

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**THURSDAY, 5TH SEPTEMBER, 2024**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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**THURSDAY, 5<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2024**

The Parliament met at 9.37 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

**PRESENT**

All Members were present, except the honourable Minister for iTaukei Affairs and Culture, Heritage and Arts; the honourable Minister for Youth and Sports; honourable A.A. Maharaj; Hon. V. Nath; honourable S. Nand; and honourable A. Bia.

**MINUTES**

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

That the Minutes of the sitting of Parliament held on Wednesday, 4th September, 2024, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and those watching proceedings on the television and the internet. As usual, thank you for your continued interest in the proceedings of Parliament.

Hibiscus Festival Contestants

Honourable Members, please, join me in extending a warm welcome to the 2024 Hibiscus Festival Contestants.

(Acclamation)

What a beautiful group of Contestants we have here, excluding honourable Ketal Lal.

(Laughter)

Honourable Members, really for a change, this needs to kind of spruce up this august Parliament by the presence of the Contestants here. This is just an effort, hopefully, you will agree, honourable Members, on our part as Parliamentarians to be part of this beautiful occasion in the capital of Fiji in honouring the Contestants, since they have also raised a few social issues among themselves in their interviews.

Hopefully, they can come and mingle amongst you, honourable Members, and see how best you can raise your question on a one-to-one basis with the honourable Members of Parliament. I

must say, on behalf of the honourable Members of Parliament, that we are also pleased to be part of this occasion since it has been quite a while after almost five years, then we have had this revival in the festivity again.

Ladies, I hope that your experience here today will not only educate you, young ladies, but also raise your awareness on the Parliament institution, to aspire to, as well as to encourage more women representation and participation in Parliament.

I am delighted to learn that in the course of your engagement with the media, business houses and the general public, you are amplifying the very issues that are pertinent in today's society. For that, I congratulate you all and, at the same time, encourage you to continue to engage in opportunities involving participation at the decision-making level with the ultimate goal of becoming change makers of your communities. I also welcome Mr. Ravai, who is sitting amongst you, and who has been in the lead role right throughout this Festival.

At the end of the final stretch only one will be crowned as Miss Hibiscus after this week's sitting, dear ladies. And to the rest, remember this is not the end, you just need to keep pressing forward, because there are other roles that you will have to play to be part of the rebuilding of our society, especially in our communities all the time.

With those few words, I warmly welcome you all to Parliament and I wish you our very best for the remainder of this week's programme and for that you will be engaged in right towards the end of the hectic week.

### Back to Office Report

For the information of the honourable Members, the Back to Office Report for the study visit that was undertaken at the Parliament of Victoria by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts Committee and the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs is now available in the Library for your perusal and reference.

Honourable Members, it is just the timing of the reports coming in. It is so quick to take the tour, but Reports need to be submitted on time as well, to ensure that the rest of the Members of Parliament are kept well abreast of what transpired during the tour.

We will proceed to the next item, honourable Members, and there will be four Committee Reports tabled today.

## **PRESENTATION OF REPORTS OF COMMITTEES**

### Consolidated Review Report - Investment Fiji 2019-2022 Annual Reports

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs hereby submits to Parliament the Consolidated Review Report on Investment Fiji 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 Annual Reports.

Investment Fiji was established in 1980 under the Economic Development Board Act 2017. It serves as Fiji's Trade & Investment Promotion Agency, with the primary goal of promoting, stimulating, and facilitating economic development in the country.

Investment Fiji operates independently as the marketing arm of the Fiji Government, providing services to promote investment, develop industries and enterprises, and increase exports

of goods and services. The agency plays a crucial role in creating employment opportunities, raising economic activities and bringing in foreign exchange, thereby, contributing to Fiji's economic growth and prosperity.

The Agency's vision is to be a leading economic development agency by ensuring increased sustainable levels of investment and exports. Its mission is to create a positive economic impact in the lives of Fijians through premium investments, export, and employment opportunities.

The Committee acknowledges positive developments in the Reports and identified areas that require improvements:

- (1) The Committee commends Investment Fiji for successfully developing a three-year Strategic Plan that aligns with its new role, as outlined in the new Investment Fiji Act 2022 (Act No. 25 of 2022), passed on 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.
- (2) The Committee expressed its concern that the Annual Reports did not contain any performance matrix aligned with the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), making it difficult to thoroughly assess the performance of Investment Fiji. However, when the Committee raised this issue, Investment Fiji did provide the performance Matrix, which should have been included in the Reports from the outset.
- (3) The Committee also noted that Investment Fiji did not report on relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which is a mandatory requirement for all Annual Reports presented to Parliament.
- (4) While the Committee recognises the progress made in specific activities such as number of trade missions and investments promotions conducted, however, the Report lacks detailed information on the level of interest these activities generated and how the interest is translated into actual investment.
- (5) The Committee observed that the Annual Reports stated the number of businesses without specifying names, making it difficult to assess how promotional activities are translated into actual investments or exports over the years. Upon inquiry, the Committee was informed that this information was withheld due to commercial sensitivity.
- (6) The Committee noted the paucity of tangible data and reliable statistics related to the operations of Investment Fiji, which hinders comprehensive evaluation.
- (7) The Committee expresses concern about their failure to report on the expected targets versus actual achievements, which is necessary to justify the budgetary allocations provided to Investment Fiji.
- (8) The Committee observed that recommendation 6 of the previous Committee Report on full disclosure of data and key information were not fully implemented.

I wish to extend my gratitude to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Investment Fiji, Mr. Kamal Chetty, and his staff for their timely assistance in this inquiry on answering various questions raised by the Committee through face-to-face public hearing.

At this juncture, I also would like to thank our Committee Members and Alternate Member who were part of the team that produced this Report:

- (1) Honourable Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection – Deputy Chairperson;
- (2) Honourable P.D. Kumar;
- (3) Honourable Assistant Minister for Agriculture and Waterways;
- (4) Honourable A. Bia; and
- (5) Honourable P. Ravunawa.

I also thank the Secretariat for their invaluable support.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, I commend this Review Report to Parliament and request all Members of this august Parliament to take note of the Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121 (5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that the debate on the contents of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members before I continue to the second Report to be submitted, I must apologise for not highlighting the fact to you, our beautiful Contestants. We also have two or three former Queens here.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, they are both sitting on this side of Parliament, the honourable Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and Deputy Speaker, I hope you all know her, otherwise, I will ask her to stand.

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Fiji knows her.

MR. SPEAKER.- Fiji knows her?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Yes.

MR. SPEAKER.- Oh, thank you, and the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, as well.

Before coming to this Sitting, I was a bit confused whether my Secretary-General was also Queen, or was it her sister?

(Laughter)

HON. S.D. TURAGA.- Yes, her sister.

MR. SPEAKER.- Quite confusing, ladies.

(Laughter)

MR. SPEAKER.- But that goes to show that Parliament is also impacted by their beauty as well.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Beauty with brains, Sir!

MR. SPEAKER.- Oh, so you mean beauty with brains on this side?

(Laughter)

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- This side as well, in the middle!

MR. SPEAKER.- In the middle?

#### Review Report - OAG's Special Investigation Conducted for Procurement of Goods and Services

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Committee's Review Report on the Special Investigation conducted by the Office of the Auditor-General (OAG) for the Procurement of Goods and Services during the 52<sup>nd</sup> Asian Development Bank Annual Meeting.

The Ministry of Civil Service was charged with leading Fiji's planning and hosting responsibilities for the 52<sup>nd</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB) Annual Meeting (the Event) which was held in Nadi from 1st May, 2019 to 5th May 2019. The Event gathered 3,582 attendees from 76 countries. Over 30 seminars, debates and other events brought together stakeholders to discuss key development issues in Asia and the Pacific.

As the host country, the Fijian Government allocated \$10 million to meet the costs for the Event. Upon completion of the meeting, the actual cost incurred was \$10.9 million. The additional \$0.9 million, which was the VAT component, was sourced from the Government's Head 50 Budget.

The (OAG) carried out a special investigation at the Ministry of Civil Service, focused on the hosting of the Event in May 2019. It came about subsequent to a preliminary audit carried out by the OAG that found that there could be a material misstatement of the financial statements of the Ministry of Civil Service for the 2019 financial year at the back of two Investigation Reports detailed below relating to the ADB event:

- (1) Special Audit: Voiding of Payments by the Internal Audit of MoF; and
- (2) Investigation Report by the Investigation Panel appointed by the Ministry of Civil Service.

The OAG found that the occurrence of misstatement is high, hence the decision to proceed with the investigation.

The Committee noted the seriousness of the issues found in the investigation, and after consultations with relevant stakeholders agreed for further investigation by the relevant law enforcement agencies on the findings that includes:

- (1) elements of fraud during payments;

- (2) breach of relevant legislations, rules and regulations and policies in the procurement of goods and services; and
- (3) limitations in the FMIS over the processing of payments.

The Committee, through its own investigation, found that with those findings:

- (1) There were delays by the Ministry of Civil Service and its then Minister to finalise this Report which was finally done on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 2020, and, apart from delays due to COVID-19, there were intentional delays to bring the Report to Parliament which was finally done on 27<sup>th</sup> March, 2023, when the new Government came in.
- (2) There were delays as well by the Ministry of Civil Service to direct the Report to the appropriate authorities, including FICAC, for further investigations, which was finally done by the current Permanent Secretary and his Team after consultation around November 2023.

Given the findings identified above, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the time that had lapsed and the move by those implicated, the Committee further recommends that the current Executive Management of the Ministry of Civil Service with the assistance of the Ministry of Finance to follow up further with FICAC on the progress of those cases referred to them.

While some or most of the recommendations have been implemented by the Ministry of Civil Service, the Ministry of Finance Internal Audit team or Office of the Auditor-General should carry out a follow up audit, especially on the breach of relevant legislations, rules and regulations and policies in the procurement of goods and services, as well as the limitation in the FMIS over the processing of payments.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, both Ministries should ensure that the Standard Operating Procedure for hosting of events such as this magnitude that is being developed and put in place to be used in the future to include the recommendations by the Office of the Auditor-General and should cover every aspect of the event.

Overall, I wish to thank the current Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Civil Service and his Team, as well as Ms. Susan Kiran, the former Permanent Secretary, for responding and providing clarifications on those audit issues that were highlighted. Also, I wish to thank the Ministry of Finance FMIS Team and the Internal Audit Team for responding positively to the Report as well to the queries raised by the Committee.

At this juncture, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to extend my appreciation to all the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, who were part of the successful compilation of this bipartisan Report namely:

- (1) Honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister;
- (2) Honourable Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management;
- (3) Honourable A.A. Maharaj;
- (4) Honourable H. Chand; and
- (5) Honourable N.T. Tuinaceva.

I also wish to thank the Alternate Members of the Standing Committee who took part in the consultations, namely, honourable Taito R. Matasawalevu who stood in as an Alternate Member, pursuant to Standing Order 115(5).



Mr. Speaker, Sir with those few words, I now commend this Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice, that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA. - Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Consolidated Review Report - Tavua Town Council 2016-2018 Annual Reports

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to present the Consolidated Review Report on the Tavua Town Council 2016-2018 Annual Report. As mandated under Standing Order 109(2) (b), the Committee looks into issues related to health, education, social services, labour, aviation, culture and media.

The Committee, through its mandatory role as stipulated under Standing Order 110, undertook a site visit to the Government grant projects administered by the Council, which was the Tavualevu Village Public Convenience Project and the Muti-Purpose Sports Court Change Room.

The Council raised concerns faced by the Council which has been ongoing from the previous years. The Committee noted the various issues raised by the Council and provided possible recommendations as well.

The Committee noted the importance of small Municipalities, like Tavua, in engaging with stakeholders to expedite various projects that are being planned to be undertaken by the Council for better service to the people. The Committee commends the Council for having a good rate collection, as compared to other Councils.

I extend my gratitude and appreciation to the Chief Executive Officer and Management of Tavua Town Council for their timely contribution in this review process.

Finally, I take this opportunity to thank the former Chairperson of the Committee, the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry, for her leadership and guidance; the former Committee Member, honourable P.K. Bala; the Alternate Members, honourable K.K. Lal and honourable P. Ravunawa, for their constructive input and tremendous teamwork; and the current Committee Members for the finalisation of this Committee Report.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, I commend this Report to Parliament and request that all Members of this august Parliament take note of the Report.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. I.S. VANAWALU. - Mr. Speaker Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU. - I second the motion, Mr. Speaker Sir.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Review Report – Office of the Auditor-General Special Investigation on Housing Authority

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker Sir, this Public Accounts Committee Report is on Special Investigation on Housing Authority (HA) which was carried out by the Office of the Auditor-General in July 2020. The investigation centered on matters related to the illegal allocation of lots and abuse of the tender process which resulted in the controversial and inappropriate owning of lots by both individuals and employees of the Housing Authority.

The case came to light after members of the public raised concerns in an uproar manner with the then Minister of Housing namely, the honourable Premila Kumar, who initiated a special investigation through the Board of Housing Authority with the Office of the Auditor-General who is empowered to do such audit under Section 6 (1)(d) of the Audit Act 1969. Honourable Kumar and Board Chairperson, Lorraine Seeto, must be commended for their effort in trying to improve the operations at Housing Authority.

As expected from the Committee under the provisions of Standing Order 109, a thorough review on the Office of the Auditor-General's investigation result document was carried out by the team and noted the following:

- (1) Corporate governance, transparency and accountability was extremely weak, bordering on being pathetic at Housing Authority.
- (2) Absence of Conflict-of-Interest Policy, lack of proper verification, poor record-keeping, abuse of power and corruption.
- (3) Not all tender documents were provided for the development of lots from 2010 to the date of this Report (2020). Critical records such as tender documents which were not provided during the investigation is a serious issue, especially when the Tender Policy was approved in 2005 which was used to process the tenders. The Authority should make every effort to locate these records for independent examination and verifications.
- (4) Cases of suspected fraud and collusion where staff and their relatives benefitted from the breakdown in the Authority's processes should be referred to relevant authorities, since the audit of the Office of the Auditor-General did not focus on non-compliance with the law. These law enforcement agencies will also be able to access information on financial transactions which are held by other institutions and with that, I wish to advise that over 60 cases were referred to FICAC by the Housing Authority after the investigations.
- (5) The Office of the Auditor-General was unable to interview a former key staff member of the Authority and was also unable to receive responses for the interview questions provided to another key staff member, who were both accountable for overseeing the

selection of applicants and for lot allocation.

- (6) Documentation relating to submissions for Ministerial approval regarding customers earning over \$50,000 could not be provided by the Housing Authority. In addition, documentation and ministerial approval for lot allocation for customers earning over \$50,000 could not also be made available by the Ministry of Housing and Community Development, for submissions made in 2015 and 2016. This restricted the Office of Auditor-General from determining if the appropriate processes were in place and were followed for approval of customers earning over \$50,000 per annum.

Another issue was the missing files. There were 12 customer files, including six files for Tacirua Subdivision and four files for Matavolivoli Subdivision which were not provided to the Office of the Auditor -General for review. Mr. Speaker Sir, the missing files meant that the officers or the Housing Authority staff were trying to hide from being investigated.

The Committee acknowledges the remarkable effort and co-operation by the current Board and the current Executive Management of Housing Authority in providing clarifications on issues relating to the case raised with them. As, I have said before, they had resolved or implemented over 75 percent of the recommendations and are targeting to complete all the recommendations by the end of this year, 2024.

The Committee's ultimate objective is to see that the key outcome of the investigation is a system overhaul at Housing Authority that ensures full proof administrative and operational processes and practical governance policies are put in place to eliminate gaps that might bring to existence any violation that stimulates corrupt practices at Housing Authority.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker Sir, the Committee agrees that those implicated in the investigation should be taken to task as an act of employing strong deterrence and sending correct disciplinary signals to members of the public and employees of Housing Authority. As I have said before, currently there are over 60 cases with FICAC, with one being taken to court, and we would like to see that FICAC facilitates the remaining cases.

Finally, Mr. Speaker Sir, I wish to extend my appreciation to all the honourable Members of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts for their contribution and participation by putting this bipartisan Report together. The task was an enormous one. Apart from reviewing the Auditor's Report, the Committee conducted separate interviews, studied relevant documents and general discussions, seeking to understand the case better.

My sincere appreciation goes to the then Minister for Housing, honourable Premila Kumar, and the Housing Authority Board Chairperson, Miss. Lorraine Seeto, as well as the current Executives of Housing Authority, for being brave enough to be consulted by the Committee to share the experiences that they faced in relation to the production and finalisation of the Report.

It is unfortunate that we could not get honourable Parveen Bala to be interviewed, who was one of the Ministers responsible for housing during the review period, in which he advised that he was not aware of the request, despite....

HON. P.K. BALA.- Just a matter of clarification, I was never asked to appear before the Committee, and let the Assistant Minister stop making a sweeping statement here. Thank you.

HON. M. S. N. KAMIKAMICA.- Restraining order!

HON. E. Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I have not finished with what I was about to say, but he advised that he was not aware of the request, despite the e-mail that was sent to him by our Secretariat and also, being advised through phone call by one of our Committee members.....

HON. P. K. BALA.- He is lying!

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. E. Y. IMMANUEL.- Appreciation is also extended to our Committee Members, the:

- (1) Honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister;
- (2) Honourable Assistant Minister for Rural, Maritime Development and Disaster Management;
- (3) Honourable A.A. Maharaj; and
- (4) Honourable N.T. Tuinaceva.

I also acknowledge our Alternative Members, namely honourable Hem Chand and honourable Taito R. Matasawalevu for standing in when required.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few words, I now commend this Public Accounts Committee Report to Parliament.

(Report handed to the Secretary-General)

HON. E. Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 121(5), I hereby move:

A motion without notice that a debate on the content of the Report is initiated at a future sitting.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we continue to the next item on the agenda for today, honourable Members, I would like to invite your views, especially when we have three Reports that we have just heard that are very serious in nature - files are missing and even Officials have moved on without being interviewed. Given the seriousness of the cases, we now have before us the oversight and scrutiny role that Parliament plays.

All I am requesting, honourable Prime Minister, is, could we make use of that oversight and scrutiny role that Members of Parliament (MPs) now have, or will we continue with this? It is now in the Standing Orders. It takes a period of time before three years to four years, may be in the next general election, then it will come to some kind of finality. To avoid all that, I am seeking your views, as certainly I would be moving this in the next Business Committee meeting.

I will be inviting your views, but I am just throwing this across since we now can jump straight into Standing Orders, get the oversight role or scrutiny, and then we continue with that. It is you, Parliamentarians, who are running this sitting. Instead of being referred to a Standing Committee and surely, the outcome we have just heard, it would certainly be the result that we would not like to

receive, especially, in our role as Government.

### MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (2) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation;
- (3) Honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport;
- (4) Honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services who will deliver two Statements; and
- (5) Honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations.

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

#### Anti-Scam Taskforce and National Scam Awareness Week

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, *Na Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, the honourable Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, fellow Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the Hibiscus Festival Queens and the reigning Queen, members in the gallery and the people of Fiji who may be listening to this broadcast either through *Walesi* or on radio; *ni sa yadra vinaka* and good morning to you all.

Mr. Speaker, on various occasions, I get asked the question, how do we think the Government is doing? My response is always very simple, “we are rebuilding a house, a house called our beloved Fiji”.

I rise this morning, Mr. Speaker, to inform this august Parliament on the progress that we have made in establishing the “Anti-Scam Taskforce”, something that the other side did not do, along with the recently concluded National Scam Awareness Week that is aimed at addressing the escalating threat of scams and the urgent need for a coordinated nationwide approach. This is very much in keeping with the attempt to rebuild Fiji.

The rapid evolution of technology in Fiji has brought tremendous opportunities for growth, communication, innovation, bridging the tech digital divide and access to these essential financial services. However, it has also given rise to a dark side that we cannot ignore - the increasing sophistication and prevalence of scams and unscrupulous behaviour.

For a fact, the global economy is increasingly shifting towards digitisation with 4.72 billion internet users that represents 60.1 percent of the global population. The Global State of Scams Report 2022 revealed a concerning trend in digital fraud where reported scams increased by 10.2 percent from 266 million reports in 2020 to 293 million in 2021.

The amount of losses from scams surged by 15.7 percent, rising to 47.8 billion in 2020 and 55.3 billion in 2021, largely driven by investment scams. In fact, from our neighbouring shore, Australia, 96 percent of Australian have been exposed to a scam in the last five years with half of these contacted daily or weekly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen a significant rise in online scams and fraud, with many Fijians falling victim to these deceitful tactics. For instance, the Consumer Council of Fiji has received more than 1,700 complaints in relation to all scams since 2019, worth over \$3 million.

We have witnessed various types of scams and fraud, including online scams that employ phishing emails and text messages, as well as impersonation of business owners, Chief Executives Officers, Industry Captains, to facilitate funds transfers via mobile wallets. Investment scams, Mr. Speaker, Sir, have also been on the rise, where fraudsters sell accurate and non-existent products or ideas to desperate investors looking to get rich quickly.

The eBay shop online recruitment scam, one of the largest in Fiji's history, has had a devastating impact on our people and brought national attention to this growing threat. The perpetrators preyed on the trust and hope of individuals, leaving them not only financially crippled, but also deeply disillusioned.

The Consumer Council of Fiji and the Fiji Police Force reported that around \$3 million was lost to eBay scams. However, I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the number is a lot higher and we are awaiting for the report from the Reserve Bank of Fiji, through the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), to properly report the extent of the impact of that scam in Fiji and I can tell you, Sir, that the estimates are quite staggering.

As a result, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the People's Coalition Government took a decisive action and established the Anti-Scam Taskforce. This multi-agency initiative is aimed at tackling the growing problem of fraud through enhanced scam surveillance, strengthening institutional frameworks and targeted awareness campaigns involving various stakeholders.

The Taskforce also has long-term plans to focus on legislative enhancements (and I will speak about that a bit later) and continued educational programmes to empower vulnerable communities and create a safer online environment for all Fijians through vigilance and collaboration. In fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there may well be a need to create a scam agency on its own, given the way things are evolving.

The Taskforce, chaired by myself, unites representatives from diverse Government agencies and private sectors, including the:

- (1) Consumer Council of Fiji;
- (2) Fijian Commerce and Consumer Commission;
- (3) Online Safety Commission;
- (4) Fiji Police Force;
- (5) Ministry of Local Government;
- (6) Reserve Bank of Fiji;
- (7) Fiji Rugby Union;
- (8) Office of the Solicitor-General; and
- (9) Telco partners.

To effectively tackle the increasing prevalence of scams in Fiji, a comprehensive approach is essential. That is why telecommunication providers, such as Vodafone Fiji and Digicel Fiji, are very much part of this Taskforce, to address the issue of scams more effectively across the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, just last week, the most significant initiative spearheaded by the Anti-Scam Taskforce took place - the National Scams Awareness Week. This week-long campaign is a strategic response to the growing threat of scams, designed to educate, engage and empower the general public,

particularly our youth.

The centrepiece of the National Scams Awareness Week was the national symposium held in Suva with over 200 participants participating for the three days. This symposium brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including Government officials, private sector leaders, representatives from international organisations, technical experts and civil society.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), the Pacific Digital Economy Programme (PDEP), and the Governments of Australia, New Zealand and the European Union, for bringing the National Scams Awareness Week to life. In the span of three days, a series of insightful panel discussions and presentations provided an overview of the challenges related to scam prevention in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we focused particularly on our youth on the final day, as we believe that they are front and centre in terms of advocating for National Scam Prevention because of their prowess with mobile phones and technology. The youth from three Universities participated in a debate and were considered quite successful. This is only the start, Sir, and we will continue this to ensure that our people protect themselves from this raging scourge.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initiative extends beyond National Scam Awareness Week, as the Taskforce actively promotes awareness through billboards across Suva right now, and we hope to move them around the country. Right now, we have billboards in Vatuwaqa Primary School and Nakasi roundabout. Additionally, in partnership with Vodafone Fiji, SMS blasts have been sent out and will continue to be disseminated to further enhance public awareness.

The Consumer Council of Fiji has launched the National TikTok Competition. This initiative aims to engage our youth and encourage them to create and share more impactful content that raises awareness about the importance of recognising and avoiding scams.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to these national initiatives, the Consumer Council of Fiji has taken the lead in conducting community visits and workshops throughout the country. These face-to-face interactions are particularly in areas where access to digital platforms maybe limited.

By bringing the message directly to the people, we ensure that scam awareness is not just a topic of discussion but is a lived reality. These workshops involve traders, schools, universities and local community groups.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, community engagement is more than ever crucial in our fight against scams. By working with local leaders, community groups and the civil society, we can foster a culture of vigilance and mutual support.

Partnerships with the private sector, particularly with industries such as telecommunications and banking, are also critical. These partnerships can help us deploy resources more effectively and ensure that our efforts are coordinated and comprehensive.

While the Taskforce is creating a nationwide awareness on the ongoing scams onshore, I am pleased to inform this august Parliament that an important initiative to strengthen the legislative framework is underway, with the support of our donor agencies. This review will be benchmarked against international best practices, ensuring that the laws are not only up-to-date, but also effective in addressing the evolving nature of scams. The consultant who is going to be appointed, intends to provide key recommendations for areas of change, helping us to align our legal framework with global standards and enhance our capacity to protect our citizens.

Just to give an example of how weak our laws are, if a scam is identified and everyone in the country is aware, unless there is a Police complaint, there is really nothing that can be done. Thus, we are hoping that through these legislative changes, if the Reserve Bank of Fiji sees a scam, for example, and identifies it as a scam, they will intervene at that point which will mitigate significantly the impact of scams that we are currently experiencing.

Furthermore, the FCCC has joined the Global Anti-Scam Alliance (GASA) and the Oceanic Chapter of the Global Anti-Scam Alliance, to enhance its capability to tackle scams more effectively. It is aimed to raise awareness, provide practical tools, facilitate knowledge sharing and conduct research educational events.

Through this partnership, the FCCC has gained access to critical tools such as, the ScamAdvisor platform, which enables better direct detection and filtering of potential harmful online scams. Moreover, the wealth of shared knowledge and expertise within GASA will be instrumental in strengthening our defences against emerging threats.

In line with these efforts, FCCC is also conducting a state of scams survey in collaboration with GASA. The survey is anticipated to provide valuable insights into the types of scams affecting Fijians and identify strategies for more targeted and effective intervention.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you are well aware of what we are doing in terms of cybersecurity and you have, on occasions, mentioned it in this Parliament. The Government, of course, is actively investing in the safety and security of its citizens in the digital space.

One of our major initiatives is developing the National Cybersecurity Strategy. This important strategy will strengthen our cybersecurity posture, boost resilience, and improve our ability to respond to the ever-evolving cyber threats.

Concurrently, Fiji has also deposited its Instruments of Accession of the Budapest Convention which was done on a bipartisan basis through this Parliament.

In conclusion, we must acknowledge that the issue of scams is not unique to Fiji. In fact, many of the tactics used by scammers in Fiji are imported or inspired by similar fraudulent schemes that have successfully been executed in other countries. Countries like the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, despite their advanced technological infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, continue to grapple with the challenge of preventing and mitigating scams. These nations have seen a rise in various forms of online fraud, from phishing, identity theft, to complex investment scams that have cost individuals and businesses billions of dollars.

Through various means and advocacy on scams and fraud protection, I have always said, and would like to reiterate in this august House, that if the offer seems too good to be true, it is likely to be a scam. Proceed with extreme caution.

Together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us build a brighter future for the general public where trusts, integrity and security is upheld.

MR. SPEAKER.- It, kind of, brings home the fact that I was raising, honourable Members, on how we could utilise the parliamentary process which is now available, in shortening the long road to getting something done. Whether it is Cabinet, or the directive should come from honourable Ministers themselves to the House for Committees to scrutinise and do oversight roles to be enabled to do so.



At this juncture, I would like to adjourn the House for tea, and in so doing, the Contestants have asked that they take a photo shoot with the honourable Prime Minister and you, honourable Members of Parliament, at our front steps of the building. Immediately after that, then you can share some tea with the Contestants as well. I am not forgetting you, Madam, the reigning Queen. The Parliament is adjourned.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.37 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.19 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I will now call on the Leader of the Opposition, or his designate, to make his response.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, I want to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications for his statement this morning on the Anti-Scam and National Scam Awareness Week.

Mr. Speaker, it is easy to get into the digital space and there is a desire for complete digitisation, especially in Fiji, but along with it and as rightfully pointed out by the honourable Minister, there is a dark side attached to it and especially now, with artificial intelligence also, there is a lot that goes on that needs for us to attend to with respect to scams, et cetera. By and large, we seem to be also a very gullible population when it comes to these things.

I think there are quite few measures that can occur, and one of the most important cornerstones of all of these would be, and I hope this is the case with the Attorney-General's Office, that the laws need to be strengthened in order to ensure that these things do not take place. So, I hope that there is a Bill on the Attorney-General's table that is going to take this into a better space for us.

This is a worldwide phenomenon that has been looked at by everyone, and I think one of the trophy cases is actually what has been done in Singapore. I think we could learn a lot from it and I am sure the honourable Minister has seen what has actually taken place. Some things that are helpful to ensuring that we do not have scams, et cetera, is also trying to help and assist those that have been part of it, like anti-scam helplines, et cetera, and it requires also that different Ministries collaborate with each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, in Fiji, probably have more SIM cards than we have people, and I think this is something that needs to be looked at in terms of addressing how you can actually restrict the SIM cards so that we can keep a track of what is actually happening and this is a very important tool that has actually been used in other countries where you restrict the number of SIM cards that are actually issued to a particular person.

Mr. Speaker, I think in light of the fact that it requires a lot of heavy involvement from all the stakeholders, I think the sector that needs to step up also in this is the banks, to ensure that the Ministry is able to do what is necessary and nationally speaking, it is a national problem. It is not a political problem, it is something that needs to be dealt with at a different scale, and there are three parts of the society that need to ensure that they are very well versed on this, the:

- (1) elderly;
- (2) youth; and
- (3) our parents.

Digital education is one of the major things that can help us fight scams, et cetera, that actually occur nowadays. What I am actually saying, Mr. Speaker, is that improving digital literacy is an important tool in fighting these particular scams.

I hope the honourable Minister will be ensuring that the banks play an integral part. There are massive profits that they actually make, so they can probably send some of those profits back to putting things into institutions that put us in a better space. The National Scam Awareness Week has actually worked well, and I commend the honourable Minister in actually making sure that something

is done regarding all of these.

We look at, maybe, an anti-scam centre. I know there is one in Singapore, Mr. Speaker, that has been replicated already in Hong Kong. So, these are examples for us to use and, hopefully, Sir, we can actually get to the bottom of this and to ensure that we actually protect our population.

We must remember, Sir, that it is not even about \$100,000 scam. For Fiji, even the loss of a \$100 through a scam is actually worth a lot to a particular person in Fiji. So, we must ensure that we get this right and the start point, as I have said right from the beginning, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that we must ensure that we have the proper legal framework done and it needs to be done at breakneck speed to ensure that we actually have that particular foundation for what we need to do to protect our people. I thank you, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the honourable leader of the G-9 Bloc, or his designate, for his response.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement presented by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications.

Mr. Speaker, before I go any further, I must acknowledge the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for updating this august House on the progress made by the Anti-Scam Taskforce and the National Scam Awareness Week which concluded on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, in an era dominated by digital connectivity, the rise of cyber-related criminal activities has reached unprecedented levels. Therefore, I commend the Coalition Government for setting up the Anti-Scam Taskforce last year, and I hope and pray that the Taskforce will continue to function and uphold their roles independently.

Mr. Speaker, scammers exist and have made Fiji their home, and I would recommend that more awareness must be conducted nationwide, especially in rural areas and in our schools from primary to secondary level. Our children must be involved in such awareness programmes so that they would be more vigilant.

Mr. Speaker, from experience, I have come across Fijian youth being the target of cybercrime. Youth were promised with overseas employment by paying lump sum of money. With constant reminders by the Ministry of Employment, Productivity and Industrial Relations, youth and members of our society continue to ignore and were easily lured by the perpetrators.

Mr. Speaker, a few times, I would be informing the Criminal Investigation Department of possible scam activities and twice, I had assisted the CID in nabbing the main suspect in the wee hours. It is a very sadful experience to see our fellow Fijians, especially our youth disheartened as most of these youth are unemployed and becoming victims of such evil activity is uncalled for.

Mr. Speaker, I would strongly recommend that stricter laws and harsher punishments must be introduced that will deter scammers and future likeminded members of our society. I thank you, once again, for this opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, this is my second time in stressing this, that this morning has transpired with some historic attachment to it because three Reports from Standing Committees all indicated, through initiatives made by the former government, that investigations be done, and it took all these time to land their report in this House. By the time the report reached us

this morning, the file has disappeared, very important people who were involved are no longer there, so we are talking about scams of late by the Deputy Prime Minister He was saying to strengthen the law, and this is because of the interconnectivity of the digital process that we have.

In the last few days, we did not conclude the day by continuing with the agenda that has already been agreed upon because we were not connected to some digital thing that was linked to the Prime Minister's Office, that is, the Govnet. When the power broke down, everything stood still. We could not function, and I thought Parliament was supposed to be independent – have their own server, et cetera. But, again, it beats me, and I got very angry that afternoon because this is not the way we are supposed to work here.

Now, we have reports coming before us, and for me, it is the first time during my tenure as Speaker to come across cases where they have been initiated by government. That was from our former Minister for Housing, honourable Premila Kumar, who initiated that investigation be undertaken but it is only, kind of, a futile exercise that they undertook because the files went missing. Even the former Minister, honourable Bala, is arguing that he was not notified.

Imagine, honourable Members, we are hearing that in this House. This is where we deal with all these laws – the repealing and amendment of laws. We can only do it if the processes are there, no matter how much you try to educate the young of Fiji today to learn more about digital and connectivity, et cetera, it still does not hammer home the fact that we tried, and we never succeeded.

I understand that may be, Cabinet should be instructing the House, just like honourable Ministers do inform the House that this should be referred to a Standing Committee. Likewise, we should also take the opportunity that we have here. We have scrutiny and oversight role now available for you, honourable Members, to undertake this at a much more faster pace than what the Committee undertakes, and you are able to zero in straight into the cause of the problems that exist. I am only raising this out of concern.

Honourable Prime Minister, we do respect you, Sir, and the honourable Members of Cabinet, we would like to see that more is done. Maybe, the Cabinet Sub-Committee make directions to Parliament that this should be investigated, scrutiny and oversight role should be done here, so then that will allow us to kick in, and we see that this is being done straightaway, like they do in various jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand. It just comes automatically.

As soon as the word comes from the honourable Prime Minister's Executive Government, "We need some investigation to be undertaken here. How did this person get the job?" Now, the Ministry is in a mess, taxpayers' fund, honourable Members, is being affected, and that is what we are all here for, to scrutinize.

I was asked during the campaign of 2018 in Sydney, Australia, "You pray for a government to take over, now that the FijiFirst has taken over. You pray for Fijians to lead, now the Prime Minister is Mr. Bainimarama. What more do you want?" I said, "Yes. We have some democracy now, we have a government in place, half loaf is better than none. But that is all we have, we do not have full democracy." We were kind of a democracy that in every step, it is like a locked step. It is being dictated by whoever was in charge at that time. But these are the things that we have to address, honourable Members.

I would like to stress this once again, 60 cases were highlighted by the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. That is quite a number of cases. Then all of a sudden, you cannot do anything on it. It makes a mockery of all the systems that we have. I apologise on that, honourable Prime Minister and honourable Members of the Government, but that needs to be echoed

again. If it is coming from the Committees, it is coming from the honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

### Combating the Brain Drain Phenomena in the Tourism Industry

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; in the tourism industry, the challenge before us is to combat the issue of brain drain. This challenge is central to ensuring the sustainable growth of our tourism industry which serves as a cornerstone of our nation's economy.

We will note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the reality about our economy today is that it is bullish, which is very different from what detractors were saying that our economy was going nowhere. On Friday, Westpac Fiji reviewed its position on the Fiji economy which it had downgraded initially due to, and I quote:

“Stronger than expected sentiments and growth in tourism. The tourism numbers are a lot stronger than we expected.”

Further adding, and I quote:

“The new Fiji Airways service to Dallas is a growth driver, it is a big positive.”

The signing of the new Air Service Agreement made in Fiji and USA early last week in Tonga will open vast possibilities in the US as articulated by the honourable Prime Minister in his Ministerial Statement on Tuesday.

In terms of banks, ANZ had earlier upgraded its forecast for Fiji, pegging it at 3.4 percent also riding on the back of tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are committed to creating world-class training facilities that will drive Fiji's tourism industry forward. Our strategy includes collaboration with private sector stakeholders and the development of cutting-edge facilities that meet the highest global standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is blessed that a good number of international brands are operating in our country, and I can venture to say they have found a home in Fiji. These brands have their culture with their ethos, systems and standards that are global and available to our people once they become part of the brands in Fiji.

Our people acquire skills that are marketable globally, that is, it is the easiest way to become a global citizen and after a few years with a brand in Fiji, you qualify to join any of that brand's property globally. And brands are an indication to travellers that a destination has quality offerings. Let me highlight some of the programmes with the brands hotel.

The Marriott Fiji Training Academy offers structured training in key areas such as Front Office Operations, Housekeeping Operations, Food and Beverage Service Operations and Kitchen Operations. They would have trained some 800 professionals of late. I was asking the honourable Minister for Education of the possibility of linking this Academy to the Higher Education Commission and thereby strengthen partnership with the Government. The Marriot properties comprise Sheraton Resort and Sheraton Villas, Westin, Marriot Momi and Sheraton Tokoriki.

The Radisson Blu Fiji is renowned for its robust Train the Trainer programme designed to continuously enhance the knowledge and skills of its people, ensuring that they remain competitive

and well-prepared for the demands of the traveller today known for its high expectations.

Hilton has its own Hilton University which is available online for every single position in the industry. The courses include programmes from Harvard, Lausanne and Cornell Universities, the three top universities in tourism in the world today.

Hilton has a dedicated recruitment executive who recruits on “attitude” and “desire to learn” as Hilton can train the candidates with skills across most of their businesses.

On three consecutive occasions, Hilton has been awarded the Great Place to Work Certification, a global recognition and says much for Hilton in Fiji. They also won the Regional Team Member Promise Award for Hilton Australasia and the South Pacific which include Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Fiji.

InterContinental has seen staff members that departed Fiji return and take back their positions which is attributed to the culture at InterContinental. It has a robust training and development programme for its people and evident in all it is Fiji’s properties, that is, Natadola, Holiday Inn, GPH and Crowne Plaza.

Shangri-La, the largest resort with some 700 staff members had seen high attrition rates for its people at levels 1 to 3 mostly to Australia and New Zealand. It has implemented robust hiring and retention strategies including partnerships with educational institutions for training programmes, cross exposure with sister properties and internal promotions for filling critical managerial positions. The training programmes in Shangri-La are tailor-made to suit Fiji are categorized at three levels:

- (1) Essential;
- (2) Functional; and
- (3) Leadership Trainings.

The past two years have seen intense activities and many challenges post pandemic, they have done very well and known to be a top performer in the Shangri-La Group. The global brands are known for how well they look after their people, for instance, in the case of Sofitel:

- minimum wage is much higher than the national minimum wage and within three months it increases by 5 percent;
- bonus scheme are tied to business performance and attendance, that is, if you are not absent for more than four days, bonus would be in the range of \$1,200 net by year end;
- access to senior management training, including external placements such as in Australia and even France
- full medical family insurance for middle management and above
- educational assistance for courses that benefit both their career and the organisation
- dedicated learning and development division running a minimum 800 hours of training per month
- after six months staff can apply for internal cross training for other positions available within the Resort.

Other brands such as Outrigger, Warwick and Wyndham are also operating in Fiji, all with well-established programmes to recruit and train to retain staff. And, of course, we have our very own Tanoa Group with properties in Fiji and the region. Independent operators have their own programmes and most are emulating what the big brands are doing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a recent phenomenon is the conversion from Independent to Brand and many are going that way after COVID-19. Pre-COVID brands were growing their portfolios mostly through new properties and less on conversion at the ratio of 80:20 percent; 80 percent for new properties, 20 percent for conversions. But now, it is 40 percent new properties and 60 percent conversions.

As recently announced, Vanua Levu will have its first brand through Wyndham in Labasa, owned by the Damodar Group. The hoteliers are all part of Fiji Hotels Tourism Association (FHTA), the pre-eminent tourism industry association that represents their interests. Sir, FHTA has a very powerful voice and plays a big role in combating the brain drain phenomenon.

On Aviation Services, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our aviation sector is a critical component of Fiji's tourism industry, and we have invested heavily in world-class training facilities. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the brain drain phenomenon is quite severe in aviation. According to International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the number of passenger and cargo numbers will double by 2036. This will call for more pilots, more engineers, more air traffic controllers and other related aviation jobs. Countries will poach from each other.

The Fiji National University (FNU) is gearing up to this challenge. At its Nadi campus, it trains our people for Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineering (LAME). It runs for three years taking in 30 intakes each year, the application is about 200 and 300 each year but they can only take 30. Sir, FNU will be adopting the New Zealand standards which takes two years and graduates can qualify for jobs in the Pacific, including Australia and New Zealand. FNU is looking at doubling its graduates each year and the Government of Australia through DFAT is playing a huge supporting role following the visit of the honourable Pat Conroy a few months ago.

Sir, FNU will expand into pilot training and is grateful that Fiji Airways has donated an A330 Maintenance and Flight Training Device (MFTD) flying simulator to help in this area. This expansion will cost some \$10 million, FNU in Nadi, today is a centre for aviation in the Pacific with huge cost benefits to our neighbours, that is, it costs 10 times as much more to train in Australia than in Fiji, for the cost in Fiji is 10 percent of what they would pay if they trained in Australia or New Zealand. We are also in discussion with certain governments in underwriting a Master's programme in aviation through FNU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airports Limited operates the Fiji Airports Aviation Academy, offering specialized courses in Air Traffic Management (ATM), Aviation Fire Fighting Services and Air Traffic Safety Electronic Personnel under the Aviation Training Institute Certificate issued by CAAF. All the courses are recognised by ICAO.

The training equips its people to manage the Nadi Flight Information Region (Nadi FIR) which covers some 6 million square kilometres in the Pacific, managed from Nadi. Of course, such highly trained people are very marketable, and they continue to move to developed countries such Australia and New Zealand, requiring the Academy to continue to increase its intake of trainees. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Airways Aviation Academy in Nadi, stands as beacon of excellence. This fully integrated training centre offers state-of-the-art facilities, including full flight simulators and advance training devices.

In the coming weeks, Fiji Airways will be commissioning two new Flights Simulators and two new Flight Training Devices. These resources provide unparalleled training for Fiji Airways flight and cabin crew, as well as for the other global aviation entities reinforcing Fiji's reputation as a leader in aviation excellence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji Airways is a high performing organisation employing some 2,200 talented employees. It has successfully navigated the challenge of returning its key skillsets through some key effective measures such as:

- (1) remuneration strategy is based on paying competitive, market benchmark salary;
- (2) best practises focus,
- (3) leadership development, with inclusive strategies to improve women in leadership,
- (4) harnessing the learning culture in the organisation.

Our national airline is a source of pride, standing 14<sup>th</sup> in excellence in the top 100 airlines globally. It was awarded the best airline in Australia and the Pacific for 2024. I believe all of us, when we fly with our national airline, we know what we are talking about here, the quality of the service is evident and very pleasing.

On pilot trainings generally, we grow our own pilots through the South Pacific Aviation Training Institute (SPATI) at the Nausori International Airport, the Pacific Flying School and Advanced Aviation Training (Fiji) Ltd in Nadi. These institutions with their modern facilities and up to-date training aids are producing graduates who now hold significant positions in regional airlines such as Fiji Airways, Air Vanuatu and Airlines of Papua New Guinea. Some are flying huge jets in the busy corridors of the Middle East and Europe.

Inbound Operators: Coordinating the ground arrangements of the tourist is a very challenging task and this falls into the domain of the inbound operators and the like, such as rental car companies. They also conduct their own training, and a leader is the Rosie Academy which has found the brain drain phenomenon as not at all bad, as it allows younger intakes into the industry. Some that have departed have returned as the grass is not always greener at the other side.

Health and Wellness Tourism: As we continue to develop Fiji as a premier tourism destination, we also focus on emerging sectors like health and wellness tourism. This niche market offer significant opportunities for growth and requires a workforce trained in specialized areas such as health and wellness services, spa management and holistic therapies. A phenomena here, Mr. Speaker, is that people who have made their fortune are now saying, "Take my wealth, give me back my health", this is a phenomena that we see today.

A prime example of this commitment to Health and Wellness Tourism is the Pacific Specialist Healthcare in Namaka, Nadi. This locally owned facility offers world-class services, and the doctors and medical staff are mostly local trained in the local School of Medicine and Fiji Nursing Schools. For general wellness, a number of academies provide training such as:

- (1) Spa Academy Fiji-Essence of Fiji based in Nadi;
- (2) Lumiere Academy at Lautoka; and
- (3) FIT College working collaboratively with FNU, FNTC and Pivot Point all across Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are also blessed with a good number of training providers under the watchful eyes of the Higher Education Commission who provides them with the accreditation, ensuring the training programmes align with industry needs. This requires close collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders to develop relevant, up-to-date curricula that reflect the latest industry trends and demands. Training Providers include:

- (1) Fiji National University offering Diplomas, Degrees and Postgraduate Degrees in Tourism and Hospitality.



- (2) University of the South Pacific offering a wide range of courses and programmes in tourism and hospitality at undergraduate and higher degree levels.
- (3) Fiji National and Productivity Centre (NPTC), a division of FNU, providing vocational and skills-based training in hospitality, tourism management and culinary arts.
- (4) Australian Pacific Training Coalition (APTC).
- (5) Pacific Polytech which has taken over some of the campuses operated by Technical Colleges that have closed. They provide training and education in hospitality and tourism at the certificate Level.
- (6) Vishan Infotech provides hospitality programmes.
- (7) Pacific Technical Institute.
- (8) Service Pro, long in the business and has made a huge impact across the community.

Most of these Training Providers receive Government grant.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, affordability or money is a significant factor, and the Coalition Government is committed to providing substantial financial support through scholarships, grants and other incentives. These initiatives are designed to make education more accessible and to encourage our people to build their careers here in Fiji. These financial supports are not merely about reducing the cost of education, they are about creating opportunities for growth, development and long-term career success.

Beyond traditional scholarship, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has initiated targeted government grants aimed at fostering innovation and encouraging the development of niche tourism markets. These grants are available to entrepreneurs and businesses that are developing new tourism products or services particularly in emerging areas such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism and adventure tourism. By providing financial support to these innovators, we encourage a development of a more diverse and resilient tourism sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for tourism and civil aviation, it is not only about stemming the brain drain, but also to ensure that we do not have any gaps in terms of manpower in our organisations. We have to be able to find replacement from abroad and this requires an accommodative immigration system.

The Coalition Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is committed to resolving the challenges relating to immigration. A Committee consisting of the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics; the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications; plus the honourable Minister for Home Affairs and Immigration; meet weekly with the Growth Reset Team who are private sector volunteers and Immigration Senior Officials to resolve issues related to immigration. This involves a focus on all permit processes with a plan to speed up processing. Automation of work permits is the key focus presently which will lead to significant improvements and expected to go live on 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2024.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the comprehensive approach we have outlined today, highlight our commitment as a nation to addressing the brain drain phenomenon, ensure the continuing health and sustainability of tourism and civil aviation. Global Labour Mobility is here to stay, but our vision is clear to create a tourism industry that only drives economic prosperity but also serves as a model of excellence in training, career development and innovation. By working together, we can overcome the challenges before us, and build a brighter future for Fiji, a future where our people thrive, our economy prospers, and our tourism industry remains a beacon of excellence on the global stage.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate to give his response.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament, this is actually a very important topic and I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for giving us a quick rundown on the brain drain phenomena.

According to his own statistics, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we lost close to 16,000 workers in the tourism sector in early last year alone. This left massive, massive labour skills gap and I think one of the solutions that was offered by the honourable Minister was that we would start hiring retirees and recruiting workers from neighbouring Pacific Island countries. This might not be sufficient, but it would help.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we must remember is that tourism is in every Fijian's DNA and because our pride and passion is our people, which has always been so with respect to the industry, we have become a target for poaching our workers.

All around the world, they know the skills that we have it is not just Australia and New Zealand, I know Dubai, et cetera, have actually been targeting our workers so that they leave. So, how do we address it? It is actually difficult, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I remember the Castaway Resort alone had lost about 70 percent of its kitchen staff. So, when you look at it from a resort perspective, that is quite a lot of staff that is lost, and these are trained staff that have actually gone. So, what do we do? There are only a few things that we can do, and I think it is because it is private sector driven, it is great to see that institutions that are within the industry are actually training all the different hotel operators but yet still, we must look at how else we can actually do this.

One of the things that can be done is that we have to look at reviewing the pay for all these workers because we cannot compete with what he is being paid. But together with the pay, you have to look at what benefits can be given to our workers so that they actually stay in the country because you must remember, they are our prized possession. This is the biggest industry in Fiji, and it requires a concerted effort from everyone. When you look at the pay, it is actually twofold, Mr. Speaker, Sir. You have to look at the cost of living and how it is that you are actually going to retain these workers.

Now, it is our opinion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that in light of the fact that the tourism industry has grown beyond what we can actually service it, a lot of profits have been made so some of those profits need to be put back into the workers themselves. I think it is important, and we must remember that this is an industry that this is completely driven by the private sector.

We have a fantastic relationship with the operators, and it requires a constant conversation with the honourable Minister, the Ministry and the Ministries that are involved, and it runs across the board with many different sectors but currently, we are looking at close to, if I am correct, honourable Minister, it is like \$3 billion dollars of earnings.

We are looking at growing this industry. If you want to grow the industry, you must show to those who want to invest in it, that we are able to service that industry by ensuring that there is a constant supply in terms of the workforce. Encouraging more young people to get into the industry, they will only stay, if they are paid well enough, Mr. Speaker.

In terms of catering for their arrivals, Mr. Speaker, we also need to look at this, currently, we have had a drop in our service ratings. If we compare ourselves to Bali, et cetera, we are sitting at about 6.84 and as a comparison to Bali and Phuket, et cetera, they sit at 8.5. That service level has actually dropped. It has dropped not because we wanted it to, it has dropped because of the migration of our skilled workers.

These other countries that we compete with are actually putting us on a knife edge, and I am glad to see that the honourable Minister has acknowledged this particular problem and he is working with the industry and also our other Ministries, especially the Ministry of Education, to ensure that we do not have a serious problem, also in light of the fact that his neighbour Minister sitting right next to him is actually encouraging more and more investment in that particular area.

We want to grow the numbers, of course, we want to see a million visitors but more hotels means more workers. If we are not able to find a strategic way to keep these workers in our country, we will have a serious problem in actually growing up because investors will look at it and say, they are not able to. We must all remember this, Mr. Speaker, our pride of possession in our industry is our workers and our hospitality. I thank you, Honourable Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the honourable leader of G-9 Bloc, or his designate for his response.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister for the Statement and thank you honourable Koya for those comments. When I look at the subject this morning on combating the brain drain phenomenon, I thought it was holistically in a sense. The honourable Deputy Prime Minister spoke on combating it within the tourism sector; a very important sector industry for Fiji. It cuts across the other sectors, even to our farmers and our fishermen, and it is important that we keep the industry alive and vibrant and trying to accommodate the increase that is anticipated in the coming years for tourism.

As honourable Koya had mentioned, the big push factor for Fiji is that our wages pushes people up. We can engage in the training and train people to be qualified, and they become very marketable to those countries that pay better. It is not only for Fiji, it is phenomenal worldwide, and that is why we have international labour mobility and this is very fluid workers that are just moving around the world and really targeting those that pay better.

I had mentioned this in the House before that one of the unique features for Fiji is that the very push factor that pushes people out is the pool factor for those in big population countries. The same wages that we do not like over here is attractive enough for those that come in from some other countries. Not only that, added to that pool factor of the wage that we have here is the fact that they come and work in one of the preferred tourism destinations in the world - in Fiji.

So, outside of Fiji we will have this pool of people who are willing to come. I think that in order to tackle this brain drain issue, we have almost no other choice but to allow these foreigners to come in and work in Fiji, which then demands that it has to be looked at holistically, and that we set policies that really target getting foreign workers to come in and work, and more importantly also, is to ensure that when they come in and work in Fiji, that they are well looked after.

I remember a story when I was Director Immigration, we got this guy that came in from Pakistan, I think. He was somewhere near Korovou. The job that he was doing was burning CDs and he was just surviving on onions, because there is always this tendency that foreign workers get exploited because they are held to ransom, "You mess up, I will chase you back to your country". But they had sacrificed so much to be able to come over. They sell their properties in order to come

back. He said that if we send them back, we send them back to nothing almost. So, it has to be a holistic approach to tackling the brain drain.

We know that in years to come, these people that go out, again, if our policies are right, we then, turn it into a brain drain gain. They come back as very well-off people, they have a lot more money, they are more educated and more experienced and maybe, they would like to come back and invest in our country.

But I commend the service providers in our tourism sector and the effort that they put into trade - our workers, so that they can, at least, fill the gap, but it is this phenomenon of being pushed out and being pulled by the better wages that are offered by our neighbours who are well developed is the problem, I suppose. I guess it is worth looking at now, for Government to holistically just sit and look at how we manage this fluidity of international labour and turn it around into a net skilled game for Fiji as we managed the going out and those that are coming in. The problem with the coming in is that everyone comes in - the workers, the scammers which we have just talked about before, the traffickers who try and sneak in through this fluidity of movement of labour around the world.

I commend the Ministry, Deputy Prime Minister, and the private sector and the tourism industry in working hard to try and keep this very vital industry for Fiji alive and thriving.

#### National Update on the 2023-2024 Water Sector Deliverables

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to address this august House on my Ministerial Statement.

The honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians, ladies and gentlemen; I thank you for the opportunity to address and elaborate more on the Water Sector 2023 to 2024 achievements and 2024 to 2025 major plans and status update.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry and the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) has made significant strides in both, infrastructural and institutional development, ensuring that the people of Fiji have access to reliable, safe and sustainable water and wastewater services, as constituted and mandated under the Water Authority of Fiji Act 2007. Allow me to highlight these achievements under two key categories: Institutional Achievements and Infrastructural Achievements.

Institutional Achievements include the following:

(1) Launch of the Water Sector 2050 Plan

This is a landmark achievement where the Coalition Government launched the Water Sector 2050 Plan in April 2024, a visionary roadmap that outlines Fiji's water sector and wastewater priorities for the next three decades. This comprehensive plan is designed to transform how water services are delivered across the nation. It addresses the challenges of climate vulnerability, renews aging infrastructure and aligns with the principles of the circular economy. Furthermore, it is a crucial step and clear roadmap in our ongoing efforts for clean and accessible water.

(2) Introduction of WAF's e-Service Platform

Mr Speaker, Sir, in our commitment to improving customer service, WAF launched its e-Service platform. This online service provides our customers with easy access to their accounts and allowing them to pay bills and report any queries with just a few clicks. This

digital transformation is a significant step in making services more accessible and efficient, particularly for those in remote areas.

(3) Water Production and Non-Revenue Water (NRW) Reduction

This is a key issue from August 2023 to July 2024. The WAF produced a total of 130,771 mega litres of water, demonstrating our capacity to meet the growing demands of our population. A key focus has been on reducing NRW. I am pleased to announce that, through diligent efforts, a reduction in NRW from 47 percent in 2023 to 45 percent in the first half of 2024 was achieved. This 2 percent reduction may seem modest, but it represents a significant accomplishment, resulting from extensive work in leak detection, infrastructure maintenance and customer engagement.

(4) Increased Water and Wastewater Connections

The WAF successfully increased water connections by 2,257 and wastewater connections by 96. This growth in connections is a direct result of the extension projects, which expanded the network to reach more households and communities. The increase in connections reflects the rising demand from customers to connect to reliable water and wastewater services and underscores Government's commitment to expanding access to clean water.

Infrastructural Achievements include the following:

(1) Urban Water Projects

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WAF has made significant progress in enhancing urban water infrastructure, to ensure more Fijians have access to reliable water services. During the 2023-2024 financial year, a total of 31.57 kilometres of pipeline extensions were completed, benefiting close to 47,350 Fijians. A key highlight of this achievement is the Sawani to Viria pipelaying project, which involved the installation of 24.5 kilometres of new pipeline, directly benefiting 6,500 Fijians. This project was made possible by the completion of the Viria Water Treatment Plant, a state-of-the-art facility that has a capacity of 40 mega litres. As a responsible Coalition Government, we shall continue to enhance and expand from developments of previous governments. As a result of this project, areas that previously experience intermittent water supply are now receiving a consistent and reliable water services.

Another major accomplishment in the financial year was the completion of the Nabouwalu Packaged Water Treatment Plant, a 2 megalitre facility that is now serving over 5,400 Fijians. This represents a significant improvement in water supply in the Nabouwalu area, ensuring that residents have access to clean and safe water. We will soon see the commissioning of this project. In addition, WAF has successfully installed backup generators at 14 major pump stations. This critical infrastructure upgrade ensures that power supply is available during outages.

(2) Rural Water Scheme Projects

WAF has completed 10 Rural Water Projects, benefiting various communities that previously lacked access to a proper water supply. These projects involved the construction of new water schemes and the installation of standpipes and shower heads, providing communities with a reliable and safe water source. I should add that the Ministry continues to work closely with organisations such as Rotary Pacific Water for Life Foundation, Fiji Water Foundation, Vodafone Foundation, LDS Church, the Australian Government, New Zealand Government and other development partners, to continue to support access to safe

water in rural Fiji. These organisations have all made significant contributions in the access of safe and clean water. I commend them for their contributions to the nation, Sir.

(3) Rainwater Harvesting Tanks

Mr. Speaker Sir, as part of our commitment to ensuring water security in remote areas, 3,200 rainwater harvesting tanks was delivered across four regions, benefiting 15,755 households. Notably, the most recent deliveries included to the *Tikina* Yasawa areas which have faced drought-like conditions. We have also delivered to low pressure and intermittent supply areas, such as Sakoca, around the Tamavua area.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition to our infrastructural and institutional achievements, WAF has also strengthened its presence on regional and international platforms, in particular in regional forums, in the 14th Pacific Water and Wastewater Association (PWWA) and the Water Ministers Forum.

I am pleased to advise that WAF recently represented Fiji at the International Water Association (IWA) and World Water Congress & Exhibition in Canada. This brought together global leaders in water management, and I am pleased to announce that WAF has been recognised and honoured with the Climate Smart Utilities Recognition Award 2024. Mr. Speaker Sir, achieving this award on an international level not only recognises the hard work of our staff at WAF, but also the stakeholders who support our organisation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the progress made in the past year sets a strong foundation for future initiatives, as outlined in the Water Sector 2050 Plan. Challenges need to be overcome and opportunities seized to enhance the quality of life. I commend all stakeholders involved, particularly with our staff contractors who have all work hard in the mud, rain and at all hours during emergency situations with commitment and dedication to restore water supply when these are cut off through various reasons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the significant initiatives and strategic plans that WAF has set in motion for the 2024-2025 financial year includes the \$259 million allocated by Government in terms of the current Budget, which will ensure access to clean and safe water and these includes \$135 million for capital expenditure and \$123 million for operational costs.

(4) Water Programme

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WAF with a significant allocation of \$82.07 million for its Water Programme, is to address supply challenges and improve infrastructure across the region. A key priority within this programme is the NRW initiative which has been allocated \$5 million. This is to address water loss through leaking pipes, which remains a significant issue.

WAF is engaged in a Performance-Based Contract for NRW reduction, specifically targeting the Suva-Nausori area. It also includes a series of essential upgrades and expansions.

(a) Water Packaged Treatment Plant

The programme includes the upgrades of:

- (i) Benau Water Treatment Plant;

- (ii) Consultancy services for the Wainadoi Water Supply Scheme; and
- (iii) Construction of the Navua Packaged Water Treatment Plant.

(b) Water Mains Upgrading Works

Mr. Speaker Sir, we will be looking into the Central Division:

- (i) RKS and QVS upgrade works;
- (ii) Northern Division: Labasa Operation Upgrade;
- (iii) Nabouwalu Operational Upgrade; and
- (iv) Savusavu Operational Upgrade

In the Western Division, the:

- (i) Dreketi Feeder Road Upgrade;
- (ii) Vuda Rider Water Mains Upgrade; and
- (iii) Wairabetia Water Mains Upgrade

(c) Pipeline Extension Projects

Mr. Speaker Sir, it is crucial to expand the water supply coverage, particularly in underserved areas:

- Central Division:

Korovou to Veinuqa Extension, Lokia Pipelaying Works and Sawani to Colo-i-Suva. This is especially important, especially as it will alleviate the water problems currently faced in the Tacirua, Sakoca, Tamavua and also into Delainavesi and Lami, and entail laying of 1.43 kilometres from Sawani Junction to a new pump station at Buresasa, then to Colo-i-Suva where two new 5 megalitres steel reservoirs will be built, and then down to Khalsa Road in Tamavua.

You may have heard of the Bilo Extension. These areas have been without water supply for decades and the Coalition Government has taken urgent action to ensure that the water pipelines are extended, and it is currently underway.

- Northern Division:

Benau to Rara Pipeline, Nabekavu Mains Extension and Degau Extension.

- Western Division:

Sigatoka Water Coverage Extension (this include three sub-projects, that is, Vusama, Navisabasaba, Nadrala and Waibogi Villages involving laying 16 kilometres water mains. Some of these villages had suffered from water borne diseases due to contaminated water and we have taken urgent action to ensure that this extension do happen, and these works are currently being done.

- The other major one is the Nagado to Nadele Pipeline from the Nagado Water Treatment Plant. This will significantly increase the discharge volume and sustain the growing demand for water in the tourism areas, Nadi, Lautoka. The Nagado Water Treatment Plant is an ongoing project nearing completion with

a more modern and automated water treatment plant and will add further capacity and redundancies.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in terms of Asset Management Programme with an allocation of \$8.54 million. This is designed for optimal functionality of our systems, and we will include matters such as the:

- (1) Lami-Nausori Wastewater Masterplan.
- (2) Feasibility study for a new water source and treatment plant for the Nadi-Lautoka region.
- (3) The development of a Masterplan for the Suva-Nausori Water Supply, ensuring the long-term sustainability.
- (4) A Masterplan for the Keyasi Water Supply and Wastewater Scheme.

Mr. Speaker Sir, as I speak, tenders for the masterplans will be advertised in the coming weeks.

Wastewater Programme, this is a current issue which will need to be expanded. Only 28 percent of our population currently has access to sanitation services and projects under wastewater include:

- (1) The rehabilitation of the Pacific Harbour Wastewater Treatment Plant.
- (2) The cleaning and upgrading of the Kinoya Wastewater Treatment Plant.
- (3) The installation of new diffusers at the Wailada Wastewater Treatment Plant.
- (4) In addition, the Coalition Government has acted quickly in terms of the increased demand and deteriorating water and sewer reticulation systems at Denarau Island. We recognize the importance of Denarau to the tourism industry and to our national economy, especially businesses, employees, and of course, the landowners of Denarau. The wastewater and water systems for Denarau was built in the 1970s with minor enhancements to-date, for basically one hotel, that is, the Regent of Fiji Hotel. Today there are nine resorts with over 2,000 rooms, water park, golf courses, residential lots and a marina with shopping and restaurant complex.

Hotel developments are ongoing with plans for substantial developments underway and the Government has prioritised this and provisioned up to \$15 million with possible cost sharing in terms of the Denarau Island Infrastructure Design/Build Upgrade Works which has been put to tender. The project will involve the upgrade and replacement of existing sewer pump stations, sewer rising main, sewer reticulation and new water mains. Mr. Speaker Sir, we also note the critical importance of spares, and it is something that has been allocated for.

Of course, in terms of rural water, that is again an area of importance to the Government:

- Rural Water Carting in Non-Metered Areas: \$4 million allocated.
- Rainwater Harvesting: \$1.4 million set aside and we encourage our Fijian people to continue to look at this option as a redundancy measure.
- Rural Water Supply Scheme: \$2.11 million has been dedicated to implement water supply schemes in the Central, Western, and Northern Divisions to benefit over 4,000 Fijians. These projects are vital to improving the quality of life in our rural communities.

In terms of the dry weather recently experienced, I wish to update on the status of catchments. You may be aware, Sir, that we had issued a public advisory through a media release on 22<sup>nd</sup> August advising the public to use water wisely. Thanks to the trough of low pressure and the rains on 24<sup>th</sup>



and 25<sup>th</sup>, this has brought temporary relief where in the Central Eastern 14 sources have now recovered out of the 17.

In the Lomaiviti Group, there are some areas which remain critical and for the Western Division, high rainfall was also observed and from these 13 sources, eight are now normal but three are still close to critical. So, I advise all Fijians to still conserve water and take the necessary measures for prudent use of water.

The Northern Division also experienced low pressure, but rainfall was not as intense and there are still areas which need assistance. Sir, with the unpredictable weather we may face in the next months, we are working closely with the various relevant authorities such as Tourism, Health and Education in monitoring the situation, and of course, with the Divisional Commissioners, we are working closely with them in alleviating water shortages and providing relief and also through the Government Shipping Services for our maritime areas.

The Coalition Government is expanding its risk for better water services internationally and we need to do that given the limitations of our national coffers. Water cannot be delivered without energy so when we talk about climate financing, the water-energy nexus is crucial, and in this regard, opportunities must be efficiently utilized. We must continue to be reminded that for Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) such as Fiji, availability and accessibility of basic utilities such as energy and water are of paramount importance in terms of daily survival, especially for our grassroots, not only that, but of course water, energy and roads.

There is a great community grassroot need to champion these water-energy annexes to alleviate poverty and it is a catalyst for transformational impact on daily lives. So, we need to target that nexus in terms of climate financing in the scope of assessing natural spring or ground water resources using the latest solar voltaic technology, where the solar powered borehole pumps or even solar power desalination plants.

This energy-water nexus, it is programme innovatively using smart national level frameworks which can truly provide transformational catalyst especially maritime communities. Sir, in this regard, we will continue to work towards this particular area. We are now intensifying Climate Financing Concept Papers and Proposals with the Ministry of Climate Change accordingly around the water and energy with great initial support from our development partners to-date.

To conclude, as already alluded to yesterday by the honourable Minister for Lands, the Coalition Government has taken a significant step in its relationship with catchment landowners with the Cabinet approval for the development of a framework and policy for compensation of standing trees in catchment areas. We, as a government, will continue to listen to all stakeholders especially and to address landowner issues as appropriate within our current legal frameworks.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think we will adjourn for lunch now. When we resume at 2.30 p.m., we will continue with the response from the honourable Leader of the Opposition and that of the Group of 9. I am also told that the honourable Minister for Justice has withdrawn his Ministerial Statement, as such, upon returning we will update you further.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.24 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.32 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate to make their response.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for his very extensive elaboration on the water sector, and in particular the achievements had been achieved over the past financial year.

Water as we all know is one of the most important things that we have and in fact its importance is reflected in its listing as one of the SDGs and also that it has a very specific segment in the Constitution which calls for the Government of Fiji to make sure that all of our citizens have safe and clean water. For having served as a Minister for Water, I know the enormous challenges that are faced in trying to make sure that we deliver that. Nevertheless, we are bound by the dictates of the Constitution, in terms of making sure that we are able to provide the water that is needed.

I have read with interest the Corporate Plan for the Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) which lists all the issues that the WAF has been targeted in this last financial year and also the 2050 Strategy. I am glad that the 2050 Strategy has come into place. I know the discussions on this were taking place while I was still a Minister and I am glad that is borne to fruition, now we can see this firmly in place.

I congratulate the WAF for having that long-term strategy because one of the problems that we have, when we do not have a long term strategy, we do things *ad hoc*. There are a number of things that I just wanted to focus in briefly in terms of the Corporate Strategy that the WAF has. There are too many things that are covered, so I cannot address all of them, so I just choose to talk on two.

On the issue of non-revenue water, it is the water that is produced, we extract from the sources of water, but they do not get to their designation. They are lost along the way either they are stolen or because of leakages in the pipes that they get lost. We know that the figure that we know that we have for non-revenue water in this country is around 47 percent, almost half of the water that we extract from the sources do not get to their intended destination. This has been a long-standing problem in WAF largely because of the old infrastructure, I think that is the major issue.

The target for the 2023-2024 Corporate Plan was to reduce this by 5 percent in this first financial year, although the target has not been achieved, the honourable Minister has highlighted that they have been able to achieve 2 percent, that is a good beginning when we get there. We need to be able to get to this, to make sure there is adequate water. Around this whole issue of the quantum of water being adequate or available to people, there are other issues that revolve around that, the conservation of water. Maybe one of the other things that I find in that corporate plan is the review of the tariff of water. This is something that is actually in this plan.

One of the challenges that we have in any commodity that we have, when it is too cheap, people do not attach a lot of importance to it. This is obviously going to be one of the issues with water. We have one of the cheapest waters in the Pacific and when it is that cheap, people are not going to conserve it and I notice in the plan, there is a call for the review, and I would like to hear the Government's intent on the actual review of the plan.

The second thing that I have, since I only have a minute and 30 seconds, I forgot where I put my notes. There are some very important targets in terms of meeting of 100 percent of customers' expectations in the customer charter. We did not have any feedback on that and there is one important target that we have. For the greater Suva area to return the 24/7 water supply. I think this is still a

challenge for us and I am hoping and congratulate the honourable Minister for what they have been able to do so far, but on those two particular areas on the non-revenue water and meeting that expectation of 24/7 water supply, it is a huge challenge. This is something that people continue to complain about, and I wish the Government well in trying to make sure that we can achieve that for the benefit of all of our people.

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

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, I also want to thank honourable Usamate for his contribution. I am grateful to the honourable Minister for his comprehensive Ministerial Statement. I noted that the Minister has covered the broader subject on water sector deliverables, particularly the update on the execution under the 2023-2024 Financial Year and the capital programme for the 2024 – 2025 Financial Year.

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the honourable Minister for emphasising on rural water access. He mentioned 11 rural water projects carried out in 2023. The issue of water is paramount to our people. During my recent visit to the voters in the Northern and Western Divisions and parts of Naitasiri last week, it was clear that water was their foremost concern. From our rural communities it was consistently clear and urgent that they need access to clean and safe water.

Historically, Mr. Speaker, rural water supplies are often being overshadowed by the urban needs, but we are beginning to see a positive shift in focus because of what we believe to be, the provision in the Constitution guarantees the right to water for all Fijians and that means it will be the responsibility of the Government to see this right is observed. We have a commitment towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG6) that advocates for water accessibility to everyone.

Most members of this august House recognise that the rural communities face significant challenges in accessing clean water. Issues such as contamination from agricultural runoff, improper waste disposal and insufficient sanitation facilities contribute to this problem. Contamination not only pose health risk but also leads to water borne diseases.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, the remote locations of many of these rural communities means that residents often have to undertake long and strenuous journeys to collect water. That will affect women, children and even elders. One of the studies that was done by the World Health Organisation titled “Drinking Water, Sanitations and Hygiene” in emergencies indicates that individuals require between 50 litres to 100 litres per day to meet basic hygiene needs and physiological needs. So those with access to only about 20 litres of water daily face significant health risk frequently encountered by the rural population, including our maritime communities. We have lots of families, as we know, the households here in Fiji today who are vulnerable and exposed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a recent Water Authority of Fiji (WAF) Report in July 2024 highlighted that 96,000 Fijians or about 12 percent of our population primarily from the rural areas lack access to safe and clean drinking water. I want to sincerely thank the honourable Minister for his commitment in addressing these pressing issues. As the honourable Minister outlined, the rural water plan is vital to improving water management and ensuring sustainable development for rural communities. While we acknowledge the efforts by previous governments in this sector, it is encouraging to hear the honourable Minister with a renewed focus and determination to resolve these issues. I am hopeful that that progress will be a swift one.

In the 2024-2025 Budget, the allocation of \$82.3 million for water programmes, including \$7.5 million for rural initiatives, this significant funding should facilitate substantial improvements

in water access for many rural communities in the coming months. Once again, I thank the honourable Minister for his Statement in reassuring the people of Fiji, especially those in the rural areas. Your message, honourable Minister will surely bring hope and encouragement to those grappling with water crisis watching this Parliamentary session.

### **Suicide Prevention**

**HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.-** Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Members of this august House, distinguished guests, members of the public virtually viewing this parliamentary session, a good afternoon to you all. Allow me to brief this august House on an issue that needs a coordinated and multi-sectoral public health response.

Working very closely with the National Committee on the Prevention of Suicide, we will be commemorating World Suicide Prevention Day on Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> September, with the launch of the Suicide Prevention 2024 theme: *“Change the narrative with a call to action, start the conversation.”* I am respectfully starting this conversation with you here in this august House and across the nation, with our viewers across the globe. We need and must work together. According to the World Health Organisation, approximately 800,000 people die by suicide every year, which means one person every 40 seconds.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for Fiji, the suicide and attempted suicide statistics gathered by the Fiji Police Force in six years from 2016 to 2021 revealed a total of 1,276 suicide and attempted cases; an average of 213 cases per year with about half the number leading to deaths. The highest number of suicide and attempted suicide cases were recorded in 2019, with 244 cases and the Western Division recorded the most cases every year for the six years.

Changing the narrative of suicide is about transforming how we perceive this complex issue and shifting from a culture of silence and stigma to one of openness, understanding and support. A call to action encourages everyone to start the conversation on suicide and suicide prevention. Every conversation, no matter how small, contributes to a supportive and understanding society. By initiating these vital conversations, we can break down barriers, raise awareness and create better cultures of support in our churches, mosques, sporting fields, and kava sessions. Let us start this conversation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan (2013-2030) underlines suicide as the second most common cause of death among young people between the ages of 15 years to 29 years across the globe. Every individual suicide has far reaching emotional, social and economic consequences and deeply affects the families, global communities and nations across the globe. I am inviting Members of this august House, your Ministries and everyone listening and watching this session, please wear a yellow or orange article of clothing, wrist band or hair band on Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> September to indicate that you are advocating that life is for living, that a life lost to suicide is a life to many.

I call on my colleagues on both sides of Parliament to get your staff, students, teachers, families and to all Civil Servants to wear orange or yellow on the day and on most days, to help advocate for suicide prevention and save a life. You can also join us from Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, via livestream on the Ministry of Health and Medical Services social media page at 8.30 a.m. and also in the evening, a candle light vigil from 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. at Ratu Sukuna Park. Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate for their response.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for enlightening the general public in Parliament on the importance of suicide cases and mental health and wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to know that suicide is a major health problem with far reaching social, emotional and economic consequences and as you alluded, more than 800,000 die every year and is the fourth leading cause of death among 15 to 29 year olds which is really worrying. In Parliament or even leaders outside, we always talk about the future generation. We are doing everything now for the future generation but the fourth leading cause of death among 15 to 29 year olds is suicide.

Fiji is considered to have one of the highest suicide rates in the world and according to statistics, it has been revealed by Lifeline Fiji that a Fijian citizen will attempt to take their life every 36 hours, and the youngest victim was a seven-year-old child.

The ingestion of pesticides, hanging and firearms are the most common methods of suicide globally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, which is why paraquat was banned in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, World Suicide Prevention Day on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2024, with the launch the Suicide Prevention 2024 theme, ‘Change the Narrative with All of Action: Start the Conversation’ is a great initiative. The more we talk about this, the more we normalise this in society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2015 was the first year when the Suicide Prevention Day was celebrated in schools. I think on a social media recently, a mother posted of her young boy who was in Year 9. It was a normal day, he went to school, by the time he came home he had killed himself already, and she is looking for reasons as to why he did so.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, suicide shrouded in stigma, shame and misunderstanding. This means that people do not often ask or seek for adequate help. Prevention of suicide cannot be accomplished by one person, organisation or institution, and it requires support for the whole community.

Here are the few recommendations, Mr. Speaker, Sir:

- (1) Restrict and monitor the sale and usage of fertilizers and pesticides which can be used as an attempt to suicide.
- (2) We need to restrict networks that are fuelling drug usage, social media bullying and threats.
- (3) We need laws that penalise those who bully, harass and threaten others on social media.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently there was a matter viral on social media where a *TikToker* had killed himself because he was being bullied on social media. In fact, what I see on *TikTok* is people threatening each other, giving their addresses and say, “I am at this address, come and fight with me”. It is quite surprising that people do these things and children have access to this kind of content in Fiji.

Corporations and businesses must be made compulsory to conduct wellness programmes and suicide awareness weeks under their corporate social responsibility. Mr. Speaker, Sir, what we can do as legislators is to increase financial support to St. Giles and various NGOs to equip them with more resources, aimed at substance use prevention, mental health, reduce risk, re-enforce protective factors by providing social support to vulnerable individuals, follow -up care, raising awareness, fighting stigma and supporting those who have deranged by suicide which, hopefully, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance can consider in the next budget.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there needs to be more dialogue and discussions within households, religious groups, communities and a society as a whole, and I am glad the honourable Minister really emphasises on this point. It serves as a reminder that suicide prevention is a public health priority and urgent action is required to make sure that suicide mortality rates are reduced. By creating hope through action, I assure the people of Fiji that we are committed to this shared responsibility and that there is hope, and that we care, and we want to support them and through collective actions, we can achieve the desired outcomes of these pressing issues, leaving no Fijian behind. *Vinaka*.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable leader of the G-9 Bloc, or his designate for their response.

HON. P. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, the honourable Minister's words reflect a deeper societal concern that affects each one of us - the grim and saddening scenario of suicide in Fiji, and we appreciate his dedication to this cause and the launching of the Suicide Prevention 2024 initiative next Tuesday. The theme, 'Change the Narrative with the call to action - start a conversation', is not just appropriate but extremely crucial to our collective effort in dealing with suicide.

I am reminded of two key scriptures from our *Holy Bible*. The first one, *Deuteronomy 30:19*, represents the sanctity of life where the Lord says, I quote,

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live”.

This passage sets forth a profound truth, every life is invaluable.

In *Galatians 6:2*, he urges us to show empathy to our fellow beings. The Apostle Paul wrote, and I quote, “Bear one another's burden, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

Both scriptures, Mr. Speaker, impress the importance of preserving life and lending an empathetic ear to individuals battling with the pressure of life. We have seen the ripple effects it sends in families, neighbours and in our communities. We ought to create an environment where our people can openly discuss their predicaments, how they feel, how they are valued, to be heard and be understood.

Professor and Director of the Hamilton Counselling and Psychology Department, Dr. Karen Mason, is writing a note which says, “Why should a church observe the National Suicide Prevention Month, the month of September?”

As I read through his research, he said in 2018, (before the pandemic) that more people died of suicide than from drug-related death. According to the latest data from the Centre of Disease Control and Prevention, the number of suicide deaths in the United States continues to climb.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, here in Fiji, the faith-based organisations are an integral part in shaping our society's moral, ethical and spiritual transformations. The influence of these organisations can be productive in creating a compassionate approach towards individuals experiencing distress. Moreover, they can contribute to creating a supportive environment for prevention efforts. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they need to be better looked after by the Government in terms of resources and capacity building.

It is important to note that the faith-based organisations in Fiji has got the biggest reach in our local settings. They must not only be used as a rubber stamp in the consultations for new government initiatives but be seen as a tangible tool in dealing with the many challenging social issues that we face in our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Suicide Prevention 2024 Programme should not just be a campaign but a necessitated movement to preserve, to cherish and honour life. The ecumenical faith-based bodies in Fiji are frontline warriors in creating a society filled with understanding, empathy, and love.

I firmly believe, if given recognition and the critical support by Government, we can be rest assured that our commitment geared towards the successful implementation of this initiative will be a success.

In conclusion, Christians view suicide prevention as part of our call to love our neighbours. As we love ourselves, it is our duty to reach out to those that are suffering, extend emotional and spiritual support and start the conversation in changing the narrative sounding mental health discussion.

I hope, Mr. Speaker, that we can create that space in which those that are struggling with suicide can find hope, solace and most importantly, find help.

We thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the Ministerial Statement from the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services this afternoon.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I think the challenge offered by the Minister for Health and Medical Services needs to be taken up. He has asked us for our support.

If I remember correctly, one of my predecessors here, Mr. Pita Nacuva, being a former Speaker, a former international rugby player, he excelled in his work front, right up to his career in politics. One day, it was a sad day one of his children took her own life and the Members of Parliament then were all badly affected from that tragedy. Even if the son or daughter of a well-off person, when you suffer this kind of fate, we all feel it, whether is to do with the suicide or drug problem, which is another upcoming case that is before us now.

I take it that the offer given by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services, I would ask for your permission honourable Members if the print on the *Daily Hansard* could be in bold letters, so as to remind us of the fate of Mr. Pita Nacuva's daughter when she took her own life. It affected the whole lot of us in the House then because you never know when will this kind of tragedy strike you and make you part of that. It was difficult moment for us.

The Rehabilitation Centre in Tamavua is still being talked about and I do not know when they will start building the rehabilitation centre. St. Giles is not a rehabilitation centre but here, we are talking about drugs and suicide. These are issues that are before us right now and we need to begin to start talking with other people who are affected seriously. You cannot understand these kind of people. They do not talk, they do not share their views but all of sudden, they take their life.

When I was serving my jail time in Nadera for five months, I served my time with some of the people who were seen as delinquents of the Nadera area and the church looked after them. I shared my meals with them, and it was a sad occasion for me because it taught me a lot of lessons. How the churches, as alluded to by the honourable Ravunawa, went out of their way to try and help our society of different ethnic background yet they were there.

Some, we can tell the mind is not 100 percent there but, again, all they wanted is love, all they wanted is some attention to be bestowed on them. That is not coming from the parents, that is not coming from the family but we, as citizens of this country, can play our role there.

It is not an easy one, it is not an easy challenge but again, the data as alluded to by honourable Ritesh Sharma and honourable Ravunawa will be on the increase all the time, it will never decrease. The population is building up, social problems are too many to address or to name, but I hope if you can agree with me that we ask the Secretary-General to, please, make that statement made by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services in bold statement so as to remind us in future that that challenge was offered to us, and either we did something about it or we almost did nothing about it.

### Blue Pacific Big Ocean States Platform for Labour Ministers

HON. A.D. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to update this august House on the Blue Pacific Big Oceans States (BPBOS) Platform for Labour Ministers with the focus on one voice for the International Labour Organization (ILO), Pacific Island Member States on Employment related matters.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BPBOS Labour Platform was established by the Government representatives of the 11 ILO Member States in consultation with their social partners. Fiji is the current Chair of the BPBOS while the Government of Cook Islands holds the role of the Secretariat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the purpose of the BPBOS is to bring together leaders and representative from the Pacific Island nations to discuss common employment challenges, opportunities and strategies for sustainable development. The BPBOS is a body for the Pacific Island nations to seek technical expertise and guidance on employment related matters. It will be the voice of the Pacific Island nations in:

- (1) Advocating or raising awareness on the impacts of Climate Change on employment and developing resilient societies.
- (2) Strengthening compliance and promoting decent work conditions in the maritime labour sector and assisting with trade agreements.
- (3) Strengthening the spirit of tripartism in the Pacific in line with ILO Convention 144.
- (4) Amplifying the voice of the ILO Pacific Member States within the International Labour Conference and the Asia-Pacific Group Forums.
- (5) Promoting decent work and advancing social justice.
- (6) Assisting Member States in meeting the obligations on ILO instruments.
- (7) Connecting with key stakeholders to assist with the unique challenges faced by the Pacific Island Member States relating to labour mobility and skills development, labour standards and compliance, labour law reform and progressive management of labour relations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish to delve in the establishment of this Labour Platform. Sir, during the 2017 International Labour Conference, a tripartite meeting was called on Friday, 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2017 for all Pacific Island Member States of the International Labour Conference (ILC) participants from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands attended this meeting. All expressed a common wish to have regular meetings at each ILC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, during the 2019 Conference, a second tripartite meeting was called on Wednesday, 12<sup>th</sup> June, 2019. The participants were Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Vanuatu and Cook Islands. It was unanimously decided that a Terms of Reference (TOR) would be adopted by the larger



group of Pacific Island States during the Pacific Tripartite High Level Forum on Climate Change and Decent Work in the Pacific on 24<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2019 in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

At that Pacific Tripartite High Level Forum, the Labour Ministers requested a presentation on the Big Ocean States and further made significant changes to the draft Terms of Reference (TOR), amend the name of the platform to align and recognise our region under a single appellation as defined by our Pacific Leaders, and restructure the platform as the regional government platform, given that both, the social partners, that is, the workers and the employers, have existing corresponding platforms and to channel their voices accordingly. The two are Pacific Islands Private Sector Organisation (PIPSO) and Pacific Islands Council of Trade Unions (PICTU).

Mr. Speaker, on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2019, the Blue Pacific Big Ocean States (BPBOS) Labour Resolution was accepted and signed by the Ministers. This was to reaffirm our joint commitment in establishing the platform and finalising the content and adoption of the TOR at the 50<sup>th</sup> Pacific Island Forum on 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> August in Tuvalu. Following the signing of the Labour Resolution, the Labour Ministers voted for a new Chair, Vice-Chairs and Secretariat for two years.

The Fiji Labour Minister, my predecessor, was elected as the Chairperson while the two Vice-Chairpersons were from Kiribati and Samoa. The Labour Minister from Cook Islands was elected as the Secretariat. Mr. Speaker, Sir, in 2024 at the High Level Tripartite Dialogue on Decent Work and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent held on 23<sup>rd</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> April here in Suva, the Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations was reconfirmed as Chair of the BPBOS and Cook Islands as the Secretariat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, regrettably, nothing had been done since 2019 for this course, for the reasons best known to the former Chair. In June 2024 at the 112<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Labour Conference in Geneva, the Pacific Member States met at the PIFs office. In attendance were the tripartite representatives from Australia, Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, New Zealand, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa and Vanuatu.

The Secretariat presented and distributed the TOR. All the members present at the meeting agreed to the proposal, thereafter as the Chair, I requested the Secretariat to meet to finalise the TOR and the way forward for the BPBOS Labour Relations platform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the functions of the BPBOS Labour Platform are to:

- (1) Facilitate collaboration and building of synergies along ILO Pacific Islands Member States around the issues of social justice, decent work and good faith employment relations with coordinated efforts and mutual support.
- (2) Strengthen the visibility and capacity of participants to advocate and support a unified Pacific voice.
- (3) Provide and/or utilise relevant tools and information for advocacy, dialogue and awareness regarding Pacific issues.
- (4) Support the ILO Pacific Island Member States in attending employment related meetings and events.
- (5) Facilitate discussions on Pacific Labour issues and aim to increase resources towards the interest of the BPBOS from international organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, following the outcome of the ILC meeting in June 2024 and re-confirmation of Fiji's chairmanship, swift action has been taken to revamp and advance the work of BPBOS Labour platform.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a two-day meeting was held on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2024 in Auckland to review the draft Terms of Reference for the BPBOS Labour Minister's Platform. This meeting was held at the Fiji Trade Office. The Government as the Chairperson of BPBOS and the Secretariat represented by the Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Government of Cook Islands, and respective delegations from both countries. The two-day meeting was a success and it saw the completion of the review of the draft TOR for the BPBOS Labour Ministers Platform for circulation to the respective Labour Ministries at the ILO Pacific Islands member states for their perusal and feedback. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the two-day meeting was fully funded by the ILO Office for the Pacific Island countries.

The Blue Pacific Big Ocean States Labour Platform is the key to recognising and aligning the Pacific region under a single Pacific voice on employment issues and ILO agendas. This Labour Platform is crucial for the ILO Pacific Island member states on the emphasis of raising visibility and having a common voice in the Pacific at the international arena, where issues that affect the Pacific are to be heard, particularly decent work, employment issues, labour mobility and climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we, the small islands states of the Pacific are always lost when we are lumped together with the Asia region because it is called Asia-Pacific. Asia has its own unique problems, which is more like conflicts and the rest of it, whereas, we, in the Pacific are small island states, and our problems are totally different from them hence the need for us to have a united voice as SIDS of the Pacific, so that we are able to amplify our voice at the international arena and make ourselves heard.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish to express my sincere appreciation through the ILO Office of the Pacific Island countries for their continued support and commitment towards the ILO Pacific Island member states in advancing social justice, not forgetting the full support from the Fiji High Commission in Wellington and Fiji's Trade Office in Auckland for hosting our two days meeting to complete the review of the TOR.

MR. SPEAKER.- So that problem is not only existing in the parliamentary representation, IPU. Now I have heard it from you, Sir. You also have a problem with getting your group organised. As I have said a while ago, we had the same problem in IPU when it comes to recognising the Pacific as a regional body because Indonesia also wants to be part of the Pacific, because they share a common boundary in having their borders fronting or be part of the Pacific Ocean. In that way, some of the countries that come to our meetings go to that meeting because they are part of the Pacific, but the rest of us, we are completely lost and when it comes to staging or staking our plea, that the member countries of the 13 countries in the Pacific their problem be taken in by the international bodies, especially going into COP meetings, they refer us to the United Nations definition again. So we are simply at a loss, like you have just stated, Sir.

Now we Chair SIDS, and you may have heard the honourable Leader of the Opposition asking the honourable Prime Minister of how best the situation could be addressed? That is a problem we are encountering, we do not know where we are. Are we part of the 13 or part of just five or six that comes up with the name "Pacific", and the big countries (our neighbours) pick their sides where they go to because of the support they need. That is a very interesting point you brought up, honourable Minister. I hope the executive would be listening intently to the plea that you have sounded.

I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate for their response.

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the Ministerial Statement by the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations. I would like to thank the honourable Minister for a very comprehensive Statement.

The Blue Pacific Big Ocean States Platform plays a critical role in identifying the Pacific Labour Region regarding labour and employment issues as well as the ILO agendas. This platform, as you all know, was established in 2019. We are proud that Fiji was the first country elected to Chair the BPBOS meeting and continues to hold the position under the leadership of the current honourable Minister.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we hope that the honourable Minister will emphasise the importance of this labour platform in enhancing visibility and the ways of the Pacific nation and also within the Asia-Pacific Region. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also need to strengthen the need for a unified voice in international discussions and issues affecting the Pacific, particularly concerning decent work, employment matters and climate change. We do hope that the Terms of Reference drafted will serve its purpose and start calling all Pacific Island States to raise a unified voice regarding labour and employment issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this labour platform is very crucial for the ILO Pacific Members States to raise visibility in the region. We anticipate that under the single umbrella, labour and employment issues will be top of the agenda. My plea to honourable Minister is for his Ministry to carry out an awareness programme regarding the Blue Pacific Big Ocean States Labour Platform so that our citizen and stakeholders are well informed.

With this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate the honourable Minister for being the Chairperson of BPBOS Labour Platform and we understand that Fiji will benefit a lot.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, having said that, while we acknowledge this effort and demonstration of leadership, we are compelled to seek some pertinent queries based on the facts at hand:

- (1) What tangible benefits have we derived from the BPBOS Labour Platform initiatives to date?
- (2) How would you assess the effects of all these efforts on better employment opportunities and workplace relations in Fiji?
- (3) What efforts are being made to make the voice of all member Pacific Island State represented and equally heard within the BPBOS?
- (4) Given our present financial constraints, how sustainable is our present level of involvement and what are the plans to securing long-term funding for these initiatives?
- (5) How do these international commitments allow us to address both now and into future the immediate labour and employment challenges our people face around things like the creation of jobs and increasing wages?

The BPBOS Platform offers a unique opportunity for us to come together and share good practices and promote policies that will improve employment opportunities, productivity and workplace relations throughout the Pacific. Together, we can make sure that our labour markets are resilient and inclusive, able to meet the changing needs of the global economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the honourable Minister's leadership in this regard. It is only through such initiatives that we can collectively have a voice and be able to make meaningful progress for all Pacific Islanders. In saying that, however, we must not lose sight of the fact that we should not be complacent or deviate from ensuring those benefits that come with tangible and measurable outcomes for our people.

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

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to thank the honourable Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations for his Ministerial Statement this afternoon. I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to the big work that you have carried within the Ministry of Employment and also to your current term as the Chairperson for BPBOS.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Blue Pacific Big Ocean States Labour Ministers Platform is an united commitment by all ILO Pacific Island Member States to advocate for the rights and welfare of workers across our Pacific Island nations. In the phase of global challenge, economic instability and employment, it is imperative that the Pacific present a cohesive and powerful voice to the ILO on employment related issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we recognise that our islands are not only rich in natural resources but also in human potential. Therefore, we must prioritise the creation of sustainable and decent work opportunities that empower our Pacific people, promote social inclusion and enhance economic resilience.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by presenting a united front, we in the Pacific, can amplify our voices and ensure that unique perspectives of Blue Pacific Big Ocean States are heard and considered in global employment discussions with emphasis towards a future where every worker in our region enjoys the rights, protection and opportunities they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Blue Pacific Big Ocean States platform will reaffirm the ILO Pacific Island Member States commitment to advancing the principles of social justice, equality and sustainable development for our Pacific Islanders as one voice to shape a brighter future for the Pacific people. Thank you so much, Sir, for the opportunity.

#### Antimicrobial Resistance

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not often that I get to deliver my Ministerial Statement but I thank you for the opportunity. I stand before you IN this august assembly today to address a matter of utmost importance - the relentless battle against Antimicrobial Resistance, commonly known as AMR, or as the media would like to call it superbugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, AMR, as the World Health Organization (WHO) defines it, occurs when a bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites no longer respond to antimicrobial medicines. You may be aware of antibiotics which the doctor might have given you when you were sick, this is one type of antimicrobial medicine. It is the misuse and overuse of antimicrobials that is leading to AMR.

In May 2015, during the 68th World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, the global community took a decisive step to adopting the Global Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance. Since then, our collective efforts have gained momentum - a momentum that extends beyond Fiji's shores, encompassing our region and the entire world.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, AMR is not merely a scientific concern, it is a threat to our very existence. It jeopardises lives today and imperils the hard-won advancements of modern medicine. Antimicrobials, our medical cornerstone, underpin surgical procedures, infectious disease management, and fundamental patient care. Imagine a world where these vital tools lose their effectiveness due to resistance. A world where simple injuries could mean hospital admissions or a world where diseases such as Pneumonia can no longer be treated. We cannot afford such a scenario.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, alarm bells rang in 2016 when a report chaired by Jim O'Neill called "Tackling Drug-Resistant Infections Globally: Final Report and Recommendations - The Review on Antimicrobial Resistance" predicted that by the year 2050, 10 million deaths will be attributed to AMR globally, surpassing the deaths from cancer and diabetes. The bugs are getting stronger, yet there are no new antibiotics to treat them.

A report from the World Bank in 2017 titled "*Drug-Resistant Infections: A threat to Our Economic Future*", framed the economic cost of AMR and the impact that it would have on the world in the not-too-distant future, predicting that an estimated 3.8 percent of global GDP could be lost annually and push 28 million people into poverty.

By 2019, the WHO had reported that 1.27 million deaths globally had been a direct result of AMR infections and contributed to the deaths of an additional 4.95 million people. The numbers are piling up as we face escalating challenges from micro-organisms, and Fiji is not immune.

In recent years, we have faced outbreaks of formidable foes like the *Acinetobacter baumannii* and other carbapenem-resistant organisms (CROs) within our major health facilities. These are what we call, and as I alluded to, as super bugs. These challenges remind us that the battle against this silent pandemic is far from over. Yet, we remain vigilant and resolute, steadfast in our commitment to protect our people.

We have made significant strides in enhancing our capacities across the various aspects of healthcare, be it in surgical interventions, advanced dialysis, or critical care. However, let us remember that even the most sophisticated medical procedures can be rendered futile, if our patients fall prey to infections caused by resistant organisms.

But this is not a cause for despair; it is a call to action. It shows us the importance of our ongoing efforts and the need to strengthen our resolve. Together, we can ensure that our advancements in healthcare are not undermined by the threat of antimicrobial resistance. We will continue to fight, innovate, and protect the health of every Fijian, ensuring that no life is lost to preventable and treatable infections.

In Fiji's mitigation strategy, we are not passive observers in this fight. Fiji has a robust mitigation strategy -the National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (NAP AMR). Launched in November 2022, the NAP AMR outlines key goals, milestones and collaborative partnerships. Our path forward lies in unity - knowing our adversary and acting collectively.

The One Health approach to mitigating AMR mandates that we work collaboratively across, not only human health, but also with our animal health and partners in the environment space. This cross-sectoral approach recognises the importance of data sharing, cooperation and the multi-disciplinary approach, and the importance of the ecosystem we all share. One Health is not only a method but also a powerful tool in our arsenal against AMR. I invite my colleagues in animal health and environmental health to work together to stop this global threat.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the National Action Plan on AMR in hand, strong cross-sectoral collaboration and good governance mechanisms in place, there is hope yet for our people. Fiji's National Antimicrobial Resistance Committee (NARC) has led the way in the Pacific and globally on the path of AMR mitigation strategies, and I commend the tireless efforts of the Committee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, awareness plays a pivotal role in our shared fight. It is not confined to healthcare professionals alone, but for every citizen, whether child or parent, holds a stake. We must

educate, empower and engage. Our battle against AMR begins with understanding what we are fighting against.

We all learnt a valuable lesson during COVID-19, the need for proper hygiene practices such as hand washing, the use of masks to prevent the spread of diseases and germs, and the need to protect ourselves from old and emerging diseases using vaccines. The message must go out there that together, we can prevent needless deaths and suffering.

Since 2015, NARC has consistently organised World AMR Awareness Week from 18<sup>th</sup> November to 24<sup>th</sup> November. This is an important global occasion during which we recognise the threat of AMR and the importance of spreading awareness on how we can protect ourselves. Mr. Speaker, Sir, awareness is our weapon, and together, we shall prevail.

Take heed when doctors and pharmacists tell you to finish your course of antibiotics and do not ask for antibiotics when your healthcare professional says you do not need it. Do not share antibiotics with friends and family. Every little bit helps, and we must listen to professional advice when it is given.

Get vaccinated against vaccine-preventable diseases and eat a balanced and healthy diet to boost your immune system. Use antibiotics and antimicrobials rationally, whether you are a healthcare professional or a member of the public, we all have a role to play. Educate other members of your family and your friends on the importance of preventing AMR, remember, we are all in this together.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us remember that our fight against AMR transcends borders. It is a shared responsibility, one that unites us in safeguarding our health, our future, and the generations to come. Our actions today will determine the future we live in tomorrow. Let us come together, from all sectors and walks of life, to fight this common enemy.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition, or his designate, for their response.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir and I want to thank the honourable Minister for his very interesting presentation. Not all of us are familiar with AMR, but I want share my experience when I was with Consumer Council of Fiji. It was 2015 that we conducted a survey with the help of the World Health Organization (WHO), just to understand the perception people had about AMR. We found that barely 27 percent of our population knew what this AMR was.

So based on that information, with the help of WHO, awareness materials were prepared. So, I am quite familiar with the area of work that was done at that time, and I am glad that the honourable Minister is continuing with this work. It is not one time work, it is going to be lifelong, and we need to continuing working in this area to raise awareness. At the end of the day, it is the people. It is the choices they make. And if they make the right choice, it will only help in controlling AMR.

As he highlighted, AMR is not a matter to be taken lightly, that is what we have heard, and it is a silent but a deadly threat which is looming over Fiji. He had shared the examples of superbugs found in the hospital. Obviously, it is a sign that we are very much into this issue, and we need to address that.

I also agree with him that many household believe a doctor is no good, or dentist is not good when they visit them and they are not given antibiotics, and that thinking needs to be out of our

minds, and some messages needs to go in that area so that people are more attuned to the fact that you do not need antibiotics for every illness, like cold and flu.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it not a just cultural norms that we have that we start blaming the doctor for not giving the antibiotics, but the spread of antibiotic resistance bacteria is driven by doctor's prescribing antibiotics when they are not needed, they are also situations of that nature.

Patients not completing the antibiotic causes, they will not complete as soon as they feel better, they will stop, and whatever they have saved they will pass it on to any other relative who is not well. They will say, "See, I took this medication, I feel good now, you should continue with it", so that becomes a problem.

Purchasing antibiotics over the counter is a huge problem. You do not need a doctor's prescription. You can walk into a pharmacy and the pharmacist will give you antibiotics. That is how easily antibiotics are available. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this overuse of antibiotics in agriculture, as he mentioned, also fuels the spread of resistance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we lack adequate infection control measures in hospital, also in clinics, especially in rural areas where resources are limited. While the 2023-2024 Budget allocated around \$12 million for diagnostic equipment, and as you told us during Committee of Supply, procurement failures have left these clinical tools were not bought around that time. This poses doctors to rely on a very broad spectrum of antibiotics and accelerating resistance.

The overprescription of antibiotics without proper testing is transforming a once treatable infections into life threatening conditions, without proper diagnostic tools our medical professionals are left blindfolded in a battle against resistant bacteria.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, antibiotics are misused in agricultural sector as well. Livestock are routinely dosed with antibiotics, not just to treat infections, but to prevent them, creating fertile ground for resistance bacteria that can spread to humans. Where are the Government's efforts to enforce responsible farming practices? We should be encouraging best practices and disease control, such as proper housing of animals, better disinfection procedures and isolation of sick livestock.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one area that we seriously need to look at is the imported meat products that comes to our shore. We need to check for antibiotic resistant contamination. Our current surveillance systems are inadequate, riddled with data gaps, as the honourable Minister highlighted, and that is also contributing to the AMR crisis. So, strengthening the systems and imposing strict regulations around antibiotic use is not a choice, it is a necessity.

If we do not fail to address AMR, there is going to be high mortality rates, longer hospital stays, increased treatment cost, economic losses as he highlighted because people are forced to take extended time off work due to prolonged illnesses and AMRs spreading across borders carried by international travellers and through global trade.

So, all in all, Mr. Speaker Sir, the honourable Minister is trying to address the issues, and I think we all need to help him, including the public who are listening. They need to take care of their own health so that we can all collectively assist with this battle against AMR crisis.

MR. SPEAKER.- It is quite interesting what you have stated, honourable Kumar, that is the Ministry of Agriculture on the meat. I remember the Assistant Minister for Agriculture telling me that they also provide antibiotics, I think to the *bulumakau*. So, his role is not much different from

the medical doctor. I like your response there, they need to be properly and thoroughly checked. Thank you, Madam.

Before we go further, honourable Members, for housekeeping purposes and for the purposes of complying with the Standing Orders with respect to sitting times, I now call upon the Leader of 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 listed on today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have 10 Oral Questions and a Motion for debate on the Fiji Sugar Corporation Guarantee.

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

Since no one wishes to speak on the motion, I now call on the Leader of the Government in Parliament to speak in reply.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have anything to add.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now offer the floor to the leader of the Group-9 Bloc, or his designate, for their response.

HON. P. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think the honourable Minister's Statement and the response by honourable Premila has covered that subject well. I do not intend to say anything further.

MR. SPEAKER.- The issue of antibiotic, honorable Ravunawa? Would you like to say something on that Assistant Minister?

HON. T.N. TUNABUNA.- Mr. Speaker, I will speak on that in a later session.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I will adjourn the House now for afternoon tea.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.39 p.m.



The Parliament resumed at 4.11 p.m.

## QUESTIONS

### Oral Questions

#### Regularisation of Private Vehicles for Public Service Activities (Question No. 195/2024)

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA asked the Government, upon notice.

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport inform Parliament on how the Ministry plans to regularise private vehicles that are engaged in illegal public service activities?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question regarding regularisation of private vehicles. The Ministry with Land Transport Authority (LTA) has recognised the growing concern of private vehicles unlawfully operating as Public Service Vehicles (PSV). The proliferation of these operators who provide transport services without receipts, permits or adherence to regulatory standards presents a significant challenge. While these unauthorised services may temporarily meet certain transportation demands, they function outside the legal framework, resulting in compromised safety, unfair competition and with legitimate operators, a loss of revenue.

However, we should recognise that the demand is there, and some are genuinely serving, for example, after hours and for emergency situation. The LTA together with the Department of Transport is looking at regularisation pathways of these vehicle owners in order to transition into the legal PSV framework which may involve creating specific criteria and incentives that will allow them to meet the regulatory requirements. Therefore, fostering a more inclusive and compliant transport sector. So it is something which is still under discussion, we are considering it and given the growing number of illegal operators, I emphasise that there are various public service permits which are open, for example, the lifting of the freeze has enabled the applications for rental (LR) and mini-buses (LM) and carriers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these categories, for example, LH, authorises the use of a motor vehicle licensed as hire vehicle with a driver provided, subject to the Act and licence and permit conditions, on a route and for a fare negotiated between the permit holder or his or her driver and the passenger carried but shall not authorise the vehicle to ply or stand for hire for the carriage of passengers.

Of course, the LR (Rental) use of a rental vehicle and there are minibuses and carriers. These are options available for them to regularise and the LTA is working closely with stakeholders in order to move them away from their current situation of unregularised operations.

HON. F. S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, the issuance of LR and LH has also meant that those LR and LH plates are being used as taxis. Will you be looking at strengthening the laws and the punishments that currently exists with respective PSV drivers and those that try and be PSV drivers within this particular boundary?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I am not sure if I heard you correctly, whether LR used as taxis, but in terms of the question of the laws, that is what we are currently reviewing - the various aspects of the law that needed to be reviewed. For example, the sale of sale permits, and looking at the review of the current regulations regarding taxis, open taxi rank, et cetera. I think there is another

the review of the current regulations regarding taxis, open taxi rank, et cetera. I think there is another question coming up on the availability of bases in the Municipal boundaries.

Those are various challenges we face but generally, we are encouraging more participation in the transport sector, but also to spread it out, not only in the urban areas where they are currently based, but also to the rural bases. For example, in villages, they are working with the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and iTLTB to create bases there or where they could operate from. I noticed, even in my area, there is quite a number of cars parked there and they are looking forward in terms of the development towards the issuance of taxi permits which we are currently working on.

Farm to Fork Initiative - Ministry of Tourism  
(Question No. 196/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the Farm-to-Fork initiative that is currently being spearheaded by the Ministry?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I thank the honourable Assistant Minister for the question. The Farm-to-Fork initiative is an important collaborative programme led by the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. It is unique because we have multiple partners across Government, private sector and development partners. We are collaborating with the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, the Ministry of Trade and Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications, with the support of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNFAO).

The Farm-to-Fork initiative was launched with a primary objective of fostering stronger relationships between our tourism and resource-based sectors - agriculture and fisheries. The initiative aims to integrate local agricultural and fisheries products into the tourism supply chain, thereby, promoting local produce and reducing dependency on imports.

Mr. Speaker Sir, since entering the partnership with the UN FAO in 2023, we have conducted two workshops - one in Sigatoka and one in Savusavu. These workshops brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including Government Officials, farmers, cooperatives and clusters, middlemen and caterers and makers from the hospitality industry such as chefs, food and beverage managers and hotel purchasing officers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the initiative is overseen by a Steering Committee which has representation of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, Ministry of Trade, Fiji Hotel Association, Fiji Chefs Association, Culinary Federation of Fiji, Tourism Fiji and UNFAO. Collectively, we have had over 100 participants in these workshops. We are covering key areas such as supply chain management, fish handling, hotel purchasing requirements, market access, funding opportunities and health and safety standards.

As part of the workshop, participants also had the opportunity to visit an on-site farm at the Outrigger Resort, Sigatoka, and Namale Resort, Savusavu, to see the variety of crops and vegetables grown, the sustainable farming practices, and how the farm contribute to the resort's commitment, of offering fresh locally sourced meals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am also pleased to share that there was a good representation of women with close to 50 percent participation. We had one who attended the Sigatoka workshop with her

two-year old child. This really attests to the commitment and the hard work of women.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the key issues that we have seen from these workshops include a significant lack of communication and coordination between farmers and key Government stakeholders, including our Ministry. There is also a need for more training, technical support and better access to farming infrastructure, equipment and water.

Farmers are often unaware of tender bids from hotels and struggle with understanding the procurement process. Other challenges include:

- (1) labour shortages;
- (2) their perception of farming as a non-lucrative and labour-intensive business;
- (3) difficulties related to market access;
- (4) high input costs; and
- (5) the unavailability of seeds and materials.

The workshops also noted problems with inconsistent supply and quality of produce, delayed payments from hotels and the need for better information on seasonality, suppliers and quality control.

The lack of coordination is a critical missing link, that if established, could significantly drive demand and supply for both industries. Strengthening this connection is vital for ensuring a consistent and high quality supply of local produce to the tourism sector, while also creating a reliable market for farmers. Establishing strong synergies through policies, taskforces and better communication channels will enable these sectors to work together more effectively, boosting the local economy and enhancing the sustainability of both agriculture and tourism.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, looking ahead, a third workshop will be held in Suva later in the year, where we hope to present solutions on the types of arrangements needed to build stronger, healthier and more sustainable links between the food and agriculture sector and the tourism sector. We are also looking to extend our partnership with the UNFAO, so that this initiative becomes a core part of our Ministry's outputs.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Farm-to-Fork Initiative is a testament of our commitment in promoting sustainable tourism and supporting local communities. By strengthening the linkages between tourism and resource-based sectors, we are not only enhancing the visitors' experience, but also contributing to the economic development of our rural areas.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, does the Farm-to-Fork Initiative actually have an organic portion to it?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Yes, it does. Organic producers, as we know, are high on the list of most people, especially our visitors. So, it is very much dominant the way we are developing this. The beauty about it is that these are local farmers who are adjacent to where the resorts are situated. As I have highlighted, it is the way for them to grow on demand, to know what the hotels want and to grow accordingly. It is working quite properly, and it is very promising for both our tourism industry and the local community of farmers.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, I think I have mentioned this during the Fiji Institute of Chartered Accountants (FICA) Conference. There are two obstacles in this Farm-to-Fork Initiative, one is the procurement officers, and two, are the middlemen. These are the ones who come in between the initiative and the farmers.

So, with this training and discussions that are ongoing, how is this being handled by the Ministry? It is a good initiative, honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the programme includes the middlemen, they are also part of this initiative because we need to secure the supply chain. In cases where you have businesses between the farms and the buyer, you do need the ability of the middlemen to consolidate producers for purchase by the hotels.

It is something that is always there, but the way to go around that is to secure a price between the farmer and the hotel and then involve the middlemen. I think it is here when the middleman decides on what the prices should be. So, it is a matter of close coordination and building a relationship that is forward looking and one that can live on for a long period of time.

The problem with middlemen is that they come in, take what they buy and come back another time and are not able to sustain the relationship between the farmer and the hotel. The Ministry is trying to find a way to sustain this relationship between the farmer and the hotel. The hotel should know what is available in their vicinity. That will be key to all these.

On procurement, I know as a hotelier, my purchasing manager, it was easier for him to pick up the phone and call New Zealand, as opposed to going around the market to go and find out what is available. So, that is what we are going to do, for the hotels to take interest in what is available locally. Do what we call, a market survey. Hoteliers normally do this to find out what is available. So, procurement is key, and our farmers need to know how the purchasing manager works. They need to be related to the chef, what the chef wants to have on the menu.

So, the food and beverage manager, the chef and purchasing manager is also part of this dialogue. And in that, the middleman will also be there, but if these people can work closely together, the fee of the middleman, manipulating prices can be addressed.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question to the Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Tourism is how is the Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA) assisting in this initiative?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they are also part of the dialogue. It is all hands on board, but the Farm-to-Fork Initiative is more the local community and the hotel. They must develop their relationship, and with that relationship, it is more a direct one between the farmer and the hotels. AMA would be more on distributing to far flung areas, areas that are away from the community. So really, there is so much good land available in the hotel areas and this is what we are trying to encourage, that the land to be put to good use based on what the hotel needs. You know, we should farm on demand, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Non-Provision of Town Base Permits for LMs and LCs  
(Question No. 197/2024)

HON. M.D. BULITAVU asked the Government, upon notice.

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament on the reasons why the Municipal Councils are not providing town base permits to vehicle owners applications which have been accepted by the Land Transport Authority (LTA) for the processing of their Public Service Vehicles (PSV) permits in particular for LMs and LCs.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. It is a very important question because of public interest and a lot of people have also been coming to my office asking for assistance in relation to the town or city base permit.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today before you to address a pressing issue that has come to the attention of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government concerning the challenges faced by PSV owners in obtaining town based permits from our municipal councils particularly for Licensed Minibuses (LM) as well as Licensed Carriers (LC), despite having their applications accepted by the Land Transport Authority as Public Service Vehicle (PSV) permits. The situation has caused concern among our constituents, particularly those whose livelihoods depend on operating these vehicles. It is, therefore, our duty as the Government to ensure that as regulatory processes are efficient, fair and supportive of economic growth while maintaining necessary standards of safety and order in our urban areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have identified a gap in coordination between the LTA, FRA and municipal councils. This is the absence of a streamlined integrated process for handling Public Service Vehicles or PSVs and town-based permit applications has resulted in conflicting requirements, duplicated efforts and confusion for applicants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the difficulty in obtaining permits has led to an increase in informal and sometimes illegal transportation services. This not only poses safety risk but also results in loss revenue for both local and our national governments. The Ministry of Transport, together with LTA, is closely working with my Ministry to obtain baseline data from the councils on the bases and what areas can be aligned as bases.

Over the past months, we have observed a growing number of complaints from vehicle owners who have successfully navigated the LTA's rigorous process for obtain PSV permits. These individuals and businesses have invested time, effort and resources to meet the LTA's standards demonstrating their commitment to providing safe and reliable transport services to our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is crucial to understand the internal role of our municipal councils in this process. Municipal councils are tasked with managing the urban environment, ensuring ordinary development and maintain a quality of life for residents.

In the context of public transportation, they play a vital role in ensuring and allocating appropriate spaces for PSV base and stands, ensuring the number and type of vehicles operating within the municipalities are aligned with the areas infrastructure and needs and collecting local fees and charges that contribute to the maintenance and improvement of urban facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, after extensive consultation with municipal councils, vehicle owners and other stakeholders have identified several key factors contributing to the current bottleneck that create challenges for permit issuance. It is important to note that municipal councils have expressed concerns about the increasing traffic congestions in their jurisdictions with limited provisions to bases to accommodate these requests. They view the limitation as of new town-based permits as a means to control the number of vehicle operating in urban centres. While this concern is valid, it often results in a blanket approach that fails to distinguish between different types of public service vehicles and specific impacts on the traffic flow.

Municipal councils face general challenges related to the existing infrastructure, limited parking spaces, narrow roads and inadequate public transport facilities contributed to hesitation in issuing new permits. The council is of the view that allowing more vehicle to operate without corresponding improvements in infrastructure would lead to chaos and deterioration of services.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Public Works, we will work with the municipal councils to develop comprehensive plans for upgrading urban infrastructure to support an efficient public transportation system. This will include dedicated lanes for public service vehicles, improving parking facilities and enhanced traffic management systems.

We recognise the need to support our municipal councils in building their capacity to handle the complexities of modern urban transportation. The challenges faced in harmonising our public service permit processes are significant. By working together across different levels of government, between agencies and in partnership with the private sector and our communities. Municipal councils are prompted to work closely with FRA and LTA in implementing these reforms. I urge patience and cooperation from our vehicle owners and operators as we work to streamline these processes.

HON. T.R. MATASAWALEVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for what he has mentioned about the town base permit for LM and LC. If someone on day one lodges their application, how long will it take – weeks or months?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- I thank the honourable Member for asking a very good question. This is like a challenge not really a new.....

MR. SPEAKER.- He is using the case in Navua.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- One river, one bus!

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- It is like a legacy issue that we are reviewing at the moment. I remember first time in Office I was asked by some carrier operators on how long it will take to approve an application for a base for a municipality here in our country. They said that their application has been sitting there for more than two weeks. That is something that we are trying to review now. Realistically, it should not take more than a week because information are there by all the Councils unless fees updates, then it should be processed within a week.

MR. SPEAKER.- Less than a week, honourable Member.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- The Minister will agree that there is a disconnection between the municipal councils and LTA. Before I mention my question, there are many areas that are no longer serviced by buses, either no longer serviced or reduce fleet in a given day. These are people who are living around who want to help their own people by buying trucks or minibuses to help them.

My supplementary question to the Minister, how will the Ministry address the concordance of streamlining the process to improve the compliance, also a timeline for opening up of, the honourable Minister for Works mentioned about the open ranking system, something similar to that?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, that is a very important question because I also been receiving this same issue from the public on some of the areas that even have been serviced by the bus providers, but due to some issues, maybe road conditions, the service are affected. They have been applying for LM applications, I think I have said earlier that we are also having consultation with the Ministry of Public Works, FRA as well as LTA on the way forward for this, because it is affecting our people, especially those who are living in the rural areas. They also need our assistance.

One thing that I also want to share, I was looking at some of the information that had been given to me regarding some of the applications, the base permits that had been given by Municipal Councils, it is very interesting to note that in some cases, some Councils have issued more bases, but these bases do not end up with the process which is formalising of the permits, this is in relation to

LM with LTA. These are some of the issues, I think there needs to be a holistic review process so that the general public understands the process and also agencies are involved in processing applications for LM, LC as well as LH.

(Question No. 198/2024 withdrawn)

Reasons for Virement and Redeployment of Funds  
(Question No. 199/2024)

HON. P.D. KUMAR 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 reasons for the virement and redeployment of funding from the capital and operational expenditures allocated in the 2023-2024 financial year and its utilisation?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for asking the question.

The virement and redeployment processes have always been a feature of our budget system, not just in this budget and provides the operation flexibility...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- That is the not the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...I am coming to that for budget execution but within a proper legal framework to ensure proper management including Cabinet approval for redeployment of funds. The reason why I am saying this at the beginning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because what the honourable Member has done by giving statements outside of this House suggests that somehow this is not allowable. The virement is a process used for ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to....

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am coming to ...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Point of Order, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

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

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Misrepresentation. I would like to ask him to produce that statement where I had said that this is not allowed. I challenge him to produce that, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- My ruling is that, he is still coming around.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I said, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impression that is created on what she said.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Now you are saying that, first you said that I said this was not allowed.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Virement is a process used for the transfer of budgeted funds from one appropriation category ...

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... to another appropriate account with the agencies had appropriation. They do not want to listen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because ...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... it is important for me to explain to them.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- The stupidity is coming from you like no one's business, why not listen?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, designation persons are provided the authority, it is important for the people outside of Parliament to also understand and also the people in this Parliament. Designated persons are provided the authority to transfer budgeted funds within the agencies Head of Appropriation. For example, under Section 16 of the Financial Management Act 2004 states and I quote:

“If the Minister is satisfied that it is necessary to vire, the Minister may in writing with or without further appropriation than this Act, authorise the transfer of an unspent amount in an appropriation category with a Head of Appropriation administered by a budget sector agency (other than a parliamentary body) to another appropriation category within that head of appropriation.”

The Minister of Finance's powers under section 16 of the FMA 2004 is delegated to the Permanent Secretary under section 10 of the Financial Instructions 2010 to transfer funds within an appropriate category as well. Mr. Speaker, Sir, apart from virement redeployment, this process allows the honourable Minister for Finance, with the approval of Cabinet, to authorise redeployment amounts appropriated by the appropriated Act, enforced for administration by the Ministry to the Heads of Appropriation and appropriation categories to be administered by one or more other budget sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is first time, unlike when they were in government, you never hear the Cabinet make a decision which was made public.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- This is the first time that when the redeployment goes to Cabinet, it is put out for public information by the honourable Prime Minister and they used that to say, “Aha, some kind of funny thing is going because funds are being redeployed.” There is nothing funny about redeployment, Mr. Speaker. I will give you examples of what happened during the FijiFirst reign.

(Chorus of interjections)



MR. SPEAKER.- Order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, for the 2023-2024 Budget, the first redeployment of funds amounted to \$105.2 million was to meet the additional expenditure demands for the following agencies and ministries. We said very clearly, we did not come with a revised budget. We looked at the expenditure, we redeployed funds (\$105.2 million) to meet the new priorities of the new Government.

The deployment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, included the:

- (1) Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF);
- (2) Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration;
- (3) Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs; and
- (4) Water Authority of Fiji.

These were entities where the funds went to. Fiji Roads Authority, a sum of \$36.1 million is to cater for the following commitments, \$21.5 million for additional restoration works on the road network which was not there when we came in. FRA's budget, whole year's budget was spent in six months and we had to come and redeploy funds from other ministries to capital expenditure to fix roads. Sir, \$14.6 million from that deployment for the completion of capital projects designated for that year because they had not budgeted properly. That is why we redeployed.

(Honourable Opposition Member interjects)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Because your question says why from capital to others.

The second redeployment, excise of \$7.9 million was undertaken to meet the funding shortfall as we said quite clearly, and \$1.8 million for the Ministry of Education was to cater for the cost of salaries and allowances for teachers in ECE. Similarly, the Fiji Police Force had encountered a funding shortfall of \$6.1 million to meet the salary cost for our police officers and payment of allowances.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that the redeployment exercise that was undertaken in the 2023-2024 Budget, the overall expenditure is well within the total appropriation approved by Parliament. The actual expenditure stands at \$4.1 billion, which is below the budgeted expenditure of \$4.3 billion, so there is no overspending as a whole of Government as was the impression created. In fact, the overall net deficit is around 3.3 percent for the last financial year; lower than 4.8 percent as budgeted and this is underpinned by strong tax collections, revenue collections and Government meeting the revenue forecast for the first time.

I would like to reiterate the fact that this is a Government which has brought in two budgets, which has stabilised the finances where Government is funding, Government is being funded well, where we have reduced the debt to GDP ratio from 90 percent in 2022 to 78 percent. This is what you call "prudent financial management", not the kind of management that we had seen.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me complete this for our information because I do not like to go back, but the stupidity of the question requires me to do that. You look at 2018, \$10.6 million was redeployed from Head 50 from ongoing rehabilitation and constructions of schools damaged by *TC Winston*; in 2018, 2019, 2021 and I can give you all the examples of redeployment or virement of fund from capital total expenditure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the statement the honourable Member put out, was all designed to create this impression that somehow, the Ministry of Education is not managing its budget properly, or somehow the Fiji Police is not managing its budget properly. They are always in a budget, every Government has that, and that is why those provisions are there in the Financial Management Act. That is why there is redeployment and virement. Because, you can have a disaster, for example, you can have an unplanned expenditure, and you can have capital expenditure not being undertaken because of weather conditions. Therefore, Governments look at where they can reallocate funds within a particular year. They know that! But still, they are asking about why we are redeploying funds? Why we have virement of funds?

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister needs to be reminded that this virement and redeployment is not new. But the question is, that \$105.2 million was redeployed in July and 31<sup>st</sup> July is the end of the financial year. You redeployed money out of the 2023-2024 Budget, the \$7.9 million, and that decision was taken in August. That is what we are questioning.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Stop the question.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- I am questioning you!

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- It is a supplementary question.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Because you talk about prudent management, you talk about transparency and accountability. This is the last financial year's allocation but authorised in August, and that is the question.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- That is perfectly fine.

MR. SPEAKER.- You have given a very thorough reply to the question that was raised. Now they are talking about the timing, coming in August, whether it is one in minute before time. You have the mandate to do that. So, let us move on.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Not fair! Absolutely not fair!

MOU Between Ministry of Agriculture & UN University  
(Question No. 200/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways update Parliament on the proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Ministry and the United Nations University for Environment and Security?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise in response to the question raised by the honourable Member regarding the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Ministry and the United Nations University for Environment and Security. I begin by expressing my gratitude to the Cabinet for the decision to endorse the partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways and the United Nations University for Environment and Human Security that has led to the formalising of the MOU between this esteemed organisation and the Ministry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the United Nations University for Environment and Human Security plays a critical role in researching risk and adaptation related to the environmental hazards and global change. The United Nations University for Environment and Human Security is the hosting organisation of the Munich Climate Insurance Initiative and is a leading think tank on climate change and insurance, focusing on promoting policies and developing solutions to reduce these risks for vulnerable communities and the agriculture sector considering the interaction between environmental and societal factors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Pacific Insurance and Climate Adaptation Programme (PICAP) was established to enhance the financial preparedness and resilience of Pacific households, communities, small businesses, organisations and Governments against the economic impacts of climate change induced disasters.

The programme initiated in 2021, has successfully introduced the first climate risk micro-insurance products in the Pacific region covering countries such as Fiji, Vanuatu and Tonga, and is jointly implemented by the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security through the Munich Climate Insurance Initiative (MCII).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in Fiji's context, the Pacific Insurance and Climate Adaptation Programme has facilitated insurance payouts to farmers in the Western and Northern Divisions following heavy rainfall in 2023 and 2024.

The upcoming project involving the Fiji Agriculture and Rural Statistics Unit in the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways and UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security, aims to conduct the survey to evaluate the impact of these parametric insurance payouts on the economic decisions of beneficiaries, specifically farmers in Fiji. The survey will involve both recipients of the payouts and a control group to provide comparative analysis.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the significance of this project lies in its multifaceted benefits to both parties involved, that is the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways and UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security. Socially, the project will provide critical insights into how climate risk micro-insurance can enhance the resilience of vulnerable populations, including women, farmers and individuals with disabilities who are disproportionately affected by climate induced disasters.

Economically, the findings will inform policy decisions that could lead to more effective risk management strategies in the agriculture sector and improve the livelihoods of those farmers insured. Financially, this project aligns with broader efforts to promote economic resilience at the community level, by integrating market-based insurance solutions into National Disaster Risk Management Frameworks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the UN University selected the Fiji Agriculture Statistics Unit within the Ministry as the ideal partner to carry out this survey, due to its proven record of extensive experience in conducting fieldwork across Fiji and managing large-scale data collection on the agriculture sector critically impacted by climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the long-term implications of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) are significant to both the Ministry and the UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security.

For the Ministry, successful implementation and analysis of the PICAP payout survey could lead to a more resilient agricultural sector, better equipped to withstand and recover from climate

induced shocks. The insights gained could drive the adoption of similar insurance schemes across other sectors, fostering a culture of proactive risk management and financial preparedness in Fiji.

Furthermore, the Ministry on the other hand will benefit from the technical expertise and global perspectives that UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security brings, enabling more effective implementation and evaluation of the insurance scheme and climate resilient work for the agriculture sector.

For the UN University, this collaboration aligns to develop and implement innovative climate adaptation strategies. The data gained from this project will contribute to UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security's global research portfolio in influencing policy and practice in other vulnerable regions worldwide. This project is a critical step in expanding the evidence base for the effectiveness of parametric insurance in Fiji and in the Pacific as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the Ministry appreciates that this collaboration and achievements of this project may open doors and promote a sustainable partnership for future research and statistical partnership between the United Nations University and the Ministry dedicated to enhancing resilience against climate change in the agriculture sector. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Assistance to Farmers Due to Drought and Low Cane Production  
(Question No. 201/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry inform Parliament on how the FSC intends to assist farmers in light of the recent drought and subsequent low production of cane?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I actually sympathize with all the farmers in this country, I myself, am a cane farmer and I will tell you, I just had a *viber* message this morning that I am one of the first importer or harvester in this country, some 10 years ago. The cane production has dropped from 15 percent to 20 percent on every farm this year. The reason being, is not that the farmers have not done their part, it is because of the climate change and the rain patterns which not helping us in this country.

So, the question is very relevant honourable Member. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respond to honourable Pillay regarding the measures been taken to assist the farmers in consideration of the recent drought, resulting in low production of cane. As we are all aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sugar is not just an economic pillar but a lifeline for many of our rural communities and the challenges posed by the drought has been formidable but I assure you Mr. Speaker, Sir, that the Ministry of Sugar Industry together with the Fiji Sugar Cooperation (FSC) and the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji (SRIF) are committed to providing comprehensive support to our farmers during the difficult times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the last financial year 2023-2024, we took proactive sustainable programmes by assisting 42 farmers with essential irrigation equipment, including water pumps and pipes. This is also critical in enabling farmers to irrigate their field and mitigate the impact of drought.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's cane production was always dependent on rainfed production. Whereas throughout the world, where patterns have changed, the relevant government have also

assisted the farmers to do irrigation and that is what we will be moving into in the coming months and years.

Recognising the ongoing nature of these challenges, provisions have been made in the 2024-2025 Budget to expand this assistance. We are now supporting an additional 300 farmers through the newly established Irrigation Support Programme and the Small Grant Programme. This expansion underscores our unwavering commitment to sustaining and revitalising the sugar industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, SRIF has been at the forefront of our efforts to combat the effects of drought. Over the past few months, SRIF have intensified research in rainwater, harvesting and surplus water retention. In Drasa Lautoka, SRIF successfully harvested water for their major drainage systems, trapping rain run-off from the surrounding watersheds. This harvested water is now being utilised to irrigate the research trial areas, demonstrating the effectiveness of small scale irrigation setups. The initiatives is part of a broader strategy by the Sugar Research Institute to enhance water resource management, ensuring that our farming practices remain resilient, even in the face of water scarcity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, last week SRIF mobilised heavy treatments to the banks of the Ba River to test the feasibility of deploying large irrigation systems which will be available on loan to farmers. The system being tested, featured high-capacity centrifugal pumps capable of delivering approximately 780 litres of water per minute to the sprinkler configuration design to cover significant areas. This development is a testament to our commitment to provide practical and scalable solutions to our farmers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our research efforts excel beyond immediate solutions, SRIF has been diligently working on the development and promotion of drought resistant sugarcane varieties as well. These varieties are more resilient to water stress and have potential to maintain better yields under the challenging conditions. This long term research is crucial in ensuring that our farmers are equipped with better tools to withstand future climate challenges.

In addition to the research, SRIF together with FSC, had intensified their outreach and extension services, educating farmers on the best practices for managing crops during drought conditions. Workshops, field days and on-farm demonstrations are being conducted to ensure that our farmers have access to the latest information and techniques. Sir, SRIF is advising farmers on soil health management with the retention, mulching, and potential use of bio-fertilizers to sustain growth during dry periods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry along with SRIF and FSC is leaving no stones unturned in our efforts to assist farmers during this challenging period. The measures we are implementing are not just an immediate response but are part of a broader long term strategy to build a more resilient and sustainable sugar industry. We will remain committed to supporting our farmers, shaping their livelihoods, ensuring the continued prosperity of the sugar industry for the benefit of all.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, supplementary question.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, farmers have lost triple of their income due to drought and also they have commitments and loans with the banks and the Sugar Cane Growers Fund. For 25 seasons, the production, they will need more money to bring back the production. Also, I have seen around the ratoons are drying up, for the truck owners and truck drivers if there is less cane than less income. Cane cutters, less income as there is less cane to be harvested. Cooperatives also face less income because expenses have increased because of the fuel cost et cetera.

My question is to the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry, will

the farmers be compensated to some level with some cash grants?

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you. Honourable Minister before you reply to that question. Who decides if the country is going through a drought? Why I am asking this, because during our time in Government, the Government has to decide, that is why we get this funds that is available...

HON. V. PILLAY.- Hear, hear! Nothing has been done so far!

MR. SPEAKER.- ...to help the farmers, even giving loans. But here, who decides? Is it the farmer or Meteorological Services or the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

On the drought issue, of course, the Meteorological Office declares the drought and that is when the emergency strikes in but during the reply to the honourable Member ....

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, the question that he is raising is part of the question that I am raising to you. If that decision lies with the Meteorological Service, the Government should be declaring that there is a drought.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I leave it to the honourable Minister for NDMO, once he declares then obviously everything else kicks in. But replying to the honourable Pillay, he should remember that in the midst of 1999, there was a major drought in this country. At that time when the SVT Government was there, they actually gave out massive grant to the farmers for replanting.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- I am coming back to that. The same Prime Minister is here today....

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen, you are not a cane farmer.

We are very mindful, I declare my interest because I am a cane farmer. The honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics is also a cane farmer.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Coming back to that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, yes, we are monitoring it, we are very mindful and once we get some indication from FSC on what the farmers require, we will definitely act on it.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is no assessment done so far. It is not only the sugarcane farmers who are affected, it is also the crop and livestock farmers those who are under the Ministry of Agriculture and those who have been assisted. So, I urge the Government if an assessment can be done because if there is no assistance given to the farmers, we will continue to see a decline in the production in the coming years.

MR. SPEAKER.- He answers himself.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Yes, that is a statement.

MR. SPEAKER.- The only thing now is you get that policy done. Yes, honourable Rinesh, you still on the drought too?

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Yes, Sir.

I would like to start off by saying, if one is smart enough, they will never say a question is stupid. The question to the honourable Minister for Sugar, he has spoken about the low production of cane and it has been seen a lot on social media that complaints are being raised about the long waiting hours at the FSC Mill to offload the cane.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- The question is coming. What is your Ministry doing in order to combat this issue of long hours drivers take waiting?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is a new question and I can come back to you.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- When will you come back?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- In the next session.

Proposed Bus Fare Increase by FCCC  
(Question No. 202/2024)

HON. J.R. VOCEA 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 proposed increase in students bus fares by the Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission?

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. The Fijian Competition and Consumer Commission (FCCC) undertook a review of the existing bus fares. The review has been completed and FCCC has adopted a new fare calculation methodology in consultation with the Fiji Bus Operators Association.

Currently, Mr. Speaker Sir, the regulated student fare is set at 50 percent of the adult fare at every stage. So, in other words, they were the bus companies which were kind of subsidizing the other 50 percent. This long-standing formula is based on the principle that adult fares cross-subsidise the lower student fares and in the past the Land Transport Authority allowed a relatively higher number of students to be accommodated in a school bus compared to the adult passenger limit. However, this policy has been changed and revised.

Under the new methodology, the FCCC recommended that student fares be increased to approximately 100 percent of the adult fares. This proposed doubling of student fares, Mr. Speaker Sir, will have a significant financial impact on the Government because the Government will continue to subsidise them. So as part of the Transport Assistance Programme, the Government currently fully subsidizes the transportation costs for students from families with household income of less than \$16,000 per annum.

And apart from bus services, the scheme also covers for Rural Service License (RSL) operators and boat services in the rural and maritime schools. In the 2024-2025 Budget, the Government has allocated a total of \$37 million to cater for the transport assistance. There are

currently about 90,000 students benefiting from this programme.

With the doubling of student fares, the additional cost exposure for subsidized students with blue cards is projected to be around \$18 million. Apart from this, there are currently non-subsidized students with yellow cards paying the full fare of 50 percent of adult fares. With the bus fares doubled, the additional cost to these students will be around \$5 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet has approved that no additional cost will be borne by any student or their families. Government will therefore subsidise the additional increase in the fares. The total additional estimated cost for transportation subsidy for students with blue cards and yellow cards is around \$23 million for 2023-2024 budget. The current funding provision in the budget will accommodate the increased cost for approximately six to seven months of the new financial year and Cabinet has approved that additional funding will have to be sourced through a budget redeployment later during the year.

Mr. Speaker Sir, it is also important to note that the RSL providers transporting students have also been asking for fare increases which have remained stagnant for a number of years like the bus fares. It was discussed during the Budget deliberations that the Ministry of Education will work with the FCCC on the fare determination for RSL operators. The cost implications can only be ascertained after the review. However, for the transportation subsidy for students with blue cards and yellow cards, this will continue until further notice.

Combatting Surge in Drug Trafficking and Usage  
(Question No. 203/2024)

HON. S. KUMAR asked the Government, upon notice.

Given the 94 percent increase in illicit drug cases recorded in January 2024, can the honourable Minister of Home Affairs and Immigration state what specific measures is the Ministry implementing to combat the surge drug trafficking and usage but clearly concerning methamphetamine and marijuana?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. The issue of drugs continues to take the centre stage of our discussions on how it has affected our Fijian community, especially our children. Recently there has been a spike of drug cases being reported and arrests that have been made. If I might allude first to the percentage that is alluded to in the question the 94 percent between the period from January 2023 to January of this year, that figure has come about because the police have been able to arrest more people. That has been the reason for the numbers now.

I had commented earlier in an interview that to me, that is a good thing because now we are catching a lot more people. It means that the police, despite in the past, are much more freer to do these arrests and do their work freely according to the law. As a consequence, they have been able to arrest more people perhaps in the course of their raids, they have been able to capture more drugs as we have heard of the cases in Legalega and also in Meingunyah in Nadi.

However, we continue as a government to raise awareness on this issue and for the Ministry, we have two particular, at least all of the agencies that are under my portfolio, Immigration, Police and also the the Anti-Narcotics Bureau have been going out extensively to the public conducting awareness on drugs, not only by themselves, but also with the use of the community, that is, both the *vanua*, *lotu* and civil society in every way possible. I think there is a lot of debate out there now on



the social media creating awareness. This is the best thing we can do because at the end of the day, Mr. Speaker.

I believe and if I might just steal one of the statements made earlier on by the honourable Premila Kumar with regards to her statement on AMR, raised earlier by the honourable Minister for Health, the whole campaign is about to help people how to make choices. That is the only thing really that we have in our control, so the police can go and raid, people can go into court and that is what is happening. Any case that comes up, we raid the houses like the case in Lautoka but the thing that we would like to achieve more and that is what we are doing right now in our public campaign is involve our agencies by telling our people, say no to drugs, do not do it, do not engage in it, do not sell it. If you know what is happening, then you must report it to the police or the appropriate agency. That is the only way to control it.

Also at the same time, we are strengthening all of the units within the Police including that within Immigration and the Ministry to try and stop these drugs from arriving here. A lot of that is to do our work with our partners; Australia, New Zealand, Americans and the French to be able to halt drugs or gather information as they are coming to our shores because once they land here, it is very hard for us to stop it and the only way to stop it for us, is to motivate and inform our people to stop indulging in drugs. You must make the informed choice, do not use drugs and if you know of anyone who is peddling drugs, you come out and tell the police, you come out and tell the authorities, that really is the only thing we can do. We are a small state.

I would like to thank the police in the efforts that they are making. They come under a lot of criticism obviously, they are being mentioned in this House many times before, but since lately, they have been able to up the ante. With the police reset, we should be able to do more and also with now coming up of the Narcotics Bureau; the police and Narcotic Bureau are now working together, sharing information with our partners and that way, we are able to work better, but we are always talking about our children and the youth consuming drugs.

Our effort, the parents, I will say it again, parents, their children, it is not the state or the church or the *vanua*, it is first their responsibility to teach their children do not do drugs. The conversation is out there, the Government is supporting it, police is arresting people every day. This case in Lautoka the other day, the police went in to raid a house where they confiscated cocaine, a significant amount in US dollars. What did they do? They released their two Rottweilers, and the police were able to handle these dogs and these are killer dogs. This is something that they had been able to do. I would like to thank them because they are at the forefront of this work. But to help them, our community must tell the members of its community, parents must tell children, "Do not do drugs." Police can only do so much; the rest is up to us.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do agree with the honourable Minister that security border control is a national priority. I would like to just highlight a case to the honourable Minister that 14.4 kilogrammes of methamphetamine had transited through Fiji from a 24-year old lady from Vancouver, Fiji to Brisbane, and those gaps of exploitation is corroding the DNA of our children, our society and our country as a whole. After this, honourable Minister, what has changed about the security checks at our airports that Fiji does not remain a point where transits of such drugs are caught in the future?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have addressed this matter over a press conference and some statements before. I think the procedure under international aviation, when you connect to a destination, your baggage goes straight from the aircraft that you came from to the next aircraft. I think that is kind of acceptable. It is only when they come inshore that they go through the checks before they land on the carousels, and that is how we check them.

But I think, it also suggests that maybe those in the aviation industry in the world, for those of us in Fiji who decide the policy on this matter, it is not only up to us, it is a global thing on how to try and detect things as they are going from one plane to another. I think under the current laws, it is from your destination of departure, your next check is your destination of arrival, and that is how it got captured. That is definitely something to consider, and hopefully, in the future, those who decide on the international policies to do with transiting luggage, would be able to make some good policy decisions to prevent drugs.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Minister, have we engaged with our development partners, because this is a situation that requires assistance, especially with our borders being porous and the vast open seas that we have? Have we engaged with our development partners to see if we can get assistance to cover the sea in a better fashion than we do - to seek assistance for that rather than just relying on our own Navy, which we know may not be able to cover the whole sea that we have, maybe more ships or more coastal guards from that perspective?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the short answer is, yes. There is an elaborate partnership programme, and I had alluded to that earlier, with our traditional partners in this regard. In the Navy, it has always been an ongoing thing. One of the latest things is under the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). We now have the Pacific Regional Vessel Boarding and Searching Training facility in Togalevu. So, with the UN and Fiji we teach the regional people on how Australians and Americans come on board under IML and teach our guys how to board a ship and how to detect drugs.

Also, at the same time, under the Transnational Crime Unit (TCU) and that involves all of our boarder agencies - we work with the Australians and New Zealanders, particularly with Australia under the Ministry of Home Affairs we shared a lot of information.

In terms of the sea, we are limited in our capacity to be able to physically dominate the space. The short answer there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is just completely impossible.

One thing we can have is to coordinate the eyes and the ears that look at the intelligence and to track things as they are coming, and the Navy is very, very good and I had alluded to that earlier. They can track ships and boats out there, and we work with all of our other agencies and if we suspect that there is a ship carrying drugs destined for Fiji, we have our partners also, to help us intercept these boats as they come. But some actually come through, which is unfortunate as they give us trouble.

Sir, because of our very nature it is difficult to dominate every space, but we do our best with our partners to gather intelligence and we have laws that allows us to board and arrest people together under INTEPOL, with Australia, New Zealand and the friends who are helping us mostly in the areas of looking after our waters. We hear funny stories of those that are dealing drugs have a funny way of changing their tactics. They come underwater, they fly over and they drop beacons in the water. Our communities in the Lau Group and Vanua Levu tell us all these stories about things that float out there in the ocean and they do not know where they come from.

So, we cannot dominate it. We need our friends, and we are very grateful to them for helping and enabling us monitor and trying to keep our country and people safe.

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my supplementary question is, these drugs are not intended for Fiji. It is intended for other markets like Australia and New Zealand and we are just a transition point. We do the drug busting and while we do that, you know the shipment that should have gone to Australia and New Zealand are not going out and given our border control measures

that are here, most of these shipments are trapped here and that is how it spills over into Fiji. Also, when it comes to police custody, its tampered and goes out to the streets. It has become Australia and New Zealand's drug strategy to dump it here, rather than having the bust at their end. What can be done so that this shipment goes to the intended destination and they deal with this problem? We do not have to deal with these issues and also the impacts to our citizens.

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. It is a good question, but a perception at this point really, because we do not invite drugs to come here. It is an assessment that we make, so people assume that for some strange reason, Australia and New Zealand will want to allow the drugs to land here so that they do not land there. I do not know how credible that theory is.

But one thing we do ask them though, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in our interactions, in terms of the surveillance plans that we do, in terms of the information and intelligence sharing that we do with our partners, that is to try and track these drugs and in the sophisticated ways that they trying to bring it to the South Pacific including Fiji and Australia, we would like them to have a greater influence in the deeper battles in the areas that we do not control.

At the moment we do not have the capacity to do that, they share this information with us. In the Navy, if you go there, you will see how they track ships and satellites, but that information is available out there, you can get on the internet and you can tell which boat is where.

But these are the countries that have the ability to look beyond, right into the US continent or even into Asia. So, we are asking them, when you discover these vessels you should try and interdict as it is in the water. Do not give us the information when it is about to land on our shore. But it is all these drug paddlers, all these people who bring these drugs, it is more convenient for them to, and this is common sense, bring it here to a point where you can consolidate, you have a short distance to take, you work out your plan and then you take it across.

Grid cannot see it unless we get the information. So, that is where the partnership comes in, and I do not think there is a deliberate intension Mr. Speaker, Sir, from our partners to allow these drugs to land here. I think we have *vuvale* for that matter, so I do not think they are doing that to us. Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Before we move on, the only alarm that this whole scenario has provided for us, as a country, is we should be ready. They have released the fierce dogs to the police, very soon it will be guns against the police, against the people. It would not be in the too distance future, with all these hard drugs are here, all the way right to my village in Somosomo. We have all these meths and everything, so it is just a matter of time, and I think we should all be working together ensuring that instead of waiting for Australia and New Zealand to react, it is us.

What will happen to our police? Our law enforcement? Even down to the Navy? When you go around the islands you see how open and vulnerable they are, but now we are dealing with sophisticated instruments and everything because every now and again a boat comes, something just pops out of the water and there you have it.

If they cannot send it to their country or destination, then for sure they will be selling it here, and it is quick money! Given the unemployment and the poverty level that we are fighting strongly against, vulnerable people are quickly influenced and enticed in the usage of this. So, that is the only answer, only reply that I would like to continue to provide is, let us be ready. If there is a need for weapons, then we should have it! To help our people combat this.

Update on Phase 2 of the National Housing Policy Review  
(Question No. 204/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the Phase 2 of the National Housing Policy Review?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to the question raised by the honourable Member and I thank him for the question.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government's commitment is to transform the housing sector is in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, stands to create sustainable, safe, inclusive and resilience citizen communities. This commitment reflects Government's priority to improve Fijian's quality of life, enhancing access to essential services, infrastructure and by developing a housing sector that is resilient to climate change impacts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, urbanisation is rising both globally within our country. By 2050, it is projected that 70 percent of the global population will reside in urban areas, while locally an additional 30 percent of the population is expected to live in urban areas by 2030. This rapid urban growth necessitates adoption of sustainable practises that integrate land development, promote the legislative reforms in enhancing urban planning. Hence, the need to review 2011, thus, the Housing Policy to cater for the increasing demand in complexities of housing issues.

On 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2019, Cabinet approved the appointment of the Housing Sector Policy Advisor funded the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to support the Ministry of Housing in this critical initiative. Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2024, the Ministry conducted a one day stakeholders consultation workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss key housing sector policy changes, issues and gaps with key stakeholders and collectively identify strategic opportunities and recommend areas of priority or priority policy focus.

Stakeholders present, which included 60 senior representatives from a broad cross-section of the housing sector, participated in thematic group discussions. These sessions were created to capitalise on the surrounding wealth of knowledge that converged together, met with the diverse perspectives and priorities shared by participants across the housing sector in Fiji.

Some of the key things emerging from the workshop included:

- (1) Improve land use and infrastructure planning;
- (2) Greater housing supply;
- (3) Improved regulatory frameworks;
- (4) Cost quality and access to building materials;
- (5) Access to finance and insurance;
- (6) Housing sector formation coordination;
- (7) Advancement of skills and training; and
- (8) Strengthening of climate change resilience.

Building upon an extensive policy review and development process, the Ministry designed a draft of the revised National Housing Policy. The revised Housing Policy integrated sites generated from thorough background research and stable consultations ensuring strong alignment with Fiji's Strategic Framework such as the three-year National Development Plan (NDP) 2025-2027, the 5-year NDP 2025-2029 that will be launched soon with the vision outlined for Fiji by 2050 for a

prosperous, inclusive and sustainable nation. Aligned with NDP's core pillars of economic resilience, people empowerment and good governance, the revised National Housing Policy aims to foster a robust housing sector that supports economic stability, empowers communities and operates under effective governance principles.

The revised National Housing Policy further aims to be a strategic document, delineating a clear vision, outcomes, principles, goals and strategies. Includes an implementation of an action plan to guide the evolution of Fiji's housing sector now and into the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 2024, the Ministry received approval to initiate phase two of the National Housing Policy, reviewed through a broad public consultation process. Therefore, this is an honour and a privilege to announce that we are now officially opening the online submission during the period of phase two of the National Housing Policy review.

The submission period will remain open until the end of September and there is a Quick Response (QR) link to the questionnaires on the Revised National Housing Policy and I would like to encourage all honourable Members to scan the QR code available on the Ministry of Housing social media platforms, such as *Facebook* and *Instagram* to share your views and feedback to ultimately help us dive into the most effective strategies for implementation.

To all my fellow Fijians watching online, the Revised Policy document and questionnaires are available on the Ministry of Housing Facebook and Instagram social media platform. I want you take time to review the document and submit your comments through the online platforms. All your feedbacks are very important, very critical and also crucial in shaping the future of our housing sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Housing phase two consultation includes a schedule, shares the face-to-face public consultations throughout the country, offering valuable opportunity for citizens to share their views of housing sector. The consultation will be as follows:

- (1) 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2024: Suva Civic Centre and Nausori Parish Hall;
- (2) 9<sup>th</sup> September, 20024: Nasinu Multipurpose Court;
- (3) 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2024: Sigatoka Sai Prema Hall;
- (4) 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2024: Lautoka Parish Hall;
- (5) 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2024: Labasa Civic Centre; and
- (6) 24<sup>th</sup> September, 2024: Savusavu Salvation Army Hall

The Ministry of Housing will meticulously analyse all public submissions and comments providing a comprehensive summary of consultation's outcome to Cabinet alongside a final draft of the National Housing Policy for consideration and endorsement. The Ministry aims to conclude public consultations and submit the final draft of the Revised Housing Policy to Cabinet by October, 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, throughout September, the Ministry of Housing will be intensively promoting consultations, venues via multimedia channels and communication campaigns. We need everyone's engagement to drive transformative change in Fiji's housing sector and to enhance effectiveness of our policies. I strongly encourage all honourable Members and the public to take part in these discussions, the feedback is essential for shaping effective housing policies and driving positive change in our housing sector. Your involvement is critical to addressing our housing needs and shaping benefits of all, leaving no one behind. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

**GOVERNMENT GUARANTEE – FIJI SUGAR CORPORATION LIMITED**

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the purpose of Section 145(1) of the Constitution and pursuant to Standing Order 131, I move:

That Parliament approves:

- (a) the increase in Government guarantee limit for the Fiji Sugar Corporation Limited (FSC) borrowings of \$95 million for the period 1st August, 2022 to 31st May, 2028 (Guarantee Period), by \$105 million to \$200 million; and
- (b) that the FSC be exempted from paying the guarantee fee.

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not need to go into the background of FSC. It is a sugar milling company...

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Tell us.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ...by an Act of Parliament in 1972 and the rest is history. Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, had been guaranteeing FSC's domestic and offshore borrowings in the past. The most recent domestic guarantee cover was approved by Parliament on 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 2024, whereby Parliament approved an additional Government guarantee to FSC of \$95 million for the guarantee period 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2028.

As of to-date, FSC has fully exhausted the approved Government guarantee limit. On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government also guaranteed FSC's offshore borrowings which was approved on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2017 whereby Parliament approved the extension of the Government guarantee period for the Exim Bank and Bank of India loan of US\$50.4 million from 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2028. Both the Parliamentary approvals exempted FSC from paying the guarantee fee. For this guaranteed financing, the FSC has started with its repayment from August 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, FSC as we all know has been operating at less than 50 percent of the 3.5 million tonnes of crop that the Ministry of Sugar has directed for inclusion in the Strategic Plan. Despite a concerted effort, the honourable Minister for Sugar has a number of times in this Parliament explained some of the difficulties within the FSC, the company's operation and how it has been affected, factors attributed to structural and operational issues ranging from spate of natural disasters, volatility in the world sugar price, milling inefficiencies, resulting also from the failed mill upgrade in the past, deteriorating cane quality, et cetera that has affected not only production, but the performance of the FSC.

Cane production for the last 14 years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the trend from 2010 to 2023, it has not picked up. It has fluctuated within a particular range of 1.6, 1.7 to 1.3. As of May 2023, FSC's total operating cost is \$60.6 million of which approximately 44 percent (\$26.7 million) is disbursed as salaries and wages. There was an increase of about 8 percent when compared to \$56 million as total expanding cost in the 2022 Financial Year, an increase mainly attributed to an increase in minimum wage rate, rise in the fuel price, post COVID-19 recovery and impact of significant loss of skilled employees.

The FSC anticipates right-sizing the business and creating an environment for a skilled and competent workforce that will take the business forward. Sir, FSC also has continuously incurred net losses for the past 10 years. If you look at figures from 2014 from \$6.9 million loss to \$31.7 million in 2015, \$53 million in 2016, \$45 million in 2017, \$80 million in 2019, \$44 million in 2022 and \$23 million in 2023. As of 31<sup>st</sup> May, FSC incurred a net loss of \$23 million compared to \$44.3 million net loss for the 2022 Financial Year. The total liabilities for FSC has also been increasing. Its liabilities has exceeded its total asset base for the last 10 years, technically meaning it has been insolvent during this period and again, the figures are there.

For the 2024 Financial Year which is 2023 cane season, FSC anticipates better results with cane production of 1.56 million tonnes and sugar make up of about 139,628 tonnes. Hence \$238.8 million in total revenue is expected from sugar proceeds in molasses for the financial year; the highest in the last 14 years. The earnings before interest tax depreciation and amortisation for the 2024 Financial Year is likely to be positive \$25 million.

The world sugar price as we all know has moved into FSC's favour, currently hovering around US\$0.20 cents per pound compared to below US\$0.40 cents per pound some two years back at the time of pricing; an increase of 43 percent. The price had increased to over US\$0.25 cents per pound last year and is projected to stay close to US\$0.20 cents per pound. The trend at the world market, looking at sugar production and the alternatives, they are being produced by many countries could see the price go further except for natural disaster, it is expected at the key performance parameters for the next five years as indicated will be achieved.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outstanding liabilities for outstanding borrowings guaranteed by Government stood at \$293 million, of which, \$216.7 million is covered by domestic Government guarantee and \$76.3 million, which amounts US\$32.7 million is covered by offshore Government guarantee. I do not want to get into the details of the respective outstanding balances that I have. The total Government guaranteed debt stood at \$1 billion or 7.7 percent of GDP at the end of July 2024. With FSC accessing this additional guaranteed borrowing will increase the total Government guarantee exposure to \$1.1 billion or 7.9 percent of GDP.

Given FSC's financial status, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is already exposed to \$293 million of guaranteed debts both domestic and offshore, which brings FSC's debt stock as at 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2024 to \$293 million. In the event of a default, which is normal for Government guarantee, the Government will be liable for the guaranteed borrowings of the FSC.

Obviously, the Ministry of Finance is working with FSC, and I am sure the honourable Minister will talk about the FAO study that is being done, the honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister is leading that. We want to ensure that we work with FSC and manage any fiscal risks, and if there are, that they are communicated to Government in a timely manner so that we are able to put in plans to mitigate any of those fiscal risks that may arise from the Government guarantee.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion and for that, I have a list with me. The batting order is as follows:

- (1) Honourable S.T. Koroilavesau;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Sugar Industry and Multi-Ethnic;
- (3) Honourable V. Pillay;

- (4) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (5) Honourable K. Lal; and
- (6) Honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to make a short contribution to the guarantee that has been mooted by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance in support of FSC. The FSC and the provision of guarantee to its loans is not a new thing. It has been ongoing for some time since the withdrawal of the preferential prices during the friendship that we had with the European Union, and that has continued. There are issues that need to be dealt with. The honourable Minister for Finance has indicated about trying to relook at how we deal with FSC and try and assist.

I think the honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister has to be congratulated in the direction that he had taken in asking FAO to come and assist. I think overall, that will give a different perspective from an outside organisation looking into. We have been dealing with these outstanding issues for a very long time. There are issues that have been there since we took over from Colonial Sugar Refinery (CRS). I think without identifying those issues and dealing with them, it will be an exercise in futility. I just wanted to highlight some issues that I think we need to consider, and I think Parliament can look at and see how we improve going forward. It is apparently not a good advice for us to try and support the guarantee without discussing the issues that surround FSC and the production of sugar in Fiji.

As highlighted by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and honourable Minister for Finance, FSC is basically insolvent and without the Government guarantees, the Corporation will be unable to continue to operate; cane production is slow, inconsistency of cane supply and decline of cane quality.

One of the issues that has been raised when I was a member of the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs was the non-existence of KPIs in all the agencies that support FSC. That needs to be looked at. There should be guidance of their performance and what they need to be able to achieve at the end of a financial year. That gives them a challenge to try and produce that at the end of the year.

We know that there is a lot of territorial hold by the sugar stakeholders. There is a lot of differences and a lot of agencies are working in silos, they are not working together. I think that is the challenge for the honourable Minister for Sugar to try and coordinate, make sure that they work together. Most of these are agencies within the sugar industry.

We had a suggestion that I think the honourable Speaker, Sir, is very well aware that we had suggested a Special Committee be appointed after FAO had done its review on the sugar industry as a whole. Again, I am pleading with you that we work with the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs to select a special committee to look at all these intricacies that can improve sugar production and the sugar industry as a whole.

The FSC needs to work closely, I certainly believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need just to grab the bull by the horns and actually direct it. The issues that I have suggested, there are a lot of landowners in Fiji that can be involved in the production of cane. They have the land. I urge the Government to put a system that can allow these landowners, especially in the Western and Northern Divisions.

I had visited these areas, these land masses are available. It just needs Government assistance for the landowners and in actual fact, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the small farmers can become work they have



labourers and work this big cane estate because they have the experience, the landowners have the land and all they need to do is work together to lift the volume of cane that can be produced. Without talking about ethanol, which is a secondary product of sugar, there is an urgent need just to lift the amount of cane that is produced and supplied to the mills. Without that, it is very difficult to go through the system and make sure that FSC is commercially viable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion before the House is basically asking us to provide the guarantee and increase it to \$200 million. The Government is arguing that the funds are necessary to keep FSC afloat. There is no doubt, if we do not support the motion before the House, then it is difficult for FSC to continue. It is a catch-22 scenario here - we do not do it, we are dead; we need to go ahead and do it, to keep FSC going.

The situation is further compounded by the steady decline in the number of sugarcane farmers. Farmers have consistently dropped with the production year after year. Even if FSC were to make some operational improvements now, the question remains, where will the sugarcane come from to sustain its operations? We need to increase cane production. Additionally, the high cost associated with farming, milling, the timely renewal of land leases and persistent labour shortages in cane carting only adds to the challenges.

We seriously need to look at bringing in labour from other countries like Bangladesh to keep this industry afloat. Without a comprehensive strategy, that includes performance benchmark, modernisation efforts, the proposed increase in borrowing guarantees could very well lead to further financial disaster.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the survival of the sugar industry is crucial for our economy, simply throwing more money at FSC is not a solution. The government must demand accountability from FSC's management, implement clear operational improvements and address the broader issues affecting the sugar industry. Whilst these measures the increased borrowing guarantee risk becoming yet another failed attempt to rescue the company and is increasingly seen as beyond sale, we must act with prudence and responsibility, ensuring that our decisions today do not lead to greater problems for our nation tomorrow.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before Parliament with reservations as I need the issues that has been highlighted in the House to be addressed.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this morning the honourable Prime Minister asked me with my other colleagues, "are we milking the wrong cow? Does the cow have sufficient milk?" I said, "the cow can produce milk but we have the wrong people milking it." In the What happened, Mr. Speaker, Sir, you look at the decline of the sugar industry from 2006 when your party was there, what I am saying, the blame should not be put on us. What I am saying Mr. Speaker, Sir, the blame should not be put on us.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- We are here trying to take up and improve, Mr. Speaker, Sir,

HON. K.K. LAL.- You do nothing!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Now, there is another story to this. A farmer had a very scheming cow grazing next to the roadside and what happened...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- ....this cow was grazing by the very dry grass.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Irrelevant!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- So, what the farmer did, was the cow did not eat the grass as it was so dry. The farmer put green sunglasses on the because then the cow started seeing green grass.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- That is what I am saying. You guys are putting on the wrong sunglasses at the wrong time.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- So, what I am saying, the key area is to bring the sugar industry back, to bring FSC back on track.

GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Therefore, I rise to support this crucial motion. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the foundation of this motion lies in our steadfast belief that the sugar...

HON. K.K. LAL.- Huh!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Come on, go outside!

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the foundation of this motion lies in our steadfast belief that the sugar industry is moving steadily towards a stable and sustainable future.

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

HON. C.J. SINGH.- This belief is grounded in a tangible progress we have seen within the industry in the recent months. Firstly, the Government has continued to bolster its support for the sugar industry. We have not only continued the programme initiated in 2023-2024 fiscal year, but we are also actively identifying areas where further funding is essential to ensure the industries long term viability.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Wasting money!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- This productive approach, reflects our commitment to securing the future of the sugar industry. Secondly, we have made significant strides in resolving the loans and issues surrounding land leases. By maintaining and spending the subsidies on premium payments, we are ensuring that the land remains accessible for cane farming. This initiative has been crucial in introducing the financial burdens on our farmers and securing their long term commitments to sugarcane cultivation.

Moreover, our focus on attracting young farmers into the sugar industry and promoting minimisation continues to bear fruit. The integration of water agriculture technologies and engagement of our next generation of farmers are vital to building a resilient and future proof sugar industry. This efforts are not only ensuring continuity, but also driving innovation and efficiency within the sector.

Additionally, we have reached a historical milestone with the 2023 crop, being the highest in payment recorded \$101.08 per tonne. To the fifth payment, still from next month. This achievement is a that our dedication to ensuring the farmers receive a full compensation for their hard work, whereby securing their financial well-being and loyalty to the industry.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the progress we have made is undeniable and the path to recovery is clear. However, to ensure that this positive momentum is sustained, the approval of this motion is imperative in increasing the Government guarantees for FSC borrowing and exempting FSC from guarantee fees and our measures that will provide financial stability, confidence with that to support the Corporation as commitment.

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

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Furthermore, this motion is not only a response to immediate financial needs of FSC but it is a strategic investment for the long term viability of the sugar industry. By providing FSC with the necessary backing, we are ensuring the cooperation can continue to support our farmers modernising operations and contributing to the broader economic recovery of our nation.

HON. RO F.Q TUISAWAU.- Modernisation.

HON. C.J. SINGH.- In conclusion, I urge all Members of this esteemed Parliament to support this motion and reward a financial instrument. It is a corner stone of a broader strategy to rejuvenate and sustain the sugar industry which remains a vital part of our economy and the livelihood of Fijians.

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

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Now listen! Next week, I have been tasked to negotiate with Wilmar, you know what is Wilmar?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Google it!

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Wilmar is the biggest sugar producer in Australia. Yes! Google it! They wanted to come into strategic partnership with FSC.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- And then?

HON. C.J. SINGH.- And then?

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- What happened? You have been made a laughingstock, because we are trying to do something better that you could not do!

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- You did nothing!

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Listen, you are a small kid.

(Laughter)

HON. C.J. SINGH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, so we are trying our best and here, people sitting on the other side have done nothing for the last 17 years are trying to attack us. With these words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. RO F.Q TUISAWAU.- Stop wearing green sunglasses!

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the motion before Parliament.

As of 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2024, FSC's outstanding borrowings guaranteed by Government stood at \$276.2 million of which \$200.2 million is covered by domestic Government guarantee and \$76 million is covered by offshore Government guarantee.

We all understand that in the event of a default, the Government will be liable for the guarantee borrowings of FSC. Earlier on, it was indicated that gradually the Coalition Government will reduce the guarantee amount as FSC improves its services, however, this is nowhere to be seen as it has increased.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Minister for Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, had stated that the Government will work with FSC to monitor the restructuring efforts of the Board and Management of FSC to ensure any fiscal risks are properly communicated and mitigated to the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we do support this Government guarantee, as this will assist the farmers and FSC, so that production is increased and the sugar industry remains afloat. Having said that, the expectation is that all stakeholders must work in tandem, so that the overall objectives of the organisation in this case, FSC is achieved.

However, this remains to be seen. For instance, Mr. Speaker, Sir, currently we are experiencing a prolonged period of drought in the West which we have discussed earlier on, which translates into low tonnage of cane and overall production of the farmers have dropped close to 40 percent. So, they have lost about to 50 to 60 percent of their production.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am being informed, and since I am a farmer also, no assessment has been carried out by the FSC or the Sugar Ministry. As I said earlier on, so far, on this drought and how it intends to assist or compensate the farmers who have lost considerable income as a direct result of this drought.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- So far there has not been any word by the honourable Minister for Sugar, on how he intends to mitigate this. Many farmers have contacted me, and I have personally visited the farmers and they have all echoed the same sentiments that there is a huge loss of production which means very less income for the families. Less income means that for the next season, farmers will find it harder to produce and harvest their cane as production cost will definitely increase.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Farmers will be forced to borrow or invest more to ease this. Mr. Speaker, Sir, another stakeholder in cane production and milling, are the hard working FSC workers who toil day in and day out to keep the mills running and also ensuring that harvested cane reach the mill on time. Recently, during the last Parliament session, the honourable Minister for Sugar belittled the FSC staff saying that instead of supporting farmers, FSC staff are consuming kava and chicken curry

at their expenses.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Shame.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. V. PILLAY.- He said and I quote, Mr. Speaker, Sir:

“They would go around in their vans, have grog, have chicken curry and then will be back, unlike in the previous years, the farm advisors and the field officers used to go out to farmers to teach and support them”

Mr. Speaker Sir, this is very sickening. Especially if this is coming from the Minister for Sugar, who is supposed to lead them and guide them. FSC staff are hardworking especially field officers, farm advisors, sector clerks, research personnel and so on. They have continued to support the farmers over the years and have even gone extra miles to assist the farmers, and here we have a Minister who is very good at putting the blame on these FSC staff for the misery and the failure of FSC or maybe to divert attention from his own failures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a common practice in the sugar cane farming community, that after successful harvesting season, farmers and FSC staff have a small gathering to celebrate the success of the harvesting season, which I find it very encouraging as this builds a better relationship between the farmers and FSC staff.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is the use of guaranteeing this loan if the persistent issue of the mill breakdown is not addressed. Year in and year out, we have the same recurring problem of mill breakdown, which delays harvesting. This, in turn creates frustration and loss of income amongst farmers, lorry drivers and cane cutters.

HON. J. USAMATE.- All year.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Also, farmers' families suffer in silence as harvesting gangs will need additional food and supplies. So far, the Ministry has not been able to mitigate the frequent mill breakdowns and if this persists during rainy days, which is about to approach, will be an extra burden to the farmers as trucks will be bogged down in the field, and they will have no choice but to pay extra costs to hire tractors and heavy machines to pull the bogged truck load of cane.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the downward trend in cane production and poor performance of the current mills and change of mind from the honourable Minister for Sugar to install a second hand mill, instead of a brand new mill as promised earlier.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. V. PILLAY.- I bet my last dollar that the same problem will occur, which is mill frequent breakdowns. Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we support this motion before Parliament on Government guarantee. I strongly urge the Parliament to appoint a joint Parliamentary Select Committee, to thoroughly look into the state of affairs of the Sugar Industry, its poor performance and how we can find ways and means to mitigate the challenges once and for all, so that there is improved mill performance and farmers are assisted and rewarded. This will bring back the

confidence in farmers and those that have withdrawn from sugar cane farming can see a glimmer of hope and return to farming. With these words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to speak very briefly on this very important motion. I thought I would just start by saying when the honourable Minister for Sugar, the started talking about the bulls or cows. I was wondering whether he was going to end up talking about the two tonne bulls that the honourable Minister for Agriculture tends to talk about now and again.

But Mr. Speaker, this motion is very significant and I think it is good that it has come to the floor again this time around, because it talks to one of the issues that has been least talked about probably, but it is one of the things that this country and this Government will solve, and it will address one of the elephants in the room that has been talked about for some time.

Mr. Speaker, I am so glad that the other side of Parliament now admits that there is a problem in sugar. I used to look at the reports that the Committees that were looking into Sugar. I used to look at their reports when I was outside Parliament, and there was never ever and admittance that there was a serious problem with sugar.

HON. K.K. LAL.- *Areh!*

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Now, never ever! I challenge them to show me one of the reports that says that there is a serious problem.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

(Laughter)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- The second thing that I would like to say, you did nothing! Let us repeat it, you did nothing! The other thing I would like to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I will leave some expressions in Tailevu, *su raice ga su kila*. When you see it, you know!

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M S. N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, sustained losses insolvency, production is down, yields are down, equipment is antiquated, obsolete, labour issues, no R&B, not really any value-add in the sugar industry. These are the fundamental problems that that side of the house did nothing about.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.-But I am so thankful, that this is now a desire to fix the issues. Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I conclude, I would just like to assure that side of Parliament and the people of Fiji listening in at this late hour.

HON. J. USAMATE.- How about those two?

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Ultimately! Mr. Speaker, Sir, it comes down to political will. Which Government has the political will to face up to the challenge and do something about it.

And to all of Fiji listening today. The People's coalition has the will and we will fix this once and for all. Not for us, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but for the future generation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. M.S. N. KAMIKAMICA.- And they failed to do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, on behalf of this side of Parliament, we wholeheartedly support the bill. We are putting in place, measures initiated by the honourable Assistant Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister. There is also a study into the FSC, that will actually ensure that we do come to this Parliament, the Government, the people of Fiji wants solutions, and there is only one Government that we can say in the last 20 years, is going to offer solutions to the people of Fiji. On that brief note, I support this motion, wholeheartedly.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to speak on an issue that is close to the heart of many Fijians. The state of our sugar industry. The honourable Minister for Sugar has recently provided reasons for the disappointing performance of this industry. He has pointed to the ongoing dry spell as a reason for the downgrade in our sugar production estimate from 1.8 million tonnes to now somewhere between 1.6 to 1.7 million tonnes. But, Mr. Speaker Sir, the FSC itself has forecasted even lower figures between 1.2 and 1.4 million tonnes. This raises a crucial question, why is there such a difference between what the Minister is saying and what the FSC is forecasting?

Mr. Speaker Sir, while I understand that weather conditions like drought are beyond our control, the fact remains the Minister cannot use this as an excuse to explain away all the problems. The sugar industry has faced many challenges over the years. Challenges that go beyond just the weather, what we need from the industry, or the Minister is a clear plan, to deal with these challenges and not just excuses when things go wrong. Mr. Speaker, Sir, for farmers every year is a fight for survival. It is deeply concerning that instead of solutions, the Minister is resulted to blaming our hard working men and women in the sugar industry, referring them as muck-a-round workers...

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- ...this is not only disrespectful but also damaging to the morale of every person who are the backbone of this industry, and also recently has been criticising the field officers, blaming them of drinking kava and having chicken curry at the farmers house. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if the Minister is serious about improving the industry, he should be lifting up the workers and not tearing them down. The success of the sugar industry depends not just on structure, but on the morale and motivation.

(Chorus of interjections)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Listen, please!

(Chorus of interjections)

“When speaking, a member must not impute improper motives to any other member.”

He explained that the honourable Minister is undermining the workers. In fact, he is just pointing out some of the practices within FSC, which contributes to inefficiency, but he has turned that out that he is campaigning against the workers. So, stop imputing improper motives in terms of what he has raised.

(Honourable Opposition Members interject)

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is the problem.

MR. SPEAKER.- Continue, honourable Ketan Lal.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when workers feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be productive and committed and serve FSC with their whole heart. Now, let us talk about the broader issue affecting the industry. The lack of effective fiscal policies which is putting more pressure on farmers who are already struggling with low yield and high cost. The Government promised to deliver a more efficient and less dependent sugar industry, but so far, we have seen very little action. Where are the measures to improve yearly outputs? What is being done to address the issues of the unsecured land leases? What about the decline in tonnage in production and labour issues faced by our farmers? These are the real challenges that need to be addressed not just the weather.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before the elections, grand promises were made to fix the sugar industry. They talked about bringing new technologies (and still they are bringing in new technologies), improved milling system and supporting our farmers, but here we are with production estimates going down and down and down and no real solutions in sight. May I ask, who is accountable for this?

HON. GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- You.

(Laughter)

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FSC has said that over 200,000 Fijians are associated and dependent on the sugar industry. The lack of fiscal planning is evident, and the fact that it was only four months ago in May, this House approved the guarantee for FSC, that is why we are calling for an investigation into the operations of FSC. This raises serious question abouts all the big talk in the industry on bringing about changes, and big plans in reviving the Penang Mill with no fiscal planning aside.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not that easy to run the sugar industry, because when we were in government, we had to go through COVID-19 and we were hit by major cyclones, but despite that, we were able to achieve 1.8 million-plus tonnes of sugarcane. However, all this while, travelling from one country to another at taxpayers' expenses, and this includes the expenses of the poor cane farmers, what is the investment on return on every trip the honourable Minister is making?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not just an economic issue, it is a matter of survival for many of our people. While I support the Government's loan guarantee from the FSC until 2028, we need to see real fiscal discipline and action from this Government. We cannot keep on bailing out FSC without seeing any improvement. The morale of our farmers and workers is just as important as running our mills. The two go hand in hand. We must remember that the sugar industry is not just about numbers and forecast, it is about our Fijian people. It is about the farmers waking up early in the morning to tend to their crops; the workers who labour in the mills and their families who depend on this industry for their livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we want to see real progress. We need to build an industry where these people feel respected, valued and motivated to give their best. The sugar industry is too important to be left in this state of uncertainty. The livelihoods of thousands of Fijians depend on it, and it is time that the honourable Minister stops blaming the weather and start taking responsibility. It has been almost two years now, and the fact the honourable Minister still has no plans, is shocking. Let us see real action and not just empty promises, honourable Minister.



Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is time to stop pointing fingers and start delivering results that will benefit our farmers, our workers and our country as a whole. Having said that, I support the motion on the floor.

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to speak on the motion moved by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance on the increase in Government guarantee to Fiji Sugar Corporation from \$105 million to \$200 million.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin, I wish to mention that Ratu Kadavulevu School will be celebrating its 100 years anniversary for one week from next Monday. The school was established in 1924 by a high chief of Bau, Ratu Penaia Kadavulevu to educate and nurture young Fijian boys to be well rounded students. It focusses on developing excellence in character, academia and sports activities. We have eight former students in this House led by the honourable Leader of the Opposition and seven other Members. On behalf of the former students of the school and Members of this august House, we wish to congratulate Ratu Kadavulevu School for its excellent achievement in the first 100 years of establishment.

HON. MEMBERS.- *Vinaka.*

HON. S. TUBUNA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I think quite a lot has been said about this subject of sugar but I just wish to raise an issue with regards to who are the people who are directly benefitting from the industry. There has been a lot of numbers that has been raised; honourable Ketan Lal raised \$200,000. However, this \$200,000 was based on the 20,000 farmers in the 1990s when it was at its a peak where we were producing over 4 million tonnes. If you calculate 20,000 multiply the average farm members of five, you might get that number.

As you are aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the number of farmers to-date has drastically reduced to around 11,000 who are quite active. On average families, we might have around 55,000 who are directly affected and include other FSC workers with around another 1,000, the numbers have drastically reduced. I think it is not fair for us to be saying that we are supporting the 200,000. I think it has been exaggerated to some extent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish to raise that the previous government has continued in its attempt to revive the industry, with an average allocation of the budget of perhaps around \$50 million to \$60 million annually. As you are aware, Mr. Speaker, Sir, production has continued to decline and most of these are just the subsidies that has been going on but has not addressed the fundamental problems now facing the industry. If you look at the industry, of the 11,000 farmers, only 80 percent of the farmers are producing 20 percent of the throughput going to the mill, with only 20 percent producing 80 percent of the throughput. So, these are some issues that we need to address and look at how we are going to facilitate 80 percent of the farmers. They had to move out if they were not efficient. So, the government programmes had to be targeted at ensuring that there were alternative livelihoods to support these farmers when moving out.

One of the things that I wish to mention, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are depriving other agricultural industries of the assistance that they are supposed to be receiving when supporting one industry, which is not economical and unsustainable. As you go around there are so much lucrative opportunities in the agriculture sector and farmers are being deprived the support that they are supposed to be receiving. You name it, coconut which is out there in the outer islands, tropical fruits, livestock there are so much opportunities for the Government to support but instead we have been supporting only one industry. When you see the contribution of agriculture to GDP, it has continued to decline. In the last 30 years it was 25 percent and now we are just reaching 80 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as was mentioned by honourable Koroilavesau when we undertook the visits in Fiji through the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs, we noticed the drastic reduction in the area that was previously cultivated for cane. There are some estimates from the 50,000 hectares that has been allocated to cane, only 24,000 has been effectively utilised. Honourable Koroilavesau and I witnessed this, when we went to Lomawai, a big flat land not being utilised. I totally support what honourable Koroilavesau has just mooted; the empowering of the landowners to be done again through a more coherent targeted initiative to ensure the landowners, with the assistance of government to be strengthened and empowered so that we can try to train them in cane production.

Previously, during the CSR days there has to be a training facility in Drasa; training people to go back into cane farming. I think that is what I wish to raise this afternoon. There are a lot of issues already mentioned, and of course, we are looking forward to the FAO study which will be produced in October that will map out the way forward for the industry. I totally agree with the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Co-operatives that if your study comes up with some recommendations that you are not comfortable with, we have no choice but to undertake drastic actions to ensure that we have an industry, without being continuously subsidised will benefit all the people of this country instead of a chosen few. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Deputy Prime and honourable Minister for Finance to speak in reply.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- I thank all the honourable Members for their contribution and support for the motion, though I was not sure whether honourable Lal was supporting or opposing with some reservations.

MR. SPEAKER.- He supported.

(Laughter)

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Honourable Koroilavesau touched a very important point. He talked about the preferential prices and how those prices came to an end. As part of the strategy of the European Union (EU) to support that phase-out or transition from guaranteed price under those conventions to more world market price, the EU provided substantial funding to all the sugar producing ex-colonies including Fiji.

In 2006, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Qarase Government, \$350 million was provided by the European Union for three aspects of the sugar industry. There were three components in that \$350 million:

- (1) upgrade of the mills (milling part);s
- (2) farm level part to support more efficient and productive farms; and
- (3) alternative livelihood because the restructuring would have allowed smaller inefficient farms to be transitioned out into more alternative crops, et cetera.

Obviously, we lost that \$350 million because of the events in 2006 and subsequently, if you look at the statistics and I do not want to go back as to what happened, but I was just listening to honourable Lal and honourable Viam Pillay, perhaps, they need to reflect on the history of what happened in last 13 or 14 years and since 2006. We were producing about 3.2 million tonnes of cane. Mr. Speaker, as you would know, since then the decline was continuous, partly because we remained inefficient, we did not benefit from that very substantial amount of money that was lost by Fiji and

we could never put that amount of money back into the industry that was provided by European Union.

The issue with respect to, I know honourable Lal raised this issue about workers. It is under this Government, 2,000 workers of FSC received a 5.3 percent pay rise. So, this question of Government not looking after the workers' interest, I think what honourable Singh was implying was that some of the inefficiencies at the mill level and the attitude of those in the industry. We used to have a great partnership right in Parliament under the Prime Ministers before 2006; under the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's time, under Prime Minister Rabuka's time and Prime Minister Qarase's time. We used to have a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Sugar and there was a lot of bi-partisan approach in terms of taking the industry forward.

MR. SPEAKER.- I was the Chair.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Sir, you were one time Chair of the Joint Parliamentary Committee and a lot of good things happened as a result of that. So, the suggestion by honourable Viam Pillay, he forgot to say that it was the FijiFirst Government which refused, and I remember moving a motion in Opposition calling for an establishment of a Joint Parliamentary Committee to address the problems in the sugar industry. I know that the honourable Prime Ministry likes that idea and that is something that the Government will consider.

What honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade and Co-operatives said, I think for the first time, we as a Government are determined to look at the industry. I think the honourable Minister for Sugar, having inherited such a difficult proposition, and I do not envy his job trying to get to the workers, trying to get to the farmers, trying to address the concerns of what is happening in the mills with aging infrastructure, aging machines and spare parts. These are real problems within the milling sector then of course, we have the same issue at the farm level; issues of labour, farm practices. These things have not changed and that is why I kept referring to that period that we lost a very critical moment in Fiji's sugar industry history which was not taken on.

I think as the honourable Assistant Minister said quite rightly, once we get the FAO Report, we are talking to the consultant, I think he has consulted a number of people, a number of us in Government, once that report comes out, I think, as a Government, we need to as honourable Koroilavesau said "take the bull by the horns". I think we are already moving towards a direction and looking at the sugar industry in a very critical manner. So, once again Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Members for their support and thank you for the opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

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

The Parliament adjourned at 6.51 p.m.