

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

THURSDAY, 18TH APRIL, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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THURSDAY, 18TH APRIL, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.35 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All Members were present, except the honourable S.S. Kirpal and honourable V. Nath.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 17th April, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Year 12 Students and Teachers – International School Suva

Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming the Year 12 students and teachers from the International School Suva. Welcome to Parliament.

(Acclamation)

I hope that the proceedings this morning will give you a better perspective of how the Parliament works.

We, in Parliament, are so grateful for your visit this morning. It is an honour to receive children and, especially, how best we can actively play our role in getting a better understanding from you students and the school that visit Parliament during its Sittings on what role Parliamentarians play and especially, what would trigger that interest from you to be part of the Members in this august Parliament sometimes in the future. We are looking forward to that and thank you for your visit.

Written Question No. 34/2024 - Withdrawal of

For the information of honourable Members, I have only received confirmation from the Land Transport Authority last night that there are matters pending before the Courts pertaining to Oral

Transport Authority last night that there are matters pending before the Courts pertaining to Oral Question No. 34/2024. Therefore, pursuant to Standing Order 44(13), Oral Question No. 34/2024 is withdrawn, and that question is under the name of honourable Tuinaceva.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

1. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics;
2. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation;
3. Attorney-General and Minister for Justice;
4. Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration; and
5. Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

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

State of the Fijian Economy

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; I am happy to provide an update on the Fijian economy. The headlines, if I can call them that, are that after a successful post-COVID recovery, we are confronting new challenges, particularly those posed by the loss of our skilled people abroad.

The Government is ready to deal with these challenges at the same time as setting a longer-term pathway for Fiji's future growth and prosperity. However, as always, we want our people to be informed and aware of the critical factors, and we want a united approach to economic management, including from our friends on the Opposition benches.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will delve briefly only on the history, but it is important because as the saying goes, "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." We know of the huge burden our people suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 when the economy shrank by more than 22 percent. In 2020, this was the fourth-largest contraction in all of the economies in the world.

But the economy was not in great shape even before COVID. In 2019, it was already contracting, and we had negative growth. Our debt to GDP ratio was already rising so that when COVID came along and the Government was forced to borrow to keep the economy afloat, it rose sharply to 90 percent.

While we expect this ratio to fall to just under 80 percent by July, the Government remains

burdened by it. When Government debt is this high, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot invest freely in the things our people need – roads, water, power, health, education, and housing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I may say, I believe that the Coalition Government's main point of difference in its economic management against that of the previous Government, has been to open the books, share information and invite people's participation in economic management. We urgently convened the Fiscal Review Committee to report to us on tax and other economic measures. We convened the National Economic Summit and now, we are completing a new National Development Plan. I will talk more about this shortly.

The Fiscal Review Committee Report identified a number of urgent steps that needed to be taken, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The first of these was that the Government was not simply raising enough money, it was critically under-funded for the basic services that our people need, and we entitled to expect. So, what happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Because we were not collecting enough taxes, Government debt was allowed to grow. We sold assets to raise money, such as 44 percent stake in our national electricity company.

But most critically, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we failed to invest in infrastructure -

- Everyone in Suva knows what happened to their water supply last month.
- We have critical bridges in our road network that may have to be closed down at any time and must be urgently rebuilt.
- Large parts of our main hospital are in an unfit state.
- Our post system urgently requires tens of millions of dollars in investment.
- Our sanitation infrastructure requires billions.
- Indeed, it was only earlier this week that the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport told Parliament that the capital investment bill for his Ministry alone is about \$8.5 billion.

Why am I raising these points, Mr. Speaker, Sir? Is it to blame the previous Government? No. It is to ensure that the lessons of the past are learned, and the challenges of the future are understood.

The first lesson to take from the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that we must be honest and open with the people about the challenges we face. We believe that if we share information with the people, and ask them to help and support the Government, they will understand why we have had to know that this has been a concern to many.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Reduce your travel!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Well, when she sees the figures, Mr. Speaker, Sir, she will stand up from her chair.

(Laughter)

We believe that if we share information with the people and ask them to help and support the Government, they will understand why we had to take hard measures, particularly, with the return of VAT reform.

We know that this has been a concern to many. We have tried to manage this by increasing welfare and other payments for our most vulnerable. We have also increased the tax burden on the businesses. We believe that the people who are willing to inform themselves and understand our

challenges, also understand the hard measures we have to take.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our economic management, our first rule will always be to inform, consult and request participation from those outside of the Government. We may not have yet made good use of our learnings at the first National Economic Summit and brought people together again to advance the resolutions we arrived at there.

Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry, like many employers, has had to deal with severe personnel challenges this year with an impact on what we can deliver. We intend to convene another National Economic Summit later in the year, in August or September after the Budget. The reason for this, Sir, is that we want the Summit to be focused on long-term challenges, not the Budget. By that time

(Chorus of interjections)

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

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...we will also have completed. So, I want to assure everyone that we will continue to consult, to listen and to interact. And we will also listen carefully to criticism, and I want to hear where we may have gone wrong and the alternative solutions that may be available.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in keeping with this focus on transparency and certainty, I intend to set out publicly in the next few weeks, the key Budget measures that are under consideration before the next National Budget is presented on 28th June this year. This is so that people can give us their input on these issues ahead of time and to tell us what might be wrong ahead of time.

I want to emphasise the importance we place on consistency, predictability and stability of policy, Mr. Speaker, Sir. We are not going to announce sudden changes on Budget night. We want everyone with a stake in economic management to understand that our approach is to be open and transparent, to set economic and fiscal policy and not to constantly change it.

In the last 18 months, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we managed to come out of the pandemic with a strong economic rebound of 20 percent in 2022 and 8.2 percent in 2023. So, we are back at pre-pandemic levels now. But that does not change the fact that our economy is now where it was in 2019. So, we have lost five years of economic growth.

The tourism industry rebounded strongly with a record of 929,740 visitors, 4 percent higher than 2019 levels. Our national airline, our hoteliers and all other tourism associated businesses had a year of record profits. Tourism earnings reached a record level of \$2.4 billion, which allowed people to go back to jobs and other businesses.

(Hon. P.D. Kumar interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Kumar, Mr. Speaker, is the most irritating Member of Parliament I have encountered in the last nine years. She cannot help herself.

Personal remittances rose to a record of \$1.25 billion last year, thanks to our people living and working overseas. This helped propel spending in the economy, and supported growth and income levels of our people. We have also attracted some major new foreign investment, although much of it remains in the 'so-called pipeline. Our job as Government is to get out of the pipeline and

and onto the ground.

Foreign reserves, Mr. Speaker, Sir, remain at comfortable levels now and is projected to remain stable in the medium term. As of yesterday, our reserves position stood at about \$3.2 billion, sufficient to cover 5.1 months of imports of goods and services. While these reserves are comfortable, the Reserve Bank of Fiji is managing them prudently, as we expect pressure on reserves in the coming months from higher oil prices and a slowdown in inwards tourism receipts.

The healthy reserves position has ensured that the liquidity in the financial system supports low interest rates, which is a key ingredient in driving private sector borrowing and investment. As of yesterday, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the financial system liquidity stood at about \$1.9 billion.

On the fiscal side, as I have said earlier, the Government has decisively tackled the debt problem and introduced a number of revenue reforms, although they are painful, to ensure long term debt sustainability.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You have increased the debt.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Debt increased.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You have no idea what you are talking about.

We have managed to bring down our debt to GDP ratio from almost 90 percent in 2022 to below 80 percent at the end of this fiscal year - July 2024. This is, Mr. Speaker, good progress, but we still have a long way to go. This path of fiscal discipline and debt reduction must continue.

As I have said, the VAT increase in particular, has had some impact on prices of goods and services to our people. But if we do not take this bitter medicine now, the consequences would be far more severe and painful, Mr. Speaker.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- They have forgotten that the government of which they were part of, had a VAT rate of 15 percent without any exemption for a long time.

MR. SPEAKER.- No running commentaries at the back, please.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Looking ahead, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the economy is now returning to its usual growth trend of about 3 percent, as we had projected in the mid-term fiscal strategy. We know this is not good enough, and we must do better than this. Sir, 5 percent per annum is the minimum growth rate that is acceptable. Once again, Mr. Speaker, we need to stop and look at what our situation is, and what measures we need to take to address them.

First and foremost is the loss of skilled people. With Australia and New Zealand after COVID-19 and the global labour market restructuring and unprecedented demand in those countries, they opened up their immigration doors to a very, very significant and unprecedented levels. We have lost about 70,000 to 80,000 people in the last 18 months, many of them with significant technical training and experience. We cannot blame people for seeking the opportunities given to them by Australia and New Zealand.

That is one of the more reason why Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is so important that we begin to tackle our big social challenges as well. Some of them, like NCDs, domestic violence, the growing issue of drug use, are generational and require all of us to get involved.

The skills lost, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a major concern for employers and investors. It is also a threat to economic growth. We should not forget that Government too is an employer of skilled personnel.

Our own Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, lost a quarter of its professional staff in the last 18 months, either to immigration or to the private sector. This has been our biggest challenge in some ways in implementing policies, and I know the honourable Minister for Immigration is going to talk about this in his Ministerial Address as to how we are reforming the Immigration Department and how we can improve the processing of work permits so that we can begin to get critical skills into the country and to get businesses, investment and construction to move faster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are continuing work on streamlining the processes in our regulatory agencies. This work is challenging and time consuming. Government is burdened with regulatory processes that are decades old, and a culture which assumes that everyone seeking its help is guilty until proven otherwise.

Decision-makers, in some sense, have grown up in a culture where they were afraid to make decisions and one that would displease a particular powerful person that they will be fired. So, they were cautious and risk averse and reluctant to even make decisions and, of course, Mr. Speaker, we are changing that.

We have also made sure, Mr. Speaker, that we have in our approach of economic management, open up the discussion and the engagement with our business sector. And we are told everyday by businesses and investors that they feel much freer, much more confident about investing in the country.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I want to look at some key economic indicators which help us to analyse and assess our economic direction for the year. At this point, the data is pointing to weaker consumer spending against the earlier projections. The loss of so many people in the last 18 months, about 8 percent of our population, will clearly impact this.

Lower consumer spending feeds into lower levels of economic activity and, of course, for Government, lower tax receipts from income tax and VAT as well, Mr. Speaker. The recent period of heavy rain and flooding has also not helped, and it is going to cause some impact on the level of spending and delay some of the investment activity.

The investment activity, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been very positive in the last 12 months to 18 months. Recent indicators point towards a pickup in activity, as major tourism-related projects gain traction. However, we need to build on this momentum and ensure that things are moving on the ground.

We all know that we are critically short of skilled construction labour. We are tackling other factors, such as quickening environmental and planning regulation and where possible, high business cost.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to talk about price inflation. There has been a lot of confusing talk about this recently, and we must all get it right because these are issues that go to consumer

confidence and the search for solutions to the cost of living. Only when we have the right data, we can look for the solutions.

The year-on-year headline inflation rate stood at 4.6 percent, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in March 2024, compared to 2.0 percent in March 2023. Why has it increased? The two main causes are the increase in global commodity prices, and the increase in VAT from 9 percent to 15 percent in August last year. The VAT increase has been largely absorbed now so we expect inflation to slow to an average of around 3 percent by the end of this year.

To cushion the impact of inflation and VAT increase on our people, in the last Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had increased the welfare payments by 25 percent for those above the age of 70, and 15 percent for the others. We paid almost \$90 million in two rounds of back-to-school payment to almost 220,000 children. We had forgiven around \$650 million in TELS debt for over 53,000 families. We reduced import duties on certain food items and more importantly we are focused on rebuilding the economy to ensure that there is more high paying job creation. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the figures from the FCCC shows that a large number of products particularly food items saw a decrease in the prices as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the financial sector remains sound and continues to support domestic economic activity. The private sector credit is showing encouraging signs but remains below pre-pandemic trend as over \$1.1 billion is approved loans yet to be draw down. We are seeing some major interest in foreign investment but, as I have said earlier, we all need to work harder towards getting this realized on the ground.

The global trends, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are watching the global trends closely, the global economy seems to have slowed down in major trading partners including our source markets. New Zealand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just went into technical recession. The IMF is projecting global growth at 3.2 percent in 2024, much lower than the historical average of 3.8 percent between 2000 and 2019.

The disruptions to shipping routes and trade fragmentation policies are expected to impact trade and add upward pressure on freight costs, although these effects are yet to be seen.

Production supply deficits....

MR. SPEAKER.- Please round off.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is the first bell, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- One minute left.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Yes, thank you.

The other issues we have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with respect to global trends is the production supply deficits shaped by OPEC policies and the expectation and escalation of the war in Gaza and this is likely to push the price of crude oil to higher levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, we are reminding our people that we have a new economic management approach. We are involving our people, our businesses and we feel that the approach that we have taken is building confidence, creating as I have said, it is going to result in a level of confidence that we never saw in this country over the last 10 years.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope you are not confused because of the

confusion that, that statement brought to the floor of Parliament today, but let me thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his Ministerial Statement this morning.

(Laughter)

I have already stated in my earlier address in reply to His Excellency's Opening of Parliament that with all the intentions that the Government has, the main thing is for the economy, for the financial footing of this nation and that is something that we will work towards as well. In the limited time that I was given this morning to prepare, I just looked into two references.

1. Reserve Bank of Fiji Economic Review Volume 42 for the period end of March 2024; and
2. Mid-Year Fiscal Statement that has been issued by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister through the Ministry of Finance.

The honourable Minister started his statement this morning on a very positive note stating that the Fijian economy has returned to pre-pandemic GDP level after two years of strong economic recovery. The recovery, and of course, the growth in 2023 was because of the initiative that was put in place by the FijiFirst Government.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, post-pandemic Fiji is the fifth fastest growing economy in the world. May I repeat that, Fiji post-pandemic was the fifth fastest growing economy in the world. That is the solid footing that we handed over to the Coalition Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the challenge that I keep raising to Government, and of course, to the honourable Minister of Finance, the forecast for this year is already on a downward trend and the same for 2025. What is Government going to do? Are we going to see a positive growth in 2024 plus vast the 3.0 percent that has been forecasted because 5 percent to 7 percent in my assessment will be the acceptable footing that we would like to be in. That is the challenge for the honourable Minister of Finance.

I will not go into the economic review because the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Biman Prasad has stated most of the issues in there. Of course, we understand there are external factors particularly the geopolitics, war that is happening, that affects us locally but what are we going to do with the influence that we can have on things that we can control? That is the challenge for Government, but the reality, Mr. Speaker, is in the expenditure. If you look at the six months expenditure, there are a few concerns.

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

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- The forecasted expenditure is \$4 billion-plus. They have only expanded \$1.9 billion, well over 50 percent in their expenditure. So, when we are spending below the expenditure forecasted, we are denying the people the services that they deserve.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I say that again, we are denying the people the services that they deserve. Too much travel, too much consultations. Where are the tangible benefits that the people will experience out of the budget that we passed in this Parliament last year, Mr. Speaker, Sir?

If I can just quickly go through a few, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Cost of living, you will hear it from

the honourable Member tomorrow. Cost of living is still increasing. Investments, although positive but it is going at a very slow rate. It is here in this economic report and we hope that we can create the environment so that there can be more in terms of investment.

Debt, I will have to talk the debt. He is focussing now on reducing the debt to GDP ratio. Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now almost \$1 billion has been added to our debt. That is when you include the TELS component loan that you have taken away. You had \$600 million already last year and take away the TELS component is \$1 billion already. He is very cunningly telling the people, hoodwinking the people that debt to GDP ratio has decreased but fiscal debt has increased. Do not hoodwink the people. The bottom line is the services to the people.

Education, we talked about the redeeming of bus cards. The carriers in Tailevu are not operating. They wanted to stop because 11 weeks, honourable Prime Minister, the carrier operators in Wainibuka have not been paid. The money is not coming. We heard it from the honourable Minister for Agriculture yesterday, we heard it from the honourable Minister for Rural Development. The money needs to come to the Ministry so that they can perform. It is one thing to have a budget, it is one thing to tell us all the good things about the economy, but people want to enjoy the benefit. We set that on a solid footing, the challenge is on you now to take it to greater heights.

Sustainable Aviation Fuel

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Members of Parliament, I rise to present a Ministerial Statement that sets light on the transformative potential of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) in standing at the forefront of aviation's green revolution. The potential to strengthen those elements of the agricultural sector involved in the growth of biomass, the green technologies that process the biomass and those who build infrastructure that is needed in selected areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, commercial aviation's climate change impact is complex, reflecting the variety of missions from operations at the surface up to cruise altitudes as high as 43,000 feet across continents and oceans and over varied time spans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, carbon dioxide is the primary contributor to aircraft emissions, accounting for around 70 percent of the exhaust. The gas mixes in the atmosphere with the same direct warming effect that occurs when it is emitted from other fossil fuel combustion sources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these global concerns in mind, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) convened a series of conferences on Aviation and Alternative Fuels to coordinate the deployment of alternative fuels in aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in November 2009, ICAO convened the CAAF/1 in Rio de Janeiro. The conference endorsed the use of sustainable alternative fuels for aviation as an important means of reducing aviation emissions and established the ICAO Global Framework for Aviation Alternative Fuels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since 2009, significant progress has occurred, including more than 180,000 flights using a blend of SAF, six airports regularly distributing SAF, and evolution on the sustainability aspects of these fuels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to provide some context, sustainable aviation fuels are biofuels that have identical attributes to conventional jet fuel but have an 80 percent lower carbon footprint. Sir, SAF feedstock includes grain, oilseeds, sugarcane, agricultural leftovers, used cooking oil, biological

waste and animal fat. Ethanol which is a biofuel produced from plant-derived raw materials like sugarcane and cassava is a crucial component in the production of SAF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to follow up on the developments on sustainable aviation fuels, ICAO organised a second conference in Mexico City in 2017 which endorsed 2050 ICAO vision for sustainable aviation fuels, calling on States, industry stakeholders and other entities to significantly substitute conventional aviation fuels with sustainable aviation fuels by 2050 or net zero carbon emissions (CO₂) by 2050.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in order to find common ground and identify remaining discrepancies for outcome-oriented discussions at CAAF/3, ICAO in September 2023 held a pre-CAAF/3 outcomes consultation to solicit feedback from states on potential CAAF/3 results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in November 2023, ICAO hosted the third conference on Aviation Alternative Fuels on CAAF/3 in Dubai. The goal was to build an ICAO global framework in line with the no country left behind initiative, taking into account national situations and capabilities. I attended the CAAF/3 at the invitation of the President and the Secretary-General of ICAO. It was indeed an honour and privilege to be nominated and elected as Chairperson of CAAF/3, which was quite welcomed for Fiji. The conference was attended by 1,000 attendees from the four regions including more than 40 government ministers, government delegations from over 100 countries and representatives from more than 30 international and regional organisations, CEOs of major airlines, fuel production companies and aircraft manufacturers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, aligning the perspectives from the four regions of the world, each with different economic capabilities was indeed a challenging endeavour. The aim was to reach a resolution intended to be presented at the COP28 in Dubai a week after CAAF/3.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as chairperson of CAAF/3, I led the adoption of new ICAO Global Framework for SAF, lower carbon aviation fuels and other aviation cleaner energies. A collective vision for the clean energy transition, harmonised regulatory foundations, supporting implementation initiatives, and improved access to financing for related initiatives so that no country is left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture, I wish to acknowledge the substantial contribution of honourable Koya who was part of Fiji's delegation to the ICAO CAAF/3. His support and insights was indeed invaluable to our efforts, exemplifying bipartisan cooperation in our shared quest for sustainability in the aviation field.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the adoption of a new ICAO Global Framework for SAF, lower carbon aviation fuels and other aviation cleaner energies, Governments from over 100 States, in collaboration with the industry and civil society have established a target for aviation fuel in 2030 to be 5 percent carbon-intensive than the current fossil fuel.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scale-up of the development and the deployment of SAF, low carbon aviation fuels and other cleaner energies on a global basis, greater clarity, consistency and predictability to all stakeholders will be possible through the ICAO global framework. This presents a significant opportunity for Fiji, particularly concerning ethanol feedstock, given Fiji's conducive environment for sugarcane and cassava production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to highlight that ADB is funding a feasibility study for Fiji Airways and Fiji Sugar Corporation for the production of ethanol from sugarcane and cassava. Sir, ADB being a Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) will be a key institution in developing SAF.

Finance Sources and Institutions that will be key are:

- Public Finance;
- Public Finance (Donors);
- Philanthropic Funding;
- Global International Financial Institutions;
- Other Multilateral Development Banks;
- Institutional Investors; and
- Private Investors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when talking with aviation professionals on SAF, I quipped that I never imagined Fiji Airways would be in dialogue with FSC about its future and likewise FSC with Fiji Airways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is currently a shortage of sustainable aviation fuels. It is necessary to greatly increase the amount of biological and non-biological resources which are the raw materials that are crucial to the SAF production chain.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the transition will need to be rapid, scaling up supply of SAF from 7.9 billion litres in 2025 to potentially 449 billion litres by 2050. This is against the backdrop of the forecasted demand for jet-fuel at 1.9 trillion litres by 2050. This rapid deployment calls for huge capital, amounting into trillions and after CAAF/3, Mr. Speaker, Sir, indications are there that financial institutions are prepared to unlock the required capital.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the journey towards sustainability is laden with challenges, yet within these challenges, the opportunities for innovation and progress. Achieving economies of scale to bring down production costs and the high cost of specialised processing required for biofuels remains a primary challenge. Access to the fuel itself poses a significant obstacle in the advancement of SAF. Despite this, the aviation sector expects SAF to become more financially viable as demand for SAF grows and technology advances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji it will mean the cultivation of cane and cassava that is unprecedented. Factor in the processing and we are looking at an industry that will transform our economy in significant ways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the corridors of this august Parliament where decisions shape destinies, we the policymakers wield a profound influence in steering the course of SAF adoption. It is imperative that we foster policies that nurture SAF deployment, policies that transcend borders and industries, policies that embrace technological neutrality and feedstock scepticism. Let us be the architects of change, crafting a path to progress guided by the principles of sustainability and equity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we navigate the complexities of SAF production and distribution, it is imperative to leverage the insights garnered from the outcomes of CAAF/3. The Conference adopted a global framework for cleaner energy in aviation, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and efforts to combat climate change. It underscores the aviation sector's commitment to improving fuel efficiency and reducing carbon emissions, with aspirations for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens, the journey towards sustainability has its challenges, yet it is also one filled with promise and possibility. The SAF is no longer just an idea from clever people in laboratory coats, it is a must for

low carbon travel. The industry players, passengers, farmers and the planet will all benefit from the technology. Let us make the aviation industry cleaner and greener, and let us start now.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me just say first of, I want to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for the invitation that took across both of us to Dubai for this particular ICAO Conference. I think it is quite important to realise that this is not about politics, this was about Fiji. It was about the betterment of Fiji, and I think it is important that we do realise that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the biggest fuel emission problems actually comes from commercial aviation, and Sustainable Aviation Fuel is something that should form a large component of the way forward with respect to how aviation fuels are dealt with. As pointed out by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, it is extremely important that we do something about it because it is a massive opportunity for Fiji.

At the Conference itself, we saw that the whole of Africa was being given assistance by Europe, yet the Pacific was left behind, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji were the only representatives from the Pacific. So, this requires a conversation with Australia and New Zealand when we actually do this, this requires a conversation with our development partners as to how we can do it, because this falls in line with what we all speak about in terms of diversification. It could revolutionise our sugar industry. It is very important that we realise that.

As a matter of fact, this particular Sustainable Aviation Fuel's issue touches on three Ministries; the Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Sugar. It is very important that something is done now. I hope honourable Minister of Finance will also start looking at some provisions that can be made, maybe incentivise things from now about the development of these fuels, because it can mean a whole lot of income for Fiji.

Fiji Airways is partially using these fuels, I understand also, they have flights that have gone across on totally Sustainable Aviation Fuels right across from the US into the Middle East. It is something that is moving forward at a very fast rate. We all are very hot-headed about the sugar industry from both sides of Parliament, but this is something that can actually turn the sugar industry around. It is something that needs to be desperately quickly looked at with respect to how we can actually develop this.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also found at the Conference that there is a pushback from the larger fuel producing nations. If you look at Saudi Arabia and other fuel producing nations, there is still a pushback from them. They are not saying, "no", but they are still looking at it in terms of how much can we do, how much should we do, and of course, it is only natural because they produce fuels. However, it is an opportunity that we may be able to capitalise on. As I said earlier on, the Pacific was only represented by Australia and New Zealand, and my conversations with them were that they would be happy to chat with us to see what can be done and get an infrastructure drawn up to see how we can benefit in terms of Fiji, and we are talking about Qantas and everyone else that might be involved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, it would not only be just for us, it is also for export, and if I could just quickly let you know, the price of Sustainable Aviation Fuel is quite high still. So you get a good return if you are actually producing these things, because it is quite high, it is still looked at or frowned upon. I am happy to hear that ADB is actually involved in getting this done and I really hope that the honourable Minister of Finance will start looking at maybe how we can actually incentivise this particular area. I am not sure if he can do it in this budget or the next budget, but at least start thinking about how we can actually do it. It is a very important aspect of our diversification that we actually talk about, and it helps three different Ministries. It is not just about sugarcane

producing ethanol, it is about cassava and many other different foods that it actually produces. We can do it. It is not something that cannot be done, we can do it. Once again, Sir, that is all I really have to say. I want to thank the honourable Viliame Gavoka for allowing us the opportunity to join him on the ICAO Conference.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, if I am to allow the learned Attorney-General to take the floor then he will go for his 20 minutes, but we need to take a break at 10.30 a.m. So, we will now take a break for tea and before we rise on this occasion, I invite the students and members of the public as well to join the honourable Members for tea in the Big Committee Room and hopefully enjoy the tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.21 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.00 a.m.

Ministry of Justice

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and fellow Members of this august Parliament, members of the public in Parliament and those joining us virtually through livestream media; good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to emphasise the unwavering commitment of the Coalition Government to improve the lives of our citizens and lead our nation towards effective governance. Our administration is founded on the principles of good governance, accountability and transparency, which serves as the cornerstone of democracy. This commitment is reflected in our efforts to uphold the rule of law and ensure justice for our people.

The Ministry of Justice is actively engaged in refining its business strategy and enhancing customer experiences through systematic feedback collection and deployment of quality management tools. We aim to ensure that our services are not only efficient but also customer centric.

The Ministry is also developing a Strategic Development Plan for the next five years which will be aligned to the National Development Plan, focusing on leadership excellence, digital transformation, customer empowerment and fostering an enabling environment for engagement. We aim to bolster our capacity to address complex challenges and enhance stakeholders' collaboration.

The Ministry acknowledges the importance of preserving and accessing vital records and is in the initial stages of exploring ways to digitise its processes. The digitisation of our systems and processes will improve the accessibility and efficiency in processing requests to better service our customers.

We have obtained a Cabinet approval to carry out digitisation works in consultation with the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Communications, as well as other relevant stakeholders on the digitisation of our legal Registries, prioritising the Registrar of Titles Office.

We are also shortening our processing times which, in the past, have taken up to three months. We have managed to significantly reduce our processing time to one month and reduce our response time to inquiries from one day to half-a-day.

In our Birth, Deaths and Marriages Registry, we are looking at offering free birth certificates for registration made within a month of a child's birth to incentivise early registration.

We are also increasing accessibility to Justice of Peace (JP) services in our community. Currently, we have 596 JPs in total with 278 in the Central and Eastern Division, 215 in the Western Division and 68 in the Northern division. We expect to increase these numbers, given the number of applications we have received.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have gone through our awareness and talanoa session and reached out to members of the communities as the need for those former civil servants or those in the community to apply for JP so that they speed up the services. One good example is that in the island of Koro, there is only one JP, in the island of Gau, there is only one and in Levuka there are few. There is a misconception that there is a limited number of JPs in one locality. Through our talanoa sessions and awareness, we hope to probably double the number of JPs this year, so that we can reach out to our citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to briefly highlights some of the significant work of the Government agencies under my responsibility.

In October last year, the Fiji Corrections Service concluded its Job Evaluation Exercise (JEE) for all positions. This is a significant achievement, as the last evaluation was done in 2006. The implementation of the JEE Report is in line with Government Staff Retention Policy that aims to align staff remuneration to the market rate. We hope to implement this during the financial year.

In addition, the Fiji Corrections Service successfully held this year's Yellow Ribbon Walk for the first time in Northern Division (Labasa) since its inception back in 2008. This is a milestone achievement, recording more than 3,500 participants, reflecting the community support for the rehabilitation initiative.

The event raised awareness of the importance of rehabilitation through various activities and provided practical pathways for the reintegrating of our inmates into society with dignity and purpose. This event was held alongside Macuata Yellow Ribbon Symposium which established the Care Network Committee made up of the 12 heads of the *Tikina* representatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moreover, the Fiji Corrections Service recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Fiji National University to train and develop the Fiji Corrections Service staff to ensure their competency and enhance their productivity, as well as upskilling inmates with tools and opportunities to become more productive members of society when they are released. This is a significant milestone, as the two parties formalise their partnership.

The Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is currently developing its five-year Strategic Plan which they plan to launch in early July. Unfortunately, this Office has not had any strategic plan for the past decade. This new initiative to formulate a strategic and intentional plan indicates the Office of the DPP will become more efficient each year as it focusses on delivering its constitutionally mandated role.

The Office of the DPP is also focussed on cybercrime training due to the increase in cybercrime. The Office of the DPP will host a conference which will be held on 13th June to 14th of June, which is co-funded by the Council of Europe and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), to familiarise prosecutors with cybercrime and digital evidence in the region.

The Office of the DPP also saw a significant increase in hard drug cases. Early this year, relevant authorities seized 4.1 tonnes of methamphetamine in Nadi that resulted in the arrest of 10 individuals.

In March alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 33 people were charged with serious offences, including murder, aggravated robbery and attempted drug exportation.

An interim board has been appointed to oversee the Accident Compensation Commission of Fiji (ACCF). The Coalition Government had agreed to review the function of ACCF. A new Board has been appointed to ensure that the ACCF statutory functions continue, while the review of its future takes place. The Board is currently chaired by the Permanent Secretary for Employment and the Acting Chairman is the Acting CEO of LTA.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Attorney-General provides critical advisory role to the Government in ensuring policies and processes are legally compliant. To enable this, we have managed to secure funding for 24 positions which have subsequently been filled. Currently, for the next budget, we have made a submission to the Ministry of Finance for the recruitment of four more

lawyers in the Attorney-General's Chambers.

The Law Reform Commission which was previously located within the Office of the Attorney-General, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has now moved to its new designated Office beside Civic Towers. Based on its budgetary allocation, the Commission has also recruited legal officers and administrative staff to support its functions.

The Ministry of Justice is also responsible for overseeing the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), as articulated yesterday.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I take this moment to congratulate the new National Flying Fijians Head Coach of Fiji, Mr. Mick. Let me just, in my role as the Minister responsible for the Fiji Rugby Union (FRU), briefly highlight some of the work that has been done in terms of governance.

As we speak, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have completed the work in terms of how financial management should be administered in the FRU. Currently, there is a draft constitution in circulation between some of the lawyers to be issued to all the unions. This was lacking all these years and we hope that in the next two months, the Interim Committee has until July to complete its work and then we will hand over to the new administrators of FRU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, speaking on FRU, may I echo my observations in terms of the issue confronting FRU. Fiji and the Fiji Rugby Committee have worked hard in its efforts to advance the professional establishment of the Drua with its current distinguished standing, and I offer my best wishes for the Fijian Drua and Fijiana Drua on their game on Friday.

I strongly emphasise the importance on facilitating the progression of local talents within the professional framework. In line with recent discussions held with World Rugby, it has become evident that there is a critical need to equip our local coaches with enhanced professional capabilities, especially in lead coaching environment.

Hence, I kindly endorse the incorporation of our local coaches into the professional structure of Drua. This decision will not only elevate and boost the interest levels amongst our local coaches, but also foster the belief that they possess and the potential to coach high level professional teams in future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I now briefly summarise a few key legislative initiatives that the Office of the Attorney-General is working on with relevant Government Ministries and Departments in order to bring this august Parliament proposed amendments and Bills:

On the Anti-Doping Bill, Cabinet has approved the Anti-Doping Bill policy which requests the establishment of the anti-doping organisation to promote clean sports and ensure compliance with international anti-doping standards.

To put this policy into action, the National Anti-Doping Bill has been drafted to provide a regulatory framework and programmes on Fiji's compliance with international standards for doping in sports. We anticipate that this Bill will be tabled in Parliament by the third quarter of this year.

On the Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expression Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, traditional knowledge and cultural expressions are the foundation of intellectual property. Developing countries like Fiji must develop policies to protect intellectual property rights and preserve their cultural heritage. They can turn into commercially viable products and services for tangible and intangible wealth.

However, the current system of accessing genetic resources and using traditional knowledge and cultural expressions has been repeatedly abused, exploiting the limited resources of indigenous societies. A legislative framework is needed to protect them. The Ministry of iTaukei and the Office of the Attorney-General will collaborate on consultations regarding the protection of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.

Consultations on the draft Bill with relevant stakeholders is ongoing. It is part of the 2024 legislative programme and will be given priority for full realisation.

On the Meteorological and Hydrological Services Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Meteorological and Hydrological Services currently lack a guiding law that oversees their functions. As Fiji has experienced tropical weather due to climate change, a proper legal framework is necessary to protect lives and property.

The Fiji Meteorological Services has been working on a draft Bill with our Office, which we anticipate will be tabled in Parliament by the third quarter of this year.

On the Personal Insolvency Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this new Bill aims to replace the Bankruptcy Act 1944. The Bill offers an alternative bankruptcy, establishes a clear creditor and debtor rights and aligns with international best practices.

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is collaborating all these projects by providing drafters who are familiar with insolvency systems worldwide. Cabinet approval is expected before holding public consultations in June with tabling in Parliament planned before the end of this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to give my congratulations to both the Ovalau Team and Ra Team that will be playing for the Vanua Quarterfinal at Nasau Park on Saturday, as well as the Under 20 of Ovalau and Taveuni. May the best team wins. *Vinaka vakalevu.*

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the Leader of Opposition or his designate, I would like to mention a few issues that you raised since you have also reported in Parliament on FRU decisions, policies, et cetera. Before I do so, I would like to acknowledge members of the public sitting in the gallery, especially Mr. Rasova and Mr. Rajesh Singh, the two stalwarts of rugby. They are very crazy rugby enthusiasts. The Kadavu President is sitting behind them.

Why I am saying this, honourable Attorney General, it is so nice to hear you relay the current position of the FRU because what we had encountered on our way to Dubai to attend the COP 28 meeting was the Fiji Team. They slept on the corridors of the airport. There was no money. They did not have the warm up and warm down clothing that was required and then I was asked to deliver the jerseys to them before they played and that is what they wore during their warm up, right through the game and they lost. As soon as they lost, I stood up and walked out because I am a bad loser. I always want to win.

Honourable Attorney General, it will be grateful if you take note of that because that was what the Coach Ben Gollings, Vili Satala and the rest of the team encountered whilst in Dubai. It is a sad occasion, being highly placed in the Sevens ranking, yet they had to sleep on the veranda of the airport in Sydney because when the last aircraft comes in, soon after that, they close down. Everyone has to go outside, including the Fiji Team that was inside. Yet when we arrived in Dubai, they were glorified again. "Oh no! These people have just woken up from the veranda of the airport outside." So, again, it places the team in a very awkward situation and whilst the Team is written all over the place as the best, yet this is what they are encountering and that affects their morale. We know as rugby players, once your morale is affected, 100 percent performance is not there.

I will offer the floor now to the honourable Leader of Opposition or his designate, to make their response.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Attorney General. From the outset, this side of Parliament in hearing the honourable Attorney General's response this morning, it is too broad - covering many various Ministries that come under him. It shows that the honourable Attorney General has been sleeping on the job for too long.

(Laughter)

If that Ministerial Statements would have been divided into two parts, probably in the last sitting and this week's sitting, it would have come in various simple topics. But he has covered a lot, it shows that he has not been doing his work and also his core responsibility is to Parliament and that is the Bills.

The honourable Attorney General's response this morning is full of hollow promises. He has talked about good governance, transparency and efficiency but what the public has seen so far is the exact opposite.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON.M.D. BULITAVU.- ...especially in terms of the Attorney-General's performance, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

If you talk about transparency, people are saying in the social media that the honourable Attorney-General is under investigation. People are saying whether the honourable Attorney-General should step aside if he needs to preach about transparency. He needs to start with the Principal Legal Advisor of Government, if we are to talk about good governance.

Sir, there is also a view from the public that given the honourable Attorney-General holds a very important office, that there is an element of interference. I am not saying that the honourable Attorney-General is interfering with their own cases but, again, due to transparency, there needs to be checks and balances and this is what the people are saying.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- The honourable Attorney-General also needs to think nationally. He is too focussed on Lomaiviti all its islands.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Bulitavu, remember Lomaiviti has nightclubs.

(Laughter)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- In terms of consultation in the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with other Bills, I hope that the honourable Attorney-General moves around Fiji in the 14 Provinces and Rotuma to do his consultation before he brings the Bills into Parliament.

There has also been a complaint from the public in terms of the Accident Compensation Commission Fiji (ACCF). I think there was no Board for the last few months and there is a slow in

payout. So, I hope the honourable Attorney-General puts a Board in place so that people are effectively and efficiently served from what he has alluded to this morning.

I welcome the Job Evaluation Exercise for the Ministry of Justice and also the Fiji Corrections Service which is quite outstanding. They have been bringing up their issues to the Opposition as well and even the Committee when they moved around to the Correctional Centres in the last few months. I hope that it comes in the next financial year, honourable Attorney-General. You have to convince the honourable Minister of Finance, given its very important.

Not only that we support the Yellow Ribbon project and the road to acceptance, but the important thing too is to see that we retain our Correction Officers that we are losing to new Zealand and Australia given the staff turnover that we have.

Mr Speaker, Sir, in regards to FRU, we had plenty issues when the interim committee came in, you were very vocal at that time honourable Attorney-General. But now, people are complaining about this selection of the new Flying Fijians Coach. The very people who had supported you when you brought in this interim committee are not happy with the selection. I do not know what is really wrong, whether we are not complying to IRB standards, these are some of the things that you look into.

For the Fijian Drua initiative, that was started by the FijiFirst Government and thank you for continuing it. But for your core functions, I hope the Bills that you have outlined this morning will come under Standing Orders 83 and 84.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- You have first reading, second reading and third reading, and then go into Committee of the whole. That is something that needs to be seen and you have not done that. Even in the last sitting, you have been bringing in Bills that are under Standing Order 51.

Mr. Speaker, will be very much aware that he had presented a Bill back in 2005 and 2006 then in the previous Parliament where it came through Standing Orders 83 and 84 - First Reading, Second Reading, committed into Standing Committee and come back into Clause by Clause before we go into Third Reading.

I hope that you bring those Bills under those right procedures, and we look forward for Bills to come in a timely manner and also they do not come in the shortcut manner. I hope that Government has taken what the Opposition have said this morning and to be more transparent, more efficient and practice good governance.

State of Immigration Services

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Ministers, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, my colleague honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers and Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; first of all, before I speak on the topic for which my Ministerial Statement is based today, I would like to take a short moment to share with Parliament an event that is happening right now at the RSL Club, where the honourable Prime Minister is joining the members of the RFMF's current and ex-serving members, particularly those who served with the first Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment as part of Bat19 on 18th April, 1996.

Today, they are remembering an event which is widely referred to as Operation Grapes of Wrath of the wrath of God. During this incident, the headquarters of the Fiji Battalion in United

Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was bombarded. I was the Site Commander or the Tactical Commander of that camp, and commanding us was Colonel Waqanivalagi, who I believe is there today. Our Contingent Commander was Colonel Raivoce. I was the Battalion Adjutant and the OC of the battalion headquarters company and Tactical Commander of the camp in Qana.

During that incident or shelling by the IDF, it killed approximately 200 men, women and children that were under our care. In it, six Fijian soldiers were seriously injured. This is very much an unknown event, and today these soldiers are here to remember this event. It reminds us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the cost of war in the world today and the price of peace. It is something that we should always strive for. Every morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you recite a prayer for all on our behalf, that is, you pray for peace in Fiji and the world. Today is the day we remember the sacrifice of those who gave their lives to be able to give us all a favourable condition to live in the world today. I wish them well and a blessed day of remembrance to all our ex-servicemen who are there today, particularly, the members of the Bat19 of 1FIR UNIFIL.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to inform Parliament of measures recently taken by our Ministry to address the current challenges faced by us, first on the issues of passport to Fijian citizens, and second, on the delays in processing work permits. We have taken note of the significant public and media criticism for our performance in these two areas. It is appropriate that I inform Parliament of the current situation and the actions that we are taking.

On the matter of passport issues, for a good part of 2023 and for all of 2024, Fiji has faced an unprecedented movement of its people to jobs abroad, some of its permanent migration and some of it for temporary work. Australia and New Zealand, in particular have opened their borders in a way we have never previously seen in order to obtain the workforce that they need. Our people have responded in their thousands to the work opportunities created. There is also increased demand for leisure and other travels by Fiji citizens, all of which requires them to obtain or renew passports. We have tried to anticipate increased demand for Department of Immigration services since last year. The Department had outgrown its previous offices and undertook a planned move to new offices in Suva last month. This, of course, disrupted our services to passport applications which has compounded the already challenging situation.

Mr. Speaker, for the information of Parliament, the volume of passport applications has increased sharply since 2021 and are now between 4,000 and 6,000 passports per month. The Department is responding to the demand despite the challenges. We face a number of systems problems with printing, computer networks and other exceptional circumstances in the face of this unprecedented demand.

Mr. Speaker, there was some publicity recently when it was reported that passport applicants were queueing up for service as early as 4 a.m. daily. We have responded by opening up our offices as early as 6 a.m. to accommodate them and on some days beginning the registration process as early as 7 a.m. We are planning to open also on Saturday mornings. We have suffered challenges with a smaller number of passports which are applied for through our overseas missions, some systems issues are causing delays for about 250 of these applications and we are moving now to address these.

It is important to note that despite the difficulties we face, we are delivering passports to most applicants within five to seven working days, urgent passport applications are processed within two to three working days. By any standard around the world, this is quick processing. We have identified the problems we are facing and the resources we need. We have had the support of both, the Ministry of Finance which has given us more money for staff and overseas donors helping us with process improvements. So overall, Mr. Speaker, we should see a general improvement in services in the next few months.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I now turn to work permit applications. The outflow of our people has created an unprecedented demand for expatriate labour at all levels. This ranges from tertiary educated professionals, and managerial employees to trades people, to construction workers and all categories in between. We are receiving work permit applications at the rate of 500 to 800 per month.

I will shortly be issuing a policy direction pursuant to 44(4) of the Immigration Act 2003 to take immediate steps to address the current backlog on the issues of work permits. This message, Mr. Speaker, I intended to take effect on 1st May, 2024 although some are already in place. I recognise the current backlog of two to four months in the processing of work permit applications, sometimes longer, is threatening economic growth and investor confidence. This has been highlighted by both the business community and a number of authoritative official sources as Fiji's most critical short term economic. Our policy actions takes time to work through the system. If decisions are not taken now, it will be too late to change Fiji's 2024 economic growth trajectory.

The loss of skills in all areas slows economic activity, it also delays the capital expenditure. Construction is critical to economic growth and to generating economic activity from completed projects such as hotels, retail centres and private facilities. At a higher functional level without accountants, engineers, IT and other professionals, essential analytical work is stalled and adds to the lead time to establishing the feasibility and design of major public and private sector projects.

However, even at lower level of skills, the construction industry being the best example, employment of expatriates is critical. This is one of the challenges the Government is facing in ensuring efficient capital investment in its own capital expenditure programme under the national budget with the resulting losses to public welfare. Fiji employers are competing with other destinations for expatriate employees. They complain that after incurring the time and cost of recruitment and documenting employment contracts, they lose their nominated employees to other countries because of the wait for their Fiji permits. They cannot see things improving so they prefer to sell their future investment projects or even scale down their current activities until things improve. So, we have taken note of these issues, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to recognise that the business and investment community must see that action is being taken now.

Medium term actions we are taking, the urgent need for skills will continue for some years Mr. Speaker, Sir, so long term measures are needed to ensure things do not get worse than they are. Work is being done with the Growth Reset Sub-Committee of Immigration Investment to simplify permit forms and requirements of future applications. This will mean simpler form filling and shorter processing likely to be implemented by the end of June.

The 2024-2025 Budget will fund more processing staff at the Department of Immigration and the Government of Australia is supporting the Department with training and document management system. However, these measures will not necessarily address the current backlog, there are approximately 1,000 applications for work permits in the system requiring processing and this must be moved out now.

Our immediate measures to clear the current backlog: Delegated powers, the first step we have taken as a Department is to ensure that the Director of Immigration holds delegated powers from the Permanent Secretary of Home Affairs to deal with work and investor permits. This should speed up processing as it eliminates one additional level of authority in the Immigration system and avoid duplication of effort.

Eliminating delays in key processing, we have also taken steps to better manage payment processes in the Department. Previously, it took some time for application sheet payment to be processed which demanded Immigration Department officers from beginning work on the relevant

application. A new process is being followed now where processing of the application begins immediately and does not await the issue of revenue receipt. Of course, all payments must be processed and verified before any work permit is issued but the payment process is now running in parallel with the application process, not one after the other.

The expedition for work permit applications promoted by qualified employers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of medium-term measures referred to in the paragraph above, the Director of Immigration will compile and issue a qualified employer list. The qualified employer list will comprise employers who in the reasonable opinion of the Director have a good track record as employers are capable of supporting compliance with work permit conditions and whose employees have not breached permit conditions or laws relating to immigration.

There are one or two other criteria, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but these are the main ones. Any employer may apply by letter to the Director to be listed as qualified employer. The qualified employer list will be regularly reviewed and updated by the Director. This will take a little time for some employers, and we ask for their patience while we bet down the new system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want us to briefly talk about how qualified employer applications are to be made and processed. The precise criteria for an application promoted by a qualified employer must be left flexible in the discretion of the Director to ensure that the Director is free to act in the most facilitative way. However, we intend in the case of qualified employer application to have a streamlined process that does not require proof of local advertising or evaluation of local candidates. Provided there is a properly completed application form, an employment contract and satisfactorily police and health clearances, these applications will receive priority processing.

Other streamlining measures to be announced, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the measures I had mentioned are the first in a series of further streamlining measures we intend to rollout. We are currently reviewing a quicker process for applicants of offshore employers who are required to visit Fiji as part of their overseas employees' requirements. We also intend to look at a streamlined process for employees of the so-called crop agencies, that is, the agencies who are members of the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, once these measures are taken, we will be looking at easing the work permit processes for spouses or permit holders and accredited diplomats and then moving on a faster process for volunteer permits. There is a concentrated plan of action to speed up the processing of work permits, and I wish to assure Parliament, affected employers and of course permit holders themselves, that we are working on this as fast as we can. Immigration is always a sensitive area. We must respect our obligations to Fiji citizens, and we must also take into account national security and other boarder control matters in making immigration decisions. However, we recognise a clear economic reward that is available if we can make our processes more efficient. We are seriously focussed on those outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, before I sit down, I would like to acknowledge some of the sentiments that were echoed in Parliament earlier this morning coming particularly from the honourable Leader of the Opposition about the benefits of economic growth. It is the only thing really that as we as a nation, if we do not have are unable to look after our people.

I, as a person responsible for our national security will do all within my best to ensure that our people are safe particularly under the initiatives that we offer as a Government, but we recognise as well that security is also enabled by making sure that our people have got money in their pockets and have got jobs where they can earn and look after their families. So, it is my job to make sure that my Ministry allows, that Government allows these two very important aspects of our society to work

together and be mindful that we need to continue to look after our country and its security whilst at the same time create opportunities for our people in creating work and generating particularly money and wealth to look after their families.

With those few words, Sir, thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to share with you in Parliament the initiatives that we are taking and I ask for the support of Parliament on this initiative and as rightfully acknowledged, particularly all the time by the other side of Parliament, we need to work together to make things work because the benefits of this can only be for our people. It is not cast in concrete, we will continue to review it to make sure our systems are safe and that our people have the opportunity to look after their own families.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Minister for his statement on the improvements to the immigration service and I wish the Department well in the changes that he has outlined and hopefully it will improve the services with immigration from where it is now and drastically improving for the better.

When we look at immigration service, a big part of it is counter service when we are looking after the visa, permits, I think there are 19 permits that they issue and the passport services - ordinary, official and diplomatic services. One thing with the Department of Immigration is, you need hands, you need people because at the end of the day most of the work that they do, they need to see the persons standing in front of them when they are making decisions or when they are issuing either passports or permits.

But the other big part of immigration work is also enforcement. In addition to them being a conduit to economic growth, I agree with what the honourable Minister said, they have a big role to filter out the unwanted, those that we would not want to come into our country and cause us trouble. In my last travel when I came out from Immigration, I was talking to the Immigration Officer at Nadi Airport and he was only one. There was only one moving back and forth from arrival, if there was a case in arrival or at departure and he was complaining to me, "I am the only one available." He has to go between arrivals and departure to deal with the cases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 500 to 800 work permits per month shows the number of foreigners who are wanting to come into our country to work because work permits are only for non-citizens, those that want to come in. Therein lies this problem of human trafficking. I raise my concern on this business visa where they come on business visa and just go to work and they are allowed to work, and given the enforcement agency also, how do you track it? Who is coming on a business visa and working? Who is responsible for them?

I was surprised when the honourable Minister for Sugar said that he had brought in a few people to come and work for him from Bangladesh in his sugar plantation, but then he said that if they do not find work with him, they can go and work in another farm and I know that is not allowed in Immigration policies. The person that brings them in, you cannot just send them away again and go and work somewhere else because there is a responsibility of those that brought them in. I am not too sure which permit they are coming in, but I think that needs to be checked as well.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Point of Order.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Sorry Minister.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Standing Order 62(1)....

MR. SPEAKER.- You face me Sir, you are saying two all the time, I do not know Standing

Order 2 or....

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Standing Order 62(1).

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. I find nothing wrong with what the honourable Naupoto was saying. He is saying something that is about the Bangladeshi, you made these comments yesterday?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what he said was that he is trying to impute improper motives. I have not broken the law. What I simply said that they are still under my work permit, if they want to be worked by someone else, I can allow them to go, but they are still under my work permit.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- No, you cannot do that.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We can.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- No you cant.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We have not done it yet but we are here with the Immigration Minister, there is shortage of labour. So you expect me that the sugar industry should go down?

MR. SPEAKER.- You may continue, honourable Naupoto.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Thank you, Sir. I was just using it as an example, but what he is saying, you cannot do it as far as immigration is concerned.

MR. SPEAKER.- All you asked was I do not know what law is he working under, that is all. He has not broken the law. You also ask him, what law is he working under by getting the Bangladeshis to go and work in someone's elses' farm when they were brought in under a different thing. Just continue now from where you were, Sir.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Thank you, Sir. I lost my train of thought.

MR. SPEAKER.- See, that is the art of being....

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Yes, Sir, I got it back now.

MR. SPEAKER.- Okay.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I talked about the enforcement role that Immigration has, I hope that you do not compromise it in this push to just get things done, that you lose out on this big role that they have as the filter at our borders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just like to warn, for passports, if you hold it for a while, passports are not being issued but applications are still coming in, and one thing I have found is, once you start again, the supply just goes out very quickly. I hope that you are going to restock as to cater for that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Carbon Trade and Fiji's Emission Reduction Payment Agreement

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and

fellow Fijians who are sitting in the gallery; *ni sa bula vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, Sir...

MR. SPEAKER.- Come again?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Sometimes I do not get what you are saying. It is like a fishhook in the fish mouth.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- I would like to present my Ministerial Statement on Carbon Trade and Fiji's Emission Reduction Payment Agreement (ERPA), which Government signed in January 2021 with the Carbon Fund of the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) that is managed by the World Bank.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that I first explain the arrangements with the FCPF, as there has been a lot of unqualified and baseless assessments and claims that, if left unanswered, could tarnish the enormous work that my Ministry has toiled to get Fiji to where it is today with regards to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Programme (REDD+) Programme, and its long standing work arrangement with the FCPF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FCPF is a global partnership of governments, businesses, civil society and indigenous people focussed on reducing greenhouse gas emissions through sustainable means and predetermined intervening programmes from within the agriculture, forestry and other land-use sectors, widely known as REDD+.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FCPF, operating under the guidance of the United Nations Framework Conventions on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has a funding portfolio of US\$1.3 billion of which:

- US\$400 million was devoted to supporting 47 countries, including Fiji, to complete its REDD+ readiness work. Fiji received US\$5.8 million for its readiness work, which was completed in 2022.
- US\$900 million is to fund Emission Reduction Payment Agreement of 15 countries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, proudly, Fiji is one of the 15 countries that have taken the bold step to actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Collectively, the 15 countries have pledged to reduce emission by 145 million tonnes by 2025, which is equivalent to removing 32 million cars of the road for a year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's contribution to this global pledge is a net emission reduction of 2.5 million tonnes. As a Small Island Developing State, this is something that is worthy of mention, and the gist of Fiji's REDD+ work to date.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's Carbon Trade Agreement with the FCPF-Carbon Fund is basically to pilot the result-based payment arrangement, and the rate of US\$5 per tonne under this Agreement was established well before other carbon markets that are offering a much higher price, which is beginning to stir discussions and unsettle our landowners and forest dwellers. At this juncture, I must acknowledge the World Bank and the FCPF for progressing Fiji's REDD+ work through funding and technical support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the arrival of foreign interest to our shores can also be taken as an indication of Fiji's state of readiness to trade. However, it is important that, first, Fiji must complete and fulfil the terms and conditions of existing Emission Reduction Payment Agreement with the FCPF Carbon Fund, and learn from the valuable lessons to better prepare for future markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's Emission Reduction Programme under Fiji's REDD+ was primarily designed to, firstly, reduce greenhouse gas emission and reduce global warming and, secondly, to provide an innovative and alternative source of sustainable financing to:

- (a) Protect the environment and promote the importance of trees and forests through the natural landscape;
- (b) support the development and meet the welfare needs of the landowners, forest owners and forest dwelling communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the assessments of the net emission cover Viti Levu, Vanua Levu and Taveuni. This means that all interests within the three islands can participate in the national programme. The Ministry has received reports of communities being unhappy of the Government's boldness to commit their land under the Carbon Trade Agreement without their prior consent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not the case. The rights of the landowner remain intact and without question. A forest or land will only be considered under this arrangement through a formal lease issued by the relevant leasing authority.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is always the responsibility of Government to safeguard the people when a new and novel approach that can potentially impact their lives, like carbon trade, appears, and the Ministry will do so by:

- Developing the framework;
- Acquiring a clearer and greater understanding of the dynamics of the carbon market; and
- Establish right platforms for engagement, as it is currently pursuing under the Carbon Trade Agreement with the FCPF-Carbon Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the benefits from the carbon payment must be meaningful and have a longer and lasting impact on the lives and welfare needs of the landowner.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry is working with the honourable Ministry of iTaukei Affairs to reach out to the landowning and forest dwelling communities with the intention of:

- Providing the right information and advice through raising awareness;
- assist in the planning and required preparatory work and provide the necessary training; and most importantly
- support the Village Improvement Scheme which is meaningful and has a longer lasting impact on the welfare needs of the present and future generations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has programmes that supports, synergises and complements the Emission Reduction Programme, for example, the:

- National Tree Planting Programme under the RDF 30 million trees;
- establishment of eco-park and eco-tourism; and
- cottage industry venture.

To conclude, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to advise the general public, especially the landowning communities, that the Ministry's goal through its national programmes are focused on:

- bettering the lives of all, particularly, the marginalised communities with very little options and opportunities; and
- protecting the environment from in-discriminant exploitation of the forest and land resources.

May God Bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I thank you for that statement. Just in terms of clarity, we raised this when we were in the Opposition. You are talking about something that is based on something per dollar and then the cost of carbon. We are talking about air here, free air coming from the forest when it breathes out. Something new has come up again, it is the first time that I have heard it, that it is going to be leased.

Most of these areas are regarded as forestry areas that are not supposed to be leased, they are protected forest. Honourable Bilitavu knows fully well how they say it in our side of the world, *"ivei na i sau ni cagi?"*

Sir, that is the issue here because when you were speaking, it is like you were speaking in a different atmosphere and we are in a separate world and it is hard for me to understand. How can I interpret what you are saying to the people who own the resources?

You mentioned Taveuni is involved and a few islands in Vanua Levu but, Sir, we are simply at a loss here. Would the Government be able to clarify this a bit more so that we better understand what you are telling us. Now, we understand after so many things have been undertaken that the land are going to be leased. Once you lease it, it is gone, you forgo all that. What do we get in return? The free air? Free air is given by God.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Maharaj, you come from our side of the world, I do not know whether you understand the meaning of this? You come from Vanua Levu.

(Laughter)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just because I come from Vanua Levu, I would like to explain what the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry was trying to explain.

The question that you have asked, Mr. Speaker, is all about carbon sequestration. It is a process whereby it is not about how much carbon is emitted but it is about how much carbon is absorbed by a particular acre of forest. So, the amount of carbon sink per acre or hectare will be calculated in tonnes and that tonne will be sold to someone or some company, for example, sitting in Australia or somewhere abroad who are emitting carbon. So, that is what carbon trading is all about.

The reason why I am well-versed with this is, again, the honourable Minister missed this particular point, that this carbon trading is part of the Climate Bill that is now the Climate Change Act that was endorsed by this Parliament back in 2021 after which that Agreement was signed for five years. So, it is all about how much carbon sink is there for a particular land or forest that is going to be leased out under this Agreement.

I also remember there was some confusion when this Bill was introduced and some Members of Parliament thought that we will have to go and fill carbon in a can or something and then trade it.

It does not actually work like that, it is all about how much carbon sink is there.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Who are the MPs?

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- You were part of that particular group, so you would know those MPs.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, as you might be aware that carbon trading is part of the Climate Change Act, there is a huge stock of forest that is available for carbon trading in Fiji. So, having a lot of stock available, that can be deposited for the carbon trading. We were the first country to domesticate the Paris Agreement in the form of Climate Change Act which allowed the landowning units to get involved in carbon trading, but the condition was they need to upgrade the current stock before it can be compensated or used for carbon trading. So, if you have a particular forest, it is not that you just go to iTLTB and lease it out for carbon trading.

There are terms and conditions, such as, you need to encourage reforestation. So, if there is a space available within the forest, you need to actually encourage reforestation. You need to discourage deforestation on the land that you lease out. You cannot have logging going on one side and then allow the land on the other side to be leased out for carbon trading.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, which is very important and is part of the terms and conditions is undisturbed ecosystem. So, it is not that the resource owners will not be able to utilise any resource that is available, but you can only utilise resources that does not have a drastic effect on the ecosystem.

Lastly, the conservation of endangered species, Mr. Speaker. If there is any endangered species that is part of that forest, you need to protect that. Any lease agreement that is given to the landowning unit, you have to follow or go through these terms and conditions before you can lease out your piece of land for carbon trading.

Mr. Speaker, there needs to be a five-year carbon budget for the purpose of planning the whole of economies emission reduction as part of accumulative effort to achieve net zero gas emission by 2015.

As per the Act, Mr. Speaker, carbon budget was supposed to be determined before 31st March, 2023 for the period 1st January, 2026 to 31st December, 2030 which, I believe, at this point in time, the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry is not aware of because we have not receive any carbon budget in this Parliament for one whole year now. And for this to come into effect and that particular agreement to be renewed, this is one of the terms and conditions that has to be passed. The carbon budget has to be passed by Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, we also need to assist the landowners to upgrade the stock of forest that they have so that it meets the criteria to be utilised for carbon trading. Carbon trading is a huge industry whereby landowning units in Fiji can really benefit from, but the Ministry needs to do much more to allow our resource owners to benefit from this programme.

Mr. Speaker, lastly, we need to assist landowning units financially because they do not have such capital which is needed to cater for the development of the forest in order to engage in carbon trading. So, we expect the Government to bring a separate budget to allow and help landowning Units to upgrade their forest so that they can lease out their forest for carbon trading, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Member. It is very interesting, and I hope the Government will do more in trying to explain that because we had you live when you were delivering your Statement. That is why I have raised that point, honourable Minister, and to the Government, the Deputy Prime Ministers and the honourable Attorney-General.

We have a sad precedent case where millions of dollars were paid to the landowners in Monasavu after a long time. They fought their case in foregoing the area that was taken under the water catchment. It was never leased, nothing was paid, but the landowners cannot touch it. They cannot harvest their forests and all, so millions of dollars have been paid to some trust account. The landowners are still fighting over that money that was paid. That was the court's decision. Here, I only hope that the Government wakes up to that. From what has been said by honourable Maharaj, no budget has been prepared and all that. I do not know about the legislation, is there any legislation?

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- It is yet to commence.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is interesting. *Au qai kerea ga Minisita, na lawa e sega tiko.* Maybe, we need to address that as well. We need to give more time to this topic.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Housing Rehabilitation Assistance – *TC Yasa* (Question No. 30/2024)

HON. J.N. NAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry update Parliament on the Housing Rehabilitation Assistance provided to landowners through the Fiji Pine Trust after the devastation caused by *TC Yasa*?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question regarding the Housing Rehabilitation Assistance provided to the landowners through the Fiji Pine Trust.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, close collaboration between the Government and non-governmental organisations and the communities is crucially important in the effort of rebuilding homes and lives during trying times after a severe natural disaster, like we faced after *TC Yasa*. The outcome of what was achieved during the rehabilitation programme was a result of united effort by Government through the Ministry of Forestry, the Ministry of Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management and NGOs where each party had respective critical roles to play in their rebuilding of lives and livelihoods of the affected communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry and key stakeholders in the Forestry Sector undertook the lead role in housing rehabilitation in the Northern Division, collaborating with the Fiji Pine Group of Companies in assisting pine landowners in Cakaudrove, Bua and Macuata Provinces to rebuild their homes. With the support of the Fiji Pine Limited and Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL), the forestry stakeholders were able to repurpose timber from trees felled during the recent series of cyclones and have them ready to rehabilitate the homes that were damaged by the cyclone.

The collective effort from the forestry stakeholders have now seen about 17 houses rebuilt, ripped and sawn for the village of Cogea from trees given by FHCL through the Ministry of Rural Development, who was the leading agency in that work.

The Government had targeted to rebuild 70 houses in Cogea and Nabavatu but the progress in achieving these numbers was stalled due to the proposal of the previous Government to rebuild both homes in concrete material suitable to withstand Category 5 cyclones.

The Ministry of Forestry have since had a home built at our Training Centre in Nasinu certified by MOIT last week to withstand Category 5 cyclones. This is the model that we use in the Northern and Maritime communities' rehabilitation work given that we have the resources readily available to carry out this work at limited cost to affected communities and doing so empower and upskill these communities to become self-reliable and sustainable during this time.

Specifically, Fiji Pine Limited and Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited supply both pines and mahogany, timber, and associated housing materials while the Ministry of Forestry provides portable sawmills and carpenters. In addition to providing its staff to operate the sawmill, the Ministry also trains the communities to assist and on occasion to actually mill timber themselves.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Forestry further supported the initiative by training and certifying 28 carpenters and 20 portable sawmill operators. Through this training, the Ministry also supplied framing materials processed through the portable sawmill for at least 250 houses. This assistance provided much needed relief to the villages in these three provinces of Vanua Levu following *TC Yasa*.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as mentioned before, lesson learnt during the past, the Ministry has received requests and constructed a Category 5 model house which has been inspected by the Ministry of Infrastructure and has now been certified. The Ministry will be conducting training on this model house and requests are already coming in:

1. Kumi - 20 houses;
2. Nameka - 15 houses; and
3. Gau - 1 house.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government through the Ministry of Forestry, and its consultation with other agencies will continue to provide practical and capable solutions for our maritime communities. There are much bigger plans in our next budget to support provisions of jetty for Muani in Kadavu, Lovu in Gau, Narocake Pine Scheme and Wainiyabia in Lakeba.

This, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will ensure ease of transportation of pine logs and timbers from these pine schemes to others close by. These jetties will allow the barge to access more resource owners and support growing in other parts of these maritime islands apart from the areas where the current jetty exists.

Housing rehabilitation assistance is currently undertaken directly and indirectly through three different agencies. The Ministry of Forestry across Fiji and Fiji Pine Trust for 49 plant schemes including those on maritime islands and Fiji Pine Limited for Fiji Pine lease landowning units with over 126 villages.

The Fiji Pine Group has assisted in re-building 85by purchasing building materials funded through the 70 percent project entitlement and dividend from the Forest Trust levies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the housing rehabilitation in the North is in addition to the housing rehabilitation in the Central, Western and the maritime islands where the Ministry of Forestry has so far have re-purposed timber building over 500 homes. We are continuing to look strategically in strengthening the Ministry's initiative in focusing and driving our economy's economic and development activities in the North and the maritime islands. This work will continue to be driven and focussed in empowering our maritime and Northern communities to be self-sustainable and commercially minded and economically driven in the respective programmes that the Ministry continues to undertake.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I offer the floor to Members of Parliament who would like to raise supplementary questions, you mentioned something that caught my ears and that is the Wainiyabia Jetty. I remember vividly in this Parliament during budget session, we raised that issue to the Government of the day then and they could not figure out where Wainiyabia was even though it was in their proposal. So, when we raised questions, the former Prime Minister shot out and said, "do not worry, we will do it". I said, "okay, do not worry" to honourable Semesa Karavaki who raised the question. This Wainiyabia is in Lakeba, it is next to the late *Turaga na Tui Nayau's* cattle farm. It is quite some distance to the deep waters and they are still waiting. It is over how many years now. You have mentioned that in your reply to the question raised and I hope you understand that issue concerning that particular proposal to build a wharf in Wainiyabia.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Fisheries in his statement highlighted about the upcoming trainings. My question to the honourable Minister for Fisheries is, what was the selection criteria for the households to be selected for the trainings and when it will commence?

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a community training, it depends on the devastation of the place which was affected by hurricanes. If we have it in Natokalau Village, we will teach them on how to operate and assist the Ministry in doing their own logging, et cetera. But for forestry training, we have our training centre in Nasinu, they can apply for training, and we can assist them with training.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, I was in Vanua Levu during *Tropical Cyclone Yasa* because of rehabilitation work and the pressure to get it done for these houses. A lot of those timbers were not treated. I think some years later, people started to complain about the condition of the houses because of untreated timber. They have been using their own pine because that was the advice given by the Ministry. Will that be part of this work again to go back and fix these houses, they are really going down now.

HON. K.V. RAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were not aware of that from past years but we are now working on that and trying to get all timbers treated. We cannot get it to Viti Levu, we will take our services down to the rural and maritime areas and do our servicing in those villages.

MR. SPEAKER.- I remember quite vividly as well, the former government, for fallen trees, they passed a very quick authority to be given to the Ministry of Forestry to cut and start providing fallen trees to enable the people affected by the cyclones to build their houses up in the Dawasamu area. So now, it is the fallen trees during the hurricane and cyclones. We do not have any fallen trees right now because we are still waiting for what may come. I leave that to you, Sir, the logistics of moving your trough to enable to treat the timbers because by then if there is a cyclone the roads will be blocked, et cetera. How quick a response time can that be undertaken? I do not know want you to reply to that, I just want you to consider that.

National Rugby League Premiership Competition
(Question No. 31/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports update Parliament on Fiji's bid to secure a licence to enter the National Rugby League (NRL) Premiership Competition for men and women rugby league teams in the 18th Extension Franchise?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I give my response, allow me to acknowledge the presence of the Bid Director, Bev Broughton and Mr. Rajesh Singh of Broughton's & Associates are partners of official Bid company in the public gallery today. For the interest of Parliament, His Excellency the President of Fiji is the current patron of the Fiji National Rugby League while the honourable Prime Minister is a former patron and now a life member.

In reference to the question raised by the honourable Member, the following updates have been received - a letter of support from the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports on behalf of the Government of Fiji was vetted by the Office of the Solicitor-General and sent to the Chairman of the Australian Rugby League Commission, Mr. Peter V'Landys on 23rd February, 2024, expressing our support for the bid.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, confirmation from the Australian Rugby League Commission for a licence is yet to be received and the timeline to have this approved may vary and could even take a while. However, in the meantime, as we wait for a confirmation, Rugby League Bid Fiji Pte Limited, our bid company is currently strengthening media coverage of the Fiji bid on the extensive wide world of sports programme that reaches out to over four million sporting fans every month on Channel 9 News in Australia. They have ensured media coverage with key online commentators, one of which has been reported by a media commentator with the following of 168,000 sports fans.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Rugby League Bid Fiji Pte Limited is also developing bid programmes and constructive liaison with the Fiji National Rugby League regarding complementary pathway programmes to ensure no duplication. Rugby League Bid Fiji Pte limited is also working on the development of the media collateral in readiness for ongoing media releases to keep the profile of Fiji and the Rugby League Bid Fiji Pte Limited consistently promoted both in Fiji and internationally.

Furthermore, they are working with sponsors including a forthcoming formal Rugby League Bid Fiji Pte Limited, the launch date to be decided, agreed and preparation for the launch of official website and social media. The above are activities that will help support Fiji's bid for a licence in the National Rugby League Franchise. The bid has a defined outcome, but whatever the timeline to when NRL licence may be, the Fiji NRL bid has great ongoing value with a range of innovative programmes that continue to strengthen Rugby League and community outcomes for Fiji.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- First of all, we are competing with the PNG Kumuls from what I understand as the 18th Extension and I also understand that they have received some Australian Government backing with respect to this, they have a war chest of about \$600 million with respect to their bid. Are we able to even match them, because we all want to see our Fijian team part of NRL. Will we be able to compete with them because I know PNG has a lot of money to do that and they have some Australian Government backing with respect to that?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the answer to the question is, yes, we are competing with PNG in our bid for a place in the NRL franchise. On the financial side, at the moment we have

Rugby League Fiji, the company that has been formed which is currently looking at that bid. Financial outcomes for that we do not have any details of it, so at the moment our priority is to secure the bid.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Have you approached the Australian Government for assistance on this?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- As I have mentioned Mr. Speaker, Sir, the company is also looking at sponsorship. There are a lot of interested partners that are willing to come on board to be part of the move for Fiji to be in the NRL franchise.

MR. SPEAKER.- What is the situation with the Silktails? Are they part of that company?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, no. Kaiviti Silktails is competing in the Under 20s category, so it is not part of the company here or the bid.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my apologies honourable Minister, you already have the Silktails there and they are already playing in that competition. Why cannot we just move them to another level? While they are already there with the NRL, just play our Silktails? That is my question in trying to understand the process that you are going to take, instead of going through another bid as we are already in that arena.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker Sir, as I have mentioned before, Silktails is competing in the Under 20s category and it is at a lower level while the Fiji National Rugby League and the plan for joining the franchise, who are looking at the premium level of rugby league in Australia.

MR. SPEAKER.- It will be a conduit to supply the rugby league.

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Silktails to the rugby league; that is the question being raised?

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Yes, Silktails can be used as a pathway for our youths to go through the same structure. They are provided the same pathway.

MR. SPEAKER.- There being no supplementary questions, I intend to adjourn Parliament now for lunch and we will resume at 2.30 p.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 12:34 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.38 p.m.

FSC – Pay Increase for Staff
(Question No. 32/2024)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament as to where the funding for the 5 percent pay increase for the Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) staff that was recently announced will be sourced from?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to first of all ask the honourable Member whether he is opposing this increment or his for the increment.

(Laughter)

I will ask all the honourable Members on the other side of the Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes I would like to actually say something more about the sugar industry, I have been given a good opportunity today.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes, I will answer. Please bear with me.

I have got 19.23 minutes left. So, first of all I would like to thank the honourable Prime Minister who is here to listen to my answers because I will be delivering a few important messages and I am here to do a job. Now, honourable Keta Lal please....

HON. K.K. LAL.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I will, it is coming. Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC (this is the whole contention of this question) was and is in a state of debacle and as and is in a state of a debacle, in a shape of disarray whereby....

HON. K.K. LAL.- What are you doing now?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Look, in three years there were no balance sheets given by the last boards because we ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ... and through my effort that I got the last board to present the last three years' of returns. In any business for that matter, and of course our honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Kamikamica will agree, you will need to have a balance sheet every year so that you can better measure yourself; where your company is going and what it is doing? Now, I had to instruct the last board to present three years of accounts and when we saw the balance sheet, it was upside down and why I am saying this is, I have given an instruction now to the new board that within three months of the closing of accounts, they have to present a balance sheet so that we can see how FSC is performing and where it is going.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Just a small thing to say.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Look!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- You have got 17 minutes, don't worry.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- One more issue that honourable Naupoto had raised earlier that I was illegally doing things in the Immigration.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I have not transferred the workers, they are under my permit. You know what happened, in my years in cane farming, as well as when cane crushing starts....

HON. K.K. LAL.- And where is the sugar?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Come on honourable Ketan, shut up!

(Laughter)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Do not say shut up.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Sir, I am sorry.

As soon as the cane crushing starts the farmers see the cane farms burning. They cannot get cane cutters to harvest because there was a seven-day window programme for the farmers to harvest and bring the cane to the mill. I will seek the honourable Pio Tikoduadua's indulgence to see how we can assist the farmers. They will still be under my contract but if I can assist them, that is my whole idea. I am not here to be illegally getting them transferred.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Yes, that is right.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Under this programme, I must thank honourable Deputy Prime Minister Gavoka and honourable Faiyaz Koya for raising the issue about ethanol and aviation fuel. We want to bring aviation fuel to this country, but we need production. With 1.6 million tonnes of cane, we cannot produce ethanol. We need volume. Later on, I would like to ask the honourable Leader of the Opposition, how did our industry fail from a 3.2 million tonnes of cane to 1.6 million tonnes?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- No, I am not blaming you directly, honourable Leader of the Opposition, but I would like to know what went wrong and to bring it back is a task. So, that is something that I will talk about with the honourable Leader of the Opposition.

The honourable Leader of Opposition has alluded to me earlier that we need to bring the cane price up and I will tell you, \$95 is minimum in this season. If everything goes well, it could be \$100 per tonne before the election.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- You not a farmer!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will tell you what the losses this country faced because of the loss of production of cane.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Answer the question!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Come on, honourable Member.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the 3.2 million tonnes of cane that we used to harvest, we used to produce 370,000 tonnes of sugar. That relates to \$700 million in foreign exchange. That was the figure we have. Now, what are we getting today? Sir, 1.6 million tonnes of cane, 140,000 tonnes of sugar and it gives us \$200 million in foreign exchange. We have to reverse it, and this why I want a bipartisan friendship. Do not go to the farmers and give the wrong signals. You just tell them that they have to work together.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, I tell you that the honourable Leader of Opposition is very in co-operation with me. I would love to see other honourable Members on the other side to be part of us. My answer to him is a four-piece answer. I have got another nine minutes.

Now, as we speak, Mr. Speaker, today we have got seven Engineers from India who are here in the country. I have negotiated to bring them here. They are working with no fees, and we only have to pay airfares and accommodation and they are currently...

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Labour Law!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ...they are in FSC Ba Mill, then to Lautoka Mill and then to Labasa Mill to assess the conditions of our aging plants. They will give us a report in the next couple of days to say how the current Mills have to be given a revamp.

They will also give us an advice on how the Rakiraki Mill and what sort of mill that we have to put there. It is coming and I am giving a promise in Parliament that like this time next year, the Mill will start with the foundation.

I will tell you why the production of sugar has gone down in this country. It is because you on the other side have ruined the sugar Mill in Rakiraki. You can put the market there, but your mill is not there.

Now, I will tell you one thing - the good part about me handling the Sugar Industry is this, the former Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhary used to criticise the sugar industry, but he has not even said one thing against me ever since I have been the Minister.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Hear, hear!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Why? I am an efficient Minister. I am a person who is working on the job. I am not sleeping on the job!

(Laughter)

I was in China recently. I will tell you that under your Government, you

imported pesticides and weedicides that could not kill the grass. So now, I am bringing in a set of weedicides and pesticides that will kill not only him but you too.

(Laughter)

Ever since he has asked me this question, he kept on saying, “Please, please do not attack me”. I said, “I will not attack you because you did not ask the question. The question was asked by someone else, but you only have your name there.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question posed by honourable Matasawalevu. The decision to provide this pay rise was made considering the several factors that have affected the Fiji Sugar Corporation employees. The last salary adjustment occurred in January 2019, marking a period of five years without a subsequent financial recognition of the Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA). This termination had led to a noticeable decline in boosting moral, motivation and productivity.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that the high inflation rates over the past five years have severely impacted the ability of FSC employees to make ends meet. The impact of these challenges, coupled with persistent demands for wages reviews has put a significant pressure on FSC and its management.

Furthermore, in the aftermath of COVID-19, we observed a troubling pattern of skill loss as employees migrated to other countries or moved to organisations offering higher wages. In the recent years, FSC has lost a total of 110 employees to either migration or to organisation offering a higher remuneration package.

In response to these pressing issues, the Board of Directors of FSC has approved a 5 percent increment, totalling to \$1.1 million annually effective from 3rd January, 2024. This has benefitted nearly 2,000 FSC employees.

It is important to note that the Executive Management is not part of this salary increase, while the majority of FSC employees have already received their increment and are benefitting from this. There are still 238 employees whose union are currently negotiating with FSC before accepting the increment.

While the unions negotiate as their rights under the Coalition Government, funds have been allocated from the budgeted \$1.1 million for these employees to also benefit from the increment. Now, this is the punch line. “Let me not compare against the salaries of two previous CEOs, Abdul Khan and Graham Clark, who, in today’s dollars, were earning in excess of \$1.1 million per year.”

We are effectively taking the funds from the Executive Management’s remuneration and invest them in our hardworking employees who run the show and keep these esteemed organisation afloat. This is investing in our own people, without lining up the pockets of the privileged few. Implementing the pay increases was not just a choice, but a necessity, resulting from past negligence.

The funding for this pay increase will be sourced from the operational budget of FSC. The decision to provide this pay rise was made after careful consideration of various factors, including the Corporation’s financial standing, operational efficiency and the dedication of its workforce.

Honourable Member, I thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to say everything from my heart.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I thank the honourable Minister for his elaborate answer.

We just recently visited all the Mills in Fiji - Western and returned from Labasa two weeks ago. The honourable Minister has highlighted the production of ethanol as fuel. Unfortunately, in our visit, it did not indicate the capacity to even produce sugar for local consumption, let alone for export. My belief is that the Ministry of Sugar should come under the Ministry of Agriculture. Does he have any comment on that?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is the prerogative of the honourable Prime Minister where the Ministry should lie. You have said a good thing and if I can get half of the Ministry of Agriculture on my side, I will be happy.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a quick question to the honourable Minister; he talked about the good old days of sugar, FSC particularly when we had more than three million tonnes and now it is down to 1.2 million tonnes.

However, there is a correlation between that and the availability of land for leases and, of course, the number of famers that we have lost through that process. Please, can you tell Parliament and every Fijians who are listening today, how many farmers were victims of non-renewable of leases? How does that relate to the production? How much land?

The expiry of land started in 1997, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Please, can you tell Parliament how many farmers did not have their land renewed and what is the impact of that on sugar production? Be honest!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a new question. It was under your 16 years of governance, what did you do?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister. We love listening to you and the way you hold up when you are under pressure. Even by reading your reply, your voice goes up and down, yet no one is questioning you.

(Laughter)

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his answer. I have another question to the honourable Minister. The FSC workers are happy now. My question is, what have you got for the farmers?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a new question but, again, I love to answer it because the farmers are listening. It will be better than last year's price.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my supplementary question is based on the first 12 minutes of uttering by the honourable Minister about the sugarcane industry. What I would like to know is, what is the current global market price for sugar at this point in time? As simple as that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I think this honourable Member is deaf or what. I said \$2,000 per tonne. Go back and listen to my speech.

National Disaster Management Office
(Question No. 33/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management update Parliament on how the Ministry through the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) is working with stakeholders to address the issues of flooding due to drainage issues?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament, first of all, I would like to digress for a little moment and try to clarify some of the issues that honourable Premila Kumar had pointed out yesterday, regarding the revived Rural Housing Programme. She was saying that it was not revived, but just an old programme that was part of what they had done.

Allow me to clarify, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Rural Housing Programme is a testimony and legacy to the previous Government's failure of trying to mainstream development programmes, particularly for our rural population.

There are two schemes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and compared to that, we have five at the moment. It is important to note that the above two schemes also include Social Welfare Scheme, which was causing them issues in the end.

The programme was transferred to the Ministry of Housing in the 2018-2019 Financial Year with approximately \$0.76 million outstanding deposit as a one-third contribution for the 113 applicants. In the last five years, when the programme was with the Ministry of Housing, only 86 applicants were processed, which is equivalent to around 17 applicants per year, compared to about 6,000 applicants that we received.

In the same period, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government never received new applications but ended up withdrawing the applicant's one-third contribution as part of the Rural Housing Reform Programme. A balance of 27 applicants with approximately \$296,056 were recorded at the end of the financial year. As a result, when it was transferred to our Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we had to go through the very arduous task of returning the one-third contribution that they had already received. That is only the clarification of yesterday's answer that I gave.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in answer to the question today from the honourable Member, I thank him for his question. It is an update on the Ministry's work facilitated by the National Disaster Management Office in collaboration with stakeholders to address the issue of flooding caused by drainage problems.

In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Natural Disaster Management Act 1998, the Prevention and Mitigation Committee holds the responsibility of formulating policies directed towards disaster mitigation and prevention.

Recently, the NDMO convened a meeting to comprehensively address the drainage issue through a holistic Government approach. During this session, the Prevention and Mitigation Committee identified feasible short-term measures, emphasising the necessity of an integrated strategy, involving stakeholders such as the Fiji Roads Authority, Municipal Councils and the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the focus was on maintaining clear roadsides and urban and field drainage systems to facilitate the uninterrupted flow of rainfall runoff to designated outlets. Following the recent flooding in the Central Division, a Multidisciplinary Team, led by the Commissioner Central, swiftly mobilised to assess the areas of concern and identified potential gaps in our disaster mitigation efforts. This approach underscores our commitment to ensuring the resilience of our communities in the face of natural disasters.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a list of priority roads and choke points that have led to floods in the last two years, was given to the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways for their contractors to attend to and desilt and clear where required.

The Ministry of Local Government was also requested to advise all Municipal Councils to be on alert and attend to all critical drainage and choke points during heavy rains to prevent build-up of runoff that contributes to flooding.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the same vein, there is a concerted effort by Municipal Councils to promote continuous public and community awareness on cleanliness and rubbish collection to avoid blocked drains from households.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the issue of urban flooding is also a matter of civic pride and responsibility, as rubbish and debris from households are often a major contributory factor to drainage systems being clogged and the onus lies with individual households to collaborate with authorities in maintaining clear drains and outlets. I would dare say it is a challenge also to the Ministry of Education in maybe adding that as part of the curriculum and also just the general public, to ensure that we take this lesson to our homes when we go back.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the NDMO, together with the Divisional Commissioners, form sub-national level taskforces as part of our coordinated responses to address recurring instances of flooding. These taskforces are led by the Divisional Commissioners and comprise of representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, Ministry of Local Government, Water Authority of Fiji and Fiji Roads Authority.

The taskforces, Mr. Speaker, Sir, met to formulate quick fix measures to address flooding in urban and rural localities particularly, and this is related to drainage and debris management. This approach is in alignment with SDG11 of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

In particular, one of the targets is to substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements, adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters and develop and implement in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the long-term plan that the NDMO is currently developing is a National Disaster Risk Reduction Plan with the assistance of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The Plan is now piloted for the Western Division, is almost completed, and it includes mapping of vulnerable areas prone to flooding, and this will guide development planning in urban and rural areas to ensure that development does not exacerbate flood risk.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we continue to implement ongoing interventions to address the issue at hand, I acknowledge the re-establishment of the Drainage Board, as announced by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways earlier this week. This will ensure a proactive and

systematic approach in the clearing of blocked drains and natural waterways that are causing flooding due to accumulation of debris and desilting.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to emphasise to our citizens the importance of proper waste management. I do concur and support the previous statement made by the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways in this august Parliament on Monday, that it is crucial for each community, household and individual to take responsibility in the appropriate disposal of their rubbish. Failure to do so will not only lead to blocked drains, which is now visible in almost all drains around us, but also will be exacerbating the risk of flooding, as well as creating breeding grounds for mosquitos in stagnant water.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this all-hands-on- deck approach requires the support and cooperation of all stakeholders, including those in the Opposition, particularly in changing the mindset and behavioural change towards proper waste management, given its important contribution for sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is concerning to note that more lives are lost to vector-borne diseases, such as LTDD, leptospirosis, typhoid, dengue and diarrhoea due to the direct impacts of flooding and heavy rainfall. This underscores the urgent need for collective action and collaboration on improving waste management.

I cannot overstate the significance of citizens' adherence to proper waste disposal practices. I urge honourable Members of this august Parliament and fellow citizens, let us unite in our efforts to promote responsible waste management and mitigate the associated risks to public health and safety.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would urge the honourable Minister perhaps just to pick up and continue with the work on rural development because regardless of whether it is in the Ministry of Housing or whether it is in the Ministry of Rural Development this is about the basic needs for our rural people. A lot has been done particularly by the Ministry when it was with Rural Development in terms of clearing the backlog from yester years. So, he just needs to pick it up and carry forward, Mr. Speaker.

You have talked about you DRR Policy. You are answering a question related to flooding due to drainage issues but most of the flooding in Fiji is because of the major rivers and streams. Under the Sendai Framework that you have mentioned, early warning systems is so important. What are your plans about the early warning systems in the major rivers and streams in order to mitigate and raise the level of resilience for our communities?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- The early warning systems that we had, some are already installed in some of the major rivers in Ba and Lautoka. There were some issues that we had met this time around. Some of the gauges were not picking up. So, we have got the Korean team coming over to have a look. The plan is to ensure that all the major inlets coming down from the hills, the ones that are causing flooding, those are the ones that we want the river gauges to be deployed up to.

At the moment, it depends on the donor members who come forward to deliver those systems. At the moment, the Koreans are the ones who had delivered those systems and those were the ones that were installed in Ba and Lautoka and in the areas surrounding and we intend to keep moving it around to other areas.

In some areas, the issues we were finding that some of the members of the public were causing damage to it. In some place the solar system was tampered with, some were stolen. In some other

areas, some technical equipment were also tampered with. So, those are the kind of issues that we are facing as we are trying to deploy these systems all over the country.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- My question to the honourable Minister, with the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways and Local Government Authorities also involved with flooding, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament of how he will ensure that there is no duplication of efforts between NDMO and other related agencies?

HON. S.R. DITOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the taskforce has been established to address the sudden onset of flooding and tree hazards. The team operates in real time to respond promptly to flooding incidents collaborating with Department of Waterways.

The Drainage Board which just been established is an institutionalise cognition forum responsible for overseeing drainage and irrigation infrastructure management. While the Board focuses on mitigation such as drainage, maintenance and dredging, the primary mandate of the taskforce is to coordinate resources which is response from both Government and private sectors to respond effectively to flooding events and minimise the impact. So, you will see that there will be no duplication of effort in that way, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Fiji's National Standardisation Strategy
(Question No. 35/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the importance of Fiji's National Standardisation Strategy, its requirement and benefits?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Standardisation Strategy will provide a policy roadmap making sure that our National Strategic Priorities and Development objectives are supported by relevant national and international standards. In this case, the development and adoption of standards should be guided by a comprehensive understanding of national priorities across various sectors such as trade, building, construction, tourism and environment to name a few.

The all-encompassing strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will also consider emerging sectors that are expected to play significant roles in the future ensuring that standards evolve to support innovation and growth for an economy. Mapping national priorities to standards also helps prioritising Fiji's resources towards achieving specific development targets.

The International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) for which Fiji is a member provides significant investment in capacity building for countries that want to develop their national standardisation strategies. The Ministry has recently completed virtual training workshops on the ISO methodology on developing National Standardisation Strategies with ISO and more virtual meetings will be expected as that strategy work commences.

Being the only full member of the ISO amongst its Pacific neighbours gives Fiji a unique position to influence regional standardisation initiatives. The strategy is an excellent policy advocacy too, it is also important because the exercise will involve conducting assessments or priority sectors and stakeholder interest which are essential in the standardisation process.

Furthermore, the Ministry will be engaging with stakeholders who are users, contributors and potential users of standards ensuring that the resulting standards are comprehensive, relevant and widely accepted within the respective industries. The Ministry plans to develop the strategy of the next 18 months and we are positive with the technical support by development partners that we will be able to use this collaboration to enhance the quality and effectiveness of our standards as a national strategy.

The Ministry will prioritise stakeholder engagement in developing the strategy as it plans to work closely with the members of the Trade Standards Advisory Council, technical committees, sub-committees of the National Standard Board or the Department of National Trade Measurement and Standards (DNTMS), industry, professional associations, core-government agencies, and of course, NGOs.

Key stakeholders are significantly affected by standardisation processes and their participation in such consultations remain vital. The National Standardisation Strategies work taskforce comprising of senior members of the Ministry of Trade including professionals with the knowledge and experience in standards will be involved in this work. The taskforce may include specialists from other sectors outside the National Standards body on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the ISO methodology, the taskforce will see that the following processes are undertaken:

- Conducting an analysis of priority sectors of the national economy;
- Conducting an analysis of a social and non-economic priority areas;
- Reviewing National Development Plans to identify new and emerging centres that are expected to have significant importance in the future; and of the top of my head
- ICT sector and the BPO sector is probably one of the most obvious ones combining economic, non-economic and priorities from these newly emerging sectors into a single work obtaining inputs and feedback from stakeholders and developing a list of topics for the required new national standards that correspond to priority sector areas.

In a nutshell, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the standard is primarily a combination of the socio-economic assessment which identifies areas that needs standardization together with stakeholder priorities based on critical areas I have mentioned. The proposal ultimately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will be to turn these areas into standards identifying national needs which could undergo identical adoption or modified adoption depending on the final recommendations of the taskforce put together after substantial or extensive consultation. A National Standardization Strategy for Fiji could indeed provide a framework for alignment on a regional level collaborating with other Pacific countries. You would have noted the honourable Prime Minister's mention of Fiji being the hub of the Pacific.

By identifying common elements and priorities among these national strategies, Fiji can contribute once again significantly to the development of joint standards for the benefit of the region. Also, as co-Chair to the Pacific Islands Standards Committee, Fiji's leadership can advance this project and foster greater cooperation and harmonisation across the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me conclude by saying that having a National Standardization Strategy will map out the future standardization in Fiji. We do not only assess our current needs and challenges. However, we also have the ability to use information available to develop future looking policy tools, in this case the National Standardisation Strategy. A national strategy that will forecast standardisation solutions though the adoption of international or national standards that can change the dynamics of trade, product performance, safety and linking climate change mitigation and economic efficiency.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, standards play a very important role in everyone's lives, whether you are buying medicine, construction materials or anything for that matter. It can take your life away if the standards are not in order or it can enhance your living condition if the standards are of an applicable level, in terms of insurance, et cetera.

The question that I have for the honourable Minister is, the DNTMS that we have plays a very important role, is there any plan for the Minister to give the importance it deserves and try and create a statutory body so that it can also get donor funding and do its job better?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you honourable Kumar for that excellent question. That is exactly where we are headed. Basically, we see great potential in the enhancement of a centralised standards body. We have some capacity issues, we also have some infrastructure needs, and we feel that through a strategy that is well articulated and then bring in the development partners, we can develop something that has not only national significance but more importantly regional significance, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I hope that answers the question.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, just listening to your presentation on this, there are organisations or institutions that use devices, measuring or weighing devices, even for those that use meter to charge fees or fare. This problem of going off this standard, I know there are a lot of complaints coming about the e-card system because of these devices failing to redeem bus fare cards and the recalibration process to bring them back. You mentioned something about getting back the system. How do you, under this strategy, ensure that the compliance level is there all the time so people will not be overcharged or undercharged or the wrong weighing and those kind of things are happening to the customers?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Tuinaceva for his very good question. There are programmes in place for monitoring, let us say for example, all the weighing machines we see around Fiji, they are regularly checked sort of on a progressive basis. Also, just as an information to Parliament, the speed guns for the Police, that has to be checked as well. There are standards and programmes in place to monitor and are checked regularly.

I think it is fair to say, I am sure honourable Premila Kumar and honourable Koya can agree to this, there is probably more capability if resource this year better to do a much better job. For example, we have standard weights to check machines and some of the weights have been around for quite some time and are beyond their use by date, but we still use them because of budgetary constraints.

These are some of the challenges, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we have but we are progressively trying to work on them. There are two pieces of legislation under DNTMS that needs to be reviewed. Those are in the legislative programme now to be reviewed as well. I am comfortable that we do have regular checking, but I think we can do more. Perhaps a bit of less resourcing or maybe working smarter with some technology.

If I may be allowed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just because I have some time just to divulge a bit. I know honourable Tuinaceva mentioned something about e-Ticketing. That is also under active consideration by the Government at the moment. Hopefully we can come and make some announcements soon on that particular aspect, hopefully in the next session of Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- We will now move on, before I offer the floor to honourable Peni Ravunawa in his question, I would like to acknowledge members of the public in the gallery. Thank you for making yourselves available to come and attend and observe the sitting today.

A special mention goes to Komal and her parents. You do not mind standing up, Komal?

(Acclamation)

She has been a long serving member of our Secretariat. It has taken a while for other ethnic groups in our society to show that keenness in coming to work in our Parliament and Komal has been an outstanding staff. We are going to lose her; she will be moving across from Monday to her new workplace at the UNDP.

At this juncture, I would like to thank your parents who are sitting here. We are so proud of your invaluable support all these years to your daughter especially for her going abroad, coming back and understand she is now married. We wish her well and wish the family well. Thank you very much.

Medical Imaging Science Technologists
(Question No. 36/2024)

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament of the strategies in place to address the critical shortage of almost 30 vacancies for Medical Imaging Science Technologists in public hospitals?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Medical Imaging Science Technologist, the cadre at the moment is facing shortage as it is. In replying to the honourable Member's Oral Question, I would like to first brief the honourable Members of this august Chamber and the public who are watching what the Medical Imaging Science Technologists do in the hospitals, before I touch on the strategies that the Ministry is currently doing, in terms of retention and holding back some of our graduates and staff.

Medical Imaging plays a crucial role in the diagnosis and treatment of various medical conditions from detecting cancerous tumours, to assessing bone fractures. Medical Imaging Technologists (MIT) have revolutionised modern healthcare. Fiji has also seen its self-radiological imaging development in the last two decades with the introduction of high-quality ultrasound, technology, computerised axial, tomography or commonly known as CT Scan and Magnetic Resonance Imaging known as MRI capabilities both in the public and private sector, the availability and accessibility of these highly advanced testing technologist for our people have dramatically increased. These advances in healthcare are very positive for the people of Fiji and contribute greatly for the overall achievement of the health targets under the SDGs. With these new technological developments, there is also the important need to ensure that our medical imaging workforce are well trained and equipped to handle these new technologies and deliver the services that our people expect to receive at our health facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue with critical shortages and what the Ministry is doing about it, the Ministry is taking the MITs submission into consideration, the reason for its resignation and high turnover. The Department of Radiology has submitted a proposal for a salary restructure for MITs. Additionally, incentives for those who will be posted in the subdivisional hospitals and maritime zones which include housing allowance and on call allowance are being considered. This will motivate MITs to take up posting as all MITs have resigned from their respective stations and moved on to the private sector. All maritime posts are currently vacant and CWM Hospital is providing staff to relieve on a rotational basis throughout Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the private sector and overseas countries offering better working conditions for MITs, this is the only way to retain our current human resource. The competitive markets are targeting our experienced MITs as they do not progress in their salary scale even after five years to 10 years on the job.

The public sector is losing our skilled MITs as it takes years to train them on special modality such as ultrasound, CT and MRI. With the proposal submitted, this has been factored in to allow experienced MITs to progress up the ladder in their salary band. The FNU produces 25 graduates every year with 20 locals and five regional students. There were only 11 graduates who had applied this year, with the rest going straight to the private sector for employment. As such, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry hopes to work with FNU to roll out an intensive programme similar to what we have with doctors and the dentists.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, not really a supplementary questions but would like to commend the honourable Minister for forward looking because when the graduates leave the public sector to go to the private sector, the salary that they are looking for is only \$2,000 margin. It is critical right now, it is good that we are looking into incentivising these officers for the speciality that they do for the healthcare service. Thank you, Sir.

Physical Education - Music, Arts and Crafts (PEMAC)
(Question No. 37/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on how the Ministry is aiming to improve Physical Education, Music, Arts and Craft (PEMAC) in schools throughout Fiji?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to respond to the question raised by the honourable Tuiwailevu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education, not only aims to improve Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and TVET subject areas, but we acknowledge the crucial role that Physical Education, Music, Arts and Craft (PEMAC) plays in the holistic development of our children and our education system and provides equal opportunities for children in Fiji to unearth and showcase their God-given talents.

First and foremost, through all the communication platforms, our Heads of Schools are constantly reminded about the importance of strengthening and maximising the existing learning time allocated to all PEMAC classes in both, primary and secondary school level. That means PEMAC classes should be used to teach the skills in these subjects.

Strengthening of PEMAC also includes allocation of adequate resources for facilities, equipment and having qualified teachers. Moreover, equally important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is restoring our multi-pronged community partnership approach. One is our local partnership at community level with local artists, musicians and sports organisations to provide additional opportunities for students which include, teaching traditional art like mat weaving, tapa designing, traditional pottery making and wood carving.

Partnering with communities in teaching traditional songs with musical instruments, accompaniment alike, like the use of *lali*, *ukulele*, *dholak* and guitar to reverse the trend of programme music. This aims to preserve our traditional heritage and knowledge, and an opportunity

for income earning, especially in our thriving tourism industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Teachers Registration Authority (FTRA) facilitates this partnership, along with the need for the development of an accelerated short course on teaching our own community partners, techniques on how to teach.

Second, Mr. Speaker Sir, is a partnership with Government and corporate entities. They have already started reviving partnership with the corporate and Government entities so the Ministry of Education can reinstate music and drama festival such as Tadra Kahani, Fiji War Dance Competition, film making and Fiji Times or design school newspapers.

I strongly believe that with these strategies reinforced again in our school system, they will reduce unwanted behaviour and criminal activities like that are escalating in society amongst our students, both at primary and secondary school level. The adage – an idle mind is a devil’s workshop would be encountered by organised educational activities that my Ministry partners with the community at large. These strategies will ensure that our children are empowered and equipped with life skills that will potentially lead to professional careers and income opportunities.

HON. RATU I. TUIWAILEVU.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to ask my supplementary question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. Most of us have seen the beautiful photo of Dr. Hussein, the first local student to receive PhD, Philosophy in FNU and most of our students too in school wore the traditional garland during the graduation. My question is will the art of making *salusalu* or traditional garland be included in the craft curriculum in schools?

MR. SPEAKER.- I think before the honourable Deputy Prime Minister answers that question, honourable Assistant Minister, it is for your Ministry to look into that. That involves a lot of very important aspects of our culture and tradition and that needs to be safeguarded, even to the extent of it being patient. So, I think you are answering your own question, but I leave it to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister to answer.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I officiated the graduation at USP and FNU and just seeing the faces all with this traditional garland - the *sisi*, I was quite impressive, just about everyone graduating had a *sisi*, and I asked the Chancellor of FNU, “How do you make this?” It is so much in demand, it can be an industry on its own and I am just hoping that it can also be part of the crafts that we can teach our students.

I understand it comes from the *vau* tree where you cut it and soak it in water for a couple of days and then you take off the bark. So, it is a craft that we need to teach across the country because the demand for *sisi* is quite huge, not only for Fiji, even our people overseas want the *sisi*. So, I like that question because I will ask our team to include this in the curriculum in terms of crafts for our students. The economic value must be huge because one *sisi* now cost about \$60 to \$80, so there is quite an economic value in this one.

I was just worried that maybe the raw materials may not be there, so we need to plant a lot of *vau*. The danger here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that someone was using the bark of the mangrove (*dogo*) and that is danger. We do not want to encourage that, we rather just stick with the *vau* - the traditional material for *sisi*. But it is something that I will ask the Ministry to try and encourage as a craft for our young people.

HON. H. CHAND.- I have a very simple question. Recently many teachers have resigned and that may have created gaps in schools, especially secondary schools. For effective delivery of

PEMAC lessons, qualified teachers are needed in specific areas, especially PE, Music and Art and Craft. My question is, what is the Ministry's plan to address the issues until the gaps are filled?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- If I listen correctly, Mr. Speaker, there is a general question regarding the whole teaching profession or is that PEMAC?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- PEMAC.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, PEMAC as we speak, there is no one in the Curriculum Unit under PEMAC, so we were putting out Expression of Interest for four. We need four at headquarters to start reviving PEMAC in the schools.

Our particular concern is the music side. Our music and dance today is from pre-recorded music. What we want to teach our people is to actually play the instruments and for that, it is quite challenging, getting the right kind of teachers into music.

For crafts, we are alright, I think we can do that in co-operation with the community. Physical education, we are alright in that area, but music is a challenging one. Our expression of interest has gone. We need four to be part of PEMAC in the system.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Just another supplementary question to the honourable Minister. Will these Art and Craft, Music and PEMAC teachers be registered under the Teacher Training Board?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes, Mr. Speaker. As I had mentioned in my speech, the registration people will be part of this, and once you join as teachers, you will be registered under the Fiji Teachers Registration Association. You will be registered under them.

If I can address that, Mr. Speaker, one of the best schools in the Western Division, Xavier College, that had a very good pass rate and they attributed that to the extra-curricular activities they have in the school - PEMAC. So, it really is a huge part of education both, at primary and secondary school, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Do you remember the days when QVS used to have a play – drama, almost every year? They used to tour around the country. We need to revive that. That is a kind of extra-curricular that we want to encourage.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just to add a bit more to what we have been hearing, Honourable Members, we have heard from the making of the *Sisi ni Lakeba*. Instead of using the traditional *vau*, it has now gone to mangrove barks- similar to Egypt as well. They do drawings on the jute straws that they get, they do drawings there and they sell very high. They have run out of jute, they have gone on to the stems of banana trees. They take out the pieces there and they all look alike.

Just recently back in my home island, when there is graduation from these three universities at the second part of the year, that is when new tracks are seen up in the lake in Taveuni where the people of the island found it as a very lucrative business to get the flower of the '*tagimoucia*' and they send it across to Lautoka or Suva where they hold this graduation - the *tagimoucia* leaves. So, that again is how good the strength of the people to make more from whatever they could in terms of the very high demands there is. If that is to be taught, I certainly would appreciate that because it will protect our flower on the island as well.

In the past you hardly find farmers down in the urban areas of Somosomo with gumboots and you will see them right at the top of the hill. How they go up there with gumboots, I really do not understand. It is quite a hike up the steep hill, yet they are there. They are picking the flowers, and it is bringing a lot of happiness to their families. They do that but at the same time, the landowners just have to face the brunt because they get direct benefit as well from all those side dealings and all that because of the demand from the three universities.

Written Question

Information on State Land Subdivisions (Question No. 38/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament on the following –

- (a) The total number of State Land Sub-divisions for residential purpose that were developed from 2014 to 2022 by Division and Districts;
- (b) The total number of State Land Sub-divisions for residential purpose that is currently under development by Divisions and Districts;
- (c) The total number of State Land Leases issued for residential purpose from 2014 to 2022 by Division;
- (d) The total number of State Land Notices of Approval of Lease issued for residential purpose from 2014 to 2022 by Division; and
- (e) The total number of applications pending for grant of lease for residential purpose on a State Land Sub-Division by Division and District as at 31 March 2024.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to table my my written response to the question posed before Parliament this afternoon.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders in respect to sitting times, at this juncture, I would like to ask the Leader of Government in Parliament 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) is suspended so as to allow Parliament to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in 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 still have Motions for Debate on the Energy Fiji Limited Reports and also the Consolidated Reports on the Fiji Corrections Service from the Standing Committees of Parliament.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT – ENERGY FIJI LIMITED 2021 AND 2022 ANNUAL REPORTS

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the followings:

- (a) Review Report of the Energy Fiji Limited 2021 Annual Report which was tabled on 23rd November, 2023; and
- (b) Review Report of the Energy Fiji Limited 2022 Annual Report which was tabled on 23rd November, 2023.

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

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs tabled its Consolidated Review Report of the Energy Fiji Limited 2021 and 2022 Annual Reports in November 2023.

In its findings, the Committee noted that Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) faced unprecedented challenges in 2021 due to COVID-19, particularly the second wave of the pandemic which significantly impacted EFL's electricity demand.

The Committee noted and increase in the number of domestic customers, benefiting from subsidies provided by EFL, especially after 2020, and acknowledges EFL for this initiative, given that several customers were affected by the pandemic.

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, considering the Government's commitment to climate change, the Committee noted that the 2021 Annual Report on the importance of EFL embarking on renewable energy site projects, and strongly recommended for the inclusion of key stakeholders, such as landowners in their land acquisition process. It also recommended that all efforts must be made to ensure that the pending Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) is expedited to achieve the current targets for 100 percent renewable energy by 2036.

The Committee noted in the 2022 Annual Report that EFL's existing risk mitigation strategies provided substantial support to the company during the adverse impact of COVID-19. This included strategies to address the disruption in EFL supply chain, and the minimising of the effects of rising fuel costs through its hedging programme.

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

The Committee observed the need for FCCC to strengthen its role in overseeing the technical aspects of EFL's regulatory functions, such as the registration of licensed electricians and ensuring standard compliance is met. In this regard the Committee recommended FCCC to recruit necessary expertise required to regulate the services of EFL.

While deliberating the Committee noted a slow increase in the use of solar rooftop installations and, of course, encourages the use of solar-powered products by domestic and commercial customers as an alternative to reduce their dependence on fossil fuel in the 2021 Annual Report.

The Committee was made aware of EFL's loss of 54 technical employees for greener pastures overseas. Given that EFL is an essential service provider, it is imperative to further develop strategies to entice the technical employees from moving overseas. Multiple renewable energy projects are in the pipeline at present, however, the Committee is concerned that our national targets to meet 100 percent renewable energy electricity by 2036 might not be achievable. While hearing submissions from various applicants who intended to invest in the renewable energy programmes, their applications were rejected.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, before I do offer the floor, I have a list before me of those who will be participating in the debate:

1. Honourable Jone Usamate;
2. Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
3. Honourable S.T. Koroilavesau;
4. Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to congratulate the honourable Members of the Committee for the Report. In short, I am quite pleased to see that despite all the kinds of difficulties that it faced, EFL has come through quite well, despite the damage to its property, the huge loss of technical staff and the kinds of damage that happens to it. I have also noted, in particular, how they have been able to mitigate against the risks that they face, such things as the hedging programme, which I think that a lot of companies in Fiji can learn from, all of us can learn on how we can mitigate the risk that we have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in going through the reports, I have noticed the strong financial record of the EFL, the Action Management and the Grid Risk Management that they had, and I think in terms of their governance system, a great use of Committees in the Board. I think this was a great example of seeing how this is taking place.

Looking at the HR aspects of EFL, despite the fact that they lost quite a lot of staff, they seem to have a very good strong pipeline of making sure that they have people in place to be able to take care of the kind of work that is being done by the people who have left. They have ongoing recruitments, they also still have a strong apprenticeship scheme, I believe it is still operational, and they hire graduate engineers.

I read in the Report that they had implemented a succession plan for all positions from Tradesman Team Leader to the CEO. I think that is very admirable. It shows that, we know that things are going to happen, but we do not just sit and cry about it, they identify high potential people and they have a programme to put them through, so if that person goes, there is someone who can take up the kind of role that the person who has left used to take. So I think that is something that they need to be congratulated for.

I have also noted during COVID-19, we asked a lot of organisations in Fiji to pitch in and help residents of our country to get through COVID-19. Looking through the Reports, I noticed that EFL's contribution to the low income earner from April 2020 to March 2021 during COVID-19 was

around \$6.77 million. This was the kind of assistance they gave to the people that they used their services. So a very big *vinaka va levu* to EFL for what they have done in that area. I noticed also with appreciation the Rural Electrification Programme that has been funded by the Government, where they extend the grid up to rural areas to care for rural dwellers.

During our time in government, we removed the requirements to pay the deposit that communities had to pay before, but this has brought electricity to people out in the rural areas. I think if there is one area for concern, and we get these complaints every now and then, is the delays in getting their electricity completed, whether it is putting up the poles or hooking up the electricity from the poles to each of the individual houses, that is the kind of complaint we get every now and then.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to speak to a few recommendations for both of the Reports. For the Report of 2021:

Recommendation 1:

The Committee noted the need for FCCC to strengthen its role in overseeing the technical aspects of EFL's regulatory functions such as the registration of licenced electricians and ensuring compliance with standards. The Committee recommends for FCCC to recruit necessary expertise to undertake the full range of regulatory functions.

I totally endorse this particular recommendation, Sir. At the moment EFL plays the role of a player and a referee at the same time. It has been like that because in the past we did not have the technical expertise around the country to be able to separate out these roles, but in order to have any good governance in any sector, we need to be able to separate these roles; the role of the player and the role of the referee.

I commend this but I know it is not going to be easy to do because there is not a lot of these technical people around. They will have to come up with some innovative ways of separating out the functions and still have access to technical expertise, whether it is from the private sector, whether it is from the institutes of higher learning, somehow that they can do that, but we need to move to that level where we separate out these two roles of player and referee.

Recommendation 6:

The Committee noted that stakeholders such as the Department of Energy under the Ministry of Public Works, EFL and FCCC need to have strong collaborations and recommends that there be clarity in their functions and their roles. I also totally endorse this particular recommendation. The energy sector or the electricity sector which is part of the energy sector has three major players. EFL is the provider, FCCC is the regulator, the Department of Energy it seems to have a mix kind of roles. One part of it is very operational, where it does the solar home systems, where it does the energy efficiencies, it identifies potential sites for hydro and wind power and the other part of it is more policy formulation.

I just come up with things like the National Energy Policy. To my mind, the establishing policy should be something that always should sit in government, policy looking forward should always sit in government. I think that role of policy setting for the sector as a whole needs to sit with the Department of Energy. It is something that I talked to the department at that time that we need to build it up and I think moving forward, we need to strengthen this role where the Department of Energy is given the right kind of people so that they can sit at that policy role looking for a

benchmarking around the world and deciding what the direction should be for the sector so that it is not led by the players.

That is why, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I endorse that particular recommendation. I have not seen the final version of the National Energy Policy that has been approved by Cabinet unfortunately, but I am familiar with the 2021 version that has been together while I was there, which calls for a higher level of involvement and coordination by DOE across the whole energy sector. As I said, the Government must keep the policy controlled to itself, can give up regulatory but the policy must be with the government, so it has oversight, et cetera.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the Report for Year 2022, I found one finding in particular which was of interest to me, Finding No. 5. The Committee is aware that multiple renewable energy permits are in the pipeline at present, however the Committee is concerned that our national targets to ensure 100 percent renewable electricity by 2036 might not be achievable. That, I think should be a concern for all of us. I will come back to talk about that particular finding because it appears again in one of the recommendations at the bottom.

Recommendation 6:

The Committee recommends for EFL to raise awareness on the benefits of installing roof-top solar plants as well as incentivise such initiatives. I would propose that the honourable Minister of Finance might look at ways in which we can incentivise our citizens to put solar panels onto their roofs so that we can reduce the amount of electricity we get out of fossil fuels.

Recommendation 7:

The Committee is of the view that a detailed enquiry is needed in the energy sector to ensure EFL embark on attaining a 100 percent renewable energy by the Year 2030. You will notice that one part of the Report talks about 2036, the other part talks about 2030. That is because one is quoting from the NDCs, the other was quoting from what National Climate Change Policy. But the thing is this, we as a country are one that fights for climate change. It is very important for us as a country when we go out in the world that there is coherence with everything that we say everywhere, there is also coherence between what we say on the global stage and what we do at home. So, I think this is something that we really need get together with, if we are not going to hit 2030, I do not think it might be possible for us to hit 2030 unless we get those Namosi hydros in very quickly; the three big ones that are still stalled for the time being. But if not, we need to shoot for 2036. How can we hit that target? So, when we hit that target, we stand on a global stage and we talk about reducing emissions, we have done it here, by getting at least our electricity 100 percent renewable.

We already have a lot of things that we have put in place, the Low Emissions Development Strategy, the Maritime and Land Transport Strategy that talked about efficio vehicles, reducing fossil fuel consumption, National Adaptation Plan that looked at creating a long term resilient strategy for the energy sector underpinned by Climate Risk Model and the National Climate Change Policy. Those are my recommendations from the Reports.

The last things that I will say, Mr, Speaker, Sir, thank you for giving me the extra minutes. I also think the energy sector is one when we look at them and commit this, we look at them in isolation; we look at EFL, we look at Ministry of Works and other parties but we need a way in the Committees, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to look at the whole energy sector. I think the honourable Leader of

the Opposition was talking about this yesterday. So, that will also be one thing that we need to consider.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, *ni sa bula vinaka* and good afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for allowing me time-off this morning to be with my friends at the RSL Club remembering the events of 18th April, 1996 and we were joined later by the honourable Minister for Home Affairs who was also there at the time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Members of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs for the preparation of this Review Report of the Energy Fiji Limited 2021 and 2022 Annual Report. As we are aware, Sir, the EFL is a vertically integrated company and honourable Usamate is concerned about players, referees all playing on the same side is because of that. Power generation, transmission, distribution and retail of electricity in the large islands of Fiji, et cetera, they all one. That was not the original intention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you know.

The SVT/GVP Government had lived through the corporatisation, privatisation era in the world and one of those identified entities was FEA (now EFL). It was supposed to be cut up into those three entities; a generation enterprise, distribution enterprise and a regulatory body. The successive government did not go that way, so we now have EFL and the way it is structured. The EFL is responsible for developing renewable energy projects to support Government's goal to attain 100 percent renewable energy. The honourable Usamate mentioned two years - 2026 and 2030. Yes, we have those feature in our plans as well as the universal goal of sustainable development.

Hydroelectric sources are the major renewable energy generators for EFL. Given sufficient rainfall, hydroelectric generation contributes approximately 50 percent to 60 percent toward electricity generation by EFL.

Sir, EFL has been consistent in providing return to the Government even during the COVID pandemic. EFL developed a 10-year power development plan which highlights the project within the Green Energy Sector that aligns to the national objectives or providing electricity to every citizens in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the EFL Board, the management and staff for their continued hard work in progressing EFL. I must apologise in advance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, few of the recommendations made to these two reports are outdated and have been overtaken by events and progress made by the entity in question, so I will only focus on the recommendations which are pending actions:

Recommendation 1:

As honourable Usamate also noted, the need for FCCC to strengthen its role in overseeing the technical aspects of EFL regulatory functions such as registration of licenced electricians and ensuring compliance with the standards. The Committee recommends for FCCC to recruit the necessary expertise to undertake the full range of regulatory functions.

Our response back, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that I am pleased to report that the FCCC now issues generation transmission and distribution and retail licences to operators in the energy sector and has absorbed the regulatory functions of EFL while few technical functions have been outsourced to EFL.

Recently, FCCC conducted public consultations on EFL proposal on 10th August, 2023 to raise electricity tariffs. The submission was declined and FCCC deemed that direct increase unsuitable at that point in time.

Recommendation 2:

The Committee noted with concern that the power purchase agreement for the Agro photovoltaic project in Ovalau is yet to be signed.

The response, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that this agreement was signed on 27th November, 2023 outside the period of the report.

If I may elaborate on various ongoing solar farm projects, a power purchase agreement has been signed with Sunergise Dratabu Pte. Limited for a 5MW solar power plant in Dratabu, Nadi. The power plant is expected to be commissioned in the fourth quarter of this year.

EFL entered into a financial advisory services agreement with International Finance Corporation (IFC) in September, 2020. Three solar power plants in Nadi, Ba and Tavua with an expected collective capacity of 19MW are undergoing due diligence by the IFC and we will be operated either by an independent power producer or via a joint venture with a development model.

EFL is working with Chugoku Electric Power Company Limited through the Sevens Pacific Pte. Limited a 44 percent shareholder in EFL to develop a 5MW solar power plant in Lautoka by 2025. IFC due diligence is also underway for a 10MW solar power plant in Seaqaqa, Vanua Levu which will have battery storage and after due diligence, tenders for the Independent Power Producer (IPP) or JV are expected to be called in 2024. Feasibility studies are also underway for a solar power plant project in Labasa which was identified by a prospective IPP.

EFL, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is working with Envelops Company Limited, a South Korean IPP on 4MW solar power plant in Ovalau. The development of one megawatt solar power plant with battery storage is also underway in Taveuni. The project is funded by Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and is expected to be completed in 2024. The EFL is working to ensure that 100 percent renewable electricity target is achieved by 2036.

The Committee strongly recommends the inclusion of key stakeholders such as the landowners in the land acquisition process. The Committee's recommendation is noted.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my position, the Coalition's position and as Minister for Public Enterprises, we must abide by our commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and sadly after this sitting this afternoon, I will be joining my golfing colleagues to pay our last respect or *reguregu* to Ratu Napolioni Delasau of Nabubuco, one of the champion landowners who had been trying to finalise the deal on their land in Monasavu. Unfortunately, the agreement we made before the Elections of 1999 have never been completed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure the other speaker from the Government side will complete the response on the other recommendations before the end of this debate.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to make a short contribution on the Review Report of Energy Fiji Limited 2021 – 2022 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Members that have spoken before me have basically covered the recommendations that has been put in by the Committee. As a Member of the Committee, I would

like to make my contributions on the findings and what we had look through during our examinations of the original report itself. Most of the recommendations have been stated by honourable Usamate and the honourable Prime Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report provided to Parliament by the Committee as findings and recommendations to reflect the effort, the Committee dug deeper into EFL operations and see if the Committee can recommend some changes. The Economic Affairs Committee through the Chairman had decided to play a more active scrutiny and oversight role in the agencies, especially on the agencies that provide economic activities in Fiji and that affects Fijians.

The EFL provided that opportunity and we are looking at the Sugar Industry and its contribution to agriculture as a whole. I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you are well aware of these efforts to make improvements on our ability to contribute to the improvement of this industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted that the FCCC's functions as has been alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister and honourable Usamate has been deprived in its checkoff. I think to enlighten Parliament on that, I think I would go back to the background on the appointment of FCCC as the regulator in September 2019 when the Electricity Act was gazetted. However, EFL had signed an MOA with FCCC to continue to carry out certain regulatory functions until further notice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is the dilemma that had been forced on EFL as part of FCCC. While FCCC is the regulator, EFL still does not see because it has the technical expertise to oversee this regulatory function. I urge the honourable Minister for Public Works to have a look at this because the Department of Energy within the Ministry of Public Works has the Director that oversees this function.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we found that EFL is on a different footing in comparison to our national commitment on energy sector. We called EFL to tell us, what is their commitment towards renewable energy? We found out the difference between our national target and the target set by EFL itself. We have highlighted to them that they must align themselves to our national target - a total of 100 percent by 2036, and we hope that they will come online on that.

The Committee believes that a comprehensive inquiry is required on energy as a whole, especially the renewable energy sector. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason I am saying this is that, there have been efforts by international companies to establish solar farms in Fiji but it seems that EFL needs position to protect itself so as a sole provider of electricity in Fiji, it has always denied this opportunity.

As the honourable Prime Minister has suggested that with the partnership with the landowners, they will be able to develop this and then provide the energy into the main grid for it to be distributed to consumers. I think in the Western side, they have been a lot of effort by landowners to give their land for solar farms. My view is this, EFL owns the assets - they own the post, they own the lines, they can rent into new investors that come in at an affordable rate that will allow the investor to generate electricity and sell it off to EFL so that the whole population of Fiji derives the benefit of cheaper electricity.

I think, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will leave it there, that is basically what Mr. Chairman had delegated and thought that we should side track and have dig deeper in why this monopolised industry should be allowed to carry on to the detriment of the people of Fiji. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Prime Minister and

other honourable Members who have spoken before me. The honourable Prime Minister gave a good account of some of the recommendations - the way in which EFL has placed itself in dealing with the whole energy issues.

What I heard from honourable Koroilavesau and honourable Usamate was quite interesting. I think a lot of what they have said we agree. On this side of Parliament, as a Government, we are deeply committed to addressing some of those concerns and moving ahead, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with plans to ensure that we achieve those targets, not only in terms of affordable energy, but also moving away from over reliance on fossil fuel to more renewable sources.

The economics of decarbonisation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, where earlier on we talked about carbon emissions trading and you raised some very intelligent questions about what it involves, because a lot of people do not seem to understand that. But before I talk about the two other recommendations, let me just remind the honourable Members of this Parliament, particularly, the honourable Members on the other side who were in the Government in 2021, the Government at that time entered into a share sale agreement with Sevens Pacific Pte limited, which is a consortium owned by Chugoku Electric Power Company and Japan Bank for International Corporation to acquire 44 percent of shareholding in the EFL. So, the consortium acquired 44 percent of the shares in the EFL, acquiring 24 percent from Government and 20 percent from FNPF. In fact, we are now wondering, why would even FNPF at that point in time want to sell its 20 percent shares to this company.

From foreign investor point of view, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it makes sense. We could say that, that is a signal that we provide to foreign investors, but the fact is that, EFL is no longer governed under the Public Enterprises Act. It is no longer a Public Enterprise. It is a private company governed by the Companies Act.

When we talk about what honourable Usamate and honourable Koroilavesau talked about, the synergy - the difference between what is our national priority, what the Government wants to do in terms of energy policy, what the company and EFL wants to do. In fact, the Government still has majority Board members, but Chugoku Electric has three Board members as well. For any private shareholder, the motive, the overwhelming objective, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to make profit. So, having said that, I think it is important for honourable Members to understand where we are in terms of what was done in the past with respect to the sale of shares.

Nonetheless, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we as a Government, the Department of Energy and a number of priorities that the Government has articulated to the EFL Board, we have a new chairman, we have a very competent Board and we are confident that the Board is bringing together the expertise of the private company that owns 44 percent of the shares, that we would be able to move ahead as part of our national strategy and national objective in not only moving away from over reliance on fossil fuel to more renewable sources of energy, but also make sure that the energy that is available is affordable, not only to our ordinary citizens, but also to our investors and those in the business sector.

On Recommendation 4, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee recommends for EFL to explore avenues through which solar roof installation can increase at a rapid pace. I know, honourable Usamate talked about incentives, so let me give you some figures. In fact, I think people themselves are moving away from the idea of just relying on the electricity supply from the EFL to rooftop solar. In fact, the EFL Grid rose from 174 in 2020 to 225 in 2023, a growth rate of about 29 percent. The issue of existing Government support and funding initiatives, the Government provides financial support, Mr. Speaker, Sir, towards household having a combined income of less than \$30,000 by contributing about 16.34 cents per unit VEP for first 100 units consumed in a month by such households.

Also for primary and secondary schools, what we call a ‘step up subsidy’ is in place where first 200 units consumed in a month are subsidy at a rate of 12.85 cents per unit VEP with the school contributing the remaining 21.16 cents per unit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the roles of the Department of Energy, FCCC and EFL and their ability to align their policies and strategies to ensure that it meets both the regulatory as well as the policy imperatives of Government is something that we, as a Government, would ensure that the Board and Government representatives of the Board are able to move this forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, I want to take this opportunity to thank the former Chairman of the EFL - Mr. Daksesh Patel, and all the Board members who were there and as stated by all honourable Members before, despite the decrease in the sales during COVID-19 in 2021 and the contribution that EFL made to consumers or households during COVID-19, it shows that EFL was in good hands at that point in time, it is in good hands now and the Government is going to work with the new Board Chairman and the Management of EFL to make sure that our national objectives of Energy Policy would be achieved by targets set by the Government. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think most of honourable Members have extensively covered most of the recommendations. I just want to highlight one area which has been highlighted by honourable Koroilavesau, the need to have a thorough inquiry at the energy sector. Of course, the Committee had written to the Secretariat so that we do not to go ahead with the recommendation.

Also has been highlighted by honourable Usamate and honourable Professor Prasad on the non-alignment of EFL to national targets. From our view and, of course, the Committee this has to be intensified and accelerated to ensure that they achieve at the national targets that the Government has established for them not to achieve.

I would like to thank the honourable Members for their comments, and I support the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank you for those comments and I think if only we bear with the workload that we have here with the Secretariat and once we get the role of the Committees on oversight and scrutiny to be better addressed, especially by the proposal to set up sub-committees under existing Standing Orders, then that should be able address what you have stated, Mr. Chairman.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- I intend to adjourn Parliament now for afternoon tea. When we return, we just try and complete the remaining motion that is still before us.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.40pm

The Parliament resumed at 5.16 p.m.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT –
FIJI CORRECTIONS SERVICE 2018-2020 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Fiji Corrections Service Annual Report for the year 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, which was tabled on 23rd November, 2023.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Member moving the motion, I rise to make a short contribution on the Consolidated Report for the Fiji Corrections Service Annual Report 2018-2019 and 2019-2020.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Committee Report was tabled in November last year and the wish to proceed directly in articulating some of the main areas of discussion that are captured in this Report.

To begin with, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are few pertinent issues identified which the Committee had noted and these were as follows:

1. The Fiji Corrections Service, or commonly known as the FCS, is committed to reducing the high number of contraband entering correctional facilities around Fiji.
2. The FCS continues to work towards its responsible targets by safely detaining and rehabilitating persons sentenced to imprisonment or, in other words, persons placed on remand at each correctional centre pending trial by the courts.
3. The FCS has no control over the number of persons incarcerated by the courts and, therefore, does not have the means to minimise overcrowding issues within the Correction facility.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji National Budget 2022-2023 provided funding for a Job Evaluation Exercise to be conducted for FCS staff, with the intention to review their salaries.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FCS engaged a consultant company, namely Maxumise Pte Limited to conduct the JEE, which was to conclude in early October this year. With that, Sir, the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Finance now have the responsibility to evaluate and determine its outcome.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is essential to note that the final two key findings noted by the Committee was derived from the site visitation that the Committee had conducted in which we were able to identify key issues for redressing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee, therefore, noted that during its tour of the correctional facilities, the Fiji Corrections Service has taken humanitarian steps to monitor and provide daycare towards inmates of old age. This has subsequently exposed the lack of facilitation for inmates that are at risk with respect to mental health problems.

The last key findings was that, the Committee was informed of the land tenure issues at its Levuka facility, Mr. Speaker. The Committee notes that the FCS has take a step to protect tenure on the *mataqali* land by signing a 99 year lease agreement with the landowning unit beginning in 2017.

Mr. Speaker, these issues were addressed and clarified by the Fiji Corrections Service and any information on this can be retrieved from the Committee's Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, based on the key findings that was noted, the Committee has come up with recommendations that he believes will possibly improve certain operations within the Corrections Service.

Sir, I will go straight into the recommendation put forth by the Committee for the consideration of this august Parliament.

Recommendation No. 1

The Committee recommends that the upgraded equipment be installed to curb the high number of contrabands smuggled into correctional facilities and this, Mr. Speaker, is a major issue whilst we were visiting the correctional facilities.

Recommendation No.2

The Committee is of the view that the human dignity of all inmates be respected and recommends that there be separate Centres allocated for remand and convicted inmates, respectively for Natabua, Vaturekuka and Korovou Correction Centres. This would reduce the issue of overcrowding and reduce the negative influence on persons on remand.

Recommendation No.3

The Committee recommends that there be a specialized area to confine offenders identified as having mental health and drug issues.

Recommendation No. 4

Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the Corrections Infirmary facilities be improved and better resourced and also serve those facilities without infirmary be furnished with one as soon as possible.

Recommendation No. 5

The Committee recommends that all Corrections full preparation as storage facilities, including kitchen and dining hall, be revamped to OHS compliance status.

With those few words, Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity, and I urge the honourable Members of this august Parliament to take note of the contents of the Committee's Report and show support for the motion before Parliament.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have a list of speakers given by the Whips and the batting is as follows:

1. Hon. M.D. Bilitavu;
2. Honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration;
3. Honourable I. Naivalurua; and
4. Honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- I rise to give my contribution to the motion that is before Parliament and, that is, to note the Committee's Report. Most of the things that I wanted to talk about has been clearly outlined by the Chairman of the Standing Committee in his opening speech in moving the motion before Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, just few other things from my observation after reading the Report, we had moved around the FCS facilities. In our visit, we have identified few areas that are in the findings for those of you who have the Report. We have got assurances this morning from the honourable Attorney-General and also Minister for Justice and Minister responsible for Corrections on the Job Evaluation Exercise that has been conducted and I have stated this morning that it is long overdue and outstanding.

That was one of the main issues that was raised to us in our visit in various Corrections Centres around the country, given they have been bringing up these issues over the past few years and they are still waiting. So, we hope that the honourable Attorney-General will bring this to the attention of the honourable Minister of Finance and we looking forward for the upcoming budget. There could probably be a \$5 million allocation for this JEE and if it is done, probably it should be given in a lump sum where lessons should be learned from the JEE that was done to the Fiji Police Force years back that had few teething problems and had to come back to the Committee for inquiries. It was given on a pro-rata basis and most that had passed on or left the Service were still being paid. There were issues of some who were paid monies that they were not supposed to receive.

On the other issue, I would like to raise with the honourable Minister responsible and honourable Attorney-General is the establishment of the Parole Board. I think that is one area that inmates have always raised in terms of having that Parole Board. I think they are in the process of getting the board members given there are certain specialists that are needed to be part of that board, psychiatrists, et cetera, and other things. Probably he will enlighten us when he takes the floor. These are some of the avenues that inmates are awaiting so that they can come through and also re-join the community outside.

On the other issue that we have found out was the caregiving training that needs to be done. If you go to Nasinu Correction Centre, I think there is one whole dorm there which is dedicated for old inmates who are disabled and I think they are being cared by some Corrections Officers and some inmates. I think proper training and proper equipment is needed there especially things like vehicles and ambulances where they can assist also them if an emergency arises in the facilities given, those old sick inmates are being cared for.

One thing that they had raised in our visit around was a x-ray scanner. Probably that could be part of the budget too as a capital expenditure for Fiji Corrections Service given the high rise of contrabands coming into our prison facilities, telephones even drugs and other things that are used by inmates illegally. But they have body scanners but given the developments that have happened, how inmates have managed to hide that even in their cavity. These are one of the things that came up in our visits – the need for x-ray scanners to be available in most of our facilities around the country.

Another thing that we came across was the remand centres. Most remand centres here in the North, we do not have a specific remand centre in Labasa given that all are in Vaturekuka. If there is probably a project in the future, honourable Minister, if there could be a capital project where a remand centre for the Northern Division can be constructed, so that it will reduce overcrowding in our centres. Usually, Labasa is the only holding prison especially in the courthouse in Labasa before they are distributed to Taveuni and other places in Fiji.

Those are my initial contribution to the Report that is before Parliament and I hope that the honourable Attorney-General and Minister for Justice who is responsible for Corrections will take those recommendations and findings that are in the Report that is readable and also those recommendations will be taken in so that the service of the Fiji Corrections Service can be improved.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to base my comments on the Report particularly the recommendations made by the Committee and I thank the Committee for their report to Parliament today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to speak on the lack of burial space. I live in Davuilevu Housing which is right next to the crematorium and the cemetery. That cemetery is filling up very quickly, I know also that the informal settlement located behind the crematorium and the cemetery is actually the reserve for the cemetery. I noted in the Report that the Committee recommended that may be some of us can take our loved ones who have passed away to our villages, so that we can bury them. I think some of us have not been to our villages for a long time, so I am not sure how that will work.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- I really like to laugh at that comment.

(Laughter)

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I would like to raise a sensitive issue that could really help the situation on burial space and that is cremation particularly the *iTaukei* and Christians. We do not quite advocate for cremation. There are many benefits of cremation, I have been to the crematorium many times, actually if I die maybe I want to be cremated, I am not sure if my wife will agree if she is still alive. This is definitely one area that has been developed in Fiji. I know there is one in Nasinu and there is more in Raralevu. I think our Hindu brethren actually use it very well. This is a good way and clean way to go.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- You already gone.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I think we should consider this as a community. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not know if many of our people know, I been to some burials in Nasinu. I personally do not want to be buried there and for one of the main reasons is right now, during the burials they do not allow the casket to be covered with the mat. I do not know whether this is a rule....

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, it is.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Or maybe because it is small. Just looks a little bit bare. It is a discussion about death but I think it is essential that we do that.

MR. SPEAKER.- Is it because of the mats or the body will not go down?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- I will leave that idea. I know we Catholics are working around this idea of getting cremated, not being buried. I would encourage discussion that much.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I reinforce the proposal raised by honourable Bilitavu on the proper remuneration of Corrections Officers and all the other conditions for their work that needs to be looked at. I was in Naboro the other day for reasons that shall not be made known to Parliament,

and I noticed that some of the workers are really working hard. I think there has been something in motion but I think we should recognise that our Corrections Officers need to be paid well.

Overcrowding in our prisons and the negative effects of that. Space is always a problem and I know it was raised earlier by the Chairman that the Corrections Service do not control the number that are coming to them. We must consider smart ways of looking after people who are convicted. The honourable Naivalurua and I were talking about restorative justice as a lead on to Yellow Ribbon as some way of looking after humanely and to try and rehabilitate people without leaving them in jail. That is something we need to look at also.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our correctional facilities are not cut for those that need special attention. One, the physically handicapped (disabled). I know an uncle of mine who is in there who is in a wheelchair. Neither is it responding enough to the mentally challenged. The third category of people that perhaps it should also look after are those that are aged. So they all clamped, and this is part of the recommendation of the Committee, in the same space as everyone else.

Definitely a challenge, something for us to all look at particularly the Government I believe. I am sure there are two places they are kind of co-located which people do not necessarily want to look at for the stigma, they are located in the same area. One is Suva Prison and the other one is St. Giles Hospital because it deals with the kind of people that we push to the limit of our community. But the important thing is that they are the very people who need our help the most. I would hope that we consider some humane policies around this, and I definitely would support this in Government, in the event that these are brought as laws to be able to help, not only the Corrections Officers, but also those who are there, spending time for the crimes that they have committed.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to start off by thanking the honourable Minister for the good news this morning. I stand together with my two colleagues, the honourable Minister for Home Affairs in thanking him for his commitment and assurance that Corrections Service JEE will be paid out in this fiscal year – thank you, Sir. Much has been presented by the two previous speakers, Sir, on the Report, but for the benefit of Parliament, I just wanted to go back to how it all started, just to enable us to understand why some of the current issues that keep on propping up in some of the reports will continue to do so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 18 years ago, the Corrections Act 2006 was enacted. That basically changed a big paradigm shift of the organisation from one of containment to one of correction and rehabilitation. That demanded a lot of changes. I am thinking the past, changing the attitude, and above all, re-training the staff, a 360 degrees turnaround, even to the uniforms, to the branding, to how they should posture themselves in public, even to the selection of the uniform that they wear today, that particular uniform was decided by the community inside the New Town Hall. A lot of things took place. The plans were very clear and we were required to align ourselves to the new order of the day; the Corrections Act 2006. All the plannings including infrastructure and capacity building had to be aligned. We had to put into place a long term development plan, together with what we thought will help us to comply with the new order of the day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in those days, the Corrections Officers were known as Prison Officers. Today, they are Corrections Officers, but I would also want to call them, they are Captains of Lives. Primarily the role of the Corrections Service is really inside the laws where they receive those who have gone offtrack and they are like doctors who treat them through a rehabilitation programme, then after they have served a time, then they are handed back again to the community. There are two parts to this – one is their role inside the wall, and secondly is their role outside the wall. You have heard about the Yellow Ribbon Programme, their positive initiative to deal with those who have served the time and were rejoining society, community or their families to be given a second chance. From my

experience, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the inside of the wall part of the work was manageable, we could control, we could deal with but it was the outside of the wall aspect of it that was most difficult. I, at this point wish to thank the *vanua*, the community at large, families for their contribution and their effort in supporting the Yellow Ribbon Programme.

Very quickly on perhaps one of those five recommendations, all the five recommendations are really the inside the wall aspects, apart from a few of the need for funding on projects. This will be ongoing, some of it are yet to be completed in line with the long-term development plan that we had set and some are just results that we are slow in catching up of the change in times. The offenders are those who are incarcerated in there, they have all the time in the world to beat the whole system. So, it is very important that we have a well-trained organisation, a well-skilled dedicated captain of lives who cares for them, treat them, change them and send them out again.

I thank the Committee for the engagement with the Fiji Ex-Prisoners Training and Rehabilitation Associate Service, this is something new for me. These are those who have done time inside and they are really giving back their time to help those find their way back out and I would like to acknowledge them at this juncture for their commitment and work in the rehabilitation programme.

Let me end, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to say that whilst we cannot control numbers that go in, I believe we can create intervention points to reduce the numbers that go in. By this I mean, in my thinking, whilst we have the Yellow Ribbon Programme, it could be extended further that would encourage and perhaps inform the public and society on the roles they could play under the Yellow Ribbon Programme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you have heard about the *Duavata* Community Policing, we had a brief discussion with the honourable Minister for Home Affairs just before we came back in and whether it is all possible whilst the Corrections Service's role is to bring them back on track, Fiji Police under the *Duavata* Community Policing could keep them on track, back a track and keeping them on track. There has been a few wonderful initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our effort to come up with innovative ways in dealing with ways or making sure that they change and they change for the better and they do not go back in.

The Arts Gallery was one, innovative one, if I may mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was one that we introduced in Taveuni. Those who stole *dalo* or *yaqona* when they come in for the rehabilitation programme, they are sent out to the places where they stole and planted five times more what they stole. Mr. Speaker, Sir, 10 *yaqona* plants, you plant 50 to the owner, 2,000 *dalo* times five. Mr. Speaker, Sir, it worked there. I am simply trying to say that there are innovative ways, it really does not cost much in how we can perhaps reduce the numbers and also prevent our sons and daughters from going in.

I support the motion here, Sir, and I once again thank the public and society for their support of the Yellow Ribbon Programme.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I will just share some experience here being an old boy. So, I have two old boys, one the school that I attended, the other one is the Rehabilitation Centre and they quickly label you with the Yellow Ribbon thing. The only concern that I have is the uniform of the Prison Wardens. When I was sent to jail, they had only about two and when honourable Naivalurua took over, lots of changes happened. I do not know how many uniforms they have now, compared to the military and the military still has more.

Why I am saying this, honourable Members, is because the Prison Officers are more exposed, very high risk job for them especially when they go with prisoners to clean some bush, et cetera, they are with prisoners who hold knives and things like that. It is quite risky and dangerous for them and on top of that, I do not know about their present uniform. Do they have overalls as well like the military? On top of that, I am happy that this Report has come up and we have two former Commissioners of Prisons here; honourable Naivalurua and honourable Vasu.

The crux of what I am trying to say is, the prisoners, when you go amongst them, when you are also thrown into jail, they do not look at you as one of their colleagues who has broken the law but rather your standing in the community. Strangely I was asked, could you give us some training and lecture about what to do and what not to do, et cetera, things of that nature and then I said, “look, I am already in uniform, it will be so stupid of me to be in this uniform and then trying to lecture to you on something that you alone can understand, because you are wearing the uniform to look after us even though we are more smarter than you”; most of the convicts there are very bright.

When you cage them in, they become more smarter in how they exercise their minds. They never put to waste anything, even the leather boots, they make nice cases for gas lighters. How they transform the lace of the shoes into strings and whereby they throw things across their cell. That is how they pass on whatever they get from this end right down to that end. Even how they throw the newspapers through the cage like grills that we have and it flies through. The distance is about from here to there, but when they fold the newspaper, it is so strange because by the time you come to understand where is the newspaper, someone is reading it on the other side. That is a different dormitory altogether.

All I am trying to share is the riskiness of the work of the officers in prison. I hope honourable Vasu will understand this better, their uniforms. They have got number one, two now, and so forth but compared to the military, is still very much behind. There are more interesting stories which we can share on the rehabilitation centre. But again, I only hope that whatever is coming out of this Report, now that the Attorney-General is going to be closing up the debate on this motion, I only hope that proper financial help is provided to the Ministry, so that they conduct themselves better.

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Deputy Prime Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, first of all, Sir, thank you for sharing the journey first-hand experience which other honourable Members too, through their visitations or probably by knowledge, are fully aware of the issues.

It brings me to light regarding this facility. When I started in Government, one of the first work I did was to look after the Government Departments’ business and that Department used to come under my portfolio. When I look at the government assistance rendered to RFMF, the Police and Prisons, the Prisons are always the last. I can see the change during Naivalurua’s appointment and thereafter, and the infrastructural changes are significant.

I happened to spend some of my time in the compounds of Natabua, Naboro and Nasinu. My eldest brother was a prison officer, you may have known him, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I just came back from Sydney to celebrate his 70th birthday, so I am fully aware of the experiences. I was a lawyer, a Magistrate and now I am the Attorney-General.

I can assure you one thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there will be changes, but it is going to take time. The last few years has been different, during honourable Naivalurua and honourable Vasu’s times. When we talk about human dignity, I can say that in the last few years, it was non-existent. It did not only affect the prisoners, it also affected the lives of the Corrections Officers and it is a huge shift from that mode to the current.

I have been constantly reminded, Sir, thank you for the change of Government and we owe it to the people of Fiji. Now, there is more access for lawyers, over the weekend and this week, we can see some of the religious faiths have been permitted to enter. That was a big no-no during the last Administration. I, for one, whenever I come to visit the head office, it is difficult. You cannot go inside because the officers were trained like military officers. But all I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in this Parliament is that there will be changes.

I would like to thank the members of the Committee for the detailed Report, the observations, findings and, of course, the five recommendations.

I do note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that they said that majority of the issues identified in the review have been adequately addressed. As you are probably aware, most of these issues are infringes in terms of finance budgetary allocation. I have been trying to impress upon the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance. I would like to invite him to visit the Corrections Centres and see firsthand what it is like. Only then one can understand because in terms of the needs, infrastructure, et cetera, it will depend on the funding.

We acknowledge the pressing nature of the issue and are firmly committed to implementing effective measures to ensure the the safety, security and rehabilitation of all individuals under the Fiji Corrections Service.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a significant concern regarding the smuggling of contraband into the Fiji Correctional facilities but with the nature of the organisation, such is bound to happen, but the Corrections Officers are supposed to be on top of their job.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to address this, the Fiji Corrections Service has embarked on a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing security measures and reducing illicit activities within its facilities. These include:

1. The purchasing of handheld machines and metal detector walk-through doors for Correctional Centres, ensuring thorough screening procedures. Mr. Speaker, Sir and honourable Members of Parliament, even then they still slip in as the human mind, and this was probably explained earlier on how they do things in prison without detection by the officers.
2. It is also a provision of capacity support for our K9 sniffer dogs at the K9 Unit.
3. There is also implementation of irregular and consistent snap security searches conducted by the K9 and Fiji Corrections Service personnel.
4. There is also procurement of full-body x-ray scanner machine.
5. There is also heightened surveillance and intelligence gathering by the Emergency Unit, facilitating proactive intervention and response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Corrections Service's core mission centres on the safe and effective rehabilitation of all prisoners and remandees. We understand the importance of individualised care and support, which is why we continuously implement rehabilitation programmes tailored to meet the diverse needs of inmates.

Except for the Labasa Corrections Centre, all correctional facilities have separate facilities for remanded and convicted inmates. Sadly, this will be a capital project if not next year, then probably in the years to come.

In the case of Labasa Corrections Centre, there are separate cell blocks for remand and convicted inmates. Sadly, we have no control of the people put in remand.

I totally agree with honourable Naivalurua regarding the theft from farms. Let me share, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I was a Magistrate, especially when I go to the island, that is the sentence I actually impose, for them to plant more. But that is below the tariff, as honourable Ratu Niudamu will realise that. The tariff is two to nine months, so if you are a first offender for that, two to nine months then normally you will suspend it. But if you commit another theft, it will be more. And the theft of farm produce, according to the Court is higher, but I have done it. It has not been appealed because maybe it was done on the island but the point is this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a creative and innovative way because that suits the particular offender - the point of being charged, appear in Court with fellow villagers watching, sentence on the same day, but when they go out, they want to change and sometimes it does help.

We hope that in the future, there will be some dialogue with the Judiciary to implement other ways in terms of imposing custodial sentences for our prisoners.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I acknowledge the shortfalls within our correctional facilities. However, we are progressively working on addressing the concerns and limited resources. Unfortunately, as I have said, the previous Administration failed to prioritise the overcrowding concern in our correctional facilities, owing to the influx of offenders, including those with drug related offences.

Some of the initiatives to address this include the utilisation of early release programmes for those inmates who are eligible, and the anticipated re-establishment of the Parole Board to facilitate early release applications. The Parole Board has been appointed, it is awaiting administrative setup from the Fiji Corrections, before it is submitted to His Excellency for their appointment.

The Standing Committee also recommended setting aside a specialised facility for offenders who are mentally challenged, including those struggling with drug addiction. As I have said, as the years go by, there is always new initiatives for the Fiji Corrections Service and one of which has been recommended is for a separate hospital facility for the Fiji Corrections Centre. That is something for the new Administration to implement.

As clarified by the honourable Prime Minister, we will be soon having a new Commissioner of Correctional Service, probably in the space of a month or two. Those are some of the projects that the new Commissioner and the new team at Fiji Corrections Service will take heed of in order to improve the status in the Fiji Corrections Centre. I fully endorse the Report of the Committee. *Vinaka.*

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members for their contributions towards the motion before Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, before I take my leave, I wish to thank yourself for allowing the Committee to visit all the correctional facilities. We have been fortunate enough to have seen another world.

For you, honourable Members, who have not been inside the prison, we have been inside and it is totally different, as honourable Naivalurua, honourable Vasu and Mr. Speaker have shared with us. It is totally different inside there, a totally different lifestyle and we met all sorts of people from all sorts of life - lawyers, teachers, policeman, politicians, with totally different lifestyle. We are being fortunate, and I thank, Mr. Speaker, for allowing us to visit all these correctional facilities.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a big thank you to the Fiji Corrections Service. To the Acting Commissioner, Madam Panapasa and all the hardworking men and women in the Fiji Corrections Service, we thank you for your services, especially with a ratio of 4:1, given that most of them have

to look after prisoners who are handling knives. We thank you for your commitment and it is a very high risk environment. Thank you to all the hardworking men and women in the Fiji Correctional Service.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a notable mention to our Liaison Officer, Deputy Commissioner Senior Superintendent Apakuki Qurai, who accompanied the Committee all throughout to all the correctional facilities around Fiji. He helped the Committee throughout the visitation.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, that bring us to the end of the sitting today. Before I adjourn Parliament, I think I was just informed a while ago that honourable Members are not able to listen or hear the bell being sounded from here, especially when you are in the Big Committee Room. However, we made checks since it happened the last time and it seems that someone has lowered the volume. Perhaps, it is only one of us here or one of the staff who has lowered the volume.

Honourable Members have been coming in late to the sitting when the bell has already sounded. On that second bell when it sounded, I was still in my office and I could not hear anything. Yet, the Orderly who has been assisting me heard it. Something strange is happening here. The volume cannot go down on its own. Maybe, we need to up the security again to ensure that bell is sounded at the same time everyone hears it.

I thank you all for your contributions today. Honourable Members, Parliament will now adjourn until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m. In addition to that, I want to inform you honourable Members that dinner is being prepared in the Big Committee Room and I hope you will enjoy your dinner.

The Parliament adjourned at 6.05 p.m.