

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI



PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DAILY HANSARD

TUESDAY, 4TH MARCH, 2025

[CORRECTED COPY]

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TUESDAY, 4TH MARCH, 2025

The Parliament met at 9.31 a.m. pursuant to adjournment.

MR. SPEAKER took the Chair and read the Prayer.

PRESENT

All honourable Members were present.

MINUTES

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

That the Minutes of the Sitting of Parliament held on Monday, 3rd March, 2025, as previously circulated, be taken as read and be confirmed.

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

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE SPEAKER

Welcome

I welcome all honourable Members to today's sitting and all those who are joining us in the gallery and those watching the live broadcast and the live streaming of today's proceeding from the comfort of your homes and offices through electronic devices. Thank you for your continued interest in the workings of your Parliament.

Honourable Members, we will proceed to the next Agenda item in accordance with the Order Paper for today.

**RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow Fijians watching through Parliament television, livestreaming or listening on radio today; good morning, *ni sa yadra* and *ni sa bula vinaka*.

May I be allowed to say a few words in the vernacular to acknowledge the traditional landowners of the land on which we gather today.

Da vakaturaga saka tiko ki Nadonumai vua saka na Gone Turaga na Tui Suva, vakaturaga saka tale tikoga i Burebasaga vei ira na Gone Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi na Vunivalu; sa ka levu saka tiko na doka kei na vakavinavinaka ena kena mai soli saka tiko na galala me keimami mai bose ka ena nomuni soso ena vuku i Viti ena siga e dai.

[To the chiefly *Vanua* of *Nadonumai*, the high chief of Suva; the chiefly sitting of *Burebasaga*, the *Marama Bale na Roko Tui Dreketi*, the *Vunivalu*; it is with deep honour and appreciation been granted the freedom for this august Parliament to deliberate on your land of heritage on behalf of Fiji and its citizens today.]

I also would like to pay homage to the late father of the Coach of the Fiji Sevens Team, Osea Kolinisau, who passed away before the start of the last rugby sevens tournament. Kolinisau battled on, despite his father's passing. May Talatala Tuikoro Kolinisau rest in peace.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency's most gracious and honourable Speech which I support wholeheartedly. My speech is in two distinct parts. With your indulgence, Sir, I will provide, firstly, the basis upon which I support His Excellency's visionary Speech; a speech imbued in chiefly and godly wisdom, before I provide a scorecard for the Ministry that I am honoured to lead, in terms of what has been done or being done, to operationalise His Excellency's Speech.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can say with confidence in this august House that the People's Coalition Government, very ably led by the honourable Prime Minister, is on the move. His Excellency has called us to build a vision for a future based on sustainability, inclusivity and resilience – one where every Fijian thrives, our environment is preserved, and we collaborate regionally and globally for peace and shared prosperity. His Excellency exhorts us to work together and stand together, upholding the values of respect, inclusivity, love and compassion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on working together, I wish to acknowledge my colleagues on the other side of the House and the honourable Leader of the Opposition. They have worked together with us when it is good for Fiji and its people. The recent Aquaculture Bill 2024 which was passed unanimously under Standing Order 51 in the last Sitting is a case in point, Mr. Speaker, and this augurs well for the next two years as we work together to rebuild Fiji.

His Excellency then talks about the Government's agenda, which is focussed on delivery, addressing the many issues that we have inherited from the previous Government - dwindling infrastructure, crumbling hospitals and health centres, water issues, HIV/AIDS, drugs, et cetera.

However, His Excellency also speaks about the positive actions being taken. Yes, now, and again, we will remind our colleagues on the other side of the House about the last 16 years but what is more important, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is our message to the people of Fiji. We acknowledge their issues, and we are fixing them.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is also a major legislative agenda that is underway this year, apart from the proposition to make changes to the Constitution, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to have any hope of lasting peace in our nation, addressing the issues since 1987 to date through the TRC and correcting the two-men ill-conceived 2013 Constitution by making appropriate amendments will be fundamental. I hope that my colleagues on the other side of the House and the people of Fiji will work together with the People's Coalition Government to develop a constitution that reflects the will of the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we have no choice. Before I transition onto the second part of my speech, His Excellency also urges us to commit to transformational leadership. This is leadership that is compassionate, has empathy and focusses on equity. It is leadership that puts the country first, before self, and partisan politics that espouses inclusivity and is committed to ensuring that as Fiji rises, everyone rises together, and no one gets left behind. I hope and pray that this august House embraces

the counsel of His Excellency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you can see in the last 27 months that the economy is in great shape, rebounding from pre-pandemic levels with growth revised upwards to 3.8 percent in 2024, and projected to 3.4 percent in 2025. Foreign reserves sit at \$3.7 billion or 5.9 months of import cover. Liquidity in the financial system is \$2.2 billion and private sector lending growth is at 11.4 percent as of January 2025.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, investor confidence is high with the current investment pipeline just under \$6.6 billion and has the potential to grow very quickly to \$10 billion, if some of the recent investment discussions gain traction. Our prudent policies, pro-business approach and commitment to fiscal discipline have positioned Fiji very well, to solidify its position as the trade, investment, aviation, logistics, education, medical and tech hub of the Pacific.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are not stopping here, we are laying the architecture of a future economy that is stable, thriving, dynamic, broad-based, and with a focus on the rural and i-Taukei economy.

To secure Fiji's future, we must press forward with a clear vision in terms of re-engineering the economic architecture of our country. To achieve this, the Ministry that I am honoured to lead, operates under five core deliverables:

- (1) economic diversification;
- (2) ease of doing business;
- (3) support for MSME and cooperatives;
- (4) digital transformation; and
- (5) raising standards in Fiji.

On economic diversification, when I returned from university in Australia in 1989, I heard our leaders talking about economic diversification. Over the past two years, we have made genuine concerted efforts to diversify our economic base. Our focus has been on the ICT sector, agriculture, aquaculture, value-added manufacturing, diversified tourism offerings, renewable energy and the blue or green economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for ICT, the entry of Google and Starlink is a game changer in the economy. It will be possible to transition our young men and women to higher paid jobs in the years to come. An independent report commissioned by Google states that Google investment will generate \$680 million between 2025 and 2030 and generate 3,600 jobs.

The Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector will continue to grow from strength to strength. At least four new BPO operations have opened in the last 18 months. The ANZ and Tower Insurance continue to grow their operations in Fiji. The Lyndhurst Business Park sets to break ground before mid-year and will create, on completion, a potential 15,000 jobs over eight years.

For commercial agriculture, we have been encouraging private sector players, both foreign and domestic, and local institutional investors. Fiji Water has announced its intent to invest in Fiji, identifying land in Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. They will focus on citrus, mangoes, pawpaw and, possibly, watermelon. The FNPF and BSP Life now jointly own Rooster Chicken. Fijian Holdings is also looking at commercial agriculture with various partners. Why is commercial agriculture important, one might ask?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the plan is to work with these investors to develop smallholder farming models at the rural level using the co-operative model and supplying into these commercial ventures.

If this is done successfully, it will revolutionise how agriculture develops in Fiji, touching the rural and *iTaukei* communities.

The development of medicinal cannabis industry and the nutraceutical industry is the key focus of this Government. We have completed consultations and are working on the legislation to be finalised later this year. At least, two to three serious players have approached us.

The Ministry is also collaborating with key stakeholders and development agencies to develop the aquaculture sector. The passing of the Aquaculture Bill 2024 has been timely. Our local experts are working on tilapia, prawn and oyster farming, which we aim to support and develop.

We are working with the honourable Minister for Fisheries and Forests on introducing a new mahogany legislation, which will support the growth of the mahogany industry and, ultimately, become a major industry in Fiji. The return of the 10 percent share ownership to the landowners is a priority.

The Kava Bill will be brought forward in this session to transform kava and realise its potential as a billion-dollar industry for Fiji and the Pacific.

For tourism, there are two major hotels under construction with jobs set to peak at 1,000 later this year. At least, two to three additional hotels will come online this year. The total investment will be in excess of \$1 billion.

Educational tourism and digital nomads are being evaluated as diversified tourism offerings. Renewable energy opportunities are being progressed in solar, hydrogen and hydro, in keeping with green transition which is being driven by EFL.

We are also supporting affordable housing projects, together with the Blue Town initiative, such as recycling and proper waste disposal.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the prospects for diversification are significant and very exciting. As part of the economic diversification, the People's Coalition Government is committed to expand trade relationships and its partnerships with its key partners.

Discussions are underway for a proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE and the Pacific Islands; planned to conclude in September, which will boost opportunities for export and investment.

Looking to our closest neighbours, Australia and New Zealand, my official visits to Australia and New Zealand last year, solidified and renewed the revitalised Vuvale and Duavata Partnerships. This commitment to deeper collaboration was further reinforced by the first ever trilateral meeting between Australia, Fiji and New Zealand in Rotorua.

On PACER Plus, we are keen to engage. However, the agreement must be balanced and inclusive, accompanied by targeted support measures to benefit all. We are confident of a win-win position for Fiji, Australia and New Zealand, and hope to complete this agreement this year.

In terms of the EU, after years of deadlock, we have finally been able to make headway on the implementation of tariff liberalisation under the Interim Economic Partnership Agreement (IEPA) with the European Union. This was endorsed by Cabinet in August 2024, and this breakthrough will activate global sourcing for fisheries, which will help PAFCO's exports. It also has opened a conversation about sugar and the assistance to sugar.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this side of the House plans to sort out sugar once and for all. We are also in discussions with India and the United Kingdom on trade cooperation agreements.

In terms of the ease of doing business, we are laser-focused on reforms to create more efficient and transparent government. The digitisation processes of government have just started. We have started the starting-a-business process where effectively, you can start a business online. We have now begun the building permit approvals process which should bring approvals down to six months. This will speed up investment churn in the economy, breaking ground faster and we hope to complete this by November.

Our national digital strategy is also being finalised which will provide a roadmap for the delivery of services to Government and the broader economy. Embedded in this strategy is a national ID project which is being developed in collaboration with the Reserve Bank of Fiji. This initiative is transformative and will make opening bank accounts easier and give access to Government services as well.

We are also working with the Minister of Immigration to sort out his immigration challenges. The work permit process is now automated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we are keen to fully automate the immigration process in the next 12 to 18 months. It is a work in progress, but it will be sorted.

With MSMEs and cooperatives, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the backbone of our economy, providing employment and driving innovation. The People's Coalition Government desires to develop a comprehensive support ecosystem for MSMEs and cooperatives. A national strategy to support this is being developed and a database for MSMEs and cooperatives will be finalised in June this year.

In terms of digital transformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is a key component of the National Development Plan and critical for our future programme. The national digital strategy as mentioned will build out our e-Government and also evolved the digital economy for our nation. Over the past two years, we have worked hard to develop the foundation so that our rural and maritime communities can benefit from the digital revolution.

We have prioritised the establishment of the Telecommunications Authority of Fiji (TAF) Board to be fully functional. The last time it was fully constituted, Mr. Speaker, Sir, was in 2013. A strong regulatory body is essential for effective telecommunication services. A programme to start connecting the unconnected will be underway in April this year and will be coordinated by TAF. The arrival of Starlink and Google has been discussed, and we plan to have 5G in place towards the end of the year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are focusing on cybersecurity, we are focusing on online scams, and we also have recently joined the WeProtect Global Alliance and also form the National Anti-Pornography Task Force as a means of combating pornography, online sexual exploitation and abuse. A new Online Safety Commissioner has been appointed, and he is busy working on strengthening the current legislation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also have a national digital e-commerce strategy, and I pleased to announce that I have distributed a copy for everyone's reading.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, on national standards, we are in the process of endeavouring to raise standards in Fiji, whether it be food safety or building standards and we expect to see more progress over this year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, in my view, the rebuilding of Fiji is well underway. As you can see, there is a lot being done and a lot more to do. I acknowledge the team at the Ministry, the Permanent Secretary, Mr. Shaheen Ali, and the senior leadership. I also thank Investment Fiji and the statutory bodies and the Ministry for their support.

His Excellency the President challenged us to grow at 5 percent per annum. In the words of President Obama, Mr. Speaker, Sir, “yes we can”. The foundations are being laid and are taking shape, and the future looks promising. The work ahead will require continued commitment and collaboration, and the will to embrace change. It will demand purpose, resilience in the face of challenges, and an unwavering belief in our collective potential to transform our nation.

The priorities that I have outlined today, Mr. Speaker, Sir, reflect our unwavering determination to build a stronger, more resilient and inclusive economy; one that works for all our people. We will continue our efforts to create jobs, support businesses, strengthen industries and improve livelihoods. We will foster an environment that encourages innovation and investment, ensuring that opportunities are accessible to all, regardless of background or circumstances.

As Nelson Mandela once said, “When we uplift the most vulnerable in our society, we uplift the entire nation.” This Government is doing exactly that! We are delivering real economic growth, real opportunities, and real progress - not just for a privileged few, but for every Fijian. This is not just governance, this is transformation, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Hardship!

HON. J. USAMATE.- Hogwash!

HON. M.S.N. KAMIKAMICA.- Our economic agenda is not just about growth, it is about sustainability and long-term prosperity. Our path will not always be easy. We will face obstacles, uncertainties, and moments of doubt. But let us draw strength from our shared vision and our common purpose. Let us remain steadfast in our mission to build a nation that stands strong, a nation that thrives, and a nation that truly works for its people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I support the motion before the House. May God bless our nation and may our work in this Chamber be always guided by wisdom, integrity, and the common good. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

HON. S. KUMAR.- The honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, and my fellow Fijians; *Nu Bula Naka* and a very good morning to you all.

It is both an honour and a profound responsibility to stand before you today as we commence the 2025 Parliamentary Session. I begin by extending my deepest gratitude to His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, for his stirring and visionary Address. His words have not only set the tone for this session but have also reignited our shared commitment in the ideals of unity, inclusivity, and progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an independent Member of Parliament, I would like to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude to His Excellency the President for his wise and considerate decision-making during the most difficult time of his tenure as the Speaker of this august Parliament. His Excellency's foresight and leadership have saved the many Members of this Parliament from rash decisions and termination. Your actions have had a significant and positive impact, and we appreciate

appreciate your dedication to your thoughtful leadership.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's call for transformational leadership, collective action, and policies that place our people at the centre of governance, is a powerful reminder of why we are here. We are not merely representatives of constituencies, we are custodians of hope, architects of change, and voices for those who look to us to shape a brighter future.

As an independent Member of Parliament and a proud son of Naitasiri, I stand here today, not just to respond to His Excellency the President's Speech, but to echo the voices of ordinary Fijians, especially those from my beloved province, who are looking to us for leadership, hope and solutions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President spoke of progress and prosperity, but lets us not forget that for many Fijians, their daily struggle to make ends meet remains a harsh reality that is only getting harder day by day.

The high cost of living is one of the most pressing issues facing our people today. Families are struggling to put food on the table, pay electricity bills and meet traditional obligations. The rise in prices of basic goods and services are pushing more and more Fijians into poverty.

This Government, during the 2022 General Election, promised to bring down the cost of living and offered those living in poverty promises of prosperity. Yes, Mr. Speaker Sir, two years later, we have seen the exact opposite. The buying power of majority of Fijians has dropped to an unacceptable level.

Although, we, in the Opposition, are working hard to highlight the plight of the people and keep the Government accountable, the now overinflated Government controlled by the Minister of Finance, whose policies have not provided any relief to the people. In fact, he has made it harder on everyone, even businesses.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we are seeing businesses closing down and business owners complaining that it is harder to do business in Fiji. Investor confidence is at an all-time low, and the recent Gross Domestic Investment (GDI) of only 12.8 percent is a clear sign of failure, not just in an academic manner but in reality.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, people want action. They want relief from the high cost of living that was promised by many on the Government side. People want employment and economic opportunities that will allow them to make a better living for their families and to feel safe in their own homes, without fearing for their children's wellbeing due to high crime rates and an alarming rise in drug abuse.

Government must prioritise policies that directly address the cost of living. Economic growth means little if it does not translate into tangible improvements in the lives of our people.

Mr. Speaker Sir, we must also address the broader economic context. The steady rise in the cost of goods has fuelled an increase in tax revenue, but this has been at the expense of ordinary Fijians. This means that the record increase in revenue collection is a burden carried by the people.

The economic pressure is particularly acute for goods that are not on the VAT exempt list. When essential items see dramatic price increases, families are forced to stretch their budgets even further. This situation exacerbates the challenges faced by our rural schools. When families are struggling to afford necessities, it becomes even harder to support educational expenses.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while some essential goods are zero-rated for VAT, the rising costs of other non-exempt goods continue to strain household budgets. There needs to be serious consideration into expanding the list in the next budget. The Government must expand the list of zero-rated VAT goods to include more essential items and reduce the overall VAT rate to provide immediate relief to our people. This will help alleviate the financial burden on families and ensure that they can afford basic necessities without sacrificing their wellbeing.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President spoke of economic growth and development, but we must ensure that this growth creates opportunities for all Fijians, especially our youth and those in rural areas. Too many of our young people are leaving school without the skills they need to find meaningful employment. Too many rural communities are being left behind with limited access to jobs, education and healthcare.

We need greater investment in job creation, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) - skills training programmes that prepare our youth for jobs and the future, support for entrepreneurship and innovation, especially in the digital economy.

Mr. Speaker, the Government must do more to empower our people to seize the opportunities of the 21st century.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I welcome His Excellency the President's announcement of township development projects, such as the Nabouwalu Passenger Services Terminal, Nabouwalu Town Centre, Keiyasi New Town Development Project and township plans for Seaqaqa, Taveuni, Navua, Waimaro and Vunidawa.

These initiatives have the potential to transform rural and outer island communities, creating jobs and improving livelihoods. However, we must ensure that these developments are people-oriented and inclusive. The Government must:

- engage in meaningful consultation with local communities to ensure their needs are met;
- provide affordable housing and basic infrastructure, like water, electricity and roads; and
- create economic opportunities for local residents during and after the development process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not repeat the mistakes of the past where development projects failed to deliver real benefits to the people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a proud representative from the beautiful Province of Naitasiri, I cannot stand here today without speaking about the development of Vunidawa and the broader Naitasiri region. Vunidawa, the heart of Naitasiri, holds immense potential for growth and development. It is a place rich in culture, natural resources and hardworking people. However, for too long our Province has been overlooked in the National Development Plans.

We need targeted investments in infrastructure such as better roads, reliable electricity and clean water supply, establishment of agricultural produce, processing and packing factories, to unlock the potential of Vunidawa and surrounding areas. Improved infrastructure will not only enhance the quality of life for our people but also attract businesses and create jobs.

Additionally, we must invest in agriculture, which is the backbone of Naitasiri's economy by providing farmers with access to modern tools, training and markets. We can boost productivity and ensure food security for our nation.

Mr. Speaker, the development of Vunidawa is not just a local issue, it is a national priority. A thriving Naitasiri means a stronger Fiji.

O keimamu na koi Naitasiri, keimamu tamata qaqa, tamata daucakacaka, yalo ni veikauwaitaki, ka keimamu vutuniyau ena loloma. Mai na vei delana, takosove na vi tolo ni wai, ka vakaraitake tu na sautu kei na kalougata ni nimamu vanua qaqa ko Naitasiri. Io, o keitou qoi!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, any amendments to the 2013 Constitution should be meticulously considered to reflect the evolving needs of our nation, while preserving our foundational principles. However, it is imperative that each proposed amendment be voted on separately by this august House, and if passed, presented to the people in a referendum as individual items, not bundled together in a single Bill. This approach ensures that each amendment is thoroughly debated and decided upon by both, Parliament and the citizens of Fiji. This is because we are dealing with the amendment of the supreme law of the land, the Constitution. It is essential that we approach this process with utmost transparency and integrity.

Another point I look forward to seeing tabled by the honourable Prime Minister is the Code of Conduct Bill. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Bill is long overdue, and I look forward to seeing this very important Bill tabled and debated in this august House. The enactment of the Code of Conduct law will ensure honourable Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers and independent constitutional office holders adhere to the highest standards of integrity and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must approach these legislative changes with the seriousness they deserve. We cannot take shortcuts with these two Bills.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President spoke of the importance of health and education, and I fully agree. A strong and prosperous Fiji depends on a healthy and educated population.

In healthcare, we acknowledge the Government's efforts to modernise facilities, but we must address the shortage of healthcare workers and long wait times that continue to plague our system. We need increased investment in recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals, faster implementation of healthcare reforms, particularly in rural areas.

In education, we welcome the review of the Education Act and the focus on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). However, we must make ensure that all Fijians, especially those in rural and underserved areas, have access to quality education. Mr. Speaker, Sir, our children are the future of this nation. We owe it to them to provide the best possible start in life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I will touch on the state of education in our rural communities. Education is the cornerstone of our nation's future, and it is imperative that we ensure all Fijian children, regardless of their geographical location, have access to quality education. In rural areas of Fiji, schools face unique challenges that significantly hinder their ability to provide an adequate learning environment.

The Fijian Government has made commendable efforts to support education through free education grants, the provision of textbooks and transportation subsidies. However, these measures are insufficient when we consider the true costs of running a school in rural areas. The reality is that many of our rural schools operate on shoestring budgets, relying heavily on community support and goodwill of dedicated teachers and staff, who often volunteer their time and resources.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is time we recognise the pressing need for increased funding for our rural schools. The Ministry of Education must be allocated a fund, specially designed to support these schools, ensuring they have the financial resources necessary to operate effectively. This fund should cover essential needs such as modern educational materials and resources, infrastructure improvements, including safe buildings and reliable utilities, training and professional development for teachers, and access to technology and the internet.

To ensure that funds are utilised efficiently, it is crucial to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the true operating cost of every school in Fiji. This assessment should compare the actual cost of running these schools to the grants currently provided, only then, we can truly understand the financial shortfalls and take meaningful steps to address them.

Let us be clear, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Expecting school employees to volunteer their time because of insufficient funding is unacceptable. These dedicated individuals deserve fair compensation for their invaluable contributions. They are the backbone of our education system, and it is our duty to support them fully.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, addressing the educational challenges in our rural communities require a multi-faceted approach. We must:

- allocate additional funds to the Ministry of Education for rural schools;
- conduct a full assessment of all schools' true operating costs; and
- ensure fair compensation for all school employees.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us commit to providing all Fijian children with the education they deserve. By doing so, we not only invest in their future, but in the future of our entire nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the safety and security of our people must always be a top priority. I welcome the Government's efforts to modernise law enforcement and enhance cyber security. However, we must also address the root causes of crimes such as poverty, unemployment and social inequality.

We need community policing initiatives to build trust between law enforcement and the public; greater support for victims of crime, particularly women and children; and stronger measures to combat transnational crimes, like drug smuggling and human trafficking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the scourge of drug abuse and trafficking is a clear indication of underlying economic and social distress. The rise in drug-related crimes is not just a law enforcement issue, it is a symptom of deeper economic malaise. When economic opportunities are scarce, individuals, particularly the youth, may turn to illicit activities out of desperation.

The drug trade flourishes in environments where hope is diminished and legitimate avenues for prosperity are limited. To combat this, we must:

- Strengthen our economic policies to create more jobs and opportunities for our young people. By providing meaningful employment and career pathways, we can divert potential recruits away from the drug trade.
- Enhance educational initiatives that inform and protect our youth from the dangers of drug abuse. Awareness programmes in schools and communities can play a critical role in prevention.
- Expand rehabilitation and support services for those struggling with addiction. Addressing drug abuse as a health issue rather than solely a criminal one, can aid in the recovery and

reintegration of affected individuals into society.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker Sir, drug-related crimes often have far-reaching impacts on public health, social stability and economic development. Substance abuse can lead to increased healthcare costs, reduced workforce productivity and heightened social tensions. This vicious cycle can perpetuate poverty and inequality, further destabilising our communities.

A comprehensive approach to drug abuse requires collaboration across various sectors. We must involve healthcare providers, educators, social workers and community leaders in our efforts to curb this menace. By fostering a multi-faceted strategy, we can address the root causes of drug abuse and build a healthier, more secure society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a safe Fiji is a prosperous Fiji. Let us commit to policies and actions that not only enhance our law enforcement capabilities but also address the economic and social conditions that give rise to crime. In doing so, we can create a nation where every Fijian can live in safely with dignity and hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark on this new parliamentary session, let us remember that the people of Fiji are counting on us to deliver real change. His Excellency the President has set a clear vision for our nation – a vision of unity, inclusivity and prosperity. It is now up to us, as leaders, to turn that vision into reality.

To the Government, I say this, “Take the President’s words to heart. Put aside narrow political interests and focus on the needs of the people. Work with the Opposition on matters of national interest, civil society and the private sector to build a Fiji that we can all be proud of.”

To the people of Fiji, especially my fellow Naitasiri villagers, I say this – Your voices matter. Your struggles are real. And your dreams for a better future are within reach. Together, we can build a Fiji that is strong, sustainable and full of promise.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let this Parliament be guided by wisdom, fairness, and an unwavering commitment to the service of our beloved nation. May God bless Fiji and her people. *Vinaka vakalevu* and thank you!

MR. SPEAKER.- Thank you, honourable Shalen Kumar for your most entertaining and lively contribution to the motion before the House - a contribution that falls squarely on the parameters of the response to His Excellency the President’s Address which I had referred to yesterday. Thank you.

HON. S. KIRAN.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and Assistant Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, and those joining us in the gallery and online; *ni sa yadra vinaka, Jai sia Ram, Aslaam alekum*, and greetings to you all.

I rise today with humility to respond to His Excellency the President’s Address that has called for action. I would like to, first, thank the honourable Prime Minister for having faith in me to lead the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection - a Ministry that is very focussed on advancing the wellbeing of our nation’s most vulnerable.

His Excellency’s Address has reminded us of our collective responsibility to ensure that every Fijian – irrespective of age, gender or background, has the opportunity to thrive. A nation’s progress is not only measured by its economic achievements, Mr. Speaker, Sir, but also by the wellbeing of its people.

Over the past two years, our Ministry has embarked on transformative initiatives that have strengthened the social fabric of our nation. I would like to pay tribute to the former Minister, honourable Lynda Tabuya, for her leadership over the past two years. We have delivered impactful programmes in social protection, gender equality and child welfare.

I wish to highlight some of our significant achievements and also share new initiatives. The National Development Plan, complemented by Vision 2050, places emphasis on social protection as a key component of its strategy to enhance the wellbeing of its citizens in creating a socially inclusive society. This will be done by implementing policies that support vulnerable populations including women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities. The commitment is evident in the Government's investment in a range of recurrent social protection programmes to protect our people's wellbeing and build resilience across the life cycle.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our Ministry is working closely with development partners on the social protection reform agenda. The Ministry has made significant progress in this space, including:

- (1) adjustments to social assistance allowance;
- (2) converting food voucher to cash; and
- (3) transforming bus fare programme to Transport Assistance Scheme that provides flexibility to older persons aged 70 years and above, and persons with disabilities to receive cash transport allowance to travel in the preferred mode of transport.

The Department of Social Protection, under the Ministry, continues to provide financial assistance to 35,000 vulnerable households and children who are in need of care and protection, support to 56,000 older persons through the Social Pension Scheme, and 13,000 persons who live with disabilities. The e-transport programme currently assists 30,000 individuals and there are 44,000 transport assistance top-ups to older persons over 70 years and persons with disabilities.

Fiji has recognised the critical role of social protection in building a shock responsive system that can support the population in mitigating, adapting, and recovering from the impacts of shock and climate disasters. A significant development is the formulation of Fiji's first adaptive Social Protection Strategy and Implementation Plan launched in mid-2023. This Strategy reflects a proactive approach to social protection, ensuring that systems are in place to support those in need during times of crisis.

In the 2024-2025 cyclone season, the Ministry is working with relevant partners to pilot the multi-purpose cash transfer anticipatory action project to 15,000 households and parametric insurance project to support selected 2,000 beneficiaries in affected areas.

The review of the Social Justice Act 2001 is on our legislative agenda, and we will also review Fiji's Poverty Eradication Strategy Framework 1999.

The Ministry has completed the formulation of the Fiji National Policy on Disability and its accompanying 10-year implementation plan. The Policy is focussed on ensuring inclusion of persons with disabilities in all decision-making processes. The Policy addresses issues of accessibility, assistive devices, support services, non-discrimination, community-based inclusive development and social protection. The Policy also tries to address the disability-specific data needs to ensure well-informed policies and interventions for persons with disabilities right across the Government.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, older persons have topped the suicide numbers for the past three years. Older persons have contributed to nation building. Many have been neglected, as their families move on to greener pastures. Some have acquired disability due to NCDs and are suffering neglect. There

are constant concerning reports of elder abuse.

The Biennial Conference of Older Persons 2024 has called for the review of the National Ageing Policy, which will be undertaken this year. This will be followed by the review of the Council of Older Persons Act 2012, which is more of an administrative document and needs to incorporate intervention mechanisms to protect the rights of older persons.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, late Sister Satya Bali, a visionary leader and a former Matron of Ba Mission Hospital, had identified loneliness as a major challenge among our senior citizens and had developed the Ba Senior Citizens Centre in 2001. The Centre is still running in Ba and creates a space for older persons to come together.

Through the National Council of Older Persons, we are rolling out the creation of spaces for older persons in each district. When seniors come to urban centres to collect their allowance, we are hoping they could come to a place of networking and be able to access various services, including counselling. We are hoping that with regular interaction and support, we can help reduce the number of seniors committing suicide, and we invite partners to assist us in facilitating these events around the country.

Through the District Advisory Councillors and Turaga-ni-Koro, we hope to be able to document those who are confined to their homes and plan visitations and support programmes. We are also requesting and pleading with faith-based organisations to create spaces and events for senior citizens in their local centres on a regular basis, to help with emotional mental wellbeing of senior citizens.

As our fellow Parliamentarians know, after 12 years in the making, we collectively passed two landmark legislations through this Parliament in December last year - the Child Justice Act 2024 and the Child Care and Protection Act 2024. These laws represent a new chapter for the children of Fiji, a chapter that will see them protected, supported, and given the chance to thrive in a safer and more nurturing society.

The Ministry is working to operationalise these laws with the newly established Department of Children and is supporting other Ministries on child protection budgeting and the policy changes required to bring the legislation to life. The National Coordinating Committee has been revived, and we are working on developing a National Action Plan for the Prevention of all Forms of Child Abuse.

With the help of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), we are already embarking on capacity-building work to help develop diversion pathways for children in conflict with the law. We are starting to build capacity of community counsellors to ensure children who have been victims of abuse get the necessary assistance in healing and rehabilitation, beyond just case work, and we are grateful to UNICEF for getting us that expert help in this very specialised area.

We realised that much of the trauma is intergenerational and parents who have grown up in abusive homes know better. We would soon be able to help these parents access positive parenting tools through a parenting app.

The wellbeing of street dwellers is a high priority for our Ministry. Through collaborations with key stakeholders, including civil society and faith-based groups, law enforcement agencies, including inter-ministerial work, we are implementing targeted interventions to support children on the street. Our approach ensures that they receive education, shelter and social services.

We are working in the partnership with the Ministry of Youth to try and support youth on the

streets while also work with beggars and older persons. Many of these individuals who are provided with support and rehabilitation, however, end up on the streets out of their choice.

We have found that a higher percentage of those on the streets have mental health challenges often due to drug use, making rehabilitation a challenge. However, we continue to work with other Ministries, and our efforts will continue to support them and re-integrate them into families and communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the month of March is dedicated to celebrating our women. The International Women's Day is on 8th March and thank you for those who have picked up the pin and worn it today. Tomorrow, we have the opening of the Women's Expo at the Vodafone Arena, where 400 women are participating from around the country. I invite honourable Members of Parliament to make time to visit. There will be traditional food stalls and competitions to tempt you.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, gender equality and the empowerment of women are not only fundamental human rights, but also powerful drivers to secure equitable economy and sustainable development across all aspects, from inclusive growth to peaceful societies.

In April this year, Fiji will participate in the Pacific Technical Cooperation CEDAW Session, scheduled to take place in Suva during the week starting 7th April, 2025. Fiji, alongside Solomon Islands and Tuvalu, will have an exchange with the committee. Our Ministry and other key Government agencies are currently preparing to defend Fiji's CEDAW report. This marks a critical opportunity for us to showcase our progress in advancing women's rights, while also identifying areas for further improvement in line with international best practices.

The Government has prioritised the implementation of the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls (NAP-PVAWG), which outlines a comprehensive whole of government and whole of population approach to stopping violence. The Ministry, through the NAP Secretariat, has been working to disseminate messaging on the prevention of violence, as well as support available for women and girls who experience violence. This includes technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which is a cause for concern for our women and children.

We will be strengthening divisional and district forums for women at the grassroots level. This is an essential step towards empowering women and enhancing their access to information on our programmes and support systems.

The Ministry and its key stakeholders are currently developing the Women's Economic Empowerment National Action Plan (WEE-NAP), indicating Government's strong commitment towards unlocking the economic potential of Fijian women and girls, and ensuring we address the interconnected issues and challenges that hinder women's economic participation and financial independence.

The Ministry, since June 2024, has held extensive consultations, focussing on critical areas such as entrepreneurship, labour force participation, access to finance, and social protection for women in both, formal and informal sectors. The Ministry is currently conducting final validation and approval processes and hopes to complete this by May this year. I am thankful to the Government of Australia for the financial and technical support towards the WEE-NAP.

Government has taken significant strides in institutionalising Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRPB) across whole of Government and this effort is amplified by the Institutional Capacity Development Initiative (ICD), led by the Ministry, which works across Government sectors to build necessary technical skills on application of technical tools including gender analysis, gender

responsive planning and budgeting (GRBP).

The Ministry wishes to acknowledge the financial support from the Government of New Zealand with the design of ICD Phase two. We are in the process of finalising the design and hope to roll out Phase 2 in the 2025-2026 financial year.

The Poverty Monitoring Unit has completed three divisional impact assessment surveys from the Central, Eastern and Northern Divisions. The team, in this financial year, is monitoring eight Poverty Alleviation Programmes, namely the:

- (1) Social Pension Scheme;
- (2) Family Assistance Scheme;
- (3) Women's Economic Empowerment;
- (4) Economic Empowerment Programme for Persons Living with Disability;
- (5) Housing Assistance for Fire Victims;
- (6) Rural Housing Assistance;
- (7) Solar Home Systems; and
- (8) Grants to Organisations for Persons Living with Disability.

Contrary to the rhetoric from the other side, the preliminary findings from these Programmes indicate that there have been significant socio-economic impacts on the livelihoods of the intended beneficiaries. In addition, communities have also commended the impact of the Solar Home Systems and Rural Housing Assistance.

In this financial year, the Ministry has completed two Rights, Empowerment and Cohesion (REACH) Missions in the Central and Northern Divisions respectively. The REACH Programme has become a significant awareness initiative by the Ministry and the Government as a whole and will continue to coordinate and bring together Government and non-government services to the doorsteps of our rural and urban communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the progress we have made is a result of the unwavering commitment of our Government, our development partners, and the tireless efforts of our Ministry staff. As we move forward, we remain steadfast in our mission to foster an inclusive, just, and prosperous Fiji. His Excellency has set a clear vision for our nation's future and we, as the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection, stand ready to play our part to ensure families of Fiji are supported.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, for various faiths in Fiji, this is a holy time for reflection. I wish *Ramdam Mubarak* to our Muslim brothers and sisters, and a blessed and reflective Lent to our Christian brothers and sisters. In the Hindu tradition, this month is called *Phalgun*. At the end of the month, there is a bonfire, signifying defeat of the evil Holika, by the devotee Prahalad. There is singing and sharing of colours, and from childhood, we have been told that it is a day when all are coloured the same. It is a time to forgive and let bygones be bygones.

Our elders used to say, *Jo Holi So Holi* – what has happened, has happened. It is considered a time of new beginnings. As the Fiji's Truth and Reconciliation Commission embarks on its journey, I hope we will take time to reflect and give the TRC our support, to reflect on our past traumas and choose to heal and move the nation forward with a new narrative of hope.

GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. KIRAN.- It is very easy to remain in our comfort zones, it is easy to give oxygen to negativity around us...

GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. P.K. BALA.- Compensate.

HON. S. KIRAN.- ...it feeds the insecurity amongst some, as it takes courage to step forward and forgive, to be the change we wish to see. I hope the nation will reflect on the message of unity given to us in His Excellency's Address.

GOVERNMENT MEMBERS.- Hear, hear!

HON. S. KIRAN.- The choice we make today will shape the destiny of our future generations. With unity, determination and transformational leadership, we can make our nation a beacon of hope, opportunity and progress. We owe it to our young and future generations, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

I support the motion before the House. *Vinaka Vakalevu*, and may God bless Fiji.

HON. SPEAKER.- I thank the honourable Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection for her contribution to the motion before the House. I add my support to the honourable Minister's invitation for honourable Members to make time to attend various activities organised tomorrow, in support and in celebration of International Women's Day.

I think now is the appropriate time to take our morning tea break. Honourable Members, we will now suspend proceedings for a break. Parliament will resume in half an hour.

The Parliament adjourned at 10.34 a.m.

The Parliament resumed at 11.11 a.m.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Members of Parliament, fellow young people in our gallery, ladies and gentlemen; *Bula Vinaka, Namaste, Assalam Alaikum.*

Fiji stands at a defining moment in our history, moment that demands courage, vision, and unwavering commitment to our people. As, His Excellency the President reminded us, and I quote: “The change that we seek, must start with us.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe change will not come from words alone. It will come when leadership moves beyond slogans and towards real action; action that transforms lives and uplifts communities.

Mr. Speaker, we are not just a nation. We are a people of resilience, of boundless potential, of unshakable spirit. Our islands hold the promise of prosperity where every Fijian regardless of background can thrive. But promises alone will not build our future. We need leadership that delivers, not leadership that simply talks.

At the outset, I acknowledge His Excellency, the President of Fiji, *Turaga Bale na Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naiqama Tawake Colati Lalabalavu, for his address. His words painted a vision of unity, prosperity and national progress - ideals that every Fijian longs for. His call was clear, and I quote: “It’s time for united and collective action rather than just grand speeches, talk and rhetoric.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, those words must serve as a warning to the Government. For two years, the Coalition Government has offered us nothing but grand speeches, empty promises, and hollow rhetoric, while the reality for ordinary Fijians worsens every day.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Government hides behind distractions and blame game, but the truth cannot be concealed forever. Families are battling the rising cost of living; young people are losing hope and businesses are closing their doors. Fiji is not moving forward. We are sliding backwards under the weight of incompetence, excuses, and political self-preservation.

As the great Abraham Lincoln once said, and I quote:

“You can fool all the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.”

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President highlighted the need for strong governance institutions and responsive decision-making. The so-called electoral “glitch” inquiry, a spectacle created, seemed to cast doubt on our democracy, delivered nothing of substance. After two years of political theatrics and conspiracy theories, the findings confirmed what we knew all along - there was no fraud, no rigging, just human error which was solved and did not change the outcome.

Mr. Speaker, the electoral system was transparent, credible and fair - a testament to the dedication of the former Prime Minister, honourable Voreqe Bainimarama; his Minister responsible for Elections, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum; the Supervisor of Elections, Mohammed Saneem; and the hardworking Fijians who upheld our democracy.

His Excellency rightly mentioned that economic growth is the bedrock of national prosperity. While the Coalition Government kept blaming the past, the real issues were ignored - two years wasted, with nothing to show. The former FijiFirst (de-registered now) left a platform for sustained

development ready to execute ...

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

Honourable Members, please, give him his breathing space. You may continue, honourable Member.

HON. K.K. LAL.- Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir.

The former FijiFirst left a platform for sustained development - ready-to-execute infrastructure plans, economic roadmaps and sectoral reforms. But instead of building on that, the Coalition Government chose to rewrite history, dismantle progress and sow the mess we are in right now.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the reckless decision to raise VAT to 15 percent has crippled families and businesses alike. Prices of food, medicine and essential goods have skyrocketed. Local businesses are struggling with cashflow as VAT and tax refunds seems to be withheld, suffocating their operations. Even established companies, like Performance Flotation Developments (PFD) (Fiji) Limited, which was highlighted in the media recently, have shut down and relocated to China, citing unbearable costs. Mr. Speaker, Sir, if local businesses can no longer survive in their own country, what confidence does this give to foreign investors?

His Excellency the President rightly highlighted and emphasised that the Government had prioritised infrastructure development, ensuring that roads, ports and energy supply systems supported national productivity. Currently, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our roads have become death traps. Potholes, collapsing bridges and decaying crossings plague every community. The honourable Minister for Infrastructure receives one of the biggest budget allocations, yet where is the evidence of effective spending? Public transport users risk injury everyday, school children cross unsafe bridges and businesses suffer delay because of failing roads. This is not infrastructure development; it is negligence and incompetence.

Mr. Speaker, the water crisis is yet another glaring example. His Excellency rightly highlighted in his Address on Page 6 of the *Daily Hansard* on Monday, 24th February, 2025, and I quote: "A nation's progress is measured not only by its economic achievements, but also by the wellbeing of its people." In Tamavua and many other areas, Fijians endure constant water cuts, unreliable water carting and broken promises.

Our Excellency also called for inclusivity, fairness and compassion in governance, which is urgently needed in Fiji for our nation's progress. Mr. Speaker, Sir, I have highlighted this in previous media statements but, again, here in our Chambers as well - critical voices, whether from youth, civil society or the Opposition are blocked from Government social media pages and denied their constitutional right to free speech and are mocked when they raise legitimate concerns.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, respectful dialogue does not mean silencing dissent or turning Government platforms into echo chambers. Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji deserves better. Fijians deserve leadership that works for them, not just talk, just like the former Prime Minister. They deserve a government that serves all Fijians, not just the politically connected few. If this Parliamentary session is to mean anything, let it be the start of real accountability, real service delivery and real leadership. Let us honour the vision His Excellency outlined, not just with words, but with action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, constructive debate is a must in this Parliament, and I support His Excellency's sentiments. We need transparency in borrowing and spending. If there is, indeed, unutilised cash available, it should be allocated towards productive investments such as infrastructure development, job creation and essential services.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, VAT and income tax refunds must be processed promptly. Businesses cannot operate efficiently if the government is withholding their working capital. Mr. Speaker, Sir, everyone is struggling all around. These businesses have staff to pay. A strict 30-day refund policy should be implemented to ensure businesses get their money back on time. This will have a flow-on effect.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we also need an independent parliamentary oversight committee that reviews Government spending and borrowing policies to ensure fiscal responsibility. The parliamentary committee should be established to conduct a full audit of government borrowing and spending to ensure fiscal discipline. Fiscal responsibility must not be just a catchphrase - it must be the foundation of our governance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a lot of talk about Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). We need tax incentives for small businesses, not penalties. The duty on imports under \$2,000 should be reconsidered, or at the very least, exemptions granted for SMEs that are bringing in materials essential for their businesses. We must also remove bureaucratic red tape that hinders SMEs from growing. Business registration processes must be simplified, and regulatory requirements must be streamlined.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, crime is spiralling out of control, with citizens no longer feeling safe in their own homes, businesses and streets. Despite the commendable efforts of our Fiji Police Force and despite the criticism, they do deserve a pay rise.

Mr. Speaker, this is not just a policing issue, this is an economic, social and governance issue. Unemployment, lack of opportunities, drug-related offences and the Government's failure to provide a secure future for the young generation are fuelling criminal activities. The longer this remains unaddressed, the more we risk creating a society where lawlessness is normalised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, much has been said about amending the 2013 Constitution, yet we have heard nothing but vague rhetoric from this Government. What exactly are they seeking to change? Are they intent on weakening the democratic protections that ensure the rights of every Fijian, or are they simply looking to consolidate power in their hands at the expense of the very freedom they promised to protect?

This Government has failed to deliver on its Election promises, leaving the people of Fiji frustrated and disillusioned. Now, they want to tamper with our Constitution, the bedrock of our nation's rights and freedoms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji deserve transparency, not just empty promises and power grabs. This reckless ambition to amend our 2013 Constitution must be met with the strongest opposition. The people of Fiji will not be fooled, and we, as their representatives, will stand firm in defence of their rights.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with your permission, I congratulate the new cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers who were former FijiFirst MPs, successfully entering Parliament, thanks to the Former Fiji First Prime Minister. All I can say to them is to do their utmost best and beat the record of all the Ministers who have been sitting there for the past two years. I know the competition is real, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and the political risks they have taken, and may be seen as a political suicide, but now they are part of a government which has a record of failures. Let us pray that they help this Government improve their

competence.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to our loyal G17 Opposition, no matter what anyone would say about us, no matter how much some want to separate us, all I can say is that we are the only hope this island nation has to keep this country moving in the right direction and no benefits will deter us from our focus on protecting the interests of all Fijians.

We must protect the 2013 Constitution and the rights of all Fijians at all costs, as that is our mandate. As Opposition, we are not just some voices here in Parliament, we are the people's representatives. Some honourable Members on other side know this better being in Opposition for the past eight years and, perhaps, in their last term in Government. We are hoping to see them back in the Opposition benches.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people of Fiji placed their trust in this Government, but that trust has rapidly eroded. If the Government cannot fulfil its promises, if it cannot lead with competence and integrity, then perhaps it is time they admit their failure and make way for leadership that truly serves the people.

Before I take my seat, I have a message for the honourable Prime Minister but he is not here, so I hope he will listen to this later. As I address him as my *kai* Savusavu, my message to the honourable Prime Minister is that the greatest danger to our democracy is not the voice that shouts in disagreement, it is the quiet acceptance of things as they are. Complacency is the enemy of progress. If we stay silent, if we look away, we allow injustice to thrive, but if we dare to speak up, to demand better, we can build a future for everyone, not just a privileged few. Change does not start with power, honourable Members, it starts with us.

With those words, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we embark on this new year, I wish all honourable Members, our Parliament staff and every Fijian a blessed and prosperous 2025, filled with good health, happiness and success. I also wish our Fijians who are celebrating *Ramadan* and will be celebrating Easter next month and our Hindu brothers and sisters, and may we continue to serve our beloved nation with dedication, compassion and unity.

HON. DR. RATU A.R. LALABALAVU.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; *bula vina'a*.

I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's most Gracious Speech for the Opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament. In his Address on Monday 24th February 2025, His Excellency the President clearly outlined the plan of excellence that the Government should undertake in the next 12 months, based on the wishes and interests of the people of Fiji.

His Excellency the President laid down a clear challenge for honourable Members on both sides of this august House to rise above the challenges of politics and internal differences, to work together and work collectively with the people we represent for the betterment and prosperity of our people and the country as a whole.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President highlighted the review of a number of legislations under the Ministry of Health and Medical Services ambit, to update the old legislations, as well as enhance the existing ones to address the current needs and the new challenges faced in the implementation of these legislations. The Ministry has initiated and progressed the review processes for a number of critical health legislations, and I wish to provide a brief update on the progress.

The Burial and Cremation Act 1911 is amongst the oldest legislation under the Ministry. A technical team of experts from the Ministry's Environmental Health have conducted consultations with stakeholders, such as the Office of the Solicitor-General and the Fiji Corrections Service on this 114-year-old Act. The review process is anticipated to be completed in April 2025.

The review process on the 61-year-old Quarantine Act 1964 is underway, following Cabinet's endorsement. The review process will involve important stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, and it is anticipated to be completed by June 2025.

On the Radiation Health Act 2009, the multi-stakeholder and multi-sectorial technical working group constituted in 2024, with the support of the Office of the Solicitor-General, have completed internal and public consultations for the review of the Act. Further consultations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will take place in March towards finalising the outcome of the review.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has expressed its support for the Ministry towards the review of the Mental Health Act 2010. Internal discussions on the review process have started and the WHO will engage an external consultant with expertise in global mental health legislation review to work alongside the Ministry and the Office of the Solicitor-General on the review process. This work is anticipated to be completed this year.

The Fiji Nursing Council is tasked with leading and coordinating the review of the Nursing Act 2011. Consultation with the Office of the Solicitor General has been undertaken and the multi-stakeholder and public consultations are planned for the coming months, while the review process is expected to be completed by December 2025.

Mr. Speaker Sir, in his remarks, His Excellency the President advocated for an overhaul in the health and medical care delivery system in Fiji. The recently published Health Sector Review Report 2024 from the World Bank clearly showed that while Fiji has graduated from a low-middle income country to a high middle-income country, our health status indicators have remained stagnant and have not improved in the last decade. In fact, our health status indicators over the last decade are the same or even lower than comparative low middle income countries. The report has a relevant theme titled "*Mo Bulabula ka Bula Balavu*" or "Wishing you a Healthy Life and a Long Life". This theme aligns well to the call and vision of His Excellency the President.

In response, the Ministry is focused on realigning its functions to service for a greater purpose on Primary Health Care (PHC) and believes that PHC is the means to address the current pressing public health issues of non-communicable diseases and endemic infectious diseases in our population.

The Ministry is finalising its Primary Health Care Strategy that will guide the transformation of PHC services at all levels in the Ministry in the years to come. The transformation is necessary to ensure we are tackling health problems early through health prevention and promotion strategies with early referrals before they become severe and complicated, and more difficult to address.

In addition, the Ministry is working with the Ministry of Finance and Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics and the World Bank, as well as our partners such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB); Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT); the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT); Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA); Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA); and bilateral partners, to undertake a significant overhaul of health facilities that support and facilitate a

transformed primary healthcare service for our people. This initiative will involve modernising and equipping our Primary Health Care facilities at nursing stations, health centres and subdivisional hospitals to better deliver health services, while at the same time, better promote health for the population.

In addition, as highlighted by His Excellency the President, the Ministry is working with our partners for the upgrading of tertiary health services in the next five years to ten years through:

- (a) the establishment of the 100 beds regional super specialty cardiovascular hospital by the Government of India.
- (b) the new National Rehabilitation Hospital funded by KOICA for more than \$20 million.
- (c) the CWM Hospital Development Project funded by DFAT and the Australian Government.
- (d) the untiring work of individuals and organisations such as: Dr. Vijay Kapadia and his dedicated team of specialists - overseas cardiologists; Dr. Russel Metcalf and Dr. Neil Price and their dedicated team of paediatric surgeons; and Dr. Oh, Dr. Murali and Dr. Suren Krishna and their dedicated team of specialist overseas team of ENT surgeons; to name a few, who pay their own way into Fiji and provided free high level medical care and mentoring and training for our local health teams.

In talking about human resource, Mr. Speaker Sir, rightsizing our human resource for health is an important strategy in transforming our primary healthcare approach, and it continues to be a major priority for Government. The exodus of well trained and competent healthcare workers from the Ministry continue to pose many challenges in our efforts to deliver quality health services for our people.

In the fiscal year 2022-2023, the Ministry recorded an alarming and unusual number of resignations, with 221 doctors and 982 nurses leaving our ranks. However, since 2023, the Ministry has witnessed a promising trend of decline in these figures. In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the number of resigning doctors decreased to 48, while the number of nurses fell to 241. As of the current fiscal year, 2024-2025 to date, we have seen further reductions to 39 doctors and 65 nurses resigning thus far.

This positive shift can be largely attributed to the workforce interventions that Government had introduced since 2023, that included raising the retirement age from 55 years to 60 years, the wage increase for civil servants and specific measures for new retention allowances and salary increments for our nursing staff. Moreover, we have seen noteworthy increase in healthcare workers, particularly nurses, who are re-joining the Ministry, hopefully signalling a reversal in workforce mobility trends.

The Ministry has also proceeded to address retention challenges with the pharmaceutical cadre. Following successful completion of the internship programme, and passing the registration exams, newly qualified pharmacists often find better financial incentives in the retail sector. To counter this, the Ministry has offered a more competitive salary package, elevating the pay for pharmacists to Step 4 of Band G, with the amount of more than \$40,000 per annum, as opposed to the previous Step I rate.

Similarly, we recognise the necessity of attracting and retaining Medical Imaging Technologists. We are implementing a comparable approach by offering recruitment at Step 4 of Band F, with a salary of more than \$30,000 per annum, once they enter into employment at the Ministry. In addition, we have progressed with establishing the Ministry's Strategic Workforce Plan for 2025-2034.

Consultations with stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Civil Service (MCS), Fiji National University (FNU), University of Fiji, the Tertiary Loans and Scholarship Service (TSLS), the private health sector, DFAT, WHO, the Fiji Medical and Dental Council, the Fiji Nursing Council, and Department Heads within the Ministry have been undertaken. The plan is expected to be ready by the end of the current fiscal year.

The Ministry highly values its workforce and continues to make a positive headway in addressing its workforce needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to talk on HIV outbreak in Fiji, the declaration of the HIV outbreak in Fiji by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services (MOHMS) on 22nd January, 2025, highlights the need for the Government and the country to tackle this disease head-on. The HIV outbreak presents an unprecedented health challenge that will require resources, expertise, and partnerships across all sectors and the community to control. The role of illicit drugs and in particular injectable drug use is directly impacting the sharp increase in new cases of HIV in Fiji.

The Ministry is committed to ensuring a rapid, coordinated and evidence-driven response, working in close collaboration with national and international partners to mitigate the impact of HIV in our communities. The Ministry has just launched the Outbreak Response Plan and the National HIV Surge Strategy 2024-2027, with strategies that are in line with the Ministry's role under the Counter Narcotics Strategy 2023-2028.

The HIV Board, under the HIV/AIDS Act 2011, has since established the National HIV Outbreak and Cluster Response Taskforce (N-HOCRT), which is tasked to lead and coordinate an across sector Outbreak Response Plan. The role of the Taskforce includes:

- (1) coordination;
- (2) strengthening the system for diagnostics, prevention, treatment and care, ensuring a supportive environment for key populations and affected communities;
- (3) re-orienting the programme response of the MOHMS to effectively tackle the emerging HIV epidemic through evidence-based interventions; and
- (4) mobilising technical and financial support for sustained HIV response efforts.

The Outbreak Response Plan focusses on prioritising high-impact and evidence-based interventions to effectively contain the outbreak and align our programmatic response towards HIV, STIs and blood-borne viruses, with a projected estimated budget of over \$80 million for full implementation.

The Ministry will work with Government, our partners and the community in implementing the strategies. It is important that our combined response must not be politicised for the purpose of point scoring, but it is a collective effort to break down the barriers of stigma and discrimination and promote actions that will halt the spread of HIV in our community.

On Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), Mr. Speaker Sir, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services forges on with its war to address the burden of NCDs in our communities, and I will continue to speak and repeat my messages on NCDs at every opportunity I get, because it is the one public health concern that requires a total paradigm shift in the way we live now and how we raise our children for the future.

The Republic of Fiji Vital Statistics Report 2016-2021 showed that NCDs accounted for 80 percent of all deaths in our country. It is crucial to recognise the profound impact these diseases have on our health system and society. Hospital admissions due to complications from NCDs such as

heart attacks, strokes and diabetes-related ailments, impose an overwhelming burden on our healthcare facilities and resources.

In 2019, healthcare costs associated with NCDs escalated to FJ\$591 million, underscoring the urgent need for preventative measures. The Fiji 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey findings reveal alarming dietary patterns with children and adults consuming low levels of nutritious foods while favouring sugary beverages.

Understanding that 95 percent of NCDs are linked to lifestyle choices, we must tackle the well-known four main modifiable risk factors of tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diets and excessive alcohol consumption through assertive and sustained actions at all levels in legislation and governance, community, family and personal actions and initiatives.

The recent Government actions in increasing tax on cigarettes and sugar and sweetened beverages, the endorsement and implementation of the National Policy on Healthy Catering in Government Institutions and the endorsement of the Early Childhood Policy for Fiji and the School Health Policy will begin to foster the healthier environment that our children and our future generations will grow in.

The Ministry is progressing its work on the STEP Survey with the assistance of the Fiji Bureau of Statistics and our partners and should be completed in this financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on governance and community engagement, the Ministry remains committed to embarking on a transformative journey for our healthcare system. This year, we will initiate the formulation of the new 5 Year National Health Strategic Plan for the period 2026-2030. This Plan will supersede the current Health Strategic Plan, which has guided us from 2020-2025.

The new Strategic Plan will be aligned to the National Development Plan for 2025-2029 and Vision 2050. It will incorporate valuable insights and recommendations from the recent Health Sector Review Report 2024.

Furthermore, the Ministry will shortly commence on the evaluation of the Ministry's strategies and operational actions for the past 15 years. This evaluation is vital, as it will lay the groundwork for the National Health Summit that we aim to convene before June 2025.

To strengthen our commitments further, we will enhance our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning activities within the Ministry. This initiative will ensure that our delivery services improve, and that our decision-making processes are firmly rooted in data-driven insights.

The Ministry has also implemented measures to ensure better utilization of resources allocated by Government under the Ministry's budgetary allocations in each financial year. Monthly budget meetings, regular site visitations to health facilities and internal virement of budgetary allocations are measures that the Ministry has undertaken to ensure better utilization of resources at its disposal.

To strengthen community partnership in the delivery of health services, the Ministry has embarked on strengthening the role of Board of Visitors for our hospitals and health facilities.

Through the work of the Board of Visitors (BOV) in supporting the leadership teams for the health facilities, BOV partnerships with the community allows for improvement in infrastructure and service delivery in health facilities. Examples of such BOV partnership with the community and the business sector include the:

- renovation works completed at CWM Hospital by the ANZ Bank in 2024;
- renovations at Sigatoka Hospital in 2024 by InterContinental Hotel;
- renovation of the Counselling Centre in Nadi by Empower Pacific and LDS Church with the value of FJ\$90,000;
- renovation of SOPD at Nadi Hospital by Jacks Fiji Limited;
- renovation of the Women's Ward Restrooms for FJ\$40,000 by Radisson Hotel in Nadi late last year; and
- upcoming renovations of the Men's Ward at Nadi Hospital by Wyndham Hotel in Nadi.

These are only a few examples of successful partnerships between BOV and the community that has supported the provisions of health services in our health facilities and this effort will continue into the future.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, last Friday, for the first time ever, the Ministry's National Health Executive Committee meeting took place in a community setting, rebuilding and strengthening old bridges of partnership between community members and the Ministry. The meeting, which included senior executives, senior divisional heads, heads of departments, institutions, clinical services network was a very successful and productive forum. Six new health policies for the Ministry were endorsed in that meeting, and more are on the way.

I wish to conclude by acknowledging and thanking the people of Naveicovatu Village, the District of Wainibuka and the *vanua o Naloto, vua na Gone Turaga Na Vunivalu Na Tui Naloto* for their warm welcome and gracious hospitality to the executives of the Ministry. The simple message from the meeting is that health work is not solely the Ministry's responsibility. It is a partnership between the ministry, government, health service provider and the people.

The Ministry looks forward to working with our community and our partners in improving health status to all our people here in Fiji. A lot has been done by the Ministry of Health and Medical Services on improving healthcare services in Fiji, and a lot continues to be done today and into the future. I fully support, endorse the motion before the House.

HON. V. LAL.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Cabinet Ministers and Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament, those present in the gallery, those watching live through various digital devices, ladies and gentlemen; *ni sa bula vinaka* and a very good morning to you all.

First, I would like to thank His Excellency the President of the Republic of Fiji for his most gracious Address. In his Address, His Excellency has at least thrice said that no one should be left behind. It is our duty as elected Members to see that everyone is treated equally and demand honesty, integrity and genuine commitment to the welfare of every member of our community. Regardless of origin or status, we must hold the authority in question responsible for its actions. Upholding the values of equality and solidarity must be reflected in concrete actions and policies that benefit all members of our society.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as an Independent Member of Parliament, I stand before you today with a strong feeling of responsibility and a resolve to offer constructive and critical input on the course set by His Excellency the President at the opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament. While embracing His Excellency's vision of development, wealth and cohesion, it is crucial to look in detail at the steps which needs to be taken in order to realise those high goals. We, as Members of the Opposition, have a duty to scrutinize Government's policies and decisions which are, for one reason or another, contrary to the best interest of the country and its citizens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at this time of socio-economic challenges and uncertain geopolitical climate, it is imperative that our legislative agenda be robust and comprehensive enough to be responsive to the needs of all Fijians. Let me urge all honourable Members on both sides of the House to try and listen more carefully to the other and have civility in their discussions and debates and scrutinizing of the proposed ideas. While the Government has power, the responsibility to deal with the needs of the people from the other side of the House lies with the Opposition.

The appeal for needing transformational leadership, empathy, and inclusion is compelling but these principles must be implemented with actionable policies and programmes that are favourable to all constituents. As custodians of democracy, there is a need to uphold the principles of openness and accountability in all actions and decisions taken. It is proper to emphasize His Excellency's call for solidarity and working together towards common goals. We need to set aside our political differences and other personal ambitions to work together towards the betterment of this nation. We can solve challenges, seize opportunities, and craft a better world for posterity if we intend to unite and commit together towards progress.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate the speech given by His Excellency the President to Parliament, where he explained everything regarding the Government's projected economic growth and social advancement. Primarily, I support the drive to increase investment, create sustainable industries and enhance trade opportunities, yet I as an Opposition Member of Parliament believe it is essential to look at the more tangible aspects needed to achieve these goals.

Moreover, I see the value in addressing new segments of the economy such as agriculture, tourism, and even digital markets. Nevertheless, we need to ensure that these developments are inclusive and supportive of all regions, especially vulnerable groups such as the aged, disabled and low-income families. One of the crucial areas that require immediate attention on our legislative agenda is the wider strengthening of social protection measures to ensure that all people in need get the services they deserve.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate the speech given by His Excellency the President where he explained everything that focused on the Government's projected economic growth and the social advancement. I appreciate the focus towards increasing investments, fostering industries and widening trade opportunities. Still, as an Opposition Member of Parliament, I think it is paramount to understand the practical measures that need to be undertaken to realize these goals.

I further support the goal of expanding the economy through investments in agriculture, tourism and digital transformation. Nevertheless, we need to ensure that these initiatives reach and benefit all segments of society especially the most vulnerable, such as the elderly, disabled persons and families with low income. Strengthening social protection measures that assist these segments should receive legislative attention.

I commend His Excellency's aforementioned optimism concerning our country's potential and at the same time, I urge the Government to consider the subject comments of each stakeholder's position so as to ensure policies and initiatives truly benefit all Fijians. It is imperative that we all unite, remain determined and work towards removing obstacles, exploring new opportunities and building a more prosperous future for our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank, His Excellency the President for his views on the review of our legislations during his recent Address. The Government's proposed vision for the legislative agenda is broad in scope and seeks to address strategic issues such as economic development, integrity and accountability, healthcare, education and even national security. However, these plans must be safeguarded, rigorous and scrutinised to ensure they bring tangible benefits to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, you must have realised in my speeches, I am stressing these words “all Fijians”. The reason being this has not been happening. As per your directive yesterday, Sir, I do not want to dwell on those, but many examples have been given by my colleagues in this august House. Furthermore, the Government's commitment to social frameworks and indigenous rights must go beyond mere rhetoric. Policies and regulations aiming at preserving customs, traditions and cultural heritage must be adequately implemented and monitored in order to preserve indigenous populations' rights. I encourage the administration to make a true commitment to accountability, openness and inclusion in its legislative efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the proposed Code of Conduct Bill focusses on enhancing honesty and accountability in public office holders which is desirable. Building trust and confidence in our institutions requires openness and ethical conduct at all levels of government. Our country's wellbeing and future depend on a commitment to healthcare and education. While progress has been achieved in renovating healthcare facilities, we have just heard from the honourable Minister and improving medical services, it is critical to emphasise the recruitment and retention of healthcare personnel in order to overcome current shortages and offer quality treatment to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the education sector, reviewing the Education Act and related legislation is a positive step towards aligning programmes with current requirements and improving service delivery. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) must be prioritised in order to provide our children with the skills they need to prosper in today's fast-changing global economy.

National security and public safety are critical to sustainable development. To ensure our country's and the Pacific region's safety and security, we must strengthen law enforcement agencies, invest in technology and improve regional collaboration in combating transnational crimes.

As the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are dedicated to working with the Government to pass laws and policies that benefit all Fijians, respect democratic ideals and promote societal wellbeing. Let us participate in constructive discourse, rigorous debate and comprehensive supervision to accomplish our common goals of Fijian prosperity and solidarity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I appreciate His Excellency the President's detailed overview but while the Government's planned plans address a wide variety of critical issues, including national security, foreign policy, climate change, the legal framework, public service reform and economic growth, these measures must be properly scrutinised to ensure they benefit all Fijians. The determination to improve safety and security through a revision of the Police Act is admirable. Empowering the Fiji Police Force with new technology and processes to restore trust and confidence is critical for effective law enforcement and community interactions.

The emphasis on regional security and collaboration with key partners is consistent with our common aim of protecting national interests. Strengthening connections with traditional friends and developing partners, as well as advocating a Pacific family first strategy will benefit Fiji and the region in terms of economy and security.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, focussing on climate change as an existential issue emphasizes the Government's obligation to develop strong climate action legislation, fight for global climate justice, and safeguard our ecosystem through adaptation and mitigation techniques. To protect our communities and livelihoods, we must emphasize sustainable behaviours. The proposed changes to the legislative framework for elections, public services, the shipbuilding industry, agricultural companies, and the mining sector demonstrates a commitment to enhancing governance, efficiency and economic opportunity for all Fijians. Improving openness, accountability and inclusion in these areas is critical to promoting growth and development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as the Opposition, we are committed to evaluating and cooperating on legislation and policy choices to ensure that they fulfil the needs of all Fijians while maintaining democratic ideals. Let us participate in constructive discourse and supervision to help the Fijian people achieve growth, equality, prosperity, and solidarity. As an Opposition MP, I acknowledge the Government's measures as indicated by His Excellency the President. While the concept seems good, we must evaluate the facts confronting our country. The tourist industry's recovery is admirable, but we must examine if our infrastructure and people are fully prepared to support this expansion.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the projected 3,000 hotel rooms are wonderful, but without addressing labour shortages, environmental sustainability and equitable sharing of tourist earnings, our people will not reap significant advantages. The National Sustainable Tourism Framework must go beyond rhetoric to guarantee that communities directly benefit from this expansion.

We acknowledge the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework's centrality in trade and economic policy. However, we are concerned about whether our local firms and people are actually prepared to compete inside this economic bloc. The government must guarantee that trade deals benefit Fijians, not only foreign businessmen. While the Access to Business Funding Bill may help MSMEs, many prospective entrepreneurs would struggle to take advantage of these prospects until bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption concerns in financial institutions are addressed. We advocate for openness in budget distribution and priority of local firms over international giants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the government's labour market changes must be thoroughly examined. While the Employment Relations Bill and the Work Care Bill aim to update legislation, any changes must not undermine workers' rights. The long-awaited settlement to the Vatukoula Mine Strike should not be exploited as political leverage; rather, it should serve as a lesson in prioritizing labour welfare and equitable treatment for all workers.

Finally, the empowerment of *iTaukei* communities and youth programmes is critical, but real engagement and openness are required. Strengthening social structures should not be utilized for political purposes. I urge the Government to go beyond word and slogans and take practical steps to establish an inclusive, sustainable and just Fiji. God bless Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- I acknowledge honourable Virendra Lal's efforts to focus on His Excellency's Address and his critical analysis of various issues that were raised in that Address, the same sentiments I had made in regards your to neighbour's intervention and I hope it is contagious.

HON. G.E. LEUNG.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow citizens; I would like to thank His Excellency the President, Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, for his most gracious and uplifting Address when he opened Parliament last Monday.

His Excellency the President reminded us of our shared responsibility to foster a society that is just, equitable and resilient, and that we must walk together in unity. In order to do so, I believe that it is vital that we develop a keen sense of mutuality. Our collective future depends on each other. If we are to develop and grow as a nation, as one people, with one destiny, our State needs to be inclusive. Our future, as a united country, comprising diverse parts, will be assured if we work together towards building a greater sense of nationhood. We have to move beyond coexistence and living in silos. We must make far greater efforts towards understanding others of different races and different faiths.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the things that unite us, our love of rugby, a good curry and the value of kith and kin, are far greater than the things that divide us. Greater social interaction and bonding between our communities is important. It will help dispel myths that we have about each other and contribute to a better understanding. No one race or community in our beloved country has a monopoly on virtue. Our sense of belonging to place and to each other as one people is underdeveloped.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, nationhood, where it encompasses various ethnic groups, suggests a rich cultural diversity. I am confident that despite our chequered history, our resilience and the large measure of goodwill that exists within and between the majority of ordinary people in our nation, means that we are fully capable of bridging the differences that have sometimes characterised our past.

Mr. Speaker, His Excellency the President made a pointed reference to the youth of this country when he said, "You are the future of this nation. Your dreams, ambitions and hard work will define the destiny of our nation."

If we are not to repeat the mistakes of the past, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I believe that our education system has a critical role in preparing our children as citizens and future leaders of our country. Our school curriculum must inculcate civic values, human rights and the rule of law. They must teach the importance of tolerance, understanding and compassion in a multicultural society such as ours.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our children must be knowledgeable about their collective past, considerate of each other's heritage, and respectful of others' rights, as well as their own.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stepping into government comes with challenges and a strong expectation to deliver. The responsibility of leading a nation is never easy, and the people rightfully look to us for leadership, stability and progress.

We understand the weight of these expectations and we do not take them lightly. Despite the obstacles, Government remains committed to a vision that prioritizes transparency, accountability and meaningful change for the people of Fiji.

I would like to outline the Government's progressive agenda and legislative programme as it relates to my Ministry, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Government intends to address widespread community concerns about the supreme law of this country by introducing into Parliament a Bill to amend the Constitution. His Excellency has said that the purpose of the review is to ensure that our supreme law aligns with the principles of inclusivity, fairness and justice.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there have been concerns expressed across the political spectrum about the rigorous amendment process outlined in Chapter 11 of the Constitution. A senior Jurist who visited Fiji recently said that the Fijian Constitution is one of the hardest in the world to amend. Paradoxically, a constitution which is impossible to change, or near impossible to change, is the very antithesis of democracy. Its rigidity carries the seeds of potential disaffection and instability.

A key part of Government's legislative programme for this session of Parliament, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is to introduce an amending Bill to the Constitution. A country's constitution is a living, organic document, which should reflect the wishes and the broad consensus of the people that it purports to govern. It should be the product of wide citizen participation, and not something that is imposed on the people. Put simply, Mr. Speaker, an imposed constitution lacks legitimacy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we should not fear discussing or making changes to the constitution. I

recognise that it is human nature to fear what we do not know or what we do not understand. But change is part of our evolution as a young democracy.

The politics of fearmongering is misguided. The United States Constitution, Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you well know, adopted in 1788, has had 27 amendments, and interestingly, the Constitution of India has had 108 amendments since its establishment in the 1950s.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President has highlighted that an important priority for the Government is the formulation of a strengthened integrity and accountability framework that sets standards for the conduct of public office holders and transparency in Government. The new framework will deliver on the laws, processes and procedures needed to set the standards of integrity and accountability that build community confidence in our public institutions, statutory bodies and office holders.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, between December last year and February this year, the Fiji Law Reform Commission conducted nationwide consultations on some of the key legislative reforms in the area of access to information and other governance laws.

Key fundamentals that will underpin the Government's integrity and accountability agenda will be the Access to Information Law to be introduced in this session of Parliament. Public access to Government held information will allow citizens to better understand the role of Government and the decisions being made on their behalf.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with an informed citizenry, governments can be held accountable for their policies. Access to information laws can be used to improve the lives of people as they request information relating to healthcare, education and other public services.

This Government, Mr. Speaker, Sir, has heard the people and understands that a new law is needed to enable them to exercise their right to access information, affecting them and their lives. Over 100 countries around the world have implemented some form of freedom of information legislation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with that in mind, the Government proposes to create new ways for people to request Government information and ensure that Government agencies are responsive to their requests by providing a suite of oversight powers for the Accountability and Transparency Commission.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government's commitment to a strong integrity and accountability framework will be further delivered with important law reform that sets clear standards of conduct for those who serve in public office, and a new Code of Conduct Bill will be introduced in the current session of Parliament.

His Excellency the President has pointedly reminded us that this law has been pending for a few decades. Its enactment is, therefore, long overdue, and there is no justification for further procrastination.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the remaining time, I simply also wish to draw attention to the reminder by His Excellency, that no one should be left behind in our quest for economic growth, national security, prosperity and sustainable development.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was privileged to have been invited last Friday, to accompany the honourable Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Strategic Planning, National

Development and Statistics to the Province of Kadavu. In just over a day, we visited the villages and settlements of Vunisea, Namalata, Tavuki, Solodamu, Namuana, Tabuya, Richmond, Naqalotu, Waisomo, Ravitaki, Mokoisa, Daviqele, Nabukelevu and Muani.

I am sorry to say, Mr. Speaker, Sir, that since Independence in 1970, the Province of Kadavu has been underdeveloped and has not received the attention that it deserves. The province has enormous potential. This underdevelopment of the Province of Kadavu was obvious from our two-day visit.

The state of infrastructure, including health, education, power and other facilities which we inspected, were in a dire state. Some civil servants had to endure substandard housing quarters and overcrowding as well. And in many of the villages that we visited, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the effects of climate change and coastal erosion was evident and poses a threat to many livelihoods and villages.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there is little evidence of any large-scale economic activity on the island to provide regular employment for the island's youth, many of whom are drawn to the urban centres in search of employment. It is my earnest plea to the Government and hope that in the next budget, it will address some of the grievances of the Province of Kadavu. The people deserve greater support, and they are not asking for much.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, may I turn to a section of His Excellency's Speech which referred to the challenges on climate change. His Excellency observed in his speech to Parliament, that one of the challenges faced in Fiji is climate change, and that the Government will advocate for climate justice on the global stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji's advocacy for climate justice has been robust, and for a country of our size, I believe our contribution in this regard has been impressive. At COP29 or the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference which was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in November last year, Fiji and Samoa were the only two SIDS that were part of the smaller group that secured the agreement on new collective quantified goal of US\$300 billion by 2035 and the mobilisation goal of US\$1.3 trillion annually from public, private and other innovative sources.

In terms of Fiji's leadership at the COP, Fiji has served and continues to serve as the G77 in China coordinator for adaptation matters.

In addition, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji was nominated and selected as the incoming Oceans Co-Chair for the Ocean and Climate Nexus Dialogue, which is the pathway to get Oceans recognised as an official UNFCCC agenda item.

In December 2024, Fiji was among the 96 countries and 11 regional organisations that participated in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) public hearing on climate change at the Hague, in Netherlands. Ambassador Luke Daunivalu and I presented Fiji's legal submissions to the Royal Court. We urged the Court to declare that failing to act on climate change violates international law, and we called on the Court to affirm that States have a duty to prevent harm, to protect human rights and ensure a liveable future for all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the advisory opinion of the ICJ is expected to be delivered in the first half of this year. It is likely to shape the future of international climate actions and agreements, potentially influencing how States behave.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am honoured to support the motion before Parliament. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and honourable Members.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, we will pause at this juncture for lunch. We will suspend our proceedings, and we will resume at 2.30 in the afternoon. Thank you, honourable Members.

The Parliament adjourned at 12.24 p.m.

The Parliament resumed at 2.33 p.m.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament and all those watching from the comfort of their homes; good afternoon, *bula siá*, *ram ram* and *salam* to you all.

I would like to join my colleagues, Mr. Speaker, in thanking His Excellency for his first ever Gracious Speech in his capacity as the President of the Republic of Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, at the very outset, I would like to take the cue from His Excellency, that it is high time that we, Parliamentarians, need to work together and be united. We need to work together to ensure that we build a better Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we need to build solidarity amongst Fijians. With solidarity, it could be difficult to achieve the pillars of the Peoples Charter that was developed to bring harmony amongst Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to ensure that we have harmony amongst all ethnic groups of Fiji, to ensure that we move from a developing nation to a developed nation, to ensure that we build a future for the next generation, we, Parliamentarians, should be able to work with each other.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while we have different ideologies, principles and values which will always exist as we represent different groups and background of people, we need to ensure that at the end of the day, we need the country to progress and care the suffering that Fijians are going through right now.

If you do not have the right foundation, it becomes difficult to build a skyscraper and maintain it upright, Mr. Speaker, Sir. Unfortunately, we have a government that was only focussed on removing the previous Administration and are now running out of ideas as to how to fulfil the promises made during the Election.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the shortfalls of 16 years were promised to be fulfilled in four years and now, they are trying their level best to explain to the people that they cannot do everything in just four years. Sir, when we used to say that development takes time, we were told, "No, do it now". So, please, practice what you have been preaching.

Gone are those days when one person could do it all. In democracy it is all about collective effort that produce the results. Group effort brings democracy where people's voices are heard whereas one person-rule brings dictatorship, which results in arrogance and ego. We need to listen to the people and work with the people rather than assuming if we are voted in as a government, we have the right to do anything we want for the next four years.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there was a perception that previous leaders were not listening and just doing things and now, we have leaders who are just listening and doing nothing. We need to get some balance where we listen to the people and work with the people to obtain better results.

Our *Hindu* scriptures say that even *Ravana*'s ego did not last forever. *Ravana* was a mighty king, who built an empire of gold; a king who did everything right for his own people; till his ego and pride destroyed everything. Compared to him we are just human beings. We can do wonders for the people, but if we have our egos, it destroys everything. In a democracy, we need the opposition to criticise and scrutinise the policies of government. That is the only way democracy operates.

For far too long, it is believed that changing the Constitution can bring unity amongst the major ethnic groups within the country and is the only solution to all problems. How many more Constitutions are we going to change?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is not the Constitution, the issue is the filth that politicians fill in the mind of the common people. For a small country like Fiji, we had more than three Constitutions since Independence.

We, as politicians, should, at least, have some level of honesty, values and morals, which should guide us when it comes to elections and in this august Parliament. We all know that most of the issues and agenda that were used during the campaign were based on lies.

Mr. Speaker, looking at the performance of the Government for the past two years, the –

- Public Works Department workers are still waiting to be recruited;
- Fiji Roads Authority (FRA) is still in existence while this Government wanted to remove FRA;
- Fiji Independent Commission Against Corruption (FICAC) is still in existence, even though FICAC was tagged as a tool against others;
- even after the commissioning of Viria Water Treatment Plant, water problem continues;
- people of Rakiraki are still waiting for the new Penang Sugar Mill after two years now;
- dairy farmers are still waiting for the increase in price of raw milk;
- agriculture farmers are waiting for subsidy and grants; and
- people are waiting for the national debt level to come down.

The honourable Minister of Finance was not getting tired talking about nominal figures when it comes to national debt and now, the only thing he talks about is debt to GDP ratio. Why? Because it favours him. Why are they not saying that we have increased the debt level of the nation by \$2 billion in the last two years?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the people are waiting for the public service to improve. Civil servants are waiting for their quarters to be fixed, improved healthcare system. Mr. Speaker, while I would like to talk more on the hospital and healthcare sector, I shall reserve it for my End of Week Statement next week.

Mr. Speaker, the operation costs of the Government has gone up from 70 percent to 80 percent. Although only 20 percent to 30 percent of the national budget is allocated for capital projects, a major portion is returned as an unutilised fund to Ministry of Finance.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- Check the Budget.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Look at the Audit Report, your Assistant Minister is Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. The Permanent Secretaries come and tell us that they are returning capital money back to Ministry of Finance because they are not able to implement capital projects.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- And they call it savings.

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- With such poor capital works, I am not sure how we can build a sporting facility in Naitasiri. People are waiting for VAT to be reduced. While 21 items, including prescribed medication, are zero-rated...

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- It is 22.

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- It is 21, including prescribed medication which comes to 22. Yes, that is what I am saying.

HON. J. USAMATE.- Listen!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- First, listen, please!

While 21 items, including prescribed medication, are zero-rated, it is not assisting as most of the items attracting 15 percent VAT are now becoming essential items and it is becoming a burden for Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, surprisingly, the honourable Minister who used to be the advocate of high inflation and criticising the reason for inflation during the previous Administration is the one using the same reason used previously to justify inflation rate today. Yet, they are still not ready to admit that inflation is at all-time high. The institutions and their reports such as ADB, World bank and Reserve Bank of Fiji (RBF) that were criticised by them are being used as shields now to hide and justify inflation.

It is interesting to see that economic growth figures given by RBF was always debated when the previous Administration gave nine years of unprecedented growth but now, this Government is using this same institution to give economic growth forecast.

Mr. Speaker, the chaos continues as citizens are suffering, and the Government continues to undermine the independent institution for the past two years.

Mr. Speaker, Government has talked a lot about the bipartisan approach but when it comes to practicing bipartisanship, it is not reflected in Parliament. Being in this Parliament for the past 10 years, the only place we see bipartisanship is in the Standing Committee.

In the past 10 years, more than 1,000 bipartisan reports had been presented to this august House by the Standing Committees. How can we have bipartisan approach in Parliament when the Committee that sets the agenda, that is, the Business Committee, when the leaders are not able to leave their Party politics aside and work together. It has been happening in the past, and it continues to happen now.

Mr. Speaker, the Opposition is suppressed to ask questions and keep the Government accountable. When will leaders leave these petty issues of revenge and vengeance aside and work in unity for betterment of the nation? For the past 10 years, when did we have a situation when leaders met for a round table discussion before bringing the issues before Parliament? We need this to eventuate to ensure that Fiji prospers.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can at least tell the government that we have a very educated and experienced Opposition during this term of Parliament. As the honourable Leader of Opposition has stated, we are willing to assist because we are here for a better Fiji. For the first time, through the media, we hear what is expected to change in the Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I ask, where is bipartisanship when on one side, we hear from media outlets, and on the other hand, we as Opposition members are expected to support the move. We heard through the media that Chapter 11 needs to be changed, however, what needs to be changed in Chapter 11 is still anyone's guess. While we assume it is the requirement of how to change the Constitution, we have not been informed officially what this Government intends to change. Is this Government afraid to share publicly that they want to take away all freehold lands, Fijian nationality, equal citizenry, secular state; say it openly! What do you want to change in the 2013 Constitution? Please be clear!

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while I would like to apologise for my above statement, but when we are not clear it leads to conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theory helps no one. A spark here in Parliament leads to smoke spreading throughout Fiji. This is the reason why the Government needs to come clean on what they want to change in the 2013 Constitution.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this used to happen in the previous Administration, and it continues to happen now. We all talk about it, but we need to put it into practice. When the government does not come out with a clear message, people will make theories. We have heard so much about bipartisanship and changing the Constitution, but till to-date, the honourable Prime Minister has neither written officially nor approached the honourable Leader of the Opposition on what their plan is about the change to the Constitution.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- I was the former chairperson then do it alone, why ask for bipartisanship.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I was the former chairperson of the JLHR Committee.

(Honourable Members interject)

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, every Bill that was brought to my Committee, we ensured that we give a bipartisan report back to Parliament. Nothing is stopping us from sitting and discussing these Bills before brought to Parliament. There are times we agree, when we can bring Bills under Standing Order 51 in a single sitting, but at the same time, new Bills should be referred to Committees for review, even under Standing Order 51. There is nothing wrong with using Standing Order 51, it is a part of the Parliament proceedings. The intent may not be wrong to use Standing Order 51, but the process may not be appropriate to flourish bipartisanship.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I may or may not be in Parliament after 2026, that is the peoples call but while I am still in this august House, I will continue to voice my concern regarding the way things are being done between the Government and Opposition. I started raising these concerns when we reviewed the Standing Orders. If we did it, it does not mean you do it. Remember, it is no longer about SODELPA and FijiFirst. It is not SODELPA that has formed the Government, it is the People's Alliance Party (PAP) and the Opposition is no longer FijiFirst. FijiFirst is now deregistered, so the Opposition consists of 17 Independent Members at this time. This is the best and only time for PAP to lead the Government to negotiate the change and the way we participate in this august House. I say this, because if PAP led by the honourable Prime Minister misses this chance, the Opposition

will do it when we come back into Government after 2026.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. A.A. MAHARAJ.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we still have members who dwell in the past and continue to work in repeat mode. People get tired of listening to music with nice rhythm on a repeat mode. Compare music to the broken record of some of these Ministers. People are tired of listening to these Ministers without any melody on repeat mode As I have stated, FijiFirst is no longer here, so it does not make sense playing the blame game.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday when honourable Premila Kumar was listing what the Bainimarama Government was doing to modernise Fiji, I heard some honourable Members said “corruption, corruption”. So much had been said about our former FijiFirst leaders but till to-date, this Government has not been able to do anything to prove if they were corrupt.

Witch hunting started on day one when this Government came into the picture, and it is 26 months now and nothing has been achieved. When nothing has been done by the former leaders and with no evidence, this Government is struggling in court to prosecute them. Now people are losing faith in the judiciary system and starting to question the intention of the Government, as it seems like an act of revenge and vengeance against former FijiFirst leaders.

On one side the Government talks about freedom of speech and on the other side the Government tries to silence the Opposition in this august House. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Media Industry Development (MIDA) Act has been repealed to allow freedom of speech, so stop suppressing the voice of the Opposition. Listen and improve, as only by listening can you fix what needs to be fixed for the betterment of the nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday the honourable Minister for Finance raised a Point of Order to honourable Bala, stating that there was no discussion about the tax on *suki*. Let me read from a news article from *FBC*, and I quote:

“The Government is considering all submissions regarding the possible introduction of a tax on *suki* in the upcoming Budget.”

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my question is, we have a government broadcasting company covering a government minister, when we raise this, all attempts are made to suppress our voice. If this news is wrong, how can the media outlet be taken to task, now that the MIDA is no longer in existence? Is the Government Commercial Company putting false information about the Ministers, or is the Minister lying in Parliament? Someone is lying over here, Mr. Speaker, Sir. I am not saying who, it is for the Government to decide.

Just yesterday, honourable Chand stated the failure at Ministry level, then the honourable Leader of the Government in Parliament stated that he is imputing improper motives. What a joke! These Members are honourable Ministers responsible for Ministry and its governance and they do not even want us to pinpoint the issue.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, while 53,000 students do not have to pay anything after completing their studies, there are close to 15,000 students still studying privately. Parents are paying for their kids by breaking their FNPF. Please do not be selective. While some do not have to pay anything, there are others who are struggling to pay their tuition fees. We can continue to work like this. We, as leaders, need to look at the national issues rather than personal issues.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I had stated and given evidence that on import of personal items, courier companies are charging administrative fees, and till to-date the administrative charges remain, honourable Minister for Finance. I have given you the evidence. No use telling these honourable Ministers about the issues as they basically listen and do nothing. Why were new vehicles needed for honourable Ministers when the vehicles that were used by the previous Ministers still had lease time left? Why waste taxpayers' money on these new vehicles? Let us look at the bigger picture. Let us work for the betterment of the nation.

HON. I. NAIVALURUA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; I rise to respond to His Excellency the President's most gracious Address at the opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament on Monday 24th February, 2025.

At the outset, I believe His Excellency inspired us with wisdom and clear direction from which he called us to shape our beloved nation's future. His Excellency further encouraged us as Members of Parliament to embrace the principles of transformational leadership that will serve the nation and secure our shared destiny.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not a time to sit on the fence. The days of old political bipartisanship are gone and a new day of responsible politics has come where the interest and the future of our people is paramount.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President stated in his Address, and I quote:

"This Parliament is not just a chamber of 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."

It is to this sentiment that I wish to acknowledge the honourable Prime Minister's vision and effort in bringing cohesion and unity to this Government. Among other bold initiatives that the honourable Prime Minister has progressed, one notable effort is advancing the democratic spirit and values through the inclusion of the G9 to participate in developing our nation and securing her destiny. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the decision by G9 to support the Coalition Government's signals and alignment to take more comprehensive approaches to key issues such as health, justice and environmental policy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, standing today in this august House, it is an honour indeed to deliver my response as Fiji's first ever Minister for Policing. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the extraordinary work of the men and women of the Fiji Police Force whose dedication and courage I have the responsibility to represent. The decision by the honourable Prime Minister to establish the Ministry of Policing to develop a focused security framework and support the Fiji Police echoes a transformative phase in Fiji's law and enforcement landscape.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on a personal note, my only motivation is to show the nation that there is something that the G9 continue to reaffirm - to make a difference and stand with the honourable Prime Minister and the Coalition Government to take issues forward.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, when I first took office earlier in the year, one part of the mandate was to create a new improved and disciplined Fiji Police Force fit for purpose. With the ever-changing security landscape, Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is working closely with the Fiji Police Force to bolster security efforts and tackle crime around the country. Criminal activities continue to become increasingly sophisticated, and our response must be equally forward-thinking, incorporating new

strategies and advanced technologies to counter these threats.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, 2024 recorded an increase in crime by 27 percent. The year 2025 started with a 26 percent increase in overall crime for January. In response to the statistics and criminal environment, the Fiji Police is elevating its operational tempo for the next three months by increasing footprints and visibility on the ground and developing effective operational strategies to address the current situation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the police uplift initiative is the commitment to modernize the Fiji Police Force and align it with the rapidly changing landscape of crime and public safety. The Coalition Government is committed to continuously improving the Fiji Police Force, to ensure that we meet the evolving needs of society. I want to acknowledge the honourable Pio Tikoduadua who laid the framework and foundation upon which this uplift is now being operationalized. *Vinaka saka vakalevu Turaga na Minisita* for your foresight, dedication and commitment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is committed to restoring integrity and rooting out corruption within the Fiji Police Force. The Fiji Police Force under the leadership of Commissioner Rusiate Tudravu is fully committed to uplifting the whole organisation and upholding the core principles of justice, integrity and service to the people of Fiji.

In a recent interview, the Commissioner of Police emphasised transparency within the Fiji Police Force and said that all police officers would be held accountable for breaching the law and face disciplinary measures. I support this call fully. Mr. Speaker,

Sir, the goal is to strengthen and improve community policing, so that people have confidence that they can safely live in their homes and communities. The Fiji Police Force is focusing its efforts on this commitment to public safety and security. You have my assurance, as the Minister responsible for that.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government, through the Ministry of Policing continues to strengthen our engagements with our regional and international partners by introducing and improving policing initiatives. Our regional engagements give us a voice, allows us to network with our counterparts and improve our capacity, capability and regional efforts and most importantly, Mr. Speaker, Sir, it reinforces Fiji's role as the hub of the Pacific.

The Pacific Policing initiatives were endorsed by the Pacific Island Chiefs of Police Meeting held last year, and one of the pillars is the development of Regional Centres of Excellence (RCE) in key policing disciplines. Fiji is one of those countries that has been identified as a Centre of Excellence. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Fiji Police Force and the Australian Federal Police, recently renewed and extended an MOU under the Solesolevaki Partnership. The MOU enhances and builds capacity and capability support for the critical policing areas, helping them meet and counter common challenges, and safeguard the region.

Additionally, the New Zealand Police in collaboration with the Fiji Police have been working on the:

- (1) Development of advanced investigative interviewing capability;
- (2) The expansion of General Patrol Dog capability;
- (3) The expansion of Fiji Detector Dog Unit in Savusavu;
- (4) Asset recovery; and
- (5) Development of our senior leadership and governance capability.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we develop new strategies to address the influx of drug-related crime, we continue to have positive discussions with our other partners, mentioning a few, from China, Indonesia and Singapore. Our partners continue to demonstrate their willingness to assist the Fiji Police Force in capability, building our support in the fight against drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the recent engagement between the honourable Prime Minister and the Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister during the Munich Security Conference in Germany resulted in Israel pledging support and assistance in our fight against drugs. This new level of cooperation will result in the donation of patrol boats to enhance our maritime surveillance and increase intelligence sharing.

An important part is the review of our legislative act. Mr. Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is fully committed to reviewing the legislative arms that allow the Fiji Police Force to carry out their duties and responsibilities effectively. The Police Act, which is a priority for the Force was enacted in 1965, and designed during a time that has since passed, limiting its effectiveness and the ability of Force members to utilise new technology and expand their operational outreach.

A review of the Fiji Police Act will enhance the delivery of effective and efficient law and order services, and help rebuild trust and confidence within the Government, the Fiji Police Force, and the public. Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Illicit Drugs Act is also under review, and this will strengthen and streamline the work undertaken by our Police Force for the effective delivery of service.

On the Counter Narcotics Bureau, the Cabinet endorsed the establishment of the Counter Narcotics Bureau in 2024 as an independent institution that is now under my purview. The Bureau's purpose is to coordinate the Government's efforts to tackle the rise in drug-related issues, including, but not limited to:

- (1) Law enforcement;
- (2) Investigations;
- (3) Prosecutions;
- (4) Intelligence gathering; and
- (5) Raising awareness in collaboration with key agencies.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet approved the development of Fiji's Counter Narcotics Bill to enhance the roles and functions of the Bureau. I am pleased to report that we have completed the first draft of the Counter Narcotics Bill, and we will hold consultations in the coming weeks to discuss the draft Bill. It has been nearly a year since the establishment of the Counter Narcotics Bureau. Although they are still in the early stages, I appreciate the work they have accomplished so far.

A call for a unified fight, Mr. Speaker, as we move forward, we remain committed to implementing a comprehensive strategy, safeguarding our borders, strengthening inter-agency collaboration and ensuring that Fiji does not remain an option for transnational drug syndicates.

Mr. Speaker Sir, I also take this opportunity to acknowledge the support from the Commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces in recognising the urgent need to address drug-related crimes in our communities and collaborative efforts for joint operations in dismantling drug operations in high-risk areas identified nationwide.

Mr. Speaker, the battle against drugs is very much in the public mind. The public asks hard questions and looks to their government for solutions because this scourge does not fit with who we have been or see ourselves as becoming. The transnational syndicates, their local bosses, and the pushers dealing this poison in our streets have elevated their own selfish needs at the expense of

everyone else.

For many listening today, this is not a news headline but the crippling reality of a personal story. As the Minister for Policing, my heart goes out to those who carry the burden for members of their families and perhaps themselves. For our nation to overcome this injury and treachery, we must remain resolute in our direction and firm in our resolve.

Mr. Speaker, while our intelligence reveals that there is no local manufacturing of methamphetamine, we can confirm that we are a transshipment hub. While external criminal syndicates seek to exploit our maritime and air routes, it is some of our people who have chosen to selfishly profit from assisting the transshipment and then distributing this form of death on their fellow citizens.

Mr. Speaker, the gravity of the situation demands plain language, clear direction and decisive action. Since accepting this role seven weeks ago, I have been assessing the strength, capacity and integrity of our Fiji Police Fore, undertaking numerous multilateral engagements with regional partners and taking the conversation out into the community.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I can inform the members of this august House, that there is a movement of goodwill among the different sectors of our communities wanting to play their part and this include NGOs, civil society groups, business houses, the *vanua* and faith-based organisations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to speak a little on the role of the church in this fight against drugs. The church plays a critical role as it has historically been a cornerstone in shaping Fiji's moral and social fabric. The church, well-organised and deeply committed to love and healing, is a powerful ally in the fight against drugs. It is already weaponised and has the arsenal to fight the war of eradicating drugs in the front line. It has the necessary spiritual and practical tools to address this issue at the grassroots level.

However, it is time for the church to rise to the occasion and fully embrace this responsibility. It must not remain a passive observer but actively engage in the fight, using its influence to not only heal but also combat this growing threat. The church has the moral authority and reach to make a real difference. Its commitment to loving and healing communities must now extend to the battle against drug abuse.

Mr. Speaker, this is no longer just a matter for the government or law enforcement, it is a call for the church to be bold and step forward as a leading force in this national cause and unite us in this fight, using its full strength to address the modern scourge of drugs that is ravaging our society. It is time for the church not just to preach, but to act. This battle demands all hands-on deck for the urgent task ahead of us.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, like the church, the *vanua* also plays a pivotal role in our fight against drugs. The *vanua*, as you are fully aware, intertwines with the land, the culture and its people. It provides for a set of shared values and allows individuals to achieve a common goal, benefiting through social connections and relationships. I call on our traditional leaders to come together and rally their people in our collective fight against drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I salute, at this point, and acknowledge the stance taken by the *Turaga Na Tui Namosi*, echoing his support and readiness to join the drug fight by boosting awareness in communities, alongside the Fiji Police. It is a true indication of his leadership, commitment and love for his *Vanua* and his people by becoming a champion in this fight against drugs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency the President, in his Opening Address, stated that leadership is not about holding power, but about empowering others. And this commitment to transformation leadership means empathetic and focussing on equity.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in the previous roles I have served, I developed a reputation for lifting capacity by expecting, encouraging and, sometimes, demanding that our organisations, people, stakeholders and efforts achieve more. This core pursuit of excellence is no different here.

I am expecting the Fiji Police Force to do more. I am expecting our faith-based community to do more. I am expecting our schools to do more. I am expecting our community and traditional leaders to do more. Together we will overcome.

From my experience, if I may share, Mr. Speaker, Sir, a few things that I have learnt in life. The first one, when the problem is big, you try and make it small. When it is small, you keep it small. Thirdly, when there is a problem, try and find out the heartbeat, simply meaning, the reason why it has happened. Last, and not least, one that I have added, when there is no problem, do not create a problem.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, yesterday, honourable Bala, my colleague on the other side of the House, in his response said that we are a divided community. I have not encountered any concrete evidence supporting this claim in my extensive community consultation. More importantly, what data is he relying on to make such a profound statement before this august House?

Also, on that side of the House, the honourable Hem Chand stated to this august House that people are getting sick from the drug smoke from the incineration of the four tonnes of illicit drugs. Incineration was a critical Police operation carried out according to advised standards over an extended period to ensure timely destruction with minimal impact. Furthermore, I would like to reassure the public that their safety and health is paramount, and there is no cause for alarm.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our people's safety and security are integral to our national wellbeing. As I stand before this august House, I am mindful of the heavy burden that drugs, crime and violence wield on our people. I am confident that every Fijian will heed the call to unity, strengthen our determination and demonstrate that we are excellent custodians of our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is not a time for big talk and fancy words, nor is this a time to play politics on issues that confront us now. It is a time to roll up our sleeves and together, get the job done. I repeat, "it is time to roll up our sleeves and get the job done".

We know our mission, Mr. Speaker, Sir, and we are determined to accomplish it together. We will deliver, Sir, we will deliver.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, Sir, allow me to close with a portion of the scripture from Luke 1:37:

"For with God, nothing will be impossible. For with God, nothing will be impossible".

I support the motion by the honourable Prime Minister. *Vinaka saka.*

HON. J.N. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Speaker of Parliament, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and our beloved fellow citizens; good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency's Speech on the opening of the 3rd Session of Parliament in 2025. I thank His Excellency for his vision to make Fiji a great nation based on the principles of our founding fathers and subsequent leaders, a vision that is centred on progress, prosperity and unity.

I am pleased to note that he has stated that it is our responsibility to shape the future of our beloved nation by fostering a society that is just, equitable and resilient.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, since the Coalition Government came into power and compared to previous years, many young, ambitious and talented Fijians have started to believe that they could realise their dreams only by going abroad, ringing the bell for our leaders to think deep of this sudden and swift actions of Fijians. Has anyone found the reasons for that? It is very simple.

Let us put it this way, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Fijian Government educates a person for good 18 years from early childhood to tertiary level for which the Fijian economy will pay that person for good 10 years or so when he or she gets a job in Fiji. Altogether, it is 28 years of investment. However, when the same person is told to go or someone is appointed in his position who is less deserving, then this happens.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this is because what experience and qualification does is when you distort effort versus reward, then surely a person's experience and qualification will go where it will be rewarded, respected and maintained. It simply does not have to put up with the new culture of recruiting people who are less deserving. So, he or she gets on a plane and leaves.

Through proper immigration, the number that have left for Australia and New Zealand will alarm all of us. In another way, Mr. Speaker, Sir, when a system is compromised, those less deserving will get opportunities to which they are not deserved. The problem is that those that are deserving look up to the open seas and skies, pick up a little document called passport, get up on a plane with a heavy heart at the Nadi International Airport and all they can say, *moce Viti*. This happens because we are not fostering a society that is just, equitable and resilient, contrary to what His Excellency has reiterated in his Address.

Let us not turn our blind eye to the fact that when skilled and qualified individuals migrate from their home country, it results in a significant loss of human capital, which can hinder the nation's economic and social development. These individuals often contribute to sectors like healthcare, education, technology and innovation, and their departure creates a gap that is very difficult to fill.

The country loses valuable expertise, knowledge and leadership which could have been used to drive progress, improve services and create job opportunities for others. Additionally, the migration of such individuals may also lead to 'brain drain' where a disproportionate number of educated and talented workers leave, further exacerbating inequality and limiting the country's potential for growth.

I am glad that His Excellency has clearly stated that in addition, Government will prioritize infrastructure development, ensuring that roads, ports and energy supply systems support our national productivity. However, Mr. Speaker, Sir, our roads have developed craters, just like on the moon and I am pretty sure it can be seen from the moon. Our ports have continued to remain small. We did not take concrete and robust steps to remove power and water scarcity to meet the demands of our growing population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let me share my disappointment by stating that despite repeated requests for upgrading and tarsealing of Kavanagasau Road in Sigatoka which has villages of Laselase, Naroro,

Nawamagi, Yalava, Nailagi, Samusamu, Conua, Narata, Nadrala, Yalasa, Kavanagasau, Mavua and Nabitu, with a total population of 2,000 people with six primary schools, one secondary school, one health centre, a police post, 40 registered commercial vegetable farmers and more than 100 subsistence farmers, their requests so far have not been addressed.

For some time, the bus service from Nabitu through Kavanagasau Road to Sigatoka has ceased to operate, leaving no alternative but commuters to hire carriers or vans to get a ride to town and carrying their produce to Sigatoka market, hence, unnecessary putting extra financial burden on the already struggling citizens of the said areas. Yet, LTA is very quick to book drivers who, at least, provide transport from morning to late evenings.

If there would have been regular bus service and carriers running, I would not have been the last person to have such a query in this august House. However, the scenario is different, and I feel for the people in these areas. So, I am left with no choice but to highlight just because poor roads can have a profound impact on people's daily lives, limiting access to essential services like education and employment opportunities. The constant wear and tear on vehicles due to poorly maintained roads often result in higher transportation costs for both individuals and businesses, making goods and services more expensive.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in rural or remote areas, bad roads can isolate communities, making it difficult for people to access healthcare, leading to delayed fitness or preventable health issues. Additionally, poor road conditions contribute to higher accident rates, putting lives at risks and putting unnecessary stress on emergency services. I hope that LTA and Fiji Police Force will do some analysis on this based on accidents that we have had recorded. Overall, inadequate infrastructure development stifles economic growth, people's social inequality and reduces the overall quality of life for affected population.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I join my fellow Opposition Members to strongly urge the honourable Minister to give a temporary bus licence to service this route. I understand there is a pending court case, but people are suffering and those are the same people who have elected this Government.

As His Excellency stated, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue expanding access to quality medical services and modernise our medical facilities across the nation. So, I would also like to dwell on health but more on the administrative side of it.

While some might be thinking as why I am speaking on the administrative issue, let me reason out, that the administration of the Ministry of Health is crucial because it ensures the efficiency and effective delivery of healthcare services to the population. Proper administration helps in the coordination of resources, such as medical supplies, healthcare personnel, as well as infrastructure, ensuring they are distributed where they are needed most. It involves setting policies and standard of healthcare delivery, monitoring the implementation and adjusting, if necessary, it will improve outcomes.

Effective health administration ensures the smooth functioning of public health campaigns, management of epidemic and addressing healthcare disparities. Moreover, it ensures transparency, accountability and optimal use of Government funds, leading to improved outcomes and the overall wellbeing of our population.

As stated by His Excellency, in 2025, the Government will prioritise strategic tourism policies, infrastructure, sustainability and a vision safety, including the modernisation of the Civil Aviation Act.

Mr. Speaker, a good start will be to address the current issues at Nadi International Airport. When a visitor arrives or a person who had gone overseas to visit arrives in the country, there is a bottleneck at the counter because there are very few health officers managing it. Sometimes, there are two or three at the maximum. This is a port of entry, and for the visitors and tourists, they do not want to stand in the line for hours before going through Customs to get their passports stamped.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am pleading to the authorities to have, at least, that same number of staff, so that these tourists and those who are returning to Fiji can be served. It is all about good customer service at the Airport, especially for visitors because it sets the tone for the entire travelling experience.

Visitors often arrive in unfamiliar surroundings and having well-trained approachable staff can help alleviate stress and confusion. Efficient Customs services can streamline the entry process, reducing long wait times and ensuring smoother transitions through security checks, baggage claim and immigration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, a positive airport experience can significantly enhance our business perception of a country, encouraging repeat visits and fostering a welcoming atmosphere for tourism and business.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as stated by His Excellency, Government is committed to addressing the growing demand for housing to enhance the quality of life of all citizens. Good housing is fundamental to high quality life because it directly affects physical and mental wellbeing. A safe, secure and comfortable home provides individuals and families with a stable environment, promoting health and reducing stress.

Adequate housing ensures protection from environmental hazards, such as extreme weather, poor sanitation and physical illness. It also offers space for privacy and physical growth, enhancing emotional wellbeing and boosting productivity. When people live in suitable housing, they are more likely to experience greater stability, security and happiness, leading to a thriving society.

However, I happened to come across some disappointed citizens, who had repeated concerns from last year with regards to improper sewerage, improper drainage, rubbish collection and deteriorating road conditions of the Nasinu Land Purchase residents, and to their dismay, the relevant authorities have not acted towards their plight. This is contrary to what His Excellency is envisioning in terms of quality life for our people.

The residents in that area have paid a significant sum for the land and the house. They would be more than pleased to speak to the appropriate departments at any time and day that works best for them so that this can be resolved. What worries me more is that this concern is falling on deaf ears. At least, authorities must meet the citizens and discuss because as we all know that not everything has solutions that can be realised overnight.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the non-sugar agriculture sector has been the cornerstone of our economy since Independence. As stated by His Excellency, the 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 that must not be compromised.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in rural areas, many farmers have been forced to halt subsistence and semi commercial farming due to stray animals rampaging the crops of these poor farmers. For example, farmers in Maro, Muka, Tagitagi, Naidiri, Natadola, Waibogi and other parts of Valley Road such as Nabaka, Bilalevu and Raunitogo are sick and tired of stray animals.

I thank the honourable Minister for Agriculture, his Assistant Minister and the Police of Sigatoka in addressing the issue of stray cattle on the Queens Highway. However, more still needs to be done as these cattle are elusive and many farmers do not want to complain because of fear of victimisation. As a result, many farmers have gradually stopped planting crops at all and as a result, their families are unable to access safe and nutritious meals, as alluded to by His Excellency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, stray animals near the Yaqara Pastoral Company have become an eyesore and they have caused so many accidents around that area. I kindly request the Ministry of Agriculture to address this issue, as they have done alongside the Queens Road from Sovi Bay to Lomawai in Sigatoka.

As stated by His Excellency and I agree that the Education Sector Strategic Plan focusses on service delivery and enhancing quality learning and teaching in all schools. It is aligned to labour market demand and addresses the issue of labour shortages and mobility.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this calls for an urgent review of the education system and structures, to ensure that it is adequately aligned to our needs. This can only be fruitful and meaningful if every effort is made to educate our children by having static systems and structures in place.

Education plays a vital role in the development of a country, and the Government commitment to providing quality education yields numerous benefits. Firstly, an educated population leads to a skilled workforce, which is essential for driving economic growth, innovation and competitiveness on the global stage.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, governments that prioritise education also foster social cohesion by ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their background, have access to opportunities for upward mobility. Moreover, investing in education helps reduce poverty, as it equips individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to secure better paying jobs.

Education also promotes better health outcomes, civic engagement and environmental awareness, as informed citizens are more likely to make decisions that benefit the society. In essence, the Government's commitment to education, strengthens the foundation of a prosperous, equitable and sustainable future for the entire nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, my teacher told me a story where the late *Turaga Na Tui Nayau*, in defending one particular skipper who was criticised during a Lau Provincial Council Meeting for sailing the ship first to his island before setting course for more prominent and chiefly islands, Ratu Kamisese Mara was quoted as saying, "If you want the ship to sail first to your island, educate your child to become a skipper because it is the skipper who decides where the ship sails to, not the Prime Minister or Provincial Council." He put them on the spot! Let us not forget such meaningful message when it comes to education such as the strength and power of education, which was so clearly articulated by His Excellency in his Address.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I challenge the Government to live up to their expectations and not only to honour the promises they made prior to the Elections, but to also uphold the words of His Excellency the President who has clearly articulated his vision for Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the way this Government has been functioning from day one or rather has not been functional and internally paralysed, there is really no need to talk much about its past or present because it has not made any significant progress, and the people are suffering daily.

There is still time that this Coalition Government needs to get its priorities right and move in that direction for the betterment of our beloved Fiji. I wish to see more from the Government rather than more talk.

Finally, I wish to thank His Excellency the President for his wonderful deliberations and a vision for our beloved nation. I am looking forward to an exciting parliamentary session for the good of our nation.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Deputy Prime Ministers, honourable Cabinet Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and fellow citizens; *ni bula vinaka* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to support and respond to His Excellency the President's profound and inspiring Address at the Opening of the 2025 Parliamentary Session. His Excellency the President has laid out a bold and inspiring vision for Fiji, a vision anchored in unity, inclusivity and transformational leadership. He has reminded us that progress is not about maintaining the status quo, but about forging a new path - one that is just, resilient and prosperous for all Fijians.

His Excellency the President's words are more than just aspirations, they are powerful reflection of a leader with a deep sense of duty, compassion and an unwavering commitment to serve his people. His call for unity, resilience and bold leadership is one that we must all embrace, not just in words, but through decisive action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the core of our Coalition Government's vision for the future is the wellbeing of every Fijian, ensuring access to quality, safe and affordable housing. The 2025-2029 National Development Plan, which builds on our past achievements while addressing the challenges, outlines key strategic policies that help us realise this vision. These policies include:

- (1) expanding affordable housing initiatives;
- (2) promoting sustainable urban planning; and
- (3) enhancing infrastructure and public services to ensure housing developments are well connected and accessible to all.

Additionally, Government is committed to introducing innovative financial support mechanisms for low and middle income earners, enabling great opportunities for home ownership and rental access. Through these initiatives, the Ministry of Housing is committed to addressing the growing demand for housing, reducing overcrowding, and enhancing the quality of life for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji remains steadfast to the global commitments we have made, particularly in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG11 - to make human settlements inclusive, safe and resilient; continues to guide our housing initiatives.

Through the Pacific-Urban Agenda and our participation in the New Urban Agenda, we remain steadfast in our undertaking to upgrade informal settlements, improve access to land and housing, and ensure that all Fijians, no matter their background or circumstances, have access to adequate housing.

Our work at the global level strengthens our resolve at the local level, ensuring that Fiji is on track to meet its international obligations, while also addressing the unique needs of our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we go into the future, the demand for housing in Fiji is growing, particularly in the peri-urban areas between Nadi-Lautoka, Lami-Suva-Nausori, and other urban hubs. We project that the demand for new dwellings will total approximately 1,600 units annually over the next 30 years.

The Ministry of Housing is actively collaborating with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Lands, the Fiji National University, iTaukei Land Trust Board (iTTLTB), Habitat for Humanity Fiji, Housing Authority, Public Rental Board (PRB), and other relevant organisations to address the growing demand and supply of affordable housing units.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we continue to address the needs of those living in informal settlements through the Informal Settlement Upgrade and Formalisation Programme (ISUP). Through this Programme, the Ministry of Housing is working tirelessly to offer long-term land tenure and better access to services, empowering families to transition from informal settlements to homes they can truly call their own.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, on 14th January, 2025, offer letters were provided to 12 families from Kalabu and one family from Makoi PRB Estate, giving them the opportunity to purchase their own flats.

On 29th January, 2025, the honourable Prime Minister officially handed over offer letters to 36 families who were relocated from the 298 families living on the northern end of the Jittu Informal Settlement to the newly constructed Lagilagi PRB Flats. Four of these flats have been specifically retrofitted with features designed to improve accessibility for persons with special needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry currently manages 48 Development Leases for the Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme consisting of 44 iTTLTB leases and four State leases. These leases cover 21 settlements in the Western Division, 14 in the Northern Division and 13 in the Central Division.

Moreover, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry's Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme is implemented through five key phases - preliminary, consultancy, civil works, final survey and issuance of title. In the 2024-2025 financial year, the Ministry plans to issue leases for three key areas. They are in Cuvu in Sigatoka, Waidamudamu in Nausori and Ledrusasa in Nadi. The other six Ministry of Housing Development Lease such as Sakoca in Tacirua, Tavela, Field 4 and Tore in Lautoka and Valewaquyaya in Ba are currently at the construction work phases and are anticipated to be ready for issuance of title in the next financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Housing provided 235 grants to the First Home Ownership Initiative assistance policy to assist home buyers in 2024. At the end of this financial year (2024-2025), the Ministry will process a total of 925 lots and distribute 235 grants, aiming to provide homes for an estimated 1,160 families in the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 financial years. This is in addition to the 49 families who received offer letters to purchase from PRB by late January 2025. Together, these efforts address more than 75 percent of the total annual demand for new dwellings, estimated at 1,600 units.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, there are currently 17 projects at planning phase with nine projects currently at the engineering plan stage and 22 projects at the preliminary stage.

The 2025-2029 National Development Plan aims to achieve significant progress in housing and urban development over the next five years. Addressing the urgent needs of Fijians, upgrading informal settlements, providing affordable home ownership opportunities, and strengthening climate

resilience will continue to build a future that is inclusive, safe and sustainable. However, the Government cannot act alone, a call for action will closely involve collaboration with private sector stakeholders, local communities and international partners to foster innovation, resilience and long-term sustainability in the housing sector.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in line with this commitment, the Ministry is actively working towards the relocation and resettlement of informal residents who are facing eviction. This includes 148 households from the Veidogo Settlement in Vatuwaqa, over 500 households from Nadiri Settlement in Tacirua and 414 households from the Fiji Muslim League Settlement in Nabua. To address this pressing issue, the Ministry has developed a comprehensive 5-Year Relocation and Resettlement Policy, along with its accompanying Standard Operating Procedure, and a detailed Relocation and Resettlement Plan for households at risk of eviction.

In this financial year alone, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is focused on the immediate relocation and resettlement of 1,062 households facing eviction notices. To ensure a smooth process, the Ministry is working closely with other Government agencies – the ITLTB and Ministry of Lands, collaboratively revising the relocation and resettlement efforts.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Cabinet has approved a review of the Development of Informal Settlements Act 2022, to establish a clearer relocation process, provide support for vulnerable groups, and ensure that landlords assist with relocation efforts. This includes, offering transportation assistance, as well as helping identify suitable relocation areas, particularly in cases where no designated relocation sites are available. The review aims to ensure that actions taken by both, lessees leases and the Government align with international human rights standards, including the right to housing, the right to adequate living conditions, and the right to participate in decisions that affects one's life and livelihood.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Government, in partnership with the International Finance Corporation, have since initiated five Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects, aimed at increasing first-time homeownership rates and reducing informal settlements over the next decade. These projects were planned for the following areas - Nepani, Davuilevu, Wainibuku, Tavakubu in Lautoka, and Tavua. However, due to the projects proving to be financially unmanageable, Cabinet, in its decision in January 2025, has resolved to transfer the management of these projects back to Housing Authority.

As part of its ongoing initiative, the Housing Authority is set to construct model houses and has issued a call for Expressions of Interest on 5th February, 2025, inviting developers to submit proposals for three distinct house models - Pre-fabricated, one Duplex and 30 Strata Units. In its 2025 Product Service Delivery Plan, the Housing Authority projects the construction of 203 housing units and the development of 362 lots. The construction of these units is expected to commence in May 2025, with a planned completion in the next financial year.

In parallel, the PRB is dedicated to expanding transitional housing options, with a focus on helping individuals transition from renting to home ownership. Additionally, the Ministry is collaborating closely with relevant agencies to finalise the Rent to Own Policy, which aims to further facilitate this important transition.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Local Government is at the forefront of this national movement. We are facilitating investment, modernising municipal services, and driving forward climate resilience initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, with this overarching vision in mind, I wish to outline the key initiatives that the Ministry of Local Government is implementing to bring this vision to life.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, before I go further, I wish to address the remarks made by honourable Hem Chand, who has pointed out the obvious challenges facing our Municipalities, which is indiscriminate waste management. However, I wish to remind the honourable Member that waste management is not just the sole responsibility of Municipal Councils, but every resident, every business and every stakeholder in our towns and cities must take responsibility. The honourable Member has failed to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of our Municipal Councils to tackle these issues, despite years of under investment and neglect.

I will give an example, Mr. Speaker, Sir. The Suva City Council, in collaboration with the Ministry for Environment and Climate Change, has taken decisive action to combat waste pollution. Initiatives, such as the installation of a trash boom at Nabukalou Creek, are part of a broader strategy to improve waste management and protect our environment.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government is working hard with Municipal Councils to improve the appalling conditions of our towns and cities. The Suva City Council has worked diligently to upgrade the Suva Bus Stand, which has been neglected for over 12 years. The old kiosks that had become an eyesore and a safety hazard were relocated to better facilities, improving the experiences for commuters and vendors alike.

HON. P.D. KUMAR.- Microwaving.

HON. M.K. NALUMISA.- The Lautoka City Council is also upgrading the Bus Stand, which will be completed in the next financial year, whilst the public convenience at the Bus Stand has been upgraded.

The Lautoka City Council continues to work on public convenience upgrade in parts of the town as ongoing operational work. Similarly, Rakiraki is undertaking market upgrades, which is in the tender process. Upgrading works for the Nadi Town Bus Stand will commence before the end of this month and should be completed before the end of this financial year with a cost of around \$150,000.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Coalition Government did not create these problems, but we are the Government that is taking responsibility and fixing them. We have initiated a comprehensive review of the Local Government Act to restore decision-making powers of to Municipal Councils, ensuring they can operate with greater efficiency and accountability. We are modernising town planning regulations, upgrading critical infrastructure, and introducing PPPs to bring much needed investment into municipal projects.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the inclusion of a dedicated audit and compliance team in the Ministry of Local Government has been instrumental in upholding good governance. Their diligent oversight ensures transparency, accountability and the effective use of resources, all of which are vital to building trust within our communities.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in alignment with the Coalition Government's legislative agenda, the Ministry of Local Government is placing a high priority on the upcoming Local Government Elections. The Ministry is currently in the final stages of consultations with the Electoral Commission of Fiji to determine the way forward. Preparatory work for the elections is well underway and once the Local Government Regulations have been approved and gazetted for enforcement, plans for civic and voter education will commence to ensure that citizens are well informed and engaged in the

electoral process.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry will also pursue legislative changes to the Town Planning Act and the Subdivision of Lands Act to modernise town planning processes and align them with current initiatives, such as the Building Permit Approval system. These updates aim to streamline procedures, enhance efficiency, and ensure that urban development aligns with sustainable and inclusive growth objectives. By modernising these frameworks, we will create a more responsive and forward-looking planning system that supports Fiji's evolving developing needs.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the development and revitalisation of our towns and cities remain a core priority for both - Ministry of Local Government and the Municipal Councils. This year, the Levuka and Nakasi Markets have been completed and opened, whilst the Savusavu Market will be completed by the middle of 2025.

The civil works for the Nabouwalu Town Centre is underway, whilst the Nabouwalu Passenger Terminal is expected to be completed by April 2025. The Keiyasi New Town Development civil works will be completed by October 2025. Additionally, documentation and civil works for the construction of a market and bus stand in Seaqaqa town will be undertaken.

On further support for regional development, priority will be given to township plans for Seaqaqa, Taveuni, Navua, Waimaro and Vunidawa. These plans will focus on upgrading critical infrastructure including roads, water supply and energy systems, while also improving access to markets, healthcare and education.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry plans to renovate and upgrade Municipal Markets requiring maintenance and repairs. The ability of Municipal Councils to establish PPPs will be vital to the success of capital projects in their communities. Furthermore, to better accommodate women vendors who often travel long distances to sell their produce and endure challenging conditions, municipal markets will be equipped with appropriate facilities to support them.

In addition to market development, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Ministry is dedicated to completing the long-awaited Ba Stadium (Govind Park) and the Lautoka Swimming Pool. These facilities are critical for hosting local sporting events and generating revenue. These venues will also bring economic benefits to local businesses, with attendees utilising taxis, buses, food and beverages from kiosks, lodging, and other services.

The Govind Park Phase 2, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is expected to be completed before the start of the next financial year. The Lautoka Swimming Pool is expected to be completed by the end of 2025-2026 financial year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we will continue to implement the National Blue Town Framework and New Town Development Programme under the Urban Policy Action Plan to promote balanced and sustainable growth across Fiji. These initiatives are designed to cater for the unique needs of both, urban and rural communities, ensuring that development is inclusive, equitable and environmentally friendly.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, waste management has become an increasingly critical issue as we face the challenges of urbanisation. The uncontrolled disposal of waste not only affects the environment but also has a negative impact on our economy, public health and overall wellbeing.

In response, the Ministry for Local Government in partnership with the Ministry for Environment and Climate Change, has entered into a Transaction Advisory Services Agreement with

the Asian Development Bank, to help develop an efficient and sustainable waste management solution. This initiative, Mr. Speaker, Sir, could include the creation of a sanitary landfill and the rehabilitation of four open dumpsites in Fiji's Western Division.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Municipal Councils are in the process of recruiting Chief Executive Officers for their respective entities and, hopefully, to be completed this in the next two to three months.

The development of the National Fire Authority (NFA), Mr. Speaker, Sir, in less than two years, the NFA recommissioned the Levuka Fire Station, launched the first-ever Paramedic Health Services, held groundbreaking for the Natadola Kabisi Fire Station and commissioned the new Navua Fire Station.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in conclusion, as we continue to work towards fostering sustainable urban growth, improving service delivery and enhancing the lives of all Fijians, initiatives discussed today highlight our commitment to transforming both, urban and rural communities, and together, through these concerted efforts, we are creating a future that is not only sustainable but one that is inclusive, equitable and prosperous for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I fully support the motion before the House, and I thank you for the opportunity.

MR. SPEAKER.-Honourable Members, I have only three more speakers for the day. and I understand that honourable Members would like or would wish to push to the end of the list before we adjourn and, in which case, I will now entertain 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 the House to sit beyond 4.30 p.m. today to complete the remaining items listed in today's Order Paper.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, as you alluded to, we have three speakers left – the contributions from honourable Sachida Nand, honourable Viliame Naupoto and honourable Vijay Nath.

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

HON. LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not have any further comments.

Question put.

Motion agreed to.

**RESUMPTION OF DEBATE ON THE ADDRESS
BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI**

HON. S. NAND.- Mr. Speaker, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Ministers, honourable Members of Parliament, friends, families and fellow citizens who are watching us live; *bula si'a* and a very good afternoon to you all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I rise to respond to His Excellency's most gracious Address delivered by His Excellency the President in the opening of the 2025 Session of Parliament. At the outset, allow me to acknowledge the aspirations and goals presented by His Excellency, particularly in relation to sustainability, inclusivity, resilience and national unity. Indeed, these are lofty ideals that speaks to the collaborative aspirations of all Fijians.

While we wholeheartedly agree with that, we must work towards a Fiji where every citizen has the opportunity to succeed. I wish to take this opportunity to bring to focus some of the key areas where our nation's progressed particularly in agriculture, MSMEs, poverty reduction, rural development and the empowerment of women require more attention and practical action.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency highlighted the importance of diversifying our economy and we agree that agriculture is an essential pillar for long-term economic prosperity. However, we must acknowledge that the agricultural sector in Fiji has far too long been underfunded and underappreciated, despite being a key economic driver for many rural and peri-urban communities. The rhetoric of empowerment for the agricultural sector is one that we have been hearing for many years, but the results remain far from satisfactory.

The promise of empowering agriculture requires more than just policy statements and reviews. We need strategic, well-funded and targeted interventions that address the long-standing issues in this sector. This includes improve access to modern farming technologies, providing better and more affordable credit facilities for our farmers, enhancing accessibility to markets for their produce and significantly improving infrastructure to ensure that farmers are resilient in the face of climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to truly empower agriculture, we must address the challenges that are holding the sector back. This starts with modern farming technologies. Across Fiji, many farmers still rely on outdated farming techniques which limits their ability to increase productivity and become more competitive. We must invest in research and development of new farm technologies, particularly those that can withstand the adverse impacts of climate change. This will require collaboration with international partners, research institutions and private sector to ensure that the farmers have access to the latest innovations available in agriculture.

We must improve access to credit for our farmers. Smallholder farmers in rural areas often struggle to obtain financing, which makes it difficult for them to invest in machinery, tools, seeds and infrastructure needed to expand their operations. By providing affordable and accessible credit facility, we can enable farmers to invest in their business and increase their productivity. It is essential that we ensure that our financial institutions have policies in place that cater specifically to the needs of farmers and agricultural enterprises, and this too, without any red tapes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, perhaps most importantly, we must recognise that the agricultural sector is at the mercy of climate change. Fiji's farmers face increased risks from extreme weather events, such as cyclones, floods and droughts. As a nation, we must invest in infrastructure that will help farmers cope with these challenges. This includes access to irrigation systems, improving drainage and building resilient infrastructure to ensure that farmers can withstand the impacts of climate change

and continue to produce food for the nation.

Moreover, His Excellency mentioned that the review of agricultural-based enterprises, I urge the Government to provide transparency in the process and ensure that these enterprises such as Agro Marketing Authority, Yaqara Pastoral Company Limited and Fiji Meats Industry Board are held accountable to all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, these enterprises were established with the intention to support farmers and enhancing agricultural productivity. However, too often, these entities have been inefficient, poorly managed and unable to deliver the services desired. We must ensure that these public enterprises are not a drain on the State's resources but are structured in a way that serves the best interests of all Fijians.

The review of these entities must involve all relevant stakeholders, farmers, industry experts and members of the public. The Government should commit to a transparent process ensuring that the findings of the review are made publicly available and that any restructuring or reforms that are carried out, is in a manner that benefits the agricultural sector and the farmers who rely on it. The enterprises should not become an additional burden on the State. They must be reformed to serve their intended purpose, enhancing productivity and sustainability of Fiji's agricultural economy.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, if we are truly committed to food security and sustaining the livelihoods of the rural Fijians, we must invest in research and development in agriculture, support our farmers especially the small-scale farmers and ensure that Fiji has control over the agriculture supply chain.

It is important that we listen to our farmers and provide them with resources and support they need to succeed. The Government must work closely with the farmers and other agricultural stakeholders to ensure that policies are tailored to the specific needs of the sector. It is only through this collaborative approach that we can create an agricultural environment that is truly empowering and sustainable for all Fijians.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, moving on to the important issue of Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), we agree with His Excellency that these businesses are vital for the development of a more diversified and inclusive economy. However, we must ask, where are the concrete measures that directly benefit MSMEs in Fiji?

While the Government has made some strides in acknowledging the roles of MSMEs in our economy, these small businesses continue to struggle with access to finance, market connectivity and limited opportunities for growth. We must ask ourselves, why so many MSMEs in Fiji face high cost of doing business and excessive bureaucracy? We must also ask, why women-led MSMEs continue to face gender-based challenges in accessing financing and markets, despite numerous policies designed to support gender equality?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, poverty reduction remains a key issue in our national dialogue. As we acknowledge the Government's stated focus on poverty reduction, we must emphasise that mere rhetoric is not enough. The current initiatives appear to be fragmented and fail to address the systemic barriers that trap many Fijians into poverty.

Government must provide clear commitment, comprehensive strategies for poverty alleviation that addresses not only the income levels, but also access to education, health services and affordable housing. It is imperative that we ensure that our most vulnerable population, including rural and peri-urban communities, are given equal opportunities for economic advancement.

A successful poverty reduction strategy must place rural and peri-urban communities at the centre of economic growth. Rural and peri-urban areas in Fiji are home to some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged people in our country, many of whom depend on agriculture and tourism for their livelihoods.

To unlock the potential of these communities, Government must prioritise rural infrastructure development, including access to reliable transportation, access to clean drinkable water and electricity. Additionally, facilitating training and education for rural population, particularly in life skills and financial skills, can create new economic opportunities and bridge the rural-urban divide and stop the rural-urban drift.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, no discussion on economic development would be complete without addressing the needs for women empowerment. Women in Fiji, particularly in rural areas, remain disproportionately impacted by economic exclusion, limited access to opportunities and gender-based violence. In this respect, the Government has made commitments to women's rights and empowerment. It is crucial that these commitments are followed by tangible and practical measures.

The support for women entrepreneurs, particularly those in agriculture and small businesses must go beyond token policies. The Government should ensure that women have equal access to equal financing and respective markets.

The Government should remove barriers that limit their participation in economic activities. It should provide opportunities for them take leadership roles in business and industry. Women-led businesses, particularly in agriculture, have proven to be key driver of sustainable economic development in other countries, and Fiji must support and harness this potential.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is insightful to compare Fiji's approach with that of other small island nations that have experienced successful economic diversification. One such example is Mauritius, a country similar to Fiji in terms of small island status, population size and reliance on tourism and agriculture. Mauritius, over the past few decades, has successfully diversified its economy, reducing its reliance on sugar exports and building strong sectors in agriculture, textiles and tourism.

The Mauritian Government has invested heavily in human capital development, infrastructure, and technology, creating a favourable environment for MSMEs to thrive. This has included programmes that provide targeted financial support for small businesses, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.

Mauritius has effectively leveraged its diaspora and international trade relations to expand its global footprint. In comparison, Fiji has yet to reach its full potential in diversifying its economy or ensuring that small businesses, particularly in rural areas, have the necessary resources to grow and succeed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not compare Fiji with Singapore and mislead people. Let us compare like with like, which is practical.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji can learn from Mauritius's success by implementing similar policies focussed on education and skills development, creating favourable conditions for MSMEs, and fostering Public Private Partnerships that promote economic growth across various sectors. The Government must prioritise these lessons to create a more resilient, inclusive, and diversified economy for the future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, I must address a matter of great concern to our economy and connectivity - the issue of international flights out of Nausori International Airport. It is alarming

that despite the significant upgrades to the runway and facilities, we still do not see international flights operating out of this important regional hub.

Earlier on, Nausori International Airport served as a key gateway for international flights, with Boeing 737s operating routes to Australia and New Zealand. They also operated routes to the Pacific Island Countries out of Nausori International Airport.

Today, however, despite improvements to the facilities, including the runway, no international flights are operating out of Nausori. This situation needs an urgent clarification from the Government. Why are we not seeing any international flights operating out from the upgraded facility? The lack of international flights out of Nausori represents a missed opportunity to boost the tourism and trade sectors, particularly for the people of the Eastern Division and the surrounding regions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Government must prioritise finding solutions to this issue and ensure that Nausori International Airport is used to its full potential. This will not only enhance Fiji's connectivity to the rest of the world, but also stimulate regional development, trade, and tourism opportunities for our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as we look to the future, we must ask ourselves, how committed are we to creating an economy that is truly inclusive, sustainable, and resilient? The Government has highlighted many important goals, but we need real action on the ground. We need greater investment in agriculture, MSMEs and rural development, and we must empower women to take an active role in Fiji's economic future.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in addressing these critical issues, we must learn from successful models like Mauritius, ensuring that we diversify our economy and create sustainable opportunities for all Fijians. Additionally, it is vital that we address the underutilisation of Nausori International Airport and ensure that our regional connectivity is enhanced for the benefit of our people.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us move forward, not with rhetoric, but with action that creates tangible benefits to all Fijians. Only through inclusive growth, fair opportunities, and strategic investment can we build the prosperous Fiji that we all desire.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I conclude, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to His Excellency the President for his unwavering support. It was his decisive leadership and steadfast decision-making during his tenure as the honourable Speaker of the House that ensured the retention of my parliamentary seat, along with those of 16 others.

Despite facing numerous challenges, His Excellency the President remained resolute in his commitment, and for that, we are eternally thankful to him. Unfortunately, while some stood by and watched us endure the hardship, they now benefit from the very struggle we endured, a reality that is not lost on us.

With that, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I conclude my response.

HON. V. NAUPOTO.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Cabinet Ministers, honourable Assistant Ministers and honourable Members of Parliament; *bula vinaka* to my fellow citizens who may be watching this afternoon.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is with great honour that I rise today in support of the motion before the House by the honourable Prime Minister to thank His Excellency for his most Gracious Speech when he opened the 2025 Session of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, His Excellency's Address sets the direction, priorities and aspirations of our nation. I thank His Excellency for his leadership and forthrightness.

His Excellency's life of service to this nation speaks volume of his goodwill and commitment to Fiji's place in the world and the wellbeing of all Fijians. It is in this spirit that I reaffirm Government's resolute commitment to strengthening our immigration role.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, immigration, as highlighted by His Excellency, is at the heart of our national security, economic growth and social development. Our nation's prosperity is closely linked to the effective management of our borders, the facilitation of legitimate migration, and our ability to curb related transnational organized crimes, such as human trafficking and smuggling.

The Government will continue to ensure an efficient and responsive immigration system that protects our sovereign territory and integrity while facilitating business investment and activities, tourism and labour mobility. Our aim is to transform Fiji's immigration landscape through modernisation, legislative reforms, regional leadership and strategic partnership.

The transformation of immigration from a department to a full-fledged ministry reflects the growing significance of immigration in national security and economic development. Mr. Speaker, Sir, this change is an opportunity to strengthen policy development, operational capabilities and service delivery. This will ensure effective border management and facilitating genuine travellers and migrants who contribute positively to our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the drafting of Fiji's National Migration Policy is a crucial step in strengthening our approach to migration management. This Policy will guide labour mobility programmes, skilled migration pathways, diaspora engagement and measures to counter irregular migration.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are ensuring that our migration framework aligns with global best practices while addressing Fiji's unique socio-economic landscape. Additionally, Sir, the Policy incorporates climate-induced migration considerations, recognising the need for resilience, and adaptation strategies for communities affected by climate change.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Immigration Act 2003 is under review. The current draft of the Act marks a significant step in modernising our legal framework to meet contemporary migration challenges. These changes, Sir, will enhance border security, streamline visa and permit processes, and strengthen enforcement mechanisms against illegal migration and fraudulent documentation.

The amendments also reinforce our commitment to protecting the rights of migrants, while upholding the primacy of national security. The Ministry is working on legislative reforms to introduce stricter penalties, including infringement notices for immigration violations, and to enhance oversight of foreign employment agencies in Fiji.

Fiji cannot afford to have more than one gate at the border, and I refer to the Registration of Professional Skills Act 2016. The Ministry will initiate the amendment or maybe, repealing certain legislations that open side gates at the border.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Fiji remains committed to combating trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, and other serious transnational crimes against individuals and the State. The Ministry has developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and enhanced cooperation with regional and international partners to tackle these.

The Ministry is dedicated to capacity building and awareness campaigns to address trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants effectively. We have also increased, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the training for our frontline officers, to promptly identify and respond to trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants' cases.

Furthermore, Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are strengthening inter-agency collaboration to ensure robust law enforcement and victim support services. In the US State Department Report on trafficking in persons, Fiji is at Tier 2 Watchlist. An Inter-Agency working group has been formed, collaborating closely with relevant Government and Non-Government Organisations to improve Fiji's ranking.

The Report is due this month, March 2025, and the first draft, which includes contributions from these agencies, have already been submitted through the US Embassy. Improving Fiji's ranking includes both, the role at the agency level and management of migration at political level.

The Ministry of Immigration, Mr. Speaker, Sir, is working to introduce a National Referral Mechanism (NRM). Through this mechanism, processes will be put in place to address issues pertaining to each category of traveller who crosses our borders. They will include *bona fide* travellers, students, tourists/visitors, investors, businesspeople and workers, smugglers and smuggled migrants, victims of trafficking, criminals and undocumented migrants. Of course, these processes will link the border frontline with secondary and third line agencies, and that includes the Police, our Courts, health and civil society organisations. Important in these is to uphold lawful decision making, clear business and border processes, consistency of application and strong enforcement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the migration space in today's landscape is much more complex. In recent years, the world has been witnessing an increased securitisation of borders. Border agencies are more stringent with the application of rules to effectively manage migration, and secure borders.

The balancing of enforcement and facilitation is less straightforward. The need for quick turnaround in the business approval process must be balanced with upholding border security. Having said that, I would like to make clear two points:

- (1) upholding the territorial integrity of Fiji is paramount; and
- (2) no country can deal with the challenges in border and migration management on its own. Collaboration and cooperation is a must.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, our international partnerships have led to greater intelligence-sharing capabilities and coordinated actions in addressing illegal migration, visa fraud and document forgery. Applications that are submitted with fraudulent documents are treated as smuggling of migrants.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, modernising Fiji's immigration process is a top priority. The introduction of advanced border technologies will improve efficiency and security at designated ports of entry. We are working towards a more integrated and technologically advanced immigration system to facilitate safe and humane travel. This system will work to Fiji's needs and circumstances.

Mr. Speaker Sir, effective border security requires a multi-agency approach. We continue to work closely with the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, Fiji Police, Biosecurity of Fiji, Financial

Intelligence and secondary line agencies to prevent illegal migration, smuggling and transnational organised crimes. Strengthening intelligence-sharing and operational coordination remains a key priority. Fiji's image as a safe and secure tourism and investment destination starts with managing our border frontline.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we are confident that the ongoing improvements to our systems, with our commitment to upholding international best practices, will continue to secure Fiji's borders and contribute to maintaining the safety and integrity of the nation while facilitating business activities and enabling the safe, orderly and humane movement of *bona fide* travellers.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker Sir, I would like to reaffirm my commitment as a Member of Parliament to follow His Excellency's pleadings to us (what the Military Officer in me interprets as a directive) and I quote from Page 5 of His Excellency the President's Address in the Daily Hansard on Monday, 24th February, 2025:

“...to put aside narrow personal interests, partisan political agendas, and the past, and move towards building a nation united in purpose for our collective future.”

Mr. Speaker, I also commit to respectful dialogue and constructive debate, as His Excellency succinctly implored us to do. I am of the view, Mr. Speaker, that the tone and the respect, the decorum or the lack of it, we display in this august House, has a bearing in the psyche of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, in His Excellency's Speech on Monday, 24th February, 2025, he said, and I quote from Page 3 of the *Daily Hansard*:

“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.”

Mr. Speaker, this statement, I think, is not for us to question if it is true or not. Yesterday it was questioned, when one of us, a fellow Member of Parliament asked, “how can this be a House of Hope when”, and there was a list of reasons given why this is not a House of Hope, and all the reasons were blamed on Government as if only what Government does or does not do matters in this House.

Mr. Speaker, as you very well know, this is not the Government's House, this is not the Opposition's House either, but this is the people's House and what we (all of us) do and say in this House matter.

Mr. Speaker Sir, instead of questioning His Excellency's statement which was simply a reminder to us of what this House is, we should, individually and collectively, work towards making and keeping it as a House of Hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Hope in this House comes to the people when they see that we, their representatives, in their House leave our political differences aside and come together for the good of the people. We had demonstrated that in this House many times in this parliamentary term. We passed two Bills unanimously for the protection and safety of our children. That is the House of Hope.

For two years, Mr. Speaker, as Member of the Opposition, I was the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. I was voted to the Chair by the majority, by Government. The same happened to honourable Seruiratu as Chairman of the Standing Committee on Natural Resources; later honourable Matasawalevu as Deputy Chairman of that same Committee; the latest

was honourable Rinesh Sharma, elected as Deputy Chairman of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, so all Members of the Opposition were voted in by Government Members. It never happened before, but that is the House of Hope that we are.

In this Chamber, Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Leader of the Opposition stood and pleaded with the honourable Prime Minister to lead the Fijian delegation to COP. The honourable Prime Minister listened and changed his plan, and he did as the honourable Leader of the Opposition pleaded. He took one more step and he invited the honourable Leader of the Opposition to attend the COP with him, which never happened before, but that is the House of Hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, finally, yesterday it was said in this august House that G9 Bloc is now the kingmaker and that is bad for democracy. This is far from the truth. Yes, we are makers alright, but we did not accept the honourable Prime Minister's invitation to join Government to make kings. We joined to lend a hand to make things happen for the good of the people, who sent us here to this house of hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I am confident that there is enough goodwill, there is enough good sense, that there is commitment to service amongst the 56 of us in this Chamber, enough to uphold and maintain this House of Hope. I must add, Sir, that we recognise and appreciate your very able and professional leadership of this House of Hope.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I thank His Excellency for his guidance and wisdom, and I reaffirm my Ministry's dedication to the mandate entrusted to us. I support the motion before the House.

MR. SPEAKER.- I thank honourable Naupoto for introducing me to a new word, "securitization".

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, 34 Ministers speak volume.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the honourable Prime Minister, honourable Ministers, the honourable Leader of the Opposition, honourable Members of Parliament and my fellow Fijians; *bula vinaka, salam alaykum, jai siya ram* to all.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I stand before you today with a deep sense of gratitude and responsibility. First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to His Excellency the President for his inspiring Address. His vision for a united, inclusive and prosperous Fiji resonates deeply with all of us.

The President's emphasis on disaster preparedness, resilience and people-orientated policies is a call to action that we must all heed. The time for complacency is over. We cannot afford to wait any longer. The safety and security of our people are at stake.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is my sincere hope that all Government Ministers, especially those responsible for disaster management, will take His Excellency's word into heart and work tirelessly to protect our beloved nation.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as a Member of Opposition, I reaffirm my unwavering commitment to supporting the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) and ensuring the safety and security of all Fijians. Disaster management is not the task for the Government alone, it requires collaborative effort between the Government, the Opposition and all stakeholders. Together, we can address the challenges of disaster management and build a more resilient Fiji.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, NDMO has played a pivotal role in coordinating and managing disaster risk reduction and disaster management activities. Their efforts in building capacity at national, divisional, district and community levels are commendable.

The organisation of the National Disaster Awareness Week in 2023 which focussed on resilience and breaking the cycle of disaster impacts was a significant milestone. Events like exhibitions and after-action reviews have been instrumental in raising awareness and improving disaster response.

However, we must acknowledge the ongoing challenges we face. Natural disasters, including tropical cyclones, droughts, floods and other climate-related events have had a devastating impact on Fiji. The need for robust disaster management strategies and effective response mechanisms cannot be overstated. We must protect lives and livelihoods, especially in rural and outer island areas where preparedness is often lacking.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, recently, *TC Rae* brought significant challenges to our nation. While initial assessments indicate minimal damage in some areas such as Vanua Levu, the situation in the Lau Group has been far more severe. The cyclone caused heavy rain, strong winds and flooding, leading to substantial damage to infrastructure, homes and crops. Tuvuca Village, in particular, in the Lau Group, experienced houses being destroyed and farms ruined. The community has been forced to seek shelter in evacuation centres, highlighting the urgent need for robust disaster preparedness and response mechanisms.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is deeply concerning that the honourable Minister responsible for NDMO has not updated this august House on the Government's response to *TC Rae*. As the honourable Minister rightly pointed out in his speech, "timely updates and transparency are critical in disaster management. The people of Fiji deserve to know what is being done to assist them in their time of need", the question we all have is, what is happening on the ground with those affected by *TC Rae*?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, *TC Rae* is the first real test for the Coalition Government. Many on the Government side were vocal critics of the Bainimarama Government, often making videos, calling out their handling of various matters like floods. However, now that they are in power, we rarely see any Minister or former Ministers visiting the affected areas whether it be floods or cyclones.

Once again, Mr. Speaker, Sir, I would like to point out that during the Bainimarama Government, we would see the former Prime Minister out there, assessing the damage, and the then Minister responsible for NDMO and now Leader of the Opposition, working with NDMO to coordinate relief efforts to those affected. We would have already seen our development partners arriving to help with recovery efforts. Yet, as of now, we have yet to see a single aircraft from any of our development partners arrive with aid. What we just saw was the honourable Minister visiting Waiqele Airport and having meetings with teams. What about visiting people affected by *TC Rae*?

Mr. Speaker, Sir, economic recovery is a critical aspect of our nation's resilience and ensures that those affected by natural disasters receive the support they need. The honourable Minister for Finance claims that a significant portion of our national debt is attributed to climate-related expenses, such as rebuilding infrastructure damaged by extreme weather events. Climate change restricts our development progress, and we must invest in health, water and sewerage, energy, roads, housing and climate adaptation, to ensure our nation's long-term sustainability.

However, the truth behind the debt is only now coming to light after two years of blame and deflection. The honourable Minister has repeatedly faced criticism for the lack of transparency and accuracy in the Government's financial statements and debt management. It is crucial that we

acknowledge past mismanagement and focus on transparent and effective use of funds to support our nation's recovery and development.

The people of Fiji deserve better, and the Opposition will continue to hold the Government accountable for their actions. And here we are, the lowest Gross Capital Formation as a percentage of GDP in the last decade. Gross Capital Formation, also known as Gross Domestic Investment, is the actual value of projects capitalised domestically (financed from domestic sources). One can see how it has fallen to the lowest level ever in the last decade, going back to 2012.

This is an accurate measure of Local Investor Confidence in the economy because it shows us how much domestic investment has been made into the economy in a year. One can see how it has fallen to the lowest ever level of the decade, going back to 2012, in 2023. Numbers do not lie, honourable Prasad, and 12.89 percent is nothing to be proud of. How do we expect people to recover from natural disasters if the investment that many have bragged about is so slow?

It is concerning that some communities still lack adequate preparedness. We must increase funding for disaster preparedness and resilience programmes. Community-based training is essential to ensure that all Fijians know how to respond in the event of a disaster. We must also address the impact of climate change on the frequency and severity of natural disasters. Investing in climate-resilient infrastructure and early warning system is crucial to protect communities at risk.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I welcome the Cabinet's approval of the National Disaster Risk Management Bill in March 2024, which expands the mandate for disaster legislation to cover all potential hazards. This is a significant step forward in disaster risk reduction and the practical application of disaster risk management measures.

However, I must express concern over the slow implementation of these commitments and the lack of tangible results on the ground. We need to see real progress in strengthening disaster risk management and enhancing the capabilities of the NDMO.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, to strengthen disaster management, I propose the following measures:

- (1) Increased Funding for NDMO
The NDMO must have the resources it needs to effectively co-ordinate and manage disaster response activities.
- (2) Community-Based Disaster Preparedness
We must advocate for community-based disaster preparedness programmes to ensure that all Fijians, particularly those in the rural and outer island areas, are equipped to respond to disasters.
- (3) Climate-Resilient Infrastructure
Investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, such as flood barriers, seawalls and reinforced buildings, is essential to protect communities from the impacts of natural disasters. The development of early warning systems will provide timely alerts to communities at risk.
- (4) Strengthening Regional Cooperation
Regional cooperation in disaster management is vital, particularly in the Pacific region. We must collaborate with regional organisations and neighbouring countries to share resources and expertise in disaster response.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we stand here today facing a harsh reality. Our nation is grappling with uncontrolled inflation, and as His Excellency the President rightly pointed out, "we have very little

control over inflation because we depend on the high volume of imports”. This is not what Fiji needs. We are overtaxed, and it is affecting everyone, from businesses to the ordinary Fijians.

Our GDI stands at a dismal 12.8 percent, the lowest Gross Capital Formation as a percentage of GDP in the last decade. Gross Capital Formation, also known as Gross Domestic Investment (GDI), reflects the actual value of projects capitalised domestically and financed from domestic sources. It is an accurate measure of local investor confidence in the economy because it shows us how much domestic investment has been made into the economy in a year. In 2023, this measure has fallen to the lowest ever level in the decade, going back to 2012.

How can we expect those who need to rebuild after the natural disaster to recover when the economy is not doing well at all? We hear a lot about how things are improving but the numbers tell a different story. Numbers do not lie.

(Honourable Members interject)

HON. V. NATH.- We are witnessing businesses closing down ...

MR. SPEAKER.- Order, order!

HON. V. NATH.- ... and both the honourable Minister for Finance and the honourable Minister for Trade and Co-operatives are downplaying the severity of the situation. This is a big deal. When businesses close, their employees become unemployed. With such a low GDI, how will these people find new jobs? Are there new jobs available?

The ordinary Fijian is feeling the pinch. Prices of basic necessities have skyrocketed, making it difficult for families to make ends meet. Our farmers and business owners are struggling to stay afloat amidst rising costs and reduced consumer spending. The burden of excessive taxation is stifling economic growth and innovation. We cannot expect our economy to thrive when the very foundation is crumbling under the weight of poor policies and mismanagement.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the impact of this economic challenges is far-reaching. Our education system, already under strain, will suffer further as families are forced to prioritise survival over education. Health services, critical to the wellbeing of our citizens, will continue to be underfunded and overstretched. Infrastructure projects essential for our development will be delayed or abandoned, leaving our nation to lag behind in an increasingly competitive global environment.

We need a comprehensive and strategic approach to address these challenges. We must prioritise sustainable economic policies that promote growth and stability. We must reduce tax burden, and I believe this will happen in this financial year. We must reduce the tax burden on our citizens and business, and encourage investment in key sectors such as agriculture, tourism and renewable energy. We must also ensure that our trade policies are aligned with our national interests, promoting exports and reducing our reliance on imports.

(Honourable Member interjects)

HON. V. NATH.- Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must invest in education and healthcare, ensuring that our citizens have the skills and resources they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world. We must improve our infrastructure, making it easier for businesses to operate and for our economy to grow.

HON. PROF. B.C. PRASAD.- You are reading something that you do not understand!

HON. V. NATH.- We must also strengthen our social safety nets, providing support to those who are most vulnerable in these challenging times.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, education plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of individuals and societies and it assists those who thrive in an ever-evolving world. If education is a priority, why are the classrooms without teachers? Mr. Speaker, Sir, it is the teacher who makes the difference, not the classroom. Students are in classrooms without teachers for weeks now. A practical example, I am the Manager of Baulevu High School and from third term last year, we did not have a Maths, Physics and Science teacher and this is week six of Term 1.

HON. OPPOSITION MEMBER.- Fire the Minister!

HON. V. NATH.- I did not want to raise this, Mr. Speaker, Sir, because I have reminded the honourable Minister, who is good and hardworking, a number of times but he failed.

An article in *The Fiji Times* today says, and I quote:

“Teacher shortage resolved. Teacher availability issues in schools in Naitarisi and Lau have been addressed.”

Where addressed? Baulevu still has no schoolteacher *yaar*, from Term 3 last year.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, Year 12 and Year 13 students studied maths and physics themselves. Thanks to the hardworking Principal who has been supervising, but we are still struggling. Just because of the Ministry's laxity, the students lost many days of teaching and learning. How will the Ministry of Education pay back the students for the lost teaching and learning hours? This is the reason, Sir, my school result for Form 7 was 100 percent but last year, it went down to 76 percent because there were no teachers. I urge the Ministry of Education to look into that with urgency.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I conclude, I urge this august House to recognise the urgency of the challenges before us. The safety, security and wellbeing of every Fijian must remain our highest priority. Disaster management is not a pertinent issue, it is a national responsibility that demands unity, collaboration and decisive action. The Government must work hand in hand with the Opposition, civil society and private sector, and our international partners to implement the solutions we have proposed.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, we must act now to strengthen our disaster preparedness - invest in climate resilient infrastructure and empower our communities to respond effectively to crisis. At the same time, we must address the economic challenges that hinder our nation's progress. Uncontrolled inflation, honourable Minister for Finance, low domestic investment and the burden of excessive taxation are stifling our growth and leaving ordinary Fijians struggling to make ends meet.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, let us not lose sight of the resilience and strength that defines us as a nation. Fiji has faced adversity before, and with unity and determination, we can overcome these changes once again. The Opposition stands ready to support initiatives that benefit the people of Fiji, while holding the Government accountable for its actions and commitments.

Let us move forward with a shared vision of prosperity, inclusivity and a resilient Fiji. Together, we can build a future where every Fijian is safe, secure and empowered to thrive. Mr. Speaker, Sir, solidarity is needed to build a better Fiji.

MR. SPEAKER.- Honourable Members, I do not know whether I should thank him for the bit of excitement in the end but we will continue tomorrow with our speakers as listed and circulated.

Honourable Members, that brings us to the end of the sitting today. I thank all of you for your contributions and may you have a good rest. Parliament is now adjourned until tomorrow at 9.30 a.m.

The Parliament adjourned at 4.49 p.m.