

# **PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**



## **PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES**

### **DAILY HANSARD**

**MONDAY, 24TH FEBRUARY, 2025**

**[CORRECTED COPY]**

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## **MONDAY, 24<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 2025**

The Parliament met at 10.01 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, Civil Service, Public Enterprises and Information

Hon. Graham Everett Leung, Attorney-General

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 Qaranio Tuisawau, Minister for Public Works and Meteorological Services and Transport

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

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. Aseri Masivou Radrodro, Minister for Education

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

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

Hon. Viliame Naupoto, Minister for Immigration

Hon. Ioane Naivalurua, Minister for Policing

Hon. Mosese Drecala Bulitavu, Minister for Environment and Climate Change

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

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

Hon. Aliko Bia, Assistant Minister for Information

Hon. Ratu Josaia Bulavakarua Niudamu, Assistant Minister for Justice

Hon. Naisa Tatau Tuinaceva, Assistant Minister for Transport and Infrastructure

Hon. Penioni Koliniwai Ravunawa, Assistant Minister for Health

Hon. Lynda Diseru Tabuya

Hon. Kalaveti Vodo Ravu

Hon. Inia Batikoto Seruiratu

Hon. Jone Usamate

Hon. Faiyaz Siddiq Koya  
Hon. Premila Devi Kumar  
Hon. Parveen Kumar Bala  
Hon. Semi Tuleca Koroilavesau  
Hon. Hem Chand  
Hon. Vijay Nath  
Hon. Joseph Nitya Nand  
Hon. Ketan Kirit Lal  
Hon. Viam Pillay  
Hon. Sanjay Salend Kirpal  
Hon. Shalen Kumar  
Hon. Alipate Nagata Tuicolo  
Hon. Virendra Lal  
Hon. Taito Rokomatu Matasawalevu

Absent

Hon. Pio Tikoduadua, Minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs  
Hon. Agni Deo Singh, Minister for Employment, Productivity and Workplace Relations  
Hon. Alitia Vakatai Bavou Cirikiyasawa Bainivalu, Minister for Fisheries and Forestry  
Hon. Sachida Nand  
Hon. Rinesh Ritesh Sharma

**COMMUNICATIONS FROM THE SPEAKER**

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's official opening of the Third Session of this Parliamentary term. I hope you have had time to enjoy with your families and loved ones during the Prorogation and are re-assembled here refreshed and prepared to contribute meaningfully to the making of our nation's future.

I extend a very warm welcome to our guests seated in the gallery, the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, Your Excellencies, High Commissioners, Ambassadors and Extraordinary, and Plenipotentiaries representatives of countries from around the world, friends of Fiji, thank you for joining us today.

I also welcome all those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceedings from the comfort of your homes and offices through electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Today is a special occasion in the Parliamentary calendar as it marks the official opening of the Third Session of the Third Term of this Fijian Parliament. Its formal opening will be officiated by the President, His Excellency Ratu Naiqama Tawakecolati Lalabalavu, *Na Gone Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*.

Honourable Members, at this juncture, I wish to inform that in keeping with customs and tradition, the third branch of government, the honourable Members of the Judiciary will be joining us in Chambers to hear the Address by His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji.

I now call upon the honourable Leader of Government in Parliament to invite the honourable Chief Justice and the honourable Justices to Parliament.

[Honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament escorted the honourable Members of the Judiciary into Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament and Secretary-General to Parliament retired from the Chamber to meet His Excellency the President, and escorted him into the Chamber]

### **ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**

Mr. Speaker, the honourable Chief Justice and Members of the Judiciary, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and fellow citizens; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we stand today, *na vanua Vakaturaga o Nadonumai, vua na Turaga na Tui Suva*. I pay my respect to their chiefs, both of the past and present, as well as emerging leaders and members of the *vanua o Nadonumai*. I acknowledge their role in caring for the *vanua*.

To our fellow citizens joining us this morning via radio, television or live streaming, *ni sa bula vinaka*. I welcome your keen interest in the State Opening of the new Session of our Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, it is with immense honour and a profound sense of duty that I come before you today to open the 2025 Session of Parliament. This moment also provides an opportunity for us to reflect on our collective vision for our beloved nation - a vision that is centred on progress, prosperity and unity.

In the words of the poet, artist and philosopher, Khalil Gibran, and I quote, "Progress lies not in enhancing what is, but in advancing toward what will be." This sentiment encapsulates our responsibility to shape the future of our beloved nation by fostering a society that is just, equitable and resilient. As a nation, we must walk together in unity, ensuring that no one is left behind in our quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development.

This Parliament is not just a Chamber for debate, but a house of hope, a beacon of progress, and a symbol of the democratic spirit that binds us together as one people, one nation with one destiny. As we open this Session, let us remember the sacred duty that has been entrusted to us. This is a solemn responsibility to serve and to lead with integrity, in building a better future for all the people of Fiji. As proclaimed in the Gospel of Matthew 20: 26-28:

“... whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This verse requires leaders to sacrifice ego, ambition and greed, in order to serve the peoples' collective interest. It is in this august House, honourable Members, that you have, for the past two years, shaped policies, enacted laws to uplift our people, drive sustainable development and strengthen our resilience against the challenges of our time.

Let us set our sights high. Our vision for the future must encompass sustainability, inclusivity and resilience - a Fiji where every Fijian has the opportunity to succeed, where our environment is preserved for generations to come, and where we work hand in hand with our neighbours to promote

peace and stability at home and in our region.

The world today faces rapid changes, economic shifts and climate challenges that test our resolve. However, we are a nation built on resilience, unity and an indomitable spirit. Let us take a moment to recognise the resilience and strength of our people, and to pay tribute to our founding fathers, our past leaders and the honourable Members who have served in this august House, laying the foundation upon which we stand today.

As the great Statesman, the late Nelson Mandela, who achieved so much in South Africa, remarked, "It always seems impossible until it is done." Let us embrace this wisdom and work together to continue turning challenges into opportunities and transforming aspirations into achievements.

This Parliament must always be a place where ideas flourish, where debates are driven by purpose, and where every decision is made with the people's best interests at heart. As the wise King Solomon says in Proverbs 29:1, and I quote:

"When the righteous are in authority and become great, the people rejoice; But when the wicked man rules, the people groan and sigh."

We know that leadership is not about holding power, but about empowering others. It is about lifting those who are struggling and ensuring that no one is left behind.

To our youth, you are the future of this nation. Your dreams, ambitions and hard work will define the destiny of our nation. Be bold in your aspirations, relentless in your pursuit of excellence and unwavering in your commitment to build a better Fiji that thrives through unity and prosperity.

To all the people of Fiji, let us continue to stand together, upholding the values of respect, inclusivity, love and compassion. There is a saying, "A rising tide lifts all boats", unless there is a big hole at the bottom of the boat.

Growing up in these islands, we are familiar with this everyday phenomenon that we take for granted. A rising tide does not discriminate; it simply lifts all boats when it comes in. This simple saying affirms that when we work together, we all rise, we all prosper, and we all contribute to a nation that flourishes for generations to come.

There is, no doubt, that we, as a nation, are living in challenging times and the whole world is experiencing the same phenomenon. No one is spared from these challenges, although the benefits of development, particularly technological advancements, are reaching most of us.

We cannot deny the fact that many of our people are still left behind, but exploiting their plight, particularly on social media, is demeaning and a low blow. We must be cautious and ensure that information shared on social media is accurate and reflects the reality, and is intended for the common good, rather than creating further division amongst our own communities.

Reflecting back on my own journey as a public officer, a politician, Parliamentary Speaker and now as your President, I started thinking about what will inspire me to act, particularly at this time of uncertainty, due to the fast-changing environment. As your President and a traditional leader, I must take the first step in making the necessary adjustments to meet the demands of modern-day Fiji.

I urge all of us here today, including those listening on the radio or watching on television or livestream, in particular, our traditional leaders, that we must all remain firmly committed to working together to build a vibrant and prosperous Fiji. The Fijian idiom “*sai doko na karikari*” is now calling out to us. The change that we seek must start with each and every one of us, honourable Members.

Mr. Speaker, Distinguished Dignitaries and fellow citizens, it is time for united and collective action rather than just grand speeches, talk and rhetoric. I urge all of us to put aside narrow personal interests, partisan political agendas, and the past, and move towards building a nation united in purpose for our future. Let us engage in respectful dialogue and constructive debate. This also applies to your political supporters, particularly in their online activities. Please, advise them to refrain from inflammatory commentary or trolling with lies for political point-scoring.

As national leaders, it is our duty to leave aside our differences for the common good of our people. As national leaders, the focus must be on our shared destiny and commonality rather than our small differences. Together, we can build a better future - one that reflects the aspirations of all our citizens. I believe, we can do this through making the necessary adjustments and a paradigm shift in our leadership approach. I call on the members humbly, Sir, of our Great Council of Chiefs, please, do the same in order to remain relevant.

I am firmly committed to transformational leadership to overcome challenges. Transformational leadership to me simply means that we must be compassionate, we must have empathy and focus on equity. Most importantly, as a diverse society, we must continue embracing inclusivity rather than assimilation.

We recognise that multi-culturalism does not exist in isolation. It is based on the originality of the various ethnic groups, for therein lies the rich mix of our diversity, which we must continue to embrace and nurture for this is our beacon shining brightly in our diverse, beloved nation.

For the intermingling of our people leads to innovation and new ways of looking and doing things. These are the catalysts for creativity, for entrepreneurship, and above all, a vibrant society and economic growth. I have no doubt in my mind that we will continue to be committed to the fundamentals of leadership of compassion, empathy, equity and embrace inclusivity. We can achieve our long-term vision to build a dynamic nation that will enjoy lasting peace, progress and prosperity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, before I outline our legislative agenda, we must acknowledge the socio-economic challenges that we face today as a nation. While the challenges are significant, they nonetheless present opportunities for transformative leadership and national development.

Fiji stands at a critical juncture in its history. Our socio-economic challenges are undeniable, yet our resolve to overcome them, must remain unwavering. An African proverb reminds us that, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together." This affirms that our collective strength and unity is the foundation on which we will build a prosperous future for all citizens.

Economic growth is the bedrock of national prosperity. Government will continue rolling out measures to stimulate even greater investment, promote sustainable industries and enhance trade opportunities. At the same time, the focus will be on the diversification of our economy to be more broad-based by investing in agriculture, tourism and digital transformation.

Special attention will be given to further empowering the agriculture sector and Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs). In addition, Government will prioritize infrastructure development, ensuring that roads, ports and energy supply systems, support national productivity.

While Government continues attracting foreign investment through new policies, the interests of our local industries and workers will continue to be safeguarded. A nation's progress is measured not only by its economic achievements, but also by the wellbeing of its people.

We must ensure that there is equity to minimise the risk of our people falling into the vicious cycle of poverty. Our legislative agenda will strengthen social protection programmes, ensuring that vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities and low-income families, have access to essential services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Members of Parliament and Distinguished Dignitaries, to appreciate the economic status of our nation, we must consider the reality that we are a very small, narrow-based and vulnerable economy. We hardly have control of the supply-chain, for example, the cost of petroleum products which we very much depend on for transportation and, to some extent, for power generation.

Basically, we have very little control over inflation because we depend on the high volume of imports and this affects imported inflation. All we can do, is to manage ourselves better, but we have no control over exogenous factors. Our domestic economy has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, but there are still many challenges besetting our country. I will be deliberating on these later.

In 2024, our growth forecast was revised upwards to 3.8 percent from the initial projection of 2.8 percent. The higher growth projection was underpinned by renewed confidence in the economy and driven by the services sector, with a better-than-expected rebound in tourism and related sectors. Similarly, growth for 2025 is projected at 3.4 percent, and largely driven by the service and related sectors.

A higher growth rate can be achieved easily if we continue improving the business environment for investment, maintain the momentum of economic reforms, ensure political stability and provide confidence through well-crafted and coordinated macroeconomic policies, and embrace the rule of law.

Although the economy has returned to the pre-pandemic level of growth and Government's continuous emphasis on fiscal consolidation and debt sustainability, global issues such as geopolitical tension and climate challenges, pose significant downside risks to the medium-term macro-economic fundamentals.

Government is committed to striking a delicate balance between rebuilding fiscal buffers and supporting growth by allocating sufficient resources to key priority sectors, particularly the resource-based sectors. This means, by investing in robust and resilient infrastructure and strengthening social safety nets for vulnerable and low-income households.

Fast-tracking key structural reforms and improving efficiency in public service delivery, reducing wastage and cutting bureaucracy by streamlining processes, and implementing high impact public and private sector projects to foster growth in the near term, will continue to be a priority. I sincerely believe and I am confident that we will do better than the current growth projections of 3.4 percent in 2025. We have the capacity to grow at 5 percent in terms of natural resource endowment, human resource capacity, and opportunities in the international trading environment.

The National Development Plan will provide a sustainable path for the implementation of policies both, in the short and long term. We must work together to strengthen our governance institutions and decision-making machinery to ensure that we can easily respond to changes, rather than continue with "business as usual". Our policy response must be robust and timely, to ensure



better sequencing and harmonization of our collective efforts.

We are taking proactive measures to successfully implement major development-funded projects through foreign development assistance. This will ensure that positive inflow of funding through effective investment, rather than the negative gearing ratio that we are currently experiencing.

Mr. Speaker, Distinguished Dignitaries and my fellow citizens, as stipulated in Section 81(4) of the Constitution, it is my solemn duty to announce the Government's proposed legislative agenda, policies and programmes for this Session of Parliament.

The Government's legislative agenda is quite ambitious but necessary to drive economic growth, enhance national security, and includes the critical review of our Constitutional Framework to reflect the evolving aspirations of our people. This review will ensure that our supreme law aligns with the principles of inclusivity, fairness and justice. We invite all citizens to participate in this process, for a constitution must reflect the aspirations of its people.

Another major priority this year is to strengthen our integrity and accountability framework for the conduct of public office holders. The Code of Conduct law has been pending for a few decades. The new framework is central to building confidence in our public institutions, statutory bodies and, most importantly, public office holders. Laws governing some of the independent institutions will also be reviewed to strengthen accountability and transparency.

Government is committed to the review of the overarching legal framework that deals with urban planning and the control of development. This is to ensure the consistent operation of planning and the development of building controls across our communities. Government also proposes to deliver reforms to ensure that the health and future of our children are not destroyed by access to addictive volatile substances. I will elaborate further on these legislative reforms in my address this morning.

Mr. Speaker, Distinguished Dignitaries and my fellow citizens, when considering opportunities for transformational change, we must fully appreciate our historical challenges. Our past has been marked by economic vulnerabilities, political instability and social divisions. However, we must transform these challenges into opportunities. By fostering transparent governance, inclusive policies and national unity, we can overcome the constraints that have hindered our development.

I re-iterate my firm belief that transformational leadership is key to nation-building - leadership that is visionary, ethical and accountable, and leadership that serves the interests of the people rather than personal ambitions. It is through this approach that we will achieve equity, progress and prosperity for all.

The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission augurs well with this effort. The Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs will continue to implement Government's vision to enhance social cohesion by promoting inclusivity and diversity through initiatives such as Girit commemoration events, the construction of crematoriums, community consultations, and support for minority cultural celebrations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Distinguished Dignitaries and my fellow citizens, healthcare will continue to be at the forefront of our policies. We will continue expanding access to quality medical services and modernise healthcare facilities across the nation. No longer is moss growing on the walls of the Colonial War Memorial (CWM) Hospital. No longer is a washroom door at the CWM Hospital tied

with an IV tube and requiring 18 months to be repaired.

We value the voluntary assistance provided by our own citizens who contribute to organisations, like the International Women's Association. That is a perfect example of patriotism.

Health and medical care delivery needs a massive overhaul, and Government has embarked on the rehabilitative and progressive work in this regard, beginning with a fresh coat of paint on the walls of our medical facilities. Work is also progressing on equipping the Divisional Hospitals with up-to-date diagnostic facilities. Medicine procurement procedures have been reviewed and are being improved.

Our development partners, in particular the Government of Australia, is playing a leading role in ensuring that we have modern public healthcare and medical care delivery facilities, beginning with a master plan for CWM Hospital.

The Indian Government's construction of a 100-bed super speciality hospital will begin soon. This is work in progress. Much is being done, and much more will be done.

There will always be a review of the Nursing Act 2011, Radiation Health Act 2009, as well as the Out of Port Clearance Fees under the Quarantine Act. In addition, legislative frameworks for the Fiji Red Cross and the Medical Laboratory Services in Fiji will be established.

In response to the surge in HIV cases, the Government has launched the 90-day HIV Outbreak Response Plan and the HIV Surge Strategy. Coordinated efforts from everyone in the implementation of the Response Plan will be crucial.

Work will continue to address the ongoing shortage of healthcare workers. Government will explore options of recruiting foreign health workers to fill critical areas.

Government remains committed to addressing the significant challenges posed by the burden of Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), which impose a substantial burden on our citizens, especially the economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, our education system will be enhanced to equip our children with the skills to compete in a rapidly evolving global economy.

The review of the Education Act 1966 and related laws, policies and programmes will be pursued to align programmes with the current educational landscape, and meet changing requirements of the community, students, teachers and parents.

The review will also address gaps that have emerged and will be conducted with a nationwide consultation process conducted by the Fiji Law Reform Commission. In the end, the people must be aware of the new laws that will affect them, and consent to the laws being enacted. That is democracy.

The Education Sector's Strategic Plan focuses on improving service delivery and enhancing a quality learning and teaching in all schools. It is aligned to labour market demand and addresses the issue of labour shortages and mobility.

At the same time, the review of the education system and structures will be undertaken, to ensure that it is adequately aligned to our needs. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) will be further prioritised, to create a system that is inclusive, innovative and integrated with industry needs.

Mr. Speaker, Distinguished Dignitaries and my fellow citizens, public safety and national security are paramount for national development. Government is taking decisive action to enhance public safety by strengthening law enforcement agencies, investing in modern technology and modernising the legal framework.

Government will work closely with regional and development partners to combat transnational crimes, including drug smuggling and human trafficking.

Our diplomatic relations and peacekeeping role continue to be a priority, more so now with developing scenarios on the global front that directly impact our nation, including the rest of the Pacific Vuvale. The proposed National Security Strategy will lay the pathway towards improved security and stability.

Regional co-operation requires to be strengthened through humanitarian and disaster relief assistance to our Pacific neighbours. I sincerely thank the men and women of the Disciplined Services for their work in the development for the nation, and in humanitarian and disaster relief to the region, to ensure that our Pacific brothers and sisters are assisted in time of need.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, to enhance the safety and security of all citizens, the review of the Police Act 1965 will soon commence. The Act was formulated in a different era and limits the ability of members of the Fiji Police Force to use new technology and enhance operational outreach. The review will facilitate the introduction of mechanisms to rebuild trust and confidence.

Collaboration with our partners will improve the cybersecurity capabilities of our critical infrastructure operators, Government agencies and law enforcement personnel. As a key player in our regional security, we will address regional challenges, in cooperation with strategic partners who will provide technical expertise.

The review of the Illicit Drugs Control Act 2004 has started, as we grapple with the challenge of illicit drugs.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, we are not isolated from global geopolitical challenges. Our Foreign Policy will continue to emphasise strategic partnerships and regional cooperation, to safeguard our national interests. We will strengthen ties with both, traditional allies and emerging partners, to secure economic and security benefits for Fiji as “friends to all and foes to none.”

The launch of our first Foreign Policy White Paper is a milestone achievement, honourable Members. The White Paper sets clear, overarching objectives and principles within which, domestic and foreign policy work in tandem. Our Foreign Policy recognises and embraces the critical role of co-operation, underpinned by our ‘Pacific family first’ approach, which asserts our role and responsibility to the Pacific region.

The honourable Prime Minister actively advocates for the Ocean of Peace Concept, which upholds fundamental values and Pacific regionalism, uniting our history with a shared future. The Concept emphasises the protection and stewardship of our ocean, which sustains our lives and livelihoods as people of the Pacific.

The Ocean of Peace also strengthens our collective response to climate change, the greatest threat to our existence, security and wellbeing, as recognised by Pacific Leaders. As the Head of State, I reaffirm our commitment to the concept of the “Ocean of Peace”.

As a Small Island Developing State, climate change remains an existential threat. Rising sea levels, extreme weather patterns and environmental degradation threaten our communities and livelihoods. Government will lead robust climate action policies, advocate for climate justice on the global stage, and implement adaptation and mitigation strategies to safeguard our environment against associated risks.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, Government is prioritising the review of the legal framework for elections to facilitate the right to vote for all citizens, including persons with disability, and ensure compliance with our treaty obligations.

A Law, Justice, Governance and Human Rights Sector Partnership Framework will identify and develop a comprehensive approach on support to be offered to all Fiji citizens. The Ministry of Justice will undertake the review of the Bankruptcy Act 1944 and the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration (Amendment) Act 2021.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, to ensure a more efficient and people-oriented public service, Government is committed to reshaping the public service landscape through public sector and regional leadership, and modernisation to meet the needs and aspirations of all citizens. As part of reform efforts, a review of the Public Service Act 1999 will be conducted and will focus on strengthening the independence and accountability of Permanent Secretaries, as well as promote merit-based recruitment and performance management.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, in collaboration with our development partners, Government is committed to revitalising the Fiji's shipbuilding sector, that may see the establishment of a new shipbuilding facility in Fiji. This will mean increased investment opportunities that will further invigorate the sector.

In addition, Government has initiated the review of six agricultural-based public enterprises to improve service delivery to Fiji citizens, boost productivity and efficiency, improve operations and reduce reliance on the Government. These entities include, the:

- (1) Agriculture Manufacturing Authority;
- (2) Food Processors Fiji Limited;
- (3) Fiji Rice Limited;
- (4) Fiji Coconut Millers;
- (5) Fiji Meat Industry Board; and
- (6) Yaqara Pastoral Company.

Government will implement measures to increase the participation of women as Directors on Boards of Public Enterprises. The Ministry has prioritised the review of its policies and laws to improve the performance of public enterprises.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and my fellow citizens, to facilitate economic growth, Government is prioritising the accessibility of information to assist potential investors for the mining sector. The Government, through the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, is focused on ensuring that the new National Groundwater Resources Development and Management Policy is effectively implemented. In addition, the Ministry will ensure that the Land Use Master Plan will balance environmental protection with social and economic development.

The Ministry will also review annuity payments on State Land at:

- (1) Domain in Suva for landowners of Suvavou;

- (2) Mataqali Ketenatukani and Vidilo of Namoli Village; and
- (3) Mataqali Nadala, Naivitini and Nabuilevu of Nadala Village.

Honourable Members, the last review of the annuity took place 27 years ago in 1998.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, the newly established Ministry of Immigration is at the forefront of the commitment to protect our sovereignty and facilitate economic growth. Government has significantly enhanced border security through the Integrated Border Management System (IBMS), as we continue to combat human trafficking.

The launch of online platforms for permit applications will enhance efficiency and security. Visa and permit systems have been streamlined, enabling the swift entry of skilled professionals and investors. Government will also develop adaptive policies to address emerging migration challenges.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, the tourism sector has been the key driver of Fiji's post-pandemic recovery and has positively surprised us. In 2024, visitor arrivals approached the one million mark, bolstered by the introduction of additional flights, major international events and the introduction of the National Sustainable Tourism Framework to better position Fiji for the global travel and tourism market. Investment Fiji forecasts the addition of over 3,000 hotel rooms in the coming years to meet the growing demand.

In 2025, Government will prioritise strengthening the tourism policies, infrastructure, sustainability and aviation safety, including the modernisation of the Civil Aviation Act. Prioritising the passage of the new civil aviation law through this august House is imperative, to ensure compliance with international safety standards. The proposed Civil Aviation Bill will drive industry competitiveness, attract investment and solidify our position in global aviation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, Government remains committed to broadening relations with our trading partners and enhancing our trade and economic position. Our Trade Policy Framework will be reviewed to enhance its effectiveness and adaptability to current global dynamics. Government will continue promoting and making Fiji a premier destination for doing business, in enhancing the regulatory compliance, access to markets and sustainable financing.

Progress made in ratifying agreements under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity means that Fiji can access an economic bloc that contributes 40 percent of the World's GDP and almost one-third of global trade. Cabinet recently endorsed the E-commerce Strategy 2024-2028 to support growth of the digital economy, enabling local businesses to compete effectively in the global market.

For Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, the Access to Business Funding Bill 2024 will facilitate enhanced access to alternative funding opportunities. The Bill is intended to simplify the process of obtaining funding from investors and lenders.

Government will continue to promote value addition in resource-based sectors to facilitate the effective participation of resource owners. This year, Government will continue to diversify the economy and strengthen partnerships with investors who are interested in expanding their operations to Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, the key initiatives in the employment sector include labour market reforms, skills development and a review of employment laws. This will support business sustainability and economic prosperity, enhance compliance, while upholding workers' rights, and addressing global challenges. Proposed legislations including the

Employment Relations Bill and the Work Care Bill seek to modernize workers' rights and enhance productivity.

The establishment of a National Productivity Commission will boost our economy. Moreover, I am pleased to note the resolution by Government of the 33 year-long strike in Vatukoula where some justice has finally been achieved for the living miners and dependents of deceased miners, who went on strike during the 1991 Vatukoula Mine Workers' Strike.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, while safeguarding customs and traditions is a priority under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), strengthening social frameworks through the iTaukei Affairs Regulations gazetted in 2024 will be a priority.

The proposed Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expression Bill provides for the recognition and protection of traditional knowledge, cultural expression and genetic resources. The review of the Rotuma and Banaban laws have been proposed after consultation with their Councils.

Government will continue to promote the participation of *iTaukei* in development by empowering them through skills enhancement and encouraging participation in business. Government will also take a review of the *iTaukei* institutions to improve their effectiveness and meet the needs of beneficiaries and clients.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, Government will pursue transformative initiatives to empower Fiji's youth and elevate sports development. A key focus will be the implementation of a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme for street kids and youth.

A Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Hub will be established to support start-ups, promote green skills training, and engage youth in renewable energy and climate adaptation initiatives. The Mobile Training Programme will be enhanced to further extend TVET and skills programmes to rural and underserved areas, ensuring inclusive development.

In the promotion of clean sports, Government will establish a National Anti-Doping Organisation and strengthen elite athlete development through the establishment of the Fiji Institute of Sports. Investment in rural sports facilities and sports tourism programme will further position Fiji as a regional hub for sports excellence.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, Government recognises the impact that the fisheries sector has on the economy and the livelihoods of many of our people. Three key policies, namely, the National Fisheries Policy 2024-2028, the Aquaculture Development Plan 2024-2028 and the Aquaculture Act 2024, are aimed to secure resource sustainability.

Government is focused on sustainable forest management, landscape restoration and to increase the sector's economic contribution to our economy. Efforts continue to expand biodiversity through nurseries and international initiatives like REDD+, while the sector now contributes over \$140 million to the economy. Future goals include increasing forest cover from 60 percent to 64 percent, expanding protected reserves, and restoring 50,000 acres of mangrove ecosystems. The Ministry also aims to boost employment and support women and youth-led businesses through targeted initiatives.

Mr. Speaker and distinguished guests, there will be renewed emphasis on rural and outer island development to ensure balanced development. Government will review the Integrated Rural Development Framework to progressively bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.

The new National Rural Development Policy will focus on graduating rural households out of poverty and address issues of access. Government will continue to prioritise better roads, jetties and basic infrastructure including bridges, seawalls, electricity, water, drainage, transportation and communication. Maintenance of rural roads will be given priority to facilitate access to markets. Government will promote growth of the rural economy by implementing sustainable resource-based economic activities.

The relocation of the people of Nabavatu to their new village site will continue this year with support from development partners and civil society; that has been long coming.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, the National Blue Town Framework will be implemented to harmonize critical areas including infrastructure, transportation, health and education.

The Government's New Town Development Programme will guide development of the following:

- Nabouwalu Passenger Services Terminal;
- Nabouwalu Town Centre;
- Keiyasi New Town Development Project; and
- Township Plans for Seaqaqa, Taveuni, Navua, Waimaro and Vunidawa.

Mr. Speaker, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, Government is committed to addressing the growing demand for housing to enhance the quality of life for all citizens. Recently, families were relocated from the Jittu Informal Settlement to the newly constructed Lagilagi Public Rental Board flats. Relocation efforts will continue, and to give families in informal settlements a more secure future.

Government remains committed to assisting persons living with disabilities, ensuring that homes are retrofitted with the necessary features to provide ease of access.

Mr. Speaker and distinguished guests, the Ministry of Sugar has achieved significant milestones, including a record-high cane payment for 2023, with a final payment of \$105.08 per tonne, the highest ever in our history.

The Ministry also launched 15 targeted programmes aimed at enhancing productivity, such as subsidies for transportation, farm mechanization, fertilizer and drainage. The non-sugar agriculture sector has been the cornerstone of our economy since Independence.

Government is committed to ensuring that every citizen has access to safe and nutritious food, while promoting a competitive, sustainable and value-driven agricultural industry.

Government is focused on improving farm access roads and supporting investment in large scale production technologies and agro-processing, to add value to agriculture products and enhance access to new markets.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, distinguished guests and fellow citizens, this moment calls upon us to rise to the challenge and make the necessary transformational change as we move forward. As we embark

on this legislative journey, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to build a Fiji that is resilient, inclusive and prosperous.

Let us foster a nation where economic opportunity thrives, social justice prevails, and security is assured for every citizen. The choice we make today will shape the future generations. With unity, determination and transformational leadership, we can make our nation a beacon of hope, opportunity and progress.

Transformational leadership requires that we are compassionate at all times, have empathy and ensure equity to embrace inclusivity. In unity, there is strength; in collaboration, there is progress; and in transformation, there is a brighter future for all.

Let this Parliament be guided by wisdom, fairness and the unwavering commitment to the service of our beloved nation rather than narrow partisan or personal interests.

May your deliberations bring hope, direction and purpose to the lives of every citizen of Fiji. Let our words inspire, our actions empower, and our leadership unite. Together, we will build a Fiji that stands tall among nations - a Fiji that is strong, sustainable and full of promise.

I wish you all great success for this year and it is now my duty and great honour to declare the 2025 Parliamentary Session open.

May God bless Fiji and her people.

(Acclamation)

[His Excellency the President retires from Parliament and is escorted by Mr. Speaker and the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament.

Members of the Judiciary also retire from Parliament]

## **ADJOURNMENT**

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

That Parliament adjourns until Monday, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2025 at 9.30 a.m.

HON. RATU R.S.S. VAKALALABURE.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I second the motion.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, the Third Session of the Third Term of the Fijian Parliament has been officially opened by His Excellency the President. All parliamentary businesses, including parliamentary sittings, parliamentary Standing Committees' proceedings on Bills, motions and reports will resume or be continued.

I take this opportunity to thank you all for your presence on this auspicious occasion. Thank you to our honoured guests and also those joining us through the live broadcast of the proceedings on television and the internet.



At its next sitting, Parliament will proceed with an address by a motion from the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency the President for his most gracious speech. Thereafter, all honourable Members will be given the opportunity to speak in accordance with the Batting Order that has been agreed to and circulated.

On that note, I invite you all, together with our guests, for refreshments which will be served at the Big Committee Room. Honourable Members, Parliament now stands adjourned until Monday, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2025 at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 11.46 a.m.