

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 15TH APRIL, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 15TH APRIL, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.48 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hon. Viliame Rogoibulu Gavoka, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation

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

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration

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

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

Hon. Jese Saukuru, Minister for Youth and Sports

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

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

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

Hon. Kalaveti Vodo Ravu, Minister for Fisheries and Forestry

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

Hon. Ratu Isikeli Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Iliesa Sovui Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education

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

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

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

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

Hon. Esrom Yosef Immanuel, Assistant Minister of Finance

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

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

Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodro

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu

Hon. Jone Usamate

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya

Hon. Premila Devi Kumar

Hon. Viliame Naupoto

Hon. Ioane Naivalurua

Hon. Mosese Drecala Bultavu
Hon. Hem Chand
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala
Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa
Hon. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau
Hon. Aliko Bia
Hon. Vijay Nath
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Ratu Josai Bulavakarua Niudamu
Hon. Ketan Kirit Lal
Hon. Alvick Avhikrit Maharaj
Hon. Naisa Tatau Tuinaceva
Hon. Viam Pillay
Hon. Shalen Kumar
Hon. Alipate Nagata Tuicolo
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Rinesh Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Taito Rokomatu Matasawalevu
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand
Hon. Sachida Nand

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sittings of Parliament held on Friday, 15th March, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

On the same token, I welcome the students from the University of the South Pacific enrolled in the PL100 Unit. Welcome to your Parliament and I hope that you will learn more about the proceedings of your Parliament.

Back to Office Report – 28th Session of the Conference of the Parties

The Back to Office Report for the 28th Session of the Conference of the Parties better known as COP 28 which was held in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates is now available in the Library, for your perusal and reference.

Newly Elected Chairperson - Standing Committee on Natural Resources

For the information of honourable Members, the newly elected Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources is the honourable Tomasi T. Tunabuna and the newly elected Deputy Chairperson is the honourable Jone Usamate. I congratulate the two Members for the duration of their tenure.

Resolutions - Business Committee

Honourable Members, at the Business Committee meeting held on Thursday, 11th April, 2024, there were deliberations on the existing workload of the Standing Committees and further deliberations focused on the Chairmanship and Deputy of the Standing Committees. At this juncture, please, be informed that the honourable Prime Minister has agreed to the review of the Chairmanship and Deputy, and should there be any changes, this will be announced accordingly.

From today through to Thursday, we will have debates on the pending Committee Reports, and to ensure that parliamentary time is utilised well, I am putting the Whips on notice to coordinate on their number of speakers, as well as the allocated speaking times.

Finally, as I had announced in the March Sitting, Parliament is now fully equipped to continue with the broadcasting of the vernacular translations. You would have noted the timers on the wall. That will be programmed accordingly to the speaking times that are provided on your tables. So, when you notice a signal coming from the clocks on the wall, that is your time to round off and resume your seat. The Speaker will be making a ruling from the Chair.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

The following Reports were tabled by honourable Ministers responsible in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

Standing Committee on Economic Affairs

1. Fiji Development Bank - Annual Report 2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 35 of 2024*); and
2. Sugar Industry Tribunal - Annual Report 2020 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 30 of 2024*).

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

1. Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji - Annual Report 2021 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 26 of 2022*);
2. Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji - Annual Report 2022 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 61 of 2023*);
3. Levuka Town Council - Annual Report for the Year 2016 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 115 of 2023*);
4. Levuka Town Council - Annual Report for the Year 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 116 of 2023*);
5. Nasinu Town Council - Annual Report 2011 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 96 of 2023*);
6. Nasinu Town Council - Annual Report 2012 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 97 of 2023*);
7. Nasinu Town Council - Annual Report 2013 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 98 of 2023*);
8. Nasinu Town Council - Annual Report 2014 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 99 of 2023*);
9. Nasinu Town Council - Annual Report 2015 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 3 of 2024*);
10. Savusavu Town Council - Annual Report 2011 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 41 of 2023*);

11. Savusavu Town Council - Annual Report 2012 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 72 of 2023*);
12. Suva City Council - Annual Report 2016 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 138 of 2023*);
13. Suva City Council - Annual Report 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 139 of 2023*);
14. Suva City Council - Annual Report 2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 140 of 2023*);
15. Tavua Town Council - Annual Report for the Year Ended 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 136 of 2023*);
16. Tavua Town Council - Annual Report for the Year Ended 2018 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 137 of 2023*); and
17. National Fire Authority - Annual Report Year Ended 31st July 2017 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 85 of 2023*).

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

1. Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport; and
2. Minister for Agriculture and Waterways

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

Water Sector 2050 Strategy

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, members of the public in the gallery and those who are listening in nationally; I am pleased to stand today to brief this esteemed Parliament on Fiji's first National Water Sector Strategy officially launched as the Water Sector 2050 Strategy earlier this month in the presence of all our major development partners. Before I delve into the document, I would like to stress on the profound significance of the Water Sector 2050 Strategy, as the roadmap for climate resilient and equitable water and sanitation service provision for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Water Sector 2050 highlights the Coalition Government's robust commitment to address water and sanitation issues that continue to affect so many of our citizens. As I stand here, I note the difference between 16 years of previous Government versus just 16 months of this Coalition Government. In 16 years, Sir, under the rule of those opposite, our water sector endured sheer neglect. They had no plan and, at worse, they continued to reduce Water Authority of Fiji's much needed capital budget. In just 16 months, this Government has worked with all segments of the Fijian society with our development partners with the renewed focus to restore the water sector. The Water Sector 2050 Strategy is our plan to deliver on that vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, soon after my appointment as a Minister for Public Works, I was briefed by the Water Authority of Fiji's Executive Team on the state of the water infrastructure the Coalition Government inherited from the previous Government. It was obvious to me at that very moment that we cannot get out of the mess that we have inherited by doing more of the same and keep on doing more of the same as the FijiFirst Government, which was the *ad hoc* reactive strategy.

As of the first task, we appointed a skills-based Board with the right experience and qualifications, to lead the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF). I tasked the new Board and the Executive to urgently develop a Strategic Action Plan to improve water and sanitation for all Fijians. I must

commend the Chairman of the Water Authority of Fiji Board, Ratu Savenaca Seniloli, for his leadership in making the Water Sector 2050 Strategy a reality.

I would like to quote the honourable Prime Minister's speech, included in the Water Strategy's Foreword, "This plan is more than just a blueprint for development, it is a promise to prioritise developing of our people. It is a call to action for collaboration and cooperation across sectors and communities." Significantly, the Coalition Government is not planning for its survival in four years, but is planning for the next three decades, irrespective of who is in government. We are not here for political survival, but we are here for the people.

Mr. Speaker, collaboration and cooperation has been the hallmark or process that WAF followed in developing the Strategy. This included consultation with major development partners through an ideation workshop which kick started the journey. The workshop formed the basis for the national debate during the National Economic Summit in April 2023. This was followed with consultation workshops in Suva, Nadi and Labasa, reaching out to WAF customers and all stakeholders.

The Strategy outlines Fiji's Water Sector Priority Projects and Programmes over the next three decades, aimed at transforming our services are delivered, responding to climate vulnerability, renewing our aging water and wastewater infrastructure, contributing to the succulent economy, enhancing the national environment.

Sir, with the support from our key development partners such as UNDP, World Bank and Asian Development Bank, WAF was able to carry out extensive research, rigorous stakeholder consultation and obtained innovative expert insights. It is, therefore, a direct product of the first ever collective planning exercise that united stakeholders from the public sector, private sector, tourism, NGOs, academia, development partners, as well as citizens. The document is not just a list of priority projects and investments, it is a shared vision for water and sanitation in Fiji.

I would like to seek the indulgence of Parliament as I highlight some key investment priorities in the Water Sector 2050 Strategy. It identifies that \$3.5 billion is required over the next three decades to improve the water infrastructure. Half of this investment is earmarked for improving asset health, in other words, \$1.75 billion is needed to renew Fiji's new water infrastructure assets that now need replacement, as they are nearing the end of their life.

I would like to reiterate in this august Parliament that the direct result of 16 years of under investment is resulting in current disruptions and inefficiencies. Just in the long Easter weekend, we experienced a double whammy of climate change and aging infrastructure. As honourable Members are aware, continuous heavy rainfall caused a landslide rupturing the bulk water pipeline to Tamavua. It resulted in thousands of citizens with no access to water. Such impacts of climate change now regularly affect our provision of reliable drinking water. It is exactly why the Strategy identifies critical water assets that now need to be upgraded with robust climate resilient design. I previously informed Parliament in my earlier water updates that our water supply system currently loses around 47 percent of the total clean water produce.

Nationally, the WAF Team is responding to over 125 pipe leak breaks for every 100 kilometres of water pipelines. I would like to point out to those sitting opposite that water assets are not magic pudding, they need maintenance and renewal. Therefore, the Water Sector 2050 Strategy calls for significant urgent investments.

Sir, the Strategy adopts a hub-and-spoke model for extending piped water supply to areas currently not serviced by WAF. This model will rely on investing in building water treatment plants

in larger population than just creating water treatment hubs, water catchments and reservoirs. As population in the adjoining areas would grow, pipelines will be extended to connect the hubs.

Some of the key identified projects moving forward are as follows:

- In the Northern Division, water treatment hubs in Labasa, Seaqqa, extension from Savusavu, Nabouwalu water treatment hubs to other population centres;
- In the Western Division, hubs in Matovo, Keiyasi, Nadarivatu and extension of networks from areas around Nadi.
- In the Central Division, hubs in Wainadoi and Navua with extension networks in surrounding areas and, of course, additional reservoirs in strategic locations as mentioned.

Sir, let me focus on wastewater and sanitation aspects of the Strategy. These requires or identifies a dire need of \$5 billion in investments, including infrastructure and management. The complete and utter neglect of wastewater over the last 16 years is nowhere more obvious than in the wastewater infrastructure.

The previous Government developed Fiji's National Development Plan 2017-2036 and that Plan promised that they would ensure improved sanitation, promising 78 percent of the population will have access to centralised sewage system by 2036. Sir, as of today, only 17 percent of urban residential customers have access to sewage sanitation infrastructure, a staggering 78 percent of residents rely on septic systems.

However, Fiji currently has no infrastructure in place to receive and treat septic faecal sludge from the systems. The current state of wastewater infrastructure suggests that while the previous Government had developed the National Development Plan, they were not serious about investing in wastewater infrastructure. The WAF's 11 out of 11 wastewater treatment plants do not have the capacity to effectively treat wastewater they receive, they are well over-capacity.

One of the strategic pillars underpinning the Water Sector 2050 Strategy is environment and tourism nexus. Sustainable tourism development is heavily dependent on healthy and pristine rivers and beaches. The wastewater services need to be urgently upgraded to ensure healthy rivers and beaches into which treated affluent is often discarded. Collaboration with our development partners is critical to develop the urgent upgrade of WAF's aging wastewater infrastructure to ensure environmental compliance.

On that front, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Wastewater Sector Strategy identifies upgrade works to the Kinoya Wastewater Treatment Plant as number one priority, and further discussions and progress is being made with our development partners.

Sir, the Water Sector 2050 Strategy has given the current Coalition Government or those who will be coming after us, let me emphasise, coming after us, it does not have to be us, so we are forward looking and not for our political survival, with a structured roadmap to implement. To develop vision of this Strategy, we need to work together and look beyond one term parliamentary politics. Water infrastructure by definition requires long term thinking, and I urge the honourable Members on both sides to familiarise themselves with this document and committing for us to work together to making it a reality.

I would like to end by noting that this Coalition Government has already made some tough decisions to save the Fijian economy. The Water Sector 2050 Strategy now provides us with an opportunity to invest in this critical essential service with a significant multiplier effect to strengthen the economy even further. A total investment need of \$8.5 billion is, indeed, a sobering number. It

is obvious that the entire amount cannot be afforded by public sector investment. Asset upgrades for climate resilience will be suitable for seeking climate finance, which is what we are pursuing at the moment. At the same time, public-private sector partnership opportunities, especially in wastewater, will be explored. Our development partners like the Asian Development Bank, the European Investment Bank and World Bank, who have been part of this Water Sector 2050 Strategy, will also play a key role.

Unlike our predecessors, this Coalition Government understands that water infrastructure needs investment and we will not shy away from making tough decisions in moving forward. We also understand that a financially viable WAF will be critical for delivering on the Water Sector Strategy. The financial model needs to be re-examined, there needs to be reduced dependency on public sector grants, which will give the WAF more autonomy and financial viability, which is something we envisage in the not too distant future. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to very briefly speak on the Water Sector Strategy for 2050 and I congratulate Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) for taking it to the next step. It is the height of naivety for this Government to imagine that just because it came into being that this Water Sector Strategy actually came in. The formulation of this was something that was already in place, so to try to take all the applause or credit for that, is really, really idiotic, to say the least.

If you go back to the National Development Plan for 2017-2037, one of the major policy outcomes there is to come up with a next stage of the Water Strategy. That was part of the 2017-2022 plan, so these things were already in motion...

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- ...all these things that you are talking about.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- For 16 years, you did not have a strategy.

HON. J. USAMATE.- First of all, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to say, it is great that this is being done. I want to congratulate the WAF Board that was there before this current Board, and I think we have a very good team at WAF - Dr. Amit Chanan, Mr. Seru Soderberg and the Team. They have been very good at putting all these things together, then we have seen progress.

When we had the 2017 Strategy, the access to clean water was only around 78 percent. From that time, it has gone up to 82 percent. The target that we had was to go up to 92 percent. There have been challenges because when you are talking about water, there is always the challenge of dealing with your own infrastructure and meeting your current needs. One of the problems that we have had over these past few years is the explosion of population into these greater Suva urban area. For the people at WAF, you always have to think, "Shall I use money just to replace the aging assets but also meet the current need?"

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- It took you eight years before you worked it up?

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hang on, hang on!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Did you have a strategy for that?

HON. J. USAMATE.- These things were in the process and we are glad to see that that is taking place.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tamavua Water Plant was built in 1961, the next one that came after that was Waila in 1982. The first government that used Green Climate Funds to deal with the biggest water problem that we have in Fiji was the FijiFirst Government that came up with the project.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- That is something that is now in place in 2024. So, it shows the devotion of the FijiFirst Government at that time, to make sure that we can meet this need for water for everyone. Yes, that challenge is with sanitation with the treatment of wastewater, but there is a whole lot of other issues in that. It is not just about the plants, it is about the wrong stuff getting into the pipes - stormwater, wastage from the various factories and commercial areas, all of these things had to be addressed.

I must say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I congratulate WAF. The honourable Minister now is riding on the horse that was already moving before he got there. The saddle was there, the stirrups were there, and he has gone hullabaloo saying, "We did it all along." So, thank you, WAF, and we look forward.

By the way, honourable Minister, it is not a plan, it is just a strategy. After this, you have to develop a plan. There is a difference between a strategy and a plan. A plan is what your actual target is. If you go to the National Development Plan (NDP), you will see the specific targets that were there for 2017 to 2022.

I wish the honourable Minister well because the people of this country need water. There has been no Government in the annals of Fiji's history that has done as much for water as the FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

MR. SPEAKER.- It is great to listen to these kinds of positive speeches where even the Opposition are praising the Board of the current Water Authority of Fiji. That is quite pleasant to hear, and I only hope we continue that way.

Drainage Plans for Farmers and Reinstatement of Drainage Board

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, those in the gallery and those watching the live telecast; I rise to make a statement on the state and progress of the drainage plans for farmers in the Western, Central and Northern Divisions, and the reinstatement of the Drainage Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the importance of Fiji's waterways, historically and currently, cannot be over-emphasized. Our major rivers and streams and creeks have sustained our people's livelihoods as a means of transportation, source of food and supply of the much-needed water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we take good care of our waterways, such that there is less pollution, erosion, dumping of household garbage, plastic bottles, containers and bags, these same waterways can be transformed into what it used to look like historically, and re-used as a means of transportation and livelihood for the majority of our population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to make clear that the Waterways Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is specifically tasked with de-silting the main waterways which includes our major rivers and main drains within the drainage scheme areas. It is important to note that the

maintenance of farm drains that discharge into these main drains falls under the care of individual farmers. Rest assured that the wellbeing of our farmers who play a crucial role in our community remains a primary focus for us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has taken significant steps to recognize the importance of drainage and protecting farmlands and wellbeing and reducing flood risks. As part of this effort, FJ\$1.5 million has been allocated to the drainage of farmland areas through the Hire of Machinery Programme in the Ministry budget for this financial year. This initiative is a fundamental part of the Ministry's strategy to tackle the impacts of flooding in farmland areas, including the Sigatoka valley.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has also initiated several proactive measures through the Programme mentioned above to improve drainage infrastructure in agricultural areas. These initiatives involve maintaining current main drains, including building new ones, installing suitable water management systems and enforcing soil conservation activities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the Ministry has effectively addressed requests from farmers by utilising the hire of machinery contracts with civil contracting companies in the Sigatoka area to perform the desilting of 24.2 kilometres of main drains and ensure sustainability of farmland in the valley.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as of now, the Drainage for Farmland Areas Programme has effectively cleared 69.3 kilometres of primary drains in the Western Division, assisting approximately 295 farmers. However, there are still around 380 kilometres of drainage awaiting completion which, once finished, will bring benefits to more than 1,000 farmers. Additionally, the Ministry will conduct 233 kilometres and 262 kilometres of drain excavation and desilting works in the Northern and Central Divisions respectively, assisting approximately 1,158 farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is committed to tackling drainage issues in all active agricultural producing areas with the view to strengthening the resilience of our farming communities. Clearing of the main drains through desilting will promote better water flow and minimise the chances of localised flooding during periods of heavy rain in the short-term.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways is collaborating with the Ministry of Sugar and the Drainage Board, to ensure that all main drains connected to sugarcane growing areas are maintained. The Ministry machines are currently being utilised to upgrade farm access roads, and to maintain main drains in the sugarcane growing areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Ministry staff have also had meetings with their counterparts from Municipalities and the National Disaster Management Office on the state of drains that come under the Municipalities and how those drains are contributing to blockages from irresponsible garbage disposal.

Municipalities currently do not have a budget for clearing and maintaining drains, so the Ministry will work closely with the Ministry of Local Government on how this can be accommodated under the current budget. We need to consult on future budgeting with the Ministry of Local Government for the maintenance of drains under the Municipalities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are also main drains connected to drains that fall under the jurisdiction of the Fiji Roads Authority (FRA), which are also in need of timely maintenance and clearing, to ensure necessary water flow. The Ministry is collaborating with the FRA to identify these drains and work with them to ensure that these drains are cleared in a timely manner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the complaints received through my Office and the Waterways Division, it is evident that the abolition of the Drainage Board seven years ago has significantly contributed to majority of the problems relating to blocked drains and flooding that we face now, which has led to negligence of drainage infrastructure, with total neglect of the collapsed floodgates and clogged main drains during that period.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take the opportunity to inform this august Parliament that during my participation in the 2023-2024 National Budget debate, I had discussed and proposed the re-establishment of the Drainage Board. I am grateful for the support of the Coalition Government in passing the Drainage (Amendment) Act 2023, which enabled the reinstatement of the Drainage Board in Fiji. Just a few days ago, on 11th April, the Ministry formally welcomed and inducted 35 new members to the Drainage Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the rationale for introducing the Drainage Board is based on its crucial function in maintaining designated drains throughout the Northern, Central and Western Divisions. These drains encompass essential structures such as turbine, seawalls, access roads, culvert crossings, main drains and outfall structures including flood gates, flap gates and spillways.

With a combined total value reaching into the millions, these projects primarily benefit both, sugarcane and non-sugar agricultural land. Acknowledging the crucial impact that efficient drainage systems have on farming, environmental protection and mitigating disaster risks, highlights the necessity of reviving the Drainage Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consequences of the abolition taken seven years ago led to the elimination of sanctioned drainage schemes under the previous Administration, creating unplanned development which converted land that had approved drainage schemes into residential subdivisions. The increase in rural-urban migration resulted in most of these unplanned development and expansion of residential subdivisions, which impacted both, sugarcane and non-sugar cane farmers in Fiji. As a result, the re-established Drainage Board is confronted with a daunting task of meeting these diverse demands from the sector to mitigate drainage issues, and to ensure efficient water management by all parties involved.

Acting within my capacity as Minister responsible, as I had alluded to, members of the Drainage Board have been appointed and each Board will comprise of a chairman, a secretary and an engineer from the Waterways Division. This ensures a comprehensive representation and the availability of technical expertise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through collaborative efforts, a Standard Operating Procedure is formulated, ensuring a streamline process for addressing grievances from the farmers, stakeholders and the public. This framework will enable a smooth transfer of relevant information to the Waterways Division and the Drainage Board for timely maintenance and mitigation actions, promoting transparency and responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our pursuit to improve service delivery, we are committed to tackling not just the drainage problems in the Sigatoka Valley, but also to address farmland drainage issues across Fiji. These issues can be achieved through the ongoing Drainage for Farmland Programme within the Waterways Division. The aim is to bolster resilience, safeguard livelihoods and ensure success and sustainability of our agriculture sector in the face of evolving climatic conditions. Moreover, the re-establishment of the Drainage Board will complement the Ministry's efforts to address the various issues and obstacles impacting farmers and stakeholders in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I plead to all users of our national waterways, whether it be our major rivers, streams, creeks or main drains - let us act responsibly to keep them clean. Please, refrain from dumping household garbage into our waterways, as these can cause unnecessary blockage that leads to unnecessary flooding and contributes to unforeseen hardships within our communities. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways. To begin with, I would like to congratulate the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways for the appointment of the Drainage Board. I hope these Boards are not just a setup but has good tooth to bite with and would love to see some work done by them.

The FijiFirst Government had a reason for abolishing the Drainage Board. Previously, these Boards only looked after their own areas and were not concentrating on the holistic approach. For example, if a Board in Lakena is appointed, they will only look at the drainage in Lakena. What it does to the water or drainage in the other areas, whether it gets flooded or not, is not their concern. That is why the Ministry of Waterways was set up, to look at the holistic approach and that was what we were doing.

The setting up of the Drainage Board is duplication of duties - we have the Ministry of Waterways and then we have the Drainage Board. Is the Ministry not capable of doing its own work?

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- That is why flooding is everywhere.

HON. S. NAND.- The management of fresh water is also a key part of the drainage system. So, is this Drainage Board which the honourable Minister has very proudly set up, will be involved in the management of waterways and the freshwater system?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$1.5 million has been allocated for drainage in this financial year and the honourable Minister has said that they have done substantial amount of drainage in the Western Division, and he is planning to do some in the Central and Eastern Divisions. However, he failed to mention the Northern Division. What is being done in the Northern Division? Are people there not requiring drainage solutions? Farms in Soasoa always get flooded with seawater during heavy rain and nothing has been done about that. I would have loved to see a holistic approach where all the areas are taken into consideration.

On the drainage waterways, where is the demarcation of boundaries? There is town council drains, road drains, FSC drains and there is agricultural drains. Will the Drainage Board look after all these drains, or is the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways going to look after the other areas and the Drainage Board is only looking after the rural and agricultural drains?

I see a lot of duplication of duties. I do not see a holistic approach, and setting up of the Drainage Board is just a promise being fulfilled by the Coalition Government.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Holistic approach brought you nothing!

HON. S. NAND.- It is just a promise that is being fulfilled. It is creating jobs for old supporters and cronies so that they can come and sit in the Board.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. S. NAND.- Time will tell if they have tooth to bite. Time will tell if waterways in this country has improved. Let me remind Parliament, especially the Government side, that no government either previously or now, has done as much as the FijiFirst Government has done in terms of drainage.

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

HON. S. NAND.- In 16 months, how much have you done? So, put your money where your mouth is and get the drains intact. Do not create boards just to show the public that you are doing duties. Get the drainage issues solved, get the flood issues resolved. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I thank the Opposition for their response and I intend to adjourn Parliament now for morning tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.34 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.07 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- On the next item on the Order Paper, the honourable Minister is not in Parliament so we will hold that question to his name and we shall continue. He will be given a chance to come back and reply.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Fiji's Membership of GDN – Progress of
(Question No. 02/2024)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs update Parliament on Fiji's Membership of the Assembly of the Global Development Network (GDN)?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- I thank the honourable Member for her question for oral reply. Before I do so, I acknowledge the students of the University of the South Pacific and I convey to them the condolences of the Government on the loss of Dr. Samu Bogitini, a long serving member of the University. He started as the Director of Labasa Centre before it became a full blown Campus and asked me to be the Chairman of the Advisory Committee to the University Centre in Labasa. Our condolences go to his family and the sad thing is that his younger daughter graduated on the day he died.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for her question. The Global Development Network (GDN) is a public international organisation that supports high quality, policy-oriented, social science research in low and middle income countries with a mission to promote better lives. The GDN promotes research on the premise that contextualised the local driven research that leads to more informed policies, increased policy ownership, better informed implementation and more sustainable and inclusive development choices.

Sir, GDN also focuses on strengthening research capacity across countries and their disciplines. The GDN fosters collaborative efforts among socio-economic research institutions, individual researchers, policy makers and donors that encourage capacity building and networking to accelerate development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 1999, GDN has supported over 4,000 development research grantees from over 140 of these countries. Sir, GDN was created in the aftermath of the landmark World Bank World Development Report 1998/1999 - Knowledge for Development, which set the stage for active promotion of policy research, particularly in developing countries. Some of their research and findings could easily have been seen as race-based, but it was mostly on the social difficulties that various groups go through in their countries.

The GDN Headquarters is in New Delhi, India, with additional presence in Washington DC, USA, and a newly established office in Clermont-Ferrand, France. Furthermore, GDN works on all aspects of development and has previous experience in such field such as development finance, agriculture, research systems, governance, industrial productivity, natural resource management, biodiversity and education, as it continually incorporates new topics on an annual basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform Parliament that on 18th October, 2023, Cabinet approved Fiji's membership of the GDN Assembly, thereby, enhancing participation of our nation in GDN hosted events. The annual cost of Fiji's membership is US\$100,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Given that Fiji has always played a major role in promoting development in the Pacific, our membership of GDN will provide participating researchers and development practitioners with global recognition and visibility, and further strengthen the work carried out by our people for the development and betterment of the lives at both, local and regional levels.

The Strategic Planning Office within the Ministry of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is currently coordinating with the University of the South Pacific (USP), on behalf of the Fiji Government, to host the 25th Annual Global Development Conference in Fiji in November of this year, marking the return of GDN flagship event to the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji to host this historic meeting is timely, as the Coalition Government has re-established the Strategic Planning Office within the Ministry of Finance to ensure better co-ordination and formulation of a strategic and robust development pathway for the nation. Through the Conference, we envisage building our research capacity, improving our network capacity and our networking and also strengthening collaboration with universities, as well as with GDN member countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Conference will be an important step in Fiji's global engagement around sustainable development issues. Fiji has commenced initial discussions with the GDN and the planning and logistic aspects of hosting that Conference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as alluded earlier, the Strategic Planning Office from the Ministry of Finance is collaborating with the USP as a co-partner in hosting the event. The GDN Conference is tentatively scheduled for the last week of November of this year. The USP, being the local partner, will fund an amount of US\$300,000 towards that GDN Conference.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's membership will enable policy makers, researchers, academic and professional bodies to undertake and produce evidence-based policies that are contextualised to the local and to the region. The GDN will generate and share knowledge and forge new working relationships with donors, partners and with key stakeholders, to deepen research capacity at individual and institutional levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, hosting the annual GDN Conference will enable a larger contingent of participants from the Pacific and local and regional research institutions' knowledge to be featured on a theme to be mutually agreed in line with the 95 development priorities in the Pacific. Fiji will sign the agreement to become a member of the GDN during the 25th GDN Conference in November of this year.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the annual GDN involves high level inclusive evidence-based debates on current development challenges and priorities. The GDN Conference intends to bring around about 800 participants in a hybrid mode, out of which roughly 250 to 400 are in person participants from across sectors and disciplines. Sir, we will be presenting Fiji to the world, and look forward to welcoming GDN Conference to Fiji.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Prime Minister for his response. In his response, he did mention about building our research capacity which is something that we would appreciate. My simple question is, will GDN be doing all the research for us now or is there a Ministry that is going to be dedicated and working together with GDN so that we can start

with this research capacity that is badly needed locally?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Prime Minister, there are two parts of the question that was being raised. Is it going to be allocated to a separate Ministry?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can I just elaborate further because there are overlaps in this work. The honourable Prime Minister has mentioned about the Strategic Planning Office, we have Poverty, and then Rural Development under the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific (CIRDAP) which we are already a member of, so there are overlaps in the work that we do. With the linkage to GDN, where will the co-ordinating office in Fiji be – USP, Strategic Planning Office or Poverty? That is my question, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will soon be with the Ministry of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics. They will initially push it forward, they brought a paper to Cabinet to work with the University, and they will have to sort out the finer details of that working towards the Conference in November and also after that.

Reduction of Duty – Imported Chicken Portions
(Question No. 03/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament of the impact of the reduction of duty from 15 percent to zero percent on imported chicken portions on the local poultry industry?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. In fact, the question is factually wrong, and I will explain why. But I think the intention of the question

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

You have raised a question with the learned Professor here, so having a go at the way the question was couched, he is trying to answer that. Let us listen to the answer.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we allowed the question because the intention of the question is relevant. I will correct the factual side of it, as well as answer the question in terms of the intent. Before I do that, let me just set this in the context.

Tariff protection has always been an important economic policy tool for countries to protect and support local industries where it is imperative. In the 1970s and 1980s, we started by that - we had huge protection for the rice industry, protection for manufacturing and some of it is still continuing. These were all done in line with fair market practices that eventually, encouraged competition and consumer options which could lead to price reduction as well. The idea of tariff protection, in economics we call it “infant industry argument”, where tariff protection is given to allow industries to grow up, to compete, and progressively reduce the tariff.

Historically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has had substantial protection for numerous local business industries, and we started with tariff reforms. It actually started under the leadership of the

honourable Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, in the 1990s. It was designed to promote trade liberalisation, and in some sense, this outward looking strategy for economic growth paid dividend.

Despite the initial reforms, certain protections persisted and were supported by all Governments in Fiji and continued over a period of time. Some, however, have been gradually phased out and the subsequent phasing out involved assessing and lowering of fiscal duties, and the most common form of protection is tariff protection - import duties and taxes on imports. Of course, the old strategy, again, was quota, but most countries do not go towards quota anymore, it is basically tariff protection. The global trading environment is one designed to gradually reduce tariff.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the poultry industry, this is one of the most heavily protected industries in Fiji. The good news, as a result of that, is that we are almost self-sufficient. However, self-sufficiency and the support for local industry must be carefully balanced with the cost to our people. What happens is, sometimes when the tariff rate is very high, even if the item is imported, the cost to the consumers can be very, very high and we need to ensure that industries that get tariff protection are, at the same time, able to reduce prices, improve quality and offer greater choice to consumers.

In the budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise and reduce the import excise duty on chicken portions from 10 percent to zero percent, not 15 percent to zero percent. So, it was the import excise duty on chicken portions only, not the whole chicken, from 10 percent to zero percent and not 15 percent to zero percent, as the question puts out. That is why I said it is factually incorrect.

But more importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite the reduction from 10 percent to zero percent in the import excise duty, the duty of 32 percent still remains. So, even if someone who is importing chicken portions today, that importer still pays 32 percent instead of the original 42 percent. So, a total tariff protection of 42 percent is still applicable for anything which includes whole chicken other than chicken portions.

What we found out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we were doing the budget, even with the 42 percent duty, some of the importers of chicken portions, chicken wings and chicken drumstick were still able to sell in the local market at a lower price than our local producers and that to me was, in some sense, unethical, because we realised that the whole chicken still has a duty of 42 percent.

The other thing that we have in this country, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that we are only, at the moment, importing chicken from New Zealand. If we import chicken from Indonesia, for example, and Indonesia has quality chicken, Japan imports (from the figures that I saw) about 40 percent of chickens from Indonesia, we will probably end up landing the chicken here with 42 percent duty and still sell those chickens at a much lower price than what our local producers sell.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we did in the budget, we reduced the duty and extended it to lamb, beef, prawns, ducks, corned meat and tinned fish, to facilitate price reductions for domestic products. What we have found is that the prices of some of those items actually came down. While we reduce the duty on chicken portions, we have still maintained a high level of protection for the whole chicken, which is about 42 percent - 32 percent fiscal duty, plus the 10 percent import excise.

Again, I want to repeat, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the highest level of protection. After the Budget, some of the producers played funny. It was all designed to bring out this negativity about the Budget and suddenly because of the Budget, because of the increase in VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent on some of the items, that suddenly the price of chicken went up and then when the Government intervened, the prices were brought down.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It has gone up again.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The other point that we want to make, Mr. Speaker, is the local producers. Between the three of them, they employ 2,400 people, and we know that even with the reduction in duty for chicken portions, their profitability has not been affected because the sign that we are getting, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, on the other day, officiated at the new investment made by Crest (another \$22 million) and all the producers that we had discussions with are actually, in the end, satisfied with what the Government had done. So, I do not see, Mr. Speaker, any significant impact on the local production as far as investment and what the three producers are getting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the point I want to make, again, as I have said, is that the poultry industry is still one of the most heavily protected industries. The Government is paying for it. When we put those very high duty, the cost, even if there was zero VAT, if you raise the duty, it is a tax on the consumers.

The people who import, Mr. Speaker, Sir, do not pay for those taxes. All they do is simply pass it onto the consumers. So, if someone imports whole chicken, for example, from New Zealand, they pay 42 percent duty and if they sell it in the market, they are not the ones who are going to subsidise. They will simply add that 42 percent onto the cost.

So, the signal that we provided in the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was to say to the local producers, “Look at your pricing, look at your efficiency. Do not just concentrate on making exorbitant profit at the cost of the prices to the consumers.” In terms of jobs (2,400), yes, we appreciate that -n2,400 families or less than that, but the important thing is that we have 800,000 people in the country. So, that is the message that we wanted to give to the producers as a result of what we did and it brought down the prices of chicken portions, wings, and people appreciate that.

HON. S. NAND.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Before I ask my supplementary question, I would like to correct the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. In the *Daily Hansard* of Friday, 30th June, 2023, it states, and I quote:

“The Government will also reduce import excise on chicken portions such as wings, drumstick, legs, feet, thighs, et cetera, from 15 percent to zero percent.”

It is mentioned 15 percent to zero percent. If you are saying this is wrong, you should have gone and corrected the *Daily Hansard*.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. S. NAND.- The question is, has your reduction in duty worked? How long does it take for a whole chicken to be cut in four or five portions and shipped to Fiji to destroy our local chicken industry and you have set the precedence? Has the reduction in duty from 15 percent (as mentioned in the *Daily Hansard*) to zero percent worked? Has the price of chicken portions come down significantly?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In the Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very clear, it is from 10 percent to zero percent, that is the protection. It could have been a mistake, but the point is, when you reduce the duty and the duty, as I have said very clearly is not produced on a whole chicken. I also said that even with the 42 percent duty, those who were importing chicken portions were actually selling at a lower price than what was available locally. The price of chicken portions now being imported with a reduction duty of 10 percent (import excise duty) the prices have gone down.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is more from the consumer perspective. The intent of the policy was to assist consumers to get affordable protein.

The intension was good, but if you look at the pricing itself, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with 15 percent VAT increase -10 percent reduction in the duty, still the price has not been cheaper. Chicken is consumed by each and every household. If you go to the supermarket, you can see the price have gone up. In fact, my question to the honourable Minister is, can the Minister admit that his policy failed and that it failed the consumers?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, sometimes, I do not get what the Opposition is trying to point out. What is their point?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- On one hand, they are worried about the impact on the producers, suddenly they turned away from consumers to be concerned about the impact it will have on the producers, then they are saying, "Oh, because of the reduction in the duty, you are not going to have...."

The answer to her question is, firstly, she is wrong because the VAT of 9 percent it is not an increase of 15 percent, VAT was increased from 9 percent to 15 percent. Before the budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had three rates of VAT. We had zero on basic food items, we had 9 percent on others, and we had 15 percent.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- She is caught now! She said VAT increased by 15 percent. The VAT only increased by 6 percent. The reduction in duty was 10 percent, so there is a 4 percent net reduction in the cost to the produce and that has been passed on to the consumers. If they go around and look at the price in the market, ask the consumers who are buying chicken portions, chicken wings, chicken drumstick, they will find that the prices have gone down further because even with the 9 percent VAT and even with the 42 percent duty, the prices were lower than what was being made locally. So, that is a policy that is working. It is a signal to the producers to look at their own pricing, become more competitive and pass better prices to the consumers.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my supplementary question would be, while we actually give duty protection to certain industries in Fiji, is Government looking at some kind of price regulations because what we have seen is that, when some of these companies are given duty protection of 30 percent or 33 percent, at the end of the day, their gross profit is much more than what their duty protection is. So, if we are giving duty protection, is the Government actually....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, the issue regarding the first question that was raised is to do with chicken - the 15 percent, zero percent and 10 percent VAT that has been added and decreased, so that is the argument that is going around. So, what are you really referring?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I am still referring to the poultry industry, Mr. Speaker.

HON. P.D. KUMAR .- Chicken.

MR. SPEAKER.- There are only three producers that are being affected.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Yes, because if there are only two or three, price curtailing can go on and I think the honourable Minister of Finance is well versed with this particular scenario where it has actually happened in the past. So, what I am asking is for all the industries that do get duty protection, is the Government intending to do some price regulation so that this massive GP is not actually obtained by this particular industry?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the question makes a lot of sense and I thank the honourable Member because he is right. If the producers are not passing the benefits of protection - the profits that they make to the consumers, then it is unethical and some of them engage in unethical pricing. I think, as a Government, price control is economically not the best thing to do when you are trying to promote competition and all that, but if the Government finds that our producers, having had this huge protection, are not moving towards providing a price which makes sense, from their point of view, the profit they make and what the Government provides in terms of protection, then the question is right, that Government will have to look at price regulation as well.

I think there is an End of Week Statement on the Dairy Industry but for 10 years, we had 32 percent protection for the import of dairy products. We protected one company and look at the prices of milk, butter, et cetera, until that 10 year period ended. You now see a reduction in the price of milk and dairy products generally.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue about price regulation in the face of a lot of protection, a lot of the producers have carried on like that for many, many years at the expense of the consumers. The signal that we provided as a result of the decision we made on chicken portions is exactly that signal, and we want the producers to think about it carefully, pass the right prices to the consumers, at the same time keep on investing and making profit.

Benefits of MSME Strategic Plan to MSMEs
(Question No. 04/2024)

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on how the proposed MSME Strategic Plan will benefit the MSMEs and increase their contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP)?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. Perhaps, before I answer the question, may I be allowed to answer a lot of utterances that have recently been made in media and social media about the Government doing nothing.

HON. V. NATH.- Just answer the question.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Sir, I was asked when I first came into Government what did I think. I said, it is like sitting at high tide in Nabukalou Creek. When you sit at Nabukalou Creek at high tide as you know, Sir, everything looks really nice. It is almost like being in Venice or France, but as soon as that tide goes away, what do you see? You see the mess that is there.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, what is your Point of Order?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Point of Order on Standing Order 74, Sir, on relevance.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I am coming to it.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, he can make that part of his speech if he comes up with a Ministerial Statement. There is a question that is asked of him, could he, please, answer it. The time for Parliament is quite valuable. If he wants to answer things that have come up in social media or whatever it is, there is a different forum for him to do it, Sir. Please, stick to the question. We value the time that we get because we get little. please, relevance, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I take note of your concern, honourable Koya, but I will allow the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, he is just coming to that point. I always provide that allowance to the Opposition. The floor is yours Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Sir, what I was trying to say is that this is a message to the people of Fiji as well. There are certain things that are a mess in this country. We have just heard the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport talk about it, so that is one aspect. The second is that we need to plan better in this country. That is why I am making this response here today. The third is, we are also picking up on the good things that our government did on the other side, Sir. So, with those ones, we are trying to develop. That is why it is relevant to the answer that I was trying to make.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government, through the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications are embarking on, I believe, is probably the first Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Strategic Plan done, at least, in the last 20 years or so. The last one, I think, was done by the Qarase-led Government, which actually went well until they threw it away, but this is another attempt to actually plan better for the future of this sector.

We all agree that the sector is a very important one in our country. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is actually the backbone of the country, with MSMEs worldwide, accounting for about 50 percent to 60 percent of the global GDP, 90 percent of businesses, and 70 percent of global employment.

In Fiji, Sir, there are approximately 30,000 registered MSMEs that account for 82 percent, if not more, if you consider the informal sector. In addition, over the last three years, the sector has contributed about \$191 million in taxes. So, no doubt, a well-crafted strategic plan will be an enabling tool to build capacity, organise participatory processes, empower stakeholders, and grow MSMEs in Fiji, as it is very critical.

It will also allow the Government to actually build something that I feel is lacking, which is a comprehensive ecosystem, an ecosystem where, as we all know, MSMEs come into the economy at different levels. So, there are those that come at the micro-level and there are those that come at the operation level.

The new strategic plan will ensure that all those needs are addressed in a comprehensive manner, and then it will allow this Government to actually plan and execute better. And I am reminded of that saying, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

Ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are hoping this plan will pave the way towards an increased contribution to the GDP, hence growing the economy. At this stage of the five-year plan, we are looking at a transition from about 18 percent to 25 percent, with a stretch target of maybe 30 percent.

Having said all that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the consultant that we are dealing with through the

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), has been engaged in carrying out consultations in the country from 26th February, 2024 to 8th March, 2024.

I have to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the level of consultations has been very exciting, with contributions across the whole country – from the private sector, obviously, the MSME Sector themselves, business development providers, the banking institutions and also, a few Fintech institutions.

Another initiative that occurred during this time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the launching of the first ever MSME Conference from 7th March, 2024 to 8th March, 2024, which was organised by Business Assistance Fiji, that provided a very valuable platform on which the MSMEs have raised their concerns and also contributed towards the strategic plan.

Some of the key elements that I would like to share and, hopefully, will come out in the strategic plan, include:

1. A more nationally-defined MSMEs – an actual database for MSMEs, which will allow us to track how our MSMEs are doing across our nation and target assistance where required.
2. Better coordination amongst Government agencies which will be critical.
3. Increase in resource owner participation in business and commercial spaces.
4. More importantly, ensuring that youth and women participation in business occurs in these sectors.
5. Adoption of technology and safe transition into digital spaces is also a key.
6. Regulatory compliance, of course, with business registration and others.

While the other things that I hope to bring forth in this venture which has never been done is to actually try and enshrine within the education system for that secondary level and at tertiary level MSME entrepreneurial education, so that we do not start building our entrepreneurs up at 30 years, or on retirement, we start at a very young age, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I have to say without a formal structure, what we are seeing in the MSME sector amongst our people is very exciting already, so this plan will only enhance their capacity.

By addressing the things that I have mentioned, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plan seeks to maximise MSMEs' contribution to shared prosperity, inclusive economic growth, sustainable production, and also contribute quite significantly to the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, the plan entails to focus on capacity development at MSMEs, including access to finance, formalisation, and also improving digitisation and also assisting with the green and blue economy. Access to finance is a key challenge for the MSMEs and this Government and the People's Coalition will do its utmost to ensure that this issue is addressed.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the MSME strategic plan will be a comprehensive forward thinking approach that supports the development of MSMEs in Fiji and laying the foundation for sustained growth in the long term.

In short, the overall vision is to provide a clear path toward increasing GDP contribution, as I have mentioned, post COVID-19 levels and provide our roadmap with roles, responsibilities and an execution plan, if you like, to ensure that we have a proper blueprint for MSME development over the next five years.

It will also have costing components, through the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, to navigate what he can provide, but the plan will outline a national vision for MSMEs, a strategic direction where we wish to take the MSMEs and also how we wish to get there.

This roadmap with then consolidate from within Government and donor partners that implementation programme.

We thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity to answer this question.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Minister for paying such close attention to the MSMEs network. As we all know, Sir, they form a considerable part of our economy and from memory, I think I remember that they contribute roughly about \$300 million in taxes, et cetera, towards our economy pre-COVID-19 and it is about 18 percent of our GDP.

In terms of strategic plans, I also do understand. Thank you for acknowledging all that has been done within that particular sector at the Ministry and I know you are building on it to do the strategic plan with a lot of work that actually that went into it.

One of the critical components of this, and I am getting to my question is, for Fiji, it is a massive, massive tool for our engine for growth and also with respect to diversification. I appreciate the fact that he is now going across and doing some work with respect to education, et cetera. My question is, honourable Minister, this issue of diversification will require massive coordination with different Ministries, et cetera, in order for that to be done. Will that consultation take place so that, that coordination is done so that we can stop relying so heavily on tourism, Sir?

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Koya. Honourable Members, please, take note that even to raise a supplementary question, we have timed that as well. So, if the bell is sounded, then you have gone over the time allocated for a supplementary question.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Koya for that excellent question. In fact, the MSME strategy is very much part and parcel of the economic diversification of this country. If you have been hearing me in this Parliament when I talk about economic diversification, the MSMEs come under that particular deliverable, if you like, because it is very important that we actually drive the economy and diversify it through MSMEs.

Allow me just to give one story, Sir. This is on the potential that exists in the MSMEs sector. There is a very young couple who have an IT company that is already doing IT blockchain solutions for the Government of Seychelles. Now, the Government of Fiji is using them thankfully a lot more.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a couple who have developed something from scratch in Fiji and now have about 20 staff, and the way they are going, they are going to be quite big. Honourable Koya was supporting them, and we have continued to support them. These are the types of initiatives that we will commit to support. So, just to assure honourable Koya, the MSME sector is very much a floundering sector when it comes to the diversification of the economy and in terms of the coordination with other agencies, that is something that we will need to improve on, but it is certainly going to be part of the overall strategy as mentioned, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would like to acknowledge the presence of former Parliamentarian, Mr. Rasova. He has been fairly busy around the corridors of Parliament. Welcome to this Sitting, Mr. Rasova.

We will move on to the next Oral Question.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister was extensively covered in his Ministerial Statement this morning, so I am quite satisfied with that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you still want to raise it?

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question that I was supposed to ask this morning on the progress of drainage plans for farmers in Valley Road, as nearly all farms were inundated with the recent flash flooding with substantial cash income being lost, the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways covered this in his Ministerial Statement this morning, but if he wants to elaborate, he can do so.

MR. SPEAKER.- This is like a fishing expedition.

(Laughter)

You just tell us whether you want to withdraw your question, or you still want to continue? You are putting in something half and half.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if he can continue, that will be better.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- That still does not give us a clear. For the sake of you being a veteran in Parliament, now I will ask the honourable Minister to, at least, answer the question.

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. I have covered this subject extensively during my Ministerial Statement. My Assistant Minister has already visited the area in question, and we are fully aware of the drainage problems faced by our farmers in the Sigatoka Valley. We are already moving to fix those problems.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think that provides a good answer for your half and half fishing expedition, Sir.

Update on the SPTE 2024
(Question No. 06/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the forthcoming South Pacific Tourism Exchange (SPTE) 2024 event to be hosted by Fiji?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the benefit of Parliament and the public, please, allow me to briefly share what the South Pacific Tourism Exchange (SPTE) is. It is a major annual event hosted by the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), formerly the Tourism Council of the South Pacific. It is the Pacific region's flagship tourism event which brings together industry leaders, tourism professionals, stakeholders and partners from across the Pacific under one roof. The event was born from our collective commitment to offer our valued international travel partners the opportunity to see and experience our regional tourism products and suppliers so that they can sell the Pacific as their destination of choice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what makes this event more special is that, this is the first time for Fiji or any other Pacific Island Country to host the SPTE. It has been hosted primarily in Australia and New Zealand, and now we are proudly bringing it closer to home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, well over a decade ago, we would host the Bula Fiji Tourism Exchange (BFTE). Over the years, Fiji, like many of our other neighbours, began hosting their own expos. That is how the Fiji Tourism Exchange (FTE) was born.

With the Coalition Government's renewed commitment to regionalism, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has partnered with SPTO to bring this element of Pacific back. Fiji's hosting also gives the opportunity for our small island brothers and sisters, who may not have their own expositions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is a founding member and host country to the SPTO. Nine Pacific Island countries founded this organisation and today, we have a membership of 21 countries and about 200 private sector members.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the SPTE 2024 will be held from 4th to 5th May in Nadi, serving as a platform for fostering regional collaboration, promoting sustainable tourism practices and showcasing the diverse cultural and natural attractions of our Pacific nations. There will also be a series of workshops and training.

The SPTE 2024 will be held along the margins of our very own Fiji Tourism Exchange. We are expecting, at least, 80 buyers from across the Globe and 80 sellers from the Pacific during the two-day event. The SPTO and Tourism Fiji also collaborated on a co-hosted buyer programme to bring in 15 buyers from the United Kingdom and Europe, to participate in both, the SPTE and FTE events.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it will be a very busy few days for the tourism industry beginning 30th April to 7th May, 2024, so much so that we are calling it "Tourism Super Week". Tourism Fiji will be leading a number of engagements, including workshops covering sustainability, adventure travel, digital, destination development and a two-day cruise symposium.

Along the margins, SPTO will also be conducting workshops for its regional tourism organisations, including a four-day Research and Statistics Capacity Building Workshop, the Sustainable Tourism Regional Consultation, Pacific Tourism Digital Champions and Marketing Managers Workshop.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, being selected to host this year's SPTE is a testament to Fiji's renewed commitment to regional tourism and the commitment of the Fiji Government to promoting tourism that is empowering, resilient, prosperous and inclusive.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I would like to acknowledge the presence of more students from the University of the South Pacific. I am sorry, I really do not know whether you are part of the old group or is this a new group altogether. Are you all studying law?

STUDENTS.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you.

Students, we are so grateful for this kind of visit from you to come and learn where we make new laws, we amend laws and we repeal laws and even endorse dealings with the rest of the world in whatever policy the Government of the day fits that Parliament endorses, this is our attachment will other countries as well. We are so grateful for your presence, and we hope you will learn how best your representatives here have been trying all their best to, at least, say something in the hope that changes the view of Government in how it is doing things. Welcome, once more.

Before I offer the seventh Oral Question for today, I would like to remind honourable Members that the first question that was raised, we have taken note of that, and I would like to offer this time to honourable Usamate, who was supposed to be raising that question and, hopefully, the honourable Minister for Public Works could also prepare for a reply.

HON. J. USAMATE .- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I apologise for being late. I would just like to add a note that the bell did not sound in the place where we were having our morning tea.

MR. SPEAKER.- These are things that will eventuate because of these new clocks. If they do not reach your ears wherever you are in the precincts, we seek your forbearance. We will try and do our best to ensure that when the bell is sounded, it reaches the four corners of the Parliament precincts that we are in.

Re-Establishment of PWD – Progress Of
(Question No. 01/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport update Parliament on the progress of the re-establishment of the Public Works Department and what it has achieved so far?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I apologise as I was not also here at that time and I thank you for allowing the question and my response.

The Public Works Department (PWD) that is a work case study in what not to do. Looking back, it was, sort of, irrational in the way things were done and in terms of how it was dismantled without really assessing and analysing the critical role it plays in the development of our nation. It is a challenge in terms of the Ministry working through that.

The decision, Sir, from the view of the Coalition Government, it was a huge mistake. It had its expertise in planning, designing, constructing and all those technical know-how in terms of public infrastructure, et cetera, as we all know. Looking back, we just cannot understand how that happened. It is not only a part of Government as a part of the Civil Service, but it plays a very critical role in terms of infrastructure and essential services such as roads and water.

The consequences were, really, I would, detrimental. We can write a thesis on it

MR. SPEAKER.- Will you be able to end that thesis?

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Let me just say that we do not want to dwell on the mistakes of the past. We will not look back. Basically, there was nothing there when we came in, in terms of equipment, manpower, et cetera, so it is really starting from scratch.

I think the Opposition is asking, “why are you re-establishing it?” It is basically the lack of services to our people, for example, roads. When we look at roads, there has been a lot of neglect because they divided the roads - FRA and non-FRA roads. When you say non-FRA roads, there are quite a lot of communities involved in non-FRA roads. Also, rural roads were neglected. That is part of our policy is to rebuild it and it has commenced.

We have issued contracts for the purchase of construction and maintenance equipment and the first batch of machinery have arrived. This marks a pivotal step towards equipping Public Works Department to effectively carry out its functions. As I have mentioned, there is nothing there – nil equipment, even nil experienced operations staff. For example, even a grader, you need to know how to operate it, not drive it. There has been quite a lot of complaints in terms of the private operators in terms of how they do that. That lack of know-how and skills contributes to the current predicament we face.

In terms of the Building Section, we have already been engaged in repairing Government buildings that were left in disrepair. This is a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Health, for example, assisting in some of the urgent works at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital, and also with other Ministries like the Ministry of Agriculture. This will intensify in the next financial year when the maintenance of all Government buildings is envisaged to be centralised. We are looking forward to this being streamlined and enhance efficiencies in property management, especially in terms of quality and durability of the kind of work being done which we have found to be lacking in terms of some of the private sector providers.

While PWD undergoes the process of reform, the maintenance of rural roads and rural water will continue to be with Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) and Water Authority of Fiji (WAF), but with FRA, it will be working with PWD in terms of complementing each other, with some depots expected to commence operations in the third quarter and fourth quarter of 2024.

Sir, when you are looking at a technical department such as PWD, human resources is very critical. When PWD was done away with, that was a big gap in the sustainability of human resources in technical areas. For example, plumbers, electricians, even those who were operating specialised equipment, so it takes time to rebuild that. You cannot rebuild that in just 12 months. A lot of the experienced staff have left, so it is quite a challenge rebuilding that, but we will be doing that as we move forward, for example, in terms of apprenticeships.

That is basically the update which, in order to answer that question, I think is a challenge, but it will be good to bring it back as we are doing now, as part of the Coalition Government's strategy to plug the gaps that are there. We see that the Drainage Board is coming back. That will be working in collaboration with our Ministry and also, complementing the gaps which are there in the services by FRA in terms of our rural roads which have been neglected for quite some time.

As I have mentioned this morning when I was discussing the Water Sector 2050 Strategy, we also need a Fiji National Roads Policy and Strategy moving forward, so probably with the same timeline and also by decade. Currently, we are engaging development partners. Thank you, honourable Minister of Finance, and not only them but also the Ministry of Climate Change to look into climate financing for water, energy and also roads in order that these are climate resilient moving forward for the next three decades.

HON. J. USAMATE.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. In August 2023, this was what the honourable Minister said, that he would equip some depots but no depots have been equipped. He said that they would work on some rural roads but according to his answer, no such work has been done. In January of 2024, he said they would work on the maintenance for the next six months, not any one of these roads have been maintained over the past six months.

The other thing that I would like to say is that he is talking about the repairs....

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- How do you know?

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- I know because I walked some of the routes of those roads and we built those roads without PWD. We built it with the Divisional Engineers and their teams. My question is, if you say something that you are going to do, when are you going to do it?

He has not answered my question at all, Mr. Speaker, Sir. He has gone on a long lament. I think you are learning from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister this side to go on this meandering round the Mississippi. So, when are you going to deliver what you said in August and what you said in January?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I mentioned, you cannot rebuild what you destroyed over 16 years in 16 months. Some of the issues he raised is very specific and maybe if he rephrases the question to specific items, I can answer that. But as I have mentioned, generally, we are doing it in a very responsible way. If we had been an irresponsible Government, we would have just come in and abolish FRA, like what you did to PWD, resulting in hundreds of technical people who are needed by the country who are just out there, and we do not know where they are.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Go to NEC.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- The other thing we do not know about is the \$8.6 million worth of equipment, I do not know where they are. We are doing it in an incremental structured responsible way, so that whatever we do complements rather than duplicates. I do not want to repeat basic management.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my simple question to the honourable Minister is, where are we heading and what are we doing? If we read past reports by ADB and World Bank, it talks about reducing cost to government and those that can be taken by the private sector has to be outsourced. Where are we heading?

My simple question to the honourable Minister is, when PWD is fully established, you have not given a timeline. What will be the overall cost to Government (taxpayers of this country)? Again, it goes back to my question, there were so many reports in the past about outsourcing, what can be done by the private sector so that we minimise cost to Government?

MR. SPEAKER.- What the honourable Minister was stating in his earlier reply was that, you were looking at streamlining and having a system where both FRA and PWD are going to be brought together but the timing and all that, that is still left to the Government to come up with. Honourable Minister, the question now raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, he raised one very important point, the participation of the private sector because basically, they brought in the private sector to replace PWD. One good example is what happened at FRA, where we have looked at the accounts and did a special audit. That was \$400 million which was expended through questionable decisions.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That was revealed by special audit. The other issue with the private contractors, if you look at them, the one which was engaged by FijiFirst, nearly all of them were contributing to the FijiFirst campaign.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Oh!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- When they are talking about the recommendation by World Bank, ADB or IMF to move to the private sector, as a developing country, we need to really assess that properly. We need to have the right balance.

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

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- What number?

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- What Order?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Standing Order 60 – Relevance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what the honourable Minister should refrain from doing is point fingers at contractors, et cetera, because companies do not contribute to political parties, it is individuals that do that. So, please, do not point fingers at contracting companies because they are not involved with political parties, it is individuals who contribute to it. I think he should withdraw what he just said.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think my answer to your Point of Order, honourable Koya, is that he is just making a grand statement here regarding the contributions and all from individuals who are also part of companies. I take that as just a general statement. But, again, if you want to continue to point fingers at people who are participating in campaigning and all that for political parties, please, you either name the individuals - that is their freedom, or the company that they are representing, and you have to have evidence.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I note that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Member. What I was saying was in terms of what was raised by the Opposition, the participation of the private sector to replace a government entity. What we, on this side of Parliament, are saying is that, that was the wrong decision because in terms of cost, it was quite astronomical. Was there was any cost benefit analysis properly conducted - the cost of engaging the private sector against the cost of keeping PWD? That is the fundamental question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. That would involve a really good study. Honourable Usamate was saying, “when, when?” But we do not want to repeat the same mistake by bringing wholesome the PWD back to replace and remove everything that was there. We need to have the right balance.

(Hon. J. Usamate interjects)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, I may have said that but as a Minister...

HON. J. USAMATE.- So you lied?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- ... I need to move forward in a responsible way in terms of taxpayer funds. We need to have the right balance to complement rather than duplicate. That is the fundamental issue here. For example, in CWM Hospital, a lot of repairs that were done by private carpenters were not up to the standard because the monitoring was not done by the relevant section of PWD, which used to do it. That is something we need to have there, to have a more effective delivery by the private sector. I am not against the private sector, but there needs to be a right balance, moving forward.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a quick question to the honourable Minister, and I hope that I am going to get a short answer. In terms of what you have just philosophised now, and

in terms of the future of PWD and FRA, in short, you will not be engaging private contractors any more to do any work with respect to PWD and FRA?

MR. SPEAKER.- That is the question being raised.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is not correct. We will continue to work towards the right balance, both private sector and public sector, for cost effectiveness and responsible use of taxpayer funds.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. He has been educating all of us in this Parliament. He even came up with that idea of, 'they are not driving, they are operators, so they have to be taught the right way to do that'. Ever since he became the Minister, I have noticed that he starts on the defensive, then he moves slowly to answering the questions because may be, he is from the province of the gift of the gab.

(Laughter)

Assistance to Cane Farmers and Cane Harvesting Co-operatives
(Question No. 07/2024)

HON. V. PILLAY asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament on how the Ministry is assisting farmers and cane harvesting co-operatives to prepare their harvesters and personnel for the crushing season?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question by the honourable Pillay and thank him for his continued observation of the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is committed to supporting farmers and cooperatives in optimising their operations and ensuring that we have a successful harvest this season, despite the many challenges that we have in the industry, such as the impacts of climate change, aged infrastructure, mills and shortage of manpower.

As per my Ministry's operational plan, we have, so far, implemented several initiatives in assisting farmers and cooperatives in preparing their mechanical harvesters and cane cutters for crushing. Firstly, we have been actively assisting cooperatives that intend to bring in operators for their harvesters from India by facilitating letters of support to the Department of Immigration. This initiative enables the cooperative to bring in harvester operators and technicians from India to address the shortage of skilled people to operate harvesters within the season. In addition to facilitating the importation of skilled labour, my Ministry has recognised the ongoing skilled labour shortage in the agriculture sector, especially during the harvesting season.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is imperative to note that the labour shortage extends beyond the sugar industry and represents a nationwide challenge too, basically in almost all skilled areas of our manpower needs. I am also an employer and I know these problems first hand.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have taken steps to engage with India and Bangladesh, to address these issues by sourcing workers for our farmers. Recently, a strategic partnership was established between the Sugar Cane Growers Council and the Anchor Care Global Migration Consultant Limited to bring in foreign workers from Bangladesh to benefit not only the sugar industry, but also broader the agriculture sector.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has collaborated with the Fiji Corrections Service from a Memorandum of Agreement under the Yellow Ribbon Project, engaging our inmates to harvest sugarcane, particularly in the hilly terrain where mechanical harvesters have limitations. This has alleviated some of the burden of the farmers in the hilly areas where the current mechanical harvesters are not able to operate and to also assist farmers with other cane cutters. This year, we are planning to engage 120 inmates in harvesting sugarcane for the 2024 season as per the Memorandum of Agreement.

Recognising the need of mechanised harvesting in the hilly terrain, the Ministry has procured equipment and machines to the Fiji Sugar Corporation for this purpose. These machines will undergo trial during the harvesting season and if successful, will acquire additional harvesters to assist farmers in the hilly terrain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has also allocated funds for the procurement of 42 additional cage bins. These bins will support mechanical harvesting and decrease transportation expenses from the distant areas of Lautoka Mill and Labasa Mill. This investment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is expected to facilitate the transportation of additional 20,000 tonnes of cane.

Regarding direct support for the farmers, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have allowed that the farmers receive a third cane payment of \$2,314 without any deduction, while the next cane payment will be in May, just in time for the next crushing season begins.

For the first time in our history, Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the establishment of the sugar industry, the Government had implemented \$1 per tonne payment for all manual harvesting to incentivise production and yield to further support the farmers. This measure has brought relief to our farmers who have to harvest cane manually.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in acknowledgment of the incentive of increased production, a reward of \$5 per tonne has been distributed to all farmers who have increased their production in 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this initiative, historically, is strategically structured to alleviate financial burden of cane farmers and enhance cash flow, creating a conducive environment for the optimum of crops.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those words, I would like to assure the honourable Member that we have fully prepared ourselves for the crushing season and we will make sure that this year's crushing becomes very smooth flowing.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a supplementary question. Most of the cane harvesters have gone past their warranty period and the repair and maintenance is very costly due to the high price of parts and spares. Also, most of the harvesters are very old and those need to be replaced in the near future. What is the Ministry doing to assist financially to mitigate the high cost and what support will be there to replace the old harvesters with new machines?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are very mindful that the machines are getting old and the parts are very expensive. However, our Ministry has done some submissions for the next budget so that we can assist the farmers.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is in regards to the mitigation of manual harvesting cost. It is quite known that the manual harvesting price is regulated but the manual harvesting cost is not - it is quite intensive and expensive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, maybe a bit of a background before I ask my question. On 7th April, 2024, the honourable Minister for Sugar Industry said and quote, "...Fiji is looking at bringing in more Bangladeshi nationals". Sir, it goes out to show that the Ministry has failed to promote new sugarcane farmers and Fijian people to the sugar industry.

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

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is, how is the honourable Minister working towards mitigating the manual harvesting cost with the increase of VAT and their recently announced National Minimum Wages that will go up because that is not regulated? Can farmers expect the price of sugarcane tonne to even go up?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have just answered that we are getting Bangladeshi workers because our local workers are not interested to work, so what is wrong with that.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, the idea is this, recently I had brought in nine workers from Bangladesh. Now, by them being on the farm, the locals are now watching and the time will come again. I am telling you, they are doing a better job on the cane farms. So, as far as mitigation is concerned, yes, everyone has to bear the cost. The answer to your last question is, you surely will expect a better price for cane this year.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the introduction of mechanical investors is good but there are some teething issues as well. My simple question to the honourable Minister is the issue of drivers and technicians that do look after the machines. How is this being handled by the Ministry?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for your information, I was the first importer of harvester in Fiji. My harvester is still running well because they are maintaining it, we are maintaining it, and putting oil at the right time.

Secondly, as far as the workers are concerned, there are technicians who have come from India and they are beside the farmers, on harvesters as well and even the operators. So, yes, those who have imported harvesters have managed to bring their own operators, but the supply of harvesters, they have technicians on the ground.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister, why is training not organised locally for our local people to operate our harvesters? A lot of people could be trained to operate harvesters. Why is the Ministry of Sugar, together with FSC, not organising and providing training to our locals?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have only been here for 1½ years but they have been in Government for 18 years, why did they not train them?

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, that was the last supplementary question that I was going to allow.

Honourable Members, I intend to adjourn Parliament for lunch, and we will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.38 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.30 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before we proceed, I would like to acknowledge, once again, another group who are out there in the gallery - another group of PL100 students from the University of the South Pacific. I hope I am correct that they are also doing law.

We welcome you to your Parliament and I hope that you will learn more about the proceeding of Parliament and that relates to what you are studying at the University. We wish you well.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now proceed to the eighth Oral Question for today.

Strategic Measures to Address Outdated Education Curriculum
(Question No. 08/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the strategic measures that the Ministry is taking to address the issue of outdated education curriculum?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for the question. Concerns have been expressed that our curriculum is outdated and irrelevant, not reflective of the needs of a modern society.

Our Ministry believes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that to some degree, it is relevant, however, to improve the teaching, resources need to be reviewed to capture new emerging concepts, such as the Artificial Intelligence (AI), the 7Rs and the 3Rs, which is Reduce, Reuse and Recycle; the Blue Pacific concept of regional approach for resilient region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity that ensures opposite peoples can lead, free, healthy and productive lives and gender equity, to name a few. Hence, we acknowledge that it needs to change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we know that our Fiji citizens, who have graduated through our education system are quite marketable and are in demand abroad. Our neighbouring countries continue to provide incentives and attractive packages to lure our citizens which is proof that our curriculum, for the most part, is up to par with the knowledge and skillsets needed in a global market.

Globally, we are competitive, we are succeeding and, however, the key now is to ensure that we continue to do so within our resources and in line with the strategic direction for the National Development Plan and SDG4, that no one is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, strategies have been implemented to ensure that the national curriculum remain relevant, culturally cognisant, technologically savvy and globally competitive. Students who acquire concepts from these outcome-based curriculum apply and reinforce these at home and in different parts of their lives.

We say that every space that a child sets foot in, is a school. The home is a school, the church is a school, this august Parliament is a school, our playgrounds and our parks are all schools.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our outcome-based curriculum syllabi and all the archaic prescriptive output driven one, however, needs to be reviewed to embed that very new emerging issues, such as those I have highlighted earlier, including the global pandemic resilience skills, online learning platforms,

knowledge and innovative world of engineering and technology and at the same time, sustain our cultural heritage, moral and civic values and responsibility in the forever changing global trends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, past Administrations, including some of my colleagues across the floor instituted a top-down approach like, “I have woken up this morning and I want to change the curriculum.”

Last week, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was part of the two days’ USP Graduation Sessions, and it was quite conspicuous that 95 percent of the graduates, who were conferred with undergraduate and post-graduate degree - information technology, maths, physics, financial management and forensic accounting, already did not have many *iTaukei* and I hate to bring this into Parliament. But I am stating something that I believe is unfair. Is this the result of a new life math curriculum that one of you people thought and introduced overnight?

The interaction of Life Math may have influenced most *iTaukei* students to opt for it instead of the Pure Math, which all of us in this august Parliament learnt in school.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I witnessed got me thinking over this weekend because of our forefathers used celestial spheres or coordinates in their inter-island travel, our grandmothers used geometry for weaving maths and metrics when they made salt or pottery, math has been part of our culture. But to have Life Math as an easy way out has a huge impact on the future of opportunities in terms of scholarships, eligibility criteria for STEM job opportunities from aviation, engineering, maths, science, including financial management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is unforgiveable to create a new subject without much research and global benchmarking, nor contributions from maths experts in our tertiary institutions, and two streams of maths have been shoved down the Curriculum Unit for senior secondary school students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, honourable Members of the Opposition are fully aware that they even disallowed the monitoring of the implementation of the curriculum at school level. This led to a huge disconnect between those developing the curriculum and the implementation of the curriculum by our teachers. Teachers have limited training on the teaching curricula which is to deliver the new invented subjects, thus impeding teaching and learning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to make matters worse, the Curriculum Unit was downsized from 60 Officers to 19. As a result of this, some of the curriculum specialists were sent back to school during the restructure of 5th October, 2020. The restructure altered the roles of the curriculum officers. The above roles became highly taxing in many aspects, as one officer was expected to handle the tasks of two or three curriculum officers.

For example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the restructure, one primary curriculum officer took charge of Elementary Science for Year 1 to Year 4, Basic Science for Year 5 to Year 8, and Healthy Living for Year 1 to Year 8, and for the secondary curriculum specialist, for Year 9 to Year 13. Again, one sole officer was expected to look after three subjects, as well for maths for Year 9 and Year 10, Life Math for Year 11 to Year 13, Pure Maths for Year 11 to Year 13 and Physics for Year 11 to Year 13, along with preparation of national examination papers. It was quite a load, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it was quite inconsiderate and, in many ways, modern slavery, and had, unfortunately, taken its toll on the health and wellbeing of my officers. I am saddened that with additional unnecessary work pressure, one of the Curriculum Specialists passed on in February, and another will be buried tomorrow, while two are still under doctor’s observations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, due to the heavy workload of the Curriculum Unit, we struggled with recruitment from January 2024 for another 17 additional officers, along with a Director and another Principal Education Officer, to be reinstated for much-needed professional ease for the Curriculum Unit to function effectively.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stated in this august Parliament with confidence that my capable, qualified and competent Curriculum Specialists have already begun the necessary work and the scoping within and across the key learning areas from Early Childhood Education (ECE) to Year 13 based on the correct curriculum perspectives that underpin the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) which are considered crucial to a broad and holistic curriculum framework to identify curriculum gaps. These include careers, citizenship, education for sustainable development, literacy, numeracy, special aids, spiritual and values education. These important perspectives are integrated across the curriculum to ensure meaningful and lifelong learning takes place in each student's life journey.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry ensures that curriculum content is culturally relevant and inclusive, representing diverse perspectives and experiences. The curriculum is designed to be flexible and enables our Fiji citizens to adapt to changes in society, technology and industry trends.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Curriculum Development Unit has been revamped. Work has begun in the right direction from the core function of curriculum review which involves working with the teachers in evaluating and identifying the curriculum gaps through hybrid workshop modes to national examination work preparations for Years 8, 12, and 13.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after 18 long years, the Ministry of Education held its National Education Summit whereby a framework titled the "2023 Denarau Declaration" was formulated, which has the guidelines on the way forward for the curriculum and education sector for the next 10 years. The recommendations of the 2023 National Education Summit and Cabinet endorsement for the formation of the new Education Commission are interconnected and complementary in their efforts to review and improve the education sector and its curriculum being a critical component. The new Education Commission will contribute valuable insights and perspectives to the global education discourse and will also consult and make recommendations on the seven thematic areas and these includes enhancing our curriculum in terms of content, design, teaching, pedagogies and relevant types of assessments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I certainly believe in the potential of education to offer a pathway out of our current challenges, and the review of the curriculum framework will ensure that our children have the right skills and competencies to take on the challenges and opportunities of global trends. I plead with you and Members of this august Parliament to partner with us as the national curriculum review is a critical aspect of the transformation of our education system that will benefit our children and the future of our beloved Fiji.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, unfortunately, the honourable Minister was all over the place. The question was rather simple. He could have presented it as a Ministerial Statement, but he is so confused. That is why we need a change in the Minister.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker Sir, the way it was presented as if no work was done. Global partnership in education where we had already sought \$1 million to get the work done, but here we have a Minister who does not know what he is doing or what he is saying. My question is, if you want a curriculum update, you need to work with Fiji's National Curriculum Framework. Is

the Curriculum Framework done or not?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have highlighted that the Framework is being developed and as we all know, new things have happened - *2023 Denarau Declaration*, the Education Commission, which was never considered by them all these years.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in fact, the honourable Minister's response has confused me.

(Laughter)

He was all over the place; very confusing. My question, Sir, which approach will the Ministry of Education take to review the curriculum?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- As you may know, in the *2023 Denarau Declaration* there are seven thematic areas and I have highlighted them in my speech, so that covers what needs to be done to take education forward. This is what you did not do, you did not have a summit, you did not have an Education Commission, so the confusion is on their side.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I highlighted the Curriculum Unit used to have 60 officers. I believe he was in HR and he brought it down to 17, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- What hope have we got?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a question to the honourable Minister,. It is good that we have a curriculum developed and congratulations to those who were involved. But the question is, in terms of the training management cycle, it is one thing to have a curriculum, it is one thing to conduct a training but one of the most important components is training validation. How is the Ministry prepared to do the validation so that it can feed back into the system, particularly on labour demand?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Part of the process.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Wait, wait!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is all part of the process.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is asking the obvious.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- May I just add, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of training providers that we have today is producing the number of people who need to fill in the gaps that have occurred over the last couple of months. We now have training providers at village level, even at tertiary level,

providing short courses. That is a highly educated and skilled citizenry in Fiji.

I was at the graduation ceremony for Pacific Polytech last week in Nabua. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 443 young people graduated with their certificates and now they are skilled people and are entering the workforce. Most of them now come under the auspices of some of the hotels in Fiji. We train, they get recognised and the proof in the pudding is where they can join the workforce and they are.

Written Questions

Official Overseas Trips – Ministers and Assistant Ministers (Question No. 09/2024)

HON. P.D. KUMAR asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs to provide the following information on official overseas trips taken by Ministers and Assistant Ministers from 24 December 2022 to 31 March 2024 –

- (a) The total number of trips undertaken; and
- (b) How much was Government funded.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, because of the second part of this question, I request that I table the answer later as allowed for in the Standing Orders.

Update on Community Posts – Fiji Police Force (Question No. 10/2024)

HON. S. KIRAN asked the Government upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration –

- (a) how does the Fiji Police Force make an assessment on whether or not to establish a Community Post in an area;
- (b) what are the basic requirements to establish a Community Post;
- (c) the total number of Community Posts by District and Division and the year of its establishment; and
- (d) the total number of applications pending for the establishment of Community Posts by District and Division as at 31st March, 2024?

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

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT - LEVUKA TOWN COUNCIL 2014 AND 2015 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review of Levuka Town Council Annual Reports 2014 and 2015 which was tabled on 20th November, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka Town is a site rich with the historical landmarks with its Colonial infrastructure and cultural history that gives it a very unique and special significance to Fiji and the Pacific. The history of Levuka tells the story of different people, such as the Colonial White Settlers, the Indentured Labourers, Chinese, indigenous people and other immigrant races coming together in what is referred to as the melting pot of Levuka.

The Standing Committee on Social Affairs was referred these Annual Reports on 17th February, 2023, and tabled its findings to Parliament in the November 2023 Sitting. During the years under review, the Committee noted a few highlights of the Levuka Town Council which are:

1. The Back to Levuka Carnival which was revived and held in October 2015 raised a revenue of \$20,745.
2. Hosted Animals Fiji VET from UK for a week on de-sexing clinic for domesticated and wildlife animals.
3. Hosted the Levuka Weightlifters who represented Fiji in the 2015 South Pacific Games.
4. As part of improving its internal controls, the Council recruited an Accountant, an Events Coordinator and a Web Assistant in 2014.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Committee's findings and recommendations, the Committee had highlighted the following:

1. Levuka is listed as a heritage site, and this is a challenge for homeowners and building owners as it is costly to renovate by keeping to its original plan. By way of recognition, the Heritage Bill, as a legal framework, is needed to support Levuka as a heritage site. Therefore, the Committee had recommended the re-introduction of the Heritage Bill in Parliament as this piece of legislation will protect and support the work in improving heritage sites in Fiji.
2. The Committee was also informed that the CEO position had not been confirmed to-date and it was recommended that the process be expedited so that the position could be confirmed, and this is vital for the effective operation of the Town Council.
3. The Committee notes the lack of financial support to fund and maintain these sites, infrastructure and buildings which are of heritage status and is recommending that the Council continues with the Public-Private Partnership Scheme to further develop Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also wishes to highlight in this august Parliament that despite correspondences being sent to Government Departments pursuant to Standing Order 121(6)(b) on a substantive response to the Committee's Report within 21 days of receiving the Report, it is unfortunate that those responses were not forthcoming. Such responses would contribute to debate such as this and with that being said, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and before I offer the floor, I just wish to remind us that the honourable Whips of both sides of Parliament have agreed to that the following be undertaken in terms of the time:

1. Five minutes for the Mover of the motion, that is, the Chairperson of the Committee and he/she will have another five minutes with a right of reply;

2. In between, two speakers have been chosen from each side and they are to speak for 10 minutes each.

To open the floor for debate, I am now offering the floor to:

1. Honourable V. Pillay;
2. Honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government;
3. Honourable H. Chand; and
4. Honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand in support of the Levuka Town Council Annual Reports 2014 and 2015 and would like to commend the efforts of the Levuka Town Council as outlined in the 2014 and 2015 Annual Reports.

Levuka, a town steep in history and cultural significance is on an upward trajectory. The Council's achievements are a testament to their dedication and commitment to the town's wellbeing. Back to Levuka Carnival in 2015 is a prime example. This celebration not only injects vibrancy into the community but also serves as a potential economic driver, attracting tourism and fostering local businesses.

Furthermore, the Council's proactive approach to infrastructure development is commendable - upgrading the drainage system, public convenience and market fencing through the Public Sector Investment Programme (PSIP) projects which improve the lives of Levuka residents. These essential upgrades enhance sanitation, public health and provide a more conducive environment for commerce.

However, the Report also sheds light on some pertinent challenges. Preserving Levuka's historical buildings, a cornerstone of the town's identity, presents a significant cadre. The stringent regulations associated with heritage status often led to exorbitant renovation costs. These highlights the crucial need for the Heritage Bill. Such a legislation will provide much needed financial support and streamlines the process, ensuring the continued preservation of Levuka's rich heritage for generations to come.

The Report also identifies the lack of confirmed Chief Executive Officer and the limited employment opportunities as areas demanding attention. A permanent Chief Executive Officer with a clear vision and leadership expertise can provide much needed stability and direction for the Town Council. Additionally, fostering trade skills and higher education opportunities in Levuka is critical to empower residents and expand their prospects.

Encouraging Public-Private Partnership could be a key strategy in achieving this. Partnering with private entities can unlock investment opportunities, create new jobs and stimulate economic activities. It is important to acknowledge the positive aspects highlighted in the Report. The Council's commitment to gender equality, evident by the high percentage of women in leadership roles, aligns perfectly with Sustainable Development Goal 5. Furthermore, their focus on sanitation and waste management initiatives contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 11 in promoting sustainable cities and communities.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Levuka Town Council deserves our praise for their achievements, they are tackling challenges head on while actively seeking solutions. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this Report, we can propel Levuka towards a brighter future, a future that honours its heritage, empowers its residents and fosters sustainable growth. Let us join hands in supporting the Levuka Town Council as they navigate this journey.

HON. M.K. NALUSIMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I respond to the motion before Parliament this afternoon, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Coalition Government on behalf of the *vanua* of Nabukebuke, Namosi to extend our heartfelt gratitude on the release of the *Vunivalu Na Tui Namosi* yesterday 14th April, 2024. It was indeed a joyous and gracious reception by the *vanua*. Today the *Vunivalu* is chairing the *Bose Vanua o Nabukebuke*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this time to also thank the Standing Committee on the Consolidated Review of the Levuka Town Council Reports from 2014 and 2015. I also take this time to thank the Acting Chief Executive Officer, management and staff of Levuka Town Council for doing a great job in administering the affairs of Levuka Town.

There are few areas that I need to share this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the findings by the Committee. One is the need to maintain and upkeep of the Council's property as well as heritage sites. Levuka Town is a very small one with only 144 ratepayers and income level of close to \$315,000. So, this is really a challenge for small Councils like Levuka to maintain its properties as well as maintain the heritage sites around Levuka Town.

The Ministry is mindful of the lack of development in Levuka in this regard, Mr. Speaker, Sir, The Ministry together with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts, Ministry of Rural Development, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and Ministry of Trade with the support of UNDP is working on a comprehensive plan for the development of Levuka. Agencies are working with UNDP to finalise its terms of reference and engage a consultant who will work on a three to five years as well as 10-year master plan for Levuka. It will set out investment in strategic assets and infrastructure, strategies to attract investments from domestic and foreign investors focused on culture and heritage tourism. All these will be done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst maintaining the heritage status of Levuka.

Another very important issue that was highlighted was the need for a timely submission of Annual Reports. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to share that the annual accounts for 2018 has been audited while the annual reports for 2016 and 2017 had been tabled in Parliament this morning. The Council is in the midst of updating its accounts for the remaining years; 2019 till 2023 by end of July 2024.

Also, the importance of the re-introduction of the Heritage Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is believed that this legislation once review is completed will aim to protect and support the work in improving heritage sites in Fiji. There was also a need for the Council to work in consultation with the Ministry of Local Government, relevant Ministries, tertiary institutions and resource owners to design and develop strategies to enhance paid skills in respect of TVET, as well as to provide higher education facilities to accommodate the students of Levuka and the Lomaiviti Province as a whole. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Council will continue to work with key partners in Levuka to bring up these institutions.

It is also very interesting to know, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that on 28th October, 2023, the Soqosoqo Vakamarama of the Lomaiviti Province hosted a *solu* for the acquisition of land in Suva for the children of the Lomaiviti Province as their hostel or place of lodgement. Another important issue that was raised is the need to complete the process of appointing a Chief Executive Officer.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has been working in collaboration with all the newly appointed Special Administrators on the way forward on how the Ministry is going to appoint the new CEOs for all the 13 Municipalities and also develop an Expression of Interest (EOI), in terms of reference, as well as role description for all the CEOs. The EOI has already been advertised by the Ministry of Local Government on behalf of the Council. The EOI closes on 22nd April, 2024.

There is also a need, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Council to continue with the Private Public Partnership Scheme to further develop Levuka. The Government of Japan has provided aid in kind assistance to the Levuka Town Council to support essential services provided by the Council.

The Government of Japan has assisted the Council in providing the Council's fleet, such as garbage truck, lawn mower, tipper truck, excavator and a seven tonne truck, which also assists the Council in earning extra revenue by giving it on hire.

The Government of Japan further assisted the Council in building seawalls in Levuka Town in 2015, which was destroyed by the Tropical Cyclone in 2018 and, again, they helped rebuild the seawall in 2018.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN Women has also assisted with the construction of the Levuka Market, providing a sum of \$400,000. The market is near its completion. It is waiting for the special interest for the furniture before the actual commissioning of the opening of the new Levuka Market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, also, some key areas that the Ministry has done to actually assist and overcome the poor services to the people of Levuka -

- The Ministry has collaborated with agencies like the National Fire Authority for the repair and upgrade of the Fire Station. I think this is very important for Levuka because with the old heritage buildings that we have, it is always important that we have a very vibrant and a very effective fire station in Levuka. So, the work has started in March 2024 and should be completed by May 2024.
- We have also identified the need to have more housing provision in Levuka Town and also in certain areas of Levuka. The Public Rental Board has also identified a 28 acre land in Waitovu, Levuka, to assist in the development of housing to assist Civil Servants and those who work in Levuka Town in the provision of accommodation.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament, and I thank you for the opportunity to present this afternoon.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution on the motion before us. First and foremost, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Social Affairs for the Review Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight some of the achievements of Levuka Town Council, Committees findings and issues that have been highlighted in the Report. The first one on the achievements of Levuka Town Council is as follows -

- The improvement of the drainage system that was done in 2014 and 2015.
- The construction of much needed retaining wall for Nasova and Batiniwai Creek.
- The upgrade of the public convenience in Levuka Town.

These very important developments were done in 2014 and 2015. Huge amount of money was invested, and it is very important for the current custodians to ensure that maintenance is carried out as and when needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very old port, but there are many more developments which took place after 2015 and one development which stands out is the new Levuka Market.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- This modern Levuka Market has given Levuka Town a facelift and this will benefit the people of Lomaiviti and those who will visit Levuka.

The Government has been supporting the improvement and renovations of the historical sites in Levuka since 2013 after the listing of Levuka as a World Heritage Site. The improvements have been going on for a number of years now, thanks to the FijiFirst Government, former Ministers, the CEOs, the Special Administrator and the Executives of the Levuka Town Council.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have noted from the Committee's Report that one of the key findings of the Committee is the CEO position which has not been confirmed till to date. The Ministry of Local Government should give priority to this and fill the position at the earliest, but it should be done using the due process. This should be in accordance with the Open Merit Recruitment and Selection (OMRS) Guidelines and not in an *ad hoc* manner, not like the appointment of the Special Administrators which was done late last year. Appointment should be based on merit and not on political recommendations.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of issues, the road conditions in Levuka is in very bad condition - pathetic. Week before last, I was in Levuka and I have noticed *lovo* sized potholes, as soon as I entered Levuka Town. We were told that the road condition in the town area has been very bad for the last few months. Whose responsibility is it to ensure that the road is well maintained, is it PWD, FRA or Levuka Town Council?

One concerned ratepayer told me that the Coalition Government does not care about the people of Levuka. That is why the road in the heart of Levuka Town is worse than the gravelled road.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Levuka is of great significance to Fiji. Levuka is the first historical port town, first capital and the first UNESCO World Heritage Site of Fiji. Government should give importance to Levuka and address the issues without delay.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is my very short contribution. I hope that the other side was listening to the issues that I had highlighted, and the Government will make lives better for those people living in Levuka as promised during the election campaign.

HON. I. VASU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand to contribute to the motion before Parliament. Also, I would like to thank the Committee on Social Affairs for the Review Report that they have provided to this august Parliament.

As we know, in the last sitting of last year, one oral question was raised with regards to the concerns of the business community in Levuka and I have addressed Parliament in regards to what the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Culture and Heritage have been trying to do with regards to the improvement of the Levuka Town Council, especially on the heritage site. The Heritage Bill, I understand that it is with the Committee which hopefully that will help Levuka Town when the Heritage Bill is passed that we can solve most of the heritage issues that is being there for so long.

We have visited Levuka Town early this year in regard to some of the concerns that was raised and we have formed a Committee to try and work with other stakeholders in regards to how we can improve Levuka Town, especially on the heritage site.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an initiative that my Ministry is working on and, hopefully, will roll out soon with the Levuka authorities and the Department of Town and Country Planning is to explain about the process stipulated in the Levuka Town Scheme statements and provide simple explanations in visual form on how they can develop the town, while keeping in mind preservation principle of heritage. A simple case is the Westpac Office in Levuka. For those of you who have never seen this, I strongly recommend that you visit Levuka and see the Westpac Office which has been renovated to date. Through the Levuka Town Council and Department of Town and Country Planning, we hope to streamline the process and standard, including provisions of quick turnaround time for the development requests in the heritage town. Another key factor is the capacity building of Levuka Town Council's staff and other stakeholders, including the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts.

Sadly, a high staff turnover of institutions involved had slowed the work on the heritage preservation. A study of similar towns in Asia, Australia and New Zealand is critical and this is an area my Ministry would like to focus on, as well as in the coming months so that implementors themselves are able to accurately interpret heritage in Levuka and help the people of the town. Given the lack of the heritage field expertise in Fiji, we hope to bring international experts in the area of heritage buildings and infrastructure and conservation to do a thorough study of restoration needs which was to have happened in years immediately after *TC Winston* that hit the island of Ovalau. This, we envisage to roll out in August and September this year.

Lastly, through the Department of Culture, Heritage and Arts, there has been numerous assistances rendered to the Levuka Town Council to assist in the upkeep of the heritage town. This engagement is important since the Town Council remains the sole authority of the municipal boundary. Other departments and organisations are merely providing assistance to the Levuka Town Council in the fulfilment of their municipal councils.

A most recent project which will begin soon is the restoration of the Deed of Cession site in Levuka. This iconic landmark is a symbolic of our history and the move to nationhood. We hope in the upcoming Budget process, Government will assist us and double our efforts in the preservation of Levuka World Heritage site, including the much-needed assistance to the Town, residents, business owners and the village of Levuka as a whole.

I must thank our development partners and the Government Departments, such as the Ministry of Local Government, Department of Town and Country Planning, Department of Tourism, Fiji Ports Authority and others, who have boldly stepped up to assist us, as well as the Levuka Town Council in sustaining the historical feature of Levuka.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in regard to the road in Levuka, as we have experienced the adverse weather in regard to climate change, it happens throughout Fiji and the Government is trying its best to improve the roads out there in the rural areas. One area that I want to state here is that in Levuka, we can only allow a three-tonne truck to go into the wharf. If we need to go quickly into repairing the roads, we need heavy trucks and machineries to help in the construction of the roads in Levuka, or else we will have to go all the way to Buresala which is quite an expensive exercise.

In regard to civil servants, they have been struggling with regard to the lack of accommodation. We need more civil servants out there to make sure they perform the duties that are required of them in the Town of Levuka. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT- FIJI NATIONAL PROVIDENT FUND 2022 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the Review of the Fiji National Provident Fund 2022 Annual Report, which was tabled on 20th November, 2023.

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

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, the Fiji National Providence Fund (FNPF) is a defined contribution Fund that provides superannuation services to its members. The operation of the Fund is guided by the Fiji National Provident Fund Act 2011. The Fund collects compulsory contributions from employees and employers towards the retirement savings of all workers in Fiji. It also provides pre-retirement benefits such as housing, medical, unemployment, education assistance and funeral.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, the Fund is also known to be the major investor in Fiji and is one of the country's largest property owner. It also owns majority shares in Amalgamated Telecom Holdings Pte Ltd, Home Finance Company Pte Ltd, and fully owns the Intercontinental Fiji Golf Resort and Spa, the Natadola Bay Championship Golf Course, the Yatule Resort and Spa at Natadola Beach, Holiday Inn in Suva, Fiji Marriott Resort Momi Bay, Sheraton Fiji Resort, the Westin Resort, Denarau Golf and Racquet Club and the Grand Pacific Hotel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the year under review, the FNPF accumulated a total of \$8.7 billion worth of assets. This achievement was a result of the following:

1. The net income of \$650.8 million as compared to \$543.5 million in the year 2021.
2. General Reserve stands at \$1.7 billion.
3. Members Fund is at \$6.7 billion.
4. Total Contribution received from employers for the employees was at \$395.2 million and \$370.3 million was the credited amount as interest to members' accounts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of the Committee's findings and recommendations, the Committee had highlighted the following. It is recommended that the FNPF:

1. Continues and builds on the participation in environmental, social and governance investments by FNPF through public private partnership.
2. Work on a scheme that is accessible for voluntary members in the informal sector. This will ensure that when retiring from being farmers or market vendors, they have saved for life after retirement. The Committee had further recommended that the FNPF develop schemes and create awareness for voluntary members in the informal sector as well.
3. Had highlighted that it is still a challenge to pursue the substantial number of inactive members.
4. To continue to build on the Fund's awareness programmes, targeting tertiary institutions and secondary schools.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. The two Whips have provided a list of speakers as follows –

- Hon. V. Pillay.
- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.
- Hon. K.K. Lal.
- Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

You have 10 minutes each.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand today in support of the Fiji National Provident Fund 2022 Annual Report as reviewed by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. This Report paints a positive picture of FNPF's financial health and its commitment to the wellbeing of its members and Fiji as a whole.

Firstly, let us acknowledge the impressive financial performance with total assets exceeding \$8.7 billion, net income of \$650.8 million and a strong member fund of \$6.7 billion. The FNPF stands as a pillar of financial security for Fijians. This translates into tangible benefits for members. Over \$467 million was paid out in benefits in 2022, including retirement payments, housing assistance and death benefits. This highlights the crucial role FNPF plays in safeguarding the future of Fijian families.

The Committee's findings reveal another commendable aspect - FNPF's commitment to responsible investing. Their involvement in environmental, social and governance initiatives to Public Private Partnership (PPP) demonstrates a focus on sustainability and positive social impact. This aligns perfectly with the growing global focus on responsible investing and ensures that FNPF's growth benefits both its members and the wider Fijian community.

Furthermore, the development of Schemes for voluntary members in the informal sector is a significance step towards financial inclusion. A large portion of Fiji's workforce operates within the informal sector and this initiative has a potential to empower these individuals and provide them with much needed safety net for their future.

However, the Report also identifies key areas for improvement. A significant number of inactive members highlights the need for increased awareness programmes. The Committee commends FNPF's existing initiatives targeting young people in schools and encourages further expansion of these programmes. Educating future generations about the importance of saving for retirement will be crucial in ensuring long term sustainability for the FNPF and the financial security of Fiji.

The Committee's site visit further eliminates the tangible impact of FNPF's investment, the success of projects like the Nadi FNPF Plaza and the renovated Sheraton Resort showcases the potential for economic growth and job creation. Additionally, the Ba Aspen Hospital, a product of PPP provides the advanced medical care and free heart surgeries, directly addressing a critical need within the community. However, the challenge remains. Addressing ambulance service limitations, parking deficiencies at the Ba Hospital and the shortage of medical personnel are crucial steps in assuring the continued success of this vital facility.

Finally, the Report highlights the FNPF's contribution to several Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations by providing retirement savings and facilities access to healthcare.

The FNPF tackles poverty and promotes good health and wellbeing, that is, SDG1 and SDG3. Their commitment to Environmental, Social & Governance (ESG) investing in climate friendly strategies showcases the alignment with SDG11 and SDG13 respectively.

In conclusion, the FNPF 2022 Annual Report demonstrates responsible financial management and a commitment to social impact and a vision for a more secure future for Fijians. By implementing the Committee's recommendations and addressing its existing challenges, the FNPF can solidify its position as a cornerstone of financial security and a driver of sustainable development in Fiji. Let us all work together to support the FNPF in securing a brighter future for generations to come.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have the honour to rise and provide some contributions on the debate of the review of the FNPF Annual Report 2022. Perhaps, may I start by saying that when we were outside Parliament as aspiring politicians, one of the things that concerned us was the use of the FNPF as perhaps, the national cheque book by the other side of Parliament. I have to pay credit to the Management of FNPF under those who have left and the current Management. They were able to keep an even keel, even when there was a lot of pressure brought to bear at various times in its operation.

I would like to congratulate FNPF for the tremendous contributions it has made to our country, and we need to attribute credit where credit is due, Sir. We need to credit the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Mr. A.D. Patel for their vision and wisdom for mirroring the investment process and system that was in Singapore, which is now FNPF, and we are all benefitting from that vision.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me, because of my role particularly in the investment trade side, to perhaps, provide some colouring in terms of where FNPF is headed and some places where we are trying to work with FNPF to try and ensure that the Fund diversifies. As we agree, there is a lot of concentration in hotels and properties and clearly, there is a need to widen the investment net (if you like) so that we continue to have a diversified portfolio in the FNPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now, there are some very active discussions in terms of commercial agriculture with some very promising players and I am hopeful that in this year, there will be some investments in that area. If that happens, Sir, that will help greatly in diversifying the Fijian economy and I know its music to not only this side of Parliament but certainly to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, who is only too acutely aware of the potential of commercial agriculture in Fiji.

The second, Sir, is in the area of communications. As you know that through the hard work of this side of Parliament, we managed to get *Google* to establish in Fiji within seven months. What that means is that we have an opportunity for institutional investors in Fiji, including FNPF, to participate in this investment. I am hopeful that they will be able to do it because there are some very good returns if they are able to secure a parcel of the investment that this company, *Google*, is investing in the Pacific wide network.

Finally, Sir, as part of that, we have to congratulate FNPF, particularly Amalgamated Telecom Holdings (ATH), for their investment in Papua New Guinea. I have been closely watching what they have been doing there, even outside Parliament, Sir, and there is a major potential investment opportunity there with some very good returns to Fiji.

Sir, those are some of the opportunities that are in front of FNPF and our Fund, if anything, will only make the Fund stronger and we look forward to some of these things coming to fruition.

One of the things that we also talked about outside Parliament before we came in, Sir, is,

Perhaps, looking at a medical scheme for the members of FNPF. I am hopeful that, that conversation can continue because it will broaden the benefit of healthcare to all our people in Fiji.

Finally, Sir, going back to the idea of a national cheque book, I am hopeful, Sir, that we will allow FNPF to invest more offshore. That is one way of taking funds out of the country and putting them offshore so that not even our government, but governments that may come after us will not have this ability to just go in and take the funds of our members and use them where they want to. I know the honourable Minister of Finance is also looking at that and if it does, as we know, the returns in offshore investment managed funds is a lot higher than what we get in our beloved country. With those few words, Sir, I totally support the Report before us and again would like to congratulate the management of FNPF for their prudent management of what is a core underlying asset in our nation.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak in support of the Report presented by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Review of the FNPF Annual Report 2022. This Report stands as a testament to the diligent work of the FijiFirst Government in overseeing the management of one of our nation's most crucial institutions.

First and foremost, I commend the FNPF for its remarkable achievements during the Financial Year 2022 with total assets reaching an impressive \$8.7 billion. It is evident that the FNPF is effectively managing the contributions of its members. The significant increase in the net income to \$650.8 million compared to \$543.5 million the previous year, demonstrates the Fund's commitment to financial stability and growth.

Moreover, the FNPF's effort to support its members during challenging times deserve recognition. Despite the adverse economic environment, the Fund continued to provide essential services and benefits to its members, from early retirement withdrawals to housing assistance and migration support. The FNPF remains steadfast in its mission to safeguard the financial well-being of its members.

I would like to commend the FNPF for its strategic investment and partnership, particularly in projects aimed at improving healthcare and infrastructure in our nation. The refurbishment of the Sheraton Resort, the completion of Nadi FNPF Retail Complex and the partnership with Aspen Medical for the upgrading of Ba Aspen Hospital are all initiatives that contribute to the social economic development of our country.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I applaud the FNPF's commitment to environmental, social and governance investment as highlighted in the report by actively participating in ESG initiatives through Public-Private Partnership, the FNPF is not only generating financial returns but also contributing to sustainable development and community welfare.

In addition to the FNPF's achievements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the diligent work and the oversight conducted by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs. Through a thorough review analysis, the Committee has provided valuable insights and recommendations for the continuous improvement of FNPF's operation.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I conclude and urge all honourable Members of the august Chamber to support the Report in front of us. We must recognise and celebrate the exemplary work of the FNPF in safeguarding the financial future of our citizens. We must commend the FijiFirst government, a responsible government which has always looked after its people, the Fijians and FNPF and for its unwavering commitment to good governance and oversight.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Ketan, you are referring to the past Government because we

have the present Government here.

HON. K.K. LAL.- The FijiFirst Government, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, the past government.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Chairperson of the Standing Committee and all the honourable Members who have spoken before me. I just wanted to pick on a number of issues and highlights some of the figures with respect to 2022. Although the Fund in 2022 still recorded negative contributions which is contributions less withdrawals of \$71.8 million. This was a big improvement from the previous negative net contribution of about \$179.5 million.

This increase, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is attributed to an increase in the contributions received due to the 2 percent increase on contribution rates and a decrease in members' withdrawals. One of the largest component of the Fund's investment return is the interest income from Government bond, subscriptions and returns from equity investment.

What honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica mentioned with respect to FNPF's ability to diversify its investment portfolio apart from the investments in the hotels and properties, particularly offshore investment to be able to move away from perhaps just relying on the Government bonds subscriptions and returns from that. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the interest rate that FNPF receives from Government bonds when compared to what is available in the market right now could be much higher, so the Government will also have to look at whether we can continue with the same interest rate.

The other point that I want to make, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government committed to restoring their contributions rates to the normal 18 percent in 2024 and we have done that accordingly as announced in the last Budget.

The Fund's investment portfolio was valued at \$8.6 billion in 2022 and the Return on Investment (ROI) new was 7.4 percent. This was a significant increase from the 6.1 percent return in the previous year. Key investment highlights for 2022, of course, as mentioned by the Chairperson was the completion of the refurbishment and reopening of the Sheraton Resort, the completion and opening of the Nadi Retail Centre, Fiji Airways acquisition, and of course, the Ba and Lautoka Hospital as Public-Private Partnership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can inform Parliament that the Cabinet has considered the situation with respect to the Public-Private Partnership with Aspen and FNPF, in which the FNPF owns majority shares within the Health Care (Fiji) Pte Ltd (HCF). Of course, there are several issues there and at some point, when we have dealt with, the Parliament will be informed of that. The Fund continues to invest in opportunities that align with its long-term objectives, and as honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica said that the Fund's portfolio growth must increase. It is important that they do that, but also as we move in the future, we need to look at very carefully what was the original intention, the Chairperson of the Committee mentioned that.

Historically, honourable Deputy Prime Minister Kamikamica talked about the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and the idea of the FNPF was first mooted by the late Mr. A.D. Patel, the former Leader of the Opposition, and the National Federation Party as a member of social services in the Legislative Council, which led to the formation of the FNPF. The original objective was to make FNPF a retirement fund so that when members retire, they have significant a social protection because of their pensions.

The Chairperson mentioned about the FNPF Act 2011, and you would recall, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that was a Decree that was put in place by the Bainimarama Government and unilaterally, the pension rate of 25 percent based on whatever the actuarial advice at that time was. We can argue about the financial implications, but the fact is, the way in which it was done, about 1,500 pensioners abruptly were put off. Some chose to remain on pension at a lower rate, and the Coalition Government recognised the pain and suffering that some of them went through.

In fact, we now have a pension rate of 9 percent and, in fact, the FNPF had already moved towards further reducing the pension rate. What is happening is, a lot of people are not going on retirement on pension. More than 60 percent of the people who were members of the FNPF have balances of about less than \$10,000, and when these people retire, what they will have will not be enough.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FNPF Board together with the Government, we are looking at this very carefully. I think the Board and the management are working together to look at what are some of the other innovative ways, apart from looking at increasing the investment portfolio, increasing the return because FNPF by law receives a certain amount of income. There are, of course, voluntary contributors. In 2022, there were about 19,000 people, these were people who could voluntarily go and become members of the FNPF and contribute. So, there were 19,145, which is only 5 percent of the total Fund membership.

What that means, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that while looking at the return, while looking at the investments, et cetera has to make sure that it looks at more innovations, particularly the National Insurance Scheme because that is one of the most difficult things for people who retire after 55 years (now after 60 years) is to continue with the income source through which they can look after their health and through which they can maintain their families.

The Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognises the pain particularly those who had low balances in 2011. They had planned their whole life based on what they were getting and suddenly some of their contributions went down by about 50 percent and less than that. In the last Budget, we recognised that, it was not tokenism, it was a recognition that the Government had some responsibility, Parliament which makes law about FNPF has a certain responsibility to look at those members who actually went to become members and worked in the country to ensure that they have retirement. So, we provided additional \$100 for those below 70 years and those over 70 years, \$125.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are working with the FNPF to look at how best we can further compensate and make sure that those who are still alive, those who are still on reduced pension and those who took lump sums and have not been able to maintain their income level are compensated. That is what the FNPF, Mr. Speaker, Sir, going forward will do. I know the Chairperson gave the responses on a number of recommendations.

All those recommendations make sense, and as a Government, we will be working with FNPF very closely to make sure that some of the legacy issues are addressed to the satisfaction of, not only the pension plus making sure that the FNPF remains a credible retirement pension fund, not just a fund where people put their contributions, get the interest rate and withdraw it towards the end of their retirement. That is what the FNPF Board and the management are working on. I want to thank the Board, Chairman, CEO and the management team for co-operating and working with the Government and managing FNPF in light of the challenges that are there to ensure that it remains a credible retirement Fund.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, may I, on a matter of housekeeping and for the purpose of complying with the Standing Order with respect to the sitting times, call on the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to extend in order to complete Schedule 3, Item 3, Motions for Debate. There is still one motion left - the Review of the Consolidated Annual Report 2010-2018 of the Media Industry Development Authority of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any further comments to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MEDIA INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF FIJI 2010-2018 ANNUAL REPORT

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of Media Industry Development Authority of Fiji 2010-2018 Annual Report, which was tabled on 21st November, 2023.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I open the floor to debate on the motion, I just want to highlight here that that particular Act was repealed in this Parliament. For the wise use of your time, honourable Members, what do we intend to do here - do we intend to be talking about something that has been taken out and repealed?

Honourable Leader of the Opposition?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do fully agree with your views and subject to your decision, we are flexible with it. As you have correctly stated, it has been repealed and there is no point in having further debate on the subject matter.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is the offer from the Opposition. The Government?

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I withdraw the motion that is before Parliament this afternoon.

MR. SPEAKER.- So, we are all in agreement. Just let me follow the process and complete it. Parliament will now vote to note the content of the Report.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 4.00 p.m.