- Hold on, let me check.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Prime Minister you are better than honourable Gavoka.

(Laughter)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are here to acknowledge His Excellency's Speech on last Monday and not a Ministerial Statement to figure out or to outlay a work of a Ministry, please.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Koroilavesau, see we must be happy because he has taken us to Hollywood, Bollywood and now we are coming back. Continue, honourable Assistant Minister.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry continue to deliver boats and engines to support students' transportation to school.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the bridge has been unrepaired since *TC Winston* in 2016. The FijiFirst Government in 2018 campaigned fervently in this are, they have got the vote but failed again to deliver to the people in the Wainimala areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after the visit by the Permanent Secretary of Education and Permanent Secretary of Rural Development and the Ministry of Education officers from the Assets and Infrastructure Unit, we will pursue the building of the bridge and the overall improvement of road infrastructure in this area.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Some populations in that area cross the river 27 times to reach education, market and health services. I wonder how Members from across the floor would fare if they or their children had to cross the cold Wainimala River at least twice a day as early as 5 a.m. to get to work or get to public transportation. I am certain that they would not fare well at all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has invested in the purchase of three tractors supplied to three Government schools to start with. The massive land mass need mechanisation for productivity and savings for those boarding schools. The schools will not only produce its vegetables and root crops to save money but also teach these young people at boarding schools the importance of eating fresh local produce and the importance of the agriculture in our economy as this can be a source of livelihood as well for them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the financial literacy in the Ministry of Education is one of the eight curriculum perspective in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF). Financial Education is incorporated in English, Math and Social Science at the Primary levels 1 to level 8, at Secondary levels from Year 9 and Year 10 in Commercial Studies and Year 11 and Year 12 in Math, Accounting, Economics and English. Smart with Money Zone Programme, an evolving Ministry of Education Initiative. This is work in progress. The Ministry's Curriculum Advisory Services (CAS) is working on this project. The programme involves parents creating an account which we call a "Money Zone Account" for their children with a minimum deposit so that the children can start owning an account and managing their own money as they grow up in our beloved Fiji.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, education is everyone's business in today's modern world and we ask the Members of this august Parliament to bring something positive to contribute to accessibility of our education here in Fiji. May God bless us all and may God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on the next speaker who is the Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister may I just acknowledge the presence of former Assistant Minister sitting in the gallery, not forgetting the old man from Kalabu behind honourable Aseri Radrodoro and Mr. Felix Magnus as well who is the Special Administrator of Nasinu Town Council.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians present here today and those connecting on livestream. I also wish to warmly welcome the Women's Dorcas Ministry from the Suvavou Village who are here with us this afternoon.

Before I begin, Mr. Speaker, I would just like to raise a few issues with regards to what has been raised by the Opposition. I find the intervention by honourable Naupoto very contradictory.

As he had known, that in 2019 the FijiFirst opposed the motion to investigate the causes of the drug problem in Fiji.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Listen, listen!

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Following that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, their leader, Mr. Voreqe Bainimarama assaulted honourable Pio Tikoduadua, of course most of the Members who are here voted him out.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drug problem in Fiji is a direct neglect of the previous FijiFirst Government.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBER.- Listen!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the last two days we have heard from the Opposition their very generalist and exaggerated claims shamefully linking policies of Government to the increase in migration of people overseas. Mr. Speaker, Sir, they had no clue of what is going on. They have no idea of what is being done in this country. They should be aware that following COVID....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, let us listen to the honourable Assistant Minister.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they should be knowing that after COVID-19....

MR. SPEAKER.- I am still speaking, honourable Assistant Minister.

I said that it is best that we listen first to the honourable Assistant Minister. If you want to make comments just hold it for a while until he finishes. You have had your chance, let us give him the opportunity to present what he has prepared. You may continue, Sir.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, following COVID-19, there was an open market out there in Australia and New Zealand and most of our people migrated because of increased salaries. The Opposition's claim on the reasons that they have raised with regards to the increased migration is bogus and misleading.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was an issue that was raised yesterday by one of the Opposition Members on the statutes for the Council CEOs. It is essential to clarify that majority of the Council's CEOs are reaching the end of their term in office and the honourable Minister for Local Government is committed to ensuring a transparent and accountable process for their replacement.

To achieve that, the Ministry has meticulously developed the Terms of Reference (TOR) and Expressions of Interest (EOI) for the engagement of a reputable recruitment agency. The Councils will collaborate to oversee this process and upon engaging the recruitment agency, then we will work very closely with the Special Administrators to initiate the recruitment of new CEOs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in this august Parliament to respond to His Excellency the President's Address. I would like to thank His Excellency the President for his inspiring and thought-provoking

Address that was delivered on Monday, 4th March, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are so blessed in Fiji to have such a high chief of high calibre, *na Turaga Bale na Tui Macuata, Taukei Bolatagane*”, who has earned the respect of everyone, including the different races that have called Fiji home. In addition, as Members of this august Parliament, we should all continue to strive and be conscious of the need to address the relevant needs of the different races that live in this country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to share some of the work that I have been undertaking at the Office of the Prime Minister. When the Coalition Government came into power, one of the saddest things that we noted was the lack of data on where the poor people really live.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this was attributed mainly to the previous Government's inability to provide relevant and reliable statistics on the status of poverty in this country. Certainly, I fully concur with His Excellency the President when he requested us as democratically elected representatives to listen to the voices of the people, not only those who had elected us but all our citizens, young and old, men and women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we assumed office, we were inundated with calls from some of the poorest communities in Suva, that they needed to be further supported with assistance from Government. Instead of taking a knee jerk reaction, we thought that it would be wise to undertake a detailed survey of these communities.

In June 2023, the Office of the Prime Minister engaged the Fiji Council of Social Services (FCOSS) to conduct a survey on 23 informal settlements and poor communities along the Suva-Nausori corridor. The 23 communities are:

1. Narocake;
2. Nukutubu;
3. Kalekana;
4. Manikoso;
5. Bali;
6. Marata;
7. Vataleka;
8. Koio;
9. Korolailai;
10. Wai;
11. Wairua;
12. Naivikinikini;
13. Valenicina;
14. Rewa;
15. Matata;
16. Naikotokoto;
17. Bua 1;
18. Bua 2;
19. Matainiborosisi;
20. Veiraisi;
21. Nabuli Settlement;
22. Naisogowaluvu; and
23. Newtown.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through this project, FCOSS went out into these communities to discuss

and identify their needs, and to conduct community assessments which identified local development challenges. These challenges were grouped into six categories which included the following:

1. Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH);
2. Environmental Degradation and Risks;
3. Infrastructure and Safety;
4. Education, Health Services and Leadership;
5. Governance and Social Cohesion; and
6. Economic and Livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was briefed on the findings of the Community Assessment Project in December last year, I was deeply troubled and burdened.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would be surprised to note that the data collected from the 23 communities along the Lami-Nausori corridor reflected that some Fijian households lack the most basic of household amenities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have Fijians living just an earshot away from our towns and cities in the Central Division that are still using pit toilets. There are even some households that do not have any toilets and share with their neighbours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a meeting of the relevant key stakeholders was convened to strategize on how Government could work collaboratively with other NGOs and the private sector to tackle the issues highlighted in the survey.

Other issues highlighted is the frequent water disruptions, unhygienic waste disposal, infrastructural issues such as access roads, bridges and health centres, limited access to electricity, social problems like drugs and substance abuse, sex trafficking and crime, security of land tenure and overcrowding, and lack of governance structures in informal settlements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as result of the survey, we have identified two communities - Bilo and Matainiborosisi in Lami, that have been without water for the last 20 years. Despite being 15 minutes from Suva City, they are not connected to any water supply. We then took this matter to the honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services to put these projects into the pipeline. These two communities will have access to regular water by the end of the year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my Maiden Speech last year, I highlighted the need to address the plight of descendants of the Melanesians who are currently living in Fiji, more particularly is to explore how the Government can formalise existing land tenancy to ensure that they have more permanent tenancy arrangements. To this effect, Government has established an Inter-Ministerial Taskforce under the administrative and policy oversight of the Office of the Prime Minister, to oversee and be responsible for the implementation of this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have started our consultation with the three communities that are in Wailoku, Namara and Matata. We will be finalising the proposal for Wailoku in the next two months. Sir, as for Matata, the land that they are currently occupying is now included as part of Lami Village.

MR. SPEAKER. – Please declare your interest, honourable Assistant Minister.

HON. S. TUBUNA. - We are indeed thankful to the two Yavusa in Lami – *Yavusa Nasevou* and *Yavusa Nakurukuru*, for their generosity in accommodating the Melanesian settlements of Matata.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most of the time, we take the generosity of the landowners for granted but they are fulfilling the role that has to be played by Government which is providing land for those who are in need to be resettled. There are so many landowners, particularly in the urban areas of Fiji who, out of their good faith, provided their land to house other communities. These landowners are namely, those from Kalabu, Tamavua, Suvavou, Kuku, Nausori, Namoli, Naviyago, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sad reality is that most of these landowners suffer silently in poverty but they do not admit it. When you talk to them privately, they will say life is difficult, '*sa rui dredre inaka*'. Sir, Government is hearing their voices, and we will strongly consider establishing a special fund to compensate the landowners for giving their land to be used by other communities in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, late last year, the Office of the Prime Minister received complaints from Indo-Fijian families around Suva that youths from squatter settlements are terrorising them and stealing green coconuts from their backyard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in January this year, the Office of the Prime Minister organised a 'Green Coconut Replanting Workshop' at Vakacoko in Naboro, to increase the supply of green coconuts in the Suva-Nausori corridor. This has not been done by anyone, including your Government.

(Laughter)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Those youth who were previously terrorising Indo-Fijian families will now be able to access the green coconuts that will be planted there. It is expected that about 10,000 coconut seednuts will be planted at Naboro in the next two years and, of course, we are very grateful to the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways for supplying the coconut seednuts and organic fertilizer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, environmental degradation, particularly soil erosion in rivers and watershed areas, remain to be one of the biggest problems. If you travel around the interior of Fiji, along the Sigatoka River and along the Ba River, you will notice this environmental problem. This problem has been there for more than 20 years but there has been no concerted effort to undertake to rectify the issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this has been made worse by the FijiFirst Government when they created the Ministry of Waterways from the Drainage and Irrigation Division of the Ministry of Agriculture. Previously, they used to have their engineers – Principal Engineers and Senior Engineers. However, when Dr. Mahendra Reddy was the Minister for Agriculture and Waterways, he converted all the engineering posts to administrative posts and there is currently no engineering capacity within the Department to execute these responsibilities. This is the legacy of the FijiFirst Government. We have a degraded watershed system and increased soil erosion with increasing flooding in all our towns, and we have very limited capacity for people to design new rivers and watershed areas.

Mr. Speaker Sir, some honourable Members in the Opposition have commented on the new National Development Plan that will facilitate practical solutions to the economic and social challenges faced by our people. We, the Coalition Government, will implement this plan to ensure that there is lasting progress. We are going down to communities and consulting with them to solicit their voices. This will be a successful plan, as compared to some of the plans that were formulated by the previous Government.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in 2016, the FijiFirst Government formulated a 20-year National Development Plan. If you look at some of the targets that were set, for the annual average growth

rate from 2016 to 2021, the target that was set was 4 percent to 5 percent, but the actual that was achieved was -1.8 percent. If you look at the Government debt, the target was to reduce to 35 percent of GDP by 2036. The actual that was achieved from 2016 to 2021 was around 60 percent. These figures, again, reveal the poor economic management of the FijiFirst Government.

Mr. Speaker Sir, when you pay a visit to Lautoka and Ba areas, one of the common problems highlighted by the community members is the extreme destruction of termites on the structures of their residences. The sad thing about this situation, Sir, is that no one knows anything or how to address it. Most of the information that we receive was from local experts who do not have full knowledge of the technology to address the problem.

The Coalition Government, for the first time in the history, is recognising the plight of our communities in Lautoka and Ba, and we have allocated a provision of \$3 million to assist in the eradication of termites. We will be providing free baits to those that have shown evidence of termite destruction, and at the same time, those families that earn less than \$30,000 can apply for a relief fund of \$5,000 to purchase housing materials. Those who have an income less than \$50,000 will have access to \$2,000, which they can use to purchase housing materials.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I wish to emphasise that this Coalition Government cares for its people, and we will do our utmost best to reach out and directly serve the needs of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue of drugs, the increase in the availability of synthetic drugs such as, Methamphetamine, is a great concern. The recent seizure of large quantities of Methamphetamine has brought home the message that drugs is here to stay.

Marijuana is widely available in most of our communities and we should make every effort to address this issue. Unfortunately, for the last 16 years, there has been no new initiatives undertaken to address this problem. When we went around the marijuana planting areas in the highlands of Noikoro, one of the things that they raised is the lack of introduction of alternative crops that they can grow. They have raised this with the previous Government, but it has fallen on deaf ears.

In the last few weeks, you might have noted that we have introduced a new crop in Noikoro, which is the planting of coffee. We would like to thank the Indonesian Government for the provision of US\$25,000 to support the "Smallholder Coffee Project". We are going to introduce this in the highlands of Navosa, Savatu, Bukuya, so that people have other alternative crops to plant and, of course, to cultivate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I totally endorse His Excellency the President's call to protect and preserve our traditions, culture and language to promote social cohesion amongst the different communities. I totally agree with this, but I certainly believe that we need to enhance the capacity of our communities first. There is a need for strong focus on human and social capital whereby communities are empowered to improve the resilience and livelihoods of their communities.

On environment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the wellbeing of the Pacific region continues to be affected and threatened by the impacts of climate change. The Pacific way of life and our cultures have been defined by the climate and our knowledge and experience of how to manage storms and cyclones which have impacted our people for generations. But our resilience is now being tested as the trends and patterns that have defined our experience and knowledge continue to change. We are in the middle of a rising and warming ocean and the implications are no longer subtle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this head up on local climate change and national programmes and activities, I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious Address in formally opening Parliament. I fully support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- We shall now press on, honourable Members. We have three more speakers and after we finish, you can probably have a relaxed time and enjoy your tea break. Thank you.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, 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 in the gallery, viewers who are listening in on television, tuning in live on the Parliament livestream, and fellow Fijians; *ni sa yadra inaka saka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

I also wish to greet the people of Ra in the usual greetings of the Ra-ssians, “*Sa yadra*”, either in the daylight or moonlight. *Au vakayadra 'iko yani ena vanua o Ra - ena vanua va 'uraga o Saivou, Rakiraki, Nakoro 'ubu kei Nalawa. Ni sa yadra, ni ma 'a vinaka mai.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I make my contribution to His Excellency the President's most gracious Address, allow me to offer my condolences to the passing away of the late Ratu Osea Kasami, *Na i 'aukei Nacokula*, the Chairperson of the Bose Vanua o Ra, who was laid to rest at his village in Dranivau last Saturday. I also wish to offer my condolences to the Mata Ni Tikina o Rakiraki, Mr. Senitiki Vunisa, who was also laid to rest last week at his home island in Malake. Both gentlemen are very reliable, influential and true sons of Ra. *Drau qai vano iko ena vakacegu na i 'aukei Nacokula. Vinaka saka vakalevu na cola 'i ni 'avi ni vanua saka va 'uraga o Ra.*

I rise today to thank and deliver my response to His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji, *Na Gone Turaga Bale Na Tui Macuata*, Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere's most encouraging and inspirational gracious Opening Address of the 2024 Session of Parliament. His Excellency made some very important points, the most important of which was unity and putting national interests above political gain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would say that the Speech by His Excellency was fitting to the vision of the high office and, that is, to be the pillar of national unity. It had encouraged and also advised us leaders of this Parliament on how to conduct ourselves in the coming year and also what our people are expecting from us as national leaders to be doing for the national good, public good, as well as those who look up to us as leaders.

His most gracious Speech called for unity and also talked about wisdom as leaders, that we must possess in making deliberations and comments which we, as influential figures in the society, have power in our words and actions that people will learn from us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am at pains to see that sadly, tribalism and egoism have been at the forefront of national politics and governance by so called leaders over time who, instead of carrying out the crucial business of nation-building, they have contributed instead to tearing down peace, unity and stability because for them, their own status, their own pockets and their own families have been more important than that young person, young mother, farmer or villager who needs assistance and who went to the polls because they trusted that we would get to this august Parliament and be true to our words to look after their needs.

Sadly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, many of us get into Parliament and never go back to see the people who gave us their votes. Many of us engage in lies during election campaigns and we get votes using

misinformation and disinformation and these distortions confuse our vulnerable voters to vote for leaders who are only seen during election campaigns and disappear into the forest for the next four years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the business of entering Parliament must be a noble job. We should be role models to aspiring politicians who will come and stand in this very place where I am standing and advocate for the ordinary person on our streets and in our communities. Like the words of His Excellency, and I quote:

“I look upon the honourable Members of this august Parliament, I am humbly reminded of the immense responsibility that comes with representing the diverse voices and aspirations of our people. As democratically elected representatives, I ask that you listen to the voices of our people, not only those who elected you, but to all our citizens young and old, men and women.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must do away and denounce those politicians that tear down peace, unity and stability in this august Parliament. We must denounce the personalisation of attacks against other politicians, especially uncalled attacks against our women who are already marginalised in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to comment on a few areas of Government that we need to put right, improve on and to develop new ideas for the betterment, progressive and prosperous Fiji.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in my province of Ra, there are issues that need to be addressed to assist our people economically, socially and politically. These needs range from infrastructural needs to education and social welfare, and these are very crucial issues which Government is obligated to address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, the cost of living is a crisis around the world right now and Fiji is no exception. I ask the Government to do something to moderate the high cost of living as the grassroot people and low earning families are being impacted by policies formulated by this Coalition Government.

Coming from the interior and isolated place in Fiji, life is very expensive, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I ask the Government to consider options such as companies need to share the burden of high prices on consumers by reducing their profit margins, which could mean putting more items under price control. I advise the Government to do less talk and more action, as currently we are seeing more talk and no action.

(Chorus of interjections)

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for electricity needs, five villages along the Nasau Road Access in Nalawa, Ra, namely Sawanivo, Nasau, Ovalau, Nubumakita and Nukulau are requesting Government if it is possible to consider giving them EFL power by connecting electricity from the already existing EFL grid.

We are also requesting EFL electricity supply to be supplied to the following settlements - Naqaqa, Onabua, Nukulevu and Nasele. The Nasau hospital is located at this place, together with the newly established Nasau Secondary School and the facilitation of electricity to the people and students of Nasau will transform their lives forever.

Honourable Tuisawau and honourable Vasu had recently visited the Nasau District in the interior of Ra, and I am sure, with the honourable Minister's concurrence, such a gesture would go a long way in uplifting the lives of our people who will appreciate the Government that is responsible for their needs.

On that same note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also looking forward with anticipation to telecommunication and internet coverage in blackspot areas in Ra, particularly the Nasau and Nailuva Districts where students and teachers continue to climb mountains in order to send emails or to access internet for school projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also requesting the Government through the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection to consider constructing an Artefacts and Handicraft Centre in Rakiraki to assist and empower women in Ra financially as there are less employment opportunities in Rakiraki Town. These issues have been raised mainly at the Ra Provincial Council, and I do hope honourable Minister for Women, that one day the Government will consider this request.

I also ask the Government to consider expanding the Ra Maternity Hospital in Navunibitu. Honourable Minister for Health, this hospital was established in 1970 serving coastal and interior communities in Ra with the aim of reducing child mortality rates and improving health care of the expecting mothers. Around 150 to 200 deliveries are done at the facility per year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of bridges, we are requesting the Government to seriously consider the following existing bridges in Ra, as it has affected the transportation of school children and the people. The Raravou Bridge in Nailuva which was washed away during *TC Winston* in 2016 and the Waimari Bridge which was washed away during *TC Yasa* in 2019.

I am also asking the Government to consider looking at the Vatukacevaceva, Natabu and Drana Bridges, including a new request or proposal for the construction of Nakorovou and Toki Village Bridges in Nakorotubu as school children have to cross these rivers in order to catch their transport to go to school. School children and people in these areas are stranded for long hours and at times with wet clothes, reaching home late in the night or in the wee hours of the morning, waiting for the water level to recede in order to get home due to poor bridge conditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Sugar this morning (unfortunately he is not here), that they are still considering whether to build a full operational sugar mill or just a juice extraction mill in Ra. This is the same old idea he proposed last year, yet no action has been taken. I wish to advise the honourable Minister for Sugar that the people of Ra are expecting a fully operational sugar mill and not a juice extraction factory as that was the promise made by certain Coalition partners, honourable Prime Minister. The construction of this intended fully operational sugar mill as promised, will help local residence with employment opportunities and our farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to touch on the call by His Excellency in the fight against crime and drug trafficking. The illegal narcotics and methamphetamine use amongst youths is a concern in Fiji. The distribution of hard drugs had spiralled out of control and is a far bigger disaster than climate change. Month after month, it is either *marijuana* seizures or arrests over possession of illicit drugs, none more dangerous than the highly addictive illegal crystal methamphetamine, a strong drug that affects the central nervous system, and the one that is widely distributed throughout the country and the Pacific region. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions estimated that funds from illicit drug activities were more than \$10 million annually and that local traffickers could make between \$5,000 a day from the sale of cocaine and methamphetamine in the domestic market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji continues to fight the war on drugs since 1980s and recently hard drugs are now more easily available on the streets in major towns and cities. Increasing news coverage on the use and sale of hard drugs in Fiji, particularly methamphetamine, has brought to light the need to raise awareness on the dangers and prevalence of illegal narcotics and methamphetamine use among youths. Tragically, our worst fears in *iTaukei* villages is that methamphetamine or ice is easily accessible as lollipops, which means our children and youths are being viciously targeted by unscrupulous drug kingpins.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force could not tackle the illegal drug trade alone, and aside from law enforcement partners in Fiji and the region, community support is needed through the sharing of information to be able to disrupt these illegal networks and safeguard our communities from the devastating impact of illicit drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also ask the newly established Great Council of Chiefs (*Bose Levu Vakaturaga*) to urgently look into a solution to drug trafficking as majority of those involved are *iTaukei* youths who are unemployed in our cities and towns. Provisions should be made by the *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* and the Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs in trying to shift unemployed youths back to their villages to utilise their idle land to earn a living. I am also calling on the Judicial Officers to pass higher sentences for hard drug offences as a deterrence to the offender and other persons from committing similar offence and the protection of the community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue our journey towards 2024, we must always stop to give thanks for the many blessings that God has bestowed upon us. We must show gratitude for what we have. Despite our challenges, we are abundantly blessed. Never take anything for granted. Give thanks for each breath of life, each sunrise and each sunset.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly believe that together we can take our nation to new heights. We will be united and we will be a nation that will stand forever more. May God bless this nation for us all. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- *Vinaka*, honourable Ratu Josaia Niudamu – the land of the Ra-ssians.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and members of the public in the public gallery, *dou bula maleka na marama mai Nadonumai. Vinaka vakalevu nomudou yaco tiko mai.*

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address the motion before this esteemed Parliament and extend my gratitude to His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech on 4th March, 2024 marking the formal Opening of the 2024-2025 Parliament Session.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President spoke eloquently on the infrastructure sector particularly on the plans moving forward. Infrastructure, as we are aware serves as the foundation of the nation's economic growth and development. It encompasses a wide range of physical structures, facility systems that support and enable economic activities. Before responding on areas highlighted by His Excellency the President, please allow me to briefly touch on significant changes the Ministry have made in the past year or so when the Coalition Government came into power.

A significant critical issue is good governance and change management. These are two areas which we focused on and started off in the Ministry. By way of definition, governance encompasses the system by which an organisation is controlled and operates, and the mechanisms by which it, and its people, are held to account. This was very critical for the Ministry given its size, the services it

delivers and also the significant budget it is allocated with. Most importantly, services provided by the Ministry has direct impact on the livelihood of people and development. Mr. Speaker Sir, with the sorry state of our national infrastructure both in urban and rural areas, the need for change cannot be overstated.

In terms of governance, the appointment of the new Boards for all Commercial Statutory Authorities under the Ministry is an effort to set a new strategic direction. In the process, the Board have also unearthed governance issues from the FijiFirst Government. The finding is a testament of poor governance by the previous government which shows lack of accountability, lack of transparency, conflict of interest and ineffective Board members. This also calls for a major overhaul of the governance system and setup by the FijiFirst Government. A specific example of the FijiFirst failure, corruption and mismanagement is the Fiji Roads Authority.

The new Board of FRA was appointed in April 2023 and they immediately identified systems and governance breakdowns and a huge cash flow crisis that was crippling FRA. Fiji Roads Authority had fully utilised its 2022-2023 Budget allocation within five months by 31st December, 2022 without any capital expenditure funds for the remaining seven months. The Board had literally no capital funds to operate since its appointment. This was worsened by huge FRA arrears owing to contractors.

Apart from the extensive damages caused by delayed maintenance in the road infrastructure in the whole country, contractors, suppliers, key services providers had not been paid when we came in since January 2023. Some workers had to be laid off. This cash flow crisis had a significant impact on the delivery of services by FRA with mounting public complaints and outcry due to the continuing deterioration of road systems. The Board had no choice but to take immediate steps to address the crisis by its line Ministry under the Ministry of Finance in terms of securing overdraft facilities and paying off arrears to contractors amounting to \$40 million.

Contractors were able to be mobilised from May 2023 to-date throughout the year enabling us to catchup on delayed works. This also required the commissioning of a Special Audit for the three-year period from July 2020 until the same month in 2023 which revealed the total cost of variations and escalation totalling \$405 million. These variations were largely facilitated and approved by the former FRA Board, with concurrence of the Minister of Everything. This is a very significant amount and exceeded the annual capital budget approved for each of these three years and is equivalent to about 10 percent of the national budget. Other findings include:

1. Preliminary and feasibility studies were not carried out;
2. Changes in project scope after tender was awarded and fresh tender was not called for significant changes;
3. Inconsistencies noted in cost escalation formulas;
4. Retention Funds owed to contractors were utilised by the Authority due to its cash flow crisis; and
5. There was no specific allocation or budgets for emergency works.

Some specific examples, for the Nadi Four-Lane Upgrade, the original contract was \$65 million, project completion of \$116.8 million, cost overrun \$50.9 million. It should be noted that the Office of the Auditor-General in its 2018-2019 Report stated that Fiji Roads Authority paid \$623,250 for bouganville plants without a proper tender as stipulated in Fiji Roads Authority Procurement Procedures where purchases of over \$100,000 should be tendered.

In terms of the Queen Elizabeth Drive from \$61.9 million, this escalated to \$65.7 million, acost overrun of \$3.7 million. This Queen Elizabeth Drive project general coincided with the sale of

State *tiri* land in Nasese initiated by the FijiFirst Government with zero consultation with current residents and the *Tui* Suva and his people. This is a total disregard of the key stakeholders.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The State *tiri* land were eventually leased by the FijiFirst Government to Punjas and Tian Lun Investments Pty Limited who indicated that they would invest \$600 million for a major hotel and high-end residential complex. Previous Cabinet decisions had specifically decided that these *tiri* lands were for State use for a good reason, given its location but this was denied by the FijiFirst Government.

Tian Lun was registered on 13th September, 2018 by a Chinese National as sole shareholder. At one point the shareholding value changed from \$6 million to \$250,000. He did not file any annual returns between 2016 and 2022 and did not file a scheme plan or start work within 12 months as required.

The company profile is totally dubious and due diligence by FijiFirst Government just failed. The question is, why did not the FijiFirst Government cancel the development lease when conditions of the lease were not fulfilled in first 12 months? Was the Queen Elizabeth Drive project of \$65.7 million for these two businesses, one of which ended in failure? What was this project for?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- This 4.25 kilometer road cost \$15.4 million a kilometer. Imagine how many rural roads, bridges where children and villagers are still struggling, we would have fixed with the \$65.7 million. Such developments are criminal, as Queen Elizabeth Drive could have been upgraded with \$10 million.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Go and see the photos.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The Coalition Government will not allow such blunders and dubious developments.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker Sir, His Excellency the President in his Speech encouraged the need to invest in robust and resilient infrastructure.

HON. P.K. BALA.- You should be Minister for Photos.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- While there are works funded through the Government budget, FRA acknowledges the assistance from development partners. The Ministry through FRA has utilised a total of \$270.7 million across the three Divisions in 2023, including 526 roads as part of the Rip and Remake Programme and also spanning 300 kilometers in length. It has accelerated the Pothole Repair Programme, so if you move around, you will notice a 70 percent reduction compared to when we came in December where there were potholes everywhere.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- There is emphasis on Climate Resilience Road Project, for example, a prolonged much needed project is the Toga Bridge which was commissioned at the beginning of this year after long delays by the FijiFirst Government probably because they were not FijiFirst voters.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- They have been disconnected from the main road network during heavy downpour and high rainfalls. There are other low lying areas which have been neglected with sea level rise and poor drainage systems. I thank the honorable Minister for Agriculture for the revival of the Drainage Boards. These are areas such as Cautata which have not been touched on in the last 30 years and it continues to flood, so we taking action on that.

In terms of the Fiji Transport Infrastructure Restoration Project, we acknowledge the assistance of the Australian Government Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, a total package of \$117 million supporting the Fiji Roads Authority in the renewal or resealing. We have also secured progress with our development partners such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and others for the design and due diligence for the additional 40 bridges and three jetties.

The Coalition Government has also signed an Agreement with the People's Republic of China for a \$300 million road upgrade in Vanua Levu which will benefit thousands of Fijians in terms of improved access to schools, health facilities, businesses and markets. This will involve sealing 82 kilometers in Natewa West Coast, Nabalebale, Naviavia, Dawara and Nabouwalu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking of rural roads and connecting the unconnected, the re-establishment of the Public Works Department remains a priority and this is strategically driven by the incoming Permanent Secretary. The Ministry has taken some proactive measures in purchasing necessary machines as part of the \$5 million allocated for the financial year and this has gone through the Tender Boards. The dismantling of the PWD by the FijiFirst Government is a national disaster of major proportions.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Government facilities have deteriorated in the last 16 years under FijiFirst. Just go around the country and look at the PWD depots, government quarters, hospitals and others. Sir, PWD teams used to man the CWM Hospital, Government House and Parliament on a 24-hour basis, just imagine and you dismantled that, this was taken away by you.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The Department of Government Buildings and Architects have completed a draft National Building Code which will undergo further consultation with some key agencies. The Department continues to service the Ministry and Government in terms of scoping, drawing and costing of new government buildings and maintenance. We have also initiated meetings with the Ministry of Health regarding CWMH and plans are in place to immediately start upgrading within the next two to three weeks.

There was a question on why was the Construction Implementation Unit (CIU) created and shifted from PWD? If you analyse the Office of the Auditor-General's Report, there was basically no basis for it, no technical basis or professional basis for moving away the technical people from

there into that office. The conclusion is, when you look at the contractors they hired or engaged, most of them are in the list of the FijiFirst finances.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- In terms of circulation of public funds - robbing Peter to pay Paul to finance the FijiFirst.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- When FijiFirst dismantled the PWD, 108 assets worth \$8.6 million were transferred out. This included backhoes, graders, cranes, tip trucks, land cruisers, et cetera. So, I am asking where are they because I do not see any sign of them.

In terms of rural roads and bridges, these are in a deplorable state as mentioned by the honourable Member from Ra and we continue, as you can see in terms of maintaining that upgrading with the budget we have. We are doing our best in terms of current resources, but it is not enough.

In this regard, let me reassure, honourable Ratu Niudamu that we have visited that areas he has mentioned including crossing flooded streams. I am not sure whether some of them have cross flooded streams.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Those will be addressed soon including Energy Fiji Limited contractors who are now working in Navosa, after that they will come to Nasau.

The Coalition Government is doing its best. We are undergoing as a matter of priority a scoping, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the rural bridges and roads in terms of looking at a mix of financing from the regular budget and also there have been discussions with development partners in terms of progressing that as a project itself. Given the ongoing challenges faced by our villagers and the need to ensure our rural life remains attractive, rural infrastructure upgrades remain a high priority for the Coalition Government.

In terms of the employment they have spoken about, most of the movements overseas, they started it with the Labour Schemes and now they are complaining about it. When it was initiated, it was meant for those who were farmers in the villages but unfortunately there were some skilled Fijians who went in that Scheme. So, that is the area which is currently being addressed.

Finally, I was shocked when a claim by MWH now Stantec, a road engineering services engaged after PWD was dismantled landed on my table amounting to \$23.8 million for services from 2014 to 2016.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Are you making a Ministerial Speech?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Why should the people of Fiji pay for a FijiFirst Government blunder? Why should we pay? If I had my way, the FijiFirst Party and its officials should be surcharged.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$23.8 million divided by how many of you? We deduct it from your pay.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- This is a direct consequence.

His Excellency the President also addressed water and sanitation and, of course, this is ongoing. We have continued to progress that and push for that in terms of urban water projects. The connecting households.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- No water.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Rural Water Projects.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- No water in Tacirua.

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- These projects have benefitted thousands of households and some of the notable Rural Water Projects were just commissioned in Nasaibitu, Tailevu, Fulton Primary School, Ra and Maumi. However, one thing I have noticed is that when developments happen, the villages who are near those developments have not been connected. So, I am asking what were they doing in the last 16 years?

We have worked hard in terms of that. The honourable Assistant Minister has mentioned the Bilo Water Project, we have moved that forward. In terms of Momi Village where the Marriot Hotel is located, that was just left aside. So, a lot of that has now being brought forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I visited Vusama Village in Natadola. There are few villages and settlements there, they are still unconnected but we are now working on that. You regularly repeat that we are not doing anything. As I mentioned here, these are just a few. There are hundreds of other projects, Sir. They are working day and night to complete it. Water is a basic need and we need to push on with it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is another one which was neglected, the Denarau Island Wastewater. In the last 16 years, despite the increasing number of hotels there, they have not done anything to expand the capacity until the systems started breaking down. Thank you to honourable Minister of Finance for agreeing to the financing of that, even though it will be more than \$10 million, so we will stagger that out. That was a major disaster. You nearly destroyed the tourism industry, but luckily we came in.

(Laughter)

If there was no change of government, the whole economy would have collapsed.

Water catchment roads from Vaturu to Nasealevu were in a deplorable state. We could not even go up, so I do not know what was happening.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Too much talk.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- When we went to do our *sevusevu* in Nagado Village, they were really happy and they said, “You are the first Government Minister for us to see in 20 years.”

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- They lied to you.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I do not know whether they lied to me or not, but I know they were telling the truth.

(Laughter)

On water catchment leases, again, these are areas which need to be rationalised. Some are there and some have not been transferred to Water Authority of Fiji. Thank you to my predecessor and the FijiFirst Government who have been working on that.

Of course, I have to mention the Viria Water Project. As a Government, we do not run down the other Opposition.

(Chorus of interjections)

As honourable Members and an honourable Government, we acknowledge that project which is a major project.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity in support of the honourable Prime Minister's motion that this Parliament thanks His Excellency the President for his most gracious Speech.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate before Parliament. Over to last few months, I was grateful to have had the chance to meet so many of our fellow Fijians to hear their stories and to understand their concerns. Their input has been invaluable in shaping our platform, and we will continue to listen to their needs and concerns as we take on the responsibilities of public office.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in a democratic society, the Opposition plays a crucial role in holding the Government accountable and ensuring that the interest of all citizens are represented in the decisions made by those in power. I am honoured to be part of this vital function and we are committed to using our voice to fight for a better future for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President, in his Speech, reiterated that to revitalise the sugar industry, a number of initiatives have been developed to increase cane production to 1.8 million tonnes in the 2024 season, compared to 1.6 million tons in 2022. To support the diversification within the industry, alternative livelihood programmes will be developed to augment farmers' income against world market price fluctuations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's sugar industry supports the livelihood of thousands of Fijians - the benefit of cane growing standards beyond the fields and crushing mills. The industry drives rural development such as upgraded rural roads, giving farmers access to agriculture inputs and machinery for their farms, and access to markets, urban centres, schools and health services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to increase cane production, the honourable Minister for Sugar needs to work in collaboration with the existing sugarcane farmers, and at the moment, such is not happening. The honourable Minister should respect the sugarcane farmers of Fiji.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. PILLAY.- In nearly all the consultations done so far by the honourable Minister last year and this year, farmers are very disappointed. According to the farmers, the honourable Minister quickly reverts on defending mode, starts finger-pointing and creating argument with the respected farmers.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Very poor!

HON. V. PILLAY.- I wish to remind the honourable Minister that he must remain courteous and maintain professionalism at all times, as he is the executive arm of Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, majority of the farmers are over 50 years old and even with sickness, they do their farm work seven days in a week to keep the industry going. But here is a Minister, in Fiji's history, that does not have any respect and regard for these hardworking farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to remind Parliament and take on a flashback to the Maiden Speech by the honourable Minister where he said, and I quote:

“Our approach is bottoms up and people centered and not bottom down of model imposition. We are here to serve and not to be served. We are here to be directed by the people and not to dictate them. We are here to listen and no to lecture.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, he is just doing totally the opposite of this. Therefore, I urge the honourable Prime Minister to sack the honourable Minister for Sugar if he wants a better vibrant future for our beloved sugar industry.

(Laughter)

Under the leadership of the honourable Minister for Sugar, cane production will never increase as he is daydreaming that only he can improve the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the additional guaranteed price of \$6.38, the Coalition Government has failed to mitigate inflation, high cost of living, hidden costs in hiring of labourers, food costs in the camps, transportation costs of bringing the labourers and sending them back after harvesting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a \$1 per tonne was given to the farmers who are part of the manual gang, last week. This was assured by the honourable Minister but was delayed. However, farmers are yet to receive a \$5 per tonne on extra tonnage, compared to 2022 season. This is yet to be paid as this was another promise to the farmers by the honourable Minister. I urge him to fast-track the process and pay the farmers as promised as soon as possible.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last year, the farmers had to pay an average extra of \$10 per tonne more to the labourers for harvesting that brought the overall amount to close to \$30 per tonne. In the 2023 season, all these costs I have stated earlier on has surpassed \$50 per tonne for manual gang, leaving aside the production cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the 2024 season, farmers are anticipating that these figures will increase. With the increase in VAT, rising food costs and other associated hidden costs, farmers will basically be left with nothing. The truck drivers, owners, cane cutters are all affected because of the rising costs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when world price was all time low, the FijiFirst Government gave a guaranteed price of \$85 per tonne. Now, since there has been an increase in the world sugar price and with farmers struggling with high costs of production and high cost of living, I challenge the Coalition Government to give the farmers a guaranteed price of \$110 per tonne. That will sustain the farmers for the next three years. Also, this was promised to the farmers by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance during the Election campaign and I hope he will stick to his promise. This will greatly assist in mitigating high costs associated with cane farming, as I have stated earlier on.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, now is the time for the Ministry of Sugar to revamp the mills, repair the rail trucks, railway network, install new cage bins, service the constant out of order tractors so that during the harvesting season and after, farmers are not affected.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the brink of harvesting, then the cane access roads are upgraded which frustrates the farmers. Therefore, I am pleading with the honourable Minister for Sugar that his Ministry must plan well ahead in advance in terms of maintenance of cane access roads and shallow crossings. I urge him to work closely with the Cane Access Road Committee in ensuring that these roads are ready well before the harvesting commences.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have dwelled at length only about the sugar industry for the simple reason and, that is, during my visits to the farmers, these are the issues that have been brought up to my attention by the farmers. And as a sugarcane farmer myself I am well aware of the hardship we all face.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the Coalition Government, in particular, the honourable Minister for Sugar to work hand in hand in keeping the sugar industry afloat and must work in collaboration with the stakeholders and give much needed respect, care and assistance to our beloved sugarcane farmers of this nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the adherence of the Constitution and the doctrine of the separation of powers, the honourable Attorney-General has a lot of influence in the chaotic appointments in the legal fraternity, which were made contrary to conditions stipulated in the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FijiFirst Leader, Mr. Bainimarama, and former General Secretary, Mr. Sayed-Khaiyum, have suffered greatly in the political persecution initiated by the honourable Attorney-General and the Coalition Government. I suggest that they stop preaching to us in Parliament and quoting from the *Bible*, but start practising what Christianity actually teaches and what Jesus Christ had practised in life. This is the more reason that the honourable Prime Minister should remove honourable Turaga and put someone with integrity, work ethic and who can abide by the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to ask the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, what is the use of these Boards he says were created to listen to the public, when none of the honourable Ministers have been answering their phones? If they had listened to the public, they would have taken away the 6 percent VAT and replaced the tax deduction to the rich Fiji Water company.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Check your facts.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the honourable Minister for Public Works, Transport and Meteorological Services, I will request the honourable Minister to stop being obsessed with

FijiFirst. With more than a year, there is no improvement on the roads, to be honest, in regards to all rural roads, the roads in the urban and peri-urban areas.

(Laughter)

HON. P.K. BALA.- Yes, because he is not doing his job.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Because of the road conditions, the people are also suffering, apart from the cost of living, the rise in inflation, et cetera. So, I will request the honourable Minister to stay back in Fiji for a while, please, do not go out. Stay back in Fiji, move around and fix all the roads.

(Laughter)

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- No water at Nasinu, honourable Minister.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he should be the next one to be sacked.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the road from Naqalotu to Tawava and to Lomati Road to join the road from Daviqele is yet to be completed. This is in Kadavu. Mr. Savenaca has been texting and asking me to ask the honourable Minister to, please, stay back in Fiji and complete this road. The first cut of this road was done by FijiFirst and now this road is overgrown. Can the honourable Minister, please, complete this road? Once this road is completed, the roads South of Kadavu from Vunisea, will be done.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to thank the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration on his talk on drugs. This would be a very good time to test all the honourable Members of Parliament do that we can give our people the confidence that we do not indulge in the taking of drugs, as he has said.

(Laughter)

We should fight this danger on all forms. Sir, I would also like to ask him, how many seeds did he plant when he was in government?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- He ran away because the seeds were budding.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency also spoke about leadership and our observation is that, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation and Acting Minister for Education has betrayed his own colleague by taking up the education ministerial portfolio...

(Laughter)

...and we are happy to hear the contribution made by honourable Radrodro compared to the honourable Minister's.

We can see a new SODELPA for the 2026 Elections under honourable Radrodro as Party leader. The old politicians that damaged SODELPA over the years are slowly resigning one by one.

Honourable Gavoka's Party leader term will expire this month.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Point of Order.

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

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Standing Order 60 – Relevance. Whilst the honourable Pillay's utterances are somewhat entertaining, he is meandering right away from His Excellency's Speech. He started talking about the inner works of SODELPA. Mind your own business, honourable Pillay.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Hogwash!

MR. SPEAKER.- Relevancy. Before I give the okay, he has finished talking.

(Laughter)

Allow the Speaker to look into the Standing Order that has been highlighted or quoted so then I would be able to make a Ruling, whether you continue or you will be asked to just resume your seat. But this one here, as we have done quite cleverly, I will ask honourable Viam Pillay to continue and be mindful. You have sacked so many people now.

(Laughter)

HON. V. PILLAY.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As I have said, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism, Civil Aviation and Education's party leader term will expire this month, and it is time to elect a young model leader, like honourable Radrodro.

(Laughter)

HON. V. PILLAY.- In FijiFirst, our leaders have our support, and they will never betray us, while the SODELPA leader has thrown one of his own members under the bus.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, FijiFirst did not run on dictatorial rules in the past, as stated by honourable Members.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY.- FijiFirst has strong decisive leadership, that leadership would get rid most of your problems which this Government is facing in five minutes. No dilly-dally, in five minutes, honourable Members. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me the opportunity and I hope this Government will consider the Opposition's criticisms as constructive which can be a catalyst for all positive change.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Pillay. You have been a long serving Member, your words are not really full of wisdom, but I thank you for your contribution.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today and I thank you all for your contributions. I now adjourn Parliament until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.34 p.m.