

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

MONDAY, 2ND DECEMBER, 2024

[CORRECTED COPY]

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MONDAY, 2ND DECEMBER, 2024

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

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hon. Siromi Dokonivalu Turaga, Minister for Justice

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs

Hon. Aseri Masivou Radrodoro, Minister for Education

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

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

Hon. Jese Saukuru, Minister for Youth and Sports

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

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

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

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

Hon. Lenora Salusalu Qereqeretabua, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs

Hon. Esrom Yosef Immanuel, Assistant Minister for Finance

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

Hon. Isikeli Tuiwailevu, Assistant Minister for iTaukei Affairs

Hon. Iliesa Sovui Vanawalu, Assistant Minister for Education

Hon. Ratu Rakuita Solesole Sauramaeva Vakalalabure, Assistant Minister for Defence

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

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

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

Hon. Kalaveti Vodo Ravu

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu

Hon. Jone Usamate

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya

Hon. Premila Devi Kumar

Hon. Viliame Naupoto

Hon. Ioane Naivalurua

Hon. Mosese Drecala Bulitavu

Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala

Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa

Hon. Sachida Nand
Hon. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau
Hon. Aliko Bia
Hon. Ratu Josaia Bulavakarua Niudamu
Hon. Hem Chand
Hon. Ketan Kirit Lal
Hon. Naisa Tatau Tuinaceva
Hon. Viam Pillay
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal
Hon. Shalen Kumar
Hon. Alipate Nagata Tuicolo
Hon. Virendra Lal
Hon. Rinesh Ritesh Sharma
Hon. Taito Rokomatu Matasawalevu

Absent

Hon. Graham Everett Leung, Attorney-General
Hon. Sakiasi Raisevu Ditoka, Minister for Rural and Maritime Development and Disaster Management
Hon. Charan Jeeth Singh, Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry
Hon. Vijay Nath
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand

MINUTES

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

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

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

Congratulations - Fiji Sevens Team

I think it would be remiss of me, on behalf of this august Assembly, not to congratulate our great Fiji Sevens Men's Rugby Team on their victory in Dubai earlier this morning.

(Acclamation)

To Mr. Osea Kolinisau and your team we, the honourable Members of Parliament and its staff congratulate you warmly for a win that has been long time coming. We, from the small island of Kabara in Southern Lau, are extremely proud of Osea, an outstanding son of Kabara, for his successes both, as Sevens Captain and a player, and now a winning Coach. May this be the beginning of another memorable chapter in the nation's sevens rugby history.

POINT OF ORDER

Misconduct – Hon. C.J. Singh

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, a Point of Order under Standing Order 7, whereby a Member takes an oath, but Mr. Speaker allow me, before I talk on the Point of Order, I would like to welcome you Sir to this august House and congratulate you on your appointment as the Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, this honourable Member concerned, took an oath that he would be faithful and would bear true allegiance to the Republic of Fiji. He also promised that he will defend the rights of the people and will act with integrity, and diligently carry out his responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, honourable Charan Jeath Singh has shown in this august House that he is not practising the oath he has taken. He has also shown that he is not worthy at national level and his recent actions and *Facebook* post has brought great humiliation to the nation and towards our hardworking civil servants.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Very poor!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, while our civil servants were working tirelessly without adequate sleep, honourable Charan Jeath Singh might have been in a drunk state posting rubbish on his *Facebook* page from his luxury hotel room because we were reliably informed Mr. Speaker that 99 percent of the time, he was missing from meeting venues. The highest level of hypocrisy was when honourable Charan J. Singh himself was missing from most of the meeting and blaming others on his *Facebook* page.

I urge the honourable Prime Minister to suspend him from all future overseas travel because he is not only bringing shame to himself, but to the nation at large. His integrity is in question, he is not working diligently and removing his *Facebook* posts testifies that his action was wrong and unwarranted. Therefore, we demand honourable Charan Jeath Singh to seek both verbal and written public apology in this august House to all hardworking civil servants and the nation. Mr. Speaker, we should also consider stripping him from his ministerial portfolio.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, I wish to respond to the Point of Order that is being raised by the honourable Member. Firstly, Mr. Speaker, the honourable Member being discussed is not in the House today and the honourable Member should know better so that he can have an opportunity to respond. I ask the honourable Member to withdraw his Point of Order so that honourable Charan Jeath Singh is present in the House to be able to respond and that would be fair. The honourable Member should know better.

Mr. Speaker, he has also made allegations that are offensive and that is against Standing Order 62(4). He has made allegations that have not been substantiated and without the opportunity of the honourable Member to respond in the House. I ask him to work with his Whip and Caucus to ensure that the honourable Member is in the House to be able to respond.

MR. SPEAKER.- Natural justice demands that the honourable Member who has been identified is here to respond to the allegations and accusations that have been made. He is not present in here and I will rule that this question or Point of Order is out of order, until such time as the honourable Member is here, you may then raise the issue that you have raised this morning.

PRESENTATION OF PAPERS AND CERTAIN DOCUMENTS

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I also add my words of congratulations to your appointment, although the honourable Members do not know that I moved your name before getting your approval. I had mentioned to you, and you have said that you will come back to me. But before you came back to me, I had nominated you and I thank you for accepting the nomination and accepting the position, and we congratulate you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the following Reports were tabled by the Minister responsible, in accordance with Standing Order 38(1), and referred to the relevant Standing Committee for deliberation, in accordance with Standing Order 38(2):

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

- (1) Ministry of Civil Service 2021 - 2022 Annual Reports (*Parliamentary Paper No. 122 of 2024*); and
- (2) Biosecurity Authority of Fiji 2011-2013 Annual Reports (*Parliamentary Paper No. 35 of 2020*).

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I table the following Reports, I want to, once again, congratulate you on your appointment and I am sure that with your wisdom and experience, we will all benefit in this Parliament.

Standing Committee on Public Accounts

- (1) Office of the Auditor-General 2022 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 79 of 2024*);
- (2) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji, Audit Report on Public Enterprises and Other Entities (*Parliamentary Paper No. 73 of 2024*); and
- (3) Report of the Auditor-General of the Republic of Fiji, Audit Report on Municipal Councils (*Parliamentary Paper No. 183 of 2024*).

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I present the following Reports, I also wish to congratulate you on your appointment as the Speaker of this august Parliament.

Standing Committee on Social Affairs

- (1) Tavua Town Council 2019 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 101 of 2024*); and
- (2) Labasa Town Council 2018 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 112 of 2024*).

HON. J. SAUKURU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to congratulate you in your new appointment as Speaker of this august House.

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

- (1) Fiji National Sports Commission, August 2022 – July 2023 Annual Report (*Parliamentary Paper No. 125 of 2024*)

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

- (1) Honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications;
- (2) Honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forestry;
- (3) Honourable Minister for Education; and
- (4) Honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection.

Honourable Members, Ministers may speak up to 20 minutes and after the Minister, I will then invite the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate to speak on the Statement for no more than five minutes. There will also be a response from the honourable Leader of the Group of Nine or his designate to also speak for five minutes. There will be no debate.

Launch of the Hydrogen Dual-Fuel Generator Demonstration Project

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

May I take this moment to extend my warmest congratulations to you, Sir, on your election as Speaker of the House. Your appointment to this significant role marks a new chapter in fostering robust and constructive debate within this esteemed chamber.

In reflecting on the principles of parliamentary democracy we are reminded of the timeless words spoken by Speaker William Lenthall in 1642, and I quote:

“May it please your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here.”

These words encapsulate, Mr. Speaker, the essence of the partiality and dedication that defines the role of the Speaker; serving as a guardian of fairness, balance and the dignity of this august Parliament.

We look forward to your guidance and leadership, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we work together to uphold these principles, ensuring meaningful and respectful dialogue that benefits our nation. Once again, congratulations on this well-deserved appointment.

I also would like to add to your congratulations, my congratulations to our victorious Fiji Sevens team to the coach Osea Kolinisau, captain Jerry Matana, and the members of the team. We congratulate them on this win in Dubai 7s after a period of about 22 months. The drought has truly broken, Mr. Speaker.

I rise today to share a groundbreaking and transformative milestone in Fiji's journey towards sustainable energy and decarbonisation. On 26th November, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji gas, in collaboration and partnership with the Obayashi Corporation of Japan and Halcyon Power of New Zealand, hosted the groundbreaking demonstration of a hydro dual fuel generator at their Lautoka depot. This project represents a significant leap in our efforts to transition towards cleaner energy sources and reduce dependency on imported fossil fuels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, simply put, this project is about testing how Fiji can use a cleaner fuel, in this case, hydrogen, to produce electricity. Hydrogen fuel is created using renewable energy such as geothermal power, which comes from heat inside the earth. Unlike our traditional diesel, which produces harmful emissions, hydrogen is cleaner and releases only water when used.

This generator at the Lautoka depot is trial run, helping us learn what works and what needs to improve before we adopt this technology on a larger scale. More importantly, it will help us understand the infrastructure and policies we need to support hydrogen use, making it easier for us to adopt this clean energy technology on a larger scale. Hydrogen, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is seen as a game changer. It can replace fossil fuels in many areas from powering generators to fuelling vehicles and vessels.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this achievement traces back to the New Zealand Trade Mission in 2023, which I headed. During the mission, we reinforced the strong relationship between Fiji and New Zealand under the Duavata Partnership. This partnership underscores our shared commitment to mutual economic progress, climate action and sustainability. As part of the Mission, we engaged in productive discussions with the New Zealand Government, which has laid the foundation for what has now become this remarkable hydrogen project.

During the mission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also had the privilege of visiting the Tuaropaki Trust Hydrogen Production Plant and witnessing the process of how green hydrogen energy is produced. The power plant harnesses geothermal energy to produce green hydrogen. Through the Tuaropaki Trust, Halcyon Power Ltd oversees the production of green hydrogen and facilitates its transportation from New Zealand to Fiji, where it is utilised for the hydrogen dual fuel generator installed by Fiji Gas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is, of course, a pilot project but is part of a broader initiative supported by the Joint Crediting Financing Support Programme administered by the Ministry of Environment of Japan. Through the Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM), Financing Support Programme, the Japanese Government has played a pivotal role in making this project a reality. This partnership reflects more than just financial support. It symbolises a transfer of knowledge, technology and vision.

Japan represented by Obayashi Corporation has contributed technical expertise and financial backing, while New Zealand, a global leader in renewable energy, has supplied the green energy and has shared its vast experience in developing hydrogen powered solutions. Together these partnerships exemplify the power of international cooperation in driving innovation and sustainability. I also commend Fiji Gas for their vision and commitment to this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this project sets the stage for Fiji to lead by example in the Pacific, demonstrating how renewable energy solutions can create a greener, most resilient future for all.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now call upon the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate.

HON. F. S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me take this opportunity to congratulate you. Much has been said already, but on a lighter note, you fill a seat that has been filled by many experienced people, and a lot that happened. So historically, there is a very hot chair that you sit on, in and amongst some very hot-headed politicians, but welcome to the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also want to take this time to congratulate our Fiji Team on their win, and seeing that I only have five minutes, I'll get right to the point.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this particular project is actually good, is great for Fiji. It is a major step also for us in terms of looking towards sustainable energy solutions and it is also something that we have been doing for many-a-year, but it is in line with all of our commitments that we have actually made in terms of green energy and energy solutions.

One of the most important things that we must remember, Sir, and this has to do with the use of hydrogen. This particular hydrogen that arrives in our country has also been sourced in a green fashion out of New Zealand. So, the supply chain itself is green before it actually gets here. And in light of what is happening around the world and many other larger countries not doing as much as they can in terms of climate change and addressing the issues with respect to climate change, any little bit that we do as Fiji, or any little bit that we do as a little company or even a large company, makes a difference. So, congratulations to Fiji Gas and also many thanks to the Japanese Government and to the New Zealand Government also that have been involved in this. Special congratulations to Fiji Gas for getting this done, Mr. Speaker, Sir. As I have said, one of the most important things is the supply chain that currently exists.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must all do what we can with respect to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions. We can see from around the world, in the news, every day, what is actually happening to all our different countries, with all the different floods etc. With us approaching our hurricane season, we should always learn to expect the worst and do the most that we can to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

So, in short, Mr. Speaker, Sir, congratulations to Fiji Gas and commend the honourable minister for bringing this to the house and letting us all know about it. On a final note, Sir, I hope and pray that Energy Fiji Limited (EFL) is taking note of the amount of projects that are actually trying to come online with respect to supplying energy and they seriously look at how viable it is and making it more viable for us to be able to invest in it, whether it is solar energy or hydrogen energy or dual-powered generators etc. Because from what I understand, I think that EFL has not really been playing ball in terms of people wanting to invest in the renewable energy sector, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Koya, I take on board your advice to the Office of the Speaker.

Before I call on the honourable Leader of the G9 Bloc or his designate, I welcome in the gallery, the High Commissioner of Australia to Fiji, His Excellency, Mr. Ewen McDonald. Welcome, Your Excellency to our proceedings.

(Acclamation)

HON. A.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, I join my colleagues in congratulating you on your appointment as the Speaker of this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his Ministerial Statement. It is great to hear and witness how the Government is taking action on Fiji's ongoing journey towards sustainable energy and decarbonisation.

Mr. Speaker, I was part of the Fiji delegation that recently returned from COP29 and this topic on sustainable energy and decarbonisation, once again, was discussed at the various levels during the COP, as this was part of the Paris Agreement. I learned that the whole idea of having this decarbonization and also the drive towards sustainable energy, which is the overarching goal, is to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees celsius above the pre-industrial level and pursue effort to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius above the

pre-industrial level. So, by supporting the hydrogen dual-fuel generator, Fiji is on the right track, and I thank the Government for honouring its commitment towards the Paris Agreement.

Once again, I congratulate the Government and also acknowledge the partnership between Fiji Gas and Obayashi Corporation and Halcyon Power Ltd, in bringing this project to our shores. We, the Group of 9, would like to see more of this clean energy project and it appears from what has been said by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, that the partnership appears to be the way forward for Fiji. So, once again, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for his Ministerial Statement on this subject.

Research on the Utilisation of Senile Coconut Stems

HON. A.V.B.C. BAINIVALU.- Mr. Speaker, honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, and all those tuning in live on Parliament's *Facebook* channel - *ni sa yadra vinaka*.

Mr. Speaker, firstly my warmest congratulations on your appointment as Speaker of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to deliver a statement on the progress of the Ministry of Forestry's research work on the utilisation of senile coconut stems under the project Coconut and Other Traditional Forest Resources for the manufacturer of engineered wood products. At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR), Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (QDAF) and the Pacific Community (SPC) for the opportunity provided to the Ministry of Forestry, to participate in the five-year project on the coconut and other non-traditional forest resources for the manufacturer of engineered wood products which began in February 2021.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, I would also like to acknowledge the support and assistance of the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Rural Development. The current project on coconut and other non-traditional wood and forest products follow the previous ACIAR funded research project in 2009, which installed new research equipment in the Ministry of Forestry facility in Nasinu.

Mr. Speaker, this resulted in the successful demonstration of the technical feasibility of peeling logs from senile coconut stems using spindle-less lathe technology to produce suitable veneers for the manufacturer of coconut-based engineered wood products. Mr. Speaker, the Coalition Government endorsed the project to the agreement in early 2023 and is providing the much-needed assistance through the provision of a very experienced team with skills and a range of disciplines to support the adoption of a coconut wood product value chain, here in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, the project is working on delivering and validating wood processing technologies to transform coconut and other currently low-value forest resources into high-value engineered wood products suitable for the local and international markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, by enabling new resources, such as senile coconut palms to be used in high-value wood products, there are many benefits that can be expected. Importantly, our farming communities are able to clear this significant number of unproductive coconut palms and use the payments received from selling the logs to clear their land. This, in turn, enables them to replant their land with new palms or other valuable crops in mixing cropping systems which may be profitable and more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our timber industry can produce new innovative products which can be used locally in speciality joinery and furniture manufacture, along with pursuing high value export opportunities. Employment opportunities are expected along the new value chain. All projects have their own share of challenges, and this project is no exception. The real challenge lies in our forest industry that can quickly take up this opportunity and make the necessary investments and adopt the technology.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are talking about an industry that is so used to processing conventional timber species and will, therefore, need a lot of convincing to adopt the new technology and process senile coconut logs. But this is not insurmountable, as the project is vigorously pursuing a number of strategies which will be able to yield the necessary outcomes in this respect. This include the direct participation of the private sector in Vanua Levu through the Hyoulin Sawmill (Fiji) Limited, a subsidiary of Long Investments Limited. This company is willing to work with the project to achieve its goals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we speak, the Ministry of Forestry, through the project, has supported the sawmill with the construction of a steam box which was commissioned last month. This will enable the heat conditioning of coconut and other non-traditional forest resources in preparation for veneer processing before they are manufactured into engineered wood products.

Preliminary testing was successfully completed, paving the way for the project team to further investigate the integration of senile coconut stem processing into commercial production. This also offers opportunities to enhance yields and to improve veneer grade of other log types through more optimised processing pathways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addition, the project is also undertaking research on utilising the mahogany Grades 4 and 5 from Fiji Hardwood Corporation Limited (FHCL) as a core species. The FHCL is having issues in selling Grades 4 and 5 logs due to their poor quality, and the project has provided an opportunity for utilising these low-quality mahogany logs.

Further, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the project team has also completed the development of a financial modelling tool that will provide valuable guidance to those who are interested in participating in the value chain, and will have immediate benefits to the plywood producers, especially in defining profitability pathways.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, most segments of the model have been tested and proven valuable for FHCL in assessing their mill-delivered log costs and costing structures.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Valebasoga Tropik Boards Limited, another plywood processor in Vanua Levu and a collaborator in the previous project recently expressed its interest with a strong willingness to participate and to ensure the success of the project. This project will have positive socio-economic and environmental impacts, including the source of income for farmers, as well as ticking the boxes for suitable forestry by using senile coconut trees.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate to reply to the Statement.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- May I join other honourable Members who have congratulated two sons of Kabara - you, Sir, as Speaker, and Kolinisau as coach for the national sevens team.

I thank the honourable Minister for bringing up the subject on the utilisation of aged coconuts and other non-traditional forestry. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the subject is current, and I have found that during our cyclone seasons, most of these trees come across with a lot of damage. During *TC Winston*, I had visited around the islands in Lau, Lomaiviti including Taveuni where there were a lot of coconut trees that had been damaged by the cyclone and basically were lying there, ripe and matured coconut trees.

In Vanuabalavu, I remember that I organised the coconut trees to be cut and the logs to be put together. Unfortunately, the transportation for the trees to be transported to Viti Levu was a barrier due to cost. Although the furniture company, Pacific Green in Sigatoka had agreed to purchase these for the benefit of the landowners and the coconut trees on the islands both in Lomaiviti and Lau, transportation could not be met. I had asked the New Zealand Navy, but unfortunately, they were not in a position to transport because they participated in the rehabilitation in these islands, but they did not have the facility to transport it on their ships to be brought back to Viti Levu.

I remember very well during the cyclones also, the huge number of pine plantations that were damaged and standing that could not be harvested. These includes Tailevu North and also the coast of Ra including Kadavu and Lomaiviti where pine trees were damaged but remained standing. I would urge the honourable Minister as we are now into cyclone season (October to March) if she could look at that situation. If the cyclones come and simply make these valuable resources available, if transport could be arranged for these to be transported to the mainland and be utilised for the benefit of the landowners.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call on the honourable Leader of the Group of Nine or his designate.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my colleagues in expressing our congratulations to your appointment to the position of Speaker and also congratulations to the sevens team; a long time coming win this morning. I thank the honourable Minister for her statement. Palm wood or coconut wood, I think part of the furniture in this Parliament is made out of coconut and they turn out to be beautiful, very tough furniture, for those that buy furniture also from Pacific Green.

I certainly agree with honourable Koroilavesau. I am sure you know in Kabara and Vatoa, there are a lot of coconut trees on the outer islands. It used to be used for the framing for the Fijian *vale vaka Viti* in the Lau Group because they curve well because of the round structures of the houses in Lau. Now, all the houses are concrete block and wooden frames. And those coconut trees are also available and as mentioned by honourable Koroilavesau, yes, it is the cost of transporting them to the mainland to where the sawmills are, is the main issue. I hope that we can keep looking for solutions to get those coconut trees over. And as she mentioned, it will also encourage the re-planting of coconut trees that will be more fruitful in a sense.

The honourable Minister talked about non-traditional forest products. I mention the African tulip for one, it is all over the place and everyone wants to cut it down. They are huge and big. Perhaps, a bit of research into the African tulip and see what can be done to those trees. I know a few years back, there were some research done into it; is to pulp African tulip because it is very wet, there is a lot of fluid in it. Dry it out, turn into pallets and then use it to fire up the boilers that boil the water for the generators that generate the electricity like the bio-electrical factory that is sitting in Nabou.

I encourage the Ministry of Forestry to continue their research into the non-traditional products in our forestry especially because of the fact that we cannot keep cutting out the traditional woods that we have. We need them to protect our water sources so that we continue to have our clean drinking water that we so very much enjoy here in Fiji.

The fact that Fiji is a small island and the connectivity from the ridge to the reef is there, and if you mess up with the biodiversity up the hill, it goes right down and even goes right down to our reefs. It is a worthwhile project to look at the non-traditional forest products and see how best we can turn them into products that can be economical, with high value and helps improve the living standards of the people, especially those that live out in the rural areas where these products are available.

MR. SPEAKER.- I know that the honourable Minister for Education is ready to deliver his Statement but I am advised by the Secretary-General that this is a convenient time for our morning tea and coffee break.

We will now suspend proceedings, and Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.22 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.10 a.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will resume from where we were before adjournment.

Fiji Year 8 Examination Provisional Results for 2024

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers and Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen; I would like to take this time to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of this Parliament. I wish to convey my best wishes to you, Sir, during your tenure in Parliament. Also, I would like to join the other Members of this Parliament in congratulating the Fiji Team for winning the Dubai Sevens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to brief this august House on the recently announced Fiji Year 8 Examination provisional results for 2024. All Year 8 students are given 30 days to apply for recount and remarking of scripts.

As a nation committed to the advancement of our education, the overall pass rate of 69 percent is a significant indicator of the progress we are making, as well as the challenges that lie ahead of us. First and foremost, I would like to take this time to extend my congratulations to the students who worked diligently throughout the year to achieve these results.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, there has been a lot of criticisms, exaggeration and blame game with reference to the 2024 Fiji Year 8 Examination provisional results pass rate and the failing numbers.

Sir, at this point I wish to emphasise on a quote by Carl Sagan, an American astronomer, and I quote:

“One of the criteria for national leadership should therefore be a talent for understanding, encouraging, and making constructive use of vigorous criticism.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministerial Statement will provide a comprehensive analysis of the provisional results for 2024, and it will also highlight a few trends and insights as this information will be useful to students, parents, stakeholders, teachers and policymakers, in making informed decisions and planning for the future. But before I move on, Mr. Speaker, I would like to highlight in this Parliament some of the initiatives that the Coalition Government undertook when it came into office.

We started off with the re-engagement of retirees. We reviewed the Retirement Age Policy from 55 to 60, to allow teachers to continue their teaching programmes. We removed the ‘No Jab No Job’ Policy. We conducted the Fiji National Education Summit. We also established the new Education Commission. We also undertook visitations to schools in the rural and maritime areas and took the opportunity to listen to their queries and concerns that had been raised by teachers and stakeholders and try, to the best of our ability, to accommodate the concerns that they raised.

We also restructured the Curriculum Department within the Ministry of Education by putting in the right resources and the exact number of personnel to ensure that the heartbeat of the Ministry of Education, which is the Curriculum Development Unit plays a very important role and they be resourced accordingly. Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we introduced the school chaplaincy and the school Board of Governors. All of these were undertaken to try and improve the education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to take this time to reiterate that the national pass rate for the last eight years from 2015 to 2024, has shown fluctuation over the years, with a notable decline in 2022 and a significant increase in 2024. The highest national pass rate for Fiji Eighth Year Examination was achieved in 2024, which is 69 percent. The lowest point was observed in 2022 with the national pass rate of 62 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with the limited information that is within the Ministry, we could only gather information from 2018 in the number of enrolled students in Year 8 and are as follows:

- (1) 2018 – 16,954 students enrolled, and the pass rate was around 59 percent;
- (2) 2019 – 17,396 students enrolled, and the pass rate was 69 percent;
- (3) 2022 – 17,924 students enrolled, and the pass rate was 62 percent;
- (4) 2023 – 19,554 students enrolled, and the pass rate was 67 percent; and
- (5) 2024 – 19,396 students enrolled, with the pass rate of 69 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you compare the rural and urban, the number who sat in the rural areas was 7,914 and the pass rate was around 66 percent. In the urban areas, 11,054 sat, with the pass rate of 71 percent. The trend for results in rural areas compared to urban centres depicts that more students are not performing well at schools located in rural areas. For instance, in 2017, the pass rate in rural areas was 61 percent and in urban areas was 73 percent. In 2018, 51 percent in rural areas and 65 percent in urban areas. In 2019, 64 percent in rural areas and 73 percent in urban areas. In 2022, 57 percent in rural areas and 66 percent in urban areas. In 2023, 63 percent in rural areas and 70 percent in urban areas. In 2024, 66 percent (increased from 2023) in rural areas and 71 percent in urban areas.

I would like to also share the ethnicity breakdown of students enrolled and sat in the Year 8 Exam. For *iTaukei*, the number of students who sat was 13,714 with the pass rate of 67 percent. For Indian students, 4,449 sat and number of pass is 73 percent. For Rotumans, 648 sat and the pass rate is 76 percent. Other students, 157 sat and pass rate is 78 percent.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reason for the fluctuation of results in the 2024 provisional Year 8 examinations for the last eight years includes but not limited to the:

- (1) Curriculum Changes - the curriculum was not aligned well with the student needs and interest and local context. We take heed of the call by the honourable Prime Minister that there is a need to review the curriculum of the Ministry of Education.
- (2) The high student to teacher ratio, the overcrowded classrooms and reduced individual attention and support for students.
- (3) Poor school management, weak leadership, lack of planning and inadequate monitoring of academic performance.

Student-related factors include:

- (1) Low academic preparedness.
- (2) Students attending Year 8 classes with weak foundation skills in key subjects such as mathematics and literacy.
- (3) Lack of motivation and disinterest in learning or lack of understanding about the importance of education.
- (4) Behavioural issues, disruptions in class or lack of discipline among students and stakeholders.
- (5) Attendance problems, irregular school attendance due to illness, family responsibilities, or lack of interest.

- (6) Parental and family factors, limited engagements of parents in their children's education such as not monitoring homework or attending school meetings.
- (7) Parents are also noted to not be supervising and monitoring their students' schoolwork at home or homework.
- (8) There seems to be a need to improve on educational issues regarding curriculum reviews, curriculum changes to accommodate the changing needs or the inadequate teacher recruitment and retention strategies. Over-emphasis on rote learning and exam results rather than conceptual understanding.

Community factors include:

- (1) Issues on violence, substance abuse, lack of access to support services, lack of access to digital learning, as evidenced in school visits to the rural and maritime areas.
- (2) Lack of accessibility, particularly during periods of remote learning.
- (3) Unclear or overly difficult exam questions that do not reflect the curriculum that has been taught.
- (4) Weak systems of monitoring in addressing individuals or group learning deficits.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I have alluded to earlier, this is not only limited to this list, but there are other contributing factors as well and addressing these factors require a collaborative approach among schools, among families, among policymakers and among communities, to create a supportive learning environment and an effective education system.

There is always a general question that has been raised on catering for students who have failed. Sir, as a way forward, the Ministry of Education is looking at introducing technical vocational education training at a lower level from Year 8 or Year 9. And we also have to review the so-called no repeat policy, to allow students to go through this process.

The automatic progression is something that we have not explored to see how many of those students, over the past years that I have mentioned, have automatically progressed into Year 9. Sir, we found that there is lack of monitoring tools, but we have noted that in 2023-2024, there has been a steady increase in those that enrol in Year 9 and, perhaps, we can contribute that to the \$200 Back to School assistance that was issued for those students who are enrolled in the education system.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the current practice is that all students who have completed Year 8 or primary school level, are supposed to be enrolled in Year 9 at secondary school. This is something that we are trying to review and monitor. And I also wish to inform this august House that all students completing Year 8 Examination and for Year 9 in 2025, we will have to review the recruitment policy accordingly. On the same note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, any parent or guardian who still faces difficulty in enrolling their children into Year 9 will have to contact our District Offices so they can be assisted accordingly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, English has an average national percentage pass rate of 57 percent in the last three years. Mathematics, however, has been low for the last three years, achieving 41 percent national pass rate, and we are working on reviewing the teaching contents and also the mathematics paper accordingly.

Sir, I wish to assure this august House that the teams from the Ministry of Education are collaboratively working to improve the Year 8 results. An ongoing review of the curriculum will be conducted to ensure it is relevant, aligned with the needs of the 21st century, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills among our students. We have also set ourselves to have strict monitoring

of head of schools, whose schools fall under the Hope school category for the last three consecutive years and a circular to this has been sent targeting such schools.

We are also reviewing the automatic progression of students and school visits will be undertaken targeting individual Hope schools and Follow-Up schools. We are also working on trying to increase the outreach to maritime and remote rural schools. I have a list of strategies that is here, but I think I am compressed for time.

This year's results serve as a reminder, Sir, that education is a shared responsibility, and it takes the collective effort of the student, teachers, parents, *vanua*, *lotu* and the Government to ensure that our children receive quality education.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I encourage all stakeholders to take inspiration from the achievements of our students and to work collaboratively towards enhancing our education system, because together, we can ensure that Fiji remains a place where every child has the opportunity to not only learn, but also to grow and succeed.

MR. SPEAKER.- I now call upon the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate.

HON. H. CHAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I would like to congratulate you, Sir, on your appointment as the Speaker of the House. Secondly, I would like to congratulate the Fiji Sevens Team for winning the Dubai Sevens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to congratulate all Year 8 students for completing eight years of primary education and wish them well for their secondary education. I would like to also thank the teachers for their hard work and effort.

Fiji Year 8 Examination is very important for Year 8 students. Examination plays a crucial role in a student's career. The purpose of examinations is to measure the knowledge and understanding, promote discipline and time management, prepares one for real world challenges and provides fair and objective assessment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was listening very carefully to the honourable Minister for Education and if I heard it right, he mentioned that 41 percent of students passed Year 8 Mathematics. That is quite alarming. The other thing that he has mentioned is 56 percent of students who are studying in remote rural areas have successfully completed Year 8, compared to 71 percent who are schooling in urban areas.

Analysing examination results is important because it can help improve teaching and learning. Using exam results data effectively is key to improving both, school and student performance. While basic scores are useful, the real value comes from deeper analysis of examination data. By using advance and thorough analysis methods, the Ministry of Education can find important trends and patterns to guide their decisions and help students and teachers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I hope that the analysis of the Fiji Eighth Year Examination includes the following:

- How did the students in rural remote areas do in their examination, compared to urban area students? If this can be done thoroughly subject by subject and school by school.
- Why did students not do well in second subjects in certain schools?
- Is it because of lack of resources or
- is it facilities or is it because of

- not meeting teaching learning hours? In here, monitoring comes in.

If you look at the results in remote maritime schools, it is only 56 percent compared to urban which is 71 percent. So, my question is – was proper monitoring done by the Education Officers in respective Districts?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. H. CHAND.- After the analysis of the examination results, the Ministry should come up with plans so that students can be assisted in areas where they are weak. The Ministry should also plan and provide support, guidance and training to teachers in areas where they need training.

About 14,000 students have met the benchmark and 31 percent, that is around 6,000 students did not do very well in Year 8 examination. So, what are the plans? What will the Ministry do? How will the Ministry assist these 6,000 students who did not do very well in the Year 8 Examination?

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now call upon the honourable Leader of the G9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. A. BIA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to reply to the Statement by the honourable Minister for Education in regards to the Analysis of the Fiji Eighth Year Examination. At the outset, Sir, I would also like to join my fellow colleagues who have already congratulated you on your appointment as the Speaker of this august House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is one of the much-talked-about issue recently around the country, as well as on social media. I thank the honourable Minister for the thorough statement and the analysis that he has given, highlighting some of the initiatives and also the work he is currently doing in terms of the review of the Education system. He also mentioned about the pass rate that has improved, but I believe that a major concern at the moment is also what the honourable Member has just alluded to, that over 6,000 students could not make it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, still on the Fiji Eighth Year Examination, I would also like to question the validity or the significant of sitting the Year 8 Examination. In speaking of this, if you look at all the secondary schools in Fiji, at the moment, in terms of their intake to Year 10, majority of the schools are selecting students after getting the marks from their annual exam or third term examination. Not all the schools are using the Year 8 exam to intake students into schools. So, I agree with the honourable Minister in terms of the review and how significant the Year 8 Examination is, because a lot of schools are selecting students to secondary schools from the 3rd Term Exams.

Secondly, this is an issue which we should not play a blame game to. As shared by the honourable Minister, it is a shared responsibility. What has happened, has happened, and the onus is on Government and all of us sitting in this august Parliament to work together with the Minister responsible as to how we can improve from here. There is a lot of doubts and areas that we need to connect to try and improve, despite the improvement of the passing rate. We need to focus on those that could not make it.

Now, some of the very foundations of the areas that we need to look into is the family. Speaking of families, parents are most important in terms of the upbringing of every child that goes to school and speaking of parents, Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look around the country at the moment, there are a lot of young parents. My questions, and I raised these issues a lot:

- (1) Is enough awareness or counselling created to these young parents in terms of the upbringing of a small child into the education system?
- (2) Is the curriculum still relevant to the current situation we are in, in terms of the evolving world? Things do evolve and change?
- (3) Is our curriculum still relevant to the changes that we are currently undertaking?

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, just focussing on the different levels of our education system, first is the Early Childhood Education (ECE). I believe that there needs to be more focus on ECE, which is the very foundation of the upbringing of any school kid around Fiji. It has also been raised last year about the level of the education system that is there to cater for the ECE because of the number of students, non-readers that are there in our school systems.

So, with that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know time has caught up on me, so I thank the honourable Minister for the thorough analysis on the Year 8 Examination Results.

Beijing Platform for Action +30 Regional Review

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Good morning, Mr. Speaker, Sir and honourable Members of Parliament. I wish to join my colleagues to congratulate you in your election as Speaker of Parliament and wish you the very best as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to provide an update on the recent Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing Platform for Action +30 Regional Review which is held in Thailand earlier last month. The significant event brought together over 1,200 delegates including Ministers, senior officials, women rights organisations, civil society and development partners from across the Asia Pacific Region to assess our progress and challenges in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action over the past 30 years.

Every five years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, this review is conducted, and it will remain as one of the most comprehensive frameworks for advancing gender equality across the globe.

Next year, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will celebrate the 30th year of the Beijing Platform for Action, so as part of the build up to this celebration next year, each country is to present its Review Report on the Status of Gender Equality. For Fiji, we had successfully compiled our report and earlier this year, Cabinet endorsed our Review Report.

At the Conference, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji reaffirmed its dedication to the 12 critical areas of concern outlined in the platform. Notably, Sir, this Beijing Platform for Action is adopted under the leadership of our current Prime Minister and the areas of concern include, to name a few: women's health, women's education, women's economic participation, women's political empowerment and, of course, the elimination of violence against women and children.

As such, Mr. Speaker, Sir, with alignments to the critical areas of concern, Fiji was able to participate in emerging issues which were not there 30 years ago but is certainly a rising trend and an area of concern in the review of the Beijing Platform for Action and that is the issue of technology facilitated gender-based violence or online violence. For Fiji, we shared the data, which was given by Fiji's Online Safety Commission, where it indicated that 62 percent of women are experiencing online violence compared to 38 percent of men.

In this context, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we shared how Fiji is making progress as well in implementing our National Action to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls or Fiji NAP, as well as the forthcoming Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan and the work

we are currently doing to gender mainstream across Government Ministries and agencies in terms of institutional capacity development, as we may commonly refer to, specifically gender responsive budgeting across the Ministries and agencies.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to just briefly share some of the key activities and milestones shared at the Conference that Fiji has been able to achieve, especially as we are currently in the 16 Days of Activism period to end violence against women and girls. The first, Sir, is the engagement with the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC).

I wish to acknowledge and commend the GCC, especially the Chairman, Ratu Viliame Seruvakula for prioritising violence against women and children. It is truly significant that they have prioritised this and put this on their agenda because the traditional setting, is a key setting to look at the root causes of violence against women and children, especially emphasising on building respectful relationships between girls and boys.

We appreciate the collaboration between the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the iTaukei Affairs Board in reinforcing the efforts to create safe spaces across our villages and our settlements. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am even more grateful for the commitment of Government with the very recent amendment to the iTaukei Affairs (Great Council of Chiefs) Regulations, which spells out the Great Council of Chiefs mandate. Just this week, the amendment has been made to Regulation 14(e) specifically, which states that the Great Council of Chiefs is to advocate and set strategic directions to address violence against women and girls.

Secondly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is the faith-based setting. We have already started working with faith leaders and faith-based organisations on a communication campaign which they have launched during the 16 Days of Activism. This campaign aims to foster awareness and drive behavioural change within our faith settings.

I wish to commend the House of Sarah Coordinator, Reverend Sereima Lomaloma, and her team for their impactful video titled, *My Faith Says No to Rape*. This collaboration with faith leaders and the Ministry, as well as SPC, Pacific Women Lead and Australian Aid, highlights the power of collective advocacy to end violence against women and girls in Fiji.

Thirdly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have conducted a gender analysis of the Fiji Online Safety Act. The Ministry, together with the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA), undertook this gender analysis to address technology facilitated gender-based violence, which is a growing concern in Fiji. This analysis has identified gaps in prevention, protection and reporting mechanisms for women and children, and provides actionable recommendations. The findings will be presented during our Members of Parliament retreat and will form future legislative review and actions. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am very grateful to UNFPA for this partnership.

Fourthly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will be convening a forum for young women aged 18 years to 25 years old to coincide with the 16 Days of Activism, which is on 5th December. This is to gather insights from our young women on how gender-based violence or how violence online affects their lives. This forum will provide a platform where they can share their experiences, in particular, on their online challenges, seeking their perspectives on necessary protections and responses. The outcomes of these discussions will be documented as well and will be presented at our Members of Parliament retreat this month, and it will be presented by one of their own peers. This direct engagement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, ensures that we are capturing the voices of our young people, especially our young women who are suffering greatly from online violence.

The fifth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is what is called a National Community Attitude Survey. Starting in January, with the technical support from UNICEF, we will roll out a national survey to examine society's attitude towards women and children, and the need to be able to create key messages for an aggressive communications campaign to target those attitudes that are causing violence and to be able to help in change of behaviour of these attitudes. This survey will not just be talking to women and girls, as is being done conventionally to date, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but will also include talking to our men and boys.

Sixth, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is enhancing responses to victims of and survivors of violence when they present themselves to our Fiji Police Force (FPF). As we know, Sir, through the Fiji NAP, we are trying to look at the prevention of violence before it starts and not just response.

What we have done as part of the 16 Days of Activism is that the Ministry has partnered with the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) where we have been conducting awareness sessions or refresher courses with the FPF in terms of strengthening the implementation of services they provide to victims who present, as well as survivors of violence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is what the Fiji NAP represents, collective effort by all players and I wish to acknowledge the continued support and technical expertise by the Fiji NAP Secretariat, as well as the FPF and the criminal justice system. I also wish to thank the Government of Australia for their generous financial support and technical support of the NAP Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

Moving forward, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am excited and committed to forging this partnership in making 2025, hopefully, a transformative year, particularly, in violence prevention and response. This will mean, of course, continuing to collaborate with our partners and stakeholders and will involve strengthening partnerships with other organisations such as UNFPA, UNICEF, UNSCAF, UN Women at Women Deliver.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the Conference in Bangkok, Fiji had the opportunity to chair the Conference on the final day, culminating the adoption of the report on the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing +30 review, as well as the closing ceremony.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, five years ago, my predecessor, Ms. Mere Rakuita, chaired the very same Conference. The selection of Fiji to chair these regional conferences shows Fiji's leadership in the Pacific, in Asia and to the world, and underscores our commitment in empowering women throughout our region.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference on the review of Beijing Platform for Action has provided a renewed momentum and a renewed commitment in reinforcing our commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Our active participation in the Conference and discussions have been significant and beneficial. I would like to extend my gratitude to the honourable Prime Minister for his leadership and also to Cabinet and to Government and, of course, Parliament for your continued support, as well as encouraging the implementation of the NAP GBV since it certainly is a bipartisan effort as it had begun from the previous Government in developing the NAP GBV, as well as now our turn to implement it effectively.

It is only together, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that we can protect, advance the rights and well-being of all members of society, not just women and girls, our boys as well, our men, our persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups that we are charged with. Hopefully, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to carry on striving for a more just and equitable Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER. – I will now call on the honourable Leader of the Opposition or his designate.

HON. V. LAL. –Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go on to my reply, I would like to take this opportunity to, once again, congratulate you, Sir. I wish you all the best and looking forward to working with you. Similar to my other colleagues, I also would like to congratulate the Fiji Sevens Team and Coach for the win.

On the Ministerial Statement, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection for her Statement on Fiji's participation in the Beijing Platform for Action, +30 regional review. While I acknowledge the efforts made by the honourable Minister and her team, it is imperative to critically examine the outcomes and the actual progress on the ground.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Beijing Platform for Action +30 regional review was, indeed, a significant event, providing a platform for assessing our progress in gender equality and women's empowerment. However, the Minister's Statement, while highlighting some advancement, fails to address several critical areas where our efforts have fallen short.

Firstly, the honourable Minister spoke about the implementation of gender responsive policies and programmes. While these initiatives are commendable in Chile, the reality is that many of these programmes lack adequate funding and effective implementation. Women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas, continue to face significant barriers in accessing financial resources and support. The Government's effort must go beyond mere policy announcements, and ensure tangible support reaches those who need it most.

In the promotion of Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education for girls, the data shows that gender disparities in education persists, particularly in higher education and vocational training. The Government must take more robust measures to ensure that girls not only have access to education but are also encouraged and supported to pursue careers in STEM fields. This requires a comprehensive approach, including mentorship programmes, scholarships and addressing societal attitudes that discourage girls from these fields.

The honourable Minister also mentioned our commitment to addressing gender-based violence. While awareness campaigns and legal frameworks are essential, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Reports of gender-based violence remains alarmingly high and many survivors still lack access to adequate support services. The Government must prioritise that establishment of more shelters, council services and legal aid for survivors.

Additionally, there needs to be a stronger focus on prevention, including education and community engagement, to change harmful attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, the honourable Minister's Statement did not adequately address the issue of intersectionality. Women and girls from marginalised communities, including those with disabilities, businesswomen and LGBTQ+ individuals face compounded discrimination and barriers.

The Government's policies must be inclusive and address the unique challenges faced by these groups to ensure that no one is left behind. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Beijing +30 Regional Review has provided us with valuable insights and best practices from across the region. However, it is clear that our government needs to do more to translate these insights into concrete actions. We must hold ourselves accountable and ensure that our commitments are not just words on paper but are reflected in the experiences of women and girls in Fiji.

In conclusion, while I appreciate the Minister's efforts and the progress made, it is crucial that we critically evaluate our shortcomings and take decisive actions to address them. Let us work together to ensure that the principles of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are fully realised, and that gender equality becomes a reality for all.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will now invite the honourable Leader of the G9 Bloc or his designate.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to join my colleagues in congratulating you on your appointment as the Speaker of the House.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, across the Pacific, accelerated action is needed to meet the ambitions of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, including SDG5 on Gender Equality and all other SDGs. Despite significant strides in women's education and health and some progress made in women's political representation in the past three decades, progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women appears to be stagnating and even regressing in some areas, such as labour force participation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, women and girls in the region continue to face discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes - high levels of gender-based violence, disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work burden, among other challenges. The level of political will to address these issues remain inadequate. Mr. Speaker, Sir, moreover women and girls have been more disproportionately affected by multiple and interrelated crisis that are expected to continue or worsen in the absence of accelerated action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, women play a very crucial role in Fiji's economy where their contribution are often unrecognised. There is far more work to be done in Fiji, but we have made important gains over the past 25 years in education, maternal mortality, access to health services, women's representation in leadership positions and participation in Parliament and increased public awareness and recognition of women's rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have enacted progressive legislation and regulatory framework. A good example which is stated by the honourable Minister for Social Protection in relation to the amendment of the iTaukei Affairs (Great Council of Chiefs) (Amendment) Regulations 2024. It is a good move, Sir. The Government, in particular, has led a relentless effort to end violence against women by changing the laws governing sexual assault to make it easier and safer for a woman to come forward and feel secure under the law and confident that justice will be delivered, and by speaking out at every opportunity to shame the very notion of violence directed against women and girls. As you are most aware, Mr, Speaker, Sir the removal of the law which is discriminatory to sexual victims and now the law corroboration has come into play where there is no corroboration needed under our Fiji laws.

I thank the Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for its policies and programmes that enables women to pursue enhanced opportunities and excel in all aspects of their development, be it in education, leadership, career development, empowering them to reach their highest potential in life.

Sir, all children in Fiji attend primary school with 92 percent of girls completing secondary school. Female students make up 57 percent of the graduates of tertiary institutions. Women hold five of 55 seats in our Parliament and half of those female parliamentarians are here today serving as Ministers or Assistant Minister in the current Government. Almost 30 percent of leadership positions in the Civil Service are women. Sir, under the 2018 Employment Relations (Budget Amendment) Act, it has been amended to increase the level of maternity leave and introduce paternity leave so that women can have assistance with childbearing in the home. The 2018 amendment to the Succession,

Probate and Administration Act now guarantees inheritance rights to women living in de-facto relationships.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we cannot take pride in certain achievements. We cannot rest. We expect steady transformation as more girls in Fijian classrooms and universities translate into more women participation in the formal economy having greater access to financial resources and serving as government and business leaders, engineers, entrepreneurs, scientists, doctors and financiers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are determined to have an inclusive and equal Fiji, and I ask the Government that we must not stop until we get there.

QUESTIONS

Oral Questions

Evaluation of Erosion – Rewa Riverbanks (Question No. 259/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways inform Parliament on the current evaluation of the erosion issue along the Rewa riverbanks, specifically between the central Nausori Town boundary towards Lakena Point?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, foremost let me offer my congratulations to His Excellency the *Turaga na Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu on his appointment as our new President of the Republic of the Fiji Islands.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would also like to congratulate you on your new appointment as a Speaker of the House. This is a momentous occasion and your election to this distinguished position reflects the trust and confidence placed in your leadership, integrity and dedication to serving the people of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in response to the honourable Member's question, I rise to address the concerns raised regarding the ongoing erosion issue along the Rewa riverbank, particularly between the central Nausori Town boundary and Lakena Point. This area is of great significance both in terms of its natural environment and the communities that depend on it for their livelihoods.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to the soil erosion index, the country is losing over 50 tonnes of soil per hectare each year through run off which is four times the average in tropical areas. The consequences of the expansion of agriculture and the increase logging activities of rainforest on erosion have been significant. The effects of erosion include degradation of land, reduction in soil carbon, decrease productivity and sediment accumulation in rivers leading to an increase in flooding and harm to coral reef by transport of sand sediments. Erosion also poses a direct threat to critical infrastructure including nearby roads, residential properties and community facilities. Communities have expressed concerns about the safety of their homes, access to transportation routes, potential loss of arable land and biodiversity loss in preparing zones with destabilised riverbank habitats impacting the ecosystem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways, through the Waterways Division is actively addressing this critical issue. The ongoing assessments indicate that this stretch

of the riverbank is significantly impacted by erosion is significantly impacted by erosion due to several contributing factors, including high river flow velocities during peak rainfall seasons, increased sediment load from riverbanks upstream activities such as agriculture and land clearing, insufficient recurring vegetation leaving the susceptible to erosion, encroachment and unregulated developments near the riverbanks and uncontrolled sand extraction works close to the river. Multiple site visits and technical surveys have identified critical erosion hotspots, particularly where the river meanders sharply, creating areas of heightened flow velocity and stress on the banks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognising the potential threats posed by this issue, the engineers from the Ministry of Waterways Division are examining and analysing flow patterns and sedimental transport to determine the root cause and develop effective interventions. Meeting with stakeholders including residents, businesses and local government representatives are also being conducted to incorporate their input and ensure solutions.

These entities, each with legal jurisdiction within their area, are essential partners in formulating an effective solution to address the erosion challenges along the section of the Rewa River. Currently, the Waterways Division is collaborating with key stakeholders, including the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the National Disaster Management Office to develop a National Waterways Strategy and incorporate inputs into Disaster Risk Reduction Plans for the Rewa catchment. These consultations aim to develop comprehensive, sustainable strategies for addressing erosion and other water related hazards in the region. Additionally, the engineers are leveraging drone-based mapping to monitor changes in riverbank profiles, providing real time data to guide decision making and project implementation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is also considering these additional strategies aimed at mitigating erosion and reinforcing the stability of the riverbanks. The planting of vetiver grass and native vegetation, as a nature-based solution to naturally stabilise the banks shall reduce erosion, improve structural interventions by installing boulder revetment at critical locations for immediate protection and constructing groynes to redirect river flow and alleviate pressure on vulnerable areas. Silt removed from the river is deposited along the riverbanks as part of the riverbank protection works and this have started at Vunimono, Toga and Nasilai are portions of the Rewa Riverbank. Enhancing awareness and regulation through developing and introducing Riverbank Management Guidelines to minimise encroachment and regulate activities along the riverbanks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is committed to a balanced approach, combining short term stabilisation measures with long-term riverbank management practices. A comprehensive project proposal will be submitted through the Ministry's budget submission to secure the necessary resources for implementation.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry acknowledges the critical need to address erosion along the Rewa riverbank to safeguard lives, infrastructure and environment. The Ministry's prioritising the completion of technical assessments and will commence remedial works as soon as possible.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while some people would just see this as soil erosion, I see that the resources of the *qoliqoli* owners are washed away. Is the Ministry considering some kind of compensation to the *i qoliqoli* owners for the washing away of their resources into Rewa River?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, do you wish to comment?

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, right now there is no talk of compensation, but I am glad that question is being asked from that side of the House because they did nothing during their time.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for his explanation, I think a very in-depth explanation of the factors that are affecting the erosion. By the way, Sir, congratulations on your appointment and congratulations for the son of Kabara who also got, after 22 tournaments they did not win anything. It had to take a boy from Kabara to take Dubai back after nine years.

I want to thank the honourable Minister for his long, very good and in-depth explanation of the various factors and I understand that they are still continuing the investigations while they decide what to do. Part of the things that he talked about was the lack of vegetation on the sides of the river and at the same time, maybe the impacts of the extraction of gravel and sand from the river.

I noticed the day I drove past last week that the dredgers are right on the side of the river. If I understand, these dredgers are supposed to be in the middle of the river. So, in the interim while his awaiting that, is he also considering liaising with these dredgers to move to the middle of the river, and at the same time whether there is any approach to get those who own the farms there to actually plant trees and plants along the edge of the river to protect

MR. SPEAKER.- Do you need to answer that, honourable Minister?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- The dredge owners have been told exactly that, to move into the middle of the river.

Status of Fiji's National Carbon Strategy Roadmap
(Question No. 260/2024)

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

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises, Information, Immigration and Fiji Police Force update Parliament on the status of Fiji's National Carbon Strategy Roadmap?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wish I could just show him this and ask him to go and read it because that was adopted in COP29.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also add my words of congratulations to His Excellency the President and our gratitude to the immediate past President. Also, my congratulations to the sevens rugby team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the question from the honourable Tunabuna. The Coalition Government, I believe, have made significant strides in developing Fiji's National Carbon Strategy Roadmap and there is the copy. It was embraced by COP29. A lot of work had gone into that, and I would like to also thank the Australian Government for seconding an official from the Australian Government to the Prime Minister's Office to help out in climate change matters, who was with us for one year and has gone back.

In essence, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the strategic roadmap has been developed to support the process required for Fiji to safely and effectively engage with international carbon markets. The roadmap provides information on Fiji's context, our objectives and priorities, and provides the basis for developing the necessary regulatory environment to support interested parties to collaborate, to support our efforts to reduce emissions and build resilience.

As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), Fiji faces unique challenges related to climate change, such as the rising sea levels and climate change excavated natural disasters. Keeping global emissions below 1.5 degrees Celsius is critical for our future and there are opportunities to attract investment to help us meet our emissions reduction targets in ways that support our local economy and our resilience.

The honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications' Ministerial Statement this morning elaborated on such efforts to reduce our emissions and contribute to global warming.

Mr. Speaker, 55 percent of our energy supply is currently from non-fossil fuel - 50 percent from hydropower and 5 percent from biomass and wind generators. We are well on our way in our contributions to reducing carbon emissions.

Fiji's National Carbon Market Strategy Roadmap provides an initial framework to help the nation leverage international carbon markets in alignment with our ambitious climate goal. The roadmap offers pathways and options that can help a range of stakeholders to use carbon market instruments to scale resilience and unlock sustainable development opportunities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Carbon Market Strategy Roadmap outlines specific actions needed to ensure that carbon market engagement supports Fiji's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and advanced high integrity carbon projects that uphold environmental integrity and social safeguards.

This Roadmap is centred on Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, and I assume everyone knows that, and the focus is on the use of co-operative approaches between parties and stakeholders to address climate change through market and non-market approaches that enable Fiji to engage both, market based and non-market-based carbon mitigation mechanisms, emphasising high integrity practices, equitable benefit sharing and sustainable development. This initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, leverages international carbon markets to mobilise investments for decarbonisation and resilience building projects, while safeguarding the interests of local communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Roadmap identified five pillars of actions which have been sequenced across short, medium and long term categories to facilitate a staged approach to the implementation of the Roadmap Action Plan in Fiji. They include:

- (1) Pillar 1
Enhancing market readiness through strategic actions.
- (2) Pillar 2
Strengthening legal frameworks and governance structures.
- (3) Pillar 3
Safeguarding community benefits and landowner rights. A lot of our landowners are coming up with their own suggestions in that area.
- (4) Pillar 4
Increasing public awareness, participation and ownership and capacity.
- (5) Pillar 5
Developing effective partnerships and scaling finance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's vulnerability to climate change, compounded by limited resources and competing development priorities, underscores the importance of innovative financial solutions. The reality is that, through carbon markets, we can attract additional financial flows, in exchange with partial share in the emissions reduction we facilitate with those investments.

There is significant international interest to provide funding to Fiji in ways that support both, our adaptation and resilience building objectives, as well as our effort to reduce emissions. This Roadmap is important both, for domestic stakeholders, as well as for international parties interested to engage with us.

An example, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji has signed an initial agreement with the Government of Singapore which, in the future, could enable companies in Singapore to invest in low carbon technology in Fiji, whether it be transport infrastructure or renewable energy systems. This would help to offset the cost of these new types of technology in exchange for a share in emissions reduction outcomes.

International actors are in a position to invest in countries, like Fiji, with the cost of reducing emissions potentially cheaper than it would be in their domestic setting. The benefit for us is that those investments can help give us access to infrastructure and technology that we would not otherwise have been able to afford. The Roadmap, Mr. Speaker, Sir, provides details of our priorities and actions which we will take to ensure these tools are brought about in an effective way.

Mr. Speaker, the Roadmap was co-designed through an 18-month process that included multi-stakeholder engagement through workshops and webinars that involved representatives from 14 key government ministries, community groups, private sector participants and international experts. This collaborative process has, overall, created awareness on carbon markets through the dissemination of information and generally facilitated ownership of the process and outcome. The roadmap is not a final strategy or policy, but a guide to how progress further efforts and consultations. Mr. Speaker, Sir, technical support for his work was funded by the Australian Government, as I had mentioned, and delivered through the Carbon Market Institute.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Carbon Market Strategy Roadmap that I had shown this august House was endorsed in Cabinet on 13th November, 2024, and was also launched at the margins of COP 29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, by the honourable Attorney-General.

The Government of Singapore and Conservation International have expressed interest in supporting the Government of Fiji's implementation efforts. A range of bilateral and multilateral engagements are actively being pursued to ensure comprehensive support for project development and market engagement in response to the launch of this key document.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to provide legal institutional support for the implementation, the regulations under Part 10 of the Climate Change Act 2021 will be expedited to operationalise our ability to regulate and engage with the carbon market mechanisms.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all, I would like to welcome you to our Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is in terms of carbon capture, sequestration and the Strategic Roadmap as mentioned by the honourable Prime Minister. Honourable Prime Minister, there is an issue at hand on our ground where excessive vehicle emission in terms of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide particulate matter, volatile organic matter, is getting quite high. What we get to see honourable

Prime Minister is that vehicles that are not serviced or should not be on the roads are on our roads and polluting the air with excessive carbon and all these gases. So, what is the line Ministry doing to reduce this carbon footprint in going forward?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am sure there are regulations, and the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport is aware that during the renewal of licences, there are systems to check the emission from each vehicle before the licences are renewed. There are no spot checks on the road at the moment, but they can be re-introduced. Thank you.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Honourable Prime Minister, this may or may not have international trade implications in terms of our exports and I am not sure if it applies to imports, but will this strategy properly address those issues that may arise? I understand that Europe may put on a carbon levy, so some of the stuff that we actually export out to them may be subject to carbon levy. Is that going to be addressed by us in terms of our own economy?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question. All these are contained in this Carbon Market Strategy. It is a strategy. There are various actions that we have to carry out - those that reduce our own emissions and those that encourage investors to contribute to those industries that will further contribute to the global effort to maintain the global warming target of 1.5 degrees Celsius by the target date.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, a supplementary question; are we still on the roadmap to 2050 to have Fiji as a zero emitter of carbon in the globe? Secondly, does this framework actually provide any kind of imitative to all those landowners who already have their stock, to upgrade their stock to do carbon trading?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the simple answer to that is yes. We are encouraging landowners and forest owners to continue to put forward their suggestions for the inclusion of their forest areas under this Roadmap.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to join my colleagues to congratulate you for taking the post of the Speaker of the House.

Honourable Prime Minister, strategies and roadmaps are beautiful documents with good intentions. My question to you is on capacity building. Are there any plans to build the capacity so that this Roadmap can be delivered effectively?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for her question. Yes, they are all part of it and all we have to do is collectively contribute to our strategies and policies that we have here, to contribute towards our national effort, in contributing to the world effort towards our fight against climate change.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, at this point, we will break for lunch. Therefore, this proceeding is suspended. The Parliament will resume proceedings at 2.30 this afternoon.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.29 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.41 p.m.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, please, join me in welcoming a group of Australian sponsored students currently enrolled in the Institute of Indigenous Studies Fiji for iTaukei Conversational Language and their leader is Ms. Rosy Lagi. You are most welcome.

Plans to Reinstate Rotuma, Rabi and Kioa Island Councils
(Question No. 261/2024)

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask my Oral Question, I would like to congratulate you on your calling. I pray that God will continue to guide you in your leadership role.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is as follows:

Can the honourable Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Climate Change, Environment, Civil Service, Information, Public Enterprises Information, Immigration and Fiji Police Force update Parliament on plans to reinstate the Rotuma, Rabi and Kioa Island Councils?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for his question.

With regards to the plan in reinstating the Rotuma Island Council, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Rotuma is administratively incorporated into Fiji as dependency with some measures of autonomy given to Local Government in the current Rotuma Act where the Rotuma Island Council can make regulations for the island.

In line with the Government's obligation under the ILO Convention No. 169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples and United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), I have an office under my portfolio that is responsible for looking after Rotuman affairs.

The UNDRIP ILO No. 169, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognises that indigenous peoples have the right to free, prior and informed consent, or nothing about us without us. This means that their consent must be sought and freely given to changes that affect their institutions, their resources and their traditional decision-making processes, for example, the appointment of their chiefs.

The Coalition Government is adamant that the people of Rotuma should decide for themselves their future and to be governed by law and systems that are in line with their culture and traditions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to delve into history. The 1970 Constitution recognised the Council of Rotuma as a local authority. The Great Council of Chiefs would permit the Rotuma Island Council delegates to make decisions on all issues pertaining to Rotumans, which the Chief would then support.

The cession of Rotuma in 1879 was also acknowledged in the 1997 Constitution and according to that Constitution, the iTaukei and Rotuma indigenous people have the right to governance through their separate administrative systems and the rights of all individuals, communities and groups are respected.

The Rotuma Lands Act, the Rotuma Act, the Native Land Trust Act, the Native Lands Act, the Fijian Affairs Act and the Banaban Act were all included and protected under Section 185 of the 1997 Constitution. Those provisions, unfortunately, were not included in the 2013 Constitution. So, the laws relating to Fiji's indigenous peoples may be amended by the Government with the simple

majority in the House.

Now, that the Great Council of Chiefs has been reinstated, I urge the Chiefs and residents of Rotuma to participate in the determination of matters pertaining to their functions, including the revision of legislations, that include meaningful consultations and dialogues through free prior and informed consensus.

Chapter 122 of the Rotuma Act created the Council of Rotuma, a statutory authority. The seven elected representatives from each of the seven districts and the seven district leaders, make up that Council. As stated, each of Rotuma's seven districts elects one representative of the Council and the traditional chief of each district is also a Council member. The seven Chiefs are chosen according to traditional custom; the election is usually for life.

The seven elected representatives are elected for three-year terms by resident Rotuma islanders, aged 21 years and over. Candidacy is restricted to persons who are eligible to vote. The full members of the Council elect a chairman from among themselves.

For the honourable Members information, the Rotuma Island Council was not dissolved but the subvention fund was suspended for two consecutive financial years due to non-compliance to financial regulations by the Council. The matter has now been rectified by the Council and the annual subvention funds have been released.

On elections, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Rotuma Island Council held its election on 24th August, 2023, where the current chairman was re-elected for another three year term. It is critical to note that elections are held every three years and the current electoral procedure, as outlined in the current Rotuma Act, is still being followed. This is another critical area of interest that will be subject for consultation and thorough discussion once the review of the Act commences.

The Council now looks after the overall development on the island. The Council is now allocated budgetary grant and the Rotuma's Subvention Fund that is administered by the Office to support its daily operational needs and to provide development assistance to communities in Rotuma. Just because I plan to intend to reinstate the Rabi Island Council, I would like to read our relative inquiry, *Kam na Mauri*.

The Rabi Island Council of Leaders was established under the Banaban Settlement Act 1970, Cap 123. The last election of the Council members was held in 2011. As the Prime Minister and Minister in charge of Rabi Island matters, I have appointed an administrator for the Rabi Island Council of Leaders to oversee the Council's operations and restore the annual Rabi Subvention Fund as one of the Coalition Government's top priorities for the people of Rabi, who had been left behind in social and economic advancements over the years when the subvention fund was withheld by the Office.

The Council was dissolved in 2013 due to the mismanagement of funds and pending court cases for some of its members. Legal advice was sought, noting that the dissolution was due to the failure to meet financial standards and requirements within specified timeframes.

General elections for the Council were first held in November 1996 in accordance with Regulation 1951(2)(1) of the Banaban Settlement Act. Elections are scheduled to take place in January of the following four years - 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020. Therefore, the next General Election should have been held in January 2024, in accordance with Article 2(1).

In order to improve governance, oversee island development and prepare for the next election,

the Office is currently consulting with and reviewing portions of the Banaban Settlement Act in collaboration with the interim Rabi Administrator. This will ensure that the Act takes into account current and emerging development trends.

A major change to be expected from the review was for the election process to be aligned to that of the Fijian Elections Office in terms of voting age and the criteria for those wishing to contest the elections and selection process. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Banaban Settlement Act's existing voting age is 21, that must also be changed to 18 in order to comply with the Fijian Elections Regulations.

The Kioa Island and Melanasian *Vasu iTaukei*, Talofa, welcome and *bula vinaka*. Apart from that legislative role, the office also coordinates and facilitates the disbursement of development grants of Melanesian *Vasu iTaukei* and Kioa Island based on community priorities.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are there any supplementary questions?

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- I thank the honourable Prime Minister for a very detailed response on Rotuma, but my question is related to Rabi Island. I understand the Faith Candidate of The People's Alliance Party (PAP), Mr. Jacob Korotake, was appointed as the Administrator, and he had come up with a policy that anyone who is a non-Banaban who wants to enter Rabi Island, it has been reported in the media, that one has to get police clearance to enter Rabi Island. Is the honourable Prime Minister aware of it? And if, yes, has any action been taken against this member?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am not aware of that and I will follow it up with the police.

Status of Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programme
(Question No. 262/2024)

HON. J.R. VOCEA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I ask my question, I would like to also join the other honourable Members of Parliament who have spoken before me to congratulate you and thank you for being appointed as the Speaker of this august Parliament.

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation update Parliament on the current status of the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programme?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also wish to join my colleagues in congratulating you, Mr. Speaker, on your appointment to be our Speaker. I know that we are in good hands and there will be many wonderful years ahead with your leadership.

Also, to the favourite son of Kabara, Osea Kolinisau, who brought so much joy to our nation early this morning - the victory in Dubai. I am sure, like most of you, the quarter final with the French, that last try, I am not a good loser, I left and went to my room, and my family was still cheering and apparently, someone from Nadroga picked up the ball and went to score that try.

(Laughter)

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank honourable Vocea for his question. I know that this is a programme that not only the honourable Members in this Parliament hold dear, but our people across the country.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the benefit of those listening online, in June last year, the World Bank approved financing of US\$200 million or FJ\$447 million for a ten-year multi-phase programmatic

approach to tourism development in Vanua Levu. This is on a highly concessional terms through the International Development Association.

As I have shared in this august Parliament, the US\$100 million dollars, while earmarked for the tourism programme, will greatly benefit other sectors. The crux of this programme is to mobilise investments in resilient infrastructure and essential services, create a more enabling business environment and to enhance institutional coordination. It is known as *Na Vualiku Project*, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

We are in phase one of *Na Vualiku Project* valued at US\$61.5 million, it runs from year one to year six. This phase will set the foundations for sustainable tourism in Vanua Levu and is where we are starting. In September of this year, the honourable Prime Minister officially launched the *Na Vualiku Project* in Savusavu and he also officially opened our office there.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2024-2025 financial year, the project has been allocated an estimated \$13.6 million. Of this, the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation has provided \$7.69 million, Fiji Roads Authority - \$2.4 million and Fiji Airports - \$3.4 million.

From the Ministry's side, considerable work has begun. We are first undertaking a Strategic Environmental Social Assessment (SESA) to look at all the environmental and social risks and impacts that could be expected with the implementation of the integrated tourism master plan, a firm has been engaged.

In parallel with SESA, we are now in the process of preparing an integrated tourism master plan which will be an important framework that will give us a 25-year forecast for tourism growth to Vanua Levu and Taveuni. It will also include baseline, and a scenario forecast that can tell us the investments and finances needed to cater for future demand. This work will commence by April 2025.

By January 2025, we will commence working on a Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) pilot programme. Here we will map out tourism MSMEs, community-based tourism and women cultural enterprises, understand their specific needs, then design a pilot programme. Together with the National Trust of Fiji, we are progressing work on the design of the Waisali Forest Reserve Visitor Centre and Tracks, et cetera.

We are working with our partners on the design and feasibility study of the solar panel installations. The Savusavu Town Council have identified a few locations where the panels could be installed. There are, of course, a number of large infrastructural activities that will require more coordination, for example, solid waste management.

We have established a waste management committee to support the project in terms of land identification and acquisition. The Fiji Roads Authority have also commenced work on the design phase of the Labasa – Savusavu Link Scenic Road before civil works begin.

With respect to airports for Vanua Levu, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to start landing ATR 72 to make a difference in carrying the passengers to Vanua Levu. Right now, only Labasa can take the ATR 72, and the plan is to extend Matei to also cater for ATR 72. There is a site that I visited on Friday, very much in the news in Vunilagi which can take ATR 72 and possibly smaller jets. Vunilagi is very well situated and is located about 40 minutes' drive from Savusavu, very picturesque, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The Na Vualiku Project is progressing very well and I might just add, I was there on Thursday and Friday, in Labasa and Savusavu, the boom in those two economies is very evident and I think there are great years ahead for Vanua Levu. And for this programme to work, we need the buy-in, not just from other government ministries but other government organisations, civil society, private sector, development partners and communities.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join honourable Members in welcoming and also congratulating you on your election, and I hope you will be very lenient with the Opposition MPs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Deputy Prime Minister for the project and looking after our Vanua Levu people.

As much as we promote the Northern Development Programme or the Vanua Levu Tourism Development Programme, one of the major issues is our hospital. Are there funds allocated or priority allocations for our hospital in Savusavu? There will be more tourists, there will be more developments going on in infrastructure, but our hospital is in a bad state. Will you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister, look into improving our hospital in Savusavu?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- I understand the question is on the hospital, I missed that one. It is very much in the plan with the honourable Minister for Health, but let me assure the learned gentlemen, Savusavu today is booming in a manner that I have not seen for many years and thank the Coalition Government. It is all set to....

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- There are many wonderful years ahead for Savusavu, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

MR. SPEAKER.- Can we have the question from honourable Bala?

HON. P.K. BALA.- May I also take this time to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, of this august Parliament. Can the honourable Minister clarify whether the construction of the Labasa Airport is part of the Tourism Development Programme? If yes, when is the completion time? On what basis was the contractor awarded the contract?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, work on Labasa has started. The terminal building is being enlarged right now. It is a matter of acquiring the land necessary for that, Mr. Speaker Sir. The process is in place, and we are in the hands of very professional people, people from the World Bank who are managing this and based in Savusavu, as I have indicated. So, you can be assured that the quality of the work is going to be of the highest standard, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also join my colleagues in congratulating you for your appointment as Speaker of the House. We are indeed proud of the achievements of Kabara. May I also say that for that reason, we from Verata are very elated as well, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

A question to the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, you have been talking about development of airport facilities, but my question is related to seaports. The honourable Tikoduadua would be aware that few years back he visited with the team concerning the development of seaports in Vanua Levu, particularly in Savusavu, the move to get the roll-on, roll-off facility from where it is now to Balaga so that tourism can be facilitated in the current port facility where dolphins and

others are installed. So, my question to the honourable Minister is, are there considerations as well for the development of port facilities in Savusavu particularly?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just want to comment, what the Opposition side enjoy now was something that we were denied over the last eight years. You have been very kind to them, there are more than three questions per question. It is something that we welcome in this House.

There is dialogue on that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is a need that has been articulated for a seaport. What we have here, Mr. Speaker, Sir, \$200 million is in three phases. Its first phase will be the learning phase. What we learned from this one will determine the second phase and third phase. We want to do it carefully and properly. It is very much in the dialogue, honourable Leader of the Opposition.

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am glad to see that the Government is picking up on all the action work that was done by the government before it; put that land in place, the Look North Policy.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. J. USAMATE.- I am glad to see that you did not chuck everything out the door, in particular, I am interested in the cross-island road linking Labasa to Savusavu. We have the Lomolomo Slip up there. I noticed that you said that you wanted to make it more scenic. I do know what it is that is going to make it more scenic than the way it is right now. How, in particular, are you going to make this road more scenic especially the Lomolomo Slip that keeps dropping?

HON. V.R. GAVOKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drive from Labasa to Savusavu these days is about one and half hours or more to two hours. We are trying to shorten the drive to make it easier for tourists to arrive through Labasa. For the reason, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is that only Labasa Acan take the bigger aircraft – ATR 72. Savusavu cannot even accept the full load of the Badeirante and the other smaller aircrafts. So, Labasa is the entry point right now and by developing the road, you are going to make it quicker to commute between Labasa and Savusavu.

On a scenic basis, there will be rest points along the way. We are aiming to make it pleasant for our tourists driving between Labasa and Savusavu, given that some of them would have travelled quite some distance to come into Nadi and then Nadi into Labasa and then Labasa to Savusavu. So, the aim is to make the drive pleasant.

MR. SPEAKER.- We now move on to the next Oral Question. I am made aware that the honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry is not present with us today. In such cases, the former Speaker and my predecessor, would rule that the Question be deferred to a later date when the honourable Minister is present. I will abide by that precedent and, therefore, honourable Members, Oral Question 263/2024 is deferred to a later sitting date.

(Question No. 263/2024 deferred to a later date)

Fiji's Developments & Plans - International Solar Alliance
(Question No. 264/2024)

HON. E.Y. IMMANUEL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, congratulations on your ascending the Office of Speaker in this august House.

Can the honourable Minister for Public Works, Meteorological Services and Transport update Parliament on some of the developments and plans related to Fiji's membership on the International Solar Alliance?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members, I rise to take this opportunity to speak today about the significant role of the International Solar Alliance (ISA). I join my colleagues in congratulating you, Sir, in your appointment as the Speaker of the House.

The ISA has been vigorously working with Fiji to leverage solar energy as a critical pathway for energy transformation and sustainable development, recognising the significant potential of solar power to diversify energy generation, improve energy access and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Fiji formally joined the ISA by ratifying the framework agreement on 25th October, 2017. The Ministry, as the focal Ministry for ISA, has been making substantial strides in solar energy implementation and capacity development in the last few years. One of the notable achievements has been the successful commissioning of solar projects in the healthcare sector.

The ISA provided technical and financial support to develop demonstration solar projects resulting in the solarisation of health centres, each equipped with eight KWP solar installations. This initiative not only demonstrates the practical application of solar technology but also highlights the potential for improving energy infrastructure in critical public services such as health.

Capacity building has also been a cornerstone for ISA's engagement with Fiji. Through comprehensive training programmes, the ISA supported human resource development across various domains. To-date, the country has benefitted from targeted training initiatives including participants in Masters level training, Degree and also training in solar rooftop technology and solar SMEs banker's training. These programmes are designed to build local expertise and create a sustainable ecosystem for solar and energy development and deployment.

The current engagement between ISA and Fiji's multi-faceted and forward looking, a significant progress has been a letter of co-operation between ISA and the Ministry, focusing on scaling solar rooftop projects in various facilities including schools, health centres as well as developing solar mini grid projects for rural communities.

Sir, the country has also expressed keen interest in expanding solar applications particularly in agriculture, with the proposal for 27 solar pumps under the Scaling Solar Application for Agriculture Use (SSAAU) Programme and in the Water-Energy Nexus to ensure that all Fijians including those residing in the rural and maritime areas have access to clean and safe drinking water. There are numerous diesel-powered pumps and boreholes around the country, and we are working with ISA to solarise this.

Sir, several promising initiatives, as I had already mentioned, including potential sites for solar mini grids, rooftop projects, floating solar projects, solar powered ferries or boats. Discussions are ongoing for implementing a solar grid at the Public Rental Board (PRB) with a tripartite agreement already shared for signing. The ISA is also providing policy and regulatory support to create an enabling environment for the private sector investment for solar energy development and deployment.

Looking ahead, the ISA is planning to support Fiji in implementing innovative solar solutions including solar cold storage facilities for the solarisation of health centres under ISA and Ministry of

External Affairs (MEA) Quad Climate Initiatives. We are currently discussing feasibility of hybrid boats with solar power and expanding solarised streetlights for our roads and community areas. These efforts align with Fiji's broad goals of improving energy security, reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable development. All key areas were discussed at the recent COP.

Sir, as Fiji continues to embrace solar energy, the partnership with ISA represents a promising pathway to address energy challenges, support economic resilience and contribute to global climate action.

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU.- A supplementary question, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I would just like to ask the honourable Minister, there has been continuous resistance from EFL in the private sector to contribute in the provision of solar power to their grid. In your own experience, Sir, do you feel that the resistance is hampering the provision of solar energy to provide power into the main grid?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- That is a very good question which fundamentally is the problem in Fiji relating to energy. In relation to ISA, we are not collaborating in terms of the current diagnostic study, but it is with International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). So, the study is currently in progress in terms of analysing or assessing what would be the best fit in terms of the generation, transmission and distribution of power which is currently being handled by EFL in addition to the regulatory functions.

Basically, it boils down to the current regulatory and legislative setup which we have now. As you may note from the last Government Minister's note which could be hindering the progress towards renewable energy, which is why that study is being conducted. From that, further discussions are being held with all stakeholders, we would determine what would be the right legislative and regulatory framework and structure to, not only enable renewable energy but to enhance or provide the impetus to move it forward. That study should be concluded towards the end of this year and further discussions with stakeholders in how we could move that forward as a Government, especially in the legislative and regulatory part to enhance or increase investments in renewable energy to achieve our target of 100 percent renewable energy by 2030.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Honourable Minister, in terms of the capacity building, I understand that ISA will have some capacity building, but it is actually tailored. Are we talking about capacity building from a Government's perspective or is it Government, EFL and private sector in terms of capacity building?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- At the moment, that covers ISA and Government but with the initiative to establish a Solar Training Centre in Fiji, which is currently in discussion, that will also cover the non-government including small businesses that might come into the maintenance of solar equipment, et cetera, especially if it is located out in the villages and communities. Those need to be localised in terms of the capacity to repair their own, in the village setting, for example.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, while the commitment remains to have a carbon neutral environment in the Pacific region, the question to the honourable Minister is, what is the current percentage of renewable energy or clean energy produced by EFL? Is there or will there be a measure of carbon footprint in terms of mining the materials for solar projects and its disposal?

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Minister, do you wish to answer? It is rather hypothetical, in my view.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Definitely, we are moving towards the target which is 100 percent renewable energy by 2030. It sounds ambitious but it can be achieved because right now, renewable energy is around 60 percent. If we include those renewable energy proposals (there are quite a few of them here) then we could lessen the carbon footprint.

Safety of Troops – UNIFIL & Other Peacekeeping Missions
(Question No. 265/2024)

HON. S.T. KOROILAVESAU asked the Government, upon notice:

With rising tensions in the Middle East, particularly Israel's recent attack on Lebanon, can the honourable Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs inform Parliament on what measures are being taken to ensure the safety of our troops serving in UNIFIL and other Peacekeeping Missions?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, I thank the honourable Koroilavesau for raising this critical issue concerning the safety of our troops serving in the Middle East amidst the ongoing tensions in the region. However, before I continue with the answer to that question, Sir, first of all, I join my colleagues to congratulate you on your ascend to the Speaker's Chair of this august House. May I wish you success during your term as Speaker of the Fijian Parliament.

On the same token, I would also like to congratulate coach Kolinisau, captain and the boys of the Fiji Team for delivering a sweet victory to Fiji this morning. I am sure it made all of us happy.

To continue answering the honourable Koroilavesau's question, I would just like to clarify that at the moment there is only one Fijian Officer deployed to UNIFIL, Lebanon and additionally, under the Fijian Service with United Nations Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO).

Our contingents in the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), they all remain unaffected by the recent escalations in the region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, ensuring the safety and the wellbeing of our peacekeepers is a top priority for the Coalition Government. The situation in the Middle East presents significant risks and we are closely monitoring the developments. Our troops are well prepared, they are safe, strictly adhere to Standard Operating Procedures and are supported by robust contingency plans for potential evacuation.

The Ministry is in regular contact with their headquarters of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. The joint taskforce commander at Blackrock looks after our peacekeeping troops that are deployed out in the Middle East and throughout the world. Also, with the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York (DPKO) to ensure effective coordination and support for our peacekeepers at this time. We are also consulting with some governments including the United Arab Emirates on temporarily stationing RFMF troops and equipment in their territory which would enhance our readiness. Additionally, we are working with development partners to explore options for strategic air support, if needed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government remains committed to safeguarding our peacekeepers and Fijians residing in the Middle East. We are receiving situation reports daily and we keep our stakeholders informed. We are prepared to respond swiftly to any emerging challenges.

I would just like to also inform, Mr. Speaker, that the honourable Prime Minister recently had given directions to Government that the Fijian Government will work with the United Nations in as

far as the safety of our troops is concerned. So, we align ourselves to the UN and then we work with them in looking after the safety of our troops.

As part of this commitment also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are expecting Government delegations to visit the Middle East in the early 2025, and this will allow us to assess their conditions, reinforcement, contingency measures and personally convey the appreciation in support of the Fijian people for the work that they are doing for us.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a supplementary question for the honourable Minister. When it comes to safety, are you satisfied with the equipment that the troops are issued with, particularly, protection vehicles? We know that the bushmaster is aging, so are there plans to get in additional protection vehicles as well, because this is so important for the safety of our troops?

HON. P. TIKODUADUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition is absolutely right. I would like to assure you, again, and this august House and the Fijian people, that the safety of our troops remains our top priority. Every soldier or officer whom we deploy in the Middle East or any part of the world, we would like to see them come back. So, post protection measures are an important and integral part of the RFMF, and the Government would like to do that.

In addition to that, last year, the honourable Prime Minister took receipt of 14 bushmasters that are now in Nadi. We are working on plans to send, at least, seven of those to the mission area, to UNDOF in particular. However, we are hindered at the moment because there is only a limited number of vehicles that the UN will allow, a number that is allowable by both, the Syrian side and Israeli side in the demarcated area. So, that is something we are working on.

Ultimately, at the end of the day, that is the ideal thing to do. I know we had bushmasters because we were trying to get hold of the Force Mobile Reserve for UNDOF. Unfortunately, that has slipped through, so these bushmasters are primarily there for the protection of our troops, and for supporting our Fijian troops within the locations that they are deployed. Hopefully, at some point, we will be able to have all of our troops on peacekeeping out there, or the numbered personal carriers or some kind of armoured protection.

Building Permit Applications System
(Question No. 266/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government update Parliament on the work undertaken by the Ministry on the Building Permit Application System and how it will contribute to order and efficiency of the building development process in Fiji?

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

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I table my response this afternoon, I also would like to join you to also congratulate our winnings Sevens Team that won in Dubai this morning. I also stand proud in this august Parliament to share that the first player who scored the try hails from my Province of Namosi and is also named as player of the final.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the building and construction sector serves as a vital pillar of our economy, reflecting the level of investments, job creation and economic activity. The vibrant and dynamic

construction industry is a clear indicator of our nation's path of growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, from January 2023 to November 2024, the Ministry has received a total of 2,186 building permit applications valued collectively at \$1.16 billion. Notably, 25 percent of these applications are for commercial, industrial and tourism-related projects. These are sectors that play a transformative role in Fiji's economic diversification and resilience.

This upward trajectory is a testament to the growing accommodation in Fiji's economy. Also underscored is the need for the Government to deliver efficient and effective services to ensure that these investments translate into real outcomes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Coalition Government recognises that innovation terminology are key to meeting the evolving needs of our citizens and investors. By leveraging modern systems and streamlining our processes, we aim to create a building permit application system that is not only more efficient but also fosters greater transparency and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to inform this august Parliament that the Ministry of Local Government, in line with the Government's digital transformation agenda, is working very closely with the Ministry of Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications through the consultations to develop the Building Permit Approval System (BPAS). This system is a crucial component of the project business now in Fiji, aligning with its goal of streamlining business processes and fostering economic growth.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the BPAS's portal aims to revolutionize the building permit approvals process in Fiji. By digitising the entire workflow, we aim to reduce bureaucratic delays associated with manual processing, increase transparency and compliance and, most of all, enhance efficiency in our service delivery by significantly reducing turnaround processing times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, significant progress has been made in the development of the BPAS portal. From requirements approval and referral agencies to work on the process of harmonising all requirements of key agencies into one checklist.

Currently, the Ministry is piloting a very important component of the BPAS portal whereby all building applications that had been lodged at all Municipal Councils are being tracked electronically with real time updates being shared between the Municipal Councils and the Department of Town and Country Planning.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, effective from 1st September, 2024, all Municipal Councils adopted a unified tracking system, accompanied by an Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for assessing and processing building applications. Additionally, a standardised checklist for receiving applications was implemented across all Councils to ensure consistency and transparency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the process for building permit applications follows a structured approach. Applications are first vetted by all Municipal Councils to ensure compliance with local zonings and other planning regulations. Once overall requirements are met, applications are then forwarded to the Department of Town & Country Planning for compliance search with National Planning Standards and Building Codes. The two applications are then returned to Councils which then release the building applications back to the applicants.

Through this tracking system, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Department of Town & Country Planning and Municipal Councils can now provide regular updates to consultants and applicants on the status of their building applications, enhancing communication and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the approved Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) provide clear timelines for processing building permit applications. As of now, with the normal processes, Councils must process applications within 14 days and submit to the Department of Town & Country Planning, where the Department of Town & Country Planning then processes applications within 20 working days from the date of lodgement and, that is, provided all requirements are met.

Rezoning, Mr. Speaker, Sir, takes 45 working days to complete processing of applications, whereas a subdivision takes approximately 30 working days. This timeline reflects significant improvements in efficiency given by the streamlining of processes and introduction of the standardised procedure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the thorough checks conducted at both levels, that is, the Council as well as Department of Town & Country Planning, are very important to ensure that proposed developments comply with legal and technical standards. This includes, as alluded earlier, on the checking of zoning, plot boundary setbacks and alignment with municipal regulations by the Municipal Councils, while the notification of compliance with national planning frameworks, compliance with the Town Planning Act and general provisions, and environmental consideration is done by the Town & Country Planning Team.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the introduction of a digitised tracking system, along with the SOPs and standardisation, has resulted in measurable improvements in application processing times. For instance, the building and development control applications are now processed within one month.

The proportion of subdivision applications processed within one month has increased from 22 percent in 2022 to 31.4 percent in 2024. Collectively, Mr. Speaker, Sir, 67.3 percent of subdivision applications were processed within three months in 2024, compared to 62.7 percent in 2023, and rezoning applications processed within one month also increased from 63.4 percent in 2023 to 64.4 percent in 2024.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these incremental improvements in the manual processes lay a strong foundation for even greater efficiency and transformative change once the online system is fully operationalised. We also anticipate the timeline between Councils and Town & Country Planning to reduce to 21 days.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a need to amend the legislative requirements, the amendments of the Town & Country Planning Act to align with the evolving landscape of digital technology and streamline processes required under this new system. The Ministry is also going to review some of the schedules, as well as to ensure that when the system comes into effect, it is going to work for both, Municipal as well as the Town & Country Planning Team.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry remains steadfast in its commitment to modernise the building permit approval process. The development of the new system will aim to streamline procedures, reduce delays in the processing of the applications and enhance transparency.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, through you, honourable Minister, I understand this will go online shortly. In terms of the necessary infrastructure with all the Councils that require this to fulfil what you are actually trying to do in terms of digitisation, is the Ministry itself digitised enough and together with the authorities that are tied into it, will they be fully digitised by the time this actually goes online?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Member for the question. It is a very important question because with any new system that we are going to use, we must make

sure that we have the necessary infrastructure to support the system. It is something we are also working with the Ministry of Trade, through their consultants, to assist us in identifying some of the key areas, especially when there is a need to review and amend the infrastructure that are required to support the system.

That is something that we are also going to take into account and that will also be discussed at all levels, that is, the Municipal levels, as well as within the Ministry itself or the Government itself, to ensure that when the system is taken on board, it is going to work for the purpose that it is being created for.

HON. F.S. KOYA.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, just quickly, honourable Minister, in terms of the legality of it, will you also be required to change some of the regulations and laws to facilitate all of these and how fast will that be done, or is that already with the Office of the Attorney-General?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have also mentioned in my response that some legislations and other aspects of the legislative requirements for the Town Planning Act needs to be amended and that is something that the team is closely working on right now. We should review to ensure that before we actually have the system on board, the legislation is there to support this new system. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. I.B. SERUIRATU.— A quick question to the honourable Minister and this is based on observations as former Minister for Disaster. We have very good systems and processes, but there are still those that do work behind the regulations that are set, and this is particularly concerning municipalities outside Suva. There were a lot of projects undertaken without meeting the minimum standards.

You have talked about thorough checking and monitoring. How is capacity in the smaller Councils and what is the Ministry going to do to address such issues, particularly in the absence of monitoring such projects, whether its Clerk of Works, because this is an issue, honourable Minister, and I wish to bring it to your attention.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.— Mr. Speaker, Sir, the question raised by the honourable Leader of the Opposition is really a very good one because it is something that is also experienced at the municipal level in terms of monitoring some of the developments and some of the projects that are happening at the local government level.

For some of the Councils, they have also Town Planners and Engineers that do go around and monitor the projects that they have at the local government level. We are also going to improve our monitoring system whereby we are also going to have officers stationed in places and assist the various municipalities in some of the projects that they monitor. Projects are also being monitored at our level as well as those that are at the municipality level.

MR. SPEAKER.— Now, we are at the situation whereby for the purpose 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 in

today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have two more Oral Questions, Written Questions and also Schedule 3 - Motions for Debate, in addition to Item No. 7, the Bills which will also be considered today.

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

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will suspend the proceedings for a break. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 3.46 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 4.25 p.m.

QUESTIONS

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we are at the tail end of the Oral Questions for today.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to join my other colleagues in welcoming you to Parliament and congratulating you on your appointment and also congratulate our Fiji Sevens Team for their achievements after a long droughts time. I hope both will bring us the much relief which we desperately need.

Naduruloulou Research Station (Question No. 267/2024)

HON. S. NAND asked Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Agriculture and Waterways update Parliament on the progress in converting the Naduruloulou Research Station to solely focus on research and development of organic agriculture in Fiji?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, organic farming contributes to the protection of the environment and mitigates the impacts of climate change. It improves the long-term fertility of the soil, increases levels of biodiversity and reduces pollution on the environment while maintaining high and more welfare standards.

I thank the honourable Nand for the question as it provides an opportunity to inform this august Parliament and the nation about the plans behind converting Naduruloulou Research Station for organic research work. This will be the first amongst the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Pacific region.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Naduruloulou Research Station, a pivotal agricultural research facility has been undergoing a transformative process to evolve into an organic station that will be crucial in the research and development of organic products in Fiji and the Pacific. This initiative is in line with national commitments under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) towards achieving sustainable agricultural systems and meeting the increasing demands for safe food.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the transition of the Naduruloulou Research Station to an organic station began in 2022. Since then, no synthetic fertilisers or chemicals were allowed into the station. The management of the fields has been through mechanical and manual means. The Research Officers at the Naduruloulou and Koronivia Research Stations have been working in partnership with the Pacific Community, Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom) to facilitate the transition of the station towards obtaining organic certification under the Pacific Guarantee System with aspiration of ultimately achieving the global standard of third party certification.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, upgrading and improving the infrastructure in the station is key to support this transition. The Ministry is currently engaging in discussions with the neighbouring village of Kasavu and nearby settlements regarding the plans for the station and these are primarily to reduce the risk of cross-contamination of synthetic materials and non-organic agricultural activities around the periphery of the station. This transition cannot be achieved in isolation and requires collaboration with local, regional and international organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the progress achieved at Naduruloulou Research Station in its shift towards

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the progress achieved at Naduruloulou Research Station in its shift towards becoming an organic facility is commendable. The ongoing assistance from the Government will facilitate the establishment of a certified organic agriculture station.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the introduction of organic agriculture into Fiji's production system is an option to ensure the sustainability of our natural resources. The Fiji Organic Association was established in 2006 and the Ministry of Agriculture has been collaborating closely with them in the development of the organic farming sector in Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the Ministry has developed a bacterium culture to restore soil microbial populations and build soil fertility in cultivating areas. This culture was launched on 10th June, 2020 and so far been distributed free of charge Fiji-wide from almost all agriculture stations. It has been developed to target compost which were also launched as organic fertilisers in 2022. The continued production and supply of organic fertilisers for free to farmers, more than 300 tonnes have been supplied to assist farmers who cannot afford chemical fertilisers and may one day transition to becoming full time organic farmers. The National Organic Policy is in its finalising stage and this will guide the organic sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the conversion of Naduruloulou Research Station into a centre of excellence for organic agriculture research is a strategic move that aligns with Government's broader agriculture and environmental policies. It demonstrates our commitment to fostering a sustainable agriculture future for Fiji, enhancing public health, support sustainable tourism and creating a more resilient agriculture sector. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, can the honourable Minister update Parliament on what crops or species are being propagated in Naduruloulou Station, and is this knowledge or species being disseminated to the to the farmers, and in particular what crops are these?

HON. V.T.T.K. RAYALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, Naduruloulou Research Station is mainly a tree crops station. Most of the tree cops that are grown locally are propagated from Naduruloulou Research Station. We also have cocoa and coffee as part of our tree crops propagated there. Apart from that, we have indigenous fruit trees also, in addition to lime because of the demand from the public. These are being propagated and distributed sometimes according to orders from interested farmers. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Telecom Fiji & Kordia Group - Boosting Fiji's Digital Connectivity
(Question No. 268/2024)

HON. K.V. RAVU asked the Government, upon notice.

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications update Parliament on how Telecom Fiji, in partnership with New Zealand's Kordia, is progressing in boosting Fiji's digital connectivity?

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the honourable member for the question on the ICT development in Fiji, particularly with regards to the North. But I guess before I do that, in way of context, perhaps in the last two years of the current People's Coalition Government under the leadership of the honourable Prime Minister, you would been seeing the transition that is happening in the ICT space that we are trying to rapidly evolve to capture the advancements in digital technology and also as a result, enhance connectivity services to our people, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Just this past Saturday, the honourable Prime Minister did the groundbreaking ceremony, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for one of the biggest ICT developments and in my view, Sir, probably one of the most significant historical events in Fiji in the recent past, when he performed the groundbreaking of the Google Data Centre. Google is in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and with this, it signals a new dawn, in terms of how the ICT industry will be conducted in Fiji. It also signals to the rest of the world that one of the largest tech companies in the world has come to our shores. It will certainly attract with it, some investment as well.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with regards to the developments and certainly now, with regards to the Northern developments as it were, Telecom Fiji Limited (TFL) had actually forged a partnership with Kordia, which is a New Zealand state-owned enterprise. It is a major provider of television, radio broadcasting facilities and communication networks. The partnership is aimed at implementing Telecom Fiji's Northern fibre connectivity project.

It aims to extend the connectivity between Labasa onward to Seaqaqa, and then onward to Savusavu to the submarine cable landing station. It is scheduled for completion in January 2025 or at least the first quarter of 2025. It is about 75 percent complete according to Telecom, so it is tracking well Mr. Speaker, Sir. Under the partnership, Kordia is supplying transmission equipment, that will be used to deliver high-capacity fibre links between Savusavu and Labasa. These high-capacity fibre links will reduce dependency on microwave links between Savusavu and Labasa which are of course limited in capacity and susceptible to disruptions during adverse weather.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a key feature of this project is its integration with Fiji's domestic subsea cable which connects Vanua Levu to Viti Levu via the Tui Samoa cable. This will further strengthen the national digital backbone of our country and create seamless network across the two main islands. And if you have been hearing, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the explanations by the learned Deputy Prime Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Honourable Viliame Gavoka, about the initiative in the North, what is being done through Telecom, will set up Vanua Levu well in the years to come.

It is, of course, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a game changer for Vanua Levu and for Telecom and it allows them to leverage technology into the North and it will not be too long when we will start seeing business process outsourcings (BPOs) opens up in the North, I suspect, and other ICT industries a lot closer to the Northern Division. In my view Mr, Speaker, Sir, that is a welcome development and as most of us believe on this side of the Parliament, Vanua Levu will be the next economic frontier for Fiji.

Written Questions

Identified Sites for Starlink Satellite Services (Question No. 269/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Co-operatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications provide a list of the 240 sites identified to receive Starlink or any other similar satellite services and specify the areas they will cover to improve connectivity in remote and rural regions?

HON. M.S.N.KAMIKAMICA.- I have, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the written response for the honourable learned Member.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Deputy Prime Minister. The written response is now tabled in Parliament.

Revenue Generated by Fiji Airways Aviation Academy
(Question No. 270/2024)

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

Can the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation inform Parliament on how much revenue was generated by the Fiji Airways Aviation Academy since 2020?

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

Statistics on Municipal Councils - January 2024 To date
(Question No. 271/2024)

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

Can the honourable Minister for Housing and Local Government inform Parliament on the following for each Municipal Council from January 2024 to date -

- (a) list of Councils currently run by an Executive Chair including the salary levels and the dates of appointment; and
- (b) total expenditure (inclusive of allowance/salary, travel allowances, meals, and accommodation) for Special Administrators and Executive Chairs?

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, I shall table my response to the question asked by the honourable Member.

Statistics on Low Value Mineral Extraction
(Question No. 272/2024)

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA asked the Government, upon notice:

Can the honourable Minister for Lands and Mineral Resources inform Parliament on the following:

- (a) total number of applications received in the period from 1 January 2023 to 31st July 2024 for license to extract low value minerals by Division;
- (b) total number of licenses issued in the period from 1 January 2023 to 31st July 2024 to extract low value minerals by division; and
- (c) total number of applications rejected or shelved in the period from 1st January 2023 to 31st July 2024 for license to extract low value minerals by division?

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 45(3), I intend to table the answer to that question at a later date of Parliament.

PRESIDENTIAL PENSIONS (AMENDMENT) BILL 2024

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move:

That the -

- (a) Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Bill No. 20/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or any other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Thursday, 5th December, 2024 and that one hour be given to debate the Bill with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to second the motion.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move that the Presidential Pensions (Amendment) Bill 2024 be now debated in this sitting of Parliament.

This Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, needs to be put to debate now as there has been sufficient discussions on the same with other Ministers. The Presidential Pensions Act 1994 provides the legislative framework for the pension of the former Governor Generals and Presidents of Fiji. This law was enacted during the term the SVT-GVP Coalition Government which I led from 1992 to 1999.

The provisions allow for the payment of pension as well as other benefits as follows:

- (1) Provision for the installation, connection, maintenance and rental of a telephone in any private residence of his or hers, and to meet all charges in respect of local calls originating from such telephone.
- (2) Provision of a Ministerial-type vehicle and a driver, including free-travel on scheduled trips of government ships.
- (3) Medical treatment, hospitalisation, drugs and all other hospital services locally, provided that where local specialised treatment and medical treatment overseas including the cost of treatment, accommodation and air travel necessary, such expenditure may be incurred at the discretion of the Prime Minister.
- (4) The provision of an annual budgetary allocation of an amount of \$30,0000 per annum and subject to periodic adjustments, to enable the person in receipt of the pension, to hire personal staff as required.
- (5) Provision of security protection at the discretion of the Prime Minister.

To be eligible for additional benefits, Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the current law, as it stands, a President must have completed five years of service. This term in Office in the Act should be consistent with the provisions of the term of Office in the Constitution.

Constitutions prior to the 2013 Constitution provided for a five-year term in office for President and Head of State. This was reduced to three years in the 2013 Constitution, but the Act remained unchanged. In fairness to Presidents who serve only three-year term in office, which is a complete term, it is important to amend section 8(1) of the Act to make it consistent with the Constitutional provisions and to allow the incumbent to be eligible for all benefits provided for in the Act.

I accordingly move that this Bill be now progressed further to debate, pursuant to Standing Order 51.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion, specifically on the provisions that had been cited. At the end of the debate, we would have the Right of Reply from the mover. Honourable Members are reminded that you are allowed a time limit of only 20 minutes. Are there anyone who wishes to intervene?

HON. M.D. BULITAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the motion that is before the House. I think it is necessary to go through Standing Order 51 given that it has only one amendment, that is, section 8 and it is long overdue. Given that this should have been done by the previous government when the 2013 Constitution came into being, this particular Act is to be inconsistent with the Constitution. I do not see in any way that this should be taken to the Committee given that this minor amendment can be debated in the substance on Thursday. I support the motion that it goes through Standing Order 51 because of this amendment, it only brings it to be consistent with the 2013 Constitution.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, just a small contribution on the Bill. We also do not have issues with this Bill being brought under Standing Order 51 as it is a minor amendment which is aligned to the Constitution. What we are doing is, with regards to the appointment of the President having two terms, then it becomes six years, so it is only appropriate to align the law as required by the Constitution itself.

Just a small question, once we amend this Bill and it becomes an Act whether it is going to be applied retrospectively because we have a President who has vacated office or is going to be from the day it is to be gazetted and moving forward. If we gazette it now, the President has already resigned so even though he had served for three years, he will not be eligible if it will not go in a retrospective manner. Can we get clarity on that before we vote on the motion, Mr. Speaker?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, the obvious answer to that question and suggestion is yes. It applies to the immediate past President, and it makes the provisions of the Constitution compliant with the Act or the Act complying with the Constitution.

MR. SPEAKER.- Are there anymore interventions?

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, there being no other response required at this time, I commend the motion to the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

FIJI TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION BILL 2024

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51(3), I move:

That the -

- (a) Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission Bill 2024 (Bill No. 19/2024), be considered by Parliament without delay;
- (b) Bill must pass through one stage at a single sitting of Parliament;
- (c) Bill must not be referred to a Standing Committee or any other Committee of Parliament;
- (d) Bill must be debated and voted upon by Parliament on Wednesday, 4th December, 2024 with the Right of Reply given to me as the Member moving this motion.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- I beg to second the motion.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, you are aware, this Bill was moved by First Reading on 3rd October, 2024. However, Standing Order 51(3) permits Bills to be fast-tracked at any stage. In that respect, this motion is in order.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, pursuant to Standing Order 51, I move that the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission Bill 2024 (Bill No. 19/2024) be now debated in this session of Parliament. This Bill, Mr. Speaker, Sir, needs to be put to debate now as there has been sufficient awareness and consultations undertaken, encompassing a broad cross-section of our society. I commend all those who have been participating in this.

On 10th September, 2023, Sir, this august House approved a motion to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Cabinet subsequently appointed a Steering Committee to consult and develop the legislative framework for consideration by this august House.

In drafting the Bill, the Committee conducted consultations with both victims/survivors and perpetrators of various political events. Consultations were also held with civil society, faith-based groups, human rights activists and advocates, media organisations, political parties, communities in the Northern, Western and Central Divisions. The Committee also engaged with youth groups as well as our diaspora community through digital platforms.

The basic elements of the Bill are drawn from the Commission of Inquiry Act. The Committee also learned from global experiences. Over the years around the world more than 50 countries at some point, established Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. One of the major purposes of these initiatives was to resolve historic injustices and abuses through public hearings, truth-telling and reconciliation between victims/survivors and perpetrators, as a way of moving beyond the painful past towards a peaceful future. It is hoped that many who have suffered gross human rights violations, and their families and communities will find healing and closure.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those who were in the Business Committee in the previous House will remember that I tried to move this motion with the Business Committee at that time, but it was not allowed. Now, I move that this Bill now progress further to debate pursuant to Standing Order 51.

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

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the motion has been tabled in the House and I think for all of us in this country, given the history that we have been through and all the tumultuous things that we have had in the past, we know the impact that it has had. It is not only having an impact on us, it has had an impact on those who come before us and it will happen again, it will have an impact on those who come after us.

I am not only talking about the events of *coups*, but I am also talking about all the things that ever happened in this country that have shaken this country to its very core. It is important that we do this. I think in all of our teachings, we talk about reconciliation and truth; that is true. I agree with

all of that. I agree with all the tenets that we have that these things need to take place, but what are the concerns that we have?

The honourable Prime Minister has talked at length and very eloquently about the fact that this is based on a lot of work done by Committees and the research that they have undertaken. But I think this critical Bill that we have here which people in this country have different views about, while it has gone through the lens of public opinion and the Committees that have done their work, I do not know the bureaucrats or the Civil Service that they have done it, it has not gone to the fine lens of the representatives of the people. It has not gone to the lens of their scrutiny and they are seeking their own opinions on this particular Bill because one of the things that we are talking about in truth and reconciliation, there are two aspects of this. There is the aspect of reconciliation and the aspect of truth.

What we tend to do a lot when we are talking about truth and reconciliation, we focus a lot on the reconciliation without the truth. True reconciliation happens when the truth comes out. It is important that we address and talk about these things because what we intend to do, we only talk about it to people in our own little niche and people that think like us. We need to talk about it openly.

I think Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is very important that this Bill, rather than being fast-tracked or going to Standing Order 51 for us to debate it immediately, it should go through the full parliamentary scrutiny.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. J. USAMATE.- We should allow the representatives of the voters of this country, their representatives who sit in Committees to have the opportunity to look into the Bill itself, to look into the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I believe, ultimately, in my heart and mind that it is absolutely necessary that this Bill should go to Committees. Let us consult with people. Let us, the representatives of voters, let the House of democracy also consult the people of this country. It is on that basis, Sir, that I do not agree with this motion to take it quickly for us to vote on it this week. I prefer to see that it goes through the Parliamentary Committees system.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Usamate, I had allowed you just a bit more freedom to speak on the motion, but if you had continued, I would rule you out of order because this is specifically on a technical nature. The motion is relevant only in so far as a process of how this Bill is going to come through the system and at a later stage in the arguments, my understanding is that you will indulge yourself in what you talked about on the merits or otherwise of the motion.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, what I was trying to say that the motion calls for it to be debated upon immediately. What I am against is that the idea of technical aspect to this nature for us to vote on it immediately this week. I am against that and I am, therefore, putting it to the Committee.

MR. SPEAKER.- I accept that.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wanted to make a very brief comment on this, and perhaps in response to honourable Usamate's concern, this Bill was already tabled in Parliament. It is there and honourable Members have had a lot of time to look through it. The consultation that has been done throughout the country is quite extensive, and so the timing is also very important, as the honourable Prime Minister said.

I think we should be really grateful that the honourable Prime Minister, under his leadership,

has taken the step to do this process through reconciliation in this country. The term of this Parliament is another two years. It is urgent, it is appropriate, and there has been enough consultation and discussion. Honourable Usamate has already seen the Bill, he knows the consultation is taking place, therefore, I think it is reasonable for the honourable Prime Minister to move this Bill under Standing Order 51 and have this debated on Wednesday.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe we are actually debating on the motion itself of actually bringing this particular Bill under Standing Order 51, and I tend to totally disagree that we should expedite this particular Bill. When it actually came two months ago, we could have gone through it under Standing Order 51 and send the Bill to the Committee. They would have had two months to review and bring back the report. We were actually given the Audit Bill 2024, we are reporting back on this Bill in this Sitting. I do not see as to why we are actually rushing through this Bill.

It has taken us long, it has been more than 30 years that all these things started and now, when we are just on the verge of going out for public consultations, doing it in the right and proper way. Parliamentary procedures are there for a purpose. We should not bypass the system. It was placed in Parliament for the first reading, and this was supposed to be the second reading, and the Bill was supposed to go to the Committee. Now, we are amending the procedures, using the Standing Order, to convert a normal process into Standing Order 51. If this is about truth and reconciliation, what do we actually have to hide?

It is not about me and you, it is about the general public. It is not about reconciliation between Government and Opposition. Let us take this particular Bill to the people who are affected. The Bill needs to go to the general public to have their opinions heard, and that is why we have parliamentary Committees to do that. There is a process in place. Why are we trying to bypass the process? What is the need to actually rush this Bill through under Standing Order 51 to get it passed in this particular sitting?

If it is all about the general public, it is all about the people who have actually committed something, and it is about the victims as well, let the parliamentary Committee go and have a discussion with these people, bring a report back and then we can contribute.

It is all about the process, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I personally do not agree on this particular motion to amend to actually expedite this particular Bill, I still urge the honourable Prime Minister to stick to his initial motion of sending this Bill under Second Reading to the Committee for public consultation.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I go along with my colleagues regarding this particular Bill. This is a government that talks about 'people listening government', 'government that consults', but they are not listening to the people. What is the role of the legislators?

The role of the legislators is to scrutinise the Bill, and the Committee is not given an opportunity to scrutinise the Bill. Why should we be relying on civil servants to go and consult, bring the Bill here, and we should be stamping it. It is the work of the Committee to take the Bill into the community, get their feedback, bring it here and then we can go through the Bill and, finally, make our decision. But, unfortunately, the very listening government today decided not to listen to the people.

You are talking about democracy, you were talking about change. Is this the change people wanted? You criticised a lot about Standing Order 51. What happened today? Now, you are moving away from the real issue. Where is consultation? It is all about hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the word

that describes your behaviour today, and I am extremely disappointed that the very government who said, “We will bring about the change”, what are you doing now? Is this the change people expected? Shame on you!

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I am listening to the Opposition, they might become the government, that is why I said the Opposition, it is possible. So, be positive, do not look at things negatively. But when I listened to the very individuals who are raising this issue, when we were in the Opposition, they were utilising the Standing Order 51.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Can you take your seat, please, honourable Minister?

Honourable Members, I would like some decorum in this Chambers. Please, pay respect to the speaker while he is delivering his intervention. You have every right to respond, if necessary, and I will allow you that opportunity, if need be. But allow the speaker to proceed without as much disturbance. It does, in fact, affect his train of thoughts and I wish you Members to, please, respect the speaker who is addressing the House. Can you please proceed, honourable Minister?

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Just to continue, Mr. Speaker, out of the Bills that were brought up by the very individuals who are raising their voices today, about 90 percent came through this Standing Order. And when you compare it with this Government, a very small percentage of what we are bringing up goes through Standing Order 51.

It does not mean that we are a lenient government, that we are a friendly government, that we cater for everyone that we will not use Standing Order 51, of course, we have to use it for a specific reason which the honourable Prime Minister has alluded to.

Also, when we look at that, you have to really take into account the environment. The environment right now is for reconciliation, and if you look at the Commander, I thank the Commander of the Fiji Military Forces for the work that he has done. I commend him, and in line with that, it must go hand in hand with what the Government is doing.

Some of the concerns you have raised regarding what the people might bring up, it will be catered for in this process, as we move forward, and there have been wide consultations. We have seen it in the media and also with the work of those moving around other countries regarding the issue.

HON. J. USAMATE.- A Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER.- Yes, honourable Usamate.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Standing Order 60 on Relevance, we are talking about the technicality. The honourable Member is going on a trip of looking backwards. He needs to focus on the issue at hand and talk about it, not talk about what happened in the past. He always does this. What he is talking about, Sir, is completely irrelevant to what we are talking about here.

HON. RO F.Q. TUISAWAU.- Just to conclude, everything is in order. When you look at Standing Order 51(3), the motion to proceed without delay in relation to a Bill may be moved at any stage of the progression of the Bill through Parliament. We are a law-abiding Government, that is

why we are doing it.

MR. SPEAKER.- I think we have had enough interventions on this motion. I will now invite the Prime Minister to speak in reply.

HON. S.L. RABUKA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I respect all the views expressed by the honourable Members of the Opposition and I just draw our attention to the essence of this motion to have this Bill processed through Standing Order 51 and I took a great risk moving this motion today because I know that we have, on the Government side, a minority in the vote. It is your vote, you allow us to go through and debate this on the date mentioned - Wednesday, 4th December, for its adoption.

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

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Votes cast:

Ayes - 34

Nays - 14

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT - MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, HERITAGE AND ARTS 2018-2021 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Annual Reports, which was tabled on 1st October, 2024.

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

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Consolidated Review Report is for the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts.

The Ministry of Education is a Government Ministry, responsible for providing the education that is holistic, innovative, responsive, inclusive and empowering. This education system enables our children to realise and appreciate their inheritance and potential contribution to a peaceful and sustainable Fiji.

The Committee, in its deliberation, highlighted significant key findings, to name a few:

(1) The Denarau Declaration

The Denarau Policy Framework contains the strategic way forward for the Education Sector for the next 10 years. It is important to acknowledge the policy and the implementations of the Declaration.

(2) Review of the Education Act

The review of the Education Act needs to be expedited to align with current best practices, societal changes and educational priorities.

(3) Issue on drugs

Currently, drugs have a significant impact on the lives of our children. The Ministry is working with relevant stakeholders to address this very important issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, the Ministry of Education is very critical. The Ministry requires urgent action in response to a challenge of the environment that our children are currently encountering. On that note, Sir, I thank you.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. A list has been provided to me for those who would be speaking. There are three from the Opposition and two from Government. I will first invite honourable Pillay to address Parliament.

HON. V. PILLAY.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first, I join my colleagues in congratulating you on your appointment as Speaker of our Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts for the years 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. This comprehensive review highlights the significant strides made by the Ministry in various areas, as well as the challenges that remained.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Strategic Plan by the Ministry for 2018-2021, and the new framework for 2023 to 2033, as stated in the Denarau Declaration, are commendable. But, most importantly, we must say that the establishment of the Education Commission to review the curriculum is a critical move. But we have to ask ourselves, how are these changes going to be implemented, to ensure that the system remains relevant and effective?

The registration of 24 new ECE Centres, eight primary schools and four secondary schools between 2018 and 2021 is a good indication of the Ministry's efforts towards increasing access. Mr. Speaker, Sir, while this is a positive development, we must consider the sustainability of these new institutions. Are we providing adequate resources and support to ensure their long-term success?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report highlights the Ministry's efforts in trying to address drug and substance abuse among students. Collaboration with parents, police and other stakeholders is important. However, we must question the effectiveness of these measures. Are we seeing a tangible reduction in drug related incidents in our schools? But more can be done to support our students and prevent substance abuse. Hiring full time counsellors in Divisions and Districts will provide much needed support to our students.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must ensure that these counsellors are well trained and ready to handle various challenges our students face. How will we measure the impact on student wellbeing and academic performance?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing truancy is another critical issue. Community engagement and support services from part of the Ministry's policies and strategies in the right direction but we must ask ourselves, are these measures enough to keep our children in school? What more can we do to support families so that education remains a priority?

Digitisation of examination records is a major task that was preserved our education history had improved administrative efficiency. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have to ensure that this work is completed without delay and adequate budgetary provisions are made to maintain this digital records.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the progress of the Ministry in the achievement of SDG4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable, quality education is commendable though there is much to be done in terms of leadership changes, high staff turnover and budgetary constraints. How can we ensure a more stable and enabling environment for our educators and students to thrive.

The Ministry's advocacy for a government mandate to build schools and hospitals during each term is a forward-thinking approach. Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must support this initiative to ensure that our infrastructure gives space with our growing population and educational needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while much remains to be done, I am on the view that this Report is a step in the right direction. It provides a clear roadmap for the future of education in our country with continued commitment and collaboration we can overcome the challenges and build a robust education system that serves all our children.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I fully support the motion.

HON. A.M. RADRODRO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, in support of the motion before Parliament. First of all, I would like to thank the Standing Committee Members for compiling this Report. I know it is a little bit outdated report from 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. It is very important that the Report needs to be provided on time, as timeliness of this Report will be able to allow the Ministry to provide proper strategic direction, decision-making in terms of the operations of the Ministry. The Ministry of Education is working very hard to provide its Annual Report on time.

In commenting on the Standing Committee's recommendation regarding the Education Act review, we take note of the comments. It has been recommended by the Committee and the Ministry of Education has also taken steps by obtaining the necessary Cabinet approval to commence the discussion on the review of the Education Act.

Currently, the 1978 Act and the 1966 Education Act has been shared with the Fiji Law Reform Unit to assist the Ministry of Education in the review process which is anticipated to be finalised by mid of next year, June 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the key features that the Ministry would like to ensure to be included in the Act. One is to have its own regulation, the areas that need to be scrutinised in terms of the compulsory education in current age on Year 1 to Year 12 to be in line with Section 31 of the 2013 Constitution, the right to education. The second part is the inclusion of ECE as part of the lower primary education aiming to reduce the entry age from the current year five to year three or below.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the TVET subjects to be offered in the mainstream education programme for Year 9. Just on the Denarau Declaration, it is the result of the Education Summit which was done in 2023. We intend to have the 10-year sector plan to be completed and drawn up by early next year, 2025, the first quarter, so that will cover the entire seven thematic areas that have been identified in the Denarau Declaration document.

The review of the Act will also include the inclusion of extracurricular activities; the school fundraising activities; the curriculum review and benchmarking and scaling of marks at external exams in both primary and secondary schools; benchmarking of external examinations and the quality assurance process of setting of marking of examination papers; the financial management of school funds or free education grants; the school enrolment age is also needed to be reviewed; and the automatic progress or retention of students in the education system, also to be reviewed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on the issue that has been identified by the Standing Committee on the

Education Commission, the Ministry of Education has commenced the groundwork on the appointment of the Education Commissioners, which will be partially funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). As of today, six commissioners have been identified and their appointment letters will be issued before the end of the week.

The other recommendations that has been addressed by the Standing Committee are the collaboration with other stakeholders, the appointment of officers and counsellors, and the retentions or alternative learning methods for dropout students. Over the past so many years, there has been no tracking system to identify the whereabouts of students who have dropped out of the school system. At the moment, the Ministry of Education is closely working with UNESCO in upgrading the FEMIS database to capture information on the number and details of school dropouts. We are also trying to explore whether these FEMIS numbers that are being given to students, whether they can also take it up with them when they enter higher education or in the job market.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the measures that have contributed to improve retention of students within the school system. The \$200 Back to School financial assistance to assist parents with the combined annual income of \$50,000 or less. The Ministry's e-learning programme and the introduction of Learning Management System (LMS), where teaching will be conducted online to assist students and make learning more exciting.

The reintroduction of the Matua Programme in 2003 at the Nabua Secondary School has positively assisted in the school dropouts through the readmission of students back into the education system. The Ministry also plans to expand the Matua Programme to other divisions. In terms of the vocational technology, this would be introduced as a mainstream subject in 2025 at Year 9 as one of the strategies to retain students in the education system. This will be piloted in 15 selected secondary schools prior to the full implementation of the programme. These initiatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, will provide alternative pathways to students who are not academically inclined.

On the drug issues, that has been identified by the Standing Committee, this is a major issue in the country which has infiltrated our school system, as students have been used to either peddle or use it to drown their problems. The Ministry is undertaking the following actions to address drug-related issues through the Substance Abuse Advisory Council (SAAC). They have the existing policy to train teachers on how to handle drug related issues in schools.

Due to the increase in drug related reported cases among youths, SAAC has discussed and approved, revising its awareness package and programmes to target at risk schools and strengthen parental and community engagement. The International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking programmes conducted on an annual basis in schools will be evaluated to ascertain the effectiveness of its purpose.

Counsellors in schools, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Education has already established divisional counsellors in four counselling hubs in the respective education divisions and the Ministry will propose establishing school counsel petitions in its 2025-2026 budget submission. There are 35 teacher counsellors within the education districts who are mobilised to attend to cases when the need arises from each district. The Ministry is also working together with other NGOs, which provide counselling to intervene into the lives of the students who use drugs.

Regarding the building of more schools, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry in consultation with DFAT, will be conducting the infrastructure reviews in schools. This is supposed to be due at the end of the month of November.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the school enrolment policy which is currently being drafted by the Ministry

of Education is anticipated to minimise rural-urban migration of students which is one of the reasons for overcrowding of classrooms in urban areas.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the sustainable development goals, the actualisation of the ten targets and eleven indicators in the SDG4 is reflected in the ten-year Ministry of Education sector plan and 2023 Denarau Declaration.

In terms of the budget for transport, total funding of FJ\$37 million was allocated for the transport assistance scheme of which 40 percent is allocated for RSL and 60 percent for e-ticketing.

There are currently discussions for reviewing the rate from \$1.12 to \$1.64, an additional amount of \$2.8 million will be needed.

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you honourable Minister for Education. There are three more in the batting line up for this motion.

HON. H. CHAND.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the opportunity to contribute on the motion. Firstly, I would like thank the Standing Committee for the comprehensive Report. The Standing Committee have come up with some very good findings and recommendations. I have picked two findings of the Standing Committee, and I will be talking on that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I will talk on retention and school dropouts. According to the data provided by the Ministry of Education, a high number of students drop out of school every year. Last year, that is 2023, 1,162 students dropped out of school before completing primary education and this is an increase of 34 percent compared to 2022, where the number was 755.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, over the last five years, the highest number of students dropped out of school in 2023 before completing year eight, that is more than 1,000 students which is a huge increase in school dropouts. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I see this school dropout issue as something of great concern to everyone in Fiji. The Free Education Grant and Transport Assistance were two great initiatives of the former Prime Minister Bainimarama, and it had a great impact on reducing student dropouts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the inception of the Free Education Grant 10 years ago, Government has invested around \$650 million dollars through the free Education Grant to 738 primary, 176 secondary and more than 870 ECE (Early Childhood Education) centres. The Free Education Grant eased the financial burden on parents, students, teachers and the school management committee.

One reason why students are irregular to school apart from the many other reasons, it is poor bus service. I have raised this in Parliament before and I am raising it again, many people from the interior, from the remote areas they have raised concern. I want to highlight some of the areas. I have received concerns from people of Viseisei back road, Wairabetia, Vuda back road, Vaivai and Raviravi. They have raised concerns regarding bus services not provided to students in those areas and they have to hire taxis, they have to pay huge amounts of money every week.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I have raised this issue previously in this Parliament, but nothing has been done. Children are the world's most valuable resources and is the best hope for the future. Children are the future of our country, and we want to see all of them educated. We do not want to leave any child behind. If the Coalition Government fails to address the school dropout issue, then we will see an increase in youths on the streets committing crimes.

We can already see teenagers who should be in school, sitting on the streets asking people for money, when other children their age are in school. And then, we have the drug problem, which is

of probably, the greatest concern right now. Mr. Speaker Sir, drug cases in schools increased to around 3,500 in 2023. The Ministry of Education must come up with innovative initiatives and work closely with parents, school heads, teachers, school management, faith-based organisations, non-government organisations and other government ministries, to minimise issues.

Mr. Speaker Sir, the other findings of the Standing Committee is teacher shortages. This is due to mass migration of teachers. Fiji has lost thousands of teachers in the last two years, the main reason is attractive salaries offered to teachers in countries like New Zealand, Australia and Canada and many more. The number may increase because most of the teachers have received only seven to ten percent increase in salary which is not enough compared to the huge increase in the cost of living, VAT and corporate tax. Teachers play a crucial role in setting our children's future. They deserve better pay.

Mr. Speaker Sir, each month, more teachers are leaving the profession and who can blame them. Their dedication is not being rewarded and this is affecting our children's education. If the Coalition Government's approach does not change, we risk losing more talented teachers to countries that value their contribution. Our teachers are stretched thin, as teacher resignation has created a vacuum and is directly affecting the quality of our children's education. I support the motion, thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir for the opportunity.

HON. A.N. TUICOLO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to make a short contribution on the motion moved by the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs on the Consolidated Review Report of the Ministry of Education, Heritage & Arts Annual Reports for 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to thank the Chairman and Members of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs in performing their mandated duties and compiling the Consolidated Review Report of the years in review which highlights the Standing Committees key findings and recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I noted that the Standing Committee has come up with eleven recommendations and I will be focussing on three of these recommendations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with recommendation 4.5, the Standing Committee recommends that the Ministry introduce different learning programs to address the increasing number of student dropouts. Mr. Speaker, Sir, according to an article published in the *Fiji Times* on 19th October, 2024, about 4,589 students dropped out of the formal education system before completing primary education and 5,726 left before completing Year 10 between 2019 and 2023. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is, indeed, worrying and needs the attention of all the stakeholders involved in the education of our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation put forward by the Committee is in line with the 2023 Denarau Declaration on thematic area 1A which focuses on the curriculum and sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee's recommendation 4.6 states that the Ministry in collaboration with other key stakeholders undertake collective measures to combat the issues of drugs in school, and further on recommended on 4.7 that the Ministry appoint more professional counsellors in schools to effectively address students who are affected by drugs and other social issues. These three recommendations by the Committee can be termed as a band-aid solution, a temporary fix that does not address the root cause of the problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I strongly believe that the root cause of all these problems lies on the parents neglecting their roles and responsibilities. The parents should always be involved in the nurturing of

their children. If the home has a solid foundation, which is found in Christ alone, then these children would be able to withstand any social issues and challenges that they face in life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as Ellen G. White clearly states in her book “Education” on page 284, and I quote:

“In the formation of character, no other influences count so much as the influence of the home. The teacher’s work should supplement that of the parents but is not to take its place. In all that concerns the wellbeing of the child, it should be the effort of parents and teachers to co-operate.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we can utilise all the resources we have, involve stakeholders and undertake measures to combat these social issues and if parents continue to neglect their roles and responsibilities in educating their children then all our efforts will be in vain.

A collective approach which involves the *vanua*, religious bodies and stakeholders will only be effective if parents and guidance take the leading role in character development. Mr. Speaker, Sir, thank you for this opportunity and I support the motion before the House.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Committee for the Report. I also want to thank the honourable Minister for Education for providing a detailed response on the Report highlighting some of the achievements.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is significant that we are actually debating 2018 and 2019, 2019 and 2020 Report because when we came into Government, we realised the mess that was existing within the education system. It was purely the result of haphazard, ill-conceived, out of touch policies that were introduced over so many years. I will give you an example and honourable Hem Chand, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he has got a habit of generalising. He was talking about mass-migration of teachers, teachers leaving because of their salaries.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Let me give you real statistics, Mr. Speaker, Sir, from the Ministry of Finance and the funding that we provide. We are currently funding 13,325 teachers, up from 12,793 at the end of 2022.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Hear, hear!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Net increase of 532 teachers. In fact, we are hiring more than the rate of resignation. We recruited 1,600 teachers and only 1,000 had retired or resigned, this is the statistics.

Let me point out few other things that honourable Hem Chand was talking about, some are real issues, and the honourable Minister for Education talked about it. First, Mr. Speaker, Sir, he talked about drop out, people leaving the system, students not being able to make it; that is correct.

However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, what is the reason, what are some of the factors? Education policies, when it is considered, must be considered by experts. It must be considered in a carefully calibrated manner based on data and evidence, and nothing of that sort was done when they were reforming the education system. It was all haphazard.

We, Mr. Speaker, Sir, were in Opposition for eight years called for the appointment of an Education Commission. It is this Government under this Prime Minister that we have appointed an Education Commission. We also took actions head-on immediately when we came into Government. Within few months of Government, the honourable Prime Minister announced this package; the new initiative of providing \$200 per child from Pre-School to Form Seven and we provided 227,000 students in 2023 that \$200 which helped them to get back to school.

In 2024, Mr. Speaker, Sir, again more than 200,000 and again in 2025, we are providing more than \$40 million for more than 200,000 students to get that \$200. I want to say to the parents, “the applications are still open, it is going to close on 5th December and if parents and students have not applied, we encourage them to do so.”

The other point about infrastructure that honourable Hem Chand mentioned and he is right, infrastructure Mr. Speaker, Sir, is absolutely important. But what has happened over the last 10 years or 12 years, rural-urban migration has continued. Schools in the rural areas have faced depopulation in terms of enrolment but Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the urban areas, if you look at Suva and Nausori areas in the last 10 years, hardly any single classroom has been built, hardly any new school has been built. As the honourable Minister for Education said, it is this Government that got the Australian Government to do an audit of 80 schools between Suva and Nausori areas and we are now embarking on building additional rooms and classrooms. We have also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two years completed the renovation, the building of new schools in many parts of this country including Vanua Levu.

We had in the last two years done so many things that is now addressing the mess that existed in the education system. We have also, and I want to point this out, the TELS Loan Scheme was another disaster that they presided on.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- So, when we came into Government, we replaced the Loan Scheme with scholarships based on merit - \$650 million was written off and I will tell you the result of that.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Thank you Mr. Speaker. The result of that scheme, we wrote off that loan, we provided in place of that a merit-based scholarship. We are putting in \$150 million for new scholarships and with the new scheme, we are actually giving more scholarships than all the students that studied under the TELS Loan and Scholarships. In fact, the statistics is this, we are supporting 9,940 continuing students, but we are actually giving scholarships to new 10,830 students. That is the difference, that is the kind of good thinking and good policy that we have implemented as part of this Government’s policy.

Let me point out, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have two minutes, a few other things with respect to infrastructure and the policies that support our students. I know honourable Hem Chand talked about bus services, in fact, part of the reason why the bus industry in the state of disrepair is because of the policies that was put in place. For many years, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they did not get a bus fare increase, they were artificially kept down...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... and a lot of the bus industry players could not run rural services because of what was there. What we have done in the last budget is to ensure that the bus operators get a reasonable return on their investment. We are now subsidising, we are now paying 100 percent of school fares for the students and we have put in ...

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- ... additional \$16 million to \$17 million. That is the kind of good policy that we are putting in the education system, and the people of this country are now appreciating, they can see the difference. They can see the truth from the lies that they were told in the past.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I want to thank the Committee, I think their recommendations are very important and the Education Commission that this Government has appointed, the Denarau Declaration is going to fit in and make sure that any policy going forward will be based on data, based on evidence and based on that, we will get good policies for education that will work.

HON. J. USAMATE- Hogwash!

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, let me assure you that some of these interruptions I see are on the verge of disorderly conduct under certain rules of the Standing Orders. I will tell you that I had in my other life been a referee in rugby. So, I will have no hesitation whatsoever to issue a yellow card to anyone who misbehaves in this Chamber. Just bear that in mind, honourable Members.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker Sir, upon the deliberations that were done this afternoon, we thank the honourable Members for the positive contributions in regards to these Reports. Upon our deliberations on the review of Annual Reports, the Committee recommends the following, that the:

- (1) Ministry submits its Annual Reports on time.
- (2) Education Act to be reviewed and the process to be expedited.
- (3) Committee takes note of the Denarau Declaration and strongly supports its implementation that is currently underway within the Ministry.
- (4) Education Commission Commissioners to be appointed at the earliest.
- (5) Ministry introduces different learning programmes to address the increasing number of students that drop out during examinations.
- (6) Ministry, in collaboration with other key stakeholders, undertake collective measures to combat the issue of drugs in our schools.
- (7) Ministry to appoint more professional counsellors in school to effectively address students who have been affected by drugs and other social issues.
- (8) Ministry to budget for the RSL provider to review as a matter of urgency.
- (9) Retention Policy for teachers to be reviewed.
- (10) Committee supports the submission by the Ministry to build more schools in the Suva and Nausori corridor.
- (11) Ministry takes appropriate measures to meet its SDG targets.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have no other comments on the Reports.

MR. SPEAKER.- The Parliament will now vote.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT - MINISTRY OF WOMEN,
CHILDREN AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION 2019-2021 ANNUAL REPORTS**

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Annual Reports which was tabled on 1st October, 2024.

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

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation is a Government Ministry in Fiji responsible for overseeing the well-being of women, children, elderly and the disabled in Fiji. For the period under review, the Ministry encountered significant challenges confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic and it maintained the services provided to older people and those vulnerable were met during the pandemic.

The Committee, in its deliberations, identified other important matters:

- (1) the increasing number of street kids and the Ministry's challenges in combating the issue due to budget constraints and lack of rehabilitation centres;
- (2) some existing policies were outdated and required updates to meet the changing needs of recipients; and
- (3) the REACH Programme was found to be valuable as multi-stakeholders can take their services to the underprivileged in most remote and maritime areas.

In conclusion, Sir, the Committee recommends that the Ministry, in its effort, during the pandemic ensured that the vulnerable were well cared for.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the floor is now open for debate on the motion. I have a list that had been agreed to by the Whips and reminding that each speaker is accorded with 10 minutes only in their intervention.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, a number of issues have been raised in this Report and I commend the Committee for coming up with some very realistic recommendations.

Sir, one such issue is the increasing number of street kids and the challenges faced by the Ministry in combating this. In 2023, data on child neglect, physical and sexual abuse was released last month. According to the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection, 50 percent of child neglect, physical and sexual abuses were immediate family members and 73 percent of the perpetrators of child neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse in 2023 were known to the child victims. This is very shocking. Our young generation must be provided with a safe and secure environment for the well-being and healthy growth.

In all these, education is very important and must be pursued with vigour. Family values, systems to be enhanced through spirituality and religious classes in schools and counselling services to be re-introduced in all schools for pronged action. We have huge challenges ahead of us and our concerted effort is needed, if we are to save our children from the unfolding chaos.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, more Fijian children are being caught in criminal activities. In the past five years, Police recorded an alarming 503 cases where juveniles were sexual offenders and out of the 503 cases, 206 were rapes. The Fiji Police Force is concerned over the shifting of age criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years. While the shift in criminal age group has been happening internationally, it has implications on the Fiji Police Force and the safety of the people of Fiji. While advocates also shift to the need for a more human approach to juvenile justice, it colludes the potential and adverse effect on policy, on operation and investigation of prosecutions, community safety and juvenile accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there would an increased risk of serious offences, resulting in a lack of accountability for children from the ages of 10 years to 13 years, allowing them to engage in serious offences without facing immediate legal consequences, allowing them to be more fearless.

In terms of public safety, a constructive deterrent is essential to prevent ongoing criminality among young Fijian offenders. By raising the age of criminal responsibility, we risk disempowering families and communities that play vital roles in rearing children towards fair choices and fostering positive behaviour. Collaboration between families, the *vanua*, Government and stakeholders is needed to safeguard Fijian children. Any change must have accountability and rehabilitation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another issue raised in the Report is the relocation of the Lautoka Golden Age Home due to structural concerns, with a new site identified for the residents while their current home is being rebuilt. The Committee noted that the site identified is not suitable for the relocation of our elderly citizens as it is too close to the road. I request the Ministry to take this recommendation seriously and consider the relocation of senior citizens from Natabua Golden Age Home as a matter of urgency, to ensure the residents are in a safer and more conducive environment. With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House.

HON. L.D. TABUYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is important to note that these Annual Reports are about five years to six years old, from 2019 to 2021, so in going through the recommendations by the Committee, I will briefly address what the Ministry is doing.

There are two recommendations that relate to street kids that have been raised by honourable Virendra Lal. One is to do with working with stakeholders to help assist our street kids, as well as setting up of rehabilitation centres for street kids.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have a question to respond to on Wednesday on the very same issue, so I will elaborate more there. But just for today, suffice to say that in working with Civil Society Organisations in groups that are interested in rehabilitating street children, we have Inspire Pacific that is working with the Ministry and have just completed a four-week camp with 15 street boys. They are currently undergoing assessment in terms of where to be placed next.

There are 13 year olds and 14 year olds, who appropriately would return to school and because some fear of returning home, they are exploring boarding schools instead. For those who are older, they have income generating courses available to them, like TVET as well as Polytech. We work with Inspire Pacific as well as the Salvation Army.

I want to commend the Salvation Army for opening up a centre for street children in Samabula. They are working with the Ministry in terms of providing support, as well as the technical support and advice from UNICEF in terms of ensuring that these children receive holistic care so they can be reintegrated back, not just into schools, as well as their own families. So, the families have been attending these camps as well. I am talking about fathers, mothers and caregivers, who have an opportunity to reconcile with these boys.

There have been very emotional moments as father and son reunite after the child has left home for various reasons. Parents are actually also given necessary support to be better parents, and to be able to bring their child who has left the home for some time to return home.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, very quickly on the Child Justice Bill 2024 and Child Care Protection Bill 2024 which was recommended to be expedited and tabled in Parliament, yes, it has been 12 years in the making. Sir, 12 years is too long, so I have been given the assurance by the Standing Committee on Justice Law and Human Rights that these Bills will be tabled this week for debate and, hopefully, passed. There was unanimous support in the House for these Bills, and we appreciate your support on that.

Honourable Lal has brought up the issue about raising the age of criminal responsibility. This is in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child but really, the sole or main purpose of it is to divert our children away from the criminal justice system and to be rehabilitated because statistics prove that children who enter the system as juveniles in the criminal justice system, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they return as repeat offenders.

So, in order to avoid that, we need to intervene when they are younger and know between the ages of 10 years and 13 years, it does not mean that they are excused of the crime, this means that there is a better way to process these children or to handle these children away from the criminal justice system. You will still have some element of retribution, as well as deterrence to other children, so it is not completely absolving them of responsibility, it is just the programme that will help them to understand their choices as well as to rehabilitate not to reoffend in the future.

On the issue about budgetary allocation for the Ministry to be increased for Social Protection Programmes, the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance will address that, so I will leave that to him.

Lastly, on the relocation of the senior citizens to Golden Age Home in Lautoka and I know this has been an issue raised over and over again in Parliament. As I had mentioned earlier about the falling out or the fact that the agreement with the Methodist Church of Fiji have been reneged on because they would like to use it for other purposes.

So, we have identified Matanakilagi House with Ba Provincial Holdings. Now, we have had a scoping done by Divisional Engineer Western at an estimated cost of \$350,000 and that was allocated in the current budget. However, they have come back to us after the scoping, Mr. Speaker, and have stated that increased salaries as well as rise in goods and services, that this will increase exponentially by 70 percent by really a big amount. So, it is closer to \$580,000 which is not budgeted for. So, we went back to the drawing board and negotiated with Ba Provincial Holdings, who have come back to us and are willing to do the renovations themselves at the cost of \$254,000 which is within our budget.

At the moment, we have just submitted our waiver to the Ministry of Finance in terms of the application of those funds. So, hopefully, we will get that approval so we can commence the work from January next year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have signed a rental agreement with Ba Holdings from May and they have also agreed to waive the rental from May till we are able to move in. Once we move in, then they will start charging the rent. So, I want to thank Ba Holdings for their assistance in prioritising our aged citizens.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just wish to end in terms of the REACH Project. As you know, it was funded by UNDP for the first three years, so UNDP has ended their funding. So, it is upon Government to fund this project as you know it is the REACH project that usually involves Ministries. So, Ministries would send out their teams under the REACH Project to reach the unreachable and take out government services and information on it.

Because we are a bit tight on funds within the Ministry, we cannot be funding the entire REACH project, so we are just kindly asking our Ministries who wish to participate, our staff would do the logistics and arrangements but if Ministries could, please, fund your own staff who joined us on the REACH projects so you can take your services out too, to this very effective project that has reached out to many, many parts of Fiji that are unreachable.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, I wish to commend the Report of the Committee, and I thank them for their hard work.

HON. S. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first and foremost, I am congratulating you on your appointment as the Speaker of this august Chambers. May Lord continue to guide your intellect in presiding over the legislative matters of the State.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, today, I rise to elaborate on the Review Report of Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation for the years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. This review was undertaken by the Standing Committee on Social Affairs into the efforts and challenges of the Ministry during those years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it unrepresented challenges that largely impacted the operations of this Ministry. In spite of these challenges, the Ministry proved to be resilient in its own operations by adapting its services to assist people in lockdown areas. This adaptability is testimony to the Ministry's commitment towards the service of our most vulnerable citizens.

Among the gripping concerns which have been reported is the issue about street children. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the increasing number of street children is alarming. The Ministry has tried to reintegrate these children into their families, but most of them resist going back home because they are not loved and supported at home. This situation calls for a comprehensive approach to address the root causes of homelessness amongst children. We must explore strategies that provide these children with the necessary care and support.

Budgetary constraints have, over the years, been a major challenge to the Ministry in the provision of essential services and rehabilitation centres. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recommendation by the Committee to increase the budgetary allocation to Social Protection is quite important. With more money, the Ministry can do more in rehabilitation and care for the vulnerable group.

The Report also highlights the under-utilisation of grant-in-aid allocation to institutions and NGOs dealing with the disabilities. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this calls for deeper understanding as to why the resources are not being fully utilised and developing ways on how these grants are allocated and used effectively. Our Social Protection Programmes depend greatly on effective utilisation of such grants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, another critical issue is the shifting of the Lautoka Golden Age Home for structural reasons. The safety of the proposed new site for the elderly has been questioned because of its proximity to the road. Again, careful planning and community consultation provide the key to identifying suitable sites for such facilities. How can we ensure our facility planning is designed to first protect our elderly citizens? The Ministry's partnership with stakeholders, such as the Methodist Church and the Salvation Army, in providing centre for street children is very commendable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, collaboration with various stakeholders is necessary to pull resources and expertise in the quest to address social issues. In fact, our stakeholders have been very instrumental in the successful implementation of our social programmes.

The REACH Programme which is involved in the delivery of services to rural and urban communities, has been quite a success. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Committee strongly recommends the continuation of this programme, that is, because sustainability is one of the key areas where such programs assure the same service provision to people for a long period of time. On what basis can we be sure of the success of the REACH Programme for further replication?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's effort to address discrepancies in the Social Protection Programme and improved financial management are steps in the right direction. The engagement with DFAT to update existing policies and SOPs will further enhance the Ministry's capacity to serve our communities effectively.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while there are many areas that need to be addressed, I believe this report is a step in the right direction. The recommendations provided by the community, part of which is now being implemented, will significantly improve the Ministry's ability to support vulnerable co-operations and address pressing issues.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support this Report.

HON. N.T. TUINACEVA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Mr. Chairman and his Team, for the Report.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you today with a deep sense of concern and urgency regarding a matter that should weigh heavily on all of us, our children. The 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Annual Reports from the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation paint a troubling picture of the increasing number of children living in dire circumstances, particularly those living on the streets of our capital city - Suva. This is a crisis that we cannot ignore, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Children as we all know are the future of this nation, but they are also its most vulnerable members. As a society, we are entrusted with this protection and well-being, and the fact that so many children are now living on the streets, exposed to harsh elements and are vulnerable to exploitation, is a clear indicator of our failure to uphold that responsibility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some have suggested that these children choose to live on the streets. This claim, however, is not only over simplified but dangerously dismissive of the true nature of the circumstances. How can we, as a nation, justify such a careless view?

Children, some as young as 10 years old, do not have the maturity or urgency to make the decision to live in such extreme conditions. Reality is that these children are on the streets because they have no other option. They are there because the system designed to protect them or Child Welfare Programme, our social safety nets are failing.

Let us be clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir, no child willingly choose a life of hardship and suffering. These children are there because they are escaping neglect, abuse or the overwhelming poverty of their homes. They are seeking survival not freedom. The question we must ask ourselves is not whether these children have chosen this life but why are they in this position at all? Why are so many children in our country forced to live on the streets? Is it poverty? Is it family breakdown? Is it abuse or neglect? Perhaps, it is all these factors combined. Whatever the reasons, the truth is that these children should have never been allowed to fall through the cracks in the first place. This is a collective failure, one that demands for an immediate action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not enough to merely acknowledge this crisis. We must take action, and we must ask ourselves, what can we do to support these children and restore them a sense of safety, dignity and hope for a better future? In my view, the system is reactive not proactive.

While the Ministry is working hard to address these issues, there is a lack of coordinated, comprehensive efforts to address the root cause of why children are ending up on the streets in the first place. We must move beyond temporary fixtures and build long-term solutions. The question that we must now ask is not just what are we doing for these children but what more can we do? Have we explored all the possible avenues to protect and support these children? Are there alternative systems, structures and programmes we can create to intervene before these children are forced to flee their homes and take to the streets? Can we strengthen our child protection mechanism to ensure that no child is left behind, regardless of their family circumstances?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these are not just theoretical questions, they are a call to action. We must do more, we must do it now. Some may say that the solution is simple, that we should focus on reuniting these children with their families. However, you must acknowledge that this is not always a viable or safe solution. Many of these children are escaping environments, where they face violence, neglect or abuse. For some, returning to their families would put them at a greater risk. Therefore, we must explore alternatives options such as:

- (1) Safe home or shelters where children can receive care, education and emotional support while we work to reunite them with their families when it is safe and possible.
- (2) The Mental Health Services and Counselling. These children often dealing with deep trauma, anxiety and depression.
- (3) The Vocational Training Programmes and mentorship that offer children a sense of purpose and direction, helping them to build a future beyond the streets.

Additionally, we need to strengthen our partnership with local communities, civil society organisations and international partners. This is not just a government issue, it is a societal issue. It requires collective effort of all sectors to address and resolve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we look at the rising number of children living on the streets, we cannot afford to close our eyes to their suffering. We cannot simply blame them for their circumstances. We must act now to restore their sense of belonging and purpose. These children deserve more than survival, they deserve the opportunity to thrive. Until we explore every avenue, solution, option, we carry a dark stain on our national concerns. These children are the adults of tomorrow, and the question we must ask ourselves is, what kind of future do you want to build for them? Do we want to continue allowing them to suffer or do we want to ensure that they grow into healthy, educated and productive members of society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the time to act is now. We must come together as a nation to protect our children and we must show them that they matter, they are not forgotten and that we will do everything in our power to ensure they have the opportunity to live a life free from suffering. It is my

prayer that all Members of this august Parliament, as legislators will work together with Government to find solutions to these street dwelling problems involving our children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to conclude I was doing some research on this subject and I found out there are nations who have successfully addressed these children street problem through their early detection policies. Perhaps, we can seek assistance and learn from their experience. Fiji's situation, we have a small population. We have good founding structures, the *vanua, lotu, matavuvale, veiwekani* and Government in tacking these street dwelling issues for our children should not be difficult.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with all those being said, I support the motion before Parliament.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Members, for their contribution and I also thank the Ministry for Women, Children and Social Protection for providing details on the programmes that the Ministry is undertaking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, one of the things that we did immediately when we came into Government was to recognise that in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 coming out of the COVID crises, that people were still making the transition, that there were losses in income, welfare and many things happened during COVID, movement of people and in some cases things changed permanently for families, those who were part of those families. So, the Government recognised, in the first budget, we actually increased the Department of Social Welfare's budget by about 24 percent.

We also recognised that families, particularly those who were falling through the cracks, those who were vulnerable, we increased the social welfare allowances by 15 to 25 percent across the board, 25 percent particularly for those over 70 years. We recognised that this support was needed, and we have obviously kept that allocation and a little bit more in the current budget.

I must commend the Department of Social Welfare because there was also a lot of haphazard applications of some of the good polices, therefore, the effectiveness of some of those programmes were not as good as they ought to have been. So, rationalisation of some of those programmes, particularly social welfare programmes and making sure that people who get out of the trap and are actually moved into more employment. So, the Government has used multi-pronged approach, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that families do not fall through those cracks.

Apart from increasing direct support in terms of social welfare, as we said, we included income support in the education sector, in the agriculture sector, and subsidies to farmers beyond the sugar cane. All these, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the last two years and in the last two budgets was designed to improve the income position for the families, particularly those who were vulnerable.

In terms of the recommendations and the observations made, particularly number four, we had allocated in the 2024-2025 Budget, a budget of about \$569,900, of which \$344,900 caters for the renovation of the temporary Lautoka Age Care Home to ensure that it is suitable to relocate. I know the honourable Minister has already talked about the difficulties that were there.

On number five, retention policy for staff and all vacant positions to be filled as soon as possible, again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the 2024-2025 Budget, there is a costed operational plan. The target to fill 50 substantive vacant positions in the current 2024-2025 financial year. I know the Ministry has put in place a recruitment plan and that obviously will go a long way to help.

A sum of \$9.1 million, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has been allocated in the 2024-2025 Budget to cater for the salaries and wages of the approved 303 established staff and 132 GWE officers. Mr. Speaker,

Sir, in terms of strengthening the Ministry's capacity and the ability to deliver on some of the good programmes that have been undertaken, we have obviously provided additional funding.

In terms of support for women NGOs and opening up assistance to other women's groups and institutions, we have done that. In the 2023-2024 Budget, \$500,000 was allocated as a grant to women's institutions. A total of four institutions were the recipients of the grant amounting to about \$100,000 per recipient. Again, we have allocated funding for 2024-2025 as well, under stakeholders to build rehabilitation. I know honourable Naisa was absolutely correct when he was talking about our kids and the children.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know the honourable Minister has talked about this in the past, for the first time we have a Department of Children now established within the Ministry. That, I think is going to go a long way in terms of providing a focus with the budget to deal with the issue of our street kids and some of the difficulties that we have.

On the issue of working with the stakeholders to build a rehabilitation centre for street kids, again, in the 2024-2025 Budget, the Ministry has been allocated funding of \$230,000 that is to cater for the renovation of the Vunirewa facility to establish the rehabilitation centre, and this centre will allow children and youth who are living on the streets into an institution where they will be given the opportunity to re-socialise and undergo rehabilitation processes.

In the last Budget, Mr. Speaker, Sir, recognising the importance of drug rehabilitation centres, we have included an incentive package which includes tax holidays, duty concessions and 100 percent tax deductions for donations to rehabilitation centres. That we hope, and Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will obviously look at the success or otherwise of that incentive, and whether that has helped build more rehabilitation centres, we will obviously be considering budgetary provisions for that particular and specific purpose.

So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government has recognised, and as I have said quite clearly, the transition that happened after COVID and the difficulty that we realised existed. We have not only focussed on the Social Welfare Ministry but there are many other Ministries, many other allocations which also support different activities, you know, whether it has to do with small to medium enterprises, grants from the Ministry of Trade and Commerce, whether it is to increase the minimum wage which we have now done to \$4.50 and it will be \$5.00 from 1st April. Those are significant steps, Sir, to support and build income for families and of course, you know, children included as part of those families.

So, once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I commend the Standing Committee for recognising and putting out these recommendations and also the Ministry for Women, Children and Social Protection for undertaking some of the policy interventions as provided for in the budget.

MR. SPEAKER.- With that intervention, we have now exhausted our list of speakers and I will now call upon the Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs to speak in reply.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we would like to thank all honourable Members for the constructive deliberations on these Reports. As from the Standing Committee, upon deliberation on the review of the Reports, the Standing Committee recommends the following:

- (1) The Ministry to continue to work with relevant stakeholders in addressing the issues of street kids. The Child Justice and Child Care Protection Bill process to be expedited and

tabled in Parliament. The budgetary allocation for the Ministry to be increased to ensure various social protection programmes are well resourced.

- (2) The Ministry to consider the relocation of senior citizens from Natabua Golden Age Home as a matter of urgency and ensure that residents are in a more conducive environment.
- (3) The Ministry to have a retention policy for staff and all vacant posts are to be filled as soon as possible.
- (4) The Ministry to conduct an impact analysis on the grants provided to Women NGO's and to open up a system to other women institutions.
- (5) The Ministry to work closely with stakeholders to build a rehabilitation centre for street kids.
- (6) The Standing Committee strongly recommends that the Ministry continue with the bridge programme to serve those in need in remote areas.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

CONSOLIDATED REVIEW REPORT – MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICES 2016-2021 ANNUAL REPORTS

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

That Parliament debates the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2016-2021 Annual Reports which was tabled on 2nd October, 2024.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. I.S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Consolidated Review Report on the Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2016-2021 Annual Reports, the Ministry's role to emanate from its core responsibility of delivering quality, preventative, creative and rehabilitative centre services to the population through its hospitals, health centres, nursing stations throughout the country, consistently within the demand from the public. There is a significant focus to maintain a continuum of care from community level to primary healthcare service, to tertiary level care at Divisional Hospitals.

This is, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to support a broad range of relevant policies, standards and protocols to ensure safe and high-quality service are delivered at the health sector assistance level from nursing stations, health centres in Sub-Divisional Hospitals to Divisional Hospitals.

The Standing Committee, in its deliberation, identified areas that the Ministry encountered:

- (1) Strengthening the public private partnership can lead to a more innovative solution that will help improve infrastructure and better service delivery.
- (2) The geographical isolation of Fiji's maritime and remote areas presents formidable challenges for effectively delivering healthcare services here in Fiji.

The pandemic highlighted gaps in Fiji's health system, particularly in the capacity, infrastructure and its workforce. The COVID pandemic's profound impact in Fiji's Ministry of

Health and Medical Service, leading to significant changes in its policies and operations. The Ministry of Health and Medical Services has evolved and landmarks from COVID pandemic.

The Standing Committee looks forward to its improvement service delivery of the best healthcare to the people of Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- The floor is open for debate on the motion.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, just a small comment, before I contribute to the motion towards the debate, I would like to say that natural justice prevailed whereby Mr. Daniel Kim of Grace Road was granted bail after being unlawfully detained for more than 400 days. Finally, justice has prevailed, and I wish him all the best for his case about the Judicial and Constitutional Review on Monday next week.

Coming back to the Report, I would like to thank the Standing Committee for the deliberation that they have actually done with regards to the Ministry of Health. Mr. Speaker, Sir, no one wants to lose our loved ones, especially knowing that disease or condition was treatable, but treatment was not available in our public hospital. It becomes a very sad situation when we tend to lose our family members just because medicine consumables or reagents to perform tests are not available. This is why we need to have a hundred percent effective, efficient and reliable health care system. We need to reform the health care sector to change the policies and institutions to improve its performance and the health of the population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to have the political will to revolve the health system. We need to ensure that health care is accessible to everyone, unfortunately this Government has criticised the Bainimarama Government's policies about health system in Fiji at every stage. We used to ensure that people get quality and efficient treatment through the PPP programme, but unfortunately this Government has diminished or basically crippled this policy as they do not have the money to pay private doctors. Because of this reason, they cannot include more doctors and dentists in the PPP programme.

Fijians must go and sit in lines at public hospital for hours to get treated. This is ridiculous, Mr. Speaker. All this government can do is blame, blame and blame. They should go and ask the people in the Western Division about the level and quality of treatment they get from Aspen Medical, a policy decision made by the previous Government, and on the other hand, look at the Nadi Hospital managed by the current government.

The service is pathetic at government-owned hospitals and medical centres. It is two years now and what have they done? Basically, nothing! When Keiyasi Hospital was built, the decision was criticised but now that it is done, the Government cannot maintain and operate it properly. We need to build new hospitals in deprived areas to make healthcare available to the un-deserved population.

Let us see if we can come up with any more new hospitals in this term of Parliament. We have just been hearing about the 100 Bed Super Speciality Cardiology Hospital that is to be built by the Indian Government. What we recently heard is that the Government is not even able to provide land to build this hospital.

HON. F.W.R. VOSAROGO.- Hogwash!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I do not know how far this is correct but the honourable Minister,

in his response, can elaborate on this particular matter. Healthcare organisations can play a pivotal role in increasing the health literacy of affected groups by the expanding educational programme. We need to improve the efficiency of the health sector. How can we do this when the Ministry cannot even retain the experienced medical staff to bring efficiency into the system?

Medical professionals are leaving, not just because of greener pastures but the Government is failing to provide a conducive working environment. Staff are made to work overtime even when they are not rostered. While workers are giving a hundred percent towards their work, the support needed is not provided by the Government.

Patient experience needs to be improved and that is what we were doing through the PPP programme. Fijians had options to visit GPs early in the morning and then end up at work rather than waiting for hours at public health facilities and returning home with a sick sheet.

The patient's record is still kept in files while we have the Patient Information Systems (PATIS). Why are we not implementing whereby records are entered in PATIS? We should use technology to improve efficiency and patient-care quality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it takes months to get a medical report at any public hospital and that too at a hefty fee. This Government cannot provide medical care on time therefore I am requesting at least provide medical reports on time. We need to improve coordination between departments as treating patients is a holistic approach. It would not be possible to give the best treatment if departments do not coordinate and provide adequate support to the specialist.

We need to ensure that we prioritise patients and their safety, reduce clinical errors that leads to deadly consequences as we had with one such case in Nadi and are still waiting for an outcome of the inquiry that was taken by the Ministry for a patient named Ashika; the family is still patiently waiting.

Improving the quality of health care should be paramount. To improve the quality, we need human resources, equipment, infrastructure, medicine and consumables. Quality can only be improved when the doctor is surrounded by qualified people providing support towards the management of the patient. We need to put patients at the centre of health care delivery. The patient needs access to right care, at the right time to get the best results. The staff at health centres and hospitals needs to provide customers a friendly environment, and they need to realise that they are there for the patients and need to give them such care.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the waiting room areas are not pleasant. Most of the health centres do not have adequate sitting in the waiting area leading to overcrowding. Some of the health centres do not even have awaiting area, let alone chairs to sit. The deteriorating infrastructure of the medical facility is really worrying everyone. Looking at the condition of toilets in some of the facilities is very worrying. Toilets that do not even have toilet pans to sit, taps are running without water and no toilet paper for sanitation. The stench coming from washrooms is unbearable, imagine a patient suffering from diarrhoea visiting those toilets when the Government cannot even provide toilet papers. For some of us, it may be a laughing matter, but the general public are suffering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I must mention that we need to change the membership of the National Medicine and Therapeutic Committee while on one side we are trying to bring in TGA, FDA and EU standard medication, on the other hand, the medication we are using are very old. It is becoming difficult to even source this medication under the new standard. While new, effective and more economical medicines are available, our essential drug list that is reviewed by the National Medicine and Therapeutic Committee are still using medications that are now part of archive in developed

nations. We should have the private sector and other stakeholders' representation in the National Medicine and Therapeutic Committee.

Our people deserve better and newer treatment. We need to ensure that the health care is financed sustainably. When the previous government started giving a certain percentage from FNU levy towards improving the health care sector, this Government overturned it. This Government has underutilised CAPEX, all they are doing is increasing the OPEX, reduce the expenditure, stop overseas trips, save money and put it for the good use of the health sector. Stop using the civil service to employ failed candidates and supporters. We need good people to do good job. Medical field, Mr. Speaker, Sir, human resources is very specialised. We need specialists and that comes with experience and cost. We need to fork out more money to pay better salaries across the sector to stop our health workers from migrating.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, medical system cannot function if equipment in hospitals are not operational. We need to ensure that our biomedical staff are well trained to maintain these equipment. Most of the time, people are complaining that equipment are down, and we do not have biomedical staff to fix the machines.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 90 percent of the health centres do not have pharmacists to dispatch or control the inventory. We cannot expect a staff nurse or pharmacy attendant to control inventory thus leading to medicine shortage and wastage of medicine all over the nation. This leads to poor patient management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a lot needs to be changed to improve the healthcare system, and I hope that the honourable Minister will take the considerations of the Committee and implement them as soon as possible.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I also would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of this august House, and I wish you well. I must thank the Committee for their deliberations and work on the Consolidated Annual Reports from 2016 right up to 2021. It is the report that I hold here, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I fully agree with my colleague on the issues that he has raised. It is something that I believe that did not start all of a sudden last year. It is something that has progressively been there and likewise this Government is doing something about it.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would just like to again thank the Committee for their work, and I do note that in their Report, they had raised key findings and recommendations. There are about 12 finding and 11 recommendations.

As per the previous two Reports that had been debated, the Annual Reports for the 2016-2021 Consolidated Report are mostly outdated, and the findings together with the recommendations is something that the Ministry, not only this Government, the previous Government, has rectified some of the issues:

Recommendation One:

The Ministry should submit its Annual Reports on time.

Since taking office last year, that was one of the first initiatives that I had requested the Ministry to report all relevant Annual Reports. I am glad to say that this was done last year and likewise I can say for certain that 2021-2022 Report has been done as well and now with the Vetting Team.

Recommendation Two:

In terms of the review of the regulations and policies to ensure medical professionals are adequately equipped to deal with similar unprecedented situations as similar to COVID-19. Yes, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry has commanded a number of reviews, especially on the legislation part, endorsed by Cabinet, some are in the review stages and some will be tabled in Cabinet for endorsement. Therefore, in the consequent period next year, we will be tabling Bills for review and also planning the feedback that we get and then we have amendments to each.

Recommendation Three:

The Ministry to work with relevant stakeholders to address challenges pertaining to infrastructure development and related crucial areas such as the current staff accommodation.

Again, this is one of the areas that I had mentioned, it is not something new. It has been there for quite some time and through the Ministry and some of its new initiatives, we are seeing changes in repairing, renovation of certain facilities, not only within the Government, but starting last year, we have opened up the assistance.

We recognise that we, as Government, cannot work alone. Therefore, we have asked for assistance from the private sector, especially from the Board of Visitors for certain facilities and they have come on board. They have stepped in and assisted the Ministry in terms of partnering in infrastructure development and also not to forget the development partners who have stepped up and assisted us, especially DFAT and MFAT. This partnership has shown an impact on the ground especially with the renovations and improvement of certain facilities within the Suva and Nausori corridor, and now going up to the West and hopefully before Christmas, we will commission the new Momi Nursing Station facility.

Recommendation Four:

The Ministry should review the current staff retention policy to address the staff migration challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is one of the initiatives that I am proud to say that this Government is doing and through the ongoing dialogue between the Ministry, Ministry of Finance, Civil Service, we have come up with plans and there have been improvements in remuneration of nurses, other cadres are also being included in the review, and based on the review, we will peg them to their appropriate remuneration going forward.

Recommendation Five:

The Ministry should work closely with international organisations and donor partners. Since coming into office, we had started a donor co-ordination, partnership with the relevant donor partners and through one of those donor partners, they are assisting us and likewise, learning from them as well. One of those partners is the World Bank, through an initiative have come up with a Health Sector Review of 2024. It is a good report, worth reading and it will highlight what the honourable Alvick Maharaj has said, of course, is mainly here.

Recommendation Six:

The Ministry should increase awareness on social media platforms.

Yes, that is being done through our media team, not only in terms of putting out notices but also trying to be ahead or be proactive against misinformation as well. The Ministry should address the challenges faced by the medical profession on accessing transport to the rural and maritime areas. Sir, this is something that the Ministry is also improving on, especially in the

maritime areas, we have through the budgetary allocation of last year and this year provided outboard motor boats to those living and serving in the maritime areas with facilities in the Lau Group, Central Division, Beqa and even Naililili in Rewa and up to the North, Visoqa Nursing Station and other areas, Lagi, Rabi and Kioa as well. Together with the outboard boat, also the Ministry is providing backup vehicles for certain areas and for hard-to-reach places in the interior of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu.

Recommendation Eight:

The Ministry to ensure that healthcare workers go through proper training in handling biomedical equipment.

As raised by honourable Maharaj, this is a cadre that we intend to support because going into the future, we see that they are used to be of great importance. As medicine progresses, there will be a need for them, and this is why the Ministry is investing in this cadre as well.

Recommendation Nine:

The Ministry to do a comprehensive analysis to determine the factors contributing to the extended waiting time as raised by honourable Maharaj, this is not something new. The Ministry in its current form is transforming Primary Health Care Project, something that we will do and again this will be part of the World Bank Health Sector Transformation and Scaling.

Recommendation Eleven:

The Ministry should ensure that the services provided by Ba Aspen Hospital and Lautoka Hospital under the PPP should continue.

I will let the honourable Minister for Finance elaborate more on that but nevertheless the Ministry, through dialogue with relevant partners in the partnership, have come up with an agreement to see that this can be done properly. In its initial setup, the Ministry of Health was not consulted. So, in this new partnership agreement that we will be moving forward, all parties will be consulted and therefore it is an agreement, I believe, that will reach new heights in terms of services in the PPP for our people in the West.

That is my contribution on what the Ministry is doing and again, I would like to thank the Committee and wish them well on their future deliberations.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, my contribution to this motion is not just as a Member of Parliament but as a voice for every Fijian who wants a health care system that works, one that is accessible and effective. Let us look at the reality, Mr. Speaker, Sir. A reality where election promises are broken, budgets are underutilised, and people's lives are hanging by a thread.

During the period under review, Fiji faced 14 cyclones, two of which were Category 5 and the once in a century COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these enormous challenges, the Bainimarama Government stayed focussed on improving Fiji's healthcare. We implemented forward thinking policies that made healthcare more accessible with the new and upgraded infrastructure and prioritised staff training and retention. Nursing stations like Dawasamu, Namara, Nabou, Cuvu, Nawaicoba and Tau were upgraded to health centres with doctors and nurse practitioners in charge. That is progress, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Unfortunately, during their term, I was informed by the residents of Nawaicoba that there were days that this health centre was under lock and key, not even a single nurse or the doctor was there. I hope that matter has been sorted.

The Bainimarama Government also offered incentives and embraced a Public-Private Partnership model to improve health care delivery. Initiatives like the GP subsidy scheme, private dentist subsidy, laboratory test subsidy and the free medicine programme helped Fijians access quality health care. Let us not forget the establishment of state-of-the-art facilities like Heart International Aspen Medical, Pacific Specialist Health Care, and Nasese Private Hospital, which brought specialised treatments, like open heart surgeries, stenting within the reach of many Fijians. That was through the various incentives that were provided.

After *TC Winston*, we rebuilt and upgraded critical facilities like Ba Hospital, Nakasi Hospital, Navosa Hospital, Sawakasa Health Centre, and the Makoi Maternity Hospital. These are the facts, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Our Government knew that investing in health care professional was essential. Salaries were increased; some technical staffs started at \$28,000; and specialists earned over \$140,000 annually; scholarships and overseas training opportunities were also expanded to ensure we trained out talents.

Now, let us fast forward to today. Despite a bigger health budget, the system is collapsing. Nurses who graduated in December had to wait six months for employment, while those already in the system were overworked. Where is the strategy, Mr. Speaker, Sir? We hear that there are only 200 midwives for 300,000 childbearing women, and last year alone, 500 midwives migrated. We produce 50 midwives annually, sponsored by the Australian Government but they are not even bonded. This is poor planning having a huge impact on women's health.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the underutilised 2023-2024 Budget is another glaring failure. Of the \$1million allocated for staff quarters, \$800,000 was not used. Labasa Hospital had \$5million for upgrades and less than \$1million was spent. We were given reasons like electricity was not there.

Another \$5 million for special maintenance and not a single cent was used. For urban hospital equipment, only half of the \$4 million allocation was spent. Out of \$12.3 million for biomedical supplies, \$7.4 million was unspent. Dental equipment, \$1.2 million allocated but only \$37,000 was used, and this Government claims to prioritise healthcare.

Mental health is in crisis, but the budget for St. Giles Hospital was slashed. When questioned during the Budget Committee of Supplies discussion, the honourable Minister said it was sufficient. Mr. Speaker, Sir, health care workers tell a very different story. The outsourcing budget for emergency clinical services was cut by \$1 million. Yet the honourable Minister claims the capacity has improved. Really? Meanwhile, CWM Hospital cannot even conduct basic blood tests because there are no reagents. Patients and health care workers alike are suffering.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me paint a heart wrenching picture of reality that many Fijian families go through. A father, overwhelmed with fear and helplessness, watched his critical ill son clinging to life in the ICU. It is a Sunday, a day when hope should flourish, but instead this father is forced to spend \$500 on urgent medicine because the hospital shelves are empty.

Imagine the anguish of that father as he walks into a pharmacy knowing every dollar spent is a desperate bid to save his child, but the pain does not end there. Nurses driven by desperation by the lack of resources pleaded with him to share the life-saving medicine with other patients of other families who simply cannot afford them. And if you are wondering who this father is, let me tell you that this father is no one else but honourable Aliko Bia. He shared his story with me, and I was deeply touched with the pain and suffering he went through, and his child is still in ICU.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not just a story of one family, it is a stark and devastating reflection of this Government that has failed its people. The sorrow of that father echoes the anguish of

countless Fijians who are left to fend for themselves when they are most vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while hospitals are in crisis, the Government sends a 56-member delegation, including nine Ministers, to COP29. Fijians are asking, why is this Government prioritising junket trips, as termed by honourable Minister for Multi-Ethnic Affairs and Sugar Industry, over their health?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government promised to improve healthcare but instead, it has deteriorated. Many Fijians now look back and say, thank God COVID-19 happened during the Bainimarama Government. Health care is not just a line in the budget, it is a lifeline. This Government must stop fooling the people who trusted them with the election promises. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and I also would like to thank the Standing Committee for their very comprehensive Report, and I hope this Government will pay attention towards improving the health services in this country.

I know they are very busy producing reports, consultations, reports and consultations and only in today's paper I read that NCD's is definitely a crisis in this country, but one has to ask why, NCD's is a crisis in this country? Look at the cost of living, can people afford food? These are some realities on the ground.

MR. SPEAKER.- I will rule out of order. You are completely out from the topic we are discussing. It is about the Annual Report.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- The Annual Report also mentions NCDs, Mr. Speaker, Sir. So, this is a real reality on the ground, and I am urging the Government to look at the cost of living so that people can afford decent food. They are suffering because they cannot buy food, they struggle when they go to the supermarket and see the cost of proteins, cost of milk, that is the reality on the ground.

I know you do not want to hear this, but I am speaking from the public who have related stories to me, and I am speaking from my very personal experience when you go and shop in the supermarket. So, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank you for giving me this opportunity and I hope the honourable Minister will take heed of this.

HON. P.K. RAVUNAWA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise today to contribute to the debate on the Consolidated Review Annual Report for the Ministry of Health and Medical Services 2016 to 2021. I will only focus on the Standing Committee's recommendation.

Firstly, I commend the call for the timely submission of the Annual Reports. This procedural, yet critical aspect provides a wealth of information that enables us in this Parliament to understand proposed plans and improve in a timely manner to benefit the people we represent in this Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Report falls in the uncertain and unchartered time when Tropical Cyclone Winston a category 5 cyclone swept through the southern hemisphere taking away 44 lives and devastated more than 60 percent of our population. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic where more than 800 lives were lost due to COVID.

Also, during these two turbulent times it has exposed cracks in our health system. The recommendation by the Committee on 6.2 addresses this by urging the Ministry to learn from this crisis and to ensure that our medical professionals, the equipment, the healthcare infrastructure are well equipped to deal with such situations in the future. Although infrastructure development and personnel accommodation for staff are normally not debated in the health sector's report, but the

impact on boosting the staff morale and the service level quality is undeniable, Mr. Speaker, Sir, therefore the Standing Committee recommendation for the review is essential.

The Standing Committee's attention to staff migration is also concerning. Our health care sector is losing talented health professionals overseas and we must tackle this through an attractive staff retention policy with regards to their salary, wages, resilient work environment and welfare support.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our partnership with the international bodies is essential in building healthcare facilities and counteracting the ill-effects of climate change. As I noted a surge in drug abuse, NCDs, HIV/AIDS which cannot be ignored, and the Ministry should deploy massive outreach potential at least on all social media platforms to create awareness for our population Mr. Speaker, Sir.

It is imperative to consider our established local settings, the structure to be consulted and be involved in fighting for NCD's and drug abuse. The ecumenical faith-based organisations, the *vanua*, the community set-up are critical in addressing this national crises through awareness, preaching, teaching and through *talanoa*. Already alluded to by the honourable Minister, transport is another integral enabling tool for medical professionals to reach the hard-to-reach places in our rural communities. We need good vehicles, and also for the maritime and the coastal areas, we need good boats that are safe for the transfer of staff and also patients.

To improve the service in health care centres, a reduction in waiting time is essential. To ensure that healthcare workers are properly trained in handling biomedical equipment and also capacity building and support for our biomedical engineers and biomedical technicians. I fully support the Private, Public Partnership oriented health care services at the Ba Aspen and Lautoka Hospital, and we look forward to seeing the Ministry continue its efforts towards achieving the SDG targets.

Before I resume my seat Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask all honourable Members to support the many initiatives that has been mooted by the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services recently, which include the Fiji Health Adaptation Plan 2024-2030, it was announced in COP29 in Baku last month. Also, the initiative of the National HIV Surge Strategy to counter the rise of HIV/AIDS cases by intensifying and testing capacity, increasing community awareness for HIV/AIDS. The commencement of the third steps for NCD conducted through collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) also is the intention to strengthen primary health care and to resource the primary health care initiatives.

Also, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the outcome and the recommendation out of the health audit by the World Bank, in the allocation of 3.5 percent of our national GDP towards health service is not worthy and also we can challenge ourselves to go forward from there. It will serve a strong basis for our health care development moving forward.

In all this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I urge the honourable Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Finance to look for necessary funding to enable the honourable Minister to be able to deliver this health sector initiative effectively.

Lastly, I fully agree with the Standing Committee's recommendation and urge my honourable colleagues to offer their support to this motion for the health benefit of all Fijians. I thank you Mr. Speaker, Sir, for this opportunity to contribute to this debate. *Vinaka*.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Minister for Health and Medical Services for very clearly laying out exactly what the Government and what the Ministry of Health has been doing over the last two years. I also want to thank honourable Ravunawa for a very sensible contribution, unlike the hypocrisy that came from honourable Maharaj and honourable Premila Kumar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these two honourable Members, when we were in Opposition, twice we moved a motion to have inquiry into the health system and they were sitting here, this side of Parliament and they opposed it. The result of that, Sir, and the fact that we are discussing 2016-2021 Annual Reports is a demonstration of the failure that happened in the health system delivery under the FijiFirst Government and their leader.

(Chorus of interjections)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, they should listen. Thank you, Sir, because I was listening to them very carefully.

Let me point out, then I will tell you a little story as soon as we got into Government, very early I went to Dreketi and I went to Wainikoro, when we entered Dreketi Health Centre and I entered the doctor's consultation room, there was dust, there were tiles falling apart, the two nurses on the other side were in tears, saying "Sir, this is the condition in which we work." We fixed that health centre Mr. Speaker, Sir, in about six months in 2023. When I saw the quarters of the doctor and it was falling apart, and she was still committed and serving almost 15,000 people in that area. From there, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we moved to Wainikoro, we got there and I asked the X-ray person, how is your X-ray department? She said "Sir, I have been coming to work, punching then filing and going back because the X-ray machine has not worked for four months."

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we built Nausori Health Centre in one year, we got the New Zealand Government to support building the health centre and the honourable Minister and the honourable Prime Minister went and opened, That health centre Mr. Speaker, Sir, was falling apart, people did not want to go to that health centre, they were serving 70,000 people and today you go to that health centre people have told me in Nausori, Mr. Speaker Sir, "thank you, we now feel like going to the Nausori Health Centre." This is the level at which the health facilities were left.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, honourable Maharaj, if you had listened he was not here and if he was here he would have listened to the honourable Minister for Health, all the things that he is doing. He talked about the PPP, I gave a detailed explanation in the 2024-2025 Budget Address, how that agreement was done. It was almost unlawful what was done. Government is paying every single cent....

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Take them to Court.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government is now sorting that out. We like Public Private Partnership. The abuse that was happening in the previous system, we have plugged that hole, we are now working out how it should be done, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Yes, not everywhere, not every health centre has been fixed in two years. Not every pharmacy, not every instant things happen, and we have to understand why people complain, they complain to me as well.

However, for honourable Kumar and honourable Maharaj to come here and pontificate and forget completely what they had left, be a bit honest. I know it will take time for you to get used to being in Opposition. You probably need two terms in Opposition before you come into Government

to be able to understand the frustration that one has, because when you are in Government or in Opposition, you get the same kind of complaints from people. We do not mind honourable Members from the Opposition coming and talking about it, I used to do that, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I know, honourable Maharaj learnt it from me, he is experienced enough. But you also admit that when you are in Government what went wrong. I think that will be honest, that will be more helpful and that will be appreciated by people on this side.

Let me talk about the budget. Honourable Kumar, out of her 10-minute contribution, there is only one thing that she said that made sense out of so many that she said, and that was about budget utilization. Yes, there is an issue. Our budget now is about 4 percent of GDP. The WHO's standard is about 4.5. We have moved away from the low budget that we had before to about percent of GDP, 0.5 short of the WHO international requirement of 4.5 percent which comes to about \$580 million and includes the payment that the Government makes to the PPP.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government has been very honest. We have not denied any time that there are problems and that is why this Government called for a review of the total health sector. What the Report shows, they should read the Report. What it shows very clearly that in the last, almost 15 years to 20 years, our health outcomes of an upper middle-income country, our health outcomes is equivalent to a low income country.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Richard Naidu.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- In the 1970s and 1980s, the Report says very clearly that our public health outcomes, the incidents of NCDs were much lower than what we have now.

We, as a Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also introduced policies. I know, honourable Kumar was opposing that. We put tax on sugary products and she was talking about why we are not doing anything too. She is talking about cost of living.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if you look at the last Budget, all our policies apart from the budget in 2022, 2023 and 2024 where we increased funding for social welfare for other sectors, in the last budget we addressed the income side directly, we increased the salaries of civil servants, we raised the minimum wages rate from \$4.50 to \$5 from 1st April, 2009. We have seen the impact of that. You look at the consumption. You look at the economic activity. You look at the confidence now in the economy,

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is up there and the outcome of that is what the honourable Minister for Health just said about some of the things, "things are happening, there are problems, and we admit that. But it will be fixed, it is being fixed and I would suggest to people like honourable Maharaj who is a health sector man to appreciate these things better. When you come to Parliament, give some constructive suggestion instead of playing politics. We still have 18 months before we get into the election mode. So, I will ask them to wait for another year before they get into an election mode and start talking like this.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Just speak the truth.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government is completely on board. We have got this Report; the World Bank is with us, the partners are with us, the \$650 million project. Phases 1 and 2 will deal with the incidents of NCDs, Primary Health Care and that will reduce, in economic terms, it is a no brainer because if we spend more money in the public health sector, we stop more people from coming up, ending up in hospitals. Economically, it makes sense, health wise it makes sense, it improves productivity, it makes things better for everyone, not in terms of only health outcomes, but for the economy.

HON. I. S. VANAWALU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we thank the honourable Members for the lively and positive response to this Report. As for the deliberation from the Committee, the Committee recommends that:

- (1) All the reports have to be submitted on time.
- (2) The Ministry has given the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, to review the regulations and policies and ensure that medical professionals are adequately equipped to deal with similar unprecedented situation in the future. It should also ensure that all programmes and activities undertaken by the Ministry are aligned with its strategic goals and objectives.
- (3) The Ministry to work with relevant stakeholders to address challenges pertaining to infrastructure development and related crucial areas such as the current staff retention and accommodation. This timely upgrade will boost staff and client morale and positively impact service delivery standards.
- (4) The Ministry should review the current staff retention policy to address the staff migration challenges.
- (5) The Ministry should work closely with international organisations and donor partners in building new health care facilities, refurbishment or retrofitting or even relocation due to climate change.
- (6) The Ministry should increase awareness on social media platforms to address the recent rise in drug abuse, NCDs, and the surge in HIV/AIDS cases affecting the nation.
- (7) The Ministry to address the challenges faced by medical professionals and patients in accessing transport to rural and maritime areas.
- (8) The Ministry to ensure that health care workers go through proper training in handling biomedical equipment.
- (9) The Ministry to do a comprehensive analysis to determine the factors contributing to the extended waiting time in health centres and subsequently introduce measures to improve services.
- (10) The Ministry of Health should work towards achieving the SDG targets.
- (11) The Ministry should ensure that the service provided by Ba Aspen Hospital and Lautoka Hospital under the Public-Private Partnership should continue to benefit the people of Fiji.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

REVIEW REPORT - FIJI FINANCIAL INTELLIGENCE UNIT 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I move:

That Parliament debates the Review Report on the Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit Annual Report for 2023, which was tabled on 2nd October 2024.

HON. L.S. QEREQERETABUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I know this is the last report that we debating on this afternoon, but this is the most recent up to-date report. This is the 2023 Report from the Fiji Financial

Intelligence Unit (FIU) and we thank them for being very timely with their annual report.

The FIU was established under the Financial Transactions Reporting Act 2004. In 2005, the responsibility of the line Minister, then the line Minister was the Minister for Justice, was delegated to the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Fiji. The Unit is fully funded by the Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) and it is also co-located with the RBF. The Unit has a total permanent staff of nine hardworking staff, and they basically perform two roles:

- (1) An intelligence role, where FIU is required to refer financial intelligence to its law enforcement partners for investigation and prosecution of serious financial crimes and this includes proactive dissemination as well as dissemination based on requests from law enforcement partners.
- (2) Regulatory Role, where they ensure that the financial institutions in Fiji have strong internal systems and controls to mitigate the risks of their services and products being misused by criminals and their associates for money laundering, terrorism financing and other serious financial crimes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are two recommendations that we have in the Report that I hope the line Ministry and the RBF will look into:

- (1) That the delegated responsibility from the Minister of Justice then, I think now he is under the Attorney-General, but that responsibility was delegated way back in 2005, to the Governor of the RBF. The Unit is fully funded by the RBF and our recommendation is for the line Ministry to look at the delegated authority and to assure themselves that it still works, perhaps bring it up and do it where it is now current instead of, it is so many years old since 2005.
- (2) The recommendation for the Financial Transactions Reporting Act 2004 to be reviewed. In our discussions with the staff at FIU, they mentioned that when the Act was written in 2004, it was really shaped and flavoured by the best international practices then when it comes to anti-money laundering. They mentioned that there is a lot of progress in that area now, a lot of development and there is a need for the Act to be reviewed so that we can factor in the new best practices when it comes to anti-money laundering that happens.

Those are some things that we found out when we were scheming through the Act.

Section 23(2), I think, it says that the remuneration for the Director is set by the Minister responsible for Finance. This was an amendment made in 2016, and I think it is worth looking at also whether that is okay, whether it ensures transparency and accountability, if you like, the independence of this unit, it needs to be independent and perhaps in the review of the Act, that issue also can be looked at.

HON. R.R. SHARMA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I begin, I would just like to congratulate our sevens team for their victory and I have also been following the Autumn Nations Series for our 15s team. Their match with Ireland was controversial and questionable with the calls from the referee, but the Fiji team is only getting better and better in winning the World Cup in time to come.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, once found in isolation due to geographical barriers, miles away from its Exclusive Economic Zone, the Pacific nations are now subject to exploitation with the growing influence of transnational crimes that transcends borders, cultures and social structure, imposing substantial health and economic costs, especially for our younger generation.

The FIU works closely with various financial institutions including banks, insurance companies, money remitters, real estate agents in compliance with the Financial Transactions Reporting Act. The implications of illicit financial flow are severe from small to low income nations. The FIU is a member of the Egmont Group, with a network of 177 other FIUs and they securely exchange expertise and financial intelligence to combat money laundering and tourist financing. As at 2023, FIU had 30 million financial transaction reports and the key recipients are the Fiji Police Force, FRCS and FICAC.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, some of the related crimes associated with money laundering are cybercrimes, funding terrorism, exploitation of children, child pornography and human trafficking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us break down these crimes and let us focus on them one by one. I will not be able to cover all of them but a few that are worth listening to. Sir, 1,700 cases were reported by citizens being impacted by deceptive pyramid scheme known as the eBAY Shop Online Recruitment. The Fiji Police M-PAiSA Taskforce has been on the go and people are being charged and a caution to the general public, Mr. Speaker, Sir, not to share their OTP code, passwords and PINs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently there were consignments containing apparatuses that were seized that could be used for possible Palestine laboratories, which is the manufacturer of illicit drugs, but as stated in the Illicit Drugs Control Act 2004, Schedule 3(2) and I quote: “Controlled equipment such as encapsulating machines, rotary evaporators, laboratory equipment with capacity for large production are all controlled items.”

Speaking of medications, Mr. Speaker, Sir, cases of pseudoephedrine, needles and syringe abuse has been reported. I would just like to remind the honourable Minister for Finance that the hospitals are running short of medications.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji faces a silent drug epidemic tobacco, alcohol, methamphetamine, cocaine, cannabis has penetrated into the DNA of our society. This is further exacerbated by limited access to mental health services, expertise, resources and facilities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently I was one of the panellists at the Speaker’s Debate and a question came by, “Oh, nothing was done in the last 16 years.” I never had the chance to respond to this particular person but to note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, large quantities of cannabis and cocaine were seized in 2018 and large quantities of methamphetamine in 2020. But as for 2023 and 2024, the number of drug related cases has tripled - 132 arrests, 4.8 tonnes of methamphetamine were seized.

A few more recent data, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the National Substance Abuse Advisory Council noted that there were over 3,000-plus drug related cases involving our school children and we question the trainings, counselling and protection programmes, if they were effective by this Council.

Recently, just yesterday in the news, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a 14-year-old girl was found walking along the road in school uniform with visible needle marks and when officers questioned her, she revealed that she went to a party, ended up in a place where some boys sexually abused her and injected her with methamphetamine. Sir, 39 percent of 90,000 students dropped out between years 8 and 12 and the school dropouts have reached over 5,000.

Again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I just like to remind the honourable Minister for Finance when he spoke about the education aspect, yes teacher resignation is high, delay in disbursement of grants to schools and schools focusing on fundraising, the Ministry is not providing teacher replacements, RSL drivers are not paid and bus services are not provided in certain areas like Vuda, Saweni.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, certain businesses and investments need to be invested who exploit the loopholes in our laws, legislations and policies and meet millions of black money and converted into white. A multifaceted approach, co-operation, awareness and capacity building needs to be adopted in society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to turn my attention to the Exclusive Economic Zones that we have. As a reason, we need to foster international co-operation with ongoing monitoring and adaptation strategies across the region. Treaty participation among Pacific Island nations will strengthen our approach to combat drugs, drug trafficking, money laundering in our Exclusive Economic Zones and areas beyond our national jurisdiction. I would like to mention that the BBNJ Treaty and the goal is to sustainably managed 100 percent of our Exclusive Economic Zone by 2030 and our protected areas.

Then we have the Budapest Convention as well. It shows Fiji's commitment to ensure that people and communities are safe online and that our law enforcement and prosecution authorities have the necessary tools and networks to rapidly investigate and successfully prosecute cyber criminals.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also need to look at data protection and safe browsing. We need to monitor, restrict networks and ban some of the applications, and people giving threats to each other over social media need to be taken in and charged.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to strengthen governance and rule of law, implementation of effective legal frameworks, and harsh sentencing for anyone who gets into these matters. We need to equip our law enforcement, healthcare and rehabilitation centres with resources and necessary expertise. We need to conduct trainings with the authorities who are dealing with such matters, and police safety remains paramount.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on that note, I support the findings of the Standing Committee.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank the honourable Naupoto for the motion and the points he raised. It makes a lot of sense and if I can go straight onto that, the delegated responsibility from the Minister for Justice to the Governor of the RBF which has been in place since 2005, in my view should be reassessed and honourable Naupoto made a point which is entirely correct.

The Financial Transactions Reporting (FTR) Act should be reviewed also and updated to ensure that it is aligned with the current international standards of Anti-Money Laundering. All entities Mr. Speaker, Sir, must co-operate with FIU and provide feedback in a timely manner and appointment of a substantive Director of FIU in a timely manner will be important.

Just to look at some of the 2023 highlights, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The FIU received a total of \$5,242,280 financial transactions and other reports which were used to develop intelligence products. They analysed 367 suspicious transactions reports. For a small country like ours, these numbers are big, they issued about 429 intelligence reports to law enforcement agencies and conducted credibility checks on 141 individuals and 70 entities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji is still on the EU blacklist, we are working very hard on that. We are also part of a regional project on correspondence banking relationship and Fiji has contributed towards that project. It is the first regional project funded by the World Bank which was approved within a year and is now being implemented by the Forum Secretariat. Part of the consensus with respect to correspondence banking relationship is also with respect to putting in processes and

mechanisms to deal with AML issues and I know that FIU engaged with 180 AML compliance offices of financial institutions.

They are also providing training and awareness to 31 employees of financial institutions and FIU also manages a database containing around 30 million financial transactions, but, as honourable Naupoto stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, very clearly, there is a need to review the Act and look at how we can work with different agencies to improve and combat some of those undesirable transactions and money laundering that happens.

We are also going to announce very soon steps taken by FRCS in terms of how we can work with different agencies, and we will be announcing certain steps, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as part of FRCS activities and mechanisms that they will put in place and work with different agencies to also support, not only tax compliance but also provide a linkage with different institutions. Sometimes, they may be looking at \$3 million or \$4 million transactions but what is the value of looking at all those, how is it analysed, in what sort of timeline is it done, what is the communication processes, and how effective the use of that data can be made in real time to deal with some of these issues.

I think this is an important institution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the FIU has an intelligent function and also a regulatory function, so it goes together. The important part is the intelligence, but linked to it is also the regulatory part and when both work together or when both are efficient, both are communicated, both those functions are talking to each other, as well as talking to other institutions, then we will be able to deal with some of the, at the moment, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we think that looking at the Act or looking at the mechanisms, and how it can also work with other institutions is something that is important and we will do that.

HON. F.S. KOYA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, first of all let me just thank the Chairperson and the Standing Committee members for this particular Report. I think it is actually quite an important one, although it is the last one in the day that we are actually doing, but within the recommendation I think pretty much everything has been covered by the earlier speakers. But there is one particular one that stands out most of all, it is something that is really the crux of the whole of FIU and that is the Financial Transaction Reporting Act which the report says, needs to be reviewed and updated to ensure that it aligns with current international standards.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Act came into force in 2004, so we are looking at some 20 years ago. The digital landscape around the world has actually changed, so I would urge the honourable Attorney-General to look at this post haste Sir, and make sure that we align ourselves properly and there are many things that are attached to institutions like FIU and FICAC, et cetera, agreements that we have signed and the honourable Deputy Prime Minister Prasad actually just mentioned something about Europe and us being blacklisted, that is something that we have been fighting for, for the last twelve years to get off that black list.

One of the reasons why they do it is because they consider us a non-compliant tax jurisdiction amongst all these other things. It is something that Fiji has to fight for and what it does, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it affects our trade with these particular regions, it affects our investment from that particular region. I will give you a classic example, if we were to tender out somebody to do our roads and a French company wanted to do it, they would not come because we are considered a non-compliant tax jurisdiction, and these are things that need to be right.

As you would know better than anyone else, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the law is the machinery that actually will allow the FIU to be at the top of its game. I am not saying they have done a bad job, I know there are tremendous amounts of transactions that they actually go through, they store about 50 million bits of information, and if you look at it, there are only nine staff there. Now, that also

needs to be looked at to say, “do we have enough sufficient staff within FIU to be able to deal with all that they do?”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is the main crux of what the Report actually said. But we also need to be mindful that we are compliant, and I think it is really good that Fiji is actually a member of Egmont Group of FIUs where we get guidance from this and it is a network of about 177 FIUs and actually provides a platform for secure information sharing with respect to financial intelligence. These are the tools that are needed, Mr. Speaker, Sir, to combat money laundering and terrorist financing.

I know from the details given in the Report, that 30 million financial reports are actually held by FIU, and they receive about five million reports as they say from its reporting entities. If you look at the reporting entities you got a whole host of entities that report back to FIU, but there is one glaring omission and a last one on it, it said “iTLTB is one of the agency that the MOU is actually signed here” but of the iTLTB is there why is the Ministry of Lands there not there? They are also a custodian of land. These are things that we need to look at quickly to find out where they are glaring omissions, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

Again, we also need to be mindful that this Act came about in 2004 and then we have the Constitution and within the Constitution, Section 24, with rights to privacy and rights to confidential information being sharing, so it would be as a matter of urgency that the honourable Attorney-General would need to look at the review of this. I know that the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for External Trade, Cooperatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications has been actively working on this digital space et cetera. This is an Act that needs to be aligned with what he is doing at the moment.

If we are getting into the right digital space, we must make sure we have the right laws, it also helps the Courts in dealing with what may end up as crime. We must remember, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that financial crimes do not have borders, if we do not have the right material for these institutions to be able to prosecute or do what it is they have to do, we are failing badly, and we will be looked at because of our commitments made with agreements et cetera that we signed overseas in a different fashion. So, in order to be up there with the best, the only thing I can say, I commend the Standing Committee for the Report.

I will be very short, Sir, and I urge the honourable Attorney-General to look at the Act and see if it can be done, swiftly so that we are online with the rest of the world. I know that Australia and you would know this also, Sir, that Australia has just recently repealed its financial transactions reporting and come up with the new one. So, there are development partners that could assist with all of these.

On that note, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that is all I have to contribute, I know it is late in the day, but I commend the Standing Committee for the Report and I acknowledge all the work that they have done, and I hope that the honourable Attorney-General is actually listening too, so that something can be done about it.

HON. RATU J.B. NIUDAMU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support the Review Report on the Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit Annual Report 2023.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this juncture I commend the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence for the very comprehensive Report. I acknowledge that FIU has voluntarily submitted the Annual Report which is highly encouraging. I would also like to commend the FIU, Mr. Speaker, Sir, for the work carried out during the year 2023 and as the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics had indicated that five

million reports were received from each reporting entities. So, in fact, we can see the work, we can see the result and we can see how important the work that FIU has carried out in our financial institutions.

They have been supporting a number of agencies, government agencies. They have been supporting banks. They have been supporting individual consumers whenever they have faced these kinds of problems, and it is this agency who is able to come forward with the Report and facilitate the action that needs to be undertaken.

I believe, Mr. Speaker, Sir, they also work hand in hand with the Anti-Money Laundering Unit Council which consists of the Solicitor General, the Office of the DPP, FICAC and also, FRCS. Therefore, I would encourage that this particular institution to be given very important recognition in terms of the findings and the recommendations made by the Standing Committee particularly on the need that has already been elaborated by honourable Koya and honourable Deputy Prime Minister Professor Prasad, there is a need to review a particular law which is the Financial Transactions Reporting Act and I would encourage the Government to seriously look into this recommendation for the review of this particular Act.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, under the Financial Transaction Reporting Act a number of institutions, organisations and professions actually got caught under that. So, things like real estate agents, lawyers, accountants and various other professionals actually had to have their accounts audited and indeed submit an account to ensure that they comply with the law. That is really a genius of that and it propelled in fact and enter segment within their financial system to ensure or trace the money that comes into the country and indeed went out of our country. Also to ensure collaboration between the different countries to stop terrorism financing and of course the net enlarge also to stop things like cleaning of money, or what we called money laundering. I understand that all of us have known the importance of what I have stated this evening.

It is also a warning to the members of the public, not forgetting the Members of Parliament as well, the importance of reporting our financial transactions to the relevant stakeholders if it is a need to be reported, Sir, otherwise it will be an unexplained wealth, and we are all accountable for that. So, what has actually happened over the past number of years in Fiji, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have seen that the type of intelligence too have changed. These people who are dealing with this kind of offenders are getting smarter day by day. Even online and other sectors of our economy, people are trapped in this kind of crimes and there is really a need for the laws to be changed to suit the circumstances that we are in.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, again, I commend the work of the Committee, and I support the Bill before Parliament.

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured to contribute very briefly to the Report on the FIU for the year 2023. At the risk of repeating a lot of what has been said before, I will just keep my comments very brief. But essentially the FIU as we all know is a fundamental agency when it comes to the credibility and integrity of our financial system. A dysfunctional or under resourced FIU, places a lot of risk on the economy's integrity. One of the first things, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I looked at the Report, was for 5 million transactions there is only 18 eyeballs looking at those transactions which seems quite woefully inadequate.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank all the Members in this Chamber who contributed in this Report, we support the need to perhaps relook at the resourcing and ensure that the FIU is adequately resourced to do its functions.

The other thing, Sir, that struck me was, there was a question posed by the Committee to the FIU saying whether there was a correlation between detected illegal activity and the drug fines. The answer was no. I find that a bit hard to actually believe, because it just does not gel. Given the substantial level of drugs that we are aware of that is happening in the country, you would have thought that that would have been picked up in some of the unusual reports. Perhaps just something to think about and when the Act is being reviewed that we look at supporting this very important Unit. As I mentioned, the whole credibility of our financial system hangs on how this agency performs.

The final comments, I just thought I would like to make is, one, the honourable Rinesh Sharma mentioned the advent of scams and how that is impacting a lot of them. I can say proudly that the Government has been actively involved in trying to address the scams and manage it better. One of the first things that we all realised was, virtually all the legislations of all the agencies are outdated, whether it be the Online Service Commission, whether it be all the agencies.

Secondly, a lot of the legislation really do not have teeth. To give you an example, when a scam is identified, no agency can do anything until someone goes and reports it to the police. At the moment, as part of the taskforce on scams, there is an active process going on now to review all the relevant legislations and try and amend all of them to fall in line with the international best practice so that going forward, the legislation can have teeth and we can be more punitive in terms of how we deal with scams and even money laundering, if required. I do also support the revision of the Act because it is very important, as I said, one of the most important agencies of Government in terms of holding us together in terms of financial integrity, it is important that we bring the Act up to-date and ensure that it does follow best practice as mentioned by all contributors to this debate.

Finally, in terms of the Ministry of Trade, we have been working closely as well with the FIU under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), in terms of trying to prevent money laundering, improving transparency and promoting cooperation amongst the IPEF partners. We view that it is important that we try and engage with FIU because it ensures that the economy maintains a high level of integrity and we try and encourage and foster a corrupt-free environment that benefits all sectors.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with those few comments, I again congratulate the Committee on the Report and fully support the findings that have been made.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, if I can just add two points. First, during the reporting period, the first Director, Mr. Razim Buksh, retired. He held that position since its inception in 2006, retired in 2023 and we thank him for his services and dedication in helping shape the Unit as it is today, and we wish him well in his retirement.

Despite the need for the review as we mentioned, the FIU has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the phase of evolving financial crime trends and increased demands for financial intelligence and we thank them for that. They are continuing to enhance their capabilities in ensuring a robust monitoring and reporting and as mentioned by the honourable Deputy Prime Minister, yes, they certainly are ensuring the integrity of the financial system, and we wish them well in their work.

With those words Sir, I commend this motion to the House.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of today's sitting. It has been a long day for me as an alien in this environment. Today was baptism by fire.

Before we adjourn for the day, I wish to convey to all the honourable Members my deepest sincere appreciation of your congratulations and well wishes on my assumption of this office.

As I have said in my speech on 12th November and reminded by honourable Koya this morning, the position is laden with deep responsibilities, but at the end, it ensures that this Parliament will remain or be a model for democracy in action.

I am encouraged by the assurances of everyone that you will work with me in ensuring that this Parliament remains a bastion for order, justice, civility and need I remind you, decorum during the term of my Speaker of this Parliament. I thank you all for your contributions, rest well tonight.

Parliament stands adjourned until Tuesday, 3rd December, 2024 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 8.13 p.m.