

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 5TH AUGUST, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 5TH AUGUST, 2024

The Parliament met at 9.47 a.m. pursuant to notice.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

Hon. Graham Everett Leung, Attorney-General

Hon. Prof. Biman Chand Prasad, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic

Planning, National Development and Statistics

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

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

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

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

Hon. S.D. Turaga, Minister for Justice

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

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

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

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration

Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodoro, Minister for Education

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

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

Hon. Jese Saukuru, Minister for Youth and Sports

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

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

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

Hon. Alitia Vakatai Bavou Cirikiyasawa Bainivalu, Minister for Fisheries and Forestry

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

Hon. Isikeli Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Iliesa Sovui Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education

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

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

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

Hon. Esrom Yosef Immanuel, Assistant Minister for Finance

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

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

Hon. K.V. Ravu

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu

Hon. Jone Usamate

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya

Hon. Premila Devi Kumar

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

MINUTES

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

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

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

Question out.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting, those joining 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.

Visit to Fiji - Her Excellency the President of India

Honourable Members, as you are all now aware, Her Excellency the President of the Republic of India will visit Parliament tomorrow and will deliver an address. For the duration of the Presidential visit, access to Parliament and its precincts and gallery will be by invitation only. May I also remind you that sometimes this morning a tentative programme for the official visit will be circulated to all honourable Members. That programme is from the honourable Prime Minister's

Office.

Resolutions of the Business Committee

Honourable Members, I would also like to inform you that the Members of the Business Committee have unanimously approved the following:

- (1) Parliament will uphold the ongoing practice with respect to the speaking times during debates on the Standing Committee review reports, whereby the mover will have up to five minutes to open the debate and up to five minutes of their right of reply. There will only be two speakers from each side of the House, and each of the two speakers will have up to 10 minutes to speak.
- (2) Pursuant to the Standing Order amendments of 24th May, 2024, Ministers responses to Oral Questions will be up to 10 minutes (from 20 minutes to 10 minutes) to avoid honourable Ministers being pointed out at in trying to make Ministerial Statements. These are just responses to the questions. The responses to supplementary questions will be between five minutes and 10 minutes, at the discretion of the honourable Speaker.
- (3) Honourable Whips must notify the Secretary-General if some of your honourable Members wish to speak in the vernacular at any given time and day during the sittings. All the Secretariat ask from you honourable Members is, please, give notice to us so we can prepare the translators that they be given enough notice time, because otherwise, people fire off into their own dialects and the poor translators at the top are finding it difficult to quickly respond to translations, instead of speaking in the Bauan language, they use their own dialects. I must say here, especially the two of our honourable Members from the big Province of Ra - the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry and the honourable Ratu Niudamu. I trust all honourable Members we will try and communicate accordingly with your Whips in that matter, or in that respect.
- (4) An official request was received from the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights for the Standing Committee to table its reports on the Child Justice Bill, Child Care and Protection Bill and the National Disaster Risk Management Bill at a later sitting of Parliament. The Chairperson has confirmed that the Standing Committee has further referred the Bills to the legal drafters with their comments.

Honourable Members, with your indulgence, the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights will table its reports on the Child Justice Bill, Child Care and Protection Bill and National Disaster Risk Management Bill at a later sitting of Parliament.

- (5) The Business Committee has unanimously approved that all future Bills under Standing Order 51 will be referred equally to the Standing Committees of Parliament, and not only to the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights. This is to try and share the workload to the other Standing Committees of which, the honourable Members their operational rights are all the same. It is just a matter of sharing the burden, we have done this in the past, and as such, we would like to make it part of our Standing Orders now as to ensure that it will be referred to all Standing Committees. As such, all honourable Members on the Standing Committees must be capacitated to undertake such a function.

The Business Committee has also approved the honourable Government Whip to ensure that the Bills are equally distributed between all six Standing Committees. I understand your workload, Madam Whip, is a bit heavy but, again, that is the responsibility that goes

with that position.

Status of the 26 Members of the Opposition

For the information of all honourable Members, my Office has received from the 25 honourable Members of the Opposition that they are now Independents. Some of them wrote to me and some of them declared during the participation of the debates in the recent past by informing Parliament that they stand here as an Independent now. One honourable Member is awaiting the outcome of the appeal lodged with the Fijian Electoral Commission. So, he still has to notify me of his decision whilst waiting for that appeal that he has lodged.

I can also confirm that pursuant to Standing Order 4(2), there are two working groups or blocs in the Opposition. One is being led by the honourable Leader of the Opposition, and this is the Group of 16. You try and inform me of how you want to be called, but this is the message from the Chair. This group is now known as Group of 16 Bloc. Their Whip is honourable Jone Usamate and their Deputy Whip is honourable Ketan Lal.

The other Group of 9 Bloc, (I hope you do not mind; this is like being in prison or something), is being led by honourable Ioane Naivalurua. Their Whip is the honourable Viliame Naupoto and their Deputy Whip is the honourable Alipate Matasawalevu.

As far as the 26 honourable Members are concerned, all 26 Members remain Opposition Members, operating under the two working groups or blocs, and in that respect, the Speaker is mandated that under Standing Order 18(2) to ensure the rights and privileges of all honourable Members in Parliament and in the Standing and Select Committees.

In light of the two working groups or blocs in the Opposition and pursuant to Standing Order 114(4) and Standing Order 115(1), my Office will undertake a review of the membership of the six Standing Committees and the four Select Committees to ensure fair representation of the two working groups or blocs, and a further announcement will be made later this week.

Honourable Members, whilst we appreciate that we are now being faced with unprecedented situations pertaining to deregistration of a political party and Members continuing as Independents, I plead with you all that we must continue to engage in constructive dialogue as we have done previously or recently in the Business Committee where Members of the Opposition just put their heads together and decided on how to raise questions. As such, we will continue in that element of dialogue so as to ensure and uphold the best interest of the people that have elected you, and most importantly, our beloved country.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

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

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

- (1) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji - Provincial Councils Volume 6 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 110 of 2024*)

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

- (1) Fiji National University - Annual Report 2023 (*Parliamentary Paper No. 24 of 2024*); and
- (2) Fiji Teachers Registration Authority - Annual Report 2021–2022 (*Parliamentary Paper*)

No. 111 of 2024).

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate and Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises and Veteran Affairs;
- (2) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (3) Honourable Minister for Education; and
- (4) Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry.

The Ministers may speak for up to 20 minutes. I will then invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate, to speak on the statement of no more than five minutes. There will also be a response from the honourable Leader of the Opposition or the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate, to also speak for five minutes and there will be no other debate.

Pacific as the Ocean of Peace

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also like to welcome those who are watching us on livestream and also some young visitors from the United States of America seating in the gallery this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity to inform the House of the progress in the development of the concept of the Pacific as the Ocean of Peace. This week, Officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are taking the concept through the Pacific Islands Forum consultation process.

On 15th November, 1520, a long time ago, long after the first Pacific Islanders had reached this ocean, Ferdinand Magellan sailed into the Mar del Sur (The South Sea - named by Vasco Nunez Balboa, Spanish Explorer and Conquistador) and renamed it Mar Pacifico, the Pacific Ocean because of its calm waters.

The waters of the Pacific are not always calm, they can be stormy at times, violent and threatening. However, as Epeli Hau'ofa noted in his essay, *We are the Ocean: Selected Works* and I quote:

“Just as the sea is an open and ever flowing reality, so should our oceanic identity transcend all forms of insularity, to become one that is openly searching, inventive and welcoming”.

It is fitting to note therefore, Sir, that at a time of geostrategic tension, economic uncertainty and a changing climatic environment, those who are the custodians of the ocean welcome the proposal that the Pacific be an Ocean of Peace and agree to adopt some high-level principles, to guide efforts to realise this ambition and embed peace as a cornerstone of future policies and strategies.

After having presented to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders at their meeting in Rarotonga in November 2023, the leaders have tasked the PIF Secretariat to further develop the Ocean of Peace concept for consideration at the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Tonga later this month. This directive, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has since inspired deep reflections across the region about the opportunities inherent in that concept. It has also caught the attention of international

leaders like President Biden of the United States of America, President Xi Jing Ping of China, the Emperor of Japan and his Prime Minister Kishida and the Prime Minister of India, Shri Modi, and I am sure Her Excellency, the President of India who is coming to Fiji this afternoon also agrees.

As a region, the Pacific knows the value of peace as we lived through the horrors of its absence. This ocean and its diverse and vibrant lands have been a theatre of two world wars and a testing ground of the most dangerous weapons, the impacts of which are still felt today.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, this is not a passive region without agency, the collective voice of the Pacific is as loud as it is profound and proud. Building Pacific regionalism over many decades, the Forum family have created a strong basis to give effect to this vision of advancing the region as an Ocean of Peace, the greatest area on the globe under Christianity yet so fragile and prone to conflicts.

Let me be clear, Sir, the concept of peace comes from deep within our faith in God of peace, deference and justice that finds its expressions in our approach to issues that are embedded in the Pacific Way.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, an Ocean of Peace reflects the Pacific Way, as first defined in 1970 by the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara at the United Nations. It is owned and shaped by Pacific people and Pacific traditions. The concept recognises that whilst core values and Pacific identity are shared across the region, local customs and understandings vary. Humility, quiet leadership, reconciliation and communication run through these definitions. It is a shared commitment to the peaceful resolution of concerns, based on the Pacific Way of bringing people and nations together to find common ground and manage disagreements.

As we work towards the principles, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ocean of Peace concept offers an opportunity to re-embrace foundational tenets, principles and ethics of Pacific regionalism and to weave the threads of our past with our vision for the future. In this respect, the Ocean of Peace underscores several key themes:

- (1) Protecting and recognising the Pacific's stewardship of the environment and ocean that underpins the lives, livelihoods and very existence of our people and connects us, including, in response to climate change - which our leaders recognised as the greatest threat to existence, collective security and wellbeing.
- (2) The Pacific's longstanding support for and ongoing contribution to global peace-making systems, institutions and solutions which resonates with the calls for peace in many parts of the world today.
- (3) The sophistication and longevity of the Pacific's advocacy in favour of core global platforms underpinning peace and security, including freedom of navigation, arms control and non-proliferation of hostilities arrangements.
- (4) The 2050 Strategy vision of a shared responsibility for maintaining Pacific peace and security and for building capability to meet the region's needs.
- (5) The *Boe Declaration's* broad definition of security as well as mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence.
- (6) Statements reinforcing the Pacific's peaceful example to uphold international law and urge others to refrain from actions that undermine peace and security in the Blue Pacific and beyond.
- (7) The opportunities and benefits for the Blue Pacific in enhancing regional economic connectivity and integration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ocean of Peace is a signal that we seek a region in which strategic competition is managed, where stability is the touchstone of regional relationships, where coercion

is eschewed and where differences are resolved peacefully.

The Ocean of Peace, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is both an aspiration and a pathway to a regional arrangement crafted by the States of the Pacific region, but also respected by other powers of the broader Indo Pacific region, hence our desire that when they enter the region, they tone down and tune in to the ways of the Pacific. Yet, the Ocean of Peace cannot survive as a unilateral assertion. It rests, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a shared commitment by all states in the region to put a stable peace at the centre of their strategic policies. Through the Ocean of Peace, we recognise the right of the people to peace and reaffirm the strong resolve of our people to maintain and strengthen international peace and security. By adopting this concept, Mr. Speaker, we declare and secure that right.

We are conscious of the determination of the Pacific Island countries to preserve their independence, their sovereignty and their territorial integrity, and to develop their relations under conditions of peace and liberty.

We are convinced, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of the importance of promoting peace and cooperation in Oceania for the benefit of the Pacific people, in particular, and humankind in general.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are convinced of the need to preserve the region from acts of militarisation, arms race, and, above all, nuclear weapons - their threats of use and use.

We recognise the interest and responsibility of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) membership to promote regional cooperation for economic development and peace. Working through the PIF and recognising that this is a long-term objective, Fiji promotes an Ocean of Peace based on a set of principles that recognises and complements existing frameworks.

The Pacific Leaders' guidance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the refinement of the principles and situating it within the existing landscape of Pacific regionalism and global engagement would ensure it meets the needs and expectations of the PIF membership in a complex and contested environment, regionally and beyond.

As a concept, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ocean of Peace is an opportunity and should be seen as a beacon of hope, that could spur on the evolution of our region's longstanding commitment to peace and prosperity for our people.

The Ocean of Peace concept promotes and harnesses the innovation of the Blue Pacific and the unique perspective our region brings on issues of global significance, most especially at a time that the world is going through today.

The Ocean of Peace, Mr. Speaker, Sir, offers this generation the opportunity to echo and embrace the determination, and I quote: "to ensure, so far as lies within their power, that the bounty and beauty of the land and sea in their region shall remain the heritage of their peoples and their descendants in perpetuity to be enjoyed by all in peace", which is clarified for those members who are party to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, commonly referred to as the Treaty of Rarotonga.

The Ocean of Peace, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also offers a platform to expand for a global audience, concepts central to the Pacific Way, including to articulate how those within and beyond the Blue Pacific can embrace mechanisms to work together and resolve differences respectfully and with understanding.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Leader of the Opposition, or his designate, for your contribution.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me, first of all, acknowledge and thank the honourable Prime Minister for the Ministerial Statement on the development of the concept of the Pacific as an 'Ocean of Peace', that he has delivered in this august House this morning.

Let me say from the very beginning Sir, in my response that we very much look forward to this, not only to this side of the House, but every Fijian because this is something that we first heard of, as stated by the honourable Prime Minister, when he attended the Leaders Meeting in Rarotonga in November last year. We did some follow-ups with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and we were told that Fiji was to develop the concept further, as alluded to by the honourable Prime Minister, and be presented in the meeting in Tonga this year and, of course, we look forward to that.

But let me acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister as well for assuring us that this concept of peace recognises and complements the existing frameworks and particularly, as agreed to by our Leaders, the *Boe Declaration* and the 2050 Strategy, which we are familiar with. So, I wish to acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister for that, Sir.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I say that in acknowledging the statement, we all know how important our ocean is, not only to Fiji, but other Pacific Island countries, whose livelihood and survival depend, to a large extent, on the oceans around us and moreover, its extractable into the *Boe Declaration* and the 2050 Pacific Strategy for a Blue Pacific continent.

If I may just refer to that document, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think in the strategic context and the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, it does state that the Forum Leaders endorsed the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, espousing their vision for the Pacific as a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity so that all Pacific people can live free, healthy and productive lives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, whilst much of our livelihood is derived from the ocean to a large extent, it has also become an avenue of great vulnerability to our nations. The Blue Pacific Strategy seeks to foster security and peace in the region, and the *Boe Declaration* on the other hand, affirms that the extended concept of security addresses the wide range of security issues in the region, both traditional and non-traditional. I am sure we are familiar with these documents, there are six strategic areas:

- (1) Climate Change-being high in the list;
- (2) Human Security issues;
- (3) Resource Security issues;
- (4) Environmental issues;
- (5) Cyber-Security issues; and
- (6) Trans-National Crime.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are noble aspirations, and we acknowledge Government for that. Of course, our people deserve to live in an environment where security is guaranteed, and peace is abundant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last couple of months, we have been overwhelmed with the report of major drug finds and the impacts of drug abuse within our societies, and much of these have succumb to our shores via our oceans. I know the honourable Minister for Home Affairs is doing his best in terms of monitoring of our vast ocean that we have, given the limited resources that we have, but we are thankful to the partnership, particularly SDG17 on partnership that will help us to ensure that we have a secure region.

May I just conclude in the few remaining seconds, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to emphasise that, again, we are moving out to the region, but section 13 of the Climate Change Act 2021 stipulates our responsibilities in as far as oceans is concerned.

Honourable Prime Minister, Sir, I know that it comes under your portfolio, particularly on the National Ocean Policy Steering Committee, Mr. Speaker, Sir. This is a very important Committee. I know that it has been started previously, and I followed up with your staff, honourable Prime Minister, Sir, they have been meeting regularly, which is good, but that is a very, very important Committee not only for Fiji, but particularly linking us.

We have just completed SIDS 4 in Antigua and Barbuda. These are all issues that are relevant, and you have raised these issues too, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Tonga, during the Pacific Islands Parliaments Group (PIPG) meeting last year. We look forward to this, as I have said, it is a new concept, but we look forward to its implementation and we thank the honourable Prime Minister again, and the Government for this initiative.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate for your contribution.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to first thank the honourable Prime Minister and acknowledge his Ministerial Statement on such a very important matter for the world today. The world is crying for peace, and everyone wants peace, including this part of the world - the Pacific, we call our home. The fundamentals of peace in this part of the world has already been articulated very well by the honourable Prime Minister. I have had to take the time to follow his earlier speeches, not only here but also in the region, as well in the way that he has presented to the global world.

What is ahead of us are the challenges of the '20 fast century'. I say '20 fast' not the '21st' world. The world is moving so fast that there are things that you and I can control, and there are things that we cannot control, and one of which is conflict.

Mr. Speaker, from our group this side, we endorse, acknowledge and fully support the Government's effort, led by the honourable Prime Minister, to put into place an ocean of peace. Not long ago, this part of our home was referred to as the 'arc of instability.' The honourable Prime Minister is quite familiar with that. We were labelled as the arc of instability. From our view on this side of the House, it is about time that we change this into the Ocean of Peace or the Arc of Peace, Prosperity and Stability.

Our view from this side, Mr. Speaker, that the way forward to bring the world to our part of the Pacific that we create the right environment, the right situation, and we have in place leaders that not only foster and stand on the firm belief for peace, we create the environment of peace.

We wish the honourable Prime Minister well, as he embarks on the next Pacific Islands Forum meeting, which we believe this is where it is going to be discussed and endorsed. We wish you well, honourable Prime Minister, as you posture our part of the world as the Ocean of Peace.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we adjourn for tea, honourable Members, I would like to add that we have also just returned from our recent trip to Indonesia to a regional meeting, including the Pacific. They are identifying themselves as having their borders within the Pacific Ocean, and they were looking forward to knowing how best we can address issues that were outstanding, especially in trying to address what the honourable Prime Minister has just said. We turn it into an Ocean of Peace – the ocean that brings us together

and identifies us together, should be a catalyst for peace within our region.

We are so grateful to hear that this morning, and that will be something that will be pursued, subject, of course, to the various ratifications that we have undersigned as a country, to guide us in the Pacific as well, as highlighted by the honourable Leader of the Opposition. That, honourable Members, is certainly a worthy cause to pursue, especially in the name of peace within our region.

It would be remiss of me as well not to acknowledge, even though the honourable Prime Minister has sounded his acknowledgement, on the presence in the gallery of some students, I understand, with same coloured shirts which is known locally as *kalavata*, and I apologise I do not have information here with me as to where you are from, but we appreciate your presence this morning in the gallery in being with us as the honourable Members deliberate on issues that are before them. We invite you as well to the tea that you may share with honourable Members.

Honourable Members, the House is now adjourned for tea, and we will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.30 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.05 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we shall now move on. I now call on the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications to deliver his Statement.

Update on the Business Mission to North America

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vinaka* and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to provide a Ministerial Statement of the update on the Business Mission to North America that was held on 4th May, 2024 to 14th May, 2024. The Business Mission served as a crucial platform for fostering bilateral relations, enhancing trade and economic relations with the North America region and, most importantly, reconnecting or rekindling our connections with our diaspora.

The Business Mission was organised in partnership with Investment Fiji, the Fiji Trade Commission of North America, and the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.

It featured business forums, networking diaspora events, business meetings, site visits, and meetings with government officials, investors across three locations, namely, Surrey in British Columbia, San Francisco and California in the USA, and Toronto in Ontario, Canada. It was an absolute honour, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to lead this unique Fijian delegation composed of Government representatives, private sector investors, and our exporters.

Not only was this a large mission to the North American Region, which had over 25 Delegates representing wide range of businesses and agencies, we also visited the three separate locations, as I have mentioned.

Members of the Fiji Delegation included senior representatives from Investment Fiji, the Ministry of Trade, the Fiji National Provident Fund (FNPF), Fiji Airways, iTaukei Land Trust Board (TLTB), BSP Life (Fiji) Ltd, Outsource Fiji, Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, the Trade Commission, and we were accompanied by Fiji's Honorary Consuls.

The Fiji delegation also included exporters from Agro Marketing Authority of Fiji, Green Kavalicious (Fiji) Pte Ltd, Pleass Global Ltd, Ranviz Fresh Farm Produce, Sea and Soil Fiji, Lami Kava, Green Gold Kava, and Road King Farms.

Given this Mission had both an Investment Delegation and an Exporter Delegation, separate programmes were coordinated on selected days where the investment delegation had separate meetings from the exporters.

The exporter delegation engaged in Fiji and Island Stores, warehouse, distributor visits, and had an opportunity to meet and engage in dialogue with store owners on Fiji products, particularly in the Bay Area, United States, and also in Ontario, Canada, and Surrey.

The Business Forums were the marquee events at each location, which enabled delegations to present to invited participants on Fiji's economic overview, investment opportunities, business environment and incentives, key travel statistics, Fiji tourism sector, key markets and future plans.

Agencies, such as Outsource Fiji, TLTB and the Ministry of Lands presented in the Business Forums together with FNPF and BSP Life.

Notably, Sir, at the Business Forum in San Francisco, senior executives from both Google and the Wonderful Company presented on their investments and plans for Fiji, and it set the stage for two of Fiji's largest investors to speak very positively about their potential and future plans. In that meeting, Fiji Water or Wonderful Company made the announcement about commercial agriculture in Fiji. We, on this side of the House believe that it is a transformative announcement for our country. At the same time, Google, which is approaching its entry date to Fiji, which is sometimes this year, announced or reconfirmed their entry into Fiji and the exciting prospects that lay ahead in terms of our engagement between us and Google.

The Business Forums offered exporters an opportunity to display their products and to present their products to the invited participants. This provided an opportunity for businesses and importers from North America to engage. It was also seen that the presence of our diaspora is quite large, and for me, Mr. Speaker, very exciting. Canada particularly is a place where we have perhaps neglected over the years, in particular in Ontario where the mission provided a great platform to reconnect with our diaspora and meet with our business leaders and government officials and re-introduce their country of birth to them and invite them to come and do business at home.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to the three Business Forums, there was a significant number of high level trade and investment-related meetings. This included meetings with senior representatives of Google at their Google Cloud Campus. We also visited the Wonderful Company's Pomegranate and Solar Facility in Del Ray, San Francisco which probably forbodes what the Wonderful Company or Fiji Water plans to do in Fiji. They plan to replace their currently diesel-powered factory with solar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as some of our diaspora members would say or I would like to say, they have become "sleeper agents" in North America. As I have mentioned, we have invited them to return home and together rebuild Fiji. I would like to acknowledge, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the hardworking people in North America who worked behind the scenes to ensure not only the success of the Business Mission, but we were welcoming warmed as if we never left Fiji.

In Surrey, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we were honoured to be accorded a traditional welcome by the Semiahmoo First Nations and the iTaukei community. This event was coordinated by our iTaukei Cultural Society in British Columbia, including a *talanoa* session at the Peace Arch Heritage Hall in Surrey. The Fijian Association of Canada also hosted a community event with discussions focused on diaspora investment, tourism growth and economic diversification at the Fijian Centre in Surrey Canada. The Fiji Association of Canada has been the cornerstone of for the diaspora unity for the past 56 years, making it the largest Fijian Association outside Fiji.

At San Francisco, a *talanoa* session was also organised for the Bay Area diaspora, where they were informed of investment opportunities and incentives in Fiji, along with issues and challenges faced by the diaspora community there. In Ontario, Canada, the Fiji an Association of Ontario warmly welcomed the Fiji delegation and hosted us to both the networking and community business event.

As we proactively continue to rebuild Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to assure our diaspora community in North America that we have heard their concerns and raised them in the margins of the business mission and are working towards addressing their issues. The Coalition Government, of course, will try and ensure that their issues are addressed. We are working closely with the Fiji Immigration Department to address some issues raised by our diaspora regarding passports and

citizenship services, and hopefully we can provide some solutions in the near future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir I would like to talk briefly about kava. The opportunity to meet with the US-based kava association and various actors in the kava sector was indeed timely to capitalise on the large growing market for kava in the United States of America. During the mission, Fiji's kava exporters who were part of the delegation met key large western market and Pacific Island diaspora buyers who import and distribute kava to kava bars, retail and online. Just as an aside, Sir, there are about 400 kava bars in the West Coast including Miami, and they are growing at about 10 per month, I am told. As the kava industry is anticipated to become a billion-dollar industry in the future, the Business Mission reinforced the desire to continue to pursue the Kava Bill in the interest to protecting the kava industry and establishing quality and food safety standards of Fiji's kava.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is huge potential in kava. We, as a country need to play our part and ensure that kava exported to the United States of America meets the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and import requirements, and of course, by extension creates more jobs and wealth in Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the leg to Ontario, we did meet with the Government of Ontario. I had the privilege of meeting the Premier of Ontario and the Minister for Intergovernmental Affairs, honourable Doug Ford, a very inspirational leader, where we had very positive discussions around areas of mutual understanding, cooperation and opportunities for trade and investment.

I also had the opportunity to meet with the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in Ontario, honourable Ted Arnott, and the delegation was provided a private tour and welcomed in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Subsequently, we met with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, honourable Lisa Thompson, and the Associate Minister for Small Business, Economic Development and Job Creation, honourable Ninan Tangri with discussions that centred around potential areas for collaboration and support.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Ontario, we also attended some high level meetings and networking events. A significant one was, of course, being hosted to a private invite only networking event by the Toronto- Dominion (TD) Bank Group. The TD Bank Group is one of the five largest Banks in Canada. We were invited by senior members of that Bank to share the perspectives on Fiji. There are some potential leads that have come out of that discussion. In North America, we also had very fruitful discussions along the way.

Mr. Speaker, I guess in terms of trade missions, there is always the question of what you are bringing back to your home country. I am pleased to report that in terms of potential investment generated from the meetings, there was about \$108 million leads generated through trade and investment potential, and that is excluding the \$200 million that is currently going to be invested by Google in the Data Centre. I am happy to report that there will be delegations from Canada coming into Fiji very soon.

Mr. Speaker, from what we saw during the visit, there is substantial potential in the North American region for trade and investment, including diaspora investment. This mission has acted as a platform to connect with the diaspora, meet current and potential investors, develop networks and strengthen our relationships between Government agencies and partners of Fiji. I wish to assure this august House that we will continue to explore and strengthen our networks in the North American region.

The Canadian opportunity, Sir, is quite exciting particularly when it has the same demographics and dynamics as the Australian economy, and it is almost like as if we were entering another major opportunity when we visited Canada. We look forward to further engagements with Canada and the Canadian businesses over the next few months.

Before I end, Mr. Speaker, I would like to place on record my appreciation for those who helped particularly those on the ground that helped with putting together of the event, I particular name the Honorary Consuls in the United States of America and Canada and Mr. Sam Basra, who was instrumental in putting together the visit to Canada.

Mr. Speaker, on all matrices, this visit by this Government into North America has been a success and we look forward to continuing to work together with both the United States of America and Canada to explore the opportunities that lie ahead of us.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Parliament and Ministers, first of all, let me say congratulations to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade for recognising the importance of that particular region with respect to furthering Fiji's trade, et cetera to North America.

Mr. Speaker, this has actually been an ongoing issue with respect to North America in terms of bringing investment into Fiji and also growing our export market as rightfully pointed out by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister. One of the most important issues that needs to be attended to and is critical as a component in all of these, is to ensure that our biosecurity pathways are cleared. I know the honourable Minister is hard at work trying to ensure that all of that is done, because one of the most important things for us in terms of foreign exchange, et cetera is cargo export.

Right now, Fiji's kava market, most of the kava is actually consumed locally, if I am correct, Sir, I think it is only 8 percent that actually gets exported. It is a huge following in North America. As rightfully pointed out, there are kava bars popping up everywhere. So, there is a demand for all of these, Mr. Speaker, and from what I understand, it only takes five days for a packed kava parcel to go from here to Montreal. There is room for Fiji to make considerable amount of money in North America in that industry and I take my hat off to the honourable Minister and I wish him well with respect to endeavouring into the kava industry and making it more viable for Fiji to export to Canada.

This is one of the countries, there are issues that need to be dealt with with Health Canada. I am glad that he actually met the Minister for Agriculture also in Canada and try and get these things ironed out. One of the other things also, Sir, we must realise that we have a huge diaspora that actually lives in that particular portion of the world. Pre 1987, Fiji had a visa free to Canada and I am hoping also that the honourable Minister managed to have some discussions with respect to that issue because we have a huge diaspora and I think pretty much quite a few people who live in Fiji have relatives there. It would be an important issue that would go hand-in-hand with our trade with them.

In terms of the rest of the North America, the trade that actually happens, the larger number out of the figures comes from Fiji Water export. We need to increase our trade and I think that is the only region where the balance of trade is in our favour, most of the places around the world are not in our favour but this is a one place and it comes out of the export of Fiji Water. We are exporting less to that particular region and these kinds of missions are important for us to grow our export sector, but at the same time, the encouragement also needs to come for our local growers to try and pursue those avenues. This is why I pointed out the issue regarding biosecurity.

Mr. Speaker, Canada also has a growing e-commerce industry. It exports many other things also, but it has a growing e-commerce industry and I hope the honourable Minister managed to tap into some people there to see if there was room for improvement and investment into Fiji. The travel and tourism industry also is something that is important to North America. These were discussions that were ongoing for many, many years but nothing has actually come to provision.

I will wait, Mr. Speaker, to see how many of these projects that have come on board will come into fruition and I am hopeful that Investment Fiji will facilitate them as quickly as possible because I know that one of the things that comes out of this North Americans is that, they want things done quickly, approvals and processes, et cetera need to take place really quickly so that they can get their projects into the space and actually start exporting and importing whatever it is that they need to do.

One area that I am not sure if the honourable Minister managed to tap into, they have a huge cannabis industry also and I think the medicinal cannabis industry that the honourable Minister has spoken about earlier, they are certainly experts in that particular area and I hope the honourable Minister managed to speak to some people to see if we can get some assistance whether we should be doing that or not.

With those few words, I thank the honourable Minister for a well led mission. I think the right amount of people and the right people actually went across and most definitely, Sir, from our perspective too we have heard some positive reports regarding the mission that actually went across.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade for his Statement this morning on the important work of diversifying a market, trying to improve, increase the sphere of our trade. There is a commodity that Fiji has, that is, our mahogany. Our mahogany is the second largest plantation in the world, second to Brazil. Very unique feature of our mahogany they say is that because it has those pin knots. Fiji mahogany has got those little black dots. I think that is a commodity as we go into our trade missions that we need to advertise or promote more because right now our mahogany usually goes down to America via South America, and it is really timber.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one time, I sounded out a very rich businessman, a billionaire in fact and I asked him about mahogany in Fiji, I said, “what would you do with the mahogany if it belonged to you?” He basically said, “Mahogany is a rich man’s furniture. I would process it halfway here in Fiji so that we can get employment, a bit of down streaming and then send it across to one of those companies that do those signature furniture’s, put their signature on it and sell it.”

I urge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister in further trade missions that we should be trying to promote our mahogany products, not only the timber but ways in which we can tap into those niche markets because ours is a plantation mahogany. In countries in South America where mahogany grows freely, there is a lot of restrictions put on it because of deforestation in the areas where they grow.

On the other point, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on our diaspora, there is this big problem that we are facing now which is brain drain and the way to perhaps arrest brain drain is to turn it into a brain drain gain. As they go out, they go and invest, they learn how to run their businesses, they are well educated, but we would like to turn that brain drain into a brain drain gain, and that gain comes when our policies, for them here locally, is correct - policies with immigration and how they can come back, policies with how they can come in and set up their businesses. I know that we had a seen this big flow of people out of Fiji, as brain drain but we can turn that around, Mr. Speaker, Sir, into a brain drain gain by looking at the policies that we have to ensure that it can attract them to come back and share with us the expertise that they have and help build our country as well. Again, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his Statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the Minister for Education to deliver his Statement.

Update on the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition and fellow Members of Parliament; I thank you for the opportunity to present my Ministerial Statement, providing an update on the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS) and the new initiatives for 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on behalf of the Coalition Government, I would also like to wish TSLS a happy 10th Year Anniversary.

Sir, the Coalition Government is making serious strides towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on quality education. The TSLS plays a critical role by ensuring that the targets on increasing access to tertiary education for youth, including girls, and people with disabilities are met through innovative scholarship and study grant policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must also thank the TSLS Board, the CEO and Management for coming up with recommendations for new initiatives and value adding to existing schemes in the 2024-2025 Budget, which are based on the premise and rationale to allow greater access for human capital development to commensurately mitigate loss of labour through migration and have demand-driven skills sets.

As announced and passed in the 2024-2025 National Budget, \$150.5 million is allocated to sponsor 10,830 new, and to continue to fund 9,940 sponsored students, and this allocation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the highest ever for new intakes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS came up with a recommendation to introduce two new overseas schemes for cost sharing overseas PhD and Masters Scholarship and merit-based Postgraduate Diploma specialisation in in-service overseas scholarship. I thank TSLS for this initiative, as we need more people with specialist qualification to continue to build intellectual capital in disciplines of Medical and Health Services, Engineering, Climate Change, Marine, Forestry, Public Policy and Analysis, Economic Modelling and Policies, Public Financing and Veterinary Science, and in the fields of social science.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the TSLS for brokering partnerships with four Australian Universities, who will bear tuition fee, whilst Government will take care of stipend and miscellaneous. Funding students for overseas scholarships is highly costly to the taxpayers, as it averages \$350,000 to \$400,000 for a degree programme. Therefore, the PhD will cost more, and Government would like to thank the following Australian Universities for coming onboard on this scheme with TSLS. They are:

- (1) Western Sydney University;
- (2) Swinburne University of Technology;
- (3) University of Newcastle;
- (4) Queensland University of Technology; and
- (5) Monash University who will sign an MOU later to join this scheme.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS came up with a new initiative on Graduate Business Startup Scheme. This was timely, as the Coalition Government wants our graduates to also be job creators. In the 2024-2025 Budget, 30 TSLS sponsored graduates are provided with the opportunity to undergo training and start up a business through training and mentoring by the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation (FCEF), and this initiative will allow graduates to be job creators.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is taking another bold step by partnering with the employers with specialised training facilities and resources to train students and employ them after successful completion. And I must thank the TSLS for coming up with the idea, as a new scheme of Industry/Employer Based Skills Qualification Scheme will provide opportunity to 300 students to get trained by the Higher Education Commission Fiji (HECF) accredited employer-based providers for skills qualification at Certificate III, IV or Diploma Level 5 Programmes. This will reduce the employer concerns and quality, and this is a game changer scheme to allow TVET to be employer or industry led.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to value add the Micro Qualification Grants, two new categories of White Good Repairs and Existing Micro Business training on book-keeping and marketing are added.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the TSLS Board and Management firmly believes in providing transparent information to the public, being the taxpayer-funded organisation. On 2nd August, 2024, TSLS launched the publicly accessible Community Awareness Scholarship Handbook and this is a testament. This is to assist students, parents and guardians to be much more informed and get informed decision on what programmes are offered under TSLS. The handbook can also be accessible online under the TSLS website, www.tsls.com.fj.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS will be conducting Careers Teachers Workshop around the country so that Careers Teachers will also have full information on all the scholarships and grant schemes and are able to provide right advice to students and parents.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this will be followed by school visitations to majority of the schools in Fiji, including the rural and maritime schools, to enlighten the students on the schemes available in the 2024-2025 financial year, the eligibility criteria, application requirements and the application process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS has also opened the application for Hardship Assistance Scheme on 2nd August, 2024, to allow those students who have completed Year 1 privately and has a pass rate of 50 percent to be assisted from Semester 2 of 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS will open the application for the first round of Micro-Qualification Grant on 13th September, 2024, followed by the opening of application for all other Schemes in December for the 2025 academic year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the TSLS has some remarkable achievements in the last few years. The launch of the in-house developed Employer Connect Portal marks the first of its kind in the Pacific. The portal was developed which allows graduates to search for job vacancies according to area of their specialisation.

Sir, the new online application system was also introduced by TSLS which allows students to seamlessly apply for scholarship. The new online application portal is set to redefine the standard of educational support in Fiji. It takes only five minutes to ten minutes to apply, if the applicant has all the pre-requisites.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS is committed to providing students with end-to-end care, which means a lot more is done in terms of providing scaffolding support, than just providing scholarships. It is pleasing to know that TSLS has a three-tier support system which not only caters for its current students, but students who have graduated as well, providing full support from scholarship awarding to employment. In addition to weekly learning sessions for current students, postgraduate care is provided to graduates as a search for employment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS reviewed scholarship priority areas and developed a 10-Year Human Capital Development Plan, independently done by Professor Hitendra Pillay, who is an expert from Queensland University of Technology. This plan is now used for allocation of funds for scholarships in the priority areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the strategic priority areas for TSLS in the Strategic Plan is to provide excellent customer service, and I am proud to say, as one of the line Ministers, that TSLS has done remarkably well in this area.

On 30th May, 2024, TSLS opened a new office in Nadi and this office is built around this objective, to provide excellent customer services to students in the West. This office has a bigger area for customer service, learning support facility and self-serving student kiosks. I applaud TSLS for increasing its footprint in the Western Division by opening a Nadi Office to serve the South-Western students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in ensuring convenient service to students, TSLS has come forward to take over the function of bond monitoring, travel clearance and full clearance from the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) effective from 1st January, 2025. This will make TSLS a one stop agency for providing investment statements, bond and travel clearance.

To effectively carry out this function, the opening of the new Nadi Office will provide convenience to the students and graduates, as it is in close proximity to the International Airport and Immigration Office. The TSLS will work closely with the Department of Immigration for listing and removal of names from the Immigration Controversial list.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS has strategic priority focus on ICT transformation. Together with the opening of the new Nadi Office, the new TSLS website and the Sponsorship Information Management System was lodged, which is aligned to this strategic priority.

The TSLS is now proving to be amongst the most technologically advanced institutions in Fiji, which suits them as their core clients are tech savvy. The revamped TSLS website is more convenient and easier to use and contains every information that students and stakeholders need to know about the scholarships. The website includes disability-user functions, bond calculator, is highly mobile responsive, user-friendly, and users can access information and online application system from anywhere on any device.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the new patent Sponsorship Information Management System is an enhanced version of recording sponsorship data. This shows a continuous commitment of TSLS to improve the management and accessibility of sponsorship data. The newly developed platform includes student module, payment module and integration with the University system, the Ministry of Education's Fiji Education Management Information System (FEMIS) and Immigration system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, TSLS has presence on major social media platforms and a dedicated officer providing service through all the platforms. The online Escalation Complaint Management System ensures that queries are given one day turnaround time. The students can trace their complaints on this system.

The online chat service will become 24 hours by next year to the student, as Artificial Intelligent (AI) tools are being added. Currently, it is only from 8.00 a.m. to 4.30p.m. from Mondays to Fridays.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the Board, the CEO and the Management of TSLS for envisioning and putting service at the forefront of its function. The institution has won a Fiji Business Excellence Award at the Commitment Level twice and this external and independent testament of operational and management excellence is the indication that TSLS as a 10-year-old institution is a trailblazer.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I seek your understanding and approval to submit a copy of the TSLS 2025 Community Awareness Handbook for the Parliamentary recording purposes, and I offer my best wishes to the Board, the CEO, staff and students for the better utilisation of the Government support system that is now being provided.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

MR. SPEAKER.- I may now call on the Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak in reply.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition and honourable Members of Parliament; first and foremost, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Education for his Ministerial Statement on the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLS).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Tertiary Education and Loan Scheme (TELS) was introduced in 2014 with the focus of achieving the best educational outcomes for Fiji and ensuring that funding is spent on scholarship and loans, which would result in contributing to Fiji's economic growth, workforce development and livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the TSLS has spent \$1.44 billion from the Budget to assist approximately 68,000 students in its last 10 years of operation. The total amount of taxpayers' money spent has indicated a huge contribution to Fiji that is prioritised through tertiary education and training programmes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, previously, all students meeting the educational requirements at any tertiary institution were given loans, but that is not the case today.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are many students who have received admission into programmes at universities but are studying privately. This is because they did not qualify for a scholarship or loan.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the previous Government established a sustainable funding model for tertiary education by creating a revolving fund for future students intending to study in tertiary institutions. Unfortunately, this Government has created an unsustainable financial model where, every year, taxpayers fork out around \$150 million for tertiary education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$150 million could have gone towards public goods, hospitals, roads, bridges and other important developments.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. H. CHAND.- The Government is given budgetary support by Australia and New Zealand. Students in these countries are on higher education contribution scheme, not like ours. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reality is that many of our graduates are now sitting at home without jobs and many more will join them.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. H. CHAND.- The Government has imposed 50 percent penalties for forfeiting bonds, if they wish to seek opportunities offshore. How does this help our graduates or the economy?

Remittances sent by unemployed students working abroad can contribute positively to our foreign exchange. Unfortunately, this Government is not creating jobs, but punishing the unemployed graduates.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Absolute shame!

HON. H. CHAND.- The Government decision to write off students' debts has forced over \$600 million directly equating to the current budget deficit. Converting the students loan scheme to a scholarship is not sustainable for a small economy like ours. Even larger economies like Australia, continue to maintain a loan scheme for tertiary education. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the leader of the Group of 9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister and the honourable Leader of the Opposition, I thank the honourable Minister this morning for his Ministerial Statement - a very educational one, and I also beg to differ from honourable Hem Chand in terms of his response this morning, given that the TSLS was a making of the previous Administration, but the statement this morning by the honourable Minister talks about how this particular institution has developed.

The announcement of the budget more recently, it has developed the four new scholarship schemes that are in the TSLS and also the value adding and expanding of existing schemes which we are very happy about. It also considers other areas like micro qualification grant to mitigate skills shortage for labour and targeting unemployed youths. One of the statements that was just made by the honourable Member just before me in terms of unemployment, those who have graduated but are unemployed.

One classic example was when we had our Women's Parliament last week. The Sergeant at Arms, the lady police was a Bachelor of Science graduate, but was recruited by the Fiji Police Force. This is how they are creating employment. In terms of graduates, finding other means of employment through the Fiji Police Force, they can further their studies. So, these are some of the things that we must also consider. One of the things that

I would like to applaud is the Merit Based Higher Education – Level 7 Scheme. Sir, \$27.4 million has been awarded, it will be catering for 700 awards under this scheme. From these awards, it will reserve for rural and maritime for Year 13 students 100 awards. This is very important because in the previous administration where we had awards cut off marks and some of our students from the maritime areas and rural areas, they were left off because of the cut-off marks. We are thankful that we are given 100 awards from the 700 awards that will be reserved for rural and maritime areas. Given the standard of our secondary schools in rural and maritime areas, they are not the same as those in the urban areas.

The other thing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is in terms of the Apprenticeship Scheme that is also under TSLS where \$1 million would be allocated for the Scheme and 50 percent tuition fee to encourage employers to pay apprenticeship students to offset expenses or provide wages top-up. This is something that is welcomed for the Industrial Attachment Allowance Scheme that is also under TSLS. I would like to thank the TSLS Board and also the CEO, Dr. Hasmukh Lal, for the innovation that has been done. In other areas where TSLS can also improve is taking up other courses for other disciplined forces like the RFMF TFs that are already there that can be used so that they can get

permanent employment or employment rather than waiting for calls to come on duty in the camp.

Those are a few things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of my contribution this morning and our response and I thank the honourable Minister for his Ministerial Statement this morning and also to all the students out there in the university, we wish you all well in your education.

Maritime Pine Project

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to deliver my statement on the Maritime Pine Project carried out by the Ministry of Forestry, in collaboration with our partners Fiji Pine Limited, Fiji Pine Trust and the landowners. Mr. Speaker, our logging operations in the maritime islands is a vital project that contributes to our economy and supports our local communities. It is also a project where the Government has also re-strategised and invested heavily since this financial year; recognising and addressing the situation of resource owners on these islands.

Mr. Speaker, the Government introduced the Maritime Pine Package Project with the aim of ensuring the sustainable use and management of maritime pine resources through investments in machines, skills training and inventory of pine resources. The project was introduced to support maritime communities to use their mature pine plantation resources for the construction of their houses or needed renovations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since logging contractors from the mainland find it unprofitable to barge logs or timber across to the mainland and sell them, the Government stepped in to support by subsidising part of the operations through the purchase of portable sawmill machines. The main objective is to support the maritime islands' pine schemes to be equipped with appropriate harvesting machines and tools with the capacity to economically harvest, process and market their matured pine trees. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the overall socio-economic impact of this project is to improve the livelihoods of maritime villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the work started in Cicia and in Gau. Since then, the Government has been injecting funding support into the harvesting and processing of maritime pine plantations as a capital project in the annual budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, through the Maritime Pine Development Programme, the Ministry has been able to support maritime islands to develop their pine industry as well as provide timber to local communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are various measurable outputs and outcomes from these maritime projects, support and beneficiaries including the communities, private sector and the nation as a whole. For our maritime communities, there are financial benefits, for example, in in Muani, payment of \$60 per tonne of logs to landowners resulting so far in a total payout of \$0.8 million. This direct financial support will enhance the livelihoods of the local landowners and their families.

Secondly, there are employment opportunities for communities, the project will create numerous job opportunities in logging, transportation and port operations, leading to increase employment in the local communities.

Thirdly, infrastructure development, the construction and upgrading of port facilities guided by the Fiji Roads Authority will improve local infrastructure, providing long term benefits to the communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the private sector will also benefit firstly through economic activity. The release of \$647,000 to Tropik Wood Industries Limited will stimulate economic activity within the private sector through barge subsidy. Secondly, business opportunities, logistics and transportation sectors will benefit from the movement of six barge loads, each carrying 2,000 tonnes of logs, creating new business opportunities and partnership. Thirdly, sustainable practices, by adhering to sustainable logging practices, the private sector can demonstrate its commitment to environmental stewardship, corporate responsibility, enhancing its reputation and ensuring long-term viability.

For the nation as a whole, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are also a significant benefits:

- (1) Expected economic growth - the overall economic contribution of this logging operation, including job creation and business opportunities will support national economic growth.
- (2) Sustainable development - the project aligns with our national goals of promoting sustainable practices, ensuring that our natural resources are managed responsibly for future generations.
- (3) Enhance agriculture – the improvements in port facilities and related infrastructure will have lasting positive impacts on national logistics and trade capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for example, the project has been able to provide timber to build more than 50 housing structures. This has a total estimated value of more than \$400,000. Harvesting has proven extremely fruitful over the life of the project. We have seen harvesting in the village of Waiqori in Oneata with a total log volume of 160 metres cubed, sawn timber of 92 metres cubed and 19 housing structures built. Tubou and Levuka Villages on Lakeba have log volume of 70.601 metre cubed, sawn timber at 40.591 metre cubed and eight housing structures built. Nasau and Korotolu Villages on Moce Island, a total of 129.979 metre cubed sawn timber, 73.919 metre cubed and a total of 15 housing structures built. The village of Mataso in Kadavu with a total of 450 metres cubed of log volume, sawn timber of 256 metres cubed and a total of 15 housing structures built.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have also seen the development of vital infrastructure, for example, the construction and inauguration of a jetty in Muani, Kadavu to enable the export of logs. The first logging barge departed in June this year.

The Narocake Pine Scheme in Gau has also been assisted through the Ministry of Forestry's Pine Development Capital Project in processing pine posts. The Ministry has committed a total of \$25,000 and produced a volume of 79 cubic metres worth of \$59, 724 from the sales. Mr. Speaker, Sir, with these funds, the Narocake Pine Scheme was able to purchase a three-tonne canopy truck. Together with the assistance from the Ministry of Trade and Co-operatives, the scheme managed to develop the Narocake Co-operative Limited as part of our community development programme using the Fiji Pine Trust Grant under Head 32 on Maritime Development. Mr. Speaker, Moala and Lakeba has also been assisted through the Housing Rehabilitation Programme - 15 houses in Moala and 11 houses in Lakeba had been provided for with a total value of more than \$150,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the coming financial year, the Ministry will continue to expand maritime pine projects to ensure the socio-economic benefits of the forestry sector, including rehabilitation, rebuilding and economic development are extended to our maritime communities. This year, we have a number of planned activities to further this objective and we will continue to support logistics for commercial pine development, which includes the port construction at Wainiyabia, Lakeba and Solodamu, Kadavu. We will conduct a sustainable forest management for villages in Kadavu, Lakeba

and Gau.

We have Rehabilitation Integrated Restocking Programme with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Forestry's research and development for Muani, including planting short term agricultural produce to combat food security, planting of grasses to prevent wash-off sediments, the planting of food trees and financial literacy training in collaboration with the Ministry of Co-operatives and other financial institutions.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also partake in the felling, sawmilling, timber treatment and marketing of the Narocake Pine Scheme, Lakeba Pine Scheme and the Kadavu Pine Scheme. The support will include the purchase of equipment to assist in the felling of logs, processing of logs, ensuring consistent management of machines, treatment of the logs as well as marketing the finished timber product. We will continue to support the maritime islands pine scheme using our commercial maritime pine subsidy in barge and boat fare to ensure the commercial viability of these projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the collaboration and support we receive from the Fiji Pine Limited and Fiji Pine Trust is invaluable to the success of the project. We thank them for the invaluable contributions to our maritime communities. The Ministry will continue to work closely with Fiji Pine Trust. This year the total budget allocated for Fiji Pine Trust under the Capital Grant is \$1.7 million.

In addition to working with Fiji Pine Trust in developing a 20-Year Forest Management Plan, with harvesting schedules for all pine schemes in the maritime islands, we will work with the Fiji Pine Trust on the activities mentioned above, including the development and construction of the jetties, silviculture including the establishment of a pine nursery in Kadavu, training awareness and business support for pine scheme workers. It is through Fiji Pine Limited's subsidiary Tropik Wood Industries Limited that the logs are processed through Fiji's largest sawmill, producing both woodchip mill for export and being an independent power producer, exporting excess power to the national grid.

MR. SPEAKER.- Finally the Wainiyabia Wharf is going to be constructed.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to thank and congratulate the honourable Minister for her Ministerial Statement on the maritime projects and the things that the Government has been doing. I noticed also the amount of money in investment that is going into this particular sector. We have had maritime pine around the islands over many years - Lakeba, Kadavu, Lomaiviti and various places. It is good to see that the emphasis that is taking place that should help out the people in the maritime islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the forestry sector, if there is one big crisis that is happening in this sector, that if we are not too careful in the few years ahead of us, the sector will run out of raw materials. There is basically a shortage of trees that is happening, this is impacting Tropik Wood right now, and I think Fiji Pine in particular there is a particular concern for this. This calls upon the forestry sector in Fiji to be innovative in the way it approaches what it tries to do.

I was very glad to hear about all the economics, the plans that are in place to provide assistance for the people in the villages. I was actually in Dravuwalu and Mataso Villages earlier this year. It is good that we have the plans but one of the problems that we have is execution; you have a plan and a budget and execution.

When I was in Mataso this year, the sawn timber that had been cut down in the forest had still not been brought down to the village, it was rotting in the forest. I think it is very important for us to realize that when you have these plans, the execution is absolutely critical. In the village of Mataso,

one of the things that was in the agreement was, I do not know what the term is, in our iTaukei *na sui ni vale*; the main timber for the houses. They were to do 15, they only did seven.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Oh!

HON. J. USAMATE.- There is timber that is out there that is cut, that is rotting away. Some of the houses that they were going to build in Mataso and around Kadavu, they were supposed to have the direct post that goes right from the ground to the top of the house.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- In the forest there, these thing are rotting. What I am saying is, the plans are very good, they need to be executed well because when you go to these villages people complaining on the ground. Sometimes there is a hassle between the Fiji Pine and the Pine Trust of Fiji as to who is responsible; that is very important. The other thing that is very important, one thing that has always been in the forestry sector, they have always said, “we are asset rich but cash poor.” This is the same too for the islands. If you go to some of the islands, Lakeba, I am *Vola Ni Kawa Bula* in Lakeba, I planted pine in Lakeba in the villages of Nasaqalau and Waciwaci ...

(Honourable Government Members interject)

HON. J. USAMATE.- ..but the people complain about the returns not coming to them. They are not getting those returns on the ground where people matter.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. J. USAMATE.- This is the complaint. I was in my *Bose ni Yavusa* last Saturday, that is what they were talking about.

(Honourable Government Member interjects)

HON. J. USAMATE.- So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we have these high and mighty plans, very good. But make sure you execute it, make sure you make it happen so that the people on the ground can get some returns in their pockets.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- This is absolutely critical.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things that I must say too for the forestry sector, one that has been a private company in Fiji now that they are looking (because of this shortage of raw products that we have) to innovate, to look at new kinds of things that they should plant. Xinfra which has two solars in Vanua Levu, they are beginning to do tissue culture of acacia and eucalyptus. Why? Because they mature much faster and we need these raw materials to go into the sawmills to produce those things. I encourage the Ministry of Forestry and the whole sector, what you are doing is good, do fix the execution, make sure it reaches the bottom, do not just look at your outputs, ticking your boxes, make sure you have an impact on the outcomes on people’s lives.

Secondly, being innovative in what you are doing. If you have done quite well in the past, you also need to be innovative, maybe these other forestry products and trees we need to look at; acacia and eucalyptus, things that mature faster because our sawmills are running out of inputs of the raw material to allow them to maintain the employment that we talk about, to maintain the industries

that they feed into. Overall, this sector, exports have been declining, imports have been increasing. So, I value this, honourable Minister congratulations with this, just make sure we hit the execution right and we make sure it makes an impact on the people on the grassroots.

MR. SPEAKER.- Your concern is noted given the likely shortage of our timber supply to the sawmills, et cetera. But that problem has existed for quite some time. Even my time as a Director of Fiji Pine Limited, because good raw timber for milling were converted to chips, but now that concern still lingers on, and I hope the Ministry of Forestry takes note.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for her statement this morning on the Maritime Pine Scheme, very much long-awaited by those that own pine in the maritime areas. As she had presented this morning, it is also triggering a lot of developments and economic activities in those islands where they are harvesting from. I would like to throw a bit of caution in the whole process and, that is, as we harvest the pine in these islands, I am suggesting that there is a study made as to whether it is proper to replant the pine, or you turn that land into farming land.

Over the years, I think, if there is a study at the Ministry and when I was the Permanent Secretary there, I saw that some of the pine were initially brought to Fiji to be planted in areas where you cannot plant anything else. When it grew, it thrived, and it turned into an industry. But what happened over the years as pine grew, the land began to be fertile for farming, especially in those islands where land is not as big, there is a shortage of land, and for those land where pines are planted, a study can be made if that can be turned into farmland, then please do not replant pine and then turn it into farmland.

There is also a study that would be lying down there in the Ministry when we had this big flood in the West few years ago. One of the reasons we concluded was that, that landslide that was happening because of the way we replant pine. As you know, when pine is harvested, before you replant you have to burn down where it was harvested so that the glue that is in the pine is all burnt out. It attracts insects that will eat the new pine plant that you will plant.

However, in the process of burning it down, it burns holes down where the stems of the pines are cut off and so you have these holes in the ground and we thought that when it rained heavily at that time, water seeped into those holes where the pine trees were, and it assisted in that big landslide that occurred. So, if you are going to replant in the islands, and you know all those pines are up on the hills, I hope that there is also a study that is made that we have to replant that. It does not trigger off this landslide of whatever land is available there now.

Thank you again to the honourable Minister for the maritime pine project. I know that it is a project that they have been waiting for, for a long time, and I hope that it will be pursued well.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

New National Rehabilitation Centre - Tamavua Hospital
(Question No. 97/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services inform Parliament on the progress of the plans for a new National Rehabilitation Centre to replace the current Twomey Hospital in Tamavua?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank the honourable Ravunawa for his question.

Just a point to note, Mr. Speaker, in regard to the question, if I can put it in order, the new rehabilitation centre is not to replace the current Twomey Hospital, but rather to replace the old Tamavua Military Hospital or former Tamavua Rehabilitation Facility.

On the current progress, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the construction of a new National Rehabilitation Centre has been approved by the Government of Fiji and the Government of Korea. Last year, Cabinet approved a subsidiary arrangement between the Ministry of Health and Medical Services and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), to establish Fiji's National Rehabilitation Centre.

As per the agreement, KOICA will provide a grant-in-aid of not more than \$10 million, which is approximately FJ\$22.2 million and, therefore, we are grateful to KOICA and to the Government, and to the people of Korea, for their generous assistance.

Most of the Tamavua Hospital has been assessed to be non-compliant with OHS requirements from the non-maintenance of the aging buildings and facilities that were built in many decades ago. Although we have experienced some delays in finalising the relocation of all services currently offered at the old Tamavua Hospital and the clearance of utilities servicing the hospital.

The Tamavua Hospital Team and the Ministry's Assets Management Team have been working closely with the Ministry of Works and KOICA Fiji's Office in the last 10 months, to ensure that the site is ready for the KOICA Construction Team anticipated movement into the site in January of 2025.

Sir, further to that, the health partner, the Latter Days Saints Charity, has also indicated its willingness to assist in funding more than \$300,000 required for the temporary relocation of the rehabilitation hospital to the Twomey Hospital for the duration of the construction, again, which the Ministry is grateful for.

Government has allocated a funding of \$400,000 in this financial year for the demolition and preparation of the hospital site for the new rehabilitation hospital, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Meanwhile, other preparatory activities have been undertaken and are ongoing. They include the first in-country training by rehabilitation medicine experts from the Korean University and Korea Rehab which was conducted in April this year. The second in-country training is planned for January next year.

There is an invitational training programme also planned where seven to eight health professionals from Fiji will be travelling to Korea for onsite training at a Centre of Excellence in Korea.

The project team is also expected to be travelling to Fiji later this year for ongoing discussions with KOICA Fiji Office Team and the Ministry's Team and the project designers, as we continue our preparation for this very important project, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Sir, the detailed design phase is anticipated to be completed in September of this year and

their process of tendering of project will subsequently follow in October 2024.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, a supplementary question to the honourable Minister for Health. This Rehabilitation Centre, is it specifically for physical impairment rehabilitation or is it also going to take care of our drug-dependent people that we know that St. Giles Hospital is unable to cope with the numbers at the moment? Is the Rehabilitation Centre, generally speaking, for all of those or is it specific to physical impairment?

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, I thank honourable Koya for his question. It is for the physical impairment disability.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, we noted that there is a reduction in the budget for this year by \$0.4 million for this particular project. But I am happy that there is a plan underway for staff capacity building, also in preparation for the construction, as well as for the operation of this rehabilitation centre. I have no supplementary question, but I wish the honourable Minister well and thank the Government of Korea for their support.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a quick question to the honourable Minister, I am interested in the total cost of the project. You mentioned about the FJ\$22 million from KOICA, the assistance from the LDS Church and the demolition cost. Will Government be required to fork out some more funds? I did not hear the total cost of the project, if you may elaborate on that, honourable Minister.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition for his question. The amount FJ\$22.2 million is the total cost for the project, which is equivalent to \$10 million Korean dollars. Nevertheless, our allocation has been in terms of the preparatory works. That is what is currently budgeted, even though it was not utilised in the last financial year due to some unforeseen difficulties to do with water and electricity that is currently also supplying the Fiji National University (FNU).

Those are some obstacles that the Ministry has faced but, nevertheless, in terms of the allocation - the grant, that will cover not only the construction but also the capacity building, as I have raised, as well as the finer equipment that will be used to carry out the necessary services to be provided. That is from everything - the beds, equipment, et cetera, that are all included in the Agreement. So, that is, in a nutshell, what is included in the grant.

Establishment of the Financial Services Ombudsman
(Question No. 98/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the establishment of the Financial Services Ombudsman?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Vanawalu for his question. I am pleased to inform Parliament that during the Cabinet Sitting of 15th July, 2024, the establishment of the Financial Services Ombudsman was approved. Sir, this is a significant decision and it shows the Government's commitment and political will to enhancing consumer protection and fostering trust in the financial services sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Office of the Financial Services Ombudsperson has been set up and we have appointed a skilled and knowledgeable Ombudsperson to manage complaints and aid in resolving issues. Sir, the person is Ms. Wati Seeto. She has been appointed as the first Financial Services Ombudsperson, as announced by the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) on 31st July - last month.

Ms. Seeto joined the RBF in 2010 after holding senior positions at the Capital Markets Development Authority, bringing with her 25 years of legal expertise, 15 years of which is spent in financial regulation and consumer protection. She, in our view, will spearhead this significant establishment due to her legal knowledge and commitment to consumer advocacy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the establishment of the Financial Services Ombudsperson function, the existing complaints management function undertaken by the RBF will be maintained, but elevated to ensuring the specific function is conducted by an appointed Financial Services Ombudsperson.

The Office will function as an impartial platform, dedicated to resolving disputes between consumers and financial services providers and regulated by RBF. Its primary responsibilities include investigating complaints, facilitating discussions, ensuring fair resolution. Its role is crucial in providing consumers with the reliable mechanism to address their grievances which ultimately helps to build trust and confidence in the financial services sector, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In this regard, the Ombudsperson will have an increased focus on ensuring the principles of independence, to secure impartiality, clarity of scope and powers, accessibility, effectiveness and transparency and accountability. We are confident Sir, that the Office of the Financial Services Ombudsperson will play a crucial role in maintaining transparency and accountability in Fiji's financial services sector.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Minister is, how will the Office of the Financial Services Ombudsman be funded? What measures are in place to ensure its independence and impartiality, considering that the Office is based within Reserve Bank of Fiji?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think that is a very good question. The Governor of the RBF is appointed by the Constitutional Offices Commission, and it is an independent office.

The credibility of RBF rests on the independence on which the Bank conducts its monetary policies. Therefore, the framework of independence is within the existing structure. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will be reviewing its effectiveness, and we will see how it works within the framework of the RBF.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know that in 2000, there was a Banking Services Commission Report which recommended the establishment of the Office of the Banking Ombudsman, but we are now talking about the Financial Services Ombudsperson's Office. We felt that this was an immediate issue that can be accommodated within the framework of the independence provided for the RBF, but we will be reviewing this within a year or so to assess its effectiveness, look at the data on the number of complaints and how effectively and efficiently the Office is able to serve and resolve some of those complaints.

HON. P.D. KUMAR. - Funding?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The funding, of course, will be provided by the RBF as an independent institution.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I have a supplementary question to the honourable Minister. With the creation of the Financial Services Ombudsman, I am just interested in the legislations that are in place for effectiveness and efficiency of the functioning of the Office because some of our laws are archaic and within the current environment. So, my simple question, honourable Minister is, whether the laws that we have is sufficient to ensure that the functions of the Financial Services Ombudsman is effective and serves the purposes in which we created it?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Leader of the Opposition. I think it is a very important point.

The existing Complaints Management Framework is supervised by the RBF, already in terms of all the financial institutions, the banks, but the honourable Leader of Opposition is right, that once we are able to review the effectiveness of this provision that we have created and we want to do that within a year, then I think we would be able to look at if it needs changes to the law or if it needs a completely separate Financial Services Ombudspersons Office outside of the RBF. For that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will have to look at the legislative framework and the changes that would be required, whether it is part of the Reserve Bank Act or a separate legislation to set up a totally independent Office of the Ombudsperson.

HON. J. USAMATE. - I thank the honourable Minister for the development of this position of the Financial Services Ombudsman. I am not too sure if this role will be more like a mediatory role where the parties come to a conclusion, or more like an arbiter. If it is an arbiter, would his decisions then be legally binding on the parties?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD. - Again, a good question. At the moment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the position, within the framework of the RBF, will try and resolve the complaints that consumers have with respect to any financial services institution. But, as I have said, the original recommendation that was made in 2000 as part of the banking inquiry, suggested a completely separate office for the Banking Ombudsman at that time.

Over the years, the RBF assumed and there were changes made for it to have a special Complaints Management Framework, which has been working. But this Office itself is going to strengthen and, perhaps provide a lot more teeth for an office within the RBF, and a dedicated person.

With the kind of experience that Ms. Seeto has, would be able to resolve, in my view, a lot of the complaints that consumers would have, but that option is still there - to look at a completely independent office with its own legislative framework.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will now adjourn for lunch. The first bell will be sounded at 2.25 p.m., so it is a two-hour lunch break.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.31 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.30 p.m.

Status of Re-Development at Sukuna Park
(Question No. 99/2024)

HON. I. NAIVALURUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the status of Sukuna Park?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think this issue has also been of public interest and I also wish to provide an update on the re-development of Sukuna Park in Suva.

This project Mr. Speaker, Sir, is of significant importance for the capital city. The Sukuna Park has been named in honour of one of Fiji's most revered leaders and Statesman; Ratu Sir Josefa Lalabalavu Vanayaliyali Sukuna. The Park has long been a central feature of Suva offering a green space of leisure, cultural events and public gatherings.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sukuna Park is a recreational space approved by the Suva City Council through the Ministry of Local Government. The Council was able to partner with Auckland City Council in 2019 to understand multiple dimensions of municipal operations, one of the areas of study or review has been the recreational facilities management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the project was launched with the goal of transforming the Park into a modern, multi-functional public space that meets the needs of Suva's growing population and aligns with contemporary urban learning principles. The re-development of Sukuna Park is a key initiative of the Suva City Council since 2020. The objective, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to improve the landscape, have a better podium to host events, increase foot traffic at the Park, improve lighting structure and introduce modern park furniture which is an increase of sitting, improved walkways and make the park smart through digital platforms such as charger booths and WiFi. It is believed that this will enhance the Park's functionality and statics while preserving its historical and cultural significance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project is self-funded by the Suva City Council with an initial budget of \$13 million. In 2020, the scope of work was altered to full re-development of the Park, including a two-level cafeteria; that was a concept of the previous administration. However, Sir, the budget was reduced to \$7 million with a decision by the Special Administrator of SCC to remove the cafeteria. It is worth noting that a budget of \$500,000 was allocated for landscaping purposes only.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the park was closed by the SCC towards the end of 2021 to allow for demolition works and rehabilitation works. A consultant was engaged by Suva City Council who designed the initial master plan back then. However, in the first quarter of 2023, Suva City Council had engaged a new consultant; the revision of rehabilitation masterplan to reflect a modern Suva City Smart Park.

A new consultancy team was engaged and the construction of the podium began in June 2023. The sealworks were carried after the tender and evaluation by Suva City Council. These works were followed by building services and the landscape works. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to update this august House, the project was completed last month. However, the contractors currently turning into defects as per the defects liability period, as such, they are hoping to open the Sukuna Park re-development project this month after the completion of the defects identified by the consultant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, the re-development of Sukuna Park represents a significant

investment to the future of Suva with a smart city concept. The provision of disabled facilities indicates that no one is left behind for urban development. The Council has also further considered the importance of having security with CCTV cameras, fencing and provision of security at the park to avoid any criminal activities in the area. A newly developed Sukuna Park will also be strengthening the revenue streams of the Suva City Council through some commercial activities in partnership with several business houses as well as stakeholders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that upon completion, Sukuna Park will stand as a testament to our commitment to creating a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive public space for all Fijians. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for allowing me to respond to the question before the august House this afternoon.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, supplementary question. I thank the honourable Minister for his response. At the end of the day, there are not enough parks in Suva and the surrounding areas. Two, the existing parks right now does not meet the needs of our people. Three, there is an urgent need to build multipurpose recreational centres in our community that is built for purpose and also for the future. My question to the honourable Minister, does he have this in his future plans?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Member for raising a very important issue this afternoon. Some of the concept of changing the way we do things in our municipalities have also been shared with all our Special Administrators who currently manager the 13 municipalities. In July last month the Tavua Town Council through its new Special Administration have opened a new park that is called the Family Park.

This Family Park, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is an open space but they have divided up into three different spaces. One is to cater for the children's park, the middle is where the family can go and gather while the children are playing and there is also a space just alongside those two spaces where they have dedicated for the senior citizens. These are some of the new initiatives that we are doing at the moment, all the municipalities are inclusive in the designing and the re-designing of the current parks as well as some of the unutilised and underutilised open spaces that we have in most of these municipalities, especially in Suva.

There are also some unutilised spaces in Suva that we are also thinking of developing, and if you look at some of the recreational spaces, they are mostly open spaces. There is no provision for them to have multipurpose courts while people are enjoying playing touch rugby, others can enjoy the other facility. These are some of the innovative plans that we are currently promoting with the Councils to ensure that when we come up with new designs of making use of the open spaces for the public, we have to be inclusive in the way we design some of these new recreational spaces.

MR. SPEAKER.- What about the one in Lami, that is a multipurpose one

HON P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sukuna Park was designed for entertainment purposes, and mainly for the cruise liners that come to Suva. There was a purpose for that particular park mainly to entertain the working community, people who are in the office, et cetera, they can go to that park with their lunch and enjoy their lunch. Part of that concept was this particular modern café. This café had a rooftop bar overlooking the ocean, and the back of the building had a stepwise pavilion, so people could sit and watch the entertainment happening at the podium. When tourists come, they can also enjoy that facility, et cetera.

I am rather saddened that this particular component was taken away as part of the re-development plan. We have just heard from honourable Naivalurua that anything you build is for a

purpose and for the future. That particular structure was for the future. I would like to know from the honourable Minister any reason why that particular structure was taken off considering that Suva City Council makes around \$30 million every year from ratepayers and have sufficient money in its account.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for raising this question. Maybe, she is right in her own way but if you look at Sukuna Park, it only is about 10,000 square metres. The green space that we have is not enough to cater for the population we have in Suva. That is the very reason why I have also advised the Administrator to remove the cafeteria. We need families to enjoy the green space, we want the kids to walk around freely.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Entertainment to watch rugby.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Get the community to watch rugby.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- ...if you look at the cost factor, initially it was \$13 million, removing the two-level cafeteria...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Build for the future.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- ... reduced the cost to \$7 million. The new Sukuna Park will be opened at the end of the month. The people will enjoy using the Park.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Sir, I think he knows what I am going to ask him actually.

Honourable Minister, I understand what you are doing, even with the shortfalls that are coming in, in terms of the development of the park. Because you are going to put it in a particular pristine condition like Albert Park used to be, are you going to be setting certain ground rules and rules in terms of the usage and how it is kept so as we do not fall down that same trap that we have now at Albert Park where the vehicles are running around Albert Park?

HON. K.K. LAL.- Finance Minister give more money.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the design of the park itself has enough walkways, where people can walk around the park. I have also stated in my address that SCC also has plans to install CCTV cameras as well as have securities day and night to monitor the various activities around Sukuna Park and also ensure that the security and the safety of users are paramount when they utilise the park. In any development there will always be a plan to maintain the quality and the standard of whatever plans that you have. That is something that the Council also has in place to ensure that there is a plan in place to ensure that they maintain the Park at a level that is expected by the users and the general public.

Young Entrepreneurship Scheme Programme
(Question No. 100/2024)

HON. J.R. VOCEA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, and Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme Programme?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Young Entrepreneurship Scheme Programme is commonly known as YES Programme, and I have to admit that it was a construct of the previous government which we have continued to support for some very good reasons. Firstly, it invests in our youths who have unique business ideas or innovative ideas, and the vision of which is to promote the entrepreneurial spirit in our young Fijians to become job creators rather than job seekers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since inception, the YES Programme has invested in about 18 recipients with a total investment of about \$441,000 across a wide range of sectors from health and human services, agriculture, traffic management, recreational services and information technology, just to name a few. Each of these recipients offer a unique and innovative business idea that aims to improve upon the current service or product currently being offered in the market or offering something totally new to the people of Fiji. The YES Programme offers up to a grant of about \$30,000 for the purchase of capital expenditure items, and the eligibility is for entrepreneurs or young men and women between the age of 18 years and 40 years, and of course, has to be a Fiji citizen.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the programme has some very interesting facts. The success rate of this Programme is around 73 percent. On average, a YES recipient creates about three jobs, on average, a YES recipient has a total turnover of close to \$50,000. In the year 2022 to 2023, the MSME Monitoring and Evaluation Team reported that four recipients were extremely active and performing at an excellent level. Of course, the recipients are also contributing to the SDGs by fostering innovative business practices that promotes economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Not only commercial viability, but they also create a positive impact aligning with SDGs such as:

- SDG8 - Decent work and economic growth;
- SDG9 - Industry innovation and infrastructure; and
- SDG10 - Reduced inequalities.

Existing YES recipients go above and beyond to further their education and enrich their knowledge, achieving personal growth and contributing to society. Some of them end up being part of the Fiji Enterprise Engine cohorts, which is a very popular accelerator, incubator programme run through Financial Sector Assessment Programme (FSAP).

In fact, there have been a few very prominent winners of the YES Programme. I mentioned Christopher Vanualailai, who was named as one of the top 100 climate tax startups out of 10,000 businesses assessed across the Indo-Pacific region.

Some of the other recipients that were supported this year included Rasalato Yanuyanuraa of Aswhy Enterprises, who has transformed his business from exporting raw lumber to producing guitar billets and semi-finished guitar parts from mahogany. The young entrepreneur is now targeting high-end international markets, particularly in the US and Canada, showcasing his innovation and determination in the new markets.

There is Munesh Prasad of Cocosip, who is planning to launch premium packet coconuts by preparing and peeling coconuts into diamond shape pieces, having the top of the coconut flatten and adding a coconut opener that is sold in some of the major supermarkets and resorts. The business also plans to diversify their product to manufacture chip blocks made from coconut husks.

Mr. Speaker, these demonstrates the type of innovation that exists in our country and the Ministry plans to continue to encourage this culture of entrepreneurship in developing future aspiring entrepreneurs in the years to come.

Mr. Speaker, I thought I just mention, and I have mentioned a few times in this august Chamber, that this side of the House is trying to develop a comprehensive MSME ecosystem that ensures that we continue to support entrepreneurs in their journey. As such, I just thought I would mention that there is about \$300,000 sitting within TELS which is considered a Graduate Incubator Starter Programme in terms of a grant. That will be used to actually assist our young entrepreneurs which is exciting and, at least, focused particularly on student graduates.

On top of that, Mr. Speaker, to support our young entrepreneurs, the Ministry has established an MSME information hub at the Suva Flea Market which offers assistance to MSMEs and has attracted many young people seeking information about the YES Programme. Funding permitting, Sir, we hope to extend this out to other central locations across the country.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have been one of the recipients of this very powerful programme, the YES Entrepreneurship Scheme, and I am glad to hear of all the successful stories that we have and it is so important to invest in our youth. A question for the honourable Minister is, apart from the funding, is there any other multi-sectoral support in terms of, let us just say, “I was advised later on that I could use the \$30,000 funding, put it through FDB, and I could get more out of it and get further assistance and that through low interest rates”? So, are there any more assistance, apart from the funding itself, provided to the recipients within the other Ministries?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I think the honourable Sharma has answered his own question. There are other avenues for support in other Ministries, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Rural and Development, Ministry of Youth and also Ministry of Women now has some support grants as well, Tourism has actually come up with a MSME grant. In actual fact, the total amounts that are now dedicated towards MSMEs is around \$120 million in various forms, which includes the sugarcane farmers as well. So, that is quite a broad level of support that is happening.

Mr. Speaker, it is an exciting space because as we all know, 18 percent of GDP is represented by the MSMEs. Not only that, it represents up to 60 percent of the jobs that are created in our country. So, that is why in terms of where this side of the House is headed, Sir, we are doing our best to really try and develop this ecosystem to ensure that over the next couple of years, we do create a comprehensive ecosystem. By that, Sir, I mean, just imagine if we start training our entrepreneurs from high school level before they get to university and beyond. Would that be an exciting prospect for our young people?

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, we have heard you speak a lot about diversification, et cetera. Can you tell us whether in terms of the YES Programme, is there any specific programme within it which says that, “Alright, these are the areas that we need to diversify into”, and we are hunting down those young people that are in those areas that we can diversify into, whether it be exporting or whether it be producing something for our local markets? Are we actually doing that so that we can diversify with our young people because they do end up being quite successful entrepreneurs?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you for that question. Mr. Speaker, the YES Programme is obviously targeted towards innovative ideas. By default, may be a lot of the ideas sit in the ICT space and also agricultural value-add processing. So, to the honourable Koya’s point, it starts creating that diversification that we all need in the economy. There is a couple that comes to

mind - TraSeable Solutions. They have been around for some time and are now developing solutions. A local couple, developing solutions for the Ministry of Agriculture in terms of IT Solutions for blockchain database design. I think they are now offering it to some of the other agencies. From what I hear, they are now in the Seychelles actually doing the same thing.

So, this is the level of entrepreneurship, Sir, that our young people are capable of. It is quite an exciting thing to be watching and I think that if we provide the right level of resource, we provide the right training at the right time, we can see some very significant progress in this area, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Just for the information of honourable Members, we have just returned from a Parliamentary Meeting within the region. It was held in Indonesia, and Indonesia is renowned for MSMEs and all that. We were taken to a university where the overall start-up cost for MSMEs is so reduced that the students, straight away from university, go online and they are guided and helped by the universities. I think some of them are being held now by what the Deputy Prime Minister has stated that some of the universities are helping out here, but this has reduced the start-up course.

They are well on their way to producing things straight into the online platform. I am just sharing this since it has, kind of, ignited the interest on MSMEs because it is huge and promising for us here in Fiji because we just sell online.

Some of the staff that we have now are going online and that is a great start. But I do not know how they reduce their start-up cost by going that way. I am just sharing that because that was one of the things that struck our team while we were in Indonesia. We were amazed by the developments that Indonesia has undertaken right now.

The fifth Oral Question for today has been moved to a later date. That is the question by honourable Alvick Maharaj to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, who is now tied up with the preparation for the arrival of the President of the Republic of India. As such, we will move that question to a later date.

We will go straight to the six Oral Question for today, honourable Members. For that, I have also received communication from the Ministry of Finance, that this question should be redirected to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

Again, these are some of the developments that has come during question time. In the Business Committee Meeting, we ask whether to accept these questions directed to the Ministers and we receive advice that the questions should be referred to another Minister. However, we are getting communication directly from the Ministry, asking us to redirect the question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.

(Question No. 101/2024 moved to a later date)

Disaster Recovery and Rehabilitation – Phase 2
(Question No. 102/2024)

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics update Parliament on the Stand-by Loan for Disaster Recovery and Rehabilitation – Phase 2?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing this change. I was not in the Business Committee, otherwise I would have raised it there, but thank you for allowing that. I thank the honourable Member for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Japanese Government has, over the years, offered financial assistance schemes for development projects designed to meet diverse needs of Fiji, including emergency assistance on resilience and recovery efforts to combat the aftermath of natural disasters or pandemic.

The Government of Fiji acknowledges the assistance and support from the Government of Japan over the years, particularly during the COVID-19 years and natural disasters where the Government of Japan and other development partners provided immediate assistance to Fiji during that time when Fiji was in dire need.

The Government of Japan, through the Japan International Cooperation (JICA) is the largest bilateral lender to the Government of Fiji. Mr. Speaker, Sir, JICA provides grants and loan financing to Fiji, and it is the first development partner to provide concessional loan facility to the Government of Fiji. So, JICA's proposed financing is the standby loan for Disaster Recovery and Rehabilitation - Phase 2.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2019, the Government was given Phase 1 of this standby loan for disaster recovery and the amount was FJ\$80 million. The proposed standby loan for Disaster Recovery and Rehabilitation is the continuation of the Phase 1 to Phase 2 and this was endorsed by Cabinet on 15th July. This facility provided by JICA is, again, to \$72 million and is part of the Government's loan funding programme for this fiscal year 2024 -2025.

The proposed loan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, by JICA is to promote economic stabilisation and development effects, in particular enhancing the capacity of Disaster Risk Management. The principal amount offered by the Japanese Government for such a facility is 0.25 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In the case of Fiji, 0.25 percent of GDP was applied. However, noting Fiji's vulnerability to natural disasters, the Japanese Government offered a standby loan facility in the amount US\$46 million, equivalent FJ\$72 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the financing facility is actually pegged to achievement to policy reform actions on three key action areas.

- (1) Strengthening disaster risk governance to manage disaster risk;
- (2) Investing in disaster risk reduction for resilience;
- (3) Understanding disaster risk and enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response.

So, the Policy Reform Actions will be achieved in a coordinated approach between the stakeholders, the:

- (1) National Disaster Management Office (NDMO);
- (2) Fiji Meteorological Office under the Ministry of Rural Maritime Development and Disaster Management;
- (3) Municipal Council and City Council under the Ministry of Local Government; and
- (4) Mineral Resources Division under the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources.

This standby loan facility, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is a very concessional loan with some of the most favourable terms the Fijian Government has received with an interest rate of 0.4 percent per annum and a 40 year repayment term after a 10-year grace period.

The pre-condition for the draw-down of this loan, Mr. Speaker, Sir, (this is an emergency provision), is that a Declaration of a State of Natural Disaster Post-Disaster by Cabinet on the advice of the National Disaster Management Council in accordance with section 17(1) of the Natural Disaster Management Act 1998. So, this loan, Sir, is contingent upon that condition being met after disaster had struck, after the Cabinet has declared it as a national disaster and conditioned on sound macro-economic and public financial management strategy.

Subdivision of Informal Settlements on State Land
(Question No. 103/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the informal settlements on State land that have been subdivided since January 2023?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The Ministry of Housing has acquired development leases for the Ministry of Lands to develop four informal settlements that are located on State land. These are Cuvu in Sigatoka, Sasawira in Nausori, River Road in Nasinu, as well as Wainicaubati in Nasinu.

Out of the four settlements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Sasawira Settlement is located at 9 Miles which has an area of 17.3 acres. River Road in Narere has an area of 26.2 acres and Caubati, normally called Mama's Place, with an area of 21.5 acres, and are currently undergoing planning works. These settlements, including three other settlements on iTLTB land, are earmarked for completion of construction phase by the end of this year, before progressing into construction phase.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the completion of development for three informal settlements on State land will benefit 769 households. The total estimated cost to upgrade these settlements is approximately \$21 million.

Cuvu Settlement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with an area of 9.3 acres, has had its construction works completed in 2022. This included drainage, roads, footpaths, paddings and installation of basic utilities. Due to a number of disagreements between the residents of Cuvu, the survey plan was amended and redefined to accommodate the request of the residents and the amended survey plan was approved in December 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in early 2024, the Ministry of Housing started the lot allocation process through the distribution of application forms to sitting residents. The process is in accordance with the Lot Allocation Policy. The allocation of the lots was successfully carried out by Lomara Associates to determine the market value of each lot. The information collected from applicants enabled the Lot Allocation Committee to identify those households who were eligible for Government assistance. The total cost to complete development of Cuvu Settlement is \$3.7 million. For the completion of the lot allocation process, 105 households of Cuvu will be able to legally own house blocks with a 99-year lease title.

HON. P.K. BALA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was in Cuvu last week and I was told by the tenants that the honourable Minister assured that the leases will be issued to the tenants. May I know what is holding up the issuance of the leases because he also made a public statement in the media as well?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- I have stated that there were some differences regarding the boundaries of some of the existing current residents, so the Ministry went in and amended the scheme plan and also got the survey plan approved. With Cuvu, there are some residents who have also been

given the agreement for lease, and something that we have also issue that we have had with iTLTB on who is going to allocate the lease; iTLTB or the Ministry of Housing? So, that is an issue we are trying to resolve with the iTLTB before issuing the leases to the current residents.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Honourable Minister, you did mention Sasawira. I took a cab yesterday and the owner of the taxi lives in Sasawira, and he asked me if I can raise this question in Parliament. For him, they are waiting but there is a request from them, the road condition is so bad. He asked me if I can ask, “please confirm with the honourable Minister if they can do something about the road condition while waiting for the other developments.”

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- I think there is some funding that we have allocated this year to assist those informal settlements who have issues regarding the basic services and infrastructure because the request is now raised in Parliament, we will try and look into that honourable Member, and try to assist the residents of Sasawira.

MR. SPEAKER.- I hope you will not mind honourable Minister because people are already there, they are sitting there. That is why the road conditions has worsened because they use it all the time, but that is part of the development.

Supply Chain Agreement Under IPEF
(Question No. 104/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on the Implementation of the Supply Chain Agreement under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for Prosperity?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Thank you honourable Tuiwailevu for the question and in case the House is wondering why I am so excited on giving an update, in my mind, Mr. Speaker, the implementation of IPEF and the benefits that are potentially can accrue from IPEF is the reason why I will hopefully continue to update the House because there are some promising opportunities that lie at the heart of IPEF, should Fiji continue to be an active member.

As we all know, firstly I would like to thank the House for unanimously approving IPEF together, and I had the honour of attending the last meeting in Singapore with the honourable Premila Kumar. Basically Mr. Speaker, since the approval in September of last year of the IPEF Supply Chain Agreement, the 14 partners that make up 40 percent of the global GDP had been actively working together to try and get the agreement going. The agreement officially entered into force on the 24th February, 2024 and of course on 30th July marked a significant milestone with implementation of the agreement where we started putting in place the necessary committees that are part and parcel of the Supply Chain Agreement.

Mr. Speaker, the Supply Chain Agreement, hopefully, will allow the 14 countries to start working together in terms of supply requirements across the countries and it is my hope that should there be another crisis in the global supply chain, that the 14 countries including Fiji can work closely together.

There are three bodies Mr. Speaker that were required to be set up as part of the IPEF Supply Chain Agreement. These were the:

- (1) Supply Chain Council;
- (2) Crisis Response Network; and
- (3) Labour Rights Advisory Board.

At the moment, Fiji in terms of trying to be an active participant in IPEF has actually put its hand up in serving on the Supply Chain Council and we have the Permanent Secretary for Trade and Co-operatives, MSME and Communications, Mr. Shaheen Ali on the Supply Chain Council. In the Crisis Response Network, the Principal Trade Economist, Ms. Deepika Singh is a member of that Crisis Network body.

In terms of Labour Rights Advisory Board, I am also happy to report that the Permanent Secretary for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations, Mr. Jone Maretino Nemani, who is no stranger to most of us, will serve on the Labour Rights Advisory Board. He is joined by Mr. Felix Anthony, the National Secretary of the Trade Union Congress and Mr. Jonetani Tonawai, Chief Executive of the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation.

It is also probably significant to note, Mr. Speaker, that in discussions with some of the major partners in IPEF, Fiji has been invited to be the Vice Chair on the Labour Rights Advisory Board (LRAB) and so the Permanent Secretary for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations will serve as Vice Chair on LRAB, supporting the Chair from the United States of America. This role underscores our commitment to strengthening labour relations and labour rights, and ensuring fair working conditions for all workers across the Indo-Pacific region, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Fiji's election as Vice Chair of the Labour Rights Advisory Board is a recognition of the important role Fiji plays in the region, and our capability was clearly demonstrated during the ongoing IPEF negotiations.

As Vice Chair of the Labor Rights Advisory Board, Fiji will play a pivotal role in advancing labour rights and workforce development across IPEF supply chains. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have further plans in terms of the advancement of the implementation of the supply chain agreement which includes first in-person meeting in Washing DC in September 2024. The meeting is part of a supply chain summit organised by the United States Department of Commerce and Fiji's representatives will make most of the opportunity to progress the benefits for Fiji through the three bodies that I have mentioned under the IPEF supply chain.

We will also have the Solicitor-General's Office and FICAC attend the summit as Pillar 4 on fair economy will also be discussed. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is proud to be at the forefront of this initiative. By working alongside with global players, we are committed to ensuring the security and competitiveness of our critical supply chains. Through participation in such initiatives, we aim to drive economic growth, improve living standards, and create a more resilient and prosperous future for our country.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, can you just give us a quick rundown on what is on the TOR for the Supply Chain Council?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- I do not have the TOR in front of me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but it is really to just look at the fair labour relations across the 14 countries, and discuss issues that have relevance towards industrial relations and try and build a common working environment across its jurisdiction. As you know, various countries are at different levels in terms of their labour relations, so this is an endeavour to actually have open discussions amongst the 14 in the IPEF family and continue to improve labour relations across all jurisdictions.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his response. My question to you honourable Minister is, what are some of the activities that will be undertaken to enhance Fiji's supply chain capabilities?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Basically, the way IPEF is conducting, the forward progress is there are various elements. There are elements around capacity building, which was actually initiated by Fiji as a major component of IPEF. Before Fiji's participation, it was not really there as a need. There will be a lot of capacity building, there will be a lot of sharing information particularly in terms of the capabilities of some of the countries in terms of supply chain support. By virtue of the relationship, we hope to see more closer working together in terms of getting cheaper imports, for example. That is the type of relationship building that may result from IPEF and we will be keen to progress as we go along.

Land Transport Authority – RSL Number Plates
(Question No. 105/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament why LTA is holding on to the RSL number plates for those providers whose approval has been given and are already providing the service?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I would like to inform Parliament that all road users, vehicle owners, passengers and permit holders of public services vehicles are governed by the Land Transport Act 1998 and its corresponding regulations under the Land Transport Regulation 2000.

With regard to the question, I would like to advise the honourable Member that effective 1st January, 2018, the LTA ceased issuing Rural Service Licenses (RSL) following amendments to the Land Transport Public Service Vehicle Regulation. Regulation 18A sub-regulation (6)(d) specifies that an RSL issued before this date is deemed either minibus permit or a road permit for carrier licenses, depending on the vehicle's construction.

Since then, the LTA has been converting valid RSLs issued prior to 1st January, 2018 into either mini-bus license or carrier license based on the vehicle type. To- date, a total of 460 RSL permits have been converted, with this process continuing during annual registration or renewals for those RSL holders who have not yet completed the conversion.

I would like to reassure the honourable Members that LTA is diligently processing the conversion of all RSLs into other minibus licenses (LM) or carrier licenses (LC) and is committed to facilitating this transition. All permit holders are encouraged to visit any LTA branch to complete the conversion and obtain the necessary number plates.

HON. V. LAL.- The initial question came out of a complaint from a RSL provider, Sir, that despite providing all the relevant documents, some of the RSL providers have not been paid. This has been happening for some time, we have received a number of complaints. Why is it so, Sir?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I can look into that specific case, but as I mentioned, from the initially issued 460 RSLs, only eight have yet to be converted. That is the process which the LTA is currently going through in terms of the process when they are coming up for their license renewal. I am not sure about that case, maybe it is included, but we can look into it.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Are you sure?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- He needs the specific details.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are you satisfied honourable Virendra Lal?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just to confirm with the honourable Minister, only eight left from the 460, after that there will be no more RSLs? They will be fully converted to LM and LC?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is correct.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will make that the last supplementary question.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his answers, but looking at issuing of RSL to twin cabs, these were given to a few twin cabs like in Levuka and Ra where the road condition was not good, where a normal carrier cannot go. I believe these RSL permits are not being renewed. Can the honourable Minister throw light on this, please?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have to check on those specific ones.

HON. P.K. BALA.- That is okay.

MR. SPEAKER.- Who raised the question, you, honourable Nath? Honourable Bala is saying okay.

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is alright, since the honourable Minister has agreed that he will probably provide the answers later. That is alright with me because I understand, given the landscape of few places where normal carriers cannot go, and he is aware too. I remember him asking a similar question when he was this side of Parliament. Probably, he will come back with the answer at a later stage.

Impacts of the PALM Programme
(Question No. 106/2024)

HON. S. KIRAN asked Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations update Parliament on the impacts of the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Programme towards children of workers engaged in this Programme and what is the Ministry doing to address these challenges?

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government sees the PALM Scheme and the New Zealand Seasonal Work Scheme as initiatives for economic benefits, empowerment and sustainable development through increased remittances and skills enhancements to strengthen the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour mobility for our unskilled Fijian workers offers a means for individuals to access employment opportunities, acquire new skills and generate income to support their families and communities, including children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, labour mobility schemes have a positive impact on children of workers by providing them with access to better education, financial stability and opportunities for personal growth and development. Amidst the economic opportunities and contributions generated by labour programmes, there exists significant challenges on children's welfare and protection not only in Fiji, but globally as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children face multiple challenges due to labour mobility, such as prolonged family separations, educational challenges, social isolation, emotional stress and lack of stability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, children left behind by their parents engaged under such schemes are, at least, being neglected and exploited due to economic pressures put on them under the care of a single parent or guardians. The absence of proper care and support exposes children to limited accessibility to education and healthcare. A small number of parents also get involve in extra-marital affairs and neglect their families back at home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important that we address the issue, to ensure that benefits of labour mobility do not come at the expense of the vulnerable children, emphasising the need for comprehensive social policies and support systems to protect the children from abuse and neglect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, through my Ministry, is currently taking crucial steps to address this issue. These include:

- (1) The expansion of the four days pre-departure briefing into two weeks to be more comprehensive and includes spouses, as well as caregiver participation and family focus sessions on family welfare and communication.
- (2) Reviewing client registration forms to include information on children of workers under the care of parents left behind or guardians to strengthen our data collection, enabling effective monitoring on children who may be exposed to vulnerable situations.
- (3) Review the recruitment and selection process to discourage the participation of both parents in the scheme.
- (4) The role of appointed Country Liaison Officers in attending to cases where workers disengage from their families and the provision for pastoral care.
- (5) Conducting financial literacy programmes which the families of workers can actively participate in, to ensure that remittances are managed effectively and contribute to the long-term wellbeing of the children.
- (6) Establishing networks with the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection and the Legal Aid Commission to provide the necessary support to children of spouses of disengaged labour mobility workers. The Fiji Council of Social Services representatives is also on our National Employment Centre Board.
- (7) Encouraging workers engaged under long-term to visit their families back home during the four-week break in December.
- (8) Participation of the recent Family Accompaniment Programme for August 2024, which is a step forward for Fijian PALM workers to take their families to Australia, reducing the impact of prolonged separation.

The Ministry along with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade held information sessions with 82 interested families two weeks ago. Under the conditions of this visa, spouses will have full work rights while in Australia and children can attend local public schools without paying international student fee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Australian Federal Government's recent announcement on establishing a world-first Workplace Justice Visa, allowing migrant workers, including labour mobility workers, who have been exploited at work, to extend their visa and seek justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the good news continues. Last week also saw the introduction of a new stronger protections against visa cancellation for workers when they have been subjected to workplace wrongdoings. No longer will workers need to make the difficult choice between maintaining their visa and seeking justice at work.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, redeployment in the same industry is now also possible, which was not there in the past. Why I am saying all these things, Sir, workers normally abscond or run away when they are ill-treated at the workplace, and they do not get justice. Now, all these is going to prevent them from getting into anything illegal because they have their rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all these is because of the continuous dialogue we have been having with the Australian authorities and the relevant stakeholders during our ministerial visits. Had this been done several years earlier, by now, this problem would probably have been mitigated....

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. A.D. SINGH.- ...much further.

(Laughter)

HON. A.D. SINGH.- It hurts you because you didn't do it.

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Oh!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Washing the hog now.

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, to effectively protect children in the context of labour mobility collaboration amongst Government, Civil Society Organisations and stakeholders is crucial. Comprehensive strategies are needed to safeguard children's rights and address risks from family separation due to labour mobility engagements.

We are now in the process of establishing a working group of relevant stakeholders to monitor and resolve problems faced by the children of our workers. In this instance, again, the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, as well as the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, will be included.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the above strategies put in place will assist the Government to prevent children from being harmed in any way due to prolonged absence of parents and seeks to ensure that children remain safe and supported and connected with their families.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, UNICEF and the Government of Vanuatu hosted a meeting of the labour sending countries on 16th July and 17th July, to discuss a report done by Academics from the University of Western Sydney as well as USP, on the negative impact of the Scheme on children that are left behind.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also discussed measures to be put in place for the prevention and mitigation of this impact.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outcome document should be ready in the coming weeks and then I will also be able to present a full Ministerial Statement on further studies that we will employ to prevent the negative impact on children.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Minister for that very detailed reply.

Honourable Members, I would like to take this time to introduce a housekeeping matter and, that is, for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times. I now call upon the Leader of the Government in Parliament to move a suspension motion.

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

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

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

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do have few items on the Order Paper, including the Written Questions, in addition to completing the questions we are discussing now, and also for Schedule 3 - Motions for Debate of which there are two motions.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, if any.

Since there is none, I call on the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- I have no further comments, Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

QUESTIONS

Written Questions

Free Medical and Dental Health Care Schemes
(Question No. 107/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics inform Parliament on the number of patients and the cost of services to patients seen under the Free Medical and Dental Health Care Schemes from 1st January, 2022 to 31st December, 2023?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, I will table my response at a later sitting date as permitted under Standing Order 45(3).

Update on Statistics of TSLs
(Question No. 108/2024)

HON. A.N. TUICOLO asked the Government, upon notice:

Since the establishment of the Tertiary Scholarships and Loans Service (TSLs) in 2023, can the honourable Minister inform Parliament on:

- (a) the number of students that have enrolled under the TSLs in the respective Higher Education institutions;
- (b) the number of students enrolled under the TSLs that did not complete their studies in the respective Higher Education institutions; and
- (c) the number of students enrolled under the TSLs in each Higher Education institution that have been absorbed into the workforce?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby table my response according to the Standing Orders.

Local Veterinarians in the Ministry of Agriculture
(Question No. 109/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways update Parliament on the number of local Veterinarians Fiji has with the Ministry?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hereby table my response.

Details on the Grant Awarded to Pacific Polytech
(Question No. 110/2024)

HON. J. USAMATE asked Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education provide the following information regarding the grant given to Pacific Polytech, a new private entity for skills development -

- (a) what type of skills development courses are offered by Polytech, and what is the duration of these courses;
- (b) against what standards and quality were their courses benchmarked to, to justify receiving a grant of \$7 million in the last 18 months; and
- (c) what assessment was carried out on the usage of the initial \$2 million grant?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I hereby table my response according to the Standing Orders.

Private Students Enrolled at Fiji's Universities
(Question No. 111/2024)

HON. H. CHAND asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Education inform Parliament on the number of Fiji students enrolled privately at the University of Fiji, the Fiji National University and the University of the South Pacific in the last five years (2020–2024)?

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr Speaker, Sir, I hereby table my response according to the Standing Orders.

2024-2025 Capital Projects – Fiji Roads Authority
(Question No. 112/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport provide Parliament the complete list of Capital Projects to be undertaken by the Fiji Roads Authority in the 2024–2025 financial year, indicating the following for each project:

- (a) the project's budget;
- (b) the anticipated completion date; and
- (c) the projected benefits and beneficiaries of each project?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that request, I have adhered to it, and will table my response at a later date.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I have been advised that there are no Bills for consideration today. We are on to something on the agenda of our meeting today and we all talking here.

We will now adjourn for tea and will resume when the bell is sounded.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.48 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.35 p.m.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF LANDS AND
MINERAL RESOURCES 2018-2021 ANNUAL REPORTS**

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move;

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources 2018–2019, 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 Annual Reports which were tabled on 22nd May, 2024.

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

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured to present the overview of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources operations for the fiscal year 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. These years have been pivotal as the Ministry navigated various challenges and opportunities in managing Fiji's land and mineral resources.

In 2018-2019 the focus was on enhancing land administration in improving the efficiency of land services. The Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources made significant strides in updating land records and streamlining the land allocation process. Additionally, the Ministry launched initiatives to boost sustainable land management and address environmental concerns.

The fiscal year 2019-2020 saw the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources building on these foundations which increase emphasis on strategic resource management and infrastructure development. The Ministry initiated key projects aimed at strengthening the Ministry's regulatory framework and engaging with local communities to ensure that land and mineral extraction were conducted responsibly and sustainably.

For 2020-2021 Mr. Speaker, Sir, the global COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges. Despite this hurdle, the Ministry demonstrated resilience by accelerating digital transformation, ensuring continuity in land and resources management and adapting our strategies to meet evolving needs. The staff continued to prioritise maintaining critical services, supporting economic recovering and re-enforcing our commitment to sustainable development. Throughout these years the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources has remained steadfast in its vision to manage Fiji's land and mineral resources with integrity and foresight.

The Committee noted that the Ministry had highlighted the activities and challenges while maintaining the focus on the Ministry's commitment to sustainable resource management in Fiji. The Committee is thankful to the staff of the Ministry for their overall performance during the review period.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and before I offer the floor, I have received the list of speakers from the Whips as follows:

- (1) Honourable S.S. Kirpal;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources;
- (3) Honourable J. Usamate; and
- (4) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

I have been informed as well that the second group, not the Group of 16, the Group of 9 have

decided not to participate.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion on the 2018 to 2021 Consolidated Report by the Standing Committee on Natural Resources. Before I start my contribution, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Lands, Chief Valuer, Director of Lands and the Acting Permanent Secretary.

Today, I have signed an agreement with the Ministry of Lands of the sales data which is available for all the valuers. The valuers should know that now we will be getting the sales data and our evaluation will be more accurate, honourable Minister. I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you would also understand how vital that information was, it had been missing for two and half years.

MR. SPEAKER.- It has been missing for how many years?

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- For two and a half years. The thing is that till today, I have signed the agreement, we did not know the actual values of properties around Fiji, so it was very difficult for us to do a valuation in Fiji because of that vital data missing. That is the heart of our valuation, so once again thank you honourable Minister, I really appreciate that.

This is an old report, however,

MR. SPEAKER.- That is a side comment?

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Pardon, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- That is a different thing? So now you are going to your....

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- Going back to this one.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Meandering.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Appreciating.

HON. S.S. KIRPAL.- I am appreciating, not blaming all the time, so I really appreciate the honourable Minister and the Government of the day. You should also appreciate, honourable Minister for Trade.

Going back to the Report, looking at Recommendation 2 where it says the problem of outsourcing the survey of land. I understand that there has been a shortage of surveyors in Fiji. Also, we can recommend that if the subdivision is given to individuals who can do the surveys if consent is granted, it will be much easier to have some of the informal settlements legalised.

We used to practice that during your time, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we got consent for two lots to three lots and the lessees used to do the subdivision themselves, and the cost was borne by them. It was one of the ways we could reduce the number of informal settlements on State land in Fiji. Mostly, the Western area has a lot of informal settlements on State land, and I think the honourable Minister will agree with that.

The second one is the efficient service which is in Recommendation 3. This one has to be improved because the mortgage and transfer consent has to be given on time, it should be fast tracked. If it is not given on time, for example, if it is a lapse of three months then the lessees or the buyers have to pay another consent fees of \$100. If it is done within three months or it can be done within

two weeks or three weeks, it will be much better.

If the officers of the Ministry of Lands see there is a breach of any condition which they have to rectify, that should be given to the solicitors or the lessees to rectify quickly so that the transfer or the mortgage consent could be given earlier. This is one of the areas we think that the Ministry of Lands has to improve on - the consent to the mortgage and the transfer consent. We look forward working with the Minister and other stakeholders to look into it and how they can fast-track those concerns.

The major one is Recommendation 4 where the Committee has picked up the arrears of rental, so it is not new. Arrears has been outstanding amounting to millions of dollars. A major concern are properties with the State as they do not want to pay rental because it is between the four or five brothers or sisters, and they do not want to pay rental.

The second issue is the increase in rental. I know in 1999 to 2000, the land value was not that much. In Nasinu, it was \$30,000 to \$40,000, so rental on 2.5 percent was a bit less but now the land value with the same property has gone up to \$150,000 to \$200,000 and then UCV of that, you pay rental 2.5 percent is very high. That may be one of the causes, so if the Ministry of Lands and other stakeholders and valuers could look into it, on how we can get into a percentage of rental where both parties benefit.

To reduce rental, the best part will be for the Government to have amnesty to the lessees, the penal rental and the penalties, the Government can consider giving, I will stick to the lessees to pay rental so they can take out the interest and the penal rental which has been charged on those land leases. These are the things which we can do - we can reduce rental and Government can have more revenue on it, otherwise the arrears will keep on increasing. These are a few things which we can look into, and I hope the Government considers the amnesty to the lessees of the sugarcane lessees in the West and all the lessees in residential and commercial areas, so they can have revenue, and at the same time, the people will be able to clear off their rental.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the work done by the Committee. I had been a former Member of the Natural Resource Committee and once again, I would like to thank the honourable Minister.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, first and foremost, I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources on the review of the Ministry's Report from 2018 to 2021.

Mr. Speaker, the Ministry notes the role and the responsibility that it carries and the desire to continue to strive towards delivering excellence service to the public and to the people of Fiji. The Standing Committee on Natural Resources have come up with seven general recommendations in the Report, which I will highlight in this august House.

Recommendation 1:

The Committee recommends that the Ministry clearly identifies performance indicators and also carries out proper assessments of the achievements of the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry noted the recommendation and is working towards having clear performance indicators and to ensure systematic assessment of its achievements. Within the Ministry, there is a quarterly internal verification of our plans conducted from all the respective divisions where officers are located. From the verification of these reports, Sir, presentations are conducted which we were able to gauge the performance from these officers.

Recommendation 2:

The Committee recommends that the Ministry reconsiders its policy and actively undertake the development of subdivisions which includes the option of outsourcing development work whilst maintaining an oversight role.

Mr. Speaker, this recommendation is noted by the Ministry and is considering issuing development leases to potential developers who have the capability to develop State land to its highest and best use. The Ministry will strengthen its monitoring mechanism that will ensure development works are carried out within the development lease and to avoid issues of over development.

Recommendation 3:

The Committee recommends that the Ministry continues to enhance the use of information technology, digital platforms and applications to assist the Ministry achieve our targets and deliver better, effective and efficient services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is currently taking proactive steps in firstly scanning of all of our archaic files within our offices and for update we are almost completing scanning all the files in the West and North. The major task will be in ensuring that, that also happens in the Central and Eastern regions. In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is using its in-house capacity to develop the following platforms and again I have spoken about this in my past addresses, and I just reiterate them again for the use and benefit of those who have and retain State leases.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, MyLeaseInfo app for State land leases to register and access their lease information, we are urging this to all those who have State leases is to register. Again, the second one is on Online State Land Application shortly termed as OSLA. That is a platform where all lands that belong to the State can be applied for by everyone without having to visit any Ministry office.

Consent application, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is also coming online. We are currently developing and have already trialled this consent applications which is to compliment the MyLeaseInfo and the OSLA platform where lessees can also apply online for various consents along with the digitization of the entire application process.

Recommendation 4:

The Committee strongly recommends that proper recovery plans for outstanding leases, rents are implemented to collect unpaid dues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges this comment and this recommendation. We are putting forward strategies to be undertaken by the Ministry to improve the collection of our rental:

- (1) We are working with the Solicitor-General's Office in taking legal advice, particularly those who have commercial or industrial leases and continue to default on a yearly basis.
- (2) We are looking at waiver of interest incentive. Our staff are also visiting lessees and conducting awareness on rental payments, issuance of notices and flyer on rental payments.
- (3) We are accepting undertakings with lessees to clear rental arrears within a respective period. There is much media publicity and awareness being made by the Ministry.
- (4) We are providing options on mode of payments to lessees, development of Debt and Revenue Management Policy within and, of course, the acceptance of undertakings.

Recommendation 5:

The Committees strong recommendation in the continuation and strengthening of the Ministry's retention policies and also its training and capacity building policies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry welcomes this recommendation and ensures that proper procedures are in place regarding the retention of staff and human resources development within the Ministry.

Recommendation 6:

The Committee strongly recommends for proper application of financial procedures to enable efficient financial accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledged this recommendation, and we are working to strengthening our internal processes and ensure that appropriate measures and guidelines are being followed in ensuring accuracy, transparency and compliance with regulatory standards.

In terms of financial accountability, the Ministry is working closely with the Ministry of Finance on its internal reforms and policies.

Recommendation 7:

The Committee recommends that the Ministry strengthens the measures by which it eliminates illegal sand and gravel extraction.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has strengthened its monitoring of illegal sand and river gravel extraction in the three Divisions through the engagement of our natural resources monitoring officers within the Ministry. We continue to raise awareness and engagements with the landowning units to help them monitor the resources that they and the Ministry are able to provide.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, an MOU has been signed with the Fiji Police Force in 2022, to address the illegal river gravel and sand extraction in 2022. The Ministry is also moving to a lateral approach in working together with other Ministries, such as the Provincial Offices and other Government Ministries in ensuring that illegal activities on State resources is minimised or eradicated altogether.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude, I once again commend the Report and thank the Standing Committee on Natural Resources for the recommendation and the work that has been done. *Vinaka*.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I would like to thank the Chairman for leading us through the deliberations on this Report, and the comments that have been received from the honourable Minister. There are just a few things that I would like to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Having been part of that Ministry in the latter part of the period under review and also being part of the Committee, I would just like to appreciate the format of the Annual Report that was done by the Ministry. No long essays but just the focus on key results. I think that is something good for other Ministries to look at.

One of the things that we were equally impressed with the Ministry and their Reports, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was the strong gender equality and in particular, the leadership of the Ministry at that particular point in time - the Permanent Secretary, along with many of the Directors, the Chief Valuer, Divisional Lands Officer, were all women. So, it was very remarkable to see that, that was happening in this particular Ministry.

We, also appreciate at length the manner in which the SDGs that this Ministry was trying to contribute to meeting were clearly articulated in the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had a number of comments on a lot of the recommendations. I think the honourable Minister has identified in particular how they are addressing some of these recommendations. I will not spend too much time on it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in terms of the first one on identifying performance indicators, it is clearly articulated how well they have done that - their performance management system.

There is one thing that I see, however, that a lot of these Annual Reports, we do not get an overall score on outputs or - an overall score of how the Ministry has done. In order to be able to do something like that, you would have to weigh the relative importance of different outputs so that you get an overall assessment. I think this is something that is very important when we are trying to assess. How well an entity has operated is to weight the different outputs so that you can get an overall score of the performance of the entity as a whole. That is something that I hope that this Ministry and other Ministries can take into account.

The Ministry has addressed at length the development of the subdivisions, I think there has been a lot of growth in that particular area. There has been comments also from the Minister and I want to repeat that on how well the Ministry has done in using information, digital platforms, et cetera, to ease the way in which it carries out its operations. I will not repeat all those responses that the honourable Minister has made.

Also, on the plans that have been made for the recovery of arrears, we know that the current rent in the Ministry is around \$16 million per year, but the arrears total is around \$20 million. It has been stated that this is not a new issue, it has been longstanding, but I think, as parliamentarians, we need to raise our concern with it, and we hope that the Ministry can continue to look at innovative ways of reducing that level of arrears. I know it is not easy.

We take note of the measures they have put in place, and we hope that this needs to be addressed because \$20 million is a lot of money for the Government to look at. It is an opportunity cost to what Government could have got out of that money.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a person who is involved in training, the recommendation recommending the continuation and strengthening of the Ministry's retention policies and its training and capacity building policies, is something I strongly endorse.

We were told that this particular Ministry, during this period, regularised 80 positions within the Ministry, and in particular, I was very impressed with what they referred to as an equalisation. When looking whether to give someone a job or not, they just did not look at the academic requirements, but look at the person's competencies, and if the competencies were equal to what was you thought you would get out of the academic qualification, the person was given the job. So that was competency profiling and equalisation of not just the academic qualification of the person, but the person's ability to do. I think that is the message that can be used right across all different Ministries.

If you notice, we lose a lot of people. Some people are very well skilled but do not have the academic qualification, but on the job, they deliver, whereas others have the qualifications but cannot deliver. Eventually over time, they will deliver because they have that broad knowledge capacity and the academic qualifications, over time they grow to becoming much better at their particular job.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wanted to emphasise that very strongly. I have always been very impressed with the Ministry on how they try to make sure that their staff are very well qualified. This is a very well qualified Ministry. We have people with PhDs in this Ministry and a strong group that has Masters, all of whom have worked their way up through the ranks.

I congratulate the Committee and recommend for proper application of financial procedures. The Ministry, over the past have always had qualified audit opinions and even in the year in question,

it was qualified, but I understand that in the following year (2022-2023), the audit became unqualified. I think that is the achievement on its own and we hope that the Ministry can continue to do this, to make sure that the financial procedures are in place to ensure financial accountability.

The honourable Minister has mentioned the issue of about illegal sand and gravel extraction, and this illegal extraction is something that we find for all of the resource sectors, whether it is forestry or fishing. It is not easy to address because sometimes the people who are guilty of doing this are in cahoots with some of the landowners themselves. That is always something difficult to try to address.

I am pleased to mention the idea about penalties, stronger partnerships with other agencies, and we hope that they can continue to work to improve that for this important Ministry.

I also want to mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the role of this Ministry during COVID-19 where their GIS Specialists were at the forefront of the activities that were undertaken. The Command Centre and the Ministry of Health and all around, were using their GIS skills that became very important in that battle against COVID-19 at that time.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the issues I wanted to raise, I was looking at some of the comments that were made by the staff, one of the areas that they had some difficulties in was the success of borehole development, which was less than 100 percent, which means that of the number of boreholes they put into the ground, not all of them were successful. This is understandable, but I think the percentage of it, whether it is how high it is, is a concern.

Why that is of a particular concern to me, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I was looking in this year's budget (this is not for this Report), the amount of budget that they have for boreholes in groundwater for the large islands, has increased from around \$3million right up to \$5 million. I am worried, Mr. Speaker, Sir, about execution. I have talked about this in forestry, and I hope the execution can be undertaken to make use of this rapid rise. If not, and if we are not very careful, we will do it anyhow, you do not do the reconnaissance correctly and the assessments correctly, you just dig the borehole, and your percentage of successful borehole declines. So, it is very important that, that be done. That is a concern that I have.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one last thing that I have talked about is that, in the land situation that we have in Fiji, we have the iTLTB and the Ministry of Lands that looks after most of the land in this country. There is a portion of 4 percent for the State land, then we have the portion under the iTLTB land. One of the concerns that I always have, being a former Minister, working in Government, is the fact that so many civil servants cannot afford land. A lot of them live in squatter settlements. I know that there is a grouping where the TLTB and the Ministry of Lands sit and they look at the whole land situation. We really need to find some sort of a solution where our own civil servants can get housing and can get land.

I do not know what the solution is, maybe something around valuation to make sure that people can afford land, to reduce speculation which I think is one of the causes of the hyped land prices so that our own civil servants themselves can even get land to be able to have a house for themselves. I know it will require some sort of a framework across Government, across iTaukei Affairs, TLTB and the Ministry of Lands, to come up with some sort of a scenario or approach that allows our people to get access to land so that they can build a house. There are too many people now moving into squatter settlements, et cetera.

Along those lines, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish the Ministry well with these recommendations. I was glad to hear the sentiments from the honourable Minister and I support the motion before the

House.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I want to thank the honourable Members who have spoken before me and particularly, thank the honourable Minister for Lands for addressing all the recommendations very clearly so I am not going to talk about that. I also thank honourable Kirpal and honourable Usamate. I think honourable Usamate today made some very good points and suggestions.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I always do!

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I think he touched on some very, very important points.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 18 months, I have realised the importance of this Ministry, the significance of this Ministry because when you look at how the economic entities, investment and he talked about housing, beyond housing is the efficiency and the effectiveness with which the Ministry of Lands and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs actually works. It determines, Mr. Speaker, Sir, how quickly investors can get on to the activities, but also the availability of land for those who want to build their houses.

I think the availability and access to land is a serious issue, and I agree that it is time that we, as a government, and Opposition should set up a taskforce to look at how more land could be opened up at a price at a rate which is affordable to many of our people.

I am also very pleased to say looking at it from the Ministry of Finance that in the last 18 months, a lot of progress has been made by the Ministry in terms of the legislation, review of some of the policies, ongoing digitisation of land records, Government's efforts to address shortage of registered valuers.

On the lease arrears, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see there is quite a bit of flexibility now in terms of what the Ministry is doing. They have undertaken a review of the criteria and, hopefully, we will have further incentives to reduce the amount of arrears that has been there.

Just on the 2024-2025 Budget and in relation to what honourable Usamate shared with respect to boreholes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is a very good initiative in the Budget, and this came out very clearly throughout the national consultations that we had on the National Development Plan.

It seems to us that there was a lot of legacy issues in terms of availability of water supply in the rural areas. That is why the allocation for 1,700 boreholes over the next two years - 1,000 in Viti Levu, 500 in Vanua Levu and 200 in the maritime islands.

I take the point very well that honourable Usamate made and both, myself and the honourable Minister for Lands, I mentioned that in my Budget Speech that there will be a taskforce which will involve the Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Waterways, Water Authority of Fiji and the Ministry of Finance - a taskforce made up of Permanent Secretaries who will ensure that we are able to actually deliver all these boreholes and address this fundamental issue of access and availability of drinking water in the rural areas.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will engage, not only the facilities and the machines that are available with the Ministry of Lands, but also bring in private players so that there is an urgency, there is a very clear focus as to how we can complete these boreholes as per the allocation in the Budget. The

Ministry's overall budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was increased by \$6.4 million, which is a significant increase.

The other important allocation of almost a million dollars was the survey of mahogany plantations and we realised we had some discussions this morning that a lot of trees are getting old. The value may be declining, and part of the problem was how quickly these surveys were done and forest harvested.

The Survey of Government Stations, Cabinet earlier this year had approved the extension on the Survey of Government institutions on *itaukei* land lease to the State for the next 10 years. That is another additional allocation that we have provided.

The groundwater assistance programme which includes the boreholes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is, again, a very important component of this year's Budget within the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources.

So, once again, Mr. Speaker, I think the honourable Minister has covered the recommendations very well and I thank the Committee on Natural Resources for their Report and the contribution the Members have made.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before I call on the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources to speak in reply, just some concerns caught my attention. One was mentioned recently by honourable Usamate, the affordability of land for residential purposes by civil servants. He stated that it is so high, expensive, and it is difficult for them to acquire a land, especially for residential purposes.

I do not know, I have stated this already and I will want to echo that again, it is the Town Planning together with the Ministry of Lands and the iTaukei Affairs to just try and sit and sort out how best can they make Native land or State land attractive by not imposing very stringent conditions in the town planning approval. Put gravel road instead of tarsealed road. You just do GPS boundary survey on wooden stakes and then they are given a lease. If they want to go beyond that and getting the lease surveyed and things like of that nature, then it is upon them to follow that up, whether they go through their banks, at least, they have something in their hands. It is an agreement to lease but that is a contract.

When you reduce such issues by the very approval that we give it makes the land very expensive. Cadastral surveys are very expensive and honourable Kirpal has mentioned that.

On top of that, instead of tarsealed road and gravel road, you are providing them access and it is upon them for future Government development to come up with that to tarseal the road afterwards. We did that in Ba, Bainisucu in Labasa, Malolo Sector in Nadi and Drasa in Lautoka where we relaxed all the conditions, got the approval and it is cheaper.

Recommendation 4 caught my attention, the arrears, I also mentioned this in the past, when you do not isolate what is rental owing and what is truly rental arrears, then both will be seen to be clogged up together and that becomes arrears. That is why you have a \$20 million arrears, honourable Minister for Lands. If you take away the rental owing because the rental clause in the lease as provided by Ministry of Lands and iTLTB allows for the payment of an annual sum into modes of payments – 6-monthly. When the first 6 months has not been paid, it does not mean that has become arrears in July, it is still rental owing. We have tried this, we have had it tested in the Courts and that was upheld. So, we reduced our arrears from \$20 million to about \$14 million or \$15 million.

Again, when you go into trying to address arrears by spending more money in recruiting the people who will follow up the arrears, you are spending more money to get a money that was already owing to you. I hope I am making sense here. I am just trying to share this so at least it could throw some light into this how could this be addressed.

What the honourable Usamate stated is very critical when civil servants cannot afford residential allotments and when the rents are high, arrears are high, the cost that comes with it to have it to be addressed, the end result is the eviction of people from land that is already expensive to get a hold of. I am just sharing that in the hope that it might drive some ideas into you honourable Members, to see how best you can address the arrears and the way to reduce the cost.

HON. T.N.TUNABUNA.- I wish to thank all Members who have contributed to the debate this afternoon and for the supporting the Report that had been submitted. I have nothing else to add, Sir.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – SUGAR CANE GROWERS FUND 2019 AND 2020 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2019 and 2020 Annual Reports which was tabled on 23rd May, 2024.

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

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugar Cane Growers Fund is a statutory body providing affordable loans to sugar cane growers in Fiji with the aim to increase the production of sugar cane, improve efficiency in planting, growing, harvesting and the transportation of sugar cane, also rehabilitate farms and farm buildings and other installations, the damaged, destroyed or affected by floods, cyclones and droughts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee upon being referred with the SCGF 2019 and 2020 Annual Reports undertook site visits to the Western and Northern Divisions and also received public hearing from the Fund headed by the Chief Executive Officer to gather information on the Fund operational dynamics as part of the Committee's scrutiny process.

While the Committee scrutinized the Report, it identified pertinent issues of concern such as:

- (1) Annual Reports provided by the SCGF failed to include Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the periods under review. These indicators are essential for the Committee to make more informed recommendations and to gauge the performance of the organisation.
- (2) Various assistance programmes provided by the Ministry of Sugar other than SCGF to assist sugarcane farmers in improving their production and quality of cane. For example, Sugarcane Development and Farmers Assistance, Weedicide and Fertilizer subsidy, funding to improve Cane Access Roads, subsidy to purchase mechanical harvesters, grants

to encourage new farmers in the Sugar Sector and Cane Cartage Grant.

- (3) Utilizing rail transport for cane would prove significantly more cost-effective compared to the current practice of using trucks. Trucks rely heavily on fuel and are subject to escalating fuel prices and contribute to road congestion and cause road damage.

Furthermore, the Committee in its Review Report articulated eight findings with recommendations in which the Ministry of Sugar has responded and provide assurance that the Fund will be working in implementing the recommendations to enhance sustainability and efficiency of the Fund and other sugar sectors.

The Committee is satisfied with the Annual Reports during the review period. However, we note that there are certain areas that can be improved through more enhanced coordination, commitment, and accountability of all sugar sectors.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is now open for debate and before allowing the honourable Members to take the floor, I have a list from the Whips as well:

- (1) Honourable P.D. Kumar;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Multi Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry;
- (3) Honourable S. Nand; and
- (4) Honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to speak on this motion. When cane farmers face financial distress or hardship, they rely on the Sugar Cane Growers Fund for their welfare. The Growers Fund provides loans to the cane farmers for personal use and also to increase sugar production, improve efficiency and crop diversification. The Sugar Cane Growers Fund established with farmers money holds a 90.6 percent stake in South Pacific Fertilizers Pte. Limited managed by the Growers Fund Board.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, despite Government assistance and funding from the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, cane production is declining and there is little crop diversification, and we know the key reason here is the cost of production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee scrutinized all the reports, and they came up with several recommendations but today I will speak specifically on four recommendations which was made by the Committee. Two of these recommendations focused on South Pacific Fertilizers Pte Limited and this is to improve its financial performance and invest in diversified products including the production of natural fertilizers.

It is baffling, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the fertiliser company has not ventured into diversified products to become financially viable. They still import and blend fertilisers failing to meet farmers' demand, farmers need fertilisers tailored to the soil types, but what they get is not based on the soil type. In all these, I question what Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) is doing? They need to be there to see the effectiveness of these fertilisers when they are applied on the farm.

The South Pacific Fertilizers Limited has not made any effort to produce natural fertilisers using locally available resources like chicken manure, et cetera, despite high prices of imported fertilisers. Over the years, South Pacific Fertilizers Limited missed the opportunity to become the primary supplier of fertilisers to the non-sugar sector. The company could have built a trusted brand

for farmers across all farming needs, instead it relies on Government subsidies indirectly to stay afloat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the real issue lies with the Sugar Cane Growers Board of Directors, past and present. The question is, why have they allowed South Pacific Fertilizers Limited to remain stagnant? Is it because Sugar Cane Growers Fund continues to receive dividends at taxpayer's expense?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee also recommended that the Sugar Cane Growers Fund Act be reviewed to expand its financial products to non-sugar farmers, making it a financial facility for every farmer needing assistance. This diversification would generate profits, benefitting cane farmers through broader agricultural support at reduced interest rates or even grants. It is encouraging to note that the Ministry of Sugar is pursuing in this direction, leveraging the expertise of the current CEO who is a former banker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee noted the Sugar Cane Growers Fund Act's limitation, restricting loans during emergencies such as natural disasters. In this regard, the Ministry of Sugar proposed a solution through the Master Award, but it was turned down by the Sugar Industry Tribunal, citing that Sugar Cane Growers Fund cannot be given preference. This narrow thinking has no place in an industry facing insolvency. Fiji's sugar industry is in crisis which is well-known by all of us, but it is propped up by past and present government assistance without addressing the fundamental problem. Merely keeping it on life support, each year more taxpayer money is poured into this failing system with no change to the status quo. This is not a sustainable solution, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

In the new financial year, the Government committed over \$68 million to the sugar sector. Will this money improve sugar production? Will it yield the results we hope for? These are the questions that we are posing. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry's troubles are worsened when politicians see the sugar sector as their world bank, engaging in blame games and fill good speeches. Sugar institutions instead of improving sugar production are engaged in political manoeuvring for their survival, obstructing essential reforms as seen during the consultations for the Sugar Bill that was introduced by the previous government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this year, the Government has decided to spend \$200,000 on the Fiji Sugar Cane Growers Council elections. Rather than taking politics out of the sugar sector and focusing on commercial viability, this Government is injecting politics back into the system at the expense of taxpayers who are paying for that.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- This move undermines the reforms our sugar industry desperately needs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar industry has not undergone necessary reforms due to these obstructions. The previous government's gradual reform to remove politics and establish the industry on a business model must continue. We can no longer afford to spend millions of taxpayer dollars each year on inefficient farmers, millers, and sugar institutions established during the colonial era. We cannot expect these institutions to become efficient and productive under the current structure.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the industry structure was designed for a different era, characterized by guaranteed sugar prices under the Lome and Cotonou Agreements. Trade dynamics have changed, yet we expect these colonial-era institutions to perform well.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we must learn from countries like Mauritius, which have consolidated, modernized and diversified under the new Sugar Efficiency Act. The mills have diversified into

electricity generation, ethanol production and rum. Our learned Minister has been visiting Mauritius quite a bit and we are looking forward to whatever learnings he has received through his study tour, he will be able to implement and bring the industry to a profitable level.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, all sugar institutions should assist farmers and treat them like kings. Some of these organisations do not efficiently serve the farmers, leaving them to run around to get their matters sorted and this is something we experienced during our field visit.

Mr. Speaker Sir, these institutions exist because of the farmers' hard-earned money. Under the Master Award, 70 percent of sugar sales revenue goes to the farmers, and 30 percent to the miller. From the miller's allocation, SRIF gets some component. Unfortunately, FSC still owes more than \$5 million to SRIF.

Mr. Speaker Sir, before I take my seat, the only way forward and I want to emphasise to prevent the imminent collapse of the sugar industry is through consolidation, modernisation and diversification. I do understand that the Ministry of Sugar is in the process of hiring a consultant to dive deeper into all these problems and come up with some solutions. We look forward to working with the Government in trying to address some of these problems which is encountered by the sugar sector.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs Committee Report on the Consolidated Review Reports of Sugar Cane Growers Fund 2019 and 2020 Annual Reports.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must commend the Board, the CEO, the management and staff for the remarkable transformation of the Sugar Cane Growers Fund that had gone under in the recent years under the leadership of its CEO, Mr. Raj Sharma and his new Board.

Some of the notable achievements include enhancement of the Governance Framework through the implementation of the various policies including the Compliance Risk Management and Audit. It also includes the continuous review of the products and services, the introduction of a new technology platform and deepening the engagement with the growers and stakeholders.

I would also like to applaud the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for its commitment to the international initiatives as the Sustainable Development Goals. A notable programme is the Green Cane Incentive which was recently launched complimenting the Government's incentives for the supply of green cane. Under this initiative, the farmers will harvest 75 percent or more of the green cane, receive a 2 percent deduction in interest from 6 percent to 4 percent.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugar Cane Growers Fund has repositioned itself both, within and outside of the sugar industry. This is evident from the participation and the success of the Fiji Business Excellence Award for the last three consecutive years.

We are mindful of the legislation faced by Sugarcane Growers Fund in extending credit services to both, the sugar and non-sugar sectors. The Fund's strategic intent is to diversify and expand its function for a greater sustainability which is commendable. In this context, the Asian Development Bank was engaged to conduct a debt analysis and develop a roadmap for the Sugarcane Growers Fund to potentially become a licensed financial institution.

The Sugarcane Growers Fund's intentions is to diversify its balance sheet to absorb the unexpected shocks, such as natural disasters and to generate returns to the benefit of sugar which is

noted and encouraged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugarcane Growers Fund is self-funded and concessionary that were surpluses. It has potential to evolve into a dynamic financial institution, operating on a commercial or semi-commercial basis, with the benefits accruing to the sugar sector as its core founders.

The Report also raises concern about the financial performance of the South Pacific Fertilizer Company which the Sugarcane Growers Fund holds 90 percent of shares. We are informed that appropriate actions are taken to address these issues.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must inform Parliament that consultants engaged to the Food and Agriculture Organization are currently conducting a comprehensive study on the sugarcane industry. I want to put on record my sincere appreciation to honourable Sakiusa Tubuna for facilitating our request for FAO at no cost to the Government of Fiji.

This study, Mr. Speaker, aims to identify current and the future barriers to the sugar production and provide a policy recommendation to revitalise the industry. While there are concerns over the decline in sugarcane production, despite the availability of the funds from the Sugarcane Growers Fund and the various assistance from the Ministry of Sugar Industry. The FAO report is expected to provide valuable guidance in the development of the comprehensive policy for the industry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this report will be presented to us by end of October, to Parliament as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our sugar industry faces a wide range of challenge from social and economic to environment forces. A deep understanding of this challenges is essential to appreciate the industry's performance. The outcome of the study will offer a clear direction and strategies for the future.

The sugar industry has been and will continue to be a significant contributor to the economic growth and development of this nation building. The Sugarcane Growers Fund and its subsidy - SPFL both has vital roles within and beyond the industry's economic drivers, especially with the ongoing reform of the Sugarcane Growers Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would like to just add on to what honourable Premila has said about the South Pacific Fertilizers and trying to get poultry manure, et cetera, I have initiated the programme and we have been talking to Goodman Fielder, Ram Sami and Sons and Rooster Poultry. They are coming on board to help the Sugar Research Institute and also the fertilizer company to see how we can bring in new fertilizer.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I extend my gratitude to the Committee Members for their contribution and deliberation. Based on those remarks, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before the House. Our farmers are the centre of the industry and apart from land leases, the biggest challenge our farmers face is high cost of production. The Sugarcane Growers Fund plays a very vital role in ensuring that funds are available to the farmers in terms of farm development, in terms of production, and also for their private and personal issues, for example, family issues or medical.

I would have loved to see a bit of expansion in the loans on types of loans that have been issued to our farmers. The Fund's services need to be streamlined, and there are three or four institutions that are providing services to our farmers. All these institutions should have a holistic

approach, so the farmer gets consolidated information from all the people - everyone sings the same song tune.

It is important that apart from providing loans to our farmers, we should ensure that they are capable of managing their finances. Therefore, workshops and seminars on financial management should be the core focus of the Sugarcane Growers Fund, so that our farmers' capacities is developed and enhanced.

Because of our land size and farm size, not all the farmers are able to mechanise, are not able to invest in machinery, therefore, the Sugarcane Growers Fund should exploring options where they can get for smallholder farms tractors that are walk-behind tractors, inputs that can be attached to this, so that the cost of production on the farm decreases.

The biggest cost of production on the farm is labour and the inputs. Farmers barely make a living out of the cane farm. If mechanisation is done, if the farms are mechanised, efficiency on the farm will increase. The farmer will be able to get more done in a lesser amount of time.

The operations on the farm will increase and there will be a consistent in quality. Labour savings would be another big savings on the farm. Initially, it will be a high cost of investment, but if you spread it over a period time, the farmer wins in terms of savings.

The machinery can also be used for diversification. We should strongly encourage our cane farmers to diversify. They should not totally stick to cane production. They should diversify into cash crop production, livestock production, so that each component can complement each other and enhance the farmers' income.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our objective should be to ensure that our farmers have a sustainable livelihood and that our national agriculture throughput is improved, be it sugar or be it other crops. I believe the sugar industry has the potential to grow, but together with it, the other agricultural commodities have a potential to grow and I would love to see that the Sugarcane Growers Fund provide avenues to our farmers to enable them, whilst they are improving their cane production and improving their farm, they improve their livelihood, they diversify, and have a better standard of living. That is the ultimate goal we should all strive for, ensuring that our farmers, be it sugarcane, be it other diversified products, they should ensure that the Fund supports them, the Fund ensures them, that they can have a sustainable livelihood and a better living standard.

With those, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister and other honourable Members for the contribution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Sugarcane Growers Fund was established in 1984 on the Sugar Price Support Fund which was established in 1948 and it was part of a strategy to put aside part of the sugar price for the farmers into a fund for rehabilitation. So, the history is long, the intention was very noble and the Fund, over the years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has served the farmers very well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for laying out some of the progress that has been made over the last 18 months. However, I was kind of intrigued, happy as well as concerned about the comments made my honourable Premila Kumar. I wish she was able to make those comments when she was in government, because we would not have wasted those four years that she was in government, we might have done something better.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I was not looking after sugar.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Regardless of whether you were looking after sugar or not, you were a member of the government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this reference to politics in the sugar industry, is what we used to hear for 16 years. When we had politics, we were doing very well, we were producing 3.2 million tonnes of cane in 2006. After 2006, we lost \$350 million because that was the European Union funding. Honourable Kumar knows, we wrote a paper together on the impact of the Lome Convention on the environment and she did a very good thesis, and I must commend her for that, but she has probably forgotten about that.

She should have known when she was in government that, that \$350 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was precisely directed towards reforming the sugar industry. Countries like Mauritius that she talked about, used European Union funding because the Lome Convention, the preferential prices was going to come to an end, and the European Union was providing all the sugar growing countries, under Lome Convention, with those additional grant funding so that there were three components - improving efficiency at the mill level, improving efficiency at the farm level, improving efficiency for the growers, so that the cost of production per acre went down, and the third component, of course, was alternative livelihood. So, those who wanted to exit the sugar industry, Mr. Speaker, Sir, would be allowed to do that through an appropriate funding.

We lost that. They abolished the Growers Council. She referred to a Bill, that was the draconian Bill that they wanted to bring, and if it was not for some of us in the Opposition and growers listened outside Parliament, to do that and that Bill, if there was not that kind of opposition outside of Parliament, would have enslaved the farmers to this day. That is what they were trying to do.

What we have done, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last 18 months, is to provide an open political environment that is now more thinking. Honourable Tubuna, an expert in agriculture, working with the FAO.

Now, this is a Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is thinking and putting together resources and putting more people. We have a very good Chairman for the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, we have good CEO, and there are people who are thinking now on how we can improve and get things done for the sugar industry together. As I have said, this is a Government which is not about gimmicks, which is not about fancy stunt, this is a Government which is thinking seriously about the sugar industry.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Change is there.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- We have changed a lot of things and we are doing things, Mr. Speaker, Sir. But you cannot correct the 16 years of direct deliberate neglect of the industry by the government that she was part of, and some of them are sitting on the other side. She concluded very well, and I thank her for that.

I hope, Mr. Speaker, Sir, going forward, I know the honourable Leader of the Opposition knew about this and going forward, I agree that we should work as a Parliament, and we should come together. The Committee that we have is going to drive the agenda.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when we do that, we will cut out all the hogwash, and we will do the right thing

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I thank the Committee Members for thinking and getting this Report done. It is a good beginning and I think it will mean well for the Sugar Cane Growers Fund and for the farmers. There is a possibility that the Sugar Cane Growers Fund, as honourable Sachida Nand said which is a good point, could create itself into a much more agile fund, providing additional support for non-sugar crop sectors.

This Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the first time, has put in policies. We are now providing subsidies for fertilizer and weedicide for non-sugar crop sectors as well because we believe in diversification. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you go to Vanua Levu, you will see the level of interest in the production of cassava, *dalo*, rice, and you will see Vanua Levu buzzing in many areas because of the deliberate Government policy to support the non-sugar agriculture sector.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think there has been quite a lot that has been said about the industry. This week, we will be discussing about the industry. There will be four reports that will be tabled in Parliament.

I would like to thank all the honourable Members for their contribution and, of course, I support the motion.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of our sitting today. I thank you all for your contributions. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 10.30 a.m. in our preparation to receive Her Excellency the President of the Republic of India visiting us after the ceremony at the GPH.

The Parliament adjourned at 5.52 p.m.